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The Creation of the World and Self-Consciousness in Book XIII of the *Confessions*, §§ 1-3[1]

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Abstract: In the beginning of book XIII of the *Confessions*, Augustine interprets the first verses of the *Genesis* as an entanglement of narratives on the creation of the world, on the emergence of consciousness, and on the history of conversion. To this end, he resorts to Neoplatonic sources as well as to a Christian tradition almost consolidated at that time. One of his sources could have been Mario Victorinus' Trinity Treatises.

Keywords: Augustine of Hippo, Latin Patrology, Biblical Exegesis, Creation of the World, Christian Neoplatonism, *Confessions*.

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The hypothesis on which this text is based is that Augustine, in book XIII of the *Confessions*, by drafting a providential history of the world, retakes the same steps he took in the narrative of his personal story; and that by describing the creation of matter and its successive illumination by the divine Verb he also alludes both to the origin of self-consciousness in each individual and to the Christian's conversion. The legitimacy of the parallelism rests on a passage of the *De vera religione* (25, 46):

> Divine providence not only looks after individuals as it were privately, but also after the whole human race publicly. How it deals with individuals God knows, who does it, and they also know, with whom he deals. But how he deals with the human race God has willed to be handed down through history and prophecy.

Therefore, since the *De vera religione*, written around 391, Augustine establishes an analogy between the personal history, which is woven in the dialogue between God and every man, and the universal history, assigned to the Scriptures. This is the parallelism put to the test in book XIII.

The main subject of the book is an allegorical interpretation of the narrative of the *Genesis*. Under this view, the seven days are not, as in book XII, a narrative of the creation of the spiritual and material world anymore, but also, by means of the allegory, a providential history, from the creation of the world to the constitution of the Church, until the final judgement and the subsequent rest. By interpreting the narrative of the creation as an allegory of the universal history, it seems to me that Augustine closes the circle of his narrative by reconnecting the exegetic effort on the scriptures of books XI and XII to the exegetic effort on his own life in books I to X. The interpretation of the first verses of the *Genesis* presented by Augustine in book XIII is new, distinct from the one defended in book XII, but the exegetic principles exposed in that book, which admit a plurality of senses in the text, authorizes the attempt Augustine now proposes. As a reminder: in book XII, Augustine argues that the interpretation of a text cannot be based on the author's intention, which is unattainable, but on the comparison between the internal construction of the text and the set of facts that are consensual "truths" among the interpreters.[2] All the interpretations that avoid contradictions in the text or between the text and these truths are, in principle, correct. The best interpretation will be that which, on the one hand, is able to encompass a larger number of facts consensually true and, on the other hand, that which better obeys the *caritas*, that is: the interpretation which better ascribes to the text the most positive and effective meaning in the path to salvation. However, poorer interpretations, once they do not present internal contradictions or contradictions with consensual truths, should not be discharged insofar as they respond to the demands of capable readers (of the time when they lived, of cultural education, or of intelligence) of lower levels of comprehension. On the other hand, it is always possible that the most satisfactory interpretation in a historical period is overcome in the future by a better interpretation. Therefore, a holy text (but there are reasons to believe that Augustine, differently from Aquinas, extends this reasoning to any kind of text)[3], is open to several interpretations, all of them potentially true.

One of these cases, which interests us especially, is the double interpretation of the first expression of the *Genesis*, *In Principio*, as "in the divine Verb" (according to the exegetic tradition that goes back to Philo Judeaus) or as *initially*. In book XI, Augustine states that both are correct. In book XII, he supports the second exegesis by distinguishing between four kinds of anteriority (according to eternity, according to time, according to value, according to origin). In fact, the concept of anteriority according to eternity, whose difficulty is pointed out by Augustine without proper development the book XII, grounds the beginning of book XIII.

[2] GOLDSCHMIDT, 1984.

[3] See Virgil's example in *De utilidade credendi*.

The passage I intend to analyze is composed by the three first paragraphs of the book, in the modern editions. There, the Neoplatonic scheme of progression and conversion is alternatively applied to Augustine's personal history (§ 1 and the end of § 3), and to the genesis of creation (§ 2 and the beginning of § 3). I transcribe the first part of the first paragraph:

> I, 1. I call upon Thee, O my *God, my mercy*[4], Who createdst me, and forgottest not me, forgetting Thee. I call Thee into my soul which, by the longing Thyself inspirest into her, Thou preparest for Thee. Forsake me not now calling upon Thee, whom Thou preventedst before I called, and urgedst me with much variety of repeated calls, that I would hear Thee from afar, and be converted, and call upon Thee, that calledst after me; for Thou, Lord, blottedst out all my evil deservings, so as not to *repay into my hands*[5], wherewith I fell from Thee; and Thou hast prevented all my well deservings, so as to repay the work of Thy hands wherewith Thou madest me; because before I was, Thou wert; nor was I any thing, to which Thou mightest grant to be; and yet behold, I am, out of Thy goodness, preventing all this which Thou hast made me, and whereof Thou hast made me.

