

Augustine's Understanding of the Soul, Immortality, and the Being in *De immortalitate animae*

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INTRODUCTION

After his eventual conversion at a Milanese garden in 386, Augustine began by composing a series of works in the dialogue form in about the same year: *Contra Academicos*, *De beata uita*, *De ordine*, and *Soliloquia*. In the last of these dialogues, *Soliloquia*, in which he asked himself questions and replied to himself, Augustine dealt with the problem of the immortality of soul, thereby exploring the possibility of showing the necessary correlation between the soul and the truth. Since, in two books of *Soliloquia*, he could not resolve the difficulties, once again after several months in 387, he launched into some of his discussions and put together into a “reminder” (*commonitorium*) for his own purpose. Later in *Retractationes*, this short treatise entitled *De immortalitate animae* was reviewed by himself as obscure one on account of its being convoluted and difficult to understand.¹ Consequently, it has been argued whether Augustine's treatment of the soul's immortality is reasonable and proper. How can be found out which are useful and appropriate for the illustration of the soul and its immortality from the raw material of a book? How does this “reminder” mark the completion of the discussion in *Soliloquia*? Although this work seems to be primarily based on his knowledge of Neoplatonism, are there any other possibilities to explain the significance of his drawing? In this paper I shall first examine the consistency of his explanations. Then I shall consider the relationship between the soul, immortality, and the discipline, thereby focusing on the account of the being in the latter part of the treatise. Finally I shall show the significance of *De immortalitate animae* as a “reminder”. It will give the reasons why Augustine did not abandon it.

1. See Aug. *Retr.* 1.5.1: Post libros soliloquiorum iam de agro Mediolanium reuersus scripsi librum de immortalitate animae, quod mihi quasi commonitorium esse uolueram propter Soliloquia terminanda, quae imperfecta remanserant. Sed nescio quomodo me inuito exiit in manus hominum, et inter mea opuscula nominatur. Qui primo ratiocinationum contortione atque breuitate sic obscurus est, ut fatiget cum legitur etiam intentionem meam, uixque intellegatur a me ipso.

SYNOPSIS OF THE ARGUMENT IN *DE IMMORTALITATE ANIMAE*

De immortalitate animae was written by Augustine who felt obliged to complete the unfinished work, two books of *Soliloquia*. It was intended as a complementary to *Soliloquia*, in order to resolve the unsettled question of the immortality of the soul. In *Soliloquia*, he only outlined the problem as the following:

If everything which is in a subject lasts for ever, it follows necessarily that the subject lasts for ever. Every discipline is in the soul as its subject. It is necessary, therefore, that the soul lasts for ever, if the discipline does. A discipline, however, is truth, and the truth remains for ever as reason persuaded us at the beginning of this book. Therefore, the soul lasts for ever.²

Augustine's own reason (*ratio*), with whom he is in conversation, claims that they proves that the soul is immortal. It is expressly stated that, a) truth is in the soul, b) truth is immortal, c) thus, the soul is immortal. At the beginning of *De immortalitate animae* Augustine shows the reader this argument for the immortality of the soul.

If a discipline exists anywhere, it can only exist in something which is alive, and if it exists always, and if something in which a thing exists always cannot but exist always itself, that thing in which a discipline exists, itself exists always.³

Augustine posed another problem of the soul in *Soliloquia*, which was also remained unsettled.

Augustine: But explain for me, please, the remaining points. How are we to understand that a discipline and truth can exist in an uneducated soul? We cannot say that it is mortal. — Reason: That question calls for another book if you wish to handle it properly.⁴

Again at the beginning of *De immortalitate animae* he makes an attempt to answer the problem of the ignorant soul which was raised in *Soliloquia* (2.14.25 and 2.15.27), and of which it is referred to in *Soliloquia* 2.19.33 as above mentioned. The point of a disjunction is that the soul is immortal if it possesses a discipline, and that it is mortal if it is ignorant and does not possess a discipline.

