

# **DIVINE ILLUMINATION AS “CONDITIO SINE QUA NON” FOR TRUE KNOWLEDGE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ST AUGUSTINE**

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## **Introduction**

St. Augustine in many aspects of his philosophy was preoccupied with the issue of knowledge. This knowledge in the true sense is rather impossible to reach without the divine light which shines on us, for 'in His divine light we see light.' The beaming of the illuminating light of the creator who lives in unassailable light on us makes knowledge possible. For Augustine, true knowledge comes from within, through Divine illumination and not from without. This is theme that will be explored in this article.

St. Augustine was born in Tagaste in 354 A.D. of a pagan father by the name Patricius and a devout Christian mother, Monica. His baptism and conversion into Christianity was delayed and he was eventually baptised in 387. He did higher studies first at Madaura and later at Carthage. At this time, he was still committed to Manichaeism. He later started teaching Rhetoric in Carthage and eventually opened a school of Rhetoric in Rome. After a while, he abandoned Manichaeism and scepticism and embraced Platonism. He had a riotous youthful life in which he lost his way into a life of sensuality. In 384 AD, he moved to Milan where he

met Bishop Ambrose who eventually baptised him on his conversion in 387 AD. His mother died in 388 AD, the year in which he returned to his homeland. In 391, the people of Hippo where he was staying in order to convert a friend acclaimed him a priest and he was finally ordained a priest by Bishop Valerius. He founded a monastery in Hippo and battled so many heretics among which are the Donatists and Manicheans. In 395 AD, he was named Auxilliary Bishop of Hippo and consecrated primate of Numidia. He took over as Bishop of Hippo on the death of Valerius in 396 AD. Augustine participated in numerous Councils such as the council of Carthage in which many notable heretical positions were condemned notable among them were Pelagianism and Donatism. Some of his major works are, *The Confessions*, *De Trinitate*, *De Civitate Dei* etc. He died on 28<sup>th</sup> August, 430 AD.

### **The Idea of Divine Illumination**

At this juncture it is good to ask: what really is divine illumination? It is regarded as the oldest alternative to naturalism in the areas of mind and knowledge. The doctrine teaches that “human beings require a special divine assistance in their ordinary cognitive activities.”<sup>1</sup> It means that left to himself, man cannot carry out any activity of a cognitive kind without being aided by the supernatural light. In other words, the light at work is the “light of Christ, or the light of God by which the mind is said to be able to discern the objects of intellectual vision.”<sup>2</sup>

It could be said that the idea of divine illumination was not so new in the history of philosophy. There were substantial elements of its presence since the time of the ancients. For instance, Socrates had a kind of Spirit or *Daimonion* which speaks to him and guided him. In his *Apology*, he said, “I have a divine or spiritual sign which Meletus had ridiculed in his deposition. This began when I was a child and whenever it speaks, it turns me away from something I am about to do.”<sup>3</sup> This is tenable as a classic case of some kind of divine illumination for even though Socrates did not have the concept of a Judeo-Christian God, he nevertheless had the idea that there was a kind of spiritual source to his knowledge of what

to do or otherwise. His friend Apuleius identified a friendly demon that speaks to him and since in his view, Socrates was the most perfect being. It was therefore not out of place if he received such illumination.<sup>4</sup> Here, illumination is being proposed by a close friend of Socrates as something that happens to someone who deserves it. Even though this form of illumination may be seen as restricted to the moral sphere, it is also a form of "cognitive guidance that has a spiritual or divine source."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, there is a good suggestion here that this notion of divine role in cognition is not limited to Socrates but extends to some of the ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato. His theory of recollection is indicative of some kind of inherent principles built into man making the mind or soul to have a grasp of the Forms. This is due to some kind of illumination. In the *Meno*, his emphasis was on *a priori* rational insight demonstrated in the slave's ability to see for himself the validity of a geometrical proof. On the other hand, in the *Phaedo*, his focus on the universal properties—equality in comparison to two equal sticks—thus contrasting the changeable imperfection of the physical world with exemplary perfection of the forms. In *De Anima*, Aristotle too describes the active intellect thus, "It is separate, unaffected and unmixed being in essence and activity. It is not the case that it sometimes thinks, and at other times unable to. It is just "what it is and alone immortal and eternal."<sup>6</sup> Active intellect here meets some of the conditions of what it takes to be divine in the proper sense of the term. God is the only reality that is immortal and must be the stable source of our knowledge. It all comes down to the supernatural element in human cognitive activity. In which case therefore, Illumination is not new among the ancient philosophers and so what St. Augustine has done is to develop their idea with a clearer and sharper focus.

