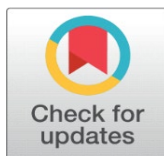
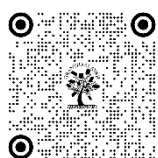


THE MODERN PROBLEMS OF FAITH AND REASON IN PHILOSOPHY: AUGUSTINE'S EMPHASIS

Dr. Alakananda Parida ¹

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.3274](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.3274)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

If there is a God, it's possible that He cannot be fully understood through human reason alone. If reason could grasp religious truths, faith wouldn't be necessary. The need for faith suggests that reason has limitations. But why is that the case? It could be because the human mind is incapable of fully understanding God's mysteries, meaning that certain religious truths (like the Resurrection or the Day of Judgment) are beyond the reach of unaided reason. Alternatively, these truths may not be provable and can only be shown to be plausible or possible. Or perhaps our minds are impaired and need to be trained, either through faith, virtue, or both, to reason more effectively and not simply rationalize. Let us delve further into the modern problem of Faith versus Reason in philosophy.

Keywords: Faith, Reason, Philosophy, God, Mystery, Spiritualism, Religion, Belief

1. INTRODUCTION

While we can know some things about God through reason in this life, it is not enough for happiness or salvation. Our need for faith, or true belief in religious matters, is akin to our reliance on belief in other aspects of life. He also argues that our weakened capacity to reason and resulting ignorance are consequences of the original sin of Adam. Three key issues can be raised here. First, it's misleading to frame Augustine's position as a direct engagement with the faith vs. reason debate, as he more often discusses the relationship between reason and authority. Second, in a later work, Augustine defines belief as "thinking with assent," which is his standard view. This leads us to question what he means by "assent," particularly in terms of the relationship between willing, loving, and the will itself. Finally, because Augustine is influenced by Plato's tradition, we must examine how his concept of faith relates to Platonic belief, especially since, for Augustine, faith (a form of belief) seeks and finds understanding, while for Plato, belief does not seek understanding in the same way. The modern faith vs. reason issue, which developed in the seventeenth century, revolves around the nature of philosophy. This raises the question of whether Augustine should be considered a philosopher or if, despite describing Christianity as a philosophy, he ceased to be one after his conversion. The modern debate arises because philosophy, focused on argument and conclusions, is thought to leave no room for faith or authority. Augustine, however, believes that philosophers fail to recognize the limits of reason, and after his conversion, he gives authority a certain priority. He affirms that while he will always hold to the authority of Christ, he will also engage in reasoning to better

understand his beliefs. In letters to others, Augustine argues that authority and reason are compatible, even though not everyone has unreasoning faith.

Despite sometimes criticizing poor reasoning about faith, he believes we must not abandon reason, even if it is often abused. Traditional philosophy is mistaken in claiming to always start with reason, according to Augustine, as this claim is irrational. Before embracing Catholic Christianity, Augustine was inspired by Cicero's Hortensius and initially pursued philosophy with the belief that reason alone could uncover the truth. However, after joining the Manichaeans and later exploring Skepticism, Augustine realized that even though reason might lead to the truth, it might also show us that certain knowledge is impossible. The Manichaeans, who claimed to rely purely on reason, ultimately faltered in their reliance on astrology, leading Augustine to prefer the authority of astrology over the skepticism of his friends. After abandoning the Manichaeans, Augustine briefly lost faith in reason, returning to Skepticism but still holding that assent should be given to the truth, even though finding it might be beyond human capability. However, Augustine acknowledged that some knowledge is possible, such as knowledge of disjunctive propositions and certain truths in mathematics. He also accepted "subjective knowledge," such as the certainty of one's own sensory experiences, suggesting that, if some forms of knowledge are possible, perhaps religious and metaphysical truths can be known as well.

2. TRUTH AND PROGRESS

Augustine maintains a firm belief in the existence of "truth," but he argues that the limitation lies in human capacity. The example of sense-knowledge suggests that firsthand experience can be a path to knowledge, but there is much knowledge beyond what is subjective, mathematical, or logical, religious claims fall into this category. After his experience with the Manichaeans, though disheartened, Augustine continued to believe that progress was possible. This led him to frequently reference Isaiah 7:9, "Unless you believe, you will not understand," and in his early work *De moribus ecclesiae catholice*, he suggests that the mind, weakened by human wickedness, needs guidance from authority to reach the truth. At this stage, Augustine doesn't yet link this ignorance to the original sin and its impact on the will (difficult as). Both ignorance and weakness of will contribute to the limited capacity of the human mind, Augustine argues. We fail to understand not only because our vision is clouded, but also because we may not even want to know the truth or recognize what is good. A prime example, for Augustine, is strict atheism. In antiquity, he suggests that atheism was often a result of moral corruption, atheists, driven by desires; choose not to believe in goodness or truth, even when they might know it. Augustine himself resisted understanding chastity for fear it would compel him to embrace it. For a thinker like Augustine, who follows the Platonic tradition, acknowledging the limits of our knowledge leads to a re-evaluation of the status of belief and a search for credible authorities?

