Augustine and the Philosophical Foundations of Sincerity.

Suzanne Stern-Gillet

University of Bolton
In 1958, the distinguished American literary critic Lionel Trilling published a book entitled *Sincerity and Authenticity*. The volume was slim, yet it opened with an ambitious claim:

I propose that at a certain point in its history the moral life of Europe added to itself a *new* element, the state or quality of the self which we call sincerity. (p. 2, my italics)

In the first chapter of this book Trilling applied himself to the task of tracing ‘the origin and rise’ of this ‘new element’ and appears soon to have found an answer that fully satisfied him. Sincerity, he writes, came into being in ‘the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries’. Why then? At that time, so he tells us, ‘something like a *mutation in human nature* took place.’ (pp 18-19, my italics) What could such a mutation have been, which had so far gone generally unnoticed? It was nothing less than the transformation of ‘men’ into ‘human beings’. As for the cause of such a mutation, Trilling advises, we need look no further than ‘the dissolution of the feudal order and the diminished authority of the Church’. Indeed, it was consequent upon these trends, so he claims, that ‘the idea of society… came into being.’ (p. 20) Society, as then newly conceived, made possible the development of individualism. The Reformation ensued.

From such a simple, not to say simplistic, psycho-historical scheme, Trilling draws an explanation of the rise of confessional discourse and the consequent emergence of sincerity as a moral virtue. Once Calvinist divines, he writes, had ‘liberated themselves from the sanctions of the corporate Church’ (p. 21), it became clear that ‘their
moral and intellectual authority’ could only be derived from their relation to the divine Word.’ This, he adds, was the point at which ‘plain speaking’ became ‘the order of the day’ (p. 22) and autobiography as a literary genre was born. Such being the drift of Trilling’s historical narrative, it is hardly surprising that he should think of autobiography as a predominantly ‘Protestant’ genre (p. 23). Admittedly, he is not unaware of the existence of examples of autobiography earlier than the sixteenth century, but he dismisses these as ‘sparse records of the events of religious experience’ (ibid.). Indeed, he muses, how could these pre-Renaissance efforts have been anything other than rudimentary, since men had not yet turned into individuals and since no author of confessional writings, therefore, could have supposed that ‘he might be an object of interest to his fellow men’ (p. 24).

But if I am not guilty of selective quotation - and I am not - then the question arises: how can Trilling possibly write as he does seemingly without taking any account of the existence of Augustine’s Confessions? One obvious temptation must, I suppose, be thrust aside: namely to suggest that Trilling writes as he does because he had not actually read the Confessions. But if, on grounds of charity, one excludes this extreme possibility and suggests instead that he may not, understandably enough, have considered that the Confessions meet the criteria of autobiography as a literary genre, one is faced with the difficult task of deciding which of the several criteria for the rise of sincerity Augustine’s Confessions have failed to meet. Can we possibly suppose Trilling to imply that Augustine’s Confessions are to be included in those ‘sparse record of the events of religious experience’ which pre-date the sixteenth century? No one even superficially acquainted with the Confessions could possibly come to such a conclusion. Are we then to assume that, in Trilling’s view, Augustine wrote as he did without supposing that what he had to say about himself ‘might be an object of interest to his fellow men’? Since Augustine, throughout the Confessions, addresses himself directly to God, yes, one might possibly attempt to argue that he was only indirectly concerned with the interest that his words might have for his fellow human beings. But nowhere in his book does Trilling argue for such a thesis, nor do I think that it could seriously be maintained. No, the conclusion has to be that Trilling’s whole account of the rise of sincerity is vitiated by his
failure to recognize Augustine’s masterpiece for what it is, his failure to take the measure of Augustine’s extraordinary innovation.

*Contra* Trilling, I shall argue in this paper, the moral ideal of sincerity long predates the sixteenth century. *Contra* Trilling, I shall here make bold to claim, the works of Augustine bear witness to the emergence, in the late antique age, of sincerity as a moral virtue. If I had a taste for large and portentous claims, I might even say that it was Augustine who invented the virtue of sincerity.

Before attempting to substantiate this contention, however, a working notion of sincerity is needed as well as some backing for the historical claim that its emergence as a virtue postdates the formulation of classical virtue theories. In section II below, I engage in some preparatory spadework, conceptual and historical, before turning to Augustine’s writings in sections III to VII.

II

Sincerity is a complex notion. Its everyday use is loose and untidy. To draw a detailed and accurate map of the conceptual territory that it covers would be a more protracted task than the present framework allows. The remarks that follow, therefore, are meant at providing no more than a sketch of the mental dispositions that sincerity is taken to characterize.

Sincerity is a quality of the self – so much Trilling got right. It designates a relationship of congruence or harmony between different parts, aspects or manifestations of the self. These include not only thoughts, feelings and emotions but also the awareness - or lack of it - that the subject has of them, as well as the manner in which he expresses - or fails to express - them. To gain an idea of the possibilities involved, consider the following example. Your latest book has received rave reviews. As your friend, I do feel pleasure. But is my pleasure heartfelt? And when I congratulate you on
your success, are my congratulations genuine? The question arises because, as I read your reviews, I find myself dwelling on the weakness of some of the arguments that you present in that book. I reflect on the dullness of your prose style. I recall factual errors in your footnotes, and so on. What’s more, all the while, I remember with renewed bitterness the lukewarm reviews that my own book has attracted. Clearly, my congratulatory self is two-faced; my pleasure at your success is tinged with envy and resentment. It is not ‘true’ pleasure. I am not whole-hearted or, as Stuart Hampshire would put it, single-minded in the matter\(^1\). Such double-mindedness cannot but cast doubt on my sincerity and the ‘genuineness’ of my pleasure. If I am sufficiently self-reflective and lucid in the matter, I may become aware of the fraudulent nature of my current feelings. I may - but I need not. Self-deception may intervene, anesthetize my resentment, and leave me conveniently unaware of my disingenuousness.

