



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Almighty and everlasting God, you have given us, your servants, grace by the confession of a true faith to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and by your divine power to worship you as one: we humbly pray that you would keep us steadfast in this faith and evermore defend us from all adversities; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Trinity Sunday

Augustine on the Trinity (*De trinitate*): Introduction and Summary

I. What Is Augustine Trying to Achieve in this Work?: Introducing Some Problems, Issues and Major Themes

A. Context and Background: Created Analogies to God's Inner Life and Their Limitations

This treatment of the Trinity not speculative but comes out of need to deal with Latin-speaking Arian sympathizers (Homoeans) who denied that the Father and Son were had the same fundamental existence (were of the same substance) and said that the two instead were only alike (similar but not the same) in will and activity; this created a clear distinction between the Father and the Son and made the Son a creature who did what the Father wanted him to do.

- The Nicene response was to say that the operations of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit outside the Godhead are inseparable (i.e. all are involved in what each does, i.e. creation, sanctification, etc.), but this posed its own set of problems.
 - In 389, Augustine's friend Nebridius had asked: If the Trinity does everything together in unity, how is it that the Son becomes incarnate, but not the Father and the Holy Spirit? (Augustine responded briefly in *Ep.* 11 and then later in detail in *De trinitate* 15.11.20: only the Son became incarnate, but every member of the Trinity played a role in bringing this about.

The *De Trinitate* turned out to be quite popular in the Middle Ages, which would have surprised Augustine who thought few would be able to understand it (*Ep.* 169: *Nimis operosi sunt, et a paucis intelligi posse arbitror*). Its success has to do with certain difficulties that make it hard to think about the Trinity and to understand the Spirit's particular role within the divine life:

The problem in thinking about the Trinity is that God's inner life is quite different from (and transcends) anything that exists in the created realm (for example, God does

not have a body or any external limitations); there is thus a real and significant difference between God and all created beings.

Even where there are some apparent analogies in the created realm that might be used to illustrate some basic truths about God's inner life (as this is revealed in the Scriptures), all of these analogies soon break down and turn out to be of very limited value.

For example, if I compare the Father to a spring and the Son to the river that issues forth from this source, one can note the following truths:

- (1) The Father is the source of the Son (the Son issues from the Father)
- (2) The spring and the river have (and are defined in part by their possession of) the same substance (water/divine existence of a certain type).

The analogy, however, has some real limitations:

- 1) Neither the Father and the Son are material beings, so any comparison with material beings is inapt;
- 2) For example, the Father and Son, being immaterial, can indwell one another; this is impossible for material beings (including the river and the spring used in the analogy), since material beings have bodies that are circumscribed and located in different places (can't be in the same place at the same time);
- 3) The river and the spring are inanimate beings that can only be related to each other in physical ways (by position in time and place; by one acting upon the other as a cause of physical change or movement). The Father and the Son are animate, rational beings that relate to one another and act toward one another far more complex ways. (Love, for example, is a far more complex relationship than heating or producing movement.)

The same is true even of more complex analogies from the created world.

For example, the comparison of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to the root, trunk and branches of a tree would truthfully show that these

- 1) possess the same nature and have the same substance (being a tree/being God)
- 2) are integrally connected and share vital processes (so they can be regarded as a single entity that is complex and internally differentiated)

At the same time,

- 1) by emphasizing the circumscription and separate physical location of the parts, this physical analogy fails to illustrate the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
- 2) trees do not possess a will, nor are they capable of love, so the vital processes at work within the divine life are far more complex than simple organic metaphors, e.g. the circulation of sap within a tree, would suggest.

B. The Special Problem of the Spirit's Identity

In the Scriptures, the personal characteristics of the Spirit are not as clearly defined or developed as the personal characteristics of the Father and the Son, since the Spirit does the work of the Father and reveals and applies truths concerning the Son (i.e. the Spirit's work does not point to himself or his own person).

At the same time, the Spirit appears to provide the basis for understanding the commonality within God's inner life.

(1) The Spirit is both the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son.

(2) Both the Father and the Son are said to have a role in the sending of the Spirit.

(3) God is Spirit (Jn. 4:24) and God is love (1Jn. 4:16; cf. Rom. 5:5: "The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us), so it is reasonable to infer that the Spirit is itself love (*caritas*), the love that lies at the heart of the divine life and binds together the Father and the Son

Is this love one of those qualities that characterizes God's inner life and belongs to each divine person in exactly the same way (i.e. is this love part of the divine substance)?

