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AUGUSTINE ON THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

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1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of the immortality of the soul is central and important in philosophy. Its significance or importance lies in the fact that it touches human existence. There has never been a question in philosophy that captures the attention of thinkers as does the question of man's survival after death. Nothing is as certain as death. For Heidegger, "death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein." The crucial issue about the immortality of the soul revolves around these questions: Is death the terminus ad quem of human existence? Is there a life after death? Is there in man something distinct from the body which survives the destruction of the body and which lives immortally? These questions and more have engaged philosophers over the centuries.

We have to note immediately that Augustine is not the first thinker to address this question. Long before him, Plato, Plotinus and Aristotle had grappled with this problem in their respective treatises/dialogues. But what is striking is that none of these philosophers has been able to articulate the problem of the soul as does Augustine. As an original thinker and great mind, he has brought his finesse and originality to bear in the treatise, De Immortalitate Animae. Though it can be argued that Plato and Plotinus (Neoplatonist) contributed in no small measure in shaping Augustine's thought on immortality of the soul, his articulation and insight show a thinker who puts into good use the sources at his disposal with a view to creating his own thought. Augustine's originality is seen in his attempt to unify the body and the soul, which his predecessors separate in their respective treatises. This is an impressive achievement on the part of a great thinker.

The De Immortalitate Animae is believed to be a follow-up of Augustine's discussion on the soul in the Soliloquia, a dialogue written in Cassianum. In the De Immortalitate Animae,
the writer attempts to develop the argument for the immortality of the soul, taking his cue from the Soliloquia. The later treatise presumes that the soul is immortal, but there is no argument to substantiate its claim. In the De Immortalitate Animae, however, Augustine sets out to argue/prove that the soul is immortal.

This paper aims at examining critically Augustine's main argument for the immortality of the soul. The essay has six sections. The first part is the introduction. The second section explores the relationship between science and the soul. It also examines the link between the soul and eternal truth. The third part deals with the notion of immutability and its relationship to the soul. The fourth part considers the turning away of the soul from truth. The fifth section dwells on the harmony of the body and the soul. It also examines the soul's relationship to the body. The sixth part is the evaluation and conclusion.

2. THE SOUL: SCIENCE AND ETERNAL TRUTH

In the introduction, it has been said that the Soliloquia provides the grounding for the De Immortalitate Animae. It is also interesting to mention that Augustine develops this philosophical argument "to support his own positive belief." De Immortalitate Animae opens with the hypothesis that science (discipline) is eternal and resides only in what has life. And in turn anything that relates to what is eternal shares in its eternity. Thus, Augustine's argument runs along this line. As a mathematical truth, science is immutable. And its immutability only suggests that it is eternal; only what is immutable is eternal. This immediately calls to mind Plato's forms, which are unchangeable and eternal. The immutable nature of science, however, shows that it is truthful and reliable. But how is eternal truth known? Is there any way of establishing its existence? Has science any being of its own? We intend to clarify these questions in the course of our reflection. Before we turn to these issues, it is good to clarify what is meant by existence.

There are two senses of existence: the formal and the objective existence. Something exists objectively if it is an object of thought. It is expressly in this sense that Augustine uses the term existence. The objective existence has its place
in the mind. In a way, every act of conception has an object. To this extent, anyone who conceives in any way must think of something. In other words, to think of nothing is not to conceive of anything. The existence of science implies that it is an object of thought. But where does it exist, given that it cannot exist in a vacuum? As an object of thought—and thought is associated with mind and reason—possibly science has its abode in the mind. It has to be noted that in the De Immortalitate Animae Augustine alternatively employs mind and reason instead of the soul. We have every reason to believe, therefore, that science, which is eternal truth, resides in the soul. This point lends support to Augustine's insistence that science dwells only in something that is alive. In the De Libero Arbitrio, he remarks that "whoever knows that he is alive does not lack reason." In this sense, reason, which characterizes one who is alive, enjoys some measure of intimacy with science. According to Augustine, "...our mind cannot reason rightly without science...without science no mind can exist except as a mind without science..."