To be sincere is both to tell the truth and to be true, for the two meanings of ‘true’ come together in sincerity.\(^2\) Commonly and roughly, truth is a property of those linguistic utterances - or, in Augustine’s terminology in the *De magistro*, signs - which correspond to some non-linguistic state of affairs. ‘Linguistic utterances’, in this context, can be construed widely and extended also to include non-linguistic modes of communication such as facial expressions, laughter, and tears as well as the silent self-narrative that each of us elaborates in the privacy of his own consciousness. In this sense of ‘truth’, sincerity is the commendable disposition to match what we express to what we feel. It is related to candour and can be contrasted with mendacity, deceitfulness and hypocrisy. In this first sense, ‘true’ is a relational property.

Less common but equally colloquial is the use of ‘true’ to designate the unalloyed nature or purity of a substance. It is in this sense that we speak of ‘pure olive oil’ (i.e. unmixed with other oils), ‘pure bicarbonate of soda’ (i.e. unmixed with cream of tartar) or, by extension, ‘pure joy’ (i.e. unmixed with other emotions). When it is applied to mental states, sincerity in this sense designates the commendable quality of one who is

\(^1\) Hampshire S. (1972: 232-256).
\(^2\) The double meaning of ‘true’ in relation to its etymology is described in O’Donnell (1992, vol. I: VII n.3).
undivided in his feelings, or is of one mind with himself. Sincerity, in this sense, is related to integrity and can be contrasted with self-deception and bad faith. In this second sense, ‘true’ is a qualitative property.

Sincerity, in both senses of the word, is the species of truth that pertains to the self. The extent of my sincerity coincides with the limits of my own self. ‘No man’, as Augustine said, ‘can look into another’s heart’\(^3\). Just as I cannot confess your sins for you, I cannot look into your heart, feel your feelings, or think your thoughts. I cannot, therefore, sincerely express them in your stead.

The two senses of ‘sincere’ and ‘true’ are combined in the above example. The congratulations that I extend to you and the broad smile that accompanies them are insincere in the first sense of the term since they do not correspond to what I think and feel. They are straightforward lies. But they are also likely to be insincere in the other sense of the word. At least they would be so if I thought that my pleasure at your good reviews was authentic and entire. My insincerity would then stem not so much from the split between what I feel and what I say, but rather from the conflict between my own emotions. On the one hand I share in your happiness - or at least I want to or think that I do - yet, on the other hand, I am sour, rancorous, and envious. What I want to be is discordant with what I truly am. Or, in Kierkegaard’s more elegant expression, my heart is not pure; it does not will one thing only\(^4\). Of this ambivalence, I may, but need not, be aware. I may not care to examine myself too closely or I may be in plain bad faith.

Sincerity is a dependent virtue.\(^5\) In this respect it is unlike first-order virtues, such as courage and generosity, which arise in direct response to the contingencies of daily

\(^3\) De sermone Domini in monte, II,25,82: non ... potest cor alterius intueri. See also Contra Mendacium, III.4: in hominis mente de qua latente, non potest judicare (‘one cannot judge of what is hidden in the human mind’, my transl.).

\(^4\) Kierkegaard S. 1938, transl. D.V. Steere. According to A.D.M. Walker (1978: 492), to whom the present section of this paper is indebted, this sense of sincerity is focal: ‘... at the kernel of the notion of sincerity lies the idea of purity, applied metaphorically to a man’s state of mind and its “contents”... our various uses of “sincere” and “sincerity” are related to each other in ways which mirror the connections between “pure”, “free from impurities” etc’. See also Walker (1977: 91).

\(^5\) The phrase ‘dependent virtues’ was coined by Michael Slote (1983: 61 sqq.) to designate those virtues which ‘only count as such when they are attended by certain other virtues’.
life, as they impinge upon the agent’s consciousness. Rather than a direct response to outside circumstances, sincerity is a quality of an individual’s response to such circumstances. Upon this response, it confers a seal of warranty certifying its genuineness or purity. Sincerity, therefore, often functions as an instrument of appraisal. But it is an instrument of appraisal of a highly specific kind since it can apply only to what is morally fine or, at least, sound. This conceptual point is crucial. In the same way as it is inappropriate to describe someone as a conscientious grifter or a diligent bank robber, it is conceptually improper to depict a person as sincerely envious or to say of a threat that it was uttered sincerely. Only what is good can be sincere, such as gratitude, repentance or, in Augustine’s favorite example, love. This is so even when sincerity is invoked as a mitigating factor, to account for the activities of the deluded crank or to mitigate the blame that we would otherwise wish to extend to the fanatical terrorist. The fact that sincerity, in such cases, is perceived as a redeeming feature shows indirectly that its range of application cannot stray much beyond what is morally acceptable.

III

Sincerity is virtually absent from classical catalogues of the virtues. Take Plato’s dialogues first, in which the ethical status of truth-telling is notoriously ambiguous. In the early Hippias Minor Socrates is made to argue that it is morally better (cf. ἀμείνων ψυχή, 376 A sqq.) to be duplicitous than truthful. He justifies this curious thesis by appeal to the craft model of virtue: while the truthful person is confined by the truth, his duplicitous counterpart, who can choose whether to tell the truth or to dissemble, has more power, hence greater wisdom. In the Republic, the same Socrates tells Adeimantus that no one should ever be told lies (ψεύδεσθαι) about ‘the things that are’ (περὶ τὰ ὄντα, 382 B 2) and that the practice of lying, if it were to become widespread, would destroy the city (389 D). This does not prevent him from later defending the thesis that rulers may lie to their fellow citizens when to do so would benefit the city as a whole (414 C – 415 C).