If the point is made that an art sometimes is present in the soul and sometimes is not (and we

2. Aug. *Sol.* 2.13.24: Omne quod in subiecto est, si semper manet, ipsum etiam subiectum maneat semper necesse est. Et omnis in subiecto est animo disciplina. Necesse est igitur semper ut animus maneat, si semper manet disciplina. Est autem disciplina veritas et semper, ut in initio libri huius ratio persuasit, veritas manet. Semper igitur animus manet nec <umquam> animus mortuus dicitur.

3. Aug. *Imm. an.* 1.1.1: Si alicubi est disciplina nec esse nisi in eo quod vivit potest et semper est neque quicquam, in quo quid semper est, potest esse non semper, semper vivit, in quo est disciplina.

4. Aug. *Sol.* 2.19.33: A. Sed, quaeso, illa quae restant expedias quomodo in animo imperito, non enim eum mortalem dicere possumus, disciplina et veritas esse intelligantur. — R. Aliud ista quaestio volumen desiderat, si eam vis tractari diligenter

are well aware that something like that can be the case because of forgetfulness and ignorance), the varying nature of the presence also adds force to the argument for the immortality of the soul. It does so if we accept the following disjunction as valid and draw the consequences. Either there may be something in the soul which is not present to consciousness, or the art of music is not present in the soul of the trained musician when he is thinking only about geometry.⁵

Therefore, *De immortalitate animae* launches inquiry into the problems of both the immortality of the soul and the ignorant soul, thereby providing the proper starting point for the work accompanying *Soliloquia*.

Taking for granted that these problems should be dealt with in this work, Augustine starts the discussion by saying that there is such a reality as reason and that it is better than body.

Reason (*ratio*) is certainly either the soul itself or it is in the soul.⁶

Three other definitions are also enumerated as follows:

“Ratio” is either 1) the mind’s capacity of seeing, by which it looks at the truth directly and not through the body, or 2) the contemplation of the true, not through the body, or 3) the true itself which the soul contemplates.⁷

Among these definitions, the third one — the reason is the true itself which is contemplated — would remind the reader of the meaning in *Soliloquia* (2.21), in which he described the art of disputation as the true itself, because the rigid observance of its rules assured the truth of other disciplines. Augustine draws explicit attention to the “Ratio” in the third sense in the latter part of the work. Consequently, both the remaining problems from *Soliloquia* and the different kinds of the definition of the “Ratio” would affect the structure of the discussions.

1. First problem: the argument of the immortality of the soul. (1.1)
2. First definition of *ratio*: “Reason” is either the soul itself or it is in the soul. (2.2)
3. Augustine considers whether the *ratio* can be unchangeable. (3.3-4.5)
4. Second problem: Is the forgetfulness or ignorance detrimental to the immortality of the rational soul? (4.6)
5. Augustine considers the possibility of change in the rational soul. (4.6-5.9)
6. Second definition of *ratio*: “Reason” is the true itself which is contemplated. (6.10)
7. Augustine considers whether the *ratio* and soul can be inseparable. (6.11-16.25)

5. Aug. *Imm. an.* 4.6: At enim si ars aliquando est, aliquando non est in animo, quod per oblivionem atque imperitiam satis notum est, nihil ad eius immortalitatem adfert argumenti huius conexio, nisi negetur antecedens hoc modo: aut est aliquid in animo, quod in praesenti cogitatione non est, aut non est in erudito animo ars musica, cum de sola geometrica cogitat.

6. Aug. *Imm. an.* 2.2: Ratio profecto aut animus est aut in animo.

7. Aug. *Imm. an.* 6.10: Ratio est 1.) aspectus animi, quo per seipsum, non per corpus uerum intuetur, aut 2.) ipsa ueri contemplatio, non per corpus, aut 3.) ipsum uerum quod contemplatur.

Augustine's first concern for the immortality of the soul has led him to the problem of the unchangeable of the *ratio* and next to the consideration of the possibility whether or not the *ratio* and soul can be inseparable.

