Studia Philosophiae Christianae
UKSW
52(2016)1

ADAM DROZDEK

AUGUSTINE'S SOCRATIC METHOD

Abstract. The article discusses a seldom investigated problem of Socrates's influence on Augustine's intellectual development. It is shown that Augustine started with an intense use of the Socratic method utilizing its elenctic and maieutic questioning to expose the truth hidden in the soul. Also, just as the Socratic method led to ontological developments in Plato and Plotinus, it led Augustine to the development of his Christian ontology.

Keywords: Augustine, Socrates, Plato, Plotinus, epistemology, ontology

1. INTRODUCTION

An influence of Socrates on Augustine has been seldom recognized. Frequently, the name of Socrates is not even mentioned when discussing Augustine's philosophy, and if it is, his influence is rarely acknowledged. On the other hand, Platonist influence is always recognized, particularly the impact of Plato and Plotinus, beginning with Augustine himself whose eyes to the truth were opened by reading their theories. However, an influence of Socrates was very strong, particularly at the beginning of Augustine's philosophical and theological development, which is what this article intends to show.

2. THE SOCRATIC METHOD

When in one of his conversations Socrates said that he did not know what virtue was and he wanted to seek together with Meno what it can be, Meno asked him: "In what way will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you set about to

search for something you do not know? If you should encounter it, how will you know that this is what you did not know?" (Plato, *Meno* 80d). This is known as Meno's paradox, which is not very easy to untangle. Socrates responded with his idea of recollection (*anamnesis*), that is, the idea that we do not really learn anything new; we only recollect what we already know, since the knowledge is already in our souls. To accomplish it, Socrates used a method that had two parts: ontological and epistemological. The ontological part is an assumption that the truth somehow exists independently of any person and that a person is somehow saturated with this truth. According to Socrates, it was done by seeing this truth before the soul joined a body at birth. The nature of the truth was unspecified by Socrates and was worked out in detail by Plato and his theory of ideas/forms. The epistemological part of the Socratic method consists of two phases used to activate the knowledge hidden in the mind: the destructive phase (*elenchus*) is used to show that the ideas we have about a subject matter are erroneous; it is followed the constructive phase (*maieusis*) which consists of attempts to uncover through series of well-chosen questions the knowledge we already have. Socrates tried to show the viability of the method most explicitly by his experiment with an uneducated slave-boy who with the assistance of Socrates discovered in himself some geometric truth (*Meno* 82b–85b).[1]

3. AUGUSTINE AND SOCRATES

Augustine was faced with the same quandary as Meno and solved it along the line of the Socratic approach. Augustine knew the theory of anamnesis and Socrates's experiment with the slave boy (*De Trin.* 12.15.24; cf. *Ep.* 7.1.2; *Retr.* 1.4.4), but very likely from Cicero (*Tusc.* 1.57) rather than directly from Plato. He thus knew the maieutic

1 A. Drozdek, *The Socratic method: elenchus, maieusis, and anamnesis*, Estudios Clásicos (2013)144, 33–56.

phase of Socratic questioning, and he also knew the elenctic phase that he understood as a method in which "he makes assertions and destroys them" (*De civ. Dei* 8.3). Augustine apparently did not know Meno's paradox, but he phrased it several times, although in less general terms than Meno: If you do not know God, how do you know that you do not know anything resembling God? (*Solil.* 1.2.7). To become a just person one has to want it not being a just person yet. To be just, one has to love a just person. But one cannot love a just person without knowing what it is to be just. And yet, someone who is not just knows what a just person is. How can that be? (*De Trin.* 8.6.9). In the similar vein, Augustine stated that people want to be happy, but how do they know what it is to be happy when they are not happy? (*Conf.* 10.20.29). Also, no thing can be recognized by any signs if the thing is not known of which these are signs (*De util. cred.* 13.28). As an Augustinian version of Meno's paradox we can count motivational questions[2]: why would anyone want to learn anything if they do not know anything about it? (*De Trin.* 10.1.1).

At first, Augustine's answer to the problem was very much modelled on Socrates and he accepted the Socratic and Platonist theory of recollection. He answered the claim that the soul did not bring any skills by saying, "it seems to me that it brought with it all skills; the so called learning is nothing else than recollection and remembering" (*De quantitate animae* 20.34), which is the statement he later rectified (*Retr.* 1.7.2).[3]

---

2 G. B. Matthews, *Knowledge and illumination*, in: *The Cambridge companion to Augustine*, ed. E. Stump, N. Kretzmann, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, 176.