6 To my knowledge Walker (1978) is the first writer on the subject of sincerity to have stressed this point.
Aristotle, to whom we owe the first and still the best systematic classification of the virtues, appears to have found no need to include in it a general virtue of veracity. In the midst of dealing with the cardinal virtues of courage, temperance, justice and wisdom, the father of virtue theory briefly considers a number of minor virtues which, as he points out, have no names (ἀνώνυμοι, N.E. 1107b30) but can be said generally to pertain to social life (τὸ συζῆν, ibid., 1127a18). Truthfulness, viz. the quality of those who habitually tell the truth (ἀληθευόνται, ibid., 1127a19), is such a virtue. In so far as it eases social life, truthfulness, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is presented as a rather superficial disposition of character, such as would be possessed by the Athenian ancestor of that old-fashioned British character, the ‘clubbable’ man. Aristotle’s truthful man keeps to the mean, which suggests that he knows better than to tell the truth scrupulously and on all occasions. His capacities of discernment enable him to do so at the right time to the right person and in the right manner. Thus he is neither boastful nor unduly self-deprecating. As Aristotle specifies, ‘he inclines to tell less, rather than more, than the truth. This appears to be in better taste, since exaggerations are burdensome’ (ibid., 1127b7-9, my transl.). Such an attitude to truth in social contexts is also characteristic of Aristotle’s paragon of virtue, the great-souled man: this man, who has a just measure of himself, habitually tells the truth ‘… except when he is resorting to “irony” (δι’ εἰρωνείαν) in his dealings with the common sort of people.’ (ibid., 1124b30-31, my transl.) ‘Resorting to irony’, which in this context means dissembling, is clearly not a practice that Aristotle regarded as morally wrong per se.

Aristotle’s views on εἰρωνεία and veracity seem to have corresponded fairly closely to those held by his near, and not so near, contemporaries. For Aristophanes, for instance, εἰρωνεία is straightforward lying. Plato, as we know, repeatedly ascribes εἰρωνεία to Socrates and, so it seems, salutes him for this quality. Yet he also uses the

---

7 As mentioned by J. Rusten and I.C. Cunningham in their edition of Theophrastus. They give as references *Clouds* 499, *Wasps* 174, and *Birds* 1211.
term to castigate the Sophists. Theophrastus, too, considers εἰρωνεία to be a profoundly ambiguous concept, as is evident from his thumbnail sketch of the dissembling man in the *Characters*. ‘Dissembling (εἰρωνεία)’, he there writes, ‘would seem to be false denigration of one’s actions and words’. But this preliminary definition is undercut by the examples that Theophrastus proceeds to offer of this disposition of character. Since these examples include praising openly someone whom one has maligned in secret as well as denying what one is actually doing at the very moment that one is doing it, it appears that Theophrastus includes under ‘dissembling’ not only urbane self-deprecation but also unadorned mendacity and plain hypocrisy. His concluding warning to avoid dissemblers more than vipers comes, therefore, as no surprise. What, by contrast, is intriguing is the reason that he gives in support of this warning, viz. that dissembling natures (ἡ ἔθη) are not ‘simple’ (μὴ ἁπλὰ). Clearly, in this context, ἁπλῶς means simple or straightforward, as opposed to duplicitous. The fact that at a later date, as proven by a number of inscriptions, ἁπλῶς could also be predicated of pure metals, as opposed to alloys is interesting and may prove relevant to the analysis of Augustine’s later use of sincerus and mundus. For the moment, let me just conclude that in classical Athens, dissembling could be considered laudable or blameworthy, depending on the circumstances.

Before concluding this whistle-stop tour of salient attitudes to truth telling in the pagan ancient world, it is worth mentioning that, if Plotinus held views on the matter, he kept them to himself. Nowhere in the *Enneads* is the subject broached, not even where one might have expected to find some mention of it, i.e. in the tractate on the virtues (I.2 [19]). Whatever sources Augustine may have drawn upon for his teachings on lying, therefore, it could not have been the Plotinian corpus.

---

8 See, e.g., *Sophist* 268 B – C. If we take Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic* to be representative of the Sophists as a group, the Sophists seem to have returned the compliment. In 337 A 4 – 5 at any rate Thrasymachus castigates Socrates for his ‘usual irony’ (ἡ εἰρωνεία εἰρωνεία).  
10 See Liddell, Scott and Jones, s.v. III.c who refer to inscriptions from the 4th century A.D., i.e. roughly contemporary with Augustine. It is interesting that this sense of ἁπλῶς may be attested as early as Plato’s *Phaedrus*. In 250 C 2 - 4, Socrates describes the vision enjoyed by discarnate souls as: ἡλάκτινα δὲ καὶ ἁπλὰ καὶ ἀγροθεὶ καὶ ἐνθαίματα μυομένα μυομένα τα καὶ ἐπτετεῖοντες ἐν αἰγή καθαρᾷ. Hackforth (1952) translates: ‘whole and unblemished likewise, free from all alloy, steadfast and blissful were the spectacles on which we gazed in the moment of final revelation’.
V

In contrast with ancient authors of the Classical period, Augustine adopted an uncompromising attitude to truth-telling. In all circumstances, he consistently taught, lying is a sin, although he allowed that, as a sin, it admits of degrees. In the De Mendacio (ca. 395), he carefully distinguishes lying from all other species of false and deceitful speech and posits that: ‘It is by the intention of the mind, not by the truth or falsity of the things themselves, that we must judge whether someone is lying or not lying.’ (III.3, my translation)\(^{11}\). The fact that this definition now strikes us as obvious is a measure of its lasting influence upon subsequent thinking on the issue. Augustine, however, was not content just to define lying. He wanted to expose it in all its ugliness, as he thought of it. To that effect, he categorized and attacked the main arguments ever put forward in favour of certain kinds of lies. As a result, the De Mendacio consists in a thorough exploration of the casuistry of mendacity. Not even lies uttered in furtherance of an indisputably good moral or religious cause escaped Augustine’s censure. To do evil in order that good may ensue can never be justified, he said again and again.