Although this work has received little attention, some scholars have examined the dependence of the argument on both Plotinus and Porphyry, thus emphasising the significance of Neoplatonism for Augustine's idea of the soul and the truth (Verbeke 1954; Dörrie 1959; Mourant 1969). While other scholars have shown the characteristics of the argument for the being, the so-called Augustinian metaphysics, in this work (Du Roy 1966; Zum Brunn 1969), Goulven Madec explains the exclusively philosophical view of the soul derived from Augustine's reading of the "*libri Platoniorum*." Madec accepts the influence from Porphyry on the spiritualism of Augustine, by which he could search for God and the soul based on the Platonic theory of the intellectual being (Madec 1987; Hadot, in *Encyclopaedia universalis*). However, there still exists a discrepancy not only in the views of his reliance on late antique philosophy but in the significance of the discussions in this work. Although it is very likely that he "does not revert again to this kind of demonstration" (Mourant 1969,9), it is more crucial than ever to examine the framework of his assumptions underlying arguments, which seems to develop further in his early thought.

DIFFICULTIES OF THE *DE IMMORTALITATE ANIMAE*

A synopsis of the argument for the immortality of the soul in *De immortalitate animae* is shown, as mentioned above.

If a discipline exists anywhere, it can only exist in something which is alive, and if it exists always, and if something in which a thing exists always cannot but exist always itself, that thing in which a discipline exists, itself exists always.⁸

This synopsis, which forms the conditional syllogisms, would be explained as the following.

Postulate: Thing in which something else always is, exists always.

A discipline exists anywhere in something which is alive.

A discipline exists always.

Thing alive, in which a discipline exists, is always alive.

In this argument, while some scholars have determined the similarities to that of Plotinus and Porphyry (e.g. Madec 1987,112), it should be indicated that the expressions of both "thing" and "something in which a thing exists" are equivalent to those of the "subject (*subiectum*)" and "that which is in the subject (*id quod in subiecto est*)" in

8. Aug. *Imm. an.* 1.1.1: Si alicubi est disciplina nec esse nisi in eo quod vivit potest et semper est neque quicquam, in quo quid semper est, potest esse non semper, semper vivit, in quo est disciplina.

Soliloquia (*sol.* 2.12.22), thus being relevant to the Aristotelian terminology considered in his *Categories* (Watson 1990,192; Dupuy-Trudelle 1998,1231 n.3). In chapter 2, Aristotle divided things into that “in a subject” and that “not in any subject”, and explained the former as follows.

(By ‘in a subject’ I mean what is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in.) For example, the individual knowledge-of-grammar is in a subject, the soul, but is not said of any subject; ... (*Categoriae* 2,1a24-26: trans. J. L. Ackrill)

By the phrase “in a subject”, he defined its dependency on the subject and the accident, like the colour of a wall, which is distinguished from inseparable properties. The latter, “not in any subject”, is designated the substance, as primarily being. Here, his words provide an example of the “individual knowledge-of-grammar”, while, in *De immortalitate animae*, Augustine refers to a discipline that includes the individual knowledge.

A discipline exists somewhere, since it exists, and whatever exists cannot be nowhere. Likewise, a discipline can only exist in something which is alive, for nothing which is not alive learns anything, and a discipline cannot exist in something which learns nothing.⁹

The proposition “whatever exists must exist somewhere” is already stated in *Soliloquia*, before Reason asked Augustine where the truth exists.

Reason: Does this proposition seem to you to be true: anything which exists must be somewhere? — Augustine: There is nothing on which I would be more inclined to agree with you. — Reason: And do you grant that truth exists? — Augustine: I do.¹⁰

It is important to note that Augustine applies this proposition “whatever exists must exist somewhere” not only to the truth (*sol.*) but also to a discipline (*imm. an.*), that is, the “thing exists in something which is alive.” He uses this proposition as valid both for being as the accident and for its subject. Consequently, it seems very likely that the word “being” is predicated of all things which exist. However, in *Categories*, Aristotle defined the individual knowledge as a thing “in a subject”. He must have refused to accept such a view as proposed in *De immortalitate animae*. Indeed, Aristotle considered the term “being” to be properly and primarily predicated of a thing in the primarily sense “being”, that is, its substance alone; on the other hand, an accident, that is, a thing which is in a subject is not predicated of being.