### **St. Augustine and Knowledge.**

The earliest encounter of St. Augustine of Hippo with philosophy was via Manichaeism. As a movement, Manichaeism contended that it is a "revelation from God that there is a good kingdom of God associated with light, and the evil kingdom of Satan associated with darkness."<sup>7</sup> These two forces

are continuously at war with each other. It later became evident that he became less interested in this position and was increasingly attracted to the sceptical position held by the Academics, the disciples of Archesilaus and the new Academy. Of them he wrote in his *Confessions*, “they held that everything was a matter of doubt asserting that we could know nothing for certain.” (5.10.19). Scepticism, according to him, was a doctrine which believed that knowledge was not possible.

The first philosophical problem which St. Augustine confronted soon after his conversion to Christianity was the problem of knowledge. This problem, in his understanding has two main perspectives. The first one being, whether we know the truth, and secondly how do we know the truth. In his response to the first problem, he embarked upon a severe critique of scepticism, a position as earlier asserted which held that we could know nothing for certain. He responded to the second with the doctrine of illumination. This has been likened to the Platonic doctrine of reminiscence and the Aristotelian doctrine of abstraction.<sup>8</sup>

His critique of the sceptical position is contained in his *Contra Academicos*, he points out that man knows some truths with certainty or self-evidently, such as the principle of non-contradiction and his own very existence as a person. According to him, no one can doubt his own existence since the very doubt itself is a proof of existence: “*sifallor sum*”. However, it is impossible to doubt what does not exist because there is no basis for it. Doubting is a further confirmation of existence. St. Augustine was of the view that he was most certain of his being as knowing and loving neither entertaining any fear concerning the claim of the academics against this position. Their claim that he deceives himself by so saying flies in the face of reality that he who does not exist cannot deceive himself. The claim of self-deception is a further proof and confirmation that I truly exist. Thus, if I deceive myself, then as a result of this very fact, I am. Consequently, I cannot deceive myself about my being when I am certain that I am if not through anything else but through the fact

of my deceiving myself. In the final analysis, Augustine says, "therefore, if I would exist, I who deceive myself, even given the hypothesis that I deceive myself, I still undoubtedly do not deceive myself in knowing myself."<sup>9</sup> Here, obviously, his contention is that to say I deceive myself will not be true as it is claimed because the one who is purported to have done so cannot deceive himself in knowing himself. A subjective argument of this sort being evoked by Augustine can hardly be faulted by the most extravagantly sceptical position.

In contradicting the academics, Augustine distinguished between the doubts of the senses and the doubts of existence. Here doubts of the senses have to do with visual images which presents every possibility of deception. In situations of this sort, things are not what they seem to be. So for him, truths of the senses are deceptive and unreliable because appearance here is not reality. The real truth is not perceptible through the eyes of the flesh, and it is in virtue of internal recognition that we know we are alive. Truths of existence therefore cannot be doubted. The man who asserts that he knows he is alive does not have the possibility to err or deceive himself. As he captures it so succinctly, "thousands of illusions of the senses may present themselves, he will not fear any one of them from the moment when the man who is deceived must be alive in order to be deceived."<sup>10</sup>