The same inflexible anti-consequentialism characterizes the Contra Mendacium ad Consentium, written over twenty years later (422) and much narrower in scope and focus. The occasion for the treatise was a suggestion that Augustine had received from a certain Consentius. Consentius, a Spanish bishop, was troubled by the growing number of Priscillianists in his province. At the time, some followers of Priscillianus, it seems, were masquerading as Catholics in order to be left undisturbed in the practice of their religion, which had already been pronounced heretical by three Councils\(^{12}\). Fearful of the deleterious effects that the presence of Priscillianists in his flock might have, Consentius wrote to Augustine with the suggestion that some trusted Catholics be persuaded, in their

\(^{11}\) ‘Ex animi enim sui sententia, non ex rerum ipsarum veritate vel falsitate mentiens aut non mentiens judicandus est.’

\(^{12}\) The Councils in question were those of Saragossa (380), Bordeaux (384) and Toledo (400). On this tangled issue, see G. Combes’ notes on the Contra Mendacium (1948: 630-635). Priscillianism was a syncretist heresy that included elements of Christianity, Gnosticism and Manicheanism.
turn, to infiltrate the ranks of Priscillianists with a view to convert them to the true religion. As Consentius might have predicted, this suggestion elicited a blast from the Bishop of Hippo. Not only would Consentius’ strategy be likely to prove ineffectual in converting those at whom the proposed lies were directed, so Augustine replied, but it would also be liable gravely to corrupt the liars themselves (III.6). While the pseudo-Catholic Priscillianists do utter the truth, they do so in order to deceive (V.9). By contrast, Consentius’ proposed fifth columnists would be guilty of a double lie: denying their own faith, they would also be disseminating religious falsehoods, albeit temporarily and in pursuit of a laudable goal. Lies should be exposed as such, Augustine argued, not countered by further lies, even if these are accompanied by an act of mental reservation (VI.14). As for the view that a lie might be permissible if later compensated by some good, Augustine continued to have none of it; a lie, he said, is no less sinful for being inspired by the hope of bringing about a beneficial effect.

While the topic of insincerity is not, as such, broached in the *Contra Mendacium*, there can be no doubt that it is covered by the comprehensive condemnation of lying contained in that treatise: ‘Those who declare thinking that which they do not think or deny thinking that which they do think, lie’, Augustine writes, before adding that those who do so in religious matters risk eternal damnation (III.5). In the earlier and more philosophical *De Mendacio*, the evil said to be attendant upon all forms of mendacity had been more subtly characterized. Lying, Augustine had then warned, corrupts the soul. As can be seen, if Augustine denounced consequentialist justifications of lying, he was not above borrowing consequentialist tools to promote veracity. But so grave, in his view, are the ills caused by lying that he may have decided to resort to any means at his disposal to discourage us from the practice. For lying, as he thought, not only deceives others but also obscures our own rational and spiritual principle. This latter view, I contend, accounts for the central place that sincerity occupies in his philosophy.

---

13 *De Mendacio*, VII.10 (*corrumpere*) and XII.18-19 (*obesse*).
To justify this claim, I turn in the first place to philology. Philology, in this instance, will not take us very far, but it will take us somewhere. Since sincerity does not figure in the classical catalogue of the virtues, it comes as no surprise to note that ‘sincere’ and ‘sincerity’ in the sense that they have in modern English deviate semantically from their Latin etymology. *Sincerus*, at the classical period and after, meant whole, simple, pure, and true in the sense of genuine, accurate or unmixed. In this last sense, it can be said to match the Greek ἁπλοῦς to mean simple, as used by Theophrastus in the *Characters*, as well as ‘unalloyed’, as used to describe materials. As for *sinceritas*, it was used to refer to physical wholeness, purity or moral integrity. In classical Latin and later, therefore, *sincerus* and *sinceritas* refer to the quality possessed by what is unmixed or pure. Although the terms may carry ethical connotations they do not as a rule denote the moral quality of veracity.\(^{14}\)

Augustine is not a heavy user of either term\(^ {15}\). To *sincerus* he prefers *simplex* or *mundus* which in classical Latin mean simple, clean, or elegant. Occasionally, he uses *mundicordis*, a rare and post-classical adjective, which the venerable Du Cange translates in its later mediaeval sense as *unica voce*.\(^ {16}\) To *sinceritas*, Augustine prefers *munditia* or *mundatio* both of which he uses in their classical sense of cleanliness or elegance of either appearance or language. Presumably in order to notify his readers that he uses these words to refer to the private, as opposed to the public self, he mostly specifies them

\(^{14}\) See *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare; C.T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, and F. Gaffiot, *Dictionnaire Illustre Latin-Francais*. For the meaning of *sincerus* as simple and pure, see Tacitus’ exhortation to his fellow countrymen to be a *sincerus et integer ... populus* (‘a pure and untainted race’) (*Historiae*, 4.64, transl. C.D. Fisher). For *sincerus* in the sense of genuine, see Aulus Gellius’ description of books sold as *bonae atque sincerae vetustatis libri* (‘books good and genuinely old’, *Attic Nights*, V.4.1, my transl.). For *sincerus* in the sense of accurate, see Cicero’s description of Thucydides as a *rerum gestarum pronunciator sincerus* (‘a faithful recorder of the past’, *Brutus*, 83.287, transl. G.L. Hendrikson and H.M. Hubbell).

\(^{15}\) Pace Walker (1978: 492), who writes: ‘Very roughly, Augustine there [*De sermone domini in monte*] sees *sinceritas* as a matter of purity of heart (*munditia cordis*), which in turn he interprets as requiring that a man should harbor no evil desires’. As the following sections will show, the matter is considerably more complex than Walker suggests. For a complete list of the occurrences of these and related terms in Augustine, see Tombeur (2002).

by *cordis*. In Augustine’s usage, therefore, *munditia*, like *mundatio cordis*, denotes purity of heart.