Difficulties arise from this argument for the immortality of the soul. First, it is hard to explain the reason why Augustine claimed that a discipline, that is, the “thing exists in something which is alive” as the accident “exists always.” Because, according to the

9. Aug. *Imm. an.* 1.1: Est autem alicubi disciplina; nam est et quicquid est, nusquam esse non potest. Item disciplina non potest esse nisi in eo quod vivit. Nihil enim, quod non vivit, aliquid discit nec esse in eo, quod nihil discit, disciplina potest.

10. Aug. *Sol.* 1.151.29: R. Verane tibi videtur ista sententia: Quidquid est, alicubi esse cogitur? — A. Nihil me sic ducit ad consentiendum.— R. Fateris autem esse veritatem? — A. Fateor.

view that Aristotle accepted, it is not proper to say that an accident as a thing “in a subject” always exists. It might be seen that an accident “in a subject” exists always in so far as its subject always exists. If so, it is likely that Augustine applies the phrase “exists always” to both the subject and the accident in the same meaning. However, from the Aristotelian point of view, nothing other than the subject is truly predicated of being. It can be seen that it derives from the second difficulty in his argument. Provided that a thing which is a subject exists always, Augustine first acknowledges that a discipline as an accident exists always, then states that the thing which is the subject and alive exists always. This sort of argument is the question-begging assertion. Presumably, these difficulties are caused by the dissimilarity in their understanding of being, thus introducing the difference of their formula for the dependency of the accident on the subject. As claimed by Aristotle, a difference between the subject and the accident both of which exist is the way of being. They both cannot be coherently stated as the things which exist always. The accident cannot be stated as being unless its subject can be stated as being. How do these difficulties get resolved? How does Augustine speak of being differently from Aristotelian mode of thinking?

AUGUSTINE'S UNDERSTANDING OF BEING

A valuable clue to discern his understanding of being is found in the expression as the following.

Likewise, something in which another thing exists always must itself exist always, for nothing which always exists will allow that at some time there will be taken from it that in which it always exists.¹¹

Concerning the relationship between “something in which another thing exists always” and “another thing”, he explains further in another passage of the work.

And so, if, as we said above [see 1.1], the soul is a subject in which a truth of reason exists inseparably, by that necessity by which things are shown to be present in a subject, and if only a living soul can be a soul at all, and if a truth of reason cannot exist in it if it is without life, and if such a truth is immortal, then the soul is immortal. For certainly a truth of reason could by no means remain unchanged if its subject had ceased to exist.¹²

Here a truth of reason is defined as “to remain (*manere*).” In this work, both words “to remain” and “to be” are exchangeably used, which would refer to a place of some kind. Indeed, when something remains or stops, it exists somewhere or in a certain state. The

11. Aug. *Imm an.* 1.1: Item nihil, in quo quid semper est, potest esse non semper. Nihil enim quod semper est, patitur sibi subtrahi aliquando id, in quo semper est.

12. Aug. *Imm. an.* 5.9: si anima subiectum est, ut supra diximus, in quo ratio inseparabiliter, ea necessitate qua quaeque in subiecto esse monstrantur, nec nisi viva anima potest esse anima nec in ea ratio potest esse sine vita et immortalis <est> ratio, immortalis est anima. Prorsus enim nullo pacto non existente subiecto suo inmutabilis ratio maneret.

phrase in the first passage, “nothing which always exists will allow that at some time there will be taken from it,” would also refer to a place of some kind where something exists. In fact, it implies that something would be taken from a place in which something exists together with it which always exists. It is already admitted that “a discipline exists anywhere” (*imm. an.* 1.1) and that, in his understanding of being, everything which exists is predicated of being. Thus, he refers to the “place” where everything, which exists, exists. But, according to the Aristotelian mode of thinking, he includes place among the accidental categories, and that, in short, to exist is not always to exist somewhere. From the Augustinian point of view, where does the “place” exist, which is referred to as “somewhere”?

