

Saint Augustine's Hermeneutical Universalism

Sergiy Kvit

Introduction

The assertion that philosophical hermeneutics are universal in meaning requires further interpretation not only in the theoretical realm, but also from a practical point of view. That is why attention focused on Saint Augustine's writings may help clarify many important theses. I propose to look at Augustine as the founder of philosophical hermeneutics whose ancient works nonetheless suggest answers to modern challenges in the search for all-important human and global mutual understanding.

The Inner Word of Truth

Philosophical hermeneutics are based on a metaphorical hermeneutical circle, which according to H.G. Gadamer, represents discourse aimed not at making an opponent change his or her mind, but at developing "a common language,"¹ that is, a search for the truth. J. Grondin focuses attention on the special meaning that Gadamer accords Augustine's writings in defining the sense of philosophical hermeneutics, in the process reducing it to a concept of the inner word, which belongs to no language and can be found in a search for the truth.²

¹ H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Kyiv: Universe, 2000), 359.

² J. Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), xiii.

The inner word belongs to Augustine's clearly and accurately presented inner, or spiritual, world. In his *Confessions*, he shows his "inner self," inaccessible to the physical "eye," "ear," and to "understanding." In contrast to the unstable outer world where we live, inner life is permanent. The latter opens itself to the eternal spirit, which is a sign of humanity.

Christian determination of faith enables a specific attitude to the world. Hence, an aspiration for seeing something essential, spiritual, and eternal, beyond the exterior and material, emerges. Augustine confesses that "my human within is where infinite light shines in my soul, where ringing melodies can never be seized by time, where unblown smells spread out, where gluttonous food savours, where embrace is so tight that no penetration can destroy it."³

The metaphor of light here is not accidental. It carries a very important conceptual sense. According to Gadamer, light, beauty, and truth are connected. He claims that the "metaphysics of light clarifies the connection between the revelation of beauty and evidence of the comprehensible."⁴ In his commentary on Genesis, Augustine uses the metaphor of light in an ontological context, which will later be drawn upon by Martin Heidegger. The Divine Word does not take part in the creation of heaven and earth. Only after having created light does God begin to speak, making it possible to distinguish things. In other words, language is the first creation by means of which "the mentally infinite is first revealed through the unity of the word."⁵ Speech as word-play allows for the revelation, differentiation, and realization of essential meanings, which are usually not evident on the surface and require separate colloquial reflection on their genuine (inner) sense.

³ St. Augustine. *The Confessions* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2007), 174.

⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 446.

⁵ Ibid.

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In his turn, Heidegger discusses a luminescence of the truth,⁶ which is formed during a discussion that begins on its occasion and in its field.⁷ Here we again see the hermeneutical circle, which is particular speech aimed at finding the truth – that third element not present prior to discourse between two interlocutors, or between the text and its interpreter. Here, beauty, truth, and light expand the horizons of the living person, whose existence in this world is only temporary.

Augustine mentions two more characteristics of human nature, viz., the abilities to think and to believe. A human being has an immortal soul and, because of it, the ability to become one with the divine truth, which penetrates the essential meanings of words. Significant effort is required to achieve this. In particular, it is necessary to ponder humanity itself (the human within each one of us), and to use one's own mind. Augustine explains the functions of the soul and of the mind, both of which have an immortal nature. They play equally important roles in the process of understanding. Inasmuch as we cannot arrive at correct conclusions without the help of science, our mind functions as the eye of our soul. The soul contemplates the truth, without the mediation of the body. Accordingly, the truth is glimpsed not through physical means (eyes), but through pure thought.

In other words, Augustine demonstrates that Christianity supplants the mind with something very important for understanding human existence. Attention is focused on the immortal soul as the realization of human nature itself. That is why we have to know "the reasons behind good and bad things," as Augustine says in his *Confessions*. The presence of the immortal soul within enables cognition of the truth.

Let religion connect us with the one Almighty God,
because no animal can be a mediator between our

⁶ Heidegger, *Creation and the Truth: Letters and Thoughts of a Different Age* (Moscow: Hnosyz, 1993), 86.

⁷ Ibid., 92.

mind, with the help of which we perceive the Lord, and the Truth – our inner Light, through which we comprehend It. And together with the Lord we will hold in high respect the Truth, which is connected with Him, and which has the shape of everything made by the one and towards a single whole.⁸

An immortal soul, together with the mind, outline the universalism of philosophical hermeneutics.