The book begins with an invocation, as it is used to happen in the *Confessions* every time Augustine starts a new task. These invocations are never generic, but always oriented by the main focus of what will follow – moreover, sometimes they covertly anticipate the solutions that will be proposed argumentatively, as if the answer was already embedded in the question. In this case, Augustine insists in God's role in his life, characterized by the relation of anteriority. The whole paragraph is inscribed under the sign of anticipation or advance (*preventio*): God inspired, beforehand, the very invocation Augustine addresses him; God, who made him, remembers him before he remembers God; he came before being invoked and made Augustine invoke him; God rewards him with merits he still does not have; above all, he made him before he was, therefore, before he deserved to be.

The main utterance, which introduces the reflection of the following paragraphs, is the following:

> because before I was, Thou wert; nor was I any thing, to which Thou mightest grant to be; and yet behold, I am, out of Thy goodness, preventing all this which Thou hast made me, and whereof Thou hast made me.

And yet behold, I am (*et tamen, ecce sum*): the consciousness of existence can only happen as existent. We remember that in book I (§ 9) the beginning of life was wrapped in mystery:

> And, lo! my infancy died long since, and I live. But Thou, Lord, who for ever livest, and in whom nothing dies: for before the foundation of the worlds, and before all that can be called "before," Thou art, and art God and Lord of all which Thou hast created: in Thee abide, fixed for ever, the first causes of all things unabiding; and of all things changeable, the springs abide in Thee unchangeable: and in Thee live the eternal reasons of all things unreasoning and temporal. Say, Lord, to me, Thy suppliant; say, all-pitying, to me, Thy pitiable one; say, did my infancy succeed another age of mine that died before it? was it that which I spent within my mother's womb? for of that I have heard somewhat, and have myself seen women with child? and what before that life again, O God my joy, was I any where or any body? For this have I none to tell me, neither father nor mother, nor experience of others, nor mine own memory.

The passage alludes to the problem of the origin of souls, on which there had not been a consensus[6] yet, but the long item based on aporias (stable causes of what is unstable, immutable origins of what is mutable etc.) obviously refers to the relation between eternity and time. In book XIII, the mystery of the origin of the soul is taken further, to the mystery of the transition from nothing to being. Why has God created the world? Certainly not by necessity, but by kindness. But how is it possible to be kind with something that does not exist? Augustine cannot resort to the platonic narrative of an order granted to chaos because that would imply the existence of a disordered matter not created by God (the Manichean thesis). But neither can he be satisfied with the thesis of a principle that eternally generates the world as actualization of that

[4] Sl 59(58):18 (Vulgate).

[5] Sl 18(17):21.

[6] Check *De libero arbitrio*, III, p. 56 ff.

which it contains in potentiality (the Neoplatonic thesis). This would imply the creation of the world by necessity of perfection (nothing can be in potentiality in God; everything is necessarily in actuality), not by a free act of the divine will. In addition, as we will see further, this same difficulty has already been investigated by the "platonic books" that serve as reference to Augustine.

The issue I intend to explore is precisely the status of this previous kindness. How can kindness exist without an object? First, does kindness imply love or is it a kind of love? Augustine avoids this term here and not by chance: in fact, as Augustine affirms in many occasions (for example, in question 34 of the *83 Diverse Questions*, he resumes a famous passage of *Phaedrus*), love is a desire generated by an object outside itself. Kindness, on the contrary, as we shall see, is a state of plenitude, at least in God's case: it does not imply lack, or an object different from itself, since in this case the object is generated by kindness and not the contrary.

Indeed, the conclusion of the first paragraph helps removing any interpretation that implies a lack on God's side:

> For neither hadst Thou need of me, nor am I any such good, as to be helpful unto Thee, my Lord and God; not in serving Thee, as though Thou wouldest tire in working; or lest Thy power might be less, if lacking my service: nor cultivating Thy service, as a land, that must remain uncultivated, unless I cultivated Thee: but serving and worshipping Thee, that I might receive a wellbeing from Thee, from whom it comes, that I have a being capable of well-being.

God's perfection does not entail, in order to be complete, the creation of something – not even as the object over which he exerts his kindness; therefore, it is not the case of a desire or love generated by a lack. Neither the man's action, nor his devotion, add something to God. Action and devotion, on the contrary, complete the man because they enable the transition from *being to being good* (it is evident that there is reference here to the refrain that closes each step of the creation in the *Genesis*: *And God saw that it was good*, and that Augustine will explore next). I now move to the second paragraph, which in my view is decisive:

> II, 2. For of the fulness of Thy goodness, doth Thy creature subsist, that so a good, which could no ways profit Thee, nor was of Thee (lest so it should be equal to Thee), might yet be since it could be made of Thee. For what did *heaven and earth*, which Thou madest *in the Beginning*, deserve of Thee? Let those spiritual and corporeal natures which Thou madest *in Thy Wisdom*[7], say wherein they deserved of Thee, to depend thereon (even in that their several inchoate and formless state, whether spiritual or corporeal, ready to fall away into an immoderate liberty and far-distant unlikeliness unto Thee; the spiritual, though without form, superior to the corporeal though formed, and the corporeal though without form, better than were it altogether nothing), and so to depend upon Thy Word, as formless, unless by the same Word they were brought back to Thy Unity, indued with form and from Thee the One Sovereign Good were made *all very good*.[8] How did they deserve of Thee, to be even without form, since they had not been even this, but from Thee?

