

Augustine Among the Social Trinitarians

W. Travis McMaken

Colin E. Gunton has observed that “In recent decades...trinitarian theology has become almost dangerously fashionable, dangerously because too many problems are sometimes too easily claimed to be solved.”¹ Beginning with Karl Barth’s restoration of the doctrine of the Trinity to a place of prominence in both the structure and the material content of Christian theology in the early 20th century,² Western theology has experienced a trinitarian renaissance and has benefited greatly from new insights – that is, those having little to do with old dead white men – and old perspectives returning to the table, as seen in the influence of Eastern theology in the contemporary Western discussion. One would not be unreasonable in arguing that this contemporary preoccupation with the doctrine of the Trinity is second in import only to those early centuries of Christian theology where the ground rules for reflection on the Triune God were established.

This Western trinitarian renaissance has not been without its own *ad fontes* impulse, which has been directed primarily toward the Cappadocian theologians - Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea. This interest has been encouraged by the work of theologian and Metropolitan of Pergamon, John Zizioulas, who has argued for what he considers to be a return to the Cappadocian understanding of being as communion.³ Colin Gunton has taken up these concerns and has championed them from his location within the Western tradition, and the Western appropriation of these ideas has lead to what can only be described as a new trinitarian school – social trinitarianism – where the being of

¹ Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 227.

² Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1* (Translated by G. T. Thomson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960).

³ Cf. John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985.

God is understood as being constituted by the relations of the three divine persons. That is, God's oneness is rethought in light of God's threeness.

Unfortunately, along with this newfound appreciation for early Eastern theology has come a patricidal urge, and the West's own great trinitarian *fontes*, Augustine of Hippo, has become the tradition's scapegoat. This is unfortunate in that it does a disservice to contemporary trinitarian theology by relegating to the sidelines one who has much to offer the conversation. Gunton is right about contemporary trinitarian theology being "dangerously fashionable." Both the widespread influence of the social trinitarian school and the wholesale dismissal of Augustine represent the dangers of this fashion. Contrary to this trend, we shall argue that Augustine, whom the social trinitarians hold to be responsible for the Western theological tradition's undue preoccupation with the divine unity, is able to offer a balanced account both of how we must consider God's oneness in light of God's threeness and of how we must consider God's threeness in light of God's oneness.

The Great Misunderstanding: Augustine and the Psychological Analogy

The point at which Gunton is most dissatisfied with Augustine has to do with Augustine's so-called 'psychological analogy.' Gunton writes, "By seeking his analogies for the being of God in the individual human mind...Augustine effectively aborted the social, ecclesiastical and practical, as distinct from the chiefly devotional, impact of the doctrine."⁴ That Augustine employs the psychological analogy in *De Trinitate* as Gunton presumes is questionable.

Barth also criticizes Augustine on this point,⁵ and through Barth's discussion we are able to begin to discern the role that the psychological analogy plays in Augustine's *De Trinitate*. In his discussion of the

⁴ Gunton, "The Trinity in Modern Theology," 941.

⁵ Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1 384-99.

the *vestigium trinitatis*, Barth is concerned with the idea that creatureliness *qua* creatureliness could have structures of being similar to those of the Trinity.⁶ The fundamental question is one of theological language. Is language capable in its own strength of speaking about God? Barth is adamant that language does not grasp revelation, but that revelation grasps language. Barth's central concern here is that there should be no material source for the doctrine of the Trinity other than God's self-revelation attested by Scripture. Thus, we must inquire of Augustine as to whether his psychological analogy functions in such a way as to add material content to his doctrine of the Trinity.

In order to understand the function of the psychological analogy in Augustine's *De Trinitate* it is important to note something about the organization of the work as a whole. The most basic feature of this structure, one that becomes clear upon even a cursory reading of the text, is that there is a fundamental shift between Books 7 and 8. Augustine signals this shift by writing in the opening sentences of Book 8, "let us turn our attention to the things we are going to discuss in a more inward manner than the things that have been discussed above, though in fact they are the same things."⁷ Books 1-7 contain Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity, developed both from Scripture and from those theologians that had come before him. Books 8-14 deal with the development of the psychological analogy, with Book 15 acting as a summary of the whole. Augustine wants now to discuss the doctrine of the Trinity with reference to the human soul, as opposed to discussing it with reference to Scripture and tradition. But, it is the same doctrine of the Trinity in each case. The deployment of the psychological analogy in Books 8-14 should not be understood as the further development of the doctrine of the Trinity found in Books 1-7. Instead, it should be seen as the application of this doctrine.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid*, 384.