This religious aspect is incorporated into the Greek philosophical tradition, thereby expanding it. Augustine reflects on the features of the human soul and memory:

Does the soul contain something which momentarily does not occur to it, or does a learned soul have no knowledge of music when it is occupied only with geometry? Since the latter is wrong, the first is true. The soul is master only of that which comes to its mind. That is why the soul may contain something the presence of which it doesn't feel.⁹

In other words, the soul uses inner memory to contain knowledge, which at the opportune moment can point to the truth. We are left only with finding this knowledge.

Appealing to God, Augustine says: "Oh light that enlightened me, now I see that in using my external feelings I have not been searching correctly; you are inside of me and they knew not how You entered me."¹⁰ The Lord is the only true light. Augustine asks Him to not let himself be dispersed from the singularly significant "into the numerous, but collect me from the outward into myself, and from myself to You."¹¹ This inner (word) is not connected with the possession of particular concrete information. It now opens the way to the truth, the sense of which is much more complex.

⁸ *The Confessions*, 288.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *Conversation of the Soul with God* (Moscow, 2006), 116. The next pages are in the text.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

The truth is connected with God, and therefore with humanity in the sense that a human being is godlike and mortal simultaneously. According to Augustine,

who doubts the existence of the truth has something true inside, which gives him no reasons to doubt because all which is true can be true only from the truth. Thus, one who for some reason may have reason to doubt, should not doubt the truth.... Thinking does not create truth, but finds it ready. Thus, before it is found, the truth exists inside of itself, and when it is revealed it serves to our renovation.¹²

As we can see, it is not coincidental that truth correlates with faith. This speculative Christian proposition creates room for the universal application of hermeneutics. Gadamer stresses that in Christianity the Word exists in the realm of the miracle, which is creation, redemption, and incarnation.

The greatest miracle of language is not the fact that the Word takes on "flesh" and acquires outer being, but the fact that what emerges and finds itself in outward flesh is always the Word.... The Word was always with God for eternity; this doctrine also introduces the language question into the inner spheres of thought.¹³

We have already determined that this initial essential Word can be discovered by the human within. It does not belong to any one language, but is spoken as though it encapsulates the light of the truth. In other words, a living human being displays not only external personification: inner essential resources can also be engaged.

This inner word of the spirit is as indivisibly essential to thought as God the Son is to God the Father. This entails searching for and finding the (inner) Word, corresponding to the truth. "In spite of all distinctions there is accordance; not

¹² *St. Augustine, On True Religion: On Immortality of the Soul* (Moscow: AST, 2004), 481.

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 388–89.

only of the unity of human cognition with language, but also the connection of all human languages with things, which is extremely important. Cognition is only a prism through which the light of the only one truth creases.”¹⁴ Augustine divides the process of searching for the inner word into two stages. The first stage touches upon some particular person who has individual tastes and ideas. When “we refer ourselves to the inner memory of the mind,” this means that a word “cannot be without a thought,” even “in that inner word which does not belong to any language.”¹⁵

The next step is the reduction of a human to humanness, which leads to more hidden depth of our memory, wherein we found this also first when we thought of it, and wherein an inner word is begotten such as belongs to no tongue – as it were, knowledge of knowledge, vision of vision, and understanding which appears in [reflective] thought; of understanding which had indeed existed before in the memory, but was latent there.¹⁶

Augustine interprets thinking not as a separate capability, but in its firsthand connection with human nature, which allows the mind and the soul to interact in the process of inner word revelation.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the essentials of St. Augustine’s hermeneutical heritage, we should emphasize at least three things. First, he points out that we not only can find the truth, but that this truth potentially exists even prior to our particular hermeneutical discussion. Such substantial presence points out not metaphysical transcendence, but hermeneutical factuality

¹⁴ Ibid., 405.

¹⁵ Augustine. *On the Trinity* (10): <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1301.htm>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

in the manner of Heidegger and Gadamer, as a result of correlative introspection. It rides on phenomenology.

Second, the hermeneutical way of inner revelation of the true word is determined by human being as such. In other words, concentration on the truth is simultaneously a reflection on human nature as such. A person can find a common language with any other person if he/she needs the truth, not victory over an opponent. An ability to understand and listen to any other person leads to the common revelation of the inner word, which does not belong to any language and was unknown to either discussant prior to their discourse. This is proof that the discourse has changed the disputants in the process of heading toward the truth. This word belongs not to some specific person or metaphorical human within, but to a person as such.

Third, the universal use of philosophical hermeneutics takes on special significance according to the new challenges facing civilization, brought about by globalization. A monological way of thinking, and ideological motives for any kind of behaviour, are dead-end threats for modern civilization. The practical application of philosophical hermeneutics requires consideration and mastery of the depths of phenomenological convention of this particular kind of discourse, with the reward being truth itself.