From the foregoing we see that reason is only discovered where there is life; and in turn science resides in the mind where life exists. For Augustine, man's existence is only one thing that is indubitable. And in doing so, it provides the basis from which springs forth thought/reason. So, the eternal truth of science finds its expression in the soul where life exists. To this extent it is science, the eternal truth, which makes thought and reasoning possible. Ultimately, it shows that there is a close tie between science and the soul; both exist harmoniously. But why is the soul the only dwelling place of science? The reason is quite obvious; the soul represents what is best in man. It is also the only part where intellect and reason operate—distinguishing man from other brute animals. Augustine remarks that "...nothing else is best in man than that part of the soul, to which it is fitting that, all other things which are in man should submit as their ruler..."

It has already been noted that science is eternal; but what precisely does this mean? How is science eternal? How does the eternity of science affect the nature of the soul? What is eternity in this context? Is it understood in terms of something which has a 'beginning and an end?' All these
questions are posed with a view to explaining Augustine’s present argument.

Science is immutable because of its unchanging truths. Substantiating this point, Augustine alludes to the truth of mathematics which states that: “a line drawn through the midpoint of a circle is greater than all lines which are not drawn through the midpoint.” At this point we note that the certitude and the unchanging nature of mathematical truth—especially geometry—is accepted by both philosophers and mathematicians as an indubitable truth. In other words, Augustine is not alone in his claim. For instance, Descartes thinks that the truth of mathematics shares in the one things that are clear and evident truth which are not also indubitable.

Admittedly, the claim of science and mathematical truth to certainty and immutability is plausible. For Augustine, this expressly is what makes reason possible. The eternity of science implies then that its truth does not point to the time of the statement. This finds expression in the assertion that five plus five is ten; it cannot be denied by any rational man that the statement is out of date. Thus, it implies that mathematical truth enjoys timeless being. This raises the question as to how the eternal truth of science—which transcends space and time—can exist in the soul which is within the limits of space and time.

That science is and dwells in the soul underscores that both share something in common. From Augustine’s perspective, the common element is located in the reason, which forms a great part of the soul. Reason per se is an act of thought, and only the soul is able to think; the body has no part in thought. We have maintained earlier that science is what makes reason possible. “Thought is right reasoning moving from things certain to the investigation of things uncertain...” Arguably, the soul is the dwelling place of science, which is immutable and eternal. According to Augustine, if knowledge is knowledge of science, it implies then that whatever the mind grasps, as science is in the soul; it is precisely this that makes the soul what it is.

Having established a relationship between science and the soul, it remains to be seen to what extent one can really exist without the other. Could there be eternal truth (science)?
without the mind? Augustine thinks that it is possible for eternal truth to exist even where there is no mind. "The mind does not perceive that it contains anything except what comes into thought." It means that though truth exists in the mind, it is only accessible to the latter when it thinks about it. Truth is not generated in the mind; it is imposed on the mind. The mind cannot doubt its existence; it can only discover it. And evidently, it is by discovering it that the mind shares in the immortality of the eternal truth. So, it is the role of reason—as part of the mind—to perceive "...the truth per se and not through the body..." This testifies to the relationship between the mind and reason (science). By so doing, it is possible that the mind relates intimately with the eternal truth of science. That the soul survives death owes greatly to its intimacy with truth, which in turn is accessible through the mediation of human reason. Thus the soul is immortal on the grounds that it survives demolition.

3. THE SOUL AND IMMUTABILITY

We so far established in the preceding section that science, which exists in the soul, is immutable. The present section will show that the soul's immortality hinges on its immutable nature. Immutability, however, has a long history in philosophy. It is used in Plato and Aristotle to identify the forms and knowledge which are immutable. In the *De Immortalitate Animae*, Augustine uses the same principle to argue for the stable nature of the soul.

In chapters three and five of the *De Immortalitate Animae*, Augustine develops the argument from immutability. He begins with the claim that some power is immutable—implying that certain things are subject to change. Change occurs in two directions: there are locomotive and alteration changes. A power is immutable if it is not subject to movement and alteration. Thus, things which are not subject to movement and alteration are immortal; and anything which is immutable is immortal. Where then does the soul come in this picture? It is generally accepted that bodies are in motion; no one denies that there is movement in the universe.