In developing his arguments in favour of the reality of knowledge, he began by dismantling some of the arguments in favour of scepticism. The first argument in this regard was the issue of discord among philosophers. He agreed with the fact that it is true they dissent on an explanation of reality and states that reality is one or not one, finite or infinite, organised by nature or providence. These disjunctions are true according to him and have nothing to do with falsity. Therefore, there is something true and not fluctuating irrespective of the discord among philosophers. The following argument is the argument from deception which for him is invalid. He avers that it is not the senses that deceive us because when we are healthy, they do not deceive us. But when we are not healthy, the fault lies much with

the spirit of the ill-man, the sleeping man or the insane man who creates false images. Thirdly, scepticism is false because its consequences in the moral field are disastrous. He justifies his position by asserting that such disastrous consequences can be seen for “if the norm is to follow the probable, then adultery is not allowable for some, but allowable for others...Hence, adultery, homicide, sacrilege and every kind of wrongdoing become licit, and every foundation of morals is destroyed.”<sup>11</sup>

In discussing the process of knowledge, Augustine distinguishes three important cognitive operations namely, the senses, the inferior reason and the superior reason. Each operation has its own specific object: the senses know the qualities of bodies and the inferior reason knows the laws of the physical world while the superior reason knows eternal truths. These objects are relevant to every aspect of human cognition whether sensory, scientific and spiritual. As for the senses, they are the means through which sensitive knowledge is acquired such as the knowledge of colours, odours and others. Sensation according to Augustine is an activity carried out by the soul through the body. The process is a rather intricate one, for the body undergoes the impressions of other bodies; and the soul through the impressions gleaned from the body acquires knowledge of the corporeal world. Bodies are therefore not known immediately but rather through mediation. The knowledge of the corporeal world is arrived at through the process of mediation which means that it is “the soul that actually gathers the image and not the sense of all the sensible objects.”<sup>12</sup> Here St. Augustine sounds different from others especially St. Thomas Aquinas in his postulation that our knowledge of the sensible world is essentially an activity of the soul and that the senses only play an intermediary and instrumental role.

Inferior reason (*ratio inferior*) is the means through which scientific knowledge is obtained. In other words, scientific knowledge is mainly concerned about the corporeal world and seeks to discover universal laws through the process of abstraction.<sup>13</sup> The third operation is the knowledge of eternal truths which is obtained via divine illumination. This is the

highest form of knowledge for illumination reaches the greatest heights of reason. St. Augustine concurs with Plato that eternal truths cannot come from experience largely because of the contingent character of the known object and the knowing subject too. He however differed from Plato in certain regards. His refusal to admit the pre-existence of the souls means that he could not offer a possible explanation for the knowledge of eternal truths with the doctrine of reminiscence as Plato has done. This was what brought St. Augustine to employ the doctrine of Illumination. Illumination in his view is "*Quaedam lux sui generis incorporea*", meaning it is that which makes eternal truths visible.<sup>14</sup> What St. Augustine means by 'divine truths' has been seen along two lines of interpretation:

- a) Illumination makes certain ideas like (truth, justice etc) more visible to us;
- b) It shows the truth of judgments.

Augustine conceives the "*ratio inferior*" and the "*ratio superior*" as two functions in which knowledge takes on two opposing directions. The two are functions of the mind. This same mind is the place where the divine light beams its light for us to be able to know. It is according to the disposition of the creator that intelligible things in the natural order are brought under the influence of incorporeal light so that true knowledge is possible.

### **Divine Illumination in St. Augustine**

Naturally, to "illuminate" or "Illumine" is to bring light to shine on something. 'Lux' is light and its effect on anything that it is cast upon is to rid it of darkness and ambiguity and so ensure clarity of vision. In other words, God would provide insight into the truth of the information. If therefore we talk about the doctrine of divine illumination in St. Augustine, it is the idea that the divine light is brought to bear on something to bring about the emergence of true knowledge. This is a kind of truth made possible for us by an external source which is above our minds, thus God supplying the justification for the truth that we know. According to St. Augustine, it is impossible to know anything

