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# PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN AUGUSTINE

## FERNAND VAN STEENBERGHEN'S STANDPOINT

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### **Abstract**

What does it evoke, after all, the term 'philosophy' in Christly times at the encounter of Philosophy as such with the Christian theology that is born? It evokes, as Plato had already stated, the lover of wisdom; it also evokes, with the sceptical ones, those who always search without ever finding. It finally evokes, together with stoics, the eschatological structure of conscience. For the Apostle of nations, the Gospel does not teach us how to become wiser, but how to save ourselves, it does not show us what Heaven is, it shows us how to go towards Heaven. With all these, Saint Paul does nothing else but to substitute to Greek wisdom Christ's wisdom, i.e. he eliminates the Greek wisdom in the name of the apparent Christian madness that is, in reality, wisdom. Instead of saying that the Gospel is the way to salvation, it is better to say that the salvation he preaches is the true wisdom precisely because it is salvation. I find here a certain difference between Philosophy and Theology. On how this difference works in Augustine I want to deal in the present text, starting from the interpretation that Steenberghen gives, in his turn starting from well-known authors. It is a battle between revelation and reason, a battle where revelation participates in part and reason in its whole, a battle that is not even that. And Augustine knows this well.

*Keywords:* Augustine, Philosophy, Christian philosophy, Theology, revelation, reason

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### **1. Identifying the problem**

When we intend to study Saint Augustine's 'philosophy' we encounter a preliminary difficulty, for those who study Hermeneutics and historians do not reach to any agreement either regarding the existence of such philosophy and either regarding the nature and personal characteristics of this type of philosophizing, if it exists. This disagreement betrays, in fact, the very profound divergence of opinions on the Philosophy's object and mission in general. How can we escape this mess? By naming Augustine's 'philosophy' what Augustine himself considers to be his philosophy [1]. Certainly the history of Philosophy would fail in its attempt if it were previously connected to a too precise conception on Philosophy's nature!

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Augustine's effort consisted in proving how did the encounter of intelligence (that needs a guide) with the revelation, which is offered, to take place. This fact implies the transition from reason to faith and, in the end, no part of Augustinian philosophy escapes to *credo ut intellegam*. This *credo* is however a reasonable and cautious act. Augustine does not request at any moment of the intellectual research the blind obedience that fideism, for example, applies. His conviction is the fact that the act of faith is never a betrayal of Spirit [1, p. 335]. However, on the other hand, desiring to save others from errors and to allow them to have as quickly as possible a 'Christian intelligence', the bishop of Hippo reduces to minimum the intellectual steps previous to faith. The consequence is that this 'minimum', that can be reduced to reflections and light observations, does not even deserve anymore the name of philosophy or wisdom! What foreruns is a simple preparation for faith and no one is being asked to be firstly brilliant so that he can then be faithful. This is a kind of *praeparatio* for the true philosophy that, since it comes from purified intelligence and corrected by faith, reaches, without any other help, into the possession of bliss.

## 2. Steenberghen vs. Gilson

For some, Christian faith must rest upon a philosophy. The statement seems inaccurate to Steenberghen. The reason? The act of faith implies enough foundations to believe, but the latter ones (the reasons) can be clearly different from Philosophy. Augustine could very well, without contradiction, have stated the rational fundament of faith and, at the same time, to exclude from his Christian philosophy the same fundament, as he actually does it! There is no doubt that the spring of true philosophy is, for Augustine, faith. Neither the divine authority, nor the faith that answers him are foreign to thinking and do not violate reason. Augustine's doctrine remains essentially intellectualist (*intellectum valde ama*), or this means precisely the fact that, following a statement of Labriolle [2], 'it does not fall in love with independence', but it obeys the Church. Gilson is not going to say something else: everything that is philosophy in Augustine is nothing else but the passing from faith to mystic, and Augustinian philosophy is the rational exploration of faith's content [3]. The true philosophy begins through an act of adhering at the supernatural order and in this adherence the will of flesh is released through grace, just as scepticism is released through revelation.