How is movement effected? Do things move by themselves or are certain things responsible for their
movement? Ordinarily, motion presumes things which are moved. For movement the inanimate things, which have no life of their own, are dependent on animate things. To this extent, the soul is responsible for the movement of the body. In other words, as a living substance the soul activates the body. It is expressly the living substance that "...moves so as not to be changed..." It is however difficult to see how the soul moves the body without changing in the process. Augustine argues that it happens because the soul—which initiates motion in the body—is itself the unmoved mover. From Aristotle’s or Aquinas’ perspective, the unmoved mover is associated with the first principle of everything.

For Augustine, therefore, two main distinctions of movement abound: i) a movement where a subject moves another without any effect on itself and ii) a movement where a subject moves itself. It is only logical that a mover can be subject to change, if it is moved by another. But where it moves itself, no change occurs. Augustine admits that "all which is moved by another and does not move itself is a mortal thing." In a situation where an agent moves another without change, it is directed by the mover’s intention. It follows, therefore, that when the soul causes the body to move, the movement does not effect any change in the soul, because of its intention. Though we maintain that the soul moves the body, it is not changed. Explaining this phenomenon, Augustine conceives of time as that which is responsible in any movement of the bodies by their agents (soul). Here the movement occurs in degrees. A problem, however, arises as to how the soul moves without undergoing any change in itself? Augustine identifies this distinction in the body's inability to move simultaneously when it is activated by the soul. Possibly, motion does not occur simultaneously in the body, because it is divided into parts. The absence of unity in the acts of the body creates a problem for movement to take place at the same time. However, the soul is free of this kind of limitation, giving its three main powers: memory, intellect and volition. These three operate in union with each other at the same time.

"It is by acts of thought that we gather and collect...things that memory contained..."
It shows that the acts of the soul are coordinated and unified. Thus, the unity of the soul brings about stability. But since these acts do not exist simultaneously in the body, it is mutable. According to Augustine, "whatever things cannot exist simultaneously in time, and yet are transmitted from future into past, must be of necessity mutable." Arguably, the soul is immutable because its acts exist harmoniously at the same time.

Alteration is another dimension of change. We have maintained earlier that the soul moves the body without submitting to any change. But how does the soul exist in the body without submitting to changes that take place in it? What happens to the soul when the body which it animates is destroyed? How does the soul free itself from the demolition of the body? For Augustine, the soul is able to maintain its identity in the wake of any change in the body because it has a long standing relationship with reason which is imperishable. The power at work in the soul accounts for its imperishability. "For along with this intention, it can have memory of the past things and expectation of future things, none of which exists without life." Ultimately with the memory and the soul's intimacy with eternal truth, the immortality of the soul is possible.

Augustine points to yet another aposia arising from the immortality of the soul. The problem is seen in the domain of the passion of the body (age, disease and sorrow) and the passion of the soul (fear and worrying). All these could pose a threat to the soul. Augustine maintains that although these passions are threat to the soul's immortality, it does not suggest that there is a change in the soul. The change passion brings about is alteration. And this kind of change is mainly accidental and not substantial in nature. For instance, the wax changes from white to black; in this respect the change is accidental. Evidently, the wax maintains its substantial nature, though the shape and the colour are changed. This analogy applies to the soul, which remains as it is—the changes in the
body notwithstanding. The substance of the soul remains because it is inseparable from the imperishable eternal truth and reason.

Arguably the soul, which is the dwelling of reason, is not subject to alteration of any kind. Thus the existence of reason, which holds a home where there is life, makes its immortality possible. The changes that take place in the body do not alter the substance of the soul. Rather it transcends these situations by reason of its immutability and immortality.

4. THE SOUL AND ALIENATION FROM TRUTH

Augustine provides another argument to establish that the soul does not perish—even as it turns away from truth to falsehood. We have explained earlier that the soul is inextricably tied to the truth; it bends towards the truth as the intellect moves towards its object—the good. Traditionally, it is accepted that immortality depends on the extent which it is opened to truth which is eternal and immutable. Since truth is what the soul considers credible, what happens when it is alienated from truth into falsehood? Does this turning away from truth smack of mortality? Augustine is willing to admit that falsehood diminishes the soul, but it does not lead to its mortality. "For if the mind has more being when turned towards reason and inhering in it, thus adhering to the unchangeable thing which is truth...so when turned away from reason it has less being, which constitutes a defection." It is hard to see how this happens. For, if truth is replaced by falsehood, it can vitiate the essence of the soul.