This idea doesn't seem to be correct. The Father and the Son may be good (possess goodness), just, holy, etc. in precisely the same way, for example, but love seems to be something different and work differently. There is no such thing as an undifferentiated love that all people can possess in precisely the same way with precisely the same content. For example, my love for my wife is a very specific affection with a unique goal--it is only for her and not a generic undifferentiated quality that has precisely the same content as anyone else's love makes me feel love equally toward all women in general. My wife's love for me is similarly specific and narrowly defined--it is not an undifferentiated feeling with precisely the same content as anyone else's love for the spouse (generically considered) or for humanity in general; instead her love is directly and uniquely to *me*. Love is thus not a quality or a substance but rather a kind of relation that starts from a certain position and has a peculiar object.

This divine love differs from all created loves in that it is not one of those things that can be or cannot be (i.e. it is not an accident and, unlike accidents, does not have an existence that is contingent and can disappear). It is rather the eternal love that binds together the Father and the Son.

If we think of the love that lies at the heart of God's life as a relation that unites the Father and the Son, we can think of this love as a gift that is continually given and received.

When we think of love not as a formal or notional relation, but rather as a gift continually given and received, we can understand it to be a substantial reality existing alongside the Father and the Son. What the Father gives to the Son is his own life under a certain description (love) and, from the fullness (surplus/excess) of the life/love that is given, the Son pours out this love/life back to the Father and out toward the world.

This incidentally explains not only why and how the Spirit can be eternal but also why the divine life is limited to a Trinity. The logic of love requires two persons who are the objects of one another's love, together with the love that unites them. More persons may not properly be introduced into such a relationship.

C. Why Desiring and Loving God Is A Better Way of Relating to God Than Simple Knowledge

Since there is much about God that we cannot know, there are limits to how far we can think of our relationship to God in terms of knowledge or comprehension.

Desire and love include a certain comprehension of the goodness and excellence of the beloved, but this is not comprehensive (one doesn't already know all there is to know about the beloved); instead the knowledge one has of the beloved's goodness is only partial but is sufficient to make one want to know more of the other's goodness and to move one toward that end. (With God, who is infinitely good, this is an inexhaustible quest in which greater knowledge leads to greater desire to know the other *ad infinitum*=eternal progress.)

Since

(a) knowing is necessarily associated with loving (one can't love what one does not know) but is also distinct from loving (one can know without loving) and

(b) there must be a mind that knows,
one can think of a mental trinity of

- a mind (*mens*), knowing (*notitia*) and loving (*amor*)

or better yet,

- memory (*memoria*), intelligence (*intelligentia*) and will (*voluntas*),

showing how one mind (one life) can be related to itself in complex ways involving real distinctions.

- Each member of this mental trinity is the same mind, though related to itself in differing ways by different acts.
 - There is thus within the mind both a real unity and significant internal differentiation and these vestiges (*vestigia*) exist in human beings because human beings are in the image of God.
 - When the human mind is turned toward God (and thus rightly ordered), some likenesses to the divine life that is the source and cause of the human mind's existence can be faintly discerned through the operations previously considered.

II. Description and Summary Outline of the Order and Sequence of Arguments

Begun c. 400 and finished only c. 420. A draft of the earlier chapters was released without his permission and he then stopped work on it (Book 12 being then incomplete) and was only later persuaded by his friend Bishop Aurelius of Carthage to complete it. Books 1-7 deal with the Scriptural background for the mystery of the Trinity and define terms that are crucial to the novel account of the Trinity given in the second half of the work (Books 8-15).

- Books 1-4 are introductory and lay down an exegetical basis for what is to follow, noting in particular passages where the Son is not less than the Father because he is sent (vs. being the sender).
 - Bk. 1: Augustine explains that he will begin with Scriptural proofs and then go on to present, from the perspective of the Catholic faith, rational arguments to refute his rationally inclined opponents. These rational arguments are primarily a discussion of the way in which language can and should be used in describing the Trinity (including discussions of what "substance" and "person" might mean when applied to God).