These notions figure prominently in his *De sermone Domini in monte* (*Commentary on the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*), written in 393-94, some three years before the *Confessions*\(^{17}\). The relevant scriptural lines are Matthew 5.6 (‘Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God’) and 6.16 (‘… when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites; for they disfigure the face in order to appear to men as fasting etc.’). Taking hypocrisy, as characterized by the Apostle, to be the paradigm of impurity of heart, Augustine puts a semi-philosophical and mildly Aristotelian gloss on the eighth beatitude:

> A cleansing of the heart is, as it were, a cleansing of that eye by which God is seen, and the care for keeping it single ought to be great in proportion to the dignity of the reality that can be perceived by such an eye. (II,1,1, transl. slightly modified)\(^{18}\)

Although Augustine’s reasoning is, in this instance, unhelpfully compressed, its steps are easily identifiable: (1) An excessive concern for temporal goods spreads grime into the heart; (2) The hypocrite’s lamentable intention of winning men’s praise dominates his otherwise commendable intention of obeying God’s law; (3) The co-presence in the hypocrite’s mind of two morally discrepant intentions causes division in his soul; (4) Any cleansing of the heart is to be reflexive: the sinner himself must eradicate the bad intention; (5) Consequent upon this act of self-purification, the sinner is able to ascend to the divine, as it is to be found within and beyond the self.

As operative in the text from which this quotation is taken, Augustine’s concept of intention is crucial for an appreciation of his anguished and obsessive regard for the truth. Although he does not explicitly distinguish intentions from motives, he can nevertheless be said to make an implicit distinction between them in so far as he defines intentions as mental acts which are conscious by definition. Indeed, while motives such

---
\(^{17}\) As Augustine himself records in *Retractationes*, I.14-27.

\(^{18}\) Translations from the *De sermone Domini in monte* are in D.J. Kavanagh’s translation, with occasional slight modifications, which are flagged as such.
as envy and resentment may not be conscious, we cannot intend, as Augustine realized, without knowing that we intend. Whenever the mind intends, therefore, it is present to itself and, to that extent at least, knows itself. As defined in 393-94, therefore, Augustine’s concept of intention prefigures the theory of the self-transparency of the mind that he would later famously develop in the *De trinitate*.

Augustine exploits what appears to have been for him a straightforward conceptual point in two different ways. In the first place, he contrasts the perspicuity of intentions with the uncertainty of their outcomes. Since the fruition of our goals cannot ever be guaranteed, he denied it ethical relevance. The very existence of this contrast, as he construed it, reinforced his anti-consequentialism and led him to affirm that the morality of actions should not be assessed by their consequences but solely by the intention of the agent. As he wrote: ‘in all our actions... it is the intention, and not the act, that ought to be considered, for the intention is indeed the light within us’ ([Commentary on the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, II,13,46](#)). The use of the metaphor of light to account for the intentional aspect of actions is highly significant. We shall return to the issue.

Far bolder is the second thesis that Augustine draws from his conception of intention as ‘the light within us’. To appreciate how bold this second thesis is, let us ask him whether he means that intentions are luminous irrespectively of their morality. Let us ask him whether he would countenance the inference that evil intentions, *qua* intentions, are as luminous as good ones. ‘Yes’, he replies, ‘even a bad intention is a light’ ([ibid., II,13,46](#)). In a way, this answer is no more than should have been expected since it is consonant with his conception of intention as self-transparent by definition. Yet, for all that, it is a little surprising to see the bishop of Hippo use the metaphor of light to describe evil in the soul. Presumably to ease the paradox, he unobtrusively smuggles in an extra criterion - a moral criterion - to complement what had initially been presented as a straightforward conceptual point. Although all intentions, *qua* such, are light, he writes, the light of evil intentions is dimmed by the concomitant presence in the mind of a desire for ‘the temporal things of earth’:
… that same light is darkness when the intention is not a *single* intention (*simplex intentio*) directed toward things of the upper world, but is deflected toward the things beneath; it is as though it were causing an eclipse when the heart is twofold (*duplici corde*) (ibid., II,13,46, transl. slightly modified).

When read side by side with the scriptural texts on which they are meant as a gloss, these lines begin to yield Augustine’s concept of insincerity. In his viewpoint, the intention of the hypocrite is both light and dark. To the extent that the hypocrite’s attempt to appear other than he is can properly be described as deliberate and purposeful, he knows his own mind. His cynicism is proof of his self-knowledge. Yet, to the extent that the hypocrite is driven by the desire for the temporal good of human praise, he invites darkness into his soul. He allows the light within to be dimmed by alien shadowy elements.

At this point, let us pause briefly and ponder the nature of the contrast between light and darkness that Augustine uses to describe evil-intentioned behavior in general, and hypocrisy in particular. On the surface, his meaning is plain. The notion of divided heart (*duplex cor*) readily accounts for the two paradigms of hypocrisy in our later literary heritage, Molière’s Tartuffe and Dickens’ Uriah Heep. Tartuffe puts on a pretense of piety in order to win Orgon’s trust, but he does so with the ultimate purpose of seducing Orgon’s wife, Elmire. So doing, he bears out La Rochefoucauld’s famous maxim that ‘hypocrisy is a homage that vice renders to virtue’19. As for Uriah Heep’s strategy, it, too, consists in faking a virtue, namely humility, in order ultimately to secure the wealth and social status that he craves. Both Tartuffe and Uriah Heep deliberately and purposefully simulate the good in order to gain worldly advantages. They both concurrently fulfill two separate intentions and serve two different masters. Their heart, which ought to be pure and simple, is divided. They are doubly insincere for they are insincere in both senses of the word. As Augustine writes:

> ... whenever a man simulates goodness, he has a divided heart. Therefore, no one has a single heart - and this is the same as a clean heart - unless he

---

rises above human praise while he is living an upright life, that is to say, unless his thoughts and his efforts to please are directed solely toward Him who alone is the discerner of conscience. (ibid., II,1,1)

Augustine’s purpose in drawing a contrast between the light of righteousness and the darkness of temporal cares is not, however, solely to describe the mental set up of hypocrites and other sinners. It is also, more importantly, to offer a philosophical account of it. To this account, we now turn.