⁷ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)* (The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st century; Introduction, translation and notes by Edmund Hill; Edited by John E. Rotelle; Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005), 8.1.

Pecknold has recently argued that, “Augustine represents...a pivotal change of course in the doctrinal development of the Trinity.”⁸ This change, however, has less to do with material content than with how Augustine used the doctrine.⁹ The real significance of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* is not found in the restatement and explication of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. “Augustine did not exercise himself in *De Trinitate* to reformulate the Trinity, but to use the already formalized (already learned) doctrine of the Trinity in creative and exploratory ways.”¹⁰ In what way did Augustine use the doctrine of the Trinity?

It is our contention that Augustine’s use of the doctrine of the Trinity as found in the development of the psychological analogy is best understood in modern theological terminology as an exercise in theological anthropology. Augustine himself would have understood his use as soteriological. He is not attempting to understand God in light of the human mind so much as he is attempting to understand the human mind in light of the Triune God. When Augustine does speak about our knowledge of our minds as an aid to our knowledge of God, he is only speaking of the knowledge of our minds that we have been lead to in light of the doctrine of the Trinity. Furthermore, Augustine constantly maintains that there is a fundamental dissimilarity between our minds and the Trinity.

I have sufficiently warned...that this image, made by the trinity and altered for the worse by its own fault, is not so to be compared to that trinity that it is reckoned to be similar to it in every respect. Rather, [one] should note how great the dissimilarity is in whatever similarity there may be.¹¹

The understanding that we gain of God through knowledge of our minds does not add material content to Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity. The purpose of the psychological analogy is rather to show that

⁸ C. C. Pecknold, “How Augustine Used the Trinity: Functionalism and the Development of Doctrine” in the *Anglican Theological Review* 85:1, 127.

⁹ *Ibid*, 129.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 136.

¹¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.39.

we as humans are made in the image of God, that is, in the image of the Trinity. In the closing pages of this work Augustine summarizes the whole by telling his reader that, “this same light has shown you those three things in yourself, in which you can recognize yourself as the image of that supreme trinity.”¹² The result of this is that Augustine is able to construct a socially inclusive spirituality upon the doctrine of the Trinity, and thereby offer a truly ‘Christian’ spirituality, that is to say, a Trinitarian spirituality.

The Root of the Western Tradition: Augustine’s Balanced Account of the Trinity

It will be interesting to consider the material content of Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity. As opposed to the social trinitarian practice of understanding God’s oneness in light of God’s threeness, Augustine gives us a more balanced approach whereby God’s threeness is also understood in light of God’s oneness. The insights which we seek are as follows: that God’s being is understood as constituted by the eternal relations of the three persons, that the three persons are understood as constituted by those same relations, and that these relations are understood in terms of complete perichoretic co-penetration, although we recognize that Augustine did not have the term ‘*perichoresis*’ at his disposal. That we might discover these insights in Augustine’s thought should come as no surprise given Pecknold’s understanding of Augustine’s relationship to the Cappadocians. Pecknold writes: “I think both Augustine and the Cappadocians were seeking to express this very same co-inherent unity.”¹³

It is fitting at this point to establish the way in which Augustine thought about theological language. Gunton makes much¹⁴ of the difference between Augustine and the Cappadocians, based in no small measure upon Augustine’s admittance that the Greek distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* is obscure to his Latin sensibilities. The reason for this is that when these terms are translated to Latin they become ‘being’ and ‘substance,’ two terms that Augustine admits have come to mean basically the same thing in

¹² Ibid, 15.50.

¹³ Pecknold, “How Augustine Used the Trinity,” 135.

¹⁴ Cf. Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 230.