3 Opinions on the subject are divided. For example, Johannes Hessen, *Die Begründung der Erkenntnis nach dem heil. Augustinus*, Aschendorff, Münster 1916, 58, claimed that Augustine expressed in his early writings a strong inclination toward the idea of preexistence of the soul; Gerard O'Daly, *Did St. Augustine ever believe in the soul's pre--existence?*, Augustinian Studies 5(1974), 227–235, suggested that Augustine used in such cases figurative language never seriously accepting the anamnesis theory because even in his earliest works he spoke about illumination such as *Solil.* 1.6.13, 1.8.15, 2.19.33. When later Augustine considered as unacceptable the view that the soul in some earlier life

Augustine also accepted the Socratic questioning as a way to arrive at truth and never renounced this method: "even the inexperienced give true replies concerning certain disciplines when they are properly questioned" (*Retr.* 1.4.4). Even some of his writings are presented in the form of discussion between a mentor and students and this includes the *Soliloquies*, which is a dialogue between Augustine and his reason. And so, Augustine stated that it is the easiest to seek truth through questions and answers, with God's help in a conversation in which one party asks questions and another answers them (*Solil.* 2.7.14). Some help of the questioner was needed since, in Augustine's opinion, it was obvious that without a help from the outside a person cannot contemplate the truth, if such a movement of one's own soul is not preserved in memory (*De musica* 6.12.36). In his approach, Augustine did not clearly distinguish the elenctic and maieutic phases of questioning; they were used together, mixed with one another, without one clearly following another. To be effective, the questioner has to know where the discussion should lead, and he has to see the goal, which is bringing the pupil to the truth. In this way, the questioner, paradoxically, is not really a teacher. When a listener sees mental objects, then he knows what the speaker talks about not because of the speaker's words, but because of the listener's own inner sight. He learns not because of spoken words, but because God reveals to his eyes the same things as to the speaker. The speaker leads the listener to the truth not because of spoken words but because of questions asked according to the inner cognitive ability of the listener, the ability to listen to the inner teacher (*De magistro* 12.40).[4] The teacher, at best, teaches the student how to teach himself. The teacher is not a teacher in the sense of instilling in the student new

sinned and was then cast into a body as a punishment (*Ep.* 166.9.27, 190.1.4, 217.5.16.1), it appears to be also a rejection of the view of the preexistence of the soul.

4 For this reason, Hessen accepted Windelband's description of Augustine's system and "metaphysics of inner experience," J. Hessen, op. cit., 53.

knowledge, but in the sense of leading the student so that he can discover this knowledge in himself. In this way, Augustine's method is very much like Socrates's, the maieutic method, the method of midwifery, the method of birthing knowledge, not creating it; in fact, he himself used the child birthing imaginery for the cognition process (*De Trin.* 9.12.18).

Therefore, students are not sent to school to learn what the teacher is thinking. After the teacher presents a topic, students should ruminate on what they heard to discover in their minds the truth, whereby students really learn from themselves, from their own minds. They may think that they learn from teachers since cognition appears right after the presentation of the teacher, but the teacher only incites students to find the truth in themselves (*De magistro* 14.45). Incidentally, this view of the role of a teacher in the teaching process provides Augustine with an interpretation of the Biblical statement that no one is a teacher on earth since only Christ is a Teacher (Mt. 23:7–8; *De magistro* 14.46).

When Augustine said that "the most famous invention of Socrates asserted that what we learn is not new things introduced to us, but is recalled to memory by recollection" (*Ep.* 7.2), he agreed with this most famous invention in that learning does not introduce anything new from the outside of the cognitive subject. If he rejected the Socratic-Platonic understanding of recollection, he needed to provide the solution to the problem of the origin of this knowledge. How does the soul know what it knows not realizing that it knows? Whence knowledge in the soul? Augustine's answer is briefly summarized in the statement that "because of questions, man turns inwardly to God to understand an unchangeable truth" (*De musica* 6.12.36) and thus all truth comes from God. God has the central position in Augustine's philosophy and everything should be understood in its relation to God.

4. FAITH AND REASON

Augustine's starting point was the belief that the truth exists and can be known, at least to some extent. His principle, "I believe to understand" was derived from an oft-repeated verse, "you will not understand unless you believe" (Is. 7:9, LXX).[5] Belief is "the thought [accompanied] with assent" (*De praedestinatione sanctorum* 2.5). It is a rational process. Belief is derived from revelation, but the revelation is accepted on account of the reliability of witnesses, the reliability that has to be rationally evaluated. Belief keeps reason on the straight path. Without it, reason swerves, falls into skepticism, and is a victim of contradictions. Belief is involved even in simple things: we believe that parents are our parents because we trust in their word, in their testimony, particularly if family resemblance is absent (cf. *De util. cred.* 12.26), belief and mutual trust are indispensable elements of such relationships as friendship and marriage (*De fide rerum quae non videntur* 1.2; 2.4). In fact, people are able to believe because they have the rational soul. In some matters such as teaching and salvation, belief purifies the heart so that the heart could receive the light of reason (*Ep.* 120.1.3); that is, reason and understanding, in turn, enhance belief. Belief shows truths but does not prove them. Belief is able somehow to see the truth without appreciating its truthfulness, this appreciation being the work of reason. Also, faith prepares the ground for reason so that reason can find what it is seeking (120.2.8): "faith is understanding's step, understanding is faith's attainment" (*Sermo* 126.1).