It is precisely the distinction between being and being good, which closes the previous paragraph, that enables the explanation contained in the second paragraph. It is a hard and very succinct passage, but there is condensed an already secular discussion, which had already achieved, at the time Augustine writes, a very high degree of complexity. At first sight, it echoes the *Timaeus* (29 e):

> [The demiurge] was good, and nothing good is ever characterized by mean-spiritedness over anything; being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to be as similar to himself as possible.

But in Plato, as we have seen, bringing things to the resemblance of good (that is, to the ideal form) presupposes the preexistence of things not yet completed (in the double sense of not being completed and of not having an end). Augustine's formulation seems more complex: the spiritual and corporal

[7] Sl 104(103):24.

[8] Gn 1:28.

natures are created by God *in his wisdom*, but in a way that they would remain suspended in it, in a kind of limbo between being and not being, if the Word would not call them back, granting them a form. There is, therefore, so to speak, a creation in two steps: the one of the unformed natures, followed by the one of the granting of form through illumination.

As I have said, the solution does not coincide with the one proposed by Augustine in book XII. There, Augustine assigned the solution to a hypothetical interlocutor, as a possible interpretation, but not as that one he endorsed. That would be the following: in the first verse of the *Genesis*, the sky and the earth would mean, respectively, the already formed spiritual matter and the still unformed corporal matter. The expression "invisible and unordered earth" and "darkness over the abyss" would both refer to the unformed matter, which would receive corporal form through *fiat lux*. In the interlocutor's interpretation, which Augustine now adopts, *heaven and earth* indicate spiritual and corporal matter, both still unformed; "invisible and unordered earth" refers to the unformed corporal matter; "darkness over the abyss", to the unformed spiritual matter. Both would receive the form through *fiat lux*. The change in the interpretation can be justified by a change of focus: in book XII, Augustine presents a cosmology by means of the opposition between a celestial Jerusalem, eternally united with God, and the temporal world. Book XIII deals with the spiritual history of salvation and, therefore, with the manner God gives form to the spirit in history. The plurality of meanings helps the *caritas* choose in each case the most adequate exegesis to its scope.

But the text of the second paragraph says more than that. In order to understand the solution he proposes, it is necessary to include it in a historical niche of investigations on the creation of the world from a principle, which goes from Aristotle to the neoplatonics.[9] The issue, as it was structured after Plato, is, in a very schematic way, the following: it is necessary to stipulate a simple, eternal, and immutable principle for everything that is composed, temporal, and mutable. So, the difficulty is the manner such principle could be the efficient cause of everything that is temporal and mutable, without postulating in it some kind of action or temporal variation. A classic solution is provided by Aristotle, formulated from the notion of movement (*Metaphysics*, Λ 7, 20-25):

> there is something which is always being moved in an unceasing motion and this motion is in a circle [...]. Consequently, the first heaven must be eternal. There is also, therefore, something which causes its motion[10]; and since that which is moved and causes motion is an intermediate, there is a mover which causes motion without being moved, being eternal, and substance, and activity. This is how the objects of desire and of intellect cause motion; they cause motion without being moved.[11]

According to Aristotle's reasoning, the first principle could not be an efficient cause because, in that case, in order to create movement, it should move itself. It will be, then, a final cause, that is, an end *to which* the rest moves. In fact, love and comprehension move in the direction of an object, without the object acting in order to create this movement. But Aristotle adds,

> The primary objects of these are the same. For what appears to be good [*tó phainómenon kalón*] is an object of appetite [*epithymeton*], while that which is good [*tó on kalón*] is the primary object of wish [*bouletòn*]. And it is rather that we desire something because it seems good, than that it seems good because we desire it; for thinking is a principle.

The difference between *boulésis* and *epithymia* (which Cicero, in the *Tusculanae,* translated as *voluntas* and *appetitus,* respectively) is that in the *boulésis* the object to be desired is established by rational means. There

[9] On this matter, I follow ROUX, 2004.

[10] Reference to the principle mentioned in the *Physics*, VIII, 5, 19 (ARISTÓTELES, 1995, p. 419): Everything which is in motion is moved by another.

[11] Aristotle, 2019, p. 31

is, therefore, an object in direction to which the whole universe moves, not because the latter is created by the former, but because the universe finds its completeness in it. In this regard, Aristotle says (1027b 15):

> On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and nature.

"Depend" translates *ertetai*, passive of *airô*, which means "to raise", "to elevate", "to suspend". Thus, the translation "are suspended" is common. Plotinus, in treatise 38 (VI, 7: *How the Multiplicity of the Ideas Subsist. The Good*), about which we will talk again, uses a term of the same root (*exartéseis*; 42, 5) to recommend:

> For thus you will leave each of them as they are and will make the things which come after depend upon those higher realities which exist in independence as the later things circle round them.

The expression is important to us because Augustine uses a very similar one in the passage we previously read:

> and so to depend upon Thy Word, as formless (…).

However, I have still not found any evidence that the family of expressions derived from the verb *airô* was translated by Latin authors, as by the Latin modern languages, by expressions derived from the verb *suspendere*. The approximation, therefore, remains hypothetical. Furthermore, the meaning in Augustine seems different: it is not a permanent dependency, but an intermediary state of suspension, which God solves by calling back the natures and by granting them a form.