Latin.¹⁵ Thus, for Latin ears, these two Greek terms represent a distinction without a difference and set before the theologian a formulation – ‘one substance, three substances’ – with marginal significance for fostering careful exploration and development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Augustine readily admits that with God we have to do not only with one but also with three, and he is looking for an answer to the question of “Three what?” In answer Augustine explains that, “human speech labors under a great dearth of words. So we say three persons, not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence.”¹⁶ Far from being a rejection of the three, Augustine here recognizes that no human language is capable of properly describing the divine mystery, and that whatever terms we use do not finally communicate the divine reality. Furthermore, it is not only that our language is insufficient. The mystery of the Trinity is beyond even our thought.¹⁷

Augustine makes it clear that God is ‘substance,’ although he thinks that ‘being’ is a better word and ultimately wishes to express what in Greek is called *ousia*. One should not become immediately concerned that, in using the term ‘substance,’ Augustine has imported pagan metaphysics into his doctrine of the Trinity, for Augustine makes it clear that he prefers ‘being’ to ‘substance’ on the basis of Exodus 3.14 – “I am who I am.”¹⁸ In saying that God is ‘substance’ or ‘being,’ Augustine means to say that God exists. Our question must now be, “In what way does God exist?” Augustine affirms that, “the substance of the Father and of the Son is one”¹⁹ (*homoousios*). The problem is that the Arians have argued that God is eternal and therefore unchangeable, that is, without modification. Further, if God is without modification, then anything that we say of God must refer to God’s substance because God’s substance admits to no modification. But, at the same time, we speak of the Son as begotten of the Father and the

¹⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.10. Cf. also 3.1, where Augustine confesses that, as far as he is, concerned the work done on the doctrine of the Trinity in Greek is wholly sufficient, and that he only writes to make the matter accessible to those who do not have sufficient access to the Greek language. This suggests, contra Gunton, not only that Augustine understands the work of the Cappadocians, but that he is in fundamental agreement with that work. Indeed, Pecknold points out that Augustine had read Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzen, two of the three Cappadocian theologians, as well as a number of other Greek writers. Cf. Pecknold, “How Augustine Used the Trinity,” 132-3.

¹⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.4.

Father as unbegotten. If this is to be understood with reference to substance, it implies that the Son is subordinate to the Father on the conclusion that to be 'begotten' in substance is different from being 'unbegotten' in substance.²⁰ Augustine's solution to this dilemma is to argue that there are two ways that we are able to rightly speak about God – "substance-wise" and "relationship-wise."²¹ Augustine asserts that, while it is true that with reference to created things one is only able to speak in terms of modification and substance, this is not the case with reference to God. We are also able to speak of God's relations, which do not imply change in God "because what is signified by calling them Father and Son belongs to them eternally and unchangeably."²² Augustine's final move here is to explain that 'begotten' and 'unbegotten' are not predicates of Father and Son respectively, that is, they are not attributes possessed by the persons. Rather, these things are said only with reference to the other person.²³

What has Augustine accomplished with this formulation? Ultimately, he has understood the three persons in terms of the one being and he has understood the one being in terms of the three persons. Hill points out that Augustine has established that the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit reveal their eternal processions and that the relationships revealed by the economy express the eternal relations.²⁴ That is, the three that we see in God's self-revelation correspond to the eternal threefold form of the Trinity. Furthermore, these three are not secondary to what it means to be God. They are internal to the divine substance such that it is possible to say that these relationships are the divine substance – God's being.²⁵ In this way, Augustine understands that God's being is constituted by the eternal relations of the three persons.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.* What is going on here is something like a substance / accident distinction. Accidents are added or subtracted from a substance. But, if God does not change, then we cannot say that anything is added or subtracted from God's substance. Thus, if we say something about God, it must refer to the divine substance.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.6.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.7.

²⁴ Hill, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 92.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

But, Augustine also understands that the three persons are constituted by these same relations, and it is here that we begin to bump up against the mystery of the Trinity. Augustine argues that “every being that is called something by way of relationship is also something besides the relationship.”²⁶ What Augustine is trying to get at is that being precedes relation. A thing must first exist in order for that thing to be in relation. Augustine does not want to collapse the distinctions between the three persons simply to relationship since relationship is secondary to being. Still, what is this aspect of the three persons that establishes these persons prior to their relationship? Augustine is clear that it is not that they possess distinct substances or beings. “This is not the case, then; each, Father and Son, is substance.”²⁷ This is illustrated in Augustine’s discussion of the Son as the Wisdom of the Father.