- Books 2-3 offer a discussion of the separate "missions" of the Son and Holy Spirit (both being sent by the Father, though each in a different way and with different purposes), which were not discernible in the Old Covenant, but can be discerned in the New, pointing back to the eternal begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit from the Father.
- Book 4 (see esp. 4.20) argues that the Arians are wrong to think that relations that
 - involve differences in position and
 - are non-reciprocal (e.g. the Father's begetting of the Son and sending of the Son)
 establish unequal relationships (greater and lesser power; greater and lesser perfection, etc.).
 The Father can be the source of the Son's life without making the Son a fundamentally different kind of being than the Father
 - Cf. "light from light, true God from true God" in the Creed--same fundamental kind of existence [= "substance"] is transmitted, hence the Son says, "The Father and I are one" and "He thought it not robbery to be equal to God."
- Books 5-7 try to state and expound the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity (esp. Father-Son relations) in opposition to Western Homoean and Arian criticisms.
 - Augustine is concerned to clear the field by removing any concepts that could be used to support the opponent's position.
 - Thus, he needs to define terms that relate to identity and existence (e.g. substance, accident, relation, etc.) in ways that support the Catholic cause and preempt the Arian use of these terms to produce arguments opposing Catholic doctrine.
 - In particular, Augustine wants to oppose the Arian idea that God's essential simplicity means that he cannot have any accidents that differentiate him at a further, non-essential level (and would also make him subject to change and loss). Augustine agrees that God always is what he is and that there are no qualities or perfections that he sometimes has and sometimes doesn't have.
 - The distinctions that exist in the life of God will turn out to be not accidental qualities, but rather eternal relationships (e.g. being father or son; Augustine follows Hilary of Poitiers in thinking of the Spirit as *gift*, which is something
 - ♣ essentially relational (with the Father and Son as the givers, based on Acts 8:20 and Rom. 5:5) and
 - ♣ intrinsically connected with love
 - Cf. 15.18.32: "The Spirit is called gift only because of love... The love that is from God and indeed is God is, properly speaking, the Holy

Spirit...What is meant by Gift, if not love...?"

- The Spirit is the overflowing love which the Father and Son have for each other and which bind them to each other in eternal communion and which they in turn pour out on creatures.
 - Cf. *Serm 71*: Father and Son wish to give us that which unites them, so that we too can be similarly united to them and to each other.
 - This love proceeds simultaneously from the Father and the Son, so that they function as one source, not two (see 5.14.15; 15.27.48).
 - ♣ However, since the Son received from the Father his ability to be a source of the Spirit (so that the Spirit receives *from* the Son and proceeds *through* him), one may say that the Spirit proceeds principally from the Father (15.17.29).

Summary of Major Arguments in Book 5

- Especially important are the arguments Augustine makes in 5.4.5: One should reject the Arian idea that the Son is called "God" in a transferred way because the Son has some of the same qualities God does, but, unlike God, can come to have less of these qualities or even lose these qualities.
If
(a) one is to be called "God" and
(b) part of being God is that you retain the good (which is an essential part of who you are) without become corrupted and losing that good
then
(c) God doesn't have qualities separable from who he fundamentally is that can come and go ("accidents").
The Son isn't a sort of second-tier, discount-brand divinity who varies in goodness and can be less good than the

Father. The Son and the Father have one life and the same, enduring fundamental qualities.

- 5.8.9: As a consequence of this, any fundamental features of the divine life—even things like relations—must be a part of God's ongoing, eternal life, rather than things separable from the divine life that come and go.
- 7.2: This is important because we do not discern or define each of the divine persons by reference to themselves alone, but rather by reference to the relation one bears to the other(s). This difference is made known by the terms "Son" and "Father" (the Father is the Father of the Son but not the Father of the Spirit, so F-S relations are distinguishable and different from F-HS relations) and makes the relationship that is created one that is not reciprocal (i.e. the Father is not the Son and vice-versa).
- 7.4: When we talk about three, we are not talking about three things that all have the same quality (three members of a class) such that there could be other members of this class that also have the same quality (e.g. there could be four oranges, not just three). There is no other occurrence of what these three have in common other than what we find in the three themselves.
 - The Spirit can be thought of as the gift of God.

Bks. 8-15 deal with the trinitarian image of God in man and how this might be used to understand the mystery of the Trinity. (Mind is useful because it is dynamic in nature and relatively immaterial.)