unless the divine light or the light of Christ by which the “mind is able to detect the objects of intellectual vision shines on us.”<sup>15</sup> This issue of divine light was discussed by St. Augustine in some of his early dialogues such as *De Magistro* and *De Genesiad Litteramlibriduodecim*. He points out that the light is already God himself and the soul on the other hand is a creature although in reason and intellect it is made in his image. However, when the soul tries to focus its full attention on this light, it suffers a setback because of its weakness, yet it is from the light that this soul understands anything at all it is able to understand. In discussing illumination, St. Augustine was not saying that only *a priori* truths are made intellectually visible by divine illumination. Rather, all human knowledge and understanding results from this source. His view concerning the real source or origin of our knowledge is therefore broader and unmistakable. In *De Magistro*, he writes, “concerning everything we understand, we consult not the speaker who makes noise outside us but the truth that presides over the mind within.”<sup>16</sup> He further suggests that even though we perceive through the external senses no amount of perception will make it clear to us in the most proper way except through the inner light of divine illumination. It has been suggested that another interesting rival to this idea is Aristotle's theory of Abstraction. The theory states that upon coming to know something, our passive intellect takes on without the matter, the form of the object concerned. Abstraction however will not address the ambiguity in ostensive teaching. For a red dress for instance will not have only the form red but also the more specific form powder red and the more general form colour as well as the form dress and others.

The primary motive of Augustine in his theory of divine illumination was to invoke supernatural aid in dealing with the whole issue of ambiguity. It is to bring the illuminating light and power of Christ the Teacher to use his special powers to illuminate red without illuminating anything more general such as colour or anything more specific such as powder red. In his thinking, Christ, the Inner Teacher can perhaps, point to walking without pointing to hurrying. The learner through the use of his

intellect profits from this ambiguity-free inner pointing ability which only Christ the Teacher can provide.

It is part of divine illumination to account for our access to realities that can in no way be perceived by our senses. Here, there is a reference to the theory of forms which according to him exists nowhere else but in the mind of the creator. The soul therefore sees some special realities made possible only through the extraordinary eye of the soul because of its special closeness to God. The knowledge is made possible and can only be made so by the Supreme teacher who is the true light inside whose light we see light. We therefore do not and cannot see properly on our own in spite of how gifted we think we are. Rather, our true vision of things is made possible solely by the primary source of all knowledge, the true light that enlightens all men. Here, the words of St. John's gospel become instructive, "the true light that enlightens all men has come into this world" (John1:9). Illumination is therefore principally a divine activity and solely so. Only the supreme light can provide the ultimate vision which is needed to bring about real and true knowledge. He could be clearer when he said "When I speak the truth, I do not teach someone who sees these truths. For he is taught not by my words but the things themselves made manifest within when God discloses them"<sup>17</sup>. As a result, the production of knowledge is the sole prerogative of God and only through his assistance can man derive the inner power to see. True vision is therefore impossible without him because he is the ultimate facilitator.

What then is being illuminated? What is illuminated is any and every being in conception and in reality. This is the simplest answer. However, on a deeper note, there is a lot more in contention here. As human beings, we all seek to know. Our love of knowledge is pretty natural. In fact, it can be said without any equivocation that man is not fully human and cannot realize his goals without the urge to know. The urge to know is directed at the unknown and the unclear. Our knowledge of the world starts with our senses and they interact with the world and so the sense data becomes the immediate source of our knowledge of the

world. The assumption ordinarily is that this is possible through the use of our human powers of perception. According to Gareth Matthews, through divine illumination, “the mind is able to discern the objects of intellectual vision.”<sup>18</sup> The soul obtains the power to deal with objects of intellectual vision through its gaze on real light which is God Himself and the soul which although in reason and intellect is created in His image and likeness cannot totally absorb the power of that light, yet it is through it that it understands whatever it knows. Like it was pointed out earlier, what is made known and visible through divine illumination goes beyond just *a priori* truths to every aspect of human understanding. It is therefore the source of all human understanding. This is not just possible through man's contact with external realities alone but with the consent and final approval of man's deeper source of knowledge which resides in the interiority of man. This must have informed his position when he said “concerning everything we understand... we consult not the speaker who makes noises outside us, but the Truth that presides over the mind within.”<sup>19</sup> What meaning grasped is not made possible by the mere seeing of the object or action, but through the instrumentality of divine illumination. This according to him removes all ambiguities of ostentation. Augustine used the example of 'head covering' and that to learn the truth of what head covering is, we must use our bodily senses but no amount of the perception of 'head covering' no matter the regularity can unambiguously make clear what it is unless through the inner illumination of the divine light.