Gilson, says Steenberghen, has underlined with insistence the 'Christian' character of Augustinian speculation. Gilson goes so far as to state that outside Augustinianism we can only find anti-Christian philosophies or philosophies compatible with Christianity, but in order to be Christian *as philosophy*, a philosophy will be Augustinian or it won't be at all! Gilson's conclusion appears in the form: Augustinianism entirely is a philosophy, yes!, but it is a philosophy of a special nature, a Christian philosophy.

Steenberghen wonders: is this statement correct? He will answer no! How does he argue? “First of all, I do not find it appropriate to characterize the ensemble of his doctrines (those of Augustine – *n.m.*) through the term of ‘Christian philosophy’, because this doctrine is not a philosophy in the proper sense; the expression ‘Christian philosophy’ does not resist the analysis; anyhow, it is inapplicable to a doctrine that formally inspires from *Credo*” [1, p. 346]. If we were to thus conceive it, Augustine’s doctrine is very close to what we call today Theology. It could be said, if we follow this reasoning, that Augustine is formally a theologian due to the fact that his entire speculation is not and does not want to be anything else but the rational exploration of *Credo*. Rather Martin Grabmann is right: the true philosophy that Augustine opposes to pagan philosophy coincides with the speculative theology in the sense from nowadays of the expression. “Augustine’s work, formally theological regarding the intention and the method that characterizes it, is entirely pervaded by theological thinking and criticism. It is speculative theology and it is worth as much as it is worth the rational instrument that it uses.” [1, p. 347]. I share the opinion according to which if the Augustinian wisdom is today as well a source of fecund philosophical meditations, this is due to the speculative genius of the African bishop, a genius in the job of faith.

Very interesting is the opinion according to which, if we were to especially imagine, on the one hand a philosophy, on the other one a theology, in order to conceive the project of making from one the submissive and the servant of the other one (as Gilson thinks), it would be enough that him, the believer, develops his faith in theological speculation, and in this case it would be under the empire of the necessity to use reason’s services and to exercise the faculty of philosophizing; this latter one is suddenly raised at the rank, very honourable, of ‘servant of faith’. If things were like this, believes P. Mandonnet, unlike Steenberghen, Philosophy did not interfere but for servant and secondary purposes [1, p. 348]. For servant purposes, yes!, says Steenberghen, but not at all secondary.

Let me exemplify, following Steenberghen and those to whom he himself refers. According to J. Maritain, the intelligence born from faith is developed in wisdom that aims at the mystical union of the wise one (that became wise) with God [1, p. 338]. Augustine serves constantly from Philosophy, does not create any philosophical system and is, constantly, pragmatically and programmatic, above Philosophy, at least after conversion. This interpretation that Maritain gives here to Augustine’s doctrine does not regard anymore the philosopher’s competence, but the religious faith. But the philosophy thus conceived is no longer that philosophy that we normally know. For Augustine, the true philosophy is nothing but the intelligence that is in love with *Credo*, for “the true philosopher can only be a human being that loves God” [4]. It is certain that Augustine’s thinking is the least suitable for fragmentation (what is and how much is philosophy in Augustine!), and to isolate the philosophical elements is an operation always difficult and always delicate. Gilson makes it and finds in Augustine ‘the theologian that argues’ and ‘the Christian philosopher that

meditates'. The difference is the following: the theologian starts from a revealed given and tries to define its content rationally; the Christian philosopher starts from the same revealed given and subjects it to his reflections in order to see if and to what extent the content of the given coincides with the one of reason.