- Bk. 8 is transitional and joins the two halves of *De trinitate* together. There is a real (ontological) connection between our inner life and the inner life of the Trinity. The connection lies in truth and goodness.
 - God is Truth itself (*ipsa veritas*) and the Good itself (*ipsum bonum*).
 - Truth is that in terms of which we know and understand whatever is known and understood.
 - Goodness is that in terms of which we desire, approve and love whatever is desired, approved and loved.
 - God is that in terms of which we may know and love anything.
 - Thus at the end of Bk. 8, within the category of goodness and the activity of love that it governs, one may distinguish a trinity:
 - the lover, the beloved and the love that binds them together.
- Bks. 9-11 develop this and other created trinities and relates them to the divine Trinity. The three persons are identified and defined by their mutual relationships.
 - *Conf. XIII.11.12* as the background and beginnings of this project: reflection upon roles played by being, knowledge and will, each distinct within the one inseparable life. These distinctions, however, give us only a faint image of Trinitarian relations and cannot be mapped onto the latter in any simple way. "Thus the Godhead exists and is known to itself and is its own all-sufficient joy

without variation forever, Being-Itself in the manifold greatness of its unity. “

One might also compare here *City of God* 11.26:

- “We too, as a matter of fact, recognize in ourselves and image of God, that is of this most high Trinity, even if the Image is not equal to Him in worth, but rather very far short of being so. The image is not co-eternal and, to sum up the matter briefly, it is not formed of the same substance of God. Yet it is nearer to him in the scale of nature than any other thing created by him, although it still requires to be reshaped and perfected in order to be nearest to him in its likeness to him also. For we exist, and we know that we exist, and we love to exist and to know that we exist. “
- Book 9: The first mental trinity introduced: mind, its knowledge of itself, and its love of itself (*mens, notitia sui, amor sui*)--the latter two co-extensive with the first, from which they proceed. But in a way this is not satisfactory, since the mind is a thing, not an act.

Summary of Major Arguments in Book 9

- 9.1.1: In seeking knowledge of the Holy Trinity, it is worth reflecting upon the nature of that mind we have received from God that is itself in the image of God. (We should do this with appropriate modesty and caution: "faith is the beginning of knowledge" and this knowledge will only be perfected when we see face to face, so we must be careful that now with knowledge that is limited and partial we say nothing unworthy of God when discussing the characteristics of and relations between the Father, Son and Spirit.)
- 9.2.2: Let us investigate the love which lies at the heart of the divine life and see whether it is shared equally and in the same way by all three divine persons and what role the Spirit plays.
- The logic of love (the lover, beloved and the love which joins them together) is particularly appropriate here, since it depends upon a certain basic trinity: "For I do not love, unless I love a lover, for there is no love where nothing is loved."
 - But what if I love only myself--are there only two elements then? (me and the love which I have for myself--in this case the lover and the beloved are one)
 - Response (9.3.3): There is really more here than just me and the love which I have for myself. To love anything I must have knowledge (who ever loved something with which they were utterly unfamiliar?) and therefore there are actually three things here--the love, the knowledge of the thing loved, and the mind that has this knowledge (can there ever be a knowledge or a knowing that is not connected with some knower?)
- 9.4.4: Knowledge is not something static (product) but something dynamic (vital process=knowing) that aims at fullness/perfection:

"Knowledge is a kind of life in the understanding of the one who knows..."

- 9.4.5: Where knowledge is perfect it is equal to its object and befits its object (same true for Son as God's understanding and expression of Himself [=Word]), so Son/Word is equal to God and fittingly a member of the divine life.
 - 9.4.6: knowing and loving as continuing processes which have an ongoing reality of their own and remain in relation to each other
 - 9.4.7-5.8: knowledge and love are not confined to a part but is something the whole mind/being has (is in the whole mind/being) and they are inseparable parts of the immaterial life that one has (unity and distinction, without confusion)
- Book 10 tries to fix this problem by keeping the mind as the underlying term of unity (the one substance) and adding an initial function of memory. This mental trinity can now be seen to consist in the three distinct acts (not faculties or powers, as Peter Lombard thought) by which the one mind (*mens*) remembers itself, understands itself and wills (i.e. loves) itself. The underlying term of unity would correspond to the divine substance, while the three acts would correspond to the persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit respectively, with remembering being a kind of self-presence (a presence of the mind to itself) which is prior to the two further acts and upon which the two further acts are always dependent. (being aware of myself, knowing myself, liking/loving myself).
- 10.11.17: the refinement of the mental trinity in terms of memory, understanding and will as belonging to one mind (one life), though each of these terms must be understood to have a distinct relational element and to have certain necessary relationships in which one is comprehended by the other and presupposes the other (one can't will without understanding, one can't understand without remembering)
 - 10.11.18: Memory, understanding and will "are not three lives, but one, nor are they three minds, but **one mind**. When we say that memory is life, mind and substance, we speak of it in relation to itself, but when we call it memory we speak of it **in relation to something else**."
 - Thus, the members of the Trinity are one, yet distinguished by their mutual relations
- Book 11 introduces some supplementary analogies relating to the external senses
- seeing with the eyes=
 - the external object we see,
 - the actual vision and
 - the mind's attention which links our vision to the object seen,

