

Presenting on these trajectories has been intimidating. How do we cover “modernity” in one session? Answer: We don’t. Instead, we choose one or two aspects of modernity that are worth exploring. Today we will concentrate on the modern “turn to the subject.”

The theological stalemates and religious wars of the post-Reformation era fatigued Europe spiritually, politically, and intellectually. There *had* to be a better way, thought some philosophers. Out of this fatigue came the Enlightenment, a movement intended to bring epistemological certainty and universal intellectual consensus to war-torn Europe.

We commonly tell the story of modernity by concentrating on Descartes. “The *Meditations*, which Descartes published in 1641, bore the subtitle: ‘in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the immortality of the soul’. This work, dedicated to the Paris theology faculty, started the turn to the self.” (Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 3). “I can make this thought-experiment, thinks Descartes: I can ‘peel off’ everything, my previous beliefs, my senses, my body, my confidence even that the external world really exists, and I shall find, in the end, that I am *essentially* a thinking thing. As he says, he no longer thinks of himself as a man or even as a rational animal; he has redefined what it is to be human in terms of *consciousness*, and his perspective is completely *egocentric*. Thus the Cartesian ‘I’, as a thing that thinks, comes into the philosophical tradition” (Kerr 4-5).

Immanuel Kant gave this tradition a heroic, Lutheran “here I stand” twist. Whereas Descartes’ methodological skepticism is more a thought-experiment than a true conviction, for Kant the radical unknowability of the world “outside” was unavoidable. Kant helped give us what Iris Murdoch calls the modern man, who is “free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy.”

Egocentric philosophy produces anthropocentric theology (Kerr 5) and spirituality (Kerr 40). This epistemological priority of our individual consciousness and the radical externality and uncertainty of everything “outside” that consciousness have simply become the way we think and pray. I start *everything* with myself. Hans Küng (sort of a Catholic) is representative of modern theologians in claiming “that the fact of any reality at all independent of our consciousness can be accepted only in an act of trust” (Kerr 15). You know how this looks in evangelical spirituality: *I* read the Gideon’s Bible in *my* motel room night stand, and *I* am confronted with the demand for a heroic decision, a *leap of faith*. With a private prayer *I* accept Jesus as *my* personal savior, and *I* am saved – a moral hero! Then, when an ornery professor claims that salvation is only extended from and leads only into the Church, *I* become offended that *my* sovereignty and authenticity are being compromised by organized religion.

“My” prayers, “my” encounters with God, “my” personal relationship with Jesus, “my” biblical reading strategies, “my” theological opinions, “my” relations with other Christians – all are drawn out in terms of a psychology that begins *and* ends with the priority of the individual. (The quotes are there because something else is really going on; but that will have to wait.)

What does Augustine have to do with all this? He can’t be blamed for all of it, for the Augustinian “I” is neither the Cartesian nor the Kantian “I”. But listen to *Confessions* 1.6 on the infant Augustine: “Gradually I realized where I was, and I decided to display my wishes to those who might fulfill them, and I could not, because my wishes were inside and they were outside, and powerless to get inside my mind by any of their senses.” *Inside* and *outside*? The picture seems to be of Descartes’ self-sufficient ego, interacting with alien outsiders through its body’s gestures and expressions and words. Says Kerr (56):

The transparent little soul looks out from its head, hears the adults making various noises, watches them (through its eyes) as they lumber towards some item of middle-sized dry good, and then suddenly, on its own,

makes the connection, in its own mind, between the sounds the adults emit and the objects that they touch. Augustine pictures his infant self as already aware of its own identity (what is going inside its own mind) and of what is going on around it (outside its mind), prior to and independently of its mastering the arts of speech.

The resemblances are striking. “To open the *Confessions* is at once to be under the spell of the theological story of the soul that has decisively affected Christian spirituality and hence the Cartesian and modern philosophy of the self” (Kerr 40).

Then there is *On the Trinity*:

Since we treat of the nature of the mind, let us remove from our consideration all knowledge which is received from without, through the senses of the body; and attend more carefully to the position which we have laid down, that all minds know and are certain concerning themselves. For me certainly have doubted [many particulars of human psychology and physiology]. And one has attempted to establish this, and another to establish that. Yet who ever doubts that he himself lives, and remembers, and understands, and wills, and thinks, and knows, and judges? Seeing that even if he doubts, he lives.... Whosoever therefore doubts about anything else, ought not to doubt of all these things; which if they were not, he would not be able to doubt of anything (10.10.14).

Descartes has turned Augustine’s project into a new quest for universal epistemological certainty. If all of us can agree to the *cogito ergo sum*, then we have a universal set of foundational first principles from which we can reason together and come to agreement – agreement that even withstands (and critiques) our particular, mutually exclusive confessional commitments. We might even stop killing each other over our gods, and forge a new world order. *E pluribus unum. Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Workers of the world, unite.

Jesus is no longer central to our epistemology; I am. And modernity is born.

Just how Augustinian is all this? Not at all, for “on other fundamental issues – the potential of human reason, the need for grace, the centrality of faith, the importance of divine revelation, the relation of soul to body – Descartes and Augustine were worlds apart. ... Descartes’ contemporary, Blaise Pascal, was equally indebted to Augustine’s works but used them to argue for the limitations of the very analytical and rational processes that Descartes had found so appealing” (Quillen, 720). You see, for Augustine the recognition that *I am* is about the best a fallen, sick mind can do. Alone, such a mind is incapable of any real progress; what it cannot doubt, it can only distort, until its creator begins to redeem it. It hears a voice “outside” saying *you will be like God, knowing good and evil*, and it surrenders, forgetting who it is.

It takes the grace of revelation to remind me that my memory, intellect, and will are shattered and rebellious vestiges of the great Triune substance they were meant to image. *On the Trinity* is a regimen of such healing, and *Confessions* is the story of a soul marred by its own depravity, and gradually rescued by the many worldly mediations of God’s love. Augustine’s interior self may have given modernity a foothold; but “the privacy of the Augustinian inner space is not an irredeemable or unbridgeable solitude. For the God that is seen within is not private property but common to all souls; hence to find God within the soul is to be united with other souls who glimpse the same Truth. ... The privacy of the individual soul is therefore not natural or inevitable but rather a consequence of the fall” (Cary, “Interiority,” 455).

We may indeed all be certain of the formal validity of the *cogito*; but our shared agreement has never been able to establish much of real substance that we can agree on. We still don’t know what it is to *think*, or to *be*. Worse, we have deluded ourselves into thinking that we can learn these things on our own.

That is the Achilles’ Heel of the modern appropriation/distortion of Augustine. It marginalizes (or denies) grace, faith, and revelation, centering the world in the modern self and vesting all value in a “reason” that its individualism fundamentally misunderstands. It takes the career of a man dedicated to rooting out pride, and turns it into an exercise in pride.

Is there a way out, or a way back? Don’t skip class Friday, and you’ll find out.