Considering the threat which this poses to the soul, Augustine draws an analogy of a dismembered body. Though the body diminishes with severing of its parts, the loss of its members does not bring the body to nothingness. He argues that all the remaining parts of the body retain still the essence of the body. In other words, whatever remains is not nothing, but something of that body. Applying the analogy to the soul, the expectation is great, giving its superior nature. It is unlikely that the soul which animates the body is destroyed, if the latter is not reduced to nothing. Ultimately, the unity which sustains the soul does not admit of disintegration.
Obviously, analogy limps and does not therefore explain more accurately what the soul goes through in the face of its alienation from truth. However, it is plausible to maintain that the soul’s inability to perish stems from its intimate connection with truth. To the degree that truth is the essence of the soul, the latter and the former exist in one mode. “For all which does not exist always in the same mode is mutable...” Since truth is the soul’s essence, it is only logical that it is immutable and immortal. Augustine explains that “...no essence exists for any other reason than it exists. Being has no contrary except non-being. Hence, nothing is the contrary of essence. Therefore, in no way can anything exist as a contrary to that substance which exists first and in highest degree...”

It is good to note that Being (truth) and non-being (falsehood) exist separately. Thus, it stands to reason that their essences differ from each other. From Augustine’s perspective, truth remains what it is, and its essence cannot associate with the essence of falsehood. Admittedly, truth cannot separate itself from the soul because it is its essence. In this way, falsehood, which slips into the soul, exists as a separable entity, and it does not form the essence of the soul. It exists as something which militates against truth. Augustine thinks that the soul is self-subsistent. And as such, it is responsible for its existence. In doing so, the soul exists as an animator and does not abandon itself. “For if the mind dies wholly when life abandons it, that very life which deserts it is understood much better as mind...not something deserted by life, but the very life itself which deserted.” From the foregoing, it is hard to see how the defection of the soul can bring about its demise. Nothing, therefore, can remove from the soul its essence.

5. HARMONY OF THE SOUL AND THE BODY

The present section explores the harmony of the soul and body as one of Augustine’s arguments for the immortality of the soul. It is primarily an argument that centres on the relationship between the soul and the body. This raises immediately the question as to how the soul relates with the body. It is generally claimed that the soul informs the body. How does the soul inform the body? When the soul informs the body, does it become one with the latter? We have said that
the change in the body does not affect the soul; the defection of the soul does not bring about its demise. How then does the soul survive the apparent changes in the body, if it is the harmony of the body?

Primarily, Augustine denies that the soul is the organization of the body. Definitely, the soul’s organization of body has its obvious implication. It will imply that the former—while organizing the latter—forms one entity. Contending this view, Augustine argues for the nature of the soul as distinct entity from the body. Thought, therefore, is the distinctive mark of the soul’s nature. To the extent that the mind thinks effectively when it is drawn from the body, it cannot be the harmony of the latter. And since the mind enjoys close intimacy with reason, it is expressly reason that makes thinking possible. Reason exists in the mind; and it is existence in the soul that makes it immutable and immortal. So, reason does not reside in the body but in the soul; this distinguishes the body from the soul. It is precisely this separate existence of the soul that makes it “to turn itself away from the body in order to perceive intelligible things; only inasmuch as it could do this would it be made by this vision better and more excellent.” Obviously, the soul is at its best when it operates independent of the body. And Plato’s perspective, knowledge is only tenable where the soul functions on its own; the body hinders the soul in its grasping of knowledge and form.

From the foregoing, we can conclude that the soul is not an organizing principle of the body. If it is, it then exists as a quality and a dependent being. Admittedly, the object of the soul’s grasping is not corporeal but incorporeal; it exists in a higher sense than any material thing by virtue of its immutability. It raises the issue as how an incorporeal being can exist as a subject in a corporeal thing—given that both do not exist in the same mode.