Another point of contact between Aristotle's and Augustine's solution is worth emphasizing. Both are finalistic: in Aristotle, it is the beautiful as object of desire and knowledge that maintains the world in movement; in Augustine, nature arises already directed to God, being, towards being good (check the first paragraph of book I: *nos fecisti ad te*, you made us directed to you). In fact, creatures exist because existence is better (that is, closer to good) than nothing. This seems to be the meaning of the scale of values proposed by Augustine:

> the spiritual, though without form, superior to the corporeal though formed, and the corporeal, though without form, better than were it altogether nothing (…).

Therefore, there is a scale of values – nothing, unformed corporal, formed corporal, unformed spiritual, formed spiritual – that is not a logical or chronological sequence: because from nothing comes the unformed corporal and spiritual, so they can, then, be formed.

But the similarities end there. Aristotle's solution is cosmological, not cosmogonical: it concerns the structure of the world, not its generation. Indeed, it is incompatible with any cosmogony: if generation is movement and if movement is determined by desire, there must be a desiring subject previous (at least logically) to movement, therefore, eternal and uncreated. Besides that, the way Aristotle defines the first principle excludes any voluntary act on its side:

> It is a way of life of a kind [the prime motor's] which is the best possible […]. And thinking in itself is of what is best in itself, and the highest kind of thinking is of the highest kind of what is best. And it is itself which the intellect thinks, by sharing in the object of thought.

Let us recall a passage from the *Eudemian Ethics*, Book VIII: life is perception and knowledge, and knowledge and perception are the supreme pleasure in themselves. Thus, men want to live. Therefore, if the life of the Principle is the most excellent, it must be knowledge and perception or, in short: thinking. But because thinking is the most excellent way of life, it is also the most excellent object of thinking. Thus, the most excellent thinking is the thinking that thinks thinking (that thinks the act of thinking itself, but

not according to any object). This thinking that thinks itself is the final cause towards which the universe moves and that the universe desires.[12]

Plotinus responds to the *Metaphysics*, Λ 7, mainly in treatise 38 (VI, 7: *How Was the Multiplicity of Ideas Created. The Good*). Briefly, Plotinus criticism consists in perceiving that, if it is the thought of itself that makes the final end mostly desirable, this is not mostly desirable by itself, but due to this activity. If, on the other hand, the thought of itself is the ultimate end in actuality, then "thinking", in this context, is the ground or the principle of thinking, not the activity of thinking. For, as the principle of thinking, says Plotinus, thinking does not think, just as the movement, as principle, does not move itself. For this reason, Plotinus adopts Aristotle's definition of the prime mover in the second hypostasis of his system, the Intelligence, but he denies that it can be extended to the first principle. In short, his criticism comes down to this: it is not possible that an activity (even a reflexive one, like the thought that thinks itself) can be the principle because all activity is movement, therefore, it presupposes something that generates it (according to Aristotle himself in the *Physics*, VIII, already quoted). Thus, intelligence is either an activity, and then it presupposes a prior principle, or, if it is itself the generator, it is not activity, but the principle that generates activity.

Therefore, we are back to the problem of the creation of the world, which Aristotle circumvented carefully: how to go from the absence of activity to activity, from the immutable to the mutable? In order to understand the Neoplatonic solution, it is necessary to take another tradition into account, which emerges in Medium Platonism, but which has an almost universal reach and which was resumed in a scope that goes from the Chaldean oracles to the Neopythagorean currents, influencing, after all, the post-Plotinian Neoplatonism and the formation of the dogma of the Trinity in Christianity. It proposes a triad of principles composed of being, life (or potency), and intelligence (or wisdom). Life is the generating principle, whereas intelligence is the reflexive principle in which being turns to itself, mirrors itself, and recognizes itself. Three instances are embedded in the first principle, which subsequently (according to a logical posteriority, not a chronological one) actualize or externalize in distinct principles. For this thesis to make sense, it is necessary to replace the Aristotelian concept of potency, as a mere possibility that needs an exterior agent to actualize itself, by a concept of Stoical derivation, according to which potency is the natural impulse of a determined entity to act and to transform itself without external intervention. It is in this way, for instance, that in the Stoical cosmology the primal fire generates the elements and the single bodies and, then, reabsorbs them in itself. Nonetheless, the adoption of this scheme entail two fundamental steps:

1. The vector of the impulse that generates movement is inverted: if the world moves towards principle, it is because the principle created it as a world in movement. The desire of the world towards the principle responds to a prior desire or impulse, from the principle towards the world. We will see next what desire means in this context.

2. Even if one states that being, life, and intelligence are only potentially in the principle, without prejudice to unity and simplicity, it does not actually concern a so simple simplicity anymore, at least from the point of view of human reason. It is necessary to establish the relation between the three principles or whether one or all of them can be identified with the first principle. Would life and intelligence be powers or predicates of being (which would therefore occupy the first place), or would they be identical to it (intelligence would also be being and life etc.) by only changing the point of view according to which the first principle is named? Or, finally, would they all be derived from a first principle that remains beyond them? The first hypothesis is the weakest one because, by

[12] See KÜHN, 2009, specially "Partie finale: Les prédécesseurs de Plotin", pp. 313-416.

distinguishing substance and powers in the principle, the principle stops being simple. The dogma of Christian trinity, maybe based on a certain Neoplatonic interpretation (Porphyry), inclines to the first of the other two hypothesis. Plotinus, seeking to preserve the simplicity of the principle, prefers the second: the One would be beyond thinking and beyond any activity.