Augustine's skepticism about human reason's ability to attain knowledge, combined with his belief in truth, led him to conclude that faith or belief is the only way forward. He categorizes different types of belief: first, historical truths, which we believe on the authority of others, since we lack firsthand knowledge, such as the execution of the Catilinarian conspirators or the identity of our parents. Augustine notes that we trust the authority of our mothers and others who confirm these facts, and it would be absurd to dismiss these beliefs just because we don't have direct knowledge of them. He is struck by how many basic human relationships, like those between children and parents or friends and spouses, rely on trusting beliefs. Second, Augustine identifies cases where belief and understanding go hand in hand, like beliefs in logic and mathematics, where understanding accompanies belief. Finally, there are theological beliefs, such as belief in the Trinity, where belief is necessary for understanding, though it does not guarantee understanding. Augustine explains that the Platonists, while holding true metaphysical propositions about God, understand them only incompletely. Their arrogance prevents them from fully understanding these truths, and their philosophical view of God, though based on true propositions, lacks the firsthand experience necessary to understand the divine as Augustine sees it. He argues that non-Christians, lacking faith, cannot reasonably experience the type of understanding required to comprehend the Christian God.

Augustine sometimes contrasts reason and faith more sharply than he intends, suggesting that faith relies on authority, while reason may refuse to do so. However, he recognizes the need for discernment in choosing authorities, and such discernment is a function of reason. Reason does not abandon authority but helps us evaluate who is worthy of belief. This tension between faith and reason may only be resolved by tempering reason's claims, as reason must acknowledge its limitations. Augustine also contrasts reason as a strict, deductive process with the practical, inductive role reason plays in discerning authorities. In this context, reason is used to identify credible authorities, as unaided

reason may lead us astray, as it did for Augustine in his time with the Manichaeans and Skepticism. Reason alone cannot guarantee the truth, but through faith, we can find trustworthy authority. Augustine often claims that his goal is knowledge of God and the soul, but such knowledge must be approached through faith. Augustine insists that theological understanding requires prior belief, although not all knowledge is preceded by belief, only theological understanding. Augustine's position, influenced by his Platonism, differs from Plato's in that he believes we can only know God through faith, rather than through direct, philosophical knowledge of the Good. He asserts that the human mind is now inadequate for understanding the divine in this life.

While he acknowledges that the Platonists advance true metaphysical propositions, he believes that without faith, they cannot truly understand their import. Augustine was fortunate to encounter Plotinus' Platonism before converting to Christianity, as it helped him recognize the difference between philosophical presumption and religious confession. Finally, Augustine's belief that certain theological beliefs are necessary for understanding may extend beyond strictly theological propositions to ethical beliefs, which he argues must have metaphysical foundations. Ethical and aesthetic beliefs also require the proper ordering of emotions and cannot be purely cognitive. Since love, understood through Scripture, is central to Augustine's ethics, ethical beliefs devoid of this love are inadequate. Even if Augustine primarily uses theological examples, he could apply this principle to other areas, such as ethics and aesthetics, where affective belief influences judgment. Ultimately, Augustine believes that human reason, though limited and impaired by the fall, must be used to discern credible authorities, particularly in theology, ethics, and aesthetics. He recognizes his own limitations in discerning authority, but through faith and divine grace, he claims that his beliefs and discernments are true, guided by God's help.

3. THEORY OF ILLUMINATION AND THE IDEA OF VOLUNTAS

At this point, we briefly touch upon Augustine's theory of illumination, though we cannot dwell on it extensively. For example, Augustine is puzzled by the fact that when he once read the scriptures, he could understand the words but not fully grasp their meaning (De Trin. 11.8.15). However, once he believes, or rather learns to believe, he is in a position to gain further insight from divine illumination. Faith, in this context, is a prerequisite for understanding. Augustine's theory of illumination, moreover, is not limited to understanding theological ideas. Without illumination, a teacher can present truths, but we may be unable to comprehend them. Faith, which is intrinsically linked to hope and love, is necessary for understanding. This is because a heartfelt belief (for example, in God) signifies a different mentality than a purely theoretical belief. Augustine must also address the issue of why, despite the Christian God being Truth, non-believers exist, some of whom are competent philosophers. His frequent explanation, as we've seen, is that non-believers are morally underdeveloped or corrupted, or more philosophically, that their moral and spiritual dispositions are not aligned with reality. They are not properly formed, either because they rejected the chance for Christian faith or never had the opportunity to embrace it. In either case, they cannot assent to certain true propositions – they simply do not, or cannot, want to believe. Through exploring this, we gain a deeper understanding of the type of "faith" Augustine believes is necessary for theological understanding, which leads to the second problem: that of willing and assenting.