VI

In the Cassiciacum dialogues, particularly the Soliloquia and the De magistro, Augustine begins to outline the rationalist epistemology in which his commitment to the ideal of sincerity is ultimately to be traced. Three tenets of this epistemology are of especial relevance to our issue. Augustine holds, firstly, that it is in the nature of the mind to be innately furnished with abstract concepts, a priori principles and eternal truths, all of which he classifies under the umbrella title of ‘intelligibles’. He thinks, secondly, that, in certain conditions, the mind can take direct cognizance of its own contents by consulting ‘the inner truth by means of reason’ (De magistro, XII.39, tr. P. King). He believes, thirdly, as intimated earlier, that the mind enjoys automatic and privileged access to its own operations. The first two tenets are combined in the account of the cognition of intelligibles that Augustine gives in that dialogue:

When we deal with things that we perceive by the mind, that is, namely by the intellect and reason, we are speaking of things that we look upon immediately in the inner light of Truth, in virtue of which the so-called inner man is illuminated and rejoices. (XII.40, transl. P. King)

Augustine emphasizes the inwardness and incorporeal nature of intelligibles by calling them ‘spiritual’, in contrast with sense impressions, which he likes to describe as ‘carnal’ (ibid.). Later on, in the Confessions, his examples of intelligibles will turn out to be pretty standard: the ‘truths and laws of mathematics and mensuration’, the ‘principle of
The fact that all three epistemological tenets are grounded in his theory of divine illumination accounts for Augustine’s pervasive use of the metaphor of light in discussing epistemological issues. This metaphor is worked very hard in Augustine’s writings, being pressed into service to describe all possible objects of direct intellectual apprehension, from the most straightforward of intentions to the Creator. For Augustine, as will be recalled, the source of light - indeed sometimes the light itself - is God. In the same way as we see earthly things courtesy of the sun, he Platonically holds, we apprehend ‘the most certain truths which are arrived at by the sciences’ (Soliloquia, I.12, transl. G. Watson) thanks to the illumination of our mind by the divine guarantor of truth. In the words of Reason, as she is personified in the Soliloquia: ‘… it is God Himself who illuminates, and I myself, the Reason, am to minds what the sight is to eyes’ (ibid.) Hence, we may infer, when the human mind apprehends itself through its conscious operations, it does so courtesy of divine illumination. When it is so illuminated and further aided by virtue, Reason can even display God to our mind (ibid.). Although Augustine holds that the human mind has been created so as to be naturally equipped for the discovery and the enjoyment of eternal truths, he consistently teaches that it cannot actively realize these capabilities without divine assistance. As time went by, Augustine would stress the difficulties in the path of contemplation more and more. In a relatively late work, the De genesi ad litteram (written from ca 401 to 414), he expressed most clearly the paradox that is central to his theological epistemology: God is both present in the soul and above it. Fully exploiting the rich potential of his favourite metaphor while taking care to prevent any possible misunderstanding of it, Augustine urges his readers to reach out to the divine within. Let us, he writes, distinguish between the objects of intellectual vision and the light that makes it possible and understand that:

…the light itself is something else [than the objects of intellectual vision], the light by which the soul is enlightened in order truly to understand and observe all things either in itself or in this light. For this light is now God himself, while the soul is a creature, even though a rational and intelligent
one made to his image. So when it strives to gaze upon that light, it blinks and shivers in its weakness, and quite simply lacks the power to do so. Yet that light is what enables it to understand whatever is within the range of its power. When therefore the mind is snatched up there, and being withdrawn from the senses of the flesh, is set more firmly in the presence of that vision, not spatially but in its own kind of way, it also sees above itself the one by whose aid it also is enabled to see whatever it can see in itself by intellectual understanding (XII,31,59, transl. E. Hill).

As Gareth Matthews well said: ‘Augustine combines the idea of God as the source of epistemic illumination with the idea of God as a blinding light which, even as it enables us to bring other things into focus, cannot be brought into focus itself’.

The above passage, in which a distinct Plotinian echo can be heard, describes an intellectual and spiritual ascent. As a matter of definition, ascents may, but need not, culminate. Those who undertake a journey to the interior of the soul may, or may not, succeed in ‘snatching themselves up’, as the translation quoted above has it. At Ostia, Augustine undoubtedly thought that he had had such a vision, which, interestingly enough, he characterised as ‘a moment of knowledge’ (momentum intelligentiae, Conf. IX. 25). Earlier on, while still at Milan, his discovery of a Latin translation of the books of the Platonists had been, from his own account, followed by a mystical experience which he described in terms similar to those he would later to use in the De genesi ad litteram:

> These books served to remind me to return to my own self. Under your guidance I entered into the depths of my soul, and this I was able to do because your aid befriended me. I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the Light that never changes casting its ray over the same eye of my soul, over my mind. It was not the common light of day…. It shone above my mind … it was itself the Light that made me …

(Conf. VII,10.16, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, my italics)

---

21 See also Soliloquia I.12: ‘to see God is to understand God’. 
From the *Soliloquia* to the *De genesi ad litteram*, via the *De magistro*, the *De libero arbitrio* and the *Confessions*, as can be seen, Augustine’s teaching is that the human mind (or soul) can reach out to the divine light. But if Augustine believes that the self can reach beyond itself and that the soul can come within reach of the ultimate vision, he does not think that it can do so easily or comfortably. Demanding intellectual and moral conditions are set in their path. Although the two sets of conditions overlap in Augustine’s presentation, I shall, for clarity’s sake, consider them separately.