In a treatise focused specially on the issue of knowledge of oneself (V, 3[49]: *The Hypostasis Known and What Is Beyond*), Plotinus refers to the One also as *parousia* (we could translate it as *being-there* or *presence*). Nothing can be attributed to this initial unity or presence, not even being because being is not the origin, but the origin thought of, and, thus, already objectified by intelligence. In other words, intelligence, by thinking its origin, objectify it in the most general of the genera, Being. This activity of intelligence, in turn, is Life or the Soul of the world, which by thinking Being, also thinks the totality of possible beings, that is, the world (Plotinus, therefore, inverts the traditional order of the Medium-Platonic triad, which understood Potency or Life as prior to intelligence).

Notwithstanding, the question of how intelligence and life emerge from a principle outside being remained. On that matter, Plotinus finds himself in difficulty. In treatise V, 4 (7: *How That Which Is After the First Comes From the First And on the One*), states (1, 25):

> If the First is perfect, the most perfect of all, and the primal power, it must be the most powerful of all beings and the other powers must imitate it as far as they are able. Now when anything else comes to perfection we see that it produces, and does not endure to remain by itself, but makes something else. This is true not only of things which have choice, but of things which grow and produce without choosing to do so, and even lifeless things, which impart themselves to others as far as they can: as fire warms, snow cools, and drugs…

One should notice that Plotinus does not say that the First, because it is perfect, must necessarily generate (which would restrict his freedom), but that the fact that things generated by it also generate, and that they are necessarily resemblance of what generated them, enables the deduction, through an inference *a posteriori*, that the First also generates in this way. But, after all, the explanation remains in the field of analogy: in comparison with the behavior of the things that are, we imagine that which is beyond being. It is worth remembering that this treatise is initial, whereas the ones previously quoted are among the philosopher's latest texts. In a further treatise (V, 1 [10]: *The Primary Hypostasis*), Plotinus attributes this effusion potency rather to the Soul (which corresponds to Life in the Medium-Platonic triad):

> Just as a thought in its utterance is an image of the thought in the soul, so soul itself is the expressed thought of Intellect, and its whole activity, and the life which it sends out to establish another reality: as fire has the heat which remains with it and the heat which it gives.

Here, besides a more explicit reference to plenitude, Plotinus resorts to the analogy, dear to Augustine (even by referring to the Johannine prologue), of the act of creation with the production of a voiced word (*verbum prolatum*) from a thought word (*verbum mentis*). Thinking is not altered or emptied by the voiced word it produces. Thus, it can be used as a template for the creation of the world by the divine intelligence. But, again, it is the generation already actualized because thinking presupposes a source or a principle from which it can think and think itself.

Let us go back to Augustine's text. It is very akin to Plotinus' treatise 7, to the point that we can think it was amid his sources. The solution to the enigma set in the first paragraph is found in the beginning of the second paragraph:

> II, 2. For of the fulness of Thy kindness, doth Thy creature subsist, that so a good, which could no ways profit Thee, nor was of Thee (lest so it should be equal to Thee), might yet be since it could be made of Thee.

In spite of the Plotinian reminiscences (the plenitude), the great novelty here is that kindness replaces intelligence as generating principle. Later (in the *De trinitate*), faithful to the dogma of Trinity, Augustine understands the Medium-Platonic triad as an expression of identity of a single principle (God in three persons) and not as a derivation from a prior principle and transcendent to it. Being, intelligence, and life (Being, Wisdom, Love; Father, Son, and Spirit) do not descend from the single God, they are the single God. However, one can say in general that Augustine follows a Plotinian model, with the exception of a much sharper distinction between generation (which is implicit in God's essence, insofar as this essence is trinitarian) and creation (which is external to God's essence and voluntary).

Mario Vitorino's antiarian treatises are texts more akin to Augustine. We should recall that, according to Pierre Hadot, they depend largely on Porphyry's philosophy. There are indications, not only in the *Confessions*, but also in other Augustinian works (*83 Questions*, *De trinitate*), that Augustine knew these treatises. However, it is not relevant to our argument to establish whether he had contact with these theses by means of Vitorino's works or directly through the Platonic books he had read in the translation of the African rhetoric. What is important to emphasize are the following points.

1. In the treatise *Ad Candidum*, 14, 10 ff., Vitorino writes:

> For that which is above the *on* (existent) is the hidden (*absconditum*) *on* (existent). Indeed the manifestation of the hidden is begetting, if indeed the *on* (existent) in potentiality (*potentia*) begets the *on* (existent) in action (*operatione*). (…) For the embryo is not nonexistent before birth but it is in hiding and by birth there comes into manifestation the *on* (existent) in action which was *on* (existent) in potentiality; and so that, to tell the truth, *tou ontos* (the existent) comes to manifestation by the action of *on* (existent). Indeed the action begets outside. But what begets it? That which was within. What therefore was within – in God? Nothing other than *to on* (the existent) the truly *on* (existent), but rather the *proon* (preexistent), which is above the universal *on* (existent) genus that is above the *ontos onta* (truly existents), the *on* (existent) by potentiality having now become act. This is Jesus Christ.