One might compare the position of St. Augustine here with the theory of abstraction in Aristotle. According to this theory of Aristotle, when we come to know what something for instance 'red' is, our passive intellect takes on without matter, the form of the object known. While Aristotle is mainly concerned with the mere empirical form of what is perceived here, St. Augustine brings in the dimension of divine illumination in dealing with the problem of ambiguity. Thus through special powers, Christ the inner teacher can through non-natural means point to walking without hurrying and so on. In this way, the learner with the gift

of his intellect is able to point to things without the ambiguity associated with external perception.

It must be said that while the case of external realities have been somehow addressed, the more important aspect in discussing divine illumination is how we gain access to realities that can in no way be reached through the senses. This issue was extensively addressed in Question 46 of his *De Diversis quaestionibus octogintatribus*, where he offers his own Christianised interpretation of Plato's doctrine of forms. Here, he refers to the "Ideas" or what he calls "De Ideis" or "forms" or "Species" or "Rationes". The forms in his thinking can only exist in the mind of the Creator and nowhere else. It will be out of place and even sacrilegious to assume or even contemplate as it is mentioned in Plato's *Timaeus* "that God was looking at something outside of Himself when He created in accordance with it what He created."<sup>20</sup> In doing this, the power of the rational soul is put into greater focus because he considers this as that which surpasses all what God has made and is the closest to God. The measure of its closeness to God is the measure of its fortification with the intelligible light of divine illumination and so the soul sees not with physical sight "but its own highest part which lies in its own excellence i.e. with its intelligence, those reasons by the vision of which it becomes supremely blessed."<sup>21</sup> The sight of the soul is the deepest sight, its fruits pure and unadulterated or ambiguous because it derives its source from God. Here also, St. Augustine underscores the reliability of whatever comes from the soul.

Key among those things which cannot be perceived directly by the senses is God. The knowledge of God was the central hub of St. Augustine's philosophy for as he points out in the *Soliloquies*: "the two things he wants to know are his soul and God." The whole debate about the existence of God with Evodius his interlocutor was said to have led to the idea of "belief in search of understanding" which is a characteristic of him and later used copiously by St. Anselm of Canterbury. St. Augustine began by saying to Evodius that 'he was certain that God exists' to which Evodius responded that "He firmly believes it but did not know

it”.<sup>22</sup> While Augustine concluded with the saying that we should believe in order to understand, Evodius was of the view that “we want to know and understand what we believe.”<sup>23</sup>

The procedure of St. Augustine's argument began by saying that: X is God is X is more excellent than our minds and nothing is more excellent than X, (ii) Truth exists and it is more excellent than our minds, (iii) Something is God (i.e. God exists). In this line of argument here, St. Augustine builds the idea of God on Truth and Excellence and since Truth is more excellent than our minds then truth or even something more excellent than it is God. St. Augustine never talked about God from the point of view of probability but of necessity and descriptions of some of his mystical experiences which are also autobiographical most especially in Book 9 of his *Confessions* are pointers to the fact of the existence of God. It can be said that for St. Augustine, knowing God includes knowing that He exceeds our powers of comprehension and description. Reason can prove His existence. In this regard and following his trend of thought, God is the “source of epistemic illumination and the blinding light which, even as it enables us to bring other things into focus, cannot be brought into focus itself.”<sup>24</sup> As he explains “the light of God is God himself but the soul is a creature and when the soul tries to behold the light it trembles in its weakness and finds itself unable to do so.”<sup>25</sup>

### **A Critical Appraisal**

In the light of this exposition, it is important to address some key issues in relation to the theory of illumination. For instance, how can one be so sure of whether one is being truly illuminated by God or not? There are times when one might believe one is being enlightened by God and one is only being illuminated by a mere human spirit. Those who have hallucinatory experiences can bear witness to this. The ability to distinguish between divine illumination and experiences of this kind is really problematic.