The question touches on the claim that the soul is not the harmony of the body. If it is not the organization of the body, what then is its role in the body? For Augustine, the organization of the body is in the body itself. In other words, the soul does not organize the body; it can only give what it has to the body—and that is life. Discharging this function, the soul operates on its own. In doing so, it survives the body's
In Augustine's estimation, the soul is prominent and has priority over the body. This is traced to its nature as an incorporeal substance. Some critics, though, have accused Augustine of having a lower image of the body. It is not true, considering that, in *De Immortalitate Animae* there is more closer relationship between the soul and the body than we see in Plato and Plotinus. Nowhere is this intimacy more pronounced than in Augustine's insistence that the soul is a source of life in the body. According to him, "...all the mind desires in reward to the body is that it may possess it, or make it live, or fashion it in a certain manner..." Thus the soul operates for the good of the body; it is indeed satisfied when the body is weighed down by sleep.

While we accept this relationship between the soul and body, it is not to be construed that the former exists in the latter as a quality. The soul, however, is independent because of its nature and, in this way, it can survive the ruin of the body.

6. CONCLUSION

Augustine's argument is impressively made; it reflects the writer at his best. In the treatise, he makes use of the things of nature to drive home his points. Mention is also made of the various actions of humans and the works of nature. It is indicative of a thinker who has interest in nature. We understand that the soul is not spatial. Rather it is a substance that is independent of any subject. The soul is spiritual in nature.

It is generally accepted by some writers that *De Immortalitate Animae* is deeply influenced by Plato and Plotinus—a neo-Platonist. John Mourant explains that "De Immortalitate Animae seems to be completely neo-Platonist in character. It is agreed that the argument for the immortality is borrowed from Plotinus and is restricted to an argument for the immortality of the soul." While we admit some elements of Platonism and neo-Platonism at work in *De Immortalitate Animae*, it does not mean that Augustine borrowed from Plotinus. Being an original thinker, he might have got some ideas that have contributed in shaping his thought in the
treatise.

It is good to note that Augustine's interest in the inner person provides an invaluable basis for his articulation of De Immortalitate Anima. He insists on returning within oneself, it is in the inward person that truth dwells. "Augustine is always calling us within. What we need lies 'intus'...." In his thinking, he reflects two images of man: in specula and per speculum. Possibly, these two terms contribute in shaping the arguments of De Immortalitate Anima. However, "the arguments which he formulated can well have been based upon facts which he himself observed."

Interestingly, Augustine conceives of man as a whole, though he gives prominence to the soul. In some respects, he differs from the Platonists and neo-Platonists who hold a dualistic view. They conceive of the soul as the only essence of the human person, the body as a hindrance to the activities of the soul. Augustine instead thinks that the body and the soul are inseparable entities that make a human person. This expresses the Jewish-Christian view on man; in this tradition, the human person is conceived as a whole. In the new thinking, emphasis shifts now from the soul—as the only thing that is immortal—to the immortality of the whole person.

One could even maintain that the argument of De Immortalitate Anima contributes towards sustaining the faith of Augustine. His idea that truth exists in the soul remains quite significant. Being inseparable from the soul, it shares in its attributes of immutability and immortality. Ultimately, the argument viewed as a whole is plausible. It bears the originality and imprint of this great thinker.
END NOTES

4. De Immortaliitate Animae, I, 4
5. Augustine, Against the Academician Translated by Patricia Garvey (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1957), 18
6. De Immortaliitate Animae, I, 13
8. Cf. also Aristotle's De Anima, III, 4: 429b
9. De Immortaliitate Animae, I, 27
10. De Immortaliitate Animae, IV
11. De Immortaliitate Animae, IV
12. De Immortaliitate Animae, VI
13. De Immortaliitate Animae, III, 10
14. De Immortaliitate Animae, III, 4
16. De Immortaliitate Animae, III
17. De Immortaliitate Animae, III
18. De Immortaliitate Animae, VII, 3f
19. De Immortaliitate Animae, II, 7
20. De Immortaliitate Animae, XII
21. De Immortaliitate Animae, X, 10f
22. De Immortaliitate Animae, II, 11f
23. De Immortaliitate Animae, XIII, 10