In Porphyry/Vitorino's scheme everything translates into an in and out, hidden and manifest dynamics. Being, which is the most general object that intelligence can think of, is already in potentiality in the first principle, which is above intelligence. But because it is in potentiality, it tends naturally to actualize, that is, according to Vitorino's vocabulary, to manifest itself.

2. In the first treatise *Contra Ario* (49, 9 ff.), Vitorino is more detailed (I scrap many passages of the quotation): it is the

> One without existence, without substance, without knowledge – for it is above all that – infinite, invisible, wholly indiscernible for every other, both for those within it and those which are after it, even those who come from it (…). This is God, this is the Father, preexisting preintelligence and preexistence keeping himself and his own happiness in an immobile movement (…).

But this One

> being One in its simplicity, it unites these three powers: universal existence, universal life, and happiness, but all these realities are the One and the simple One, and by predominance in the power of "to be", that is, of existence, are present the powers of life and happiness. For the power which is the power of existence, by the fact that it is and that it exists is the power likewise of life and of happiness; it is, itself and through itself, idea and *logos* of itself, having both "to live" and "to act" in its own nonexistent existence (…). Therefore with this One existing, the One leapt forth, the One who is One, one in substance, one in movement, since existence is also movement. This one is therefore essentially One but not as the Father is essentially in himself One (…). But this One whom we call the One who is One is life, life which is infinite movement, creative of others (…), of all existents (*efferix aliorum*) (…).

Vitorino is complex and tortuous (Jerome considered him almost incomprehensible), but in this excerpt is possible to glimpse the structure he proposes: a One absolutely transcendent, already containing in itself, in potentiality, being, life, and beatitude, but predominantly the potency of being, which implies life

and beatitude; a second One (One-One), which is idea and Logos of the first; and, finally, Life, generator of what is outside the One. We would be tempted to identify the first One with the Father (as Vitorino explicitly affirms), the second (idea and Logos) with the Son, and Life with the Holy Ghost. But shortly after that passage, Vitorino identifies not only the Logos, but also Life, with the Son:

> This is the Son, the *Logos who is "with God", this one "through whom all things have been made* (...). For, from advancing from its power, and, as it were, from an immobile preexistence, where it was not in movement insofar as it was a power, this movement nowhere in response, awakening itself to act, hastening to produce all kinds of movement, truly a life which is infinite, this movement in its vivifying action, has in some way, appeared outside. Necessarily therefore life has been born. But life is the Son, life is movement, life is substance which comes forth from vital preexistence (...).

The Logos Son, the Father's form (idea) and, therefore, the One already delineated, objectified from the original indetermination, is also Movement Life, actualization of the generating potency that projects itself out, manifesting itself in life (vivifying action) present in the world. But, in turn, this act of enlivenment unfolds in two (51, 19 ff.):

> Therefore this existence of all existents is life, and insofar as life is movement, it received a kind of feminine power, because it desired to vivify. But since, as has been shown, this movement, since it is one, is both life and wisdom, life converted to wisdom and, what is more, to the paternal existence, better still, by a movement of return toward the paternal father, and having been fortified by that, life, returning to the Father, has been made male.

Let us put aside the distinction between the feminine and the masculine principle in the triad, recurring in the gnostic literature, but which Augustine explicitly rejects in book XII of the *De trinitate*. What interest us, due to the direct or indirect resonances with the Augustinian texts, is the mechanism of production of the enlived entities from the Father. The latter initially unfolds in his image and form, which is also the exteriorization of that which is before-the-entity to the level of the existent. Through the very movement of its exteriorization the image is also life and, as infinite and indefinite life is the generator of the finite lives of entities. But, in turn, this indefinite life turns to its origin and retraces in reverse the steps already traced: wisdom, the Father's existence (the Son), the Father's potency. Surely, Vitorino analyses the intratrinitarian structure, whereas Augustine, in the text at issue, refers to created matter. However, the mechanism seems similar to me: there is a movement that starts from God, as an outpouring of his plenitude, generating spiritual and material matter. But this enlivenment would remain indetermined and disperse if God did not call it back to its unity (*revocarentur ad unitatem tuam*) through *fiat lux* illumination and, thus, if he did not grant it a form. In this coming-to-form through the work of the highest good, all created matter becomes *very good*. The movement that creates being from God is completed by the inverse movement, but also generated by God, towards the good being. In this movement, however, the creature not only reconnects with God, recognizing in him the source of its unity, but also stops being suspended in him by acquiring its own form. In treatise 49, already quoted, Plotinus described in similar words the relation between the rational soul and the intellect: it is precisely by recognizing itself as imperfect reflection of the Intellect that the rational soul recognizes itself as different from its source and, thus, reaches consciousness of itself. Self-consciousness, according to Plotinus, is precisely the knowledge of the difference or lack that separates the soul from the universal intellect.

3. We still have to investigate how we should understand the divine kindness in terms of desire. Vitorino also provides precious clues on the issue (52, 20 ff.):

> While the paternal "to be" dwells in response, the "to be" of life, retaining its identity with the "to be" of God, is moved by its own power in dependence upon the paternal father (*a patrica potentia dependens*). And since all power is natural desire (*naturalis voluntas*), life willed to move itself, because in it there is awakened, without provoking passion, a natural movement which is accomplished in substance to attain that which is life. For a natural desire is not a passion.