The second critical remark about divine illumination is: At what point can we personalize any knowledge that comes from

illumination since it is only an attribute of the divine and human beings cannot claim to know on their own? The obvious answer that St. Augustine will aver to this is that we cannot on our own have any knowledge as such. Since the truths known by illumination are such that they are necessary, pure and immutable and so cannot be easily grasped by contingent and limited creatures. It seems therefore that there has to be some knowledge that is personal to the knowing intellect for it is hard to admit as Augustine is claiming that our intellect is passive in the process of knowing and only receives whatever is imputed into it. There must therefore be a window of admitting that the human intellect on its own can attain some kind of knowledge. In this way, some active role will be given to the human intellect since this intellect works very hard to acquire some knowledge in the area of Mathematics and the physical sciences.

Another point that appears contentious in Augustine's theory of illumination is how to explain the difference between divine illumination and the *visio Dei* which is only possible in the next life. For if we go by Augustine's position, what happens in illumination is the feeding of the human mind with divine truths in a rather direct manner. Here there is no blurred knowledge in any form or shape. But if our knowledge is so straight and direct in this world, then, there is hardly any need for a repeat of that knowledge in the beatific vision. What is even more problematic is the possible emergence of two illuminations here. The first being the illumination of human beings here in this world, while the second is the vision of the blessed in heaven. This position is not well worked out in Augustine. I therefore suggest that inasmuch as the position of Augustine can be accepted in its own right, more possibilities must be explored in bringing this position to a generally acceptable conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion therefore, I wish to state that what I set out to do is to establish that knowledge is neither possible nor attainable in the philosophy of St. Augustine without Divine illumination. Indeed, it is the primary condition for the possibility of

knowledge and nothing else. What is further underscored by St. Augustine is that man on his own is utterly and totally dependent on God for his ability to know anything in whatever manner or form. What Augustine has made clear to us even further is the fact that our bodily senses through its process of sensation cannot furnish us with the real truth in the world without the light from above. What this reveals is the fact that while the senses can play a role in the knowledge process, the finality or completion of that role is possible only with divine illumination. This, in a way, is a poignant reminder to man of his need for divine assistance without which all his efforts to achieve or make progress in every aspect of his life will come to naught.

Ancient as this may seem though to the modern mind, St. Augustine was driving at a fundamental fact that man's knowledge of the world is based on a very complex process in which the role of the divine is indispensable. In other words, be it the field of Science and Technology, Social Sciences or Medicine and so on, man has only achieved the much that he has because of the divine illumination. The need for recourse to a supernatural explanation for cognitive activities will always be there as a point of reference because man cannot justify his possession of knowledge completely due to his own ability alone. I conclude on the note that Malebranche's position on this issue is of vital importance when he says, "All our ideas must be located in the efficacious substance of the Divinity, which alone is intelligible or capable of enlightening us because it alone can affect intelligences."<sup>26</sup> This clearly drives home the point we have made so far that divine illumination is an essential condition for the emergence of true knowledge as averred by St. Augustine.

## ENDNOTES

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1. Pasnau, Robert, "Divine Illumination" in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Stanford: Centre for the study of Language and Information Stanford University, 2015, p.1

2. Gareth B. Matthews, "Knowledge and Illumination" in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp.171-185.
3. Plato, *The Apology*, 31d, (Grube's Translation).
4. *De Deo Socratis*, XVII-XIX.
5. Pasnau, Robert, *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, p.3.
6. Aristotle, *De Anima*, III 5, 430a 17-23.
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9. *De Civitate Dei* XI, 26.
10. *De Trinitate*, XV, 12, 21.
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12. *De Civitate Dei* XI, 26.
13. *De Trinitate* XII, 2.2.
14. *Confessions* VII, 10.
15. Gareth B. Matthews, Knowledge and illumination, in *Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 2010, pp.171-186.
16. *De Magistro*, 11.8.
17. *Ibid.* 12.40.
18. Gareth Matthews: *ibid.* p.181.
19. *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, 11.38.
20. *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, Ques. 46.
21. *ibid*
22. St. Augustine of Hippo, *De libero arbitrio*, Book 2.
23. *Ibid.* 2.2.5.
24. Gareth Matthews, p.183
25. St. Augustine, *De Genesis*...12.31.59.
26. Malebranche, Nicholas, *The Search after truth*, Trans. T. Lennon and P. Olscamp, Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1997 p.232.