So the Father is himself wisdom, and the Son is called the wisdom of the Father in the same way as he is called the light of the Father, that is, that as we talk of light from light, and both are one light, so we must understand wisdom from wisdom, and both one wisdom. And therefore also one being.²⁸

It is here that our understanding of Augustine’s priority of being over relationship must be refined. The example that Augustine uses to demonstrate the priority of being over relation is that of master and slave. One must first exist in order to be either master or slave. But, there is a fundamental distinction between the relationship of master and slave and the relations of the three persons of the Trinity. Master and slave do not share one being in the same sense as do the three persons. What we have here is an external relationship. Their relationship does not have to do with what it is for them to exist. In the case of the Trinity we have to do with internal relationships. These relationships have everything to do with what it means for God to exist. Thus, to translate Augustine’s concluding formulation directly into terms of being, the three persons are ‘being from being’ in threefold distinction, ‘and yet one being’ in constitutive

²⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 7.2.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

relation. Logically, the root of the problem is this: if we understand that being precedes relation in such a way as to secure threefold distinction in a case where being is constituted by this same threefold relation, then we have laid our finger on the mystery of the Trinity.

We have now discussed the ways in which Augustine has understood both that God's being is constituted by the eternal relations of the three persons and that these three persons are constituted by these same relations in as much as they are understood to share in the one divine being or substance. What remains to be seen is whether Augustine understands these relations in terms of complete perichoretic co-penetration. A helpful analytic tool for getting at an answer to this question is to inquire as to how the equality of the three persons of the Trinity is understood. A quantitative account would say that each of the three persons is as much God as any other of the two persons. While this position is a necessary aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity, it does not sufficiently express trinitarian equality. For Augustine, the greatness of God is not something to be distributed between the three persons any more than God's being is to be distributed between the three persons. Augustine breaks decisively with a quantitative understanding when he writes that, "the Father alone or the Son alone or the Holy Spirit alone is as great as the Father and Son and Holy Spirit together."²⁹ This affirmation is central to a proper understanding of the radicality of the eternal co-penetrating perichoretic relations. He then goes on to explain that, "In God, therefore, when the equal Son cleaves to the equal Father, or the equal Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son, God is not made bigger than each of them singly, because there is no possibility of his perfection growing."³⁰

That 'cleaving' is the mode in which Augustine explains this mathematical contradiction underscores the notion that we must understand God's being on the basis of the eternal relations of the three persons. Furthermore, that the relations of these three are the sort of relations that exist in this form of radical equality pushes us to realize that these three persons must be understood in terms of the unity of these

²⁹ Ibid, 6.9.

³⁰ Ibid.

eternal relations. That is, the eternal relations of the three persons constitute God's being and these same eternal relations constitute the three persons. God's being is understood as constituted by the eternal relations of the three persons, that the three persons are understood as constituted by those same eternal relations, and that these relations are understood in terms of complete perichoretic co-penetration.

Concluding Illustration

This conclusion becomes clearer with reference to Augustine's account of the inseparability of God's works *ad extra*. Augustine speaks of the Father and Son and, "[the] indivisible operation of their one and the same substance."³¹ This understanding of the indivisibility of God's works *ad extra* as predicated upon the radically perichoretic unity of God's being underscores that Augustine is equally concerned with understanding God's oneness in light of God's threeness as he is with understanding God's threeness in light of God's oneness. That this is the case might be seen in the prototypical form of Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity found in his *Confessions*, where Augustine uses the formulation *una trinitas et trina unitas* – "one in three and three in one."³² This formulation demonstrates that Augustine does not work in a linear fashion from God's oneness to God's threeness or from God's threeness to God's oneness. Rather, Augustine works in a circular fashion, taking care to understand God's oneness on the basis of God's threeness and God's threeness on the basis of God's oneness.

³¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1.25.

³² Augustine, *Confessions* (Translated with introduction and notes by Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.7.