Romeyer is opposed to Gilson in the paper *Three problems of Augustinian philosophy* [5]. He says here that Augustine did not exclude from his Christian philosophy the rational establishment of the *reasons of credibility*, reasons that he actually considers starting point. In the first eight books of *De Trinitate*, says Romeyer, Augustine argues especially as theologian, but only the philosopher in Augustine will manage to make to some extent the content of his faith. Augustine's manner to work on the revealed information is not just the one of a theologian; Augustine's manner is that of a true philosopher. Shortly, this report is thus expressed by Gilson: "when it is reproached to those that define the method of Christian philosophy by means of *fides quaerens intellectum* the fact of mistaking theology and (also with) philosophy, we prove that (they) do not understand what theology is. For, although theology is a science, it does not intend to transform in intelligence the faith by means of which it adheres to its principles [...]. As long as the believer founds his assertions on the intimate beliefs that faith offers him, he remains a pure believer and did not yet enter the field of philosophy, but as soon as he finds among his beliefs truths that can become objects of science, he himself becomes a philosopher" [6].

Steenberghen finds the consequence of this reasoning strange, because it claims that if Theology is a science, Theology as such cannot be something like that but to the extent that the revealed given, firstly simple object of faith, also becomes an object for Science. From now, *fides quaerens intellectum* defines in a very precise manner the theologian's function and Theology's method. The problem is now: can *fides quaerens intellectum* be defined also as method of the Christian philosopher? In other words, is there any non-theological manner by means of which one starts from faith in order to get to intelligence? Gilson says that there is not! Christian philosophers start from the revealed given as from an object of study and wonder if and to what extent the content of this given coincides with the one of reason. The doubt is born from new, for if it is about the fact of confronting revelation's content with the one of reason in order to 'lighten' the revealed given through 'the light' of reason, then Theology is the one that steps in. Maybe, on the other hand, it is about search, case in which the revealed given does not intervene formally as source of light for reason; in this case we are in the field of Philosophy, and revelation is nothing but the opportunity or the extrinsic help that stimulates the search of the Christian philosopher. Steenberghen concludes: "it seems to me that *fides quaerens intellectum* reflects pretty unfortunately this method. Because it is not conceived for a believer, willing to give himself to this rational search, to take as starting point the revealed given; for the Christian, faith is always the essential source of light; the Christian deals with Philosophy, Philosophy is useful for him (but not indispensable as well); the Christian philosopher (it would be more correct to

say here: the Christian that philosophizes) is a Christian in search of science. But it is clear that this *personal attitude* does not define *Philosophy's method*, be it Christian or not. The Christian exercise of reason does not require for the Christian philosopher to walk away from the revealed given." [1, p. 343]

Steenberghen summarizes: either the revealed given formally intervenes as source of knowledge and then it necessarily is a principle, starting point of the research and we are in the field of Theology, or the revealed given does not intervene, case in which it does not either constitute the initial given from which it is started, and then we are strictly in the domain of Philosophy. The assumptions are contradictory and Gilson, here, does not convince.

### **3. Steenberghen's standpoint**

"In my thinking, says Steenberghen, there are without doubt *Christian philosophers*, there can be *philosophers of Christian inspiration*, but we could not recognize the truly technical signification of the expression *Christian philosophy*. This would mean to admit that this qualifier – Christian – can, in its formal sense, to determine in an intrinsic manner a philosophy. In my opinion, it can only exist in an extrinsic manner. Otherwise, it will be about 'the Christian philosophy' as it is about 'German philosophy' or 'modern philosophy' in order to fix geographic or chronologic limits of a fragment of history of Philosophy." [1, p. 344] In the same formal manner, as consequence, we cannot say about a philosophy that it is Christian without denying by means of this that it is simultaneously a philosophy as well. Since it is difficult to fix a vocabulary on this theme, Steenberghen suggests, as being more indicated and more favourable, to remove the expression 'Christian philosophy'. The expression is adequate only when it marks the intimate relations that unite the philosophical effort and faith in the human subject, for a Christian philosopher is not a philosopher and a Christian that acts in an independent manner. The Christian philosopher is a person who, as philosopher, takes into account the superior lights of faith.

Philosophy and revelation will always be extrinsic and *fides quaerens intellectum* is not the method of Christian philosophy, as Gilson believed. Maritain is closer to the standpoint Steenberghen likes. It perfectly respects the demands of the philosophical method, when it actually shows as well that revelation does not interfere in the elaboration of a philosophy, even of a 'Christian' one. What should be recommended is the strict respect of the autonomy of philosophical research, because in the other case the problem cannot be raised! The distinction between Theology and Philosophy must be clearly made on the line of content and methods, and only thus the unity of Christian wisdom becomes a synthesis that will respect the nature of its constitutive elements.