Belief is not just belief in anything that comes along. It should be based on reliable authority and such authority should be assessed rationally. And so, there is no doubt that there are two sources of

5 *In Ev. Ioannis tractatus* 19.26; *Sermo* 43.7; 118.1, 139.1; *De magistro* 11.37; *De libero arbitrio* 1.2.4, 2.6; *De doctrina Christiana* 2.17; *De Trin.* 15.2.2; *Ep.* 120.1.3, 184A.2.4, 194.5.21; "first believe, then understand" (*De Symbolo ad Catechumenos* 2.4).

knowledge, authority and reason (*Contra acad.* 3.20.43; *De ordine* 2.9.26). "Authority demands belief and prepares man to [the use of his] reason. Reason leads to understanding and cognition. However, reason does not entirely abandon authority, since it has to decide whom to believe – and surely the authority of the known and clear truth is most important" (*De vera religione* 24.45). We would like to acquire clear, certain knowledge since believing one's own reason is different than believing someone else's authority. For most people, relying on the authority of wise people is better, since if they try to use their own reason, they are deceived by unreliable proofs (*De quantitate animae* 7.12).

For Augustine, the authority on which he based his investigations was the Scriptures (*Conf.* 6.5.7; *De civ. Dei* 11.3) and the authority of the omnipotent, immutable God who created everything out of nothing and who had given birth to Someone equal to Himself (*De libero arbitrio* 1.2.5), that is, to Christ. The triune God of the Christian faith is thus the basis of Augustine's investigations. This God is the source of truth, He, in fact, is the Truth.

Is the belief in an immutable truth just an arbitrary assumption? This is where reason weighs in. An argument is made that truth exists even if true things perish, so truth cannot be found among perishable things. Only what is immortal can be true (*Solil.* 1.15.29). Truth cannot stop to exist; if it did, it would be true that truth ceased to exist – a contradiction (2.2.2). Incidentally, an existence of an immutable truth accessible to the mind is used as a proof of the immortality of the soul: our soul, i.e., our mind, is able to comprehend the truth, in particular, geometrical truth, and thus "the truth must also be in our soul." Therefore, because no faculty can be separated from the soul and because the truth is eternal, so the soul is immortal (2.19.33).[6]

---

6 Therefore, "we hear Augustine's jubilation from the concluding words of his proof: your soul is thus immortal… Turn away from your shadow (which is the body) and turn toward

Having proper assumptions based on faith does not guarantee that rational investigations will be successful. Augustine recounted his efforts of understanding the nature of God: with all his heart he believed that God was unperishable and immutable, rationally he tried to see God as an unperishable substance spread over entire space since he thought that only nothingness can have no dimension (*Conf.* 7.1.2). Rational investigations will not be successful at all, at least not in this life: some truths simply cannot be fathomed because of the weakness of the human reason; these truths include the problem of the virgin birth, of the resurrection, and the mystery of the Trinity (*De vera religione* 8.14). In that respect, believers should rely on their faith. They may try to acquire some rational understanding, but this should be done by prayer, thinking, and a holy life, but such an understanding will be purely God's gift, the result of divine illumination rather than the result of rational effort (*De Trin.* 15.27.49).[7] The certainty of knowledge will be reached only in the afterlife (1 Cor. 13:13) (9.1.1).

5. ILLUMINATION

Just like Socrates, Augustine believed that all knowledge is locked in the human soul. "Truth dwells inside of man" (*De vera religione* 39.72). "It is obvious that the human soul is immortal and all true concepts are in its secret places even though it seems that it does not have them or lost them because of ignorance or oblivion" (*De immortalitate animae* 4.6). In particular, mathematical principles are inscribed in the mind: "memory contains innumerable relations and laws of numbers and dimensions, none of which was impressed [in

yourself," where the truth can be found, W. Thimme, *Augustins erster Entwurf einer metaphysischen Seelenlehre*, Trowitzsch, Berlin 1908, 12.

7 His idea of illumination was influenced by Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.7.8; cf. B. Kälin, *Die Erkenntnislehre des hl. Augustinus*, Louis Ehrli, Sarnen 1921, 53–54, 58–60, 65, 81.