The intellectual conditions require of the mind that it concentrate its attention on objects of a high ontological dignity, i.e. incorporeal objects or intelligibles, which can be directly apprehended by the mind without the mediation of the senses.\(^{22}\) In Augustine’s outlook, the elevation of the mind from the ‘carnal’ to the ‘spiritual’ takes the form of a mental ascent such as his own, as famously described in book X of the *Confessions*. The ascent proceeds by stages from the reception of the data of sense to the formation of images by the imagination, to the exploration of memory, to the direct apprehension by the mind of realities innately lodged in it, and, finally, to the realization that God is within the mind of the seeker.\(^{23}\) Or, as he put it in one of his most famous apostrophes to the Deity: *tu autem eras interior intimo meo, et superior summo meo* (‘You were deeper within than my own deepest self, and higher than my own highest self’), III, 6.11\(^{24}\)

Yet, as mentioned above, to ascend is not a sufficient condition for reaching the summit. To look is but one of the prerequisites for seeing. As the following passage from the *Soliloquia* shows, Augustine was keenly aware of this fact:

… to have eyes is not the same thing as to look at something, and to look at something is not the same thing as to see. So the soul must have three qualifications: it must have eyes which it can already use effectively, it must look, and it must see. ‘Healthy eyes’ means a mind which is free

\(^{22}\) See, e.g., *Confessions*, X. 12,19.

\(^{23}\) *Confessions*, X. 6,8 to 25,36.

\(^{24}\) It gives me great pleasure, in a volume that celebrates Denis O’Brien’s scholarly achievements, to quote this famous line in his own felicitous rendering (1968).
from all stain of the body, that is, far removed and cleansed from all longings for mortal things. (I.12, transl. G. Watson)

Virtue, the health of the soul, as Augustine tells us in this passage, can alone initiate and sustain the looking. ‘Virtue’ is here to be taken as a class name including both the theological and the moral virtues. Let us briefly take those in turn. Faith inspires the mind to enquire and gives the seeker confidence that the divine vision will satisfy his longing and make him blessed. Hope sustains his expectation of enjoying this vision. As for charity, it causes him actively to love the object of his longing, and thereby ensures that he will not wish to turn from the looking.

As Augustine knew well, however, the theological virtues cannot be practiced in the absence of moral virtue. More specifically, he knew that the exercise of faith, hope and charity, which enable the believer to seek spiritual sustenance over all others, is conditional upon the overcoming of superfluous bodily wants. Uppermost in Augustine’s mind, therefore, at this stage of his argument, are those among the moral virtues which silence what he calls the concupiscence of the flesh. As he makes clear in book X of the Confessions, Augustine takes a very broad interpretation of the concupiscence of the flesh. Under this heading, he includes not only non procreative sex and other corporeal delights, but also a number of other interests which would not ordinarily be so classified, such as the desire for worldly success and the temptation to court human affection. All of these, he holds, channel our attention into the wrong direction, that is aside and outwards, and are therefore liable ultimately to debilitate the soul.

A debilitated soul is one whose obsessive care for the body has rendered incapable of turning inwards and beholding the entities of reason that, in Augustine’s outlook, it holds within itself. Worse even, a debilitated soul is one that shuts out the divine illumination that would otherwise empower it to see ‘above itself’ and find its Beatitude. Of this shutting out of the light, Augustine held insincerity to be the first and paradigmatic manifestation. In the same way as Adam and Eve covered their body with leaves, he writes in the De trinitate, they wove together ‘good words without the fruit of good works so as, while living wickedly, to cover their disgrace… by speaking well.’ (X.
8. 13) By this Augustine means that, after the fall, Adam and Eve misused their rational and spiritual principle by subordinating it to temporal concerns. So doing, they adulterated it and weakened its capacity for beholding God’s truth. In the process, the inner self became Janus-like, turned at one and the same time to heaven and to earth. Its regard for God’s law became contaminated by care for temporal things. Instead of being wholehearted and pure, it became insincere because impure. As Augustine was at pains to stress in part III of the *De libero arbitrio*, to attend to earthly matters in preference to spiritual concerns is at one and the same time an error of judgment and a sin. The (culpable) error of judgment consists in mistaking the dross of the world of sense for the gold of intelligible reality. The sin is rooted in the failure of the soul to educate itself and in the turning of the will from immutable to transitory goods. Both the error and the sin incapacitate the mind by shutting out the source of its illumination. The insincere, the impure of heart will not see God.

VII

Augustine’s rationalist epistemology supports his commitment to introspection. Since the soul holds within itself eternal truths and intelligible realities, since God is the illuminating agency through which we are empowered to take cognizance of the most estimable epistemic objects, it follows that the soul that would know God must know itself. Or, in an alternative interpretation of Augustine’s thesis, in knowing God, the soul may know itself. The interchangeability, in this instance, of God and the soul as epistemic objects accounts for the minimalist and confusing syntax of the prayer which opens the second book of the *Soliloquia*: *Noverim me, noverim te* (‘May I come to know myself and come to know You’).25

25 See also the opening words of *Confessions* X: ‘Cognoscam te, cognitor meus, cognoscam, sicut et cognitus sum.’ (‘Let me know you, O you who know me; then shall I know even as I am known’, transl. M. Boulding). For a skilful unraveling of the possible meanings of the *Soliloquia* prayer, see G. Verbeke (1954), to whom I am here indebted.
Within the framework of Augustine’s theological epistemology, self-scrutiny, therefore, becomes an intellectual as well as a religious duty. In *Sermon 72 (On Almsgiving)*, a text that deserves to be better known, he urges this duty upon us:

... there is nothing which anyone ought to consider more important than to fix his attention on himself, to learn his own case, to examine himself, to scrutinize himself, to search into himself, to discover himself... (transl. D. J. Kavanagh)

As we know, self-scrutiny is not a duty that Augustine was ever reluctant to discharge. To discharge it, he found a way that was strikingly innovative: he used a form of introspection.\(^{26}\) Admittedly, self-scrutiny was not entirely unheard of in antiquity, but it took a different form from the one Augustine relied upon, consisting of either an examination of conscience or a scrutiny by the mind of its own powers. Although the first form was rare, it was not totally unknown. The Pythagoreans were thought to have advocated it. Seneca recommends practicing it daily\(^{27}\). Plotinus advocates it in a famous and much loved passage.\(^{28}\) While there is no reason to doubt that these philosophers acted upon their own advice, it should be noted that that they did not feel incumbent upon themselves to share the fruit of their search with their readers. Augustine, by contrast, did.