Augustine's notion of belief as "nothing other than thinking with assent" may seem Stoic, but it reflects a transformed Stoicism. The Stoics introduced the concept of assent into ancient discussions of action so thoroughly that even Aristotle's commentators assumed it was part of Aristotle's ethics. However, the concept of assent is not straightforward. For the Stoics, assent means agreeing with propositions, and this assent is a good or bad judgment. Augustine's view is more nuanced and extends beyond what he found in Cicero or even Seneca, his most likely Stoic source. In *De spir. et litt.* (34.60), Augustine explains that giving or withholding consent is the function of our *voluntas*, if we function properly. To grasp "assent," we must understand *voluntas*, and to do that, we need to understand Augustine's concept of the will, which may differ from ours, or from the medieval or Stoic versions. Augustine's concept of *voluntas* is best understood through the Stoic ideas he encountered. While Augustine shares similarities with Stoicism, he adapts these concepts into a form of Platonism, stressing human orientation and the primacy of love in moral agency and virtue. He argues that a mere cognitive understanding of God is insufficient; what is required for the good life and the highest metaphysical inquiries about God are a pure heart, loving faith, and personal experience of God. In comparing Stoic ideas with Augustine's, we can look to texts from Seneca and Epictetus (Augustine did not read Epictetus directly, but his ideas are relevant). For Epictetus, the Greek term *prohairesis* (moral character) is closely related to *voluntas*. For him, moral character is the ability to make judgments and live in accordance with the right reason, a capacity we choose to prioritize.

He argues that our moral character is shaped by the judgments we make about right and wrong. Augustine diverges from Stoic views in significant ways.

While the Stoics focus on right reason as the foundation of moral action, Augustine emphasizes the role of love. For Augustine, virtue is not simply right reason but is fundamentally connected to love. True virtue involves loving God, and Augustine believes that the best moral agents are those whose love for God is supreme. Augustine critiques Stoicism for failing to account for the depth of emotional commitment in moral agency. While the Stoics emphasize duty without the need for emotional attachment, Augustine argues that care without affection is hollow and inhuman. The Stoics might believe that performing a duty is the measure of faithfulness, but Augustine insists that without love, such duties are meaningless. Augustine's concept of *voluntas* is more than assent to propositions or mere intention. It is formed by our loves and hates, and our orientation toward God or the Devil shapes our will. Augustine's *voluntas*, influenced by Stoic ideas, reflects not just beliefs and desires but our deep-seated love for God, or lack thereof. He uses the word *voluntas* to point to both beliefs and the more profound concept of *eros*, the love of the good and the Beautiful, which aligns with the Platonic tradition. For Augustine, assent is not just a judgment; it is also an act of love. He argues that we often assent to false beliefs not due to a simple error in rationality but because we "love" those beliefs. Thus, the Stoic analysis of moral belief and affectivity is incomplete. We are not defined by what we believe or want, but by what we love. Returning to faith and reason, Augustine argues that theological understanding requires not just rational thought but the proper orientation of the will. Belief in God, in Augustine's view, requires a loving faith—a prerequisite for deeper understanding. Without this love of God, true comprehension of divine truths is impossible. Thus, for Augustine, faith is the necessary foundation for reasoned understanding in theology.

4. TO CONCLUDE

Since we are rational beings, it would be illogical to claim that faith must precede reason in an irrational way, and we have now shown how this is actually highly rational. The unbeliever, who demands a reason for something they cannot comprehend without first having faith, is in an untenable position. In contrast, the believer will eventually be able to understand. It is through loving faith that the mind is prepared, allowing reason to function fully and properly. Through this faith, the philosopher can cultivate love, built on the humility of Christ, which leads to understanding and a virtuous life.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Augustine. *De Trinitate*. Translated by Stephen McKenna, The Catholic University of America Press, 2023.
- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics, 2023.
- Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. University of California Press, 2023.
- Hadot, Pierre. *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. Translated by Michael Chase, Harvard University Press, 2023.
- Kahn, Charles H. *The Greek Epicurean Philosophers*. Everyman's Library, 2023.
- O'Daly, Gerard. *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*. Clarendon Press, 2023.
- Seneca. *Letters from a Stoic*. Translated by Robin Campbell, Penguin Classics, 2023.
- Epictetus. *The Discourses of Epictetus*. Translated by W.A. Oldfather, Harvard University Press, 2023.
- D'Angelo, Michael S. *Augustine's Philosophy of Language and the Interpretation of the Bible*. Oxford University Press, 2023.
- Feser, Edward. *Augustine and Modern Philosophy: A History of the Human Soul*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- Gerson, Lloyd P. *Augustine's Confessions: A Reader's Guide*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Translated by Michael Chase, Wiley-Blackwell, 2023.