the mind] by corporeal senses" since these truths never have any sensory attributes: they do not smell, have no color, etc. (*Conf.* 10.12.19). Truths about relations between numbers would exist and remain the same even if the world ceased to exist (*De ordine* 2.19.50; *De musica* 6.12.35). Also, the law of justice "is impressed in us" (*De libero arbitrio* 1.6.15). Moreover, the mind has impressed on it abstract concepts, such as happiness, wisdom (2.9.26), and goodness (*De Trin.* 8.3.4). Latent in the human soul, such truths have to be activated, as it were, brought to human consciousness, and this is a work of God to make it happen through the agency of illumination: things being discussed by two interlocutors are perceived by the mind, that is, by intellect and reason, that is, they are seen "in that inner light of truth which illuminates the one called the inner man" (*De magistro* 12.40). Just as the sun allows us to see things, so the mental entities can be seen if they are illuminated by God, the spiritual sun. God Himself is the light,[8] "the intelligible light in whom and from whom and through whom intelligibly shine [i.e., become intelligible] all the things which shine intelligibly" (*Solil.* 1.1.3). "God Himself is who illuminates" (*Solil.* 1.6.12). Wisdom is gained by illumination by divine truth, whereby the soul participates in the earthly here and now, but also in the divine reality of immutable and perfect truth. God is the sun of minds enabling them to grasp conceptual truths (*Solil.* 1.8.15). "It should be assumed that the nature of intellectual mind is so formed that when according to the disposition of the Creator it is joined in natural order to intelligible things, it sees them in some incorporeal light of its own kind proper to its nature just as the eye of the body sees in corporeal light objects surrounding it, to which light it is receptive and to which reception it was so created" (*De Trin.* 12.15.24). "There is some ineffable and incomprehensible light of minds" about which nature we can glean some imperfect understanding from the workings

8 *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* 1.25.38; *De Gen. ad litt.* 12.31.59; *De Trin.* 8.2.3; 8.8.12; *In Ev. Ioannis tractatus* 15.19, 17.8; *Ep.* 140.3.8; *In Epistolam Ioannis* 1.4–5.

of the sun light (*Solil.* 1.13.23). Discovering truth in the soul is really discovering God, since God is the truth since in Him and through Him all things are true (*Solil.* 1.1.3). By illumination, God reveals Himself in the human soul, the God who has been there all along.[9]

The mind has some kind of eyes, and inner senses of the soul and truths have to be illuminated by the sun to be visible. God Himself illuminates them. Reason is in the mind what sight is in the eyes. The soul thus needs three things: it must have eyes, it has to watch, and it has to see. At the beginning, it can have this soundness only from faith. Without faith, it will not see this light which it cannot see when it is sick of the earthly blemish. Besides faith, it also has to have hope and love. No soul without these three virtues can be healed to see, i.e., to comprehend God (*Solil.* 1.6.12).

Importantly, the divine illumination may manifest itself in various ways. There was no doubt for Augustine that the truth can be found in the Christian religion. However, how can a Christian convince anyone of it? Not without the divine assistance. In Augustine's view never anyone would be ready to receive the Christian message "who has not been smitten by the fear of God" (*De catechizandis rudibus* 5.9).

6. PURE LIFE

If illumination is coming from God and only God inwardly reveals the truth, that is, reveals Himself, it would appear that a person should only sit and wait until it happens. However, the role of a person in a cognitive process is not entirely passive. There is, as it were, an invariable element of this process, God's revelation of truth, and there are variable elements: the work of a teacher who really does not teach

9 "Knowledge is possible because God has created man after his own image as a rational soul and because God continually sustains and aids the soul in its quest for knowledge," R. H. Nash, *The Light of the mind: St. Augustine's theory of knowledge*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 1969, 111.

but stirs the listener to self-reflection, and the work of the cognitive subject, who must be active and who must be properly prepared for this cognitive endeavor. In the Orthodox tradition, there are a number of spiritual steps an iconographer must make before the actual act of iconography for the product, an icon, to have the spiritually desired effect. In the cognitive process it is not just a mental effort that leads to rationally acceptable results. There is a spiritual component there as well, the component which, arguably, is more important than the rational side of the process.

In a rather elitist spirit, Augustine stated that knowledge is seldom possessed by humans since they do not ardently seek it and lose the desire for such a search, which happens because of the adversities of life, apathy, doubt that truth can be found, or an illusion that truth has been found. Thus, the storms of life must be opposed with virtue and, primarily, by humbly and piously asking God for help on the road to knowledge (*Contra acad.* 2.1.1). "In the proper education of man, the hard work of doing what is right precedes the delight of understanding what is true" (*Contra Faustum* 22.52). "It is surely perverse and preposterous to wish to see truth that you may purify your soul, which should rather be purified that you may see" (*De util. cred*. 16.34). One must be pure to attain the truth rather than become pure after attaining the truth. This is because according to the law of Providence, those will know God and their soul who "look for it piously, chastely, and diligently" (*De quantitate animae* 14.24). The truth is attained by someone who "lives well, prays well, and studies well" (*De ordine* 2.19.51). "Not all whom we ask can teach nor all who want to learn are worthy – both diligence and piety must be applied" (*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 1.1.1).

Also, in respect to what we understand, "we consult the truth that within us directs the mind" (*De magistro* 11.38), that is, we learn "about what is within us by consulting God" (*Ep.* 13.4). This truth is God Himself (*Ep.* 118.4.23), or rather this truth is Christ, who lives in the inner man (Eph. 3:16–17). He is God's immutable power and

eternal wisdom, each rational soul relies on Him, but He reveals Himself only according to man's good or evil will (*De magistro* 11.38), which is the love of truth (as rhetorically asked, "what is love if not [an act of] will?" (*De Trin.* 15.20.38)).