Far more common in Antiquity was the epistemologically motivated exploration of the mind by itself. Of this kind of self-scrutiny, Augustine had several models to choose from, all couched in abstract and impersonal terms. Take for example Plotinus,

\(^{26}\) For a description of the two different forms of introspection at work in Augustine’s writings, see Stern-Gillet (2006).

\(^{27}\) In Seneca’s description, the Stoic Q. Sextius ‘at the end of the day, after retiring for his nightly rest, would put these questions to his soul: “What bad habit have you cured to-day?”, “What fault have you resisted?”, “In what respect are your better?” ... Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day?’ (*De Ira*, III.36.1-2, transl. J.W. Basore). This passage is often taken to provide evidence of Seneca’s Pythagorean sympathies, as shown in Griffin (1976: 37-39). On self-scrutiny in pre-Christian antiquity, see W. Jaeger (1959).

\(^{28}\) ‘Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself as beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop “working on your statue”’, *Ennead I.6 [1]* 9. 7-13, transl. A.H. Armstrong.
chief among those *platonici* to whom Augustine owed so much. When, in the fourth *Ennead*, Plotinus expresses the view that the best way to obey the Apollinian command to know oneself is ‘to seek the real nature of that which seeks’ (IV.3 [27].1. 11, transl. A.H. Armstrong), he has in mind a highly theoretical and abstract inquiry by the soul into its own origin, the manner of its descent into body as well as the nature and extent of its own cognitive powers. Admittedly, when, in the fifth *Ennead* (V.1 [10].12. 12-20), Plotinus advises us to turn our attention inwards, he seeks to motivate us to undertake a movement of conversion and a spiritual ascent. But the ascent, as he conceives it, consists in a dispassionate metaphysical meditation, a meditation that would not differ in essentials from one seeker to another. It does not require that the seeker engage in a process of retrospection and pore over past mistakes and misdeeds. Yet this is precisely what Augustine did.

The virtues required of these two types of conversion are of a different order. A Plotinian conversion requires, in the main although not exclusively, the possession of intellectual virtues such as a capacity for rational thought, discernment and intellectual integrity. By contrast, an Augustinian conversion requires, in the main although not exclusively, the possession of moral virtues. Chief among those is sincerity in the first of the two senses distinguished earlier, viz. being truthful about oneself.

The ideal of truthfulness that inspired Augustine’s *Confessions* stood to be jeopardized by three common human tendencies: lying to oneself, lying to others, and using the truth as a means to win men’s praise. Of these, the first, self-deception, is the most invidious. The kind of journey to the interior of the soul that Augustine undertook was a journey into the (almost) unknown. There were but few relevant public facts and events that he needed to record ‘exactly as they were’29. Like all historians, he had to search for what he would disclose. Unlike most historians, he was his own archives. This was especially so since Augustine had converted to a religion in which the spirit of the law takes precedence over its letter. Speech, therefore, became for him the

---

29 This, of course, is an allusion to Ranke’s famous ideal of historical objectivity: ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen ist’.
performance of truth or, in his striking formulation, a way of ‘making (facere) truth’. As a result, no one, save God, could assess the veracity of his narrative. But God’s omniscience makes lying futile. And so, why write, after all? Why make one’s confession ‘in the face of this congregation’?

The Bishop of Hippo was ever conscious of his pastoral responsibilities, and there is no doubt, therefore, that he intended his Confessions to serve a didactic purpose. The description of his journey to faith was for him a means not only of purifying his own heart but also of educating his brothers and sisters in Adam in the mysterious ways of God’s grace. The Confessions are an invitation to his readers, in their turn, to recall their own past sins and failings so that they, too, might come within reach of the immutable divine being who is above, and yet within, their own individual self. Without sincerity, in both senses of the word distinguished in section II above, such an endeavour would be doomed to failure. A confession must be sincere in the sense of being an accurate record of one’s past self. But it must also be sincere in the sense of being solely motivated by the aspiration that initiated it, which in Augustine’s case was to reach out to the divine. Vanity, smugness or the desire for self-aggrandizement must not enter into the motivation of one who confesses in the hope of finding God.

And so it was that public self-disclosure became for Augustine a pressing and important duty. And so it was that, thanks to him, sincerity became the prime moral excellence of the autobiographical, confessional, discourse. And so it was that, pace Lionel Trilling, long before the Renaissance, sincerity became a moral virtue.

---


31 To what extent Augustine himself succeeded in overcoming these tendencies is a matter for the biographer, not for a theoretical investigation such as the present one. For an attempt to confront the reality of Augustine’s confessional practice with his theory of self-disclosure, see O’Donnell (2005).

32 This article is an expanded version of the text of the Augustinian Lecture, originally delivered in April 2004 at the University of Villanova, where I then taught, and subsequently read at the Catholic University of Lublin upon the invitation of Professor Agnieszka Kijewska. In both cases I much benefited from the discussion that ensued. In addition, I should like to thank most warmly the friends and colleagues who took the trouble to discuss with me various aspects of the thesis of this paper: Helen Lang, Goulven Madec and Denis O’Brien.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

(a) Ancient authors


Plato, Phaedrus, ed. I. Burnet, 1901. Tomus II. Oxford


(b) Modern authors

Kierkegaard, S. 1846. Purity of Heart is to Will one Thing, transl. D.V. Steere New York