We see the passage already quoted from the beginning of this work.

A discipline exists somewhere, since it exists, and whatever exists cannot be nowhere. Likewise, a discipline can only exist in something which is alive, for nothing which is not alive learns anything, and a discipline cannot exist in something which learns nothing.¹³

It is clearly admitted that the proposition “whatever exists must exist somewhere” (= “whatever exists cannot be nowhere”) should be relevant to all things which exist. With regard to a discipline, what does it mean to exist “somewhere”?

the things which are grasped by the senses are felt to be outside us and are contained in a place and as a result it is said of them that cannot even be fully grasped. On the other hand, things which are grasped by the intelligence are not understood to be positioned, as it were, in some place other than the soul which understands them; they are understood at the same time not to be contained in a place.¹⁴

It is not a place where a particular thing exists. Things are known to us in the intelligence which is not restricted to a particular place. An emphasis is given by the phrase “in some place other than the soul.” Augustine confirms that, when a discipline exists somewhere, it does not exist not only in a particular place where a particular thing exists but in the place where anything can exist. Thus, this is not the place for anything which exists anywhere.

Once again we see the passage from the beginning of this work. In order to prove that the human soul always alive, Augustine speaks about the proposition “whatever exists must exist somewhere,” and applies it to a discipline, thereby trying to show that “a

13. Aug. *Imm. an.* 1.1: Si alicubi est disciplina nec esse nisi in eo quod vivit potest et semper est neque quicquam, in quo quid semper est, potest esse non semper, semper vivit, in quo est disciplina.

14. Aug. *Imm. an.* 6.10: ea quae sensu capiuntur, extra etiam nos esse sentiuntur, et locis continentur, unde nec percipi quidem posse affirmantur. Ea uero quae intelliguntur, non quasi alibi posita intelliguntur, quam ipse qui intelligit animus. Simul enim etiam intelliguntur non contineri loco.

discipline can only exist in something which is alive." The following set of statements seems to be proposed by him.

A discipline exists anywhere in something which is alive.

But, anything in which something else always exists, must exist always.

Therefore, a discipline exists in the soul.

What is interesting to note is that he includes these two propositions, in which the same matter seems to be expressed but differently.

A discipline exists in something which is alive.

A discipline exists in the soul.

Does he think that there is a difference between these propositions? Indeed, he does. Augustine carefully examines that the latter proposition would be true. Why does he deal with two cases separately? It seems very likely that he attempts to make clear a "specific" dependency of the latter on the former, thereby giving careful consideration to the latter proposition. Then, what is a specific dependency? His way of forming the relationship between the thing which is alive and the soul would be relevant to it.

And every independent reality (*substantia*) is either alive or not, and everything which is not alive is soulless.¹⁵

Here Augustine builds a conceptual relationship between them. First, all reality are divided into two kinds of being: living things and things not alive. Second, all things not alive are designated as soulless. As a consequence, the soulless is grouped into the things not alive and the soul is grouped into living things. If this relationship is also maintained in these two propositions, before introducing the latter "a discipline exists in the soul," the former "a discipline exists in something which is alive" would serve to specify and define a discipline as the one classified into living things. By the word "in" in the former preposition, it is meant that a discipline is one of all things, which are common, in one way or another, to a discipline. Consequently, a discipline exists in anything living, among which it is determined to exist.

It is accepted that, from the limitation of the "place" where a discipline exists, his way of thinking about the being is applicable to both the substance and the accident. In the proposition "a discipline exists in something which is alive," something which is alive is not the accident but its subject. In the other proposition "whatever exists must exist somewhere," what is meant by the "somewhere" is the place, in which whatever exists (both the accident and its subject) exists. In the case of the accident, it takes the place in which its subject exists. Thus, Augustine claims that, in so far as either the accident or its subject exists, both exist as the substance. Indeed, he does not refer to the

15. Aug. *Imm. an.* 3,3: et omnis substantia aut vivit aut non vivit; atque omne, quod non vivit, ex anime est.

accident as having a particular mode of being. All that is understood is that the accidents exist with the support of its subject.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Augustine's understanding of being reveals two different responses to the difficulty with the argument for the immortality of the soul in this treatise. First, it makes it possible to resolve the difficulty involved in this argument.