What is pure life? The answer is not far away, it can be found by self-reflection, since it has already been provided by God. "This knowledge in the law of God that remaining always fixed and unshaken in Him is, as it were, inscribed in the wise souls so that they know how to live much better and much more sublimely as they will more perfectly understand it [the law] and as they will follow it more diligently in their lives." This knowledge advises that young people should abstain from carnal pleasures, and earthly ambitions, be forgiving, humble, and frugal (*De ordine* 2.8.25). Again, the sound inner eyes are the thought unblemished by bodily faults, i.e., free from the desire of earthly things (*Solil.* 1.6.12); thus, this soundness of the eyes is enhanced by a properly pure life. Moral precepts, such as prohibition of theft, are "written (*scripta*) in the hearts of people which even iniquity cannot erase."[10] The Decalogue is just an outward expression of this principle written in the heart (*Enarr. in Psalmos* 57.1). And so, the moral law is imprinted in our conscience; all people know it just as they know God. This natural law orders man to live justly, to keep his heart away from perishable goods and turn it to the eternal good, to submit the soul to the body and to purify the soul to approach God (*Ep.* 157). Even evil people think about eternity and justly praise or castigate people. They use principles that are written in "the book of light that is called the truth." From here each just law gets to the human heart by being stamped on the soul just like the image of a seal is stamped on wax (*De Trin.* 14.15.21; *Enarr. in Psalmos* 4.8).

---

10 *Conf.* 2.4.9; *Contra Faustum* 27; *De spiritu et littera* 47; *De diversis quaestionibus* 31.1; *De civ. Dei* 22.24.

7. KNOWING GOD

Augustine never explicitly stated that the concept of God is impressed on the human mind. Worse yet, he also repeatedly stated that we cannot know who God is: "if you have grasped, it is not God; if you were able to comprehend, you have understood something else than God" (*Sermo* 52.6.16).[11] "We say about God, what wonder is it if we do not comprehend him? For if you comprehend, it is not God. Let us make a devout confession of ignorance rather than an audacious profession of knowledge" (117.3.5; 4.5). However, although "before we can know, who God is, we already know who He is not," which "is not a small part of notions for us breathing from this depth to that height" (*De Trin.* 8.2.3). "God is ineffable[12]: we more easily say what He is not than what He is. You think of the earth; this is not God… What is He then? I could only say, what He is not" (*Enarr. in Psalmos* 85.12; *Sermo* 53.12). However, by saying what God is not, we make positive statements: God is incorporeal, infinite, immortal, imperishable, immovable, immutable, impeccable, i.e., without sin and blemish (*De Trin.* 15.5.7–8). Also, there are more positively stated attributes: "who would dare to say that this one God… does not live or feels nothing, or does not understand… Who would deny that any [member of the Trinity] is most powerful, most righteous, most beautiful, most good, the happiest?" (15.5.7). God is also simple, and in this simplicity all attributes are one; thus, for instance, in God to be wise and to exist is one and the same thing (15.13.22) and mentioning

11 "If you understand anything about Him [God], then he is not in it, and by understanding something of Him, you fall into ignorance," Meister Eckhart, *Selected writings*, London: Penguin 1994, 237.

12 E.g., *Contra adversarium legis et prophetarum* 1.20.40; *Collatio cum Maximino* 11; *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* 2.2.2; *De Gen. ad litt.*, 5.16.34.

one of the attributes – wisdom, power, goodness, justice, etc. – is the same as mentioning all of them at once (7.1.1).[13]

In a roundabout way, starting with negative theology, Augustine arrived at the point of being able to determine the positive attributes of God. In a way, this is not surprising: he started with an unshakable belief in the existence of God and through his reasoning he confirmed this belief and also confirmed the universal acknowledgment of the existence of a supreme deity: "such is the power of true divinity, that it cannot be entirely and utterly hidden from any rational creature that uses its reason. For with the exception of a few in whom nature is too depraved, the whole race of man acknowledges God as the maker of this world" (*In Ev. Ioannis tractatus* 106.4). Since, for Augustine this universality confirms his belief in God, it must be true and, according to the Socratic principle, truth really is to be found inside oneself; therefore, there simply must be some imprint about God in the human soul.[14] Sometimes Augustine gave some intimations of it. For instance, he asked rhetorically, "What, then, is that in your heart when you think of a certain substance, living, eternal, omnipotent, infinite, omnipresent, everywhere whole, nowhere shut in? When you think of these [qualities], this is the word concerning God in your heart" (*In Ev. Ioannis tractatus* 1.8). Also, "there is in us impressed the concept of the good"; and what is good if not God? God is "the Good of all good" (*De Trin.* 8.3.4), which would mean that the concept of God is also impressed in the mind. However, as with other truths, its existence does not mean that it can be easily

13 "Augustine started with the negative method to recognize in his God attributes infinite in number and in quality," L. Grandgeorge, *Saint Augustin et le néo-platonisme*, Ernest Leroux, Paris 1896, 67. That would be the meaning of Augustine's statements that "we know [God] while not knowing [Him]" (*De ordine* 2.16.44) and "there is no knowledge of Him in the soul unless it knows in which way it does not know Him" (2.18.47).