Voluntas here, which, as we have seen, is the word that translates *boulésis* in Cicero, is not the rational choice of an alternative, but natural movement, ultimately assimilable to the stoic *potentia*, that is: an impulse towards the development inherent to the subject, an impulse that does not need an agent or an exterior object in order to be awakened.

The progression and conversion scheme, as it is found in the texts we have quoted, from Plotinus to Vitorino, has three relevant consequences to the Christian thinking and, more specifically, to Augustine:

4. On the ontological level, if the source is being, the other produced through it could only not be if it would not become imitation of the being from which it derives. Only then it will be not only another, but another being, although being extends to it only as image or imitation of the true being. Before that, he remains suspended by the divine wisdom as mere potentiality waiting for an actualization. In book XII, § 3, when speaking about the unformed matter, Augustine says that it was

> and yet not altogether nothing; for there was a certain formlessness, without any beauty (*non tamen omnino nihil: erat quaedam informitas, sine ulla specie*)

and in § 6 he insists:

> Might one say, "a nothing something", an "is, is not," I would say, this were it (*Si dici posset nihil aliquid et est non est, hoc eam dicerem*).

5. On the noetic level, Plotinus' treatises 38 and 49 converge: by trying to go back to the source of the act of thinking, by canceling the dispersion of the individual thoughts, the thinker constitutes in his thinking the figure of himself as subject of his act of thinking, imitation or copy of the transcendent source of thinking from which they think. In other words: thinking is only present in our minds in the form of acts of thinking, that is, it is never empty. Notwithstanding, we must understand it as prior to these acts of thinking (anteriority of origin, as in book XII). This thinking previous to the acts of thinking is a *Parousia*, in the Plotinian sense of mere presence, entirely indetermined.

6. Clearly, the scheme has also a soteriological meaning: it is a double movement of dispersion and conversion of the soul towards salvation. The third and last paragraph I intend to analyze refers precisely to this:

> How did corporeal matter deserve of Thee, to be even *invisible and without form*? seeing it were not even this, but that Thou madest it, and therefore because it was not, could not deserve of Thee to be made. Or how could the inchoate spiritual creature deserve of Thee, even to ebb and flow darksomely like the deep, -unlike Thee, unless it had been by the same Word turned to that, by Whom it was created, and by Him so enlightened, become light; though not equally, yet conformably to that Form which is *equal unto Thee*?[13] For as in a body, to be, is not one with being beautiful, else could it not be deformed; so likewise to a created spirit to live, is not one with living wisely; else should it be wise unchangeably. *But good it is for it always to hold fast to Thee*[14]; lest what light it hath obtained by turning to Thee, it lose by turning from Thee, and relapse into life resembling the darksome deep. For we ourselves also, who as to the soul are a spiritual creature, turned away from Thee our light, were in that

[13] 3 Fl 2:6. Cf. *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, I, 9: "The unformed matter, both spiritual and material [...], did not imitate the form of the Verb always united with the Father, through which God says all eternally, while, unequal to Him, who supreme and primarily is, leaned towards nothing due to its unformity; but now [it] imitates the form of the Verb always and immutably united with the Father, for it received the form by grace of a proportional conversion to its kind, becoming complete creature." (My translation)

[14] Sl 73(72):28.

life *sometimes darkness*[15]; and still labour amidst the relics of our darkness, until in Thy Only One we become *Thy righteousness, like the mountains of God*. For we have been *Thy judgments, which are like the great deep*.[16]

With refined technique, Augustine gradually reconducts the reader from the metaphysical to the existential level. Note that the first sentence almost literally resumes paragraph 1 – here:

> Because [the corporal matter] was not, could not deserve of Thee to be made (*quia non erat, promereri ut esset non poterat*);

there:

> nor was I any thing, to which Thou mightest grant to be (*nec eram, cui praestares ut essem*).

The transition takes place subtly in the third sentence:

> For as in a body, to be, is not one with being beautiful, else could it not be deformed; so likewise to a created spirit to live, is not one with living wisely; else should it be wise unchangeably.

It does not concern the celestial wisdom here, which gives form to the spiritual matter through illumination, but the temporal wisdom of a single created spirit, of a concrete man. Consequently, the conversion mentioned in the following sentence is not metaphysical anymore, but the historical conversion of the converted Christian, and *darkness over the abyss* is now a metaphor to the life in sin. In fact, it is a metaphor immediately supported by two biblical passages: *once we were darkness,* from the Letter to the Ephesians, and *thy judgements are a great deep,* from Psalm 36.