A discipline exists in the soul.

But, a discipline exists always.

Therefore, the soul exists always.

It is already admitted that the difficulty is caused by the procedure, with which it is concluded that the soul (subject) exists always, if a discipline (accident) exists always. But, Augustine claims that, in so far as either the accident or its subject exists, both exist as the substance. It allows to accept the postulate that, if a discipline exists, its subject, that is, the soul exists. When the proposition "a discipline exists in the soul" is given, a discipline is supposed to exist always among those, of whatever is alive. In fact, this argument would rather explain the meaning implied in the proposition "a discipline exists in the soul." If a discipline in its subject, that is, the soul, exists always, the soul, that is, the subject of a discipline, exists always. However, although this explanation enables us to understand its meaning, it remains undeniable that the bodily things and the soul exist in their own distinctive way. This single, univocal way of explanation for the being seems to be only logical, conceptual division between them.

Second, his understanding of being allows us to give a considerable significance to this work. Even sporadically and briefly, with reference to this conceptual mode of being, Augustine turns to speak about being from the viewpoint of totality, in which each being comprises a part of the whole.

since every body is part of the sensible world and (extended), it approaches more closely the whole, the greater it is and the more place it occupies. The more it does this, the more fully it exists, for the whole exists more fully than the part.¹⁶

Therefore, all body in the universe has been made by some force and nature which is more powerful and valuable than body, a force which is not itself bodily. For if a body were to be made by another body, the universe could not have come into being. For the claim which we made at

16. Aug. *Imm. an.* 7.12: quoniam quodlibet corpus pars est mundi sensibilis, et ideo quanto maius est locique plus occupat, tanto magis propinquat uniuerso; quantoque id magis facit, tanto magis est. Magis enim est totum quam pars.

the beginning of this argument is absolutely true, nothing can be made by itself.¹⁷

...whatever the soul is *said* to be forced to through the body, it is not really through the body its is forced but through its own desires, about which enough has already been said. It is agreed by all that what is better than the rational soul is God.¹⁸ (*imm. an.* 13.22)

It is noteworthy that, in these passages, he thinks not only about the incorporeal nature of the maker which produces all bodily things but also about more or less being and its disposition towards either nothingness or the truth. Dependent on the view of every bodily things as a part of the universe is the supremacy of the incorporeal creator (*conditor*) which becomes the focus of his idea on the framework of created order. A belief in the importance of the order naturally figures in his thought on the hierarchy of created beings. Afterwards it continues to occur in connection with the mid-rank position of the soul, as in the succeeding treatise *De quantitate animae* (33.70-76) where Augustine explains about the movement of human soul towards the highest being. Although this treatise seems to be the fragmentary and incomplete "reminder", immediately after showing signs of improved understanding of the questions unsettled in *Soliloquia*, *De immortalitate animae* suggests a framework of the crucial problem for him, that is, the relationship of created things with the creator and the movement of the soul. Thus, it provides the central starting point of the problem of God and the soul in his early thought.

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17. Aug. *Imm. an.* 8.14: Uniuersum igitur corpus aliqua ui et natura potentiore atque meliore factum est, non utique corpore. Nam si corpus a corpore factum est, non potuit uniuersum fieri. Verissimum est enim quod in exordio ratiocinationis huius posuimus, nullam rem a se posse fieri.

18. Aug. *Imm. an.* 13.22: quamuis quidquid illud est, ad quod per corpus cogitur, prorsus non per corpus, sed per cupiditates suas cogitur, de quibus satis dictum est. Quod autem rationali anima melius est, omnibus consentientibus, Deus est.

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