14 "As soon as there is truth, there is God," E. Gilson, *The Christian philosophy of Saint Augustine*, Random House, New York 1960 [1929], 110.

uncovered, and many rationales offered by Augustine in his work are designed to lead the reader to this truth.

Knowledge is thus of great value, but it is not the greatest accomplishment, the most important attainment. It is not a matter of knowledge for knowledge's sake – knowledge should lead to happiness. Everyone discovers in his heart that he wants to be happy (*De Trin.* 13.20.25; Plato, *Symp.* 205a) and such a desire for happiness is a very important initial prompting to find the truth. Happiness is the joy over truth, that is, over God who is the Truth (*Conf.* 10.22.32). Only the truth allows us to know the highest good which brings happiness. Through self-reflection the soul learns that its existence depends on God. Knowing God can be accomplished through the mediation of what is common to the soul and God, which is love. God is love and the soul can know God by loving him, thereby transforming itself into a more perfect image of God since its ability to be in union with God makes it an image of God (*De Trin.* 14.8.11; *Ep.* 92.3). The soul saw many true things in the light that shone upon it. But when trying to see this light itself, it cannot have its clear and distinct perception, not in this life. The soul cannot see the Trinity yet, only its image in itself (15.27.50). The soul can know God best through love, through loving God and by the purity of its life opening itself more and more to the flow of God's love. Since God is love (*Enchiridion* 32.121), since His essence is love, then intellectual knowledge will always be incomplete. The best understanding, the closest proximity to the divine sphere and eventual the union with God – if only in the afterworld[15] – can be accomplished through love,

15 Augustine "refused the vision of God properly so called, the vision face-to-face, even to great saints in spite of very rare exceptions: the vision of God and happiness are not for this life," J.-M. Le Blond, *Les conversions de saint Augustin*, Aubier, Paris 1950, 217, 231; "our union with the truth [that is, with God] is a purely mystical and incorporeal union of which earthly unions can give only very rough idea," M. Ferraz, *De la psychologie de saint Augustin*, Durand, Paris 1862, 365; R. Jolivet, *Dieu soleil des esprits ou la doctrine augustinienne de l'illumination*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1934, 74–75.

the love which is really God's, the divine love which fills the soul, "love breathed into us by the Holy Spirit" (*Ep.* 55.16.30), the love which makes humans perfect (189.2), the love enflamed by the Holy Spirit since man "has nothing to love God with if this is not [received from] from God" (*De Trin.* 15.17.31). Wisdom can fully be acquired through love, love paves the way to true knowledge, love leads to the discovery that God is love and that through loving Him back the union with Him can be reached, the union which is the ultimate of happiness. After death only love will remain when the soul will be entirely in God (1.7.14). This is a work of the Holy Spirit, who is love, whereby we dwell in God and God dwells in us (*De Trin.* 15.17.31).

Love is the last stage, the desirable goal that assures personal happiness in this life and in the next. In this way, the soul comes back to God full circle. It started with faith in the existence of God and in His grand attributes, which led it to the rational knowledge of God, the knowledge was extracted from within the soul itself. The truth, which includes the truth about God, is inscribed in the soul. Thus, through rational knowledge the soul knows about God. However, God is also the ineffable light that is present in the soul, the light shed on the knowledge that the soul possesses. God reveals Himself through this knowledge and if the soul reaches the sufficiently advanced level of rational cognition, it opens itself to the God about whom it knows and by opening itself it is filled with divine love with which it becomes united with God. Rational cognition thus appears to be, at least for most people, a necessary step through which the soul knows *about* God. Love is an act of will, it is wanting something for itself (*De div. quaest.* 35). Wanting God for Himself can be fully fulfilled when He pours His own love into the desiring soul. Such love becomes the ultimate of knowledge, true and fulfilling knowledge, it becomes knowing God, not just about God.[16] This is

16 Boyer spoke about "loving knowledge that gives us God," Ch. Boyer, *L'idée de vérité dans la philosophie de saint Augustin*, Gabriel Beauchesne, Paris 1920, 228. Gilson, op. cit., 92,

the fullness of knowledge that the soul can have, this is its goal set through faith at the beginning of the cognitive journey. This is a true vision of God, when reason reaches its goal, becoming a virtue and the soul reaches happiness (*Solil.* 1.6.13). Such a vision of God takes place "not through corporeal eyes but through purified hearts" (*Ep.* 147.20.48; 148.3.12).[17]