In the 'Foreword' of a paper written by Albert Garreau on Albert the Great, Mandonnet says about Albert the Great that he is a religious genius, but not a theological one as well and even less a philosophical one [7]. Then he

speaks of the servant and secondary purpose of Philosophy. The statement seems exaggerated and, according to Steenberghen, it really is. Because if one had to, in order to deserve the title of great philosopher, have written important treatises of Philosophy, then Saint Thomas as well would be a simple philosopher among so many others. Although he seems to correct Mandonnet's statement, Portalié does nothing else but to deepen it. Portalié says: "there is therefore a philosophy of Augustine (and here he is right – *n. m.*). But for him, Philosophy is intimately connected to Theology and we could not separate them. Also, we wouldn't study separately the theologian from the philosopher [...]. Augustine is not a person that we can divide." [8] In the second part of the statement, Portalié is only half right. If his saying satisfies the theologians, it does not satisfy the philosophers anymore. As a *philosopher*, Augustine sees to what extent the content of revelation coincides with that of reason. If he can distinguish, among the truths in which he believes, those that can become objects of Science, he does it since he captures the essential difference between a *believed* truth and a *known* truth. In the virtue of this difference Gilson (and here Steenberghen subscribes to Gilson's standpoint) will distinguish in Augustine's doctrine the philosophical elements that the Augustinian doctrine incorporates. In Augustine, as well as in Thomas as a matter of fact, philosophy is the exercise of reason that works in organizing of the given of experience in an intelligible system. Not far from this, Augustine himself speaks of the two categories of truths: some accessible only to faith, others reducible only to reason. This distinction allows the acceptance of a theology and of a philosophy at the bishop of Hippo. "If Saint Augustine hadn't noticed and hadn't admitted this distinction between speculation, whose indispensable principle is the *revealed given*, and reason, that aims the interpretation of the *given of experience*, any distinction introduced in the historic Augustinianism between Saint Augustine's theology and his philosophy should be sentenced as artificial and arbitrary." [1, p. 350].

In conclusion, it can be said that the Augustinian doctrine is a 'science' whose principle is faith, then that the effort of Christian wisdom leads to the beatifying possession of God, and this effort deserves the name of Philosophy. Steenberghen says that this 'true philosophy' ('Christian philosophy') is, in fact, a vast theology, a speculative one. This type of philosophy opposes Augustine to pagan philosophy. Augustine did not expressly care to organize his philosophical reflections precisely because Philosophy is assumed by him in the superior wisdom that is grafted on faith and feeds from (and with) it.

Symptomatic is for Augustine the absence of method. The situation can be explained precisely by means of the fact that his temperament did not obey but with great difficulty to the discipline of scientific type. *Faith* is his method. His writings are, most of the times, dictated by circumstances and answer to some private concerns. He is rather 'the doctor of faith' and, as such, he is concerned with presenting and protecting the orthodoxy of doctrine. I have the strange feeling, about method, that Augustine sensed that any method bears with self a fundamental vice: antinomy. The method cannot be method for

itself! I can find the method's structure by investigating the results of its behaviour. Gödel will raise this issue in the famous article from 1931: 'On the propositions formally undecidable from *Principia Mathematica* and from related systems' [9]. The idea is the following: "in comparison with any formal system of arithmetic, there are undecidable propositions, i.e. propositions that, based on the rules of deduction from the system, cannot be neither demonstrated, nor refuted [...]. In other words, the issue of the lack of contradiction of a formal system cannot be decided but by exiting that system." [10] Only the concept does not explain anything because clarity and distinction as well must be clarified and distinguished. Here's how, without any paradox, in order to feel good in science, Augustine manages to feel wonderful in faith (to the pietist Kant it will happen the same thing!).

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