which are then refined in terms of internal vision through the use of memory

- remembering=
 - memory of the external object once seen,
 - the internal vision of its likeness, and
 - the will that directs our internal vision to the object to the memory of the object seen).

The interesting thing about memory is that it is distinct from the external object to which it is related and yet persists (remains latent, with a kind of independent existence) even when one is not directly attending to it.

- 11.3.6-4.7: a further refinement of this latter trinity: image, inner vision and will--this more appropriate to the mind's conceiving of incorporeal (=bodiless) things by direct perception of the mind, rather than by ordinary perception of bodies via sensible images.
- 11.5.8: Note that the will (desire/love) directs the mind to view these things, so that they remain in memory.
 - Holding something in memory must come before the will itself, because we cannot will to recall a particular thing unless it is held in memory.
 - What is stored in memory may stir up and inflame the will with desire/love.
 - The act of recollection itself involves a trinity: “that which is hidden in memory even before it is thought of, that which results in thought when it is seen, and the will which forms a link between the two of these” (11.7.12).
- Book 12: distinction between two levels of activity (practical=concerned with action vs. contemplative)--the trinitarian image is found only at the level of contemplation but, due to the fall, this capacity for action is obscured or impaired
- Book 13: thus, when not only the flesh is healed but our minds are restored by Christ's work, the image of God within is restored and we become able again not only to properly remember, know and love ourselves but more importantly to remember know and love the God in whose image we are made and from whom we derive our very being. This capacity is awakened in us by grace and increases as we are renewed.
 - 13.20.26: “But when we believe to be true what we hold in thought and love what we ought to love, then we live in accord with the trinity of the inner man.
- Book 14: one is thus able not only to remember oneself, know oneself and love oneself (the image of God) but also to remember God, know God and love God (the exemplar/archetype from which the image is made). It is impossible to remember, know or love the self as image unless one remembers, knows and loves the exemplar/archetype from the image has derived its existence and likeness. (We cannot know ourselves until we know and love God.) The image remains fundamentally grounded in the archetype and a direction of mental acts toward ourselves without reference to the One who is the ground of our existence and gives us this likeness can only rank as foolishness and a failure to understand, the very

sort of failure in which the Fall consisted and human fallenness consists. The self loses not only God, but its possession of its own self and scatters itself upon the world of sensible material things, senselessly trying to find itself there rather than with its Creator.

- 14.7.9: These faculties not rightly exercised due to the blindness of sin, so that the vision of which we are capable fails and must be regained by the illumination of the mind divine grace (hence the memory is filled with lesser things, which attract and enslave the will) and being raised by God by the affection which God freely gives
 - 14.8.11: seen, retained, loved
 - 14.11.14: in memory, "the mind is present to itself, so that it can be understood by its own thought, and both can be joined together by the love of itself"
 - 14.12.15-16: ultimately the trinity of mental processes must be directed not at the mind itself, but more properly at the mind's maker (remember, understanding and loving God that one might be with God)
- Book 15:
 - In understanding, love is present along with memory “for without memory the gaze of our thought has no object to return to, and without love it has no reason to return to it” (15.21.41).
 - Thus, memory, understanding and love provide a partial and very imperfect analogy to the life of the triune God.
 - The limitations of even this kind of analogical knowledge of God are freely admitted.
 - Our spiritual growth in coming to know ourselves through divine love reflects this pattern; we are images of the triune God, from whom we derived our existence and toward whom we return.
 - ♣ Ends with a prayer (15.28.51), seeking a changed life in the image of the Holy Trinity: “Let me remember you, let me understand you, let me love you. Increase these things in me until you reform me completely.