Why does not God show Himself right away to the soul, but first uses the means of knowledge inscribed in the soul so that the soul can dig out this information when helped by God's light to gain conscious knowledge about God, which can lead to the desire of union with God through love that also comes from God? Why such a circuitous and frequently torturous way? Could God just reveal Himself directly to the soul? After all, He lives in it already. That would surely be simpler, but apparently is impossible because of sin. The fall led to the demise of the original condition of the soul and, in this life, the road to God must lead through the knowledge about God. Augustine himself used an analogy with the knowledge gained with the help of the sun light: people cannot look directly at this light since it would be damaging to their eyes and it would end up for them in darkness, in their blindness. They have to exercise their faculties, their desire to see the light must be allowed to blossom with satisfying this desire. They must be first shown something that does not shine by itself and then, gradually, they can be exposed to the light itself with increased intensity. The role of a skillful teacher, a spiritual guide, is to lead the pupil this way (*Solil.* 1.13.23).

---

spoke about natural knowledge and mystical knowledge, the former being knowledge by or in the eternal reason, the latter knowledge or seeing the eternal reasons and the divine light. He did not consider the mystical knowledge as acquired through the agency of love. After quoting Augustine that the vision of God after resurrection related to seeing God in oneself and in others, Martin only in passing stated that "such a knowledge naturally implies love," J. Martin, *Saint Augustin*, Félix Alcan, Paris 1901, 172.

17 Augustine also spoke metaphorically about touching God (*Enarr. in Psalmos* 41.8).

8. CONCLUSION: BEYOND SOCRATES

As to the relation to Socrates, Augustine, in a way, repeated the path of development of Platonism that started with Socrates' inquisitiveness and ended with ontology. In response to Meno's problem, Socrates responded with the theory of anamnesis, the theory that assumed the existence of knowledge in each human soul. It required an effort to uncover this knowledge, and this was done by Socratic questioning, which included elenctic and maieutic components. Socrates concentrated on the application of this method and early dialogues of Plato record Socrates' attempts to find the true meaning of various concepts: piety in the *Euthyphro*, courage in the *Laches*, temperance in the *Charmides*, friendship in the *Lysis*, justice in the *Republic* I, and virtue in the *Meno*. The Socratic method is not just questioning; it also requires an ontological component: recollection is only a sensible approach if it is recollection of something. However, Socrates was in a way disinterested in the nature of this something only assuming its existence. As to how the soul came into possession of its knowledge, he only briefly stated that "the soul is immortal and it has been born many times, has seen all things here and in Hades and there is nothing that it has not learned" (*Meno* 81c). The work on the nature of this something was left to Plato who developed his theory of forms/ideas. In Plato's investigations, the nature of recollection was very important – as can be seen in his famous cave metaphor, as important as the ontology behind it. However, the importance of the Socratic questioning significantly decreased. Middle and late dialogues of Plato much less frequently include the type of Socratic drilling known from the early dialogues; they are rather conversations that lead from one long monologue to another. For Plato it was clear that anamnesis was true and he also was convinced about what ontology should be used to go with it. The questioning part of the investigation was of lesser importance. Then came Plotinus, whose grand ontology overshadowed other elements

of his philosophical system. No Socratic questioning was needed at all. In fact, even anamnesis, although still present,[18] was significantly reduced or transformed into participation in or contemplation of intelligible reality.

To some extent this tripartite development of Platonism can be detected in Augustine. His cognitive journey was very likely inspired by Socrates and his investigative method. The questioning side of the method was fully adopted by Augustine. Just like Socrates, Augustine believed that the truth can be found in the soul and the adept questioning by a teacher should lead the pupil to this knowledge, which Augustine tried in his early dialogues. After fleetingly embracing anamnesis theory, Augustine eventually disagreed with Socrates (and Plato) that the truth in the soul comes from the soul's contact with the eternal and unchangeable reality before the soul was embodied, stating that this truth was not only imprinted by God, but also illuminated by Him during the cognitive process that required a virtuous life.

Augustine also admitted that he received the proper ontological direction from the Platonists, by which primarily theories of Plato and Plotinus should be understood: these theories pointed him to God's majesty as expressed in His immateriality, infinity, immutability and creativity, and that led him to the study of Scriptures (*Conf.* 7.20.26). Therefore, Augustine investigated this ontological reality by concentrating his investigations on the divine sphere abandoning dialogical approach: he was certain about the truthfulness of his ontology; he thus thought he did not need the Socratic questioning anymore. Augustine's ontology absorbed Plato's system by placing the world of ideas/forms in the mind of God (*De diversis quaestionibus* 23, 46; in Plato's system, this world is independent of the Demiurge,

18 Cf. E. W. Warren, *Memory in Plotinus*, Classical Quarterly 15(1965), 252–260; J. McCumber, *Anamnesis as memory of intelligibles in Plotinus*, Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 60(1978), 160–167.

which Augustine found blasphemous). God became an all-important subject and the desire to know God, not just about God, becomes overwhelming, which culminates in Augustine's idea of the union of the soul with God though love. This is one of points where Augustine parted with Platonists. For Augustine, love was the essence of God, for the Platonists, it was just one element of their system, not even the most important.