As conclusion to this article I would like to sketch an interpretation of the initial passage of the biographical part – the one that describes the infant's life – that uses the metaphysical perspective I tried to detect. We have already seen that the life previous to birth remains inscrutable, so that we cannot properly define when our lives begin. But even after birth the newborn remains, for a while, in a state of indetermination, in which their will and consciousness are not separate from the world surrounding them (*Conf.* I, 7):

> For what would I say, O Lord my God, but that I know not whence I came into this dying life (shall I call it?)[17] or living death. Then immediately did *the comforts of Thy compassion* take me up[18], as I heard (for I remember it not) from the parents of my flesh, out of whose substance Thou didst sometime fashion me. Thus there received me the comforts of woman's milk. For neither my mother nor my nurses stored their own breasts for me; but Thou didst bestow the food of my infancy through them, according to Thine ordinance, whereby Thou distributest Thy riches through the hidden springs of all things. Thou also gavest me to desire no more than Thou gavest; and to my nurses willingly to give me what Thou gavest them. For they, with a heaven-taught affection, willingly gave me what they abounded with from Thee. For this my good from them, was good for them. Nor, indeed, from them was it, but through them; for from Thee, O God, are all good things, and from my God is all my health. This I since learned, Thou, through these Thy gifts, within me and without, proclaiming Thyself unto me. For then I knew but to suck; to repose in what pleased, and cry at what offended my flesh; nothing more.

This unobstacled continuity between the child's, the mother's, and the childminders' desire, symbolized by the unobstructed flow of the milk, achieves the moment of plenitude in the beginning of the following paragraph; a moment, nonetheless, that is also the beginning of the separation that leads to consciousness:

[15] Ef 5:8.

[16] Sl 36:7.

[17] Cf. Euripides, *Polydus*: "Who knows that living is not a dying, and dying, a living? , cit. in: Plato, *Gorgias*, 492e; Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis III, 3; Origen, *Contra Celso*, VII, 50.

[18] Sl 94 (93):19; 69 (68):17.

> Afterwards I began to smile; first in sleep, then waking: for so it was told me of myself, and I believed it; for we see the like in other infants, though of myself I remember it not.

Laughter, first in sleep, then in vigil, is almost an awakening, the beginning of the consciousness of pleasure that starts to be determined. Indeed, Augustine proceeds:

> Thus, little by little, I became conscious where I was (*sentiebam ubi essem*); and to have a wish to express (*ostendere*) my wishes to those who could content them, and I could not; for the wishes were within me, and they without; nor could they by any sense of theirs enter within my spirit. So I flung about at random limbs and voice, making the few signs I could, and such as I could, like, though in truth very little like, what I wished.

For a child, overflowing is not so spontaneous and natural as it is for the universal Life: on the contrary, the becoming-aware that turns them into a bearer of single desires demands, first, the acknowledgement of a delimitation, a being-in-a-place (an *ubi*); and, consequently, of the separation between an in and an out, of an inner life that is not identical to the life in the world anymore. The manifestation of themselves is not immediate, as the heat transmitted by fire: it demands a system of signs, which initially are inadequate. In the famous paragraph 13, commented by Wittgenstein, Augustine describes the transition of these gestures and unconsulted sounds to an articulated system of language. What interests me to emphasize is not the Augustinian reconstruction of the process of learning language, but the way Augustine links it to the constitution of memory, which also means, in the Augustinian anthropology, the constitution of self-consciousness:

> Passing hence from infancy, I came to boyhood, or rather it came to me, displacing infancy. Nor did that depart,—(for whither went it?)—and yet it was no more. For I was no longer a speechless infant, but a speaking boy. This I remember; and have since observed how I learned to speak. It was not that my elders taught me words (as, soon after, other learning) in any set method; but I, longing by cries and broken accents and various motions of my limbs to express my thoughts, that so I might have my will, and yet unable to express all I willed, or to whom I willed, did myself, by the understanding which Thou, my God, gavest me, practise the sounds in my memory. When they named any thing, and as they spoke turned towards it, I saw and remembered that they called what they would point out by the name they uttered. And that they meant this thing and no other was plain from the motion of their body, the natural language, as it were, of all nations, expressed by the countenance, glances of the eye, gestures of the limbs, and tones of the voice, indicating the affections of the mind, as it pursues, possesses, rejects, or shuns.

The memory of ourselves arises with speaking, not as something that is learned in school, but as a function that is developed by means of an effort to assimilate, through imitation, our signs to the signs of others. In fact, an assimilation that is only possible because there is an immediate identification with the natural language of wanting: face expressions, gestures, voice inflexions – it is a list mentioned twice in the *Confessions*: in the description of friendship of book IV; and in Augustine's struggle with himself in the garden of Ostia, in book VIII. Language, understood as the attempt of reconstructing the lost unity of wishes, of healing the wound created by the discovery of the separation between in and out, is constitutive of self-consciousness. But language constitutes language through an exterior template: the way adults express their desires. Therefore, it is a deceptive identity, this one also exterior, that is silenced in order to give place to the calling of the inner voice – which, interesting detail, materializes in book VIII through a children's chant. For now, Augustine finishes his narrative on the learning of language this way:

> Thus I exchanged with those about me these current signs of our wills, and so launched deeper into the stormy intercourse of human life, yet depending on parental authority and the beck of elders.

And maybe it is a coincidence, maybe not, that this "depending on parental authority" (*Pendens ex parentum autoritate*) has a strong assonance with the way Vitorino describes the movement of Life from the first principle: *a patrica potentia dependens*; and ultimately remits as to a template of which it represents a distorted copy, as in book XIII the spiritual and corporal matters would

depend upon Thy Word (*penderent in tuo verbo*), as formless, unless by the same Word they were brought back to Thy Unity, indued with form and from Thee the One Sovereign Good were made *all very good*.[19]

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[19] Gn 1:28.

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