Socrates spoke about the love of gods for mankind (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.3.8,11), about the gods as man-loving (4.3.5,7), and about God who is "wise and loving" (1.4.7). Because Socrates spoke about the gods and about God interchangeably, this is at least an indication of a monotheistic tendency in his theology,[19] an adumbration of a belief in a loving universal God, although only in the *Euthyphro* is there some discussion of the love of the gods in the context of defining piety. Plato's supreme God, the Demiurge, appears to be somewhat deficient in this department: he created the gods, submitted to them the rest of the work of creation, and withdrew himself from the affairs of the world into an eternal rest (*Timaeus* 40e, 41a,d, 42e, 69c). Thus, it would seem that Socrates' God is closer to the God of the Christian religion as envisioned by Augustine than to the God of Plato's deistic theology. The intellectual knowledge can be the best that can be expected there, knowledge about the divine sphere. Rationality prevails so that Socrates envisioned the afterlife to be spent in unending discussions (*Apology* 41c). Plato had a vision of the incorporeal afterlife spent in "beautiful dwelling places" (*Phaedo* 114c). His idea of love that allows the soul to ascend to the beauty itself as described in the *Symposium* is rather unappealing. Love, a progeny of Penia (poverty) and Poros (way [of achieving]) (203b)

19 The existence of "the philosophical basis of monotheism" in Socrates is mentioned by M.D. Henry, *Socratic piety and the power of reason*, in: *New essays on Socrates*, ed. E. Kelly, University Press of America, Lanham 1984, 104, and "a certain progressive movement towards monotheism" by C. Phillipson, *The trial of Socrates*, Stevens, London 1928, 423.

is described as shriveled shoeless, homeless, always lying in the dirt without a bed (203d), a being neither mortal nor immortal (203e), between wisdom and ignorance (204a). In Plotinus' interpretation of Plato's tale, love looks only a little better: it is a thing of matter – and thus the lowest level of reality and at the same time a heavenly entity longing for the good (*Enneads* 3.5.9), hardly anything comparable to the divine love of Augustine.

Augustine started as a thoroughgoing Socratic investigator by using the Socratic method with its elenctic and maieutic questioning to uncover the truth hidden in the soul. In order to ontologically substantiate his approach, he borrowed, with appreciation, from Plato and Plotinus; however, he built an ontology and theology that was based on the Scriptures as he understood them and on the Christian worldview. Like them, he largely abandoned the Socratic method, the method which initiated his and their philosophical journey. For this reason, the role of the Socratic method in Augustine's philosophical development should not be overlooked.

REFERENCES

Blond Le J.-M., *Les conversions de saint Augustin*, Aubier, Paris 1950.

Boyer Ch., *L'idée de vérité dans la philosophie de saint Augustin*, Gabriel Beauchesne, Paris 1920.

Drozdek A., *The Socratic method: elenchus, maieusis, and anamnesis*, Estudios Clásicos (2013)144, 33–56.

Ferraz M., *De la psychologie de saint Augustin*, Durand, Paris 1862.

Gilson E., *The Christian philosophy of Saint Augustine*, Random House, New York 1960.

Grandgeorge L., *Saint Augustin et le néo-platonisme*, Paris: Ernest Leroux 1896.

Henry M.D., *Socratic piety and the power of reason*, in: *New essays on Socrates*, ed. E. Kelly, University Press of America, Lanham 1984.

Hessen J., *Die Begründung der Erkenntnis nach dem heil. Augustinus*, Aschendorff, Münster 1916.

Jolivet R., *Dieu soleil des esprits ou la doctrine augustinienne de l'illumination*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1934.

Kälin B., *Die Erkenntnislehre des hl. Augustinus*, Louis Ehrli, Sarnen 1921.
Martin J., *Saint Augustin*, Félix Alcan, Paris 1901.
Matthews G. B., *Knowledge and illumination*, in: *The Cambridge companion to Augustine*, ed. E. Stump, N. Kretzmann, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.
McCumber J., *Anamnesis as memory of intelligibles in Plotinus*, Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 60(1978), 160–167.
Meister Eckhart, *Selected writings*, London: Penguin 1994.
Nash R. H., *The Light of the mind: St. Augustine's theory of knowledge*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 1969.
O'Daly G., *Did St. Augustine ever believe in the soul's pre-existence?*, Augustinian Studies 5(1974), 227–235.
Phillipson C., *The trial of Socrates*, Stevens, London 1928.
Thimme W., *Augustins erster Entwurf einer metaphysischen Seelenlehre*, Trowitzsch, Berlin 1908.
Warren E. W., *Memory in Plotinus*, Classical Quarterly 15(1965), 252–260.

ADAM DROZDEK
drozdek@duq.edu
Duquesne University, Department of Mathematics and Computer Science
440 College Hall, Pittsburgh PA 15282, USA

DOI 10.21697/spch.2016.52.1.01