

Augustine and education in critical thinking

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Augustine's concept of the deep self provides a basis for a complex and many-faceted account of critical thinking. He uncovers the moral sources of thinking in the inner depths of the self and shows that critical thinking presupposes radical self-reflection ready to face the truth about oneself. Self-knowledge assumes transparency, consciousness of the corrupt desires and prejudices that distort one's thinking. Unresolved guilt endangers transparency and thereby makes it difficult to become aware of the vices distorting one's perspective on reality. That is why human beings need divine grace that gives them the courage to face their corruption.

For Augustine, the problem of critical thinking is part of a larger problem about how the human self and identity are formed, which factors influence the process, and how a person comes to know herself. Augustine writes an open account of his life in order to clarify this problem. His intention is to make sense of the nature of his self by thinking carefully who he is and how he became who he is.

Augustine seeks to find an answer to this question both philosophically and autobiographically, by analysing the factors that influenced the formation of his own identity and the development of his self-knowledge and by reflecting philosophically on the nature of these influences. Reason is one essential part of the human soul. Since God has given reason to human beings, it must have a purpose. Augustine seeks to clarify this purpose by reflecting on fundamental epistemological questions: What is knowledge and where does it come from? What is the relationship of human reason to knowledge? How can one reach ultimate knowledge?

According to Augustine, human reason and perception have been formed to acquire knowledge about reality. If God had not made human reason and perception fitting for their task, knowledge would be completely unattainable. Since God has made human reason capable of acquiring reliable knowledge, reason has an important task in the spiritual development of human beings. It is especially useful when trying to make clear conceptual distinctions.

Reason does not, however, function independently of the will and the emotions. For reason to acquire a reliable grasp on reality and to understand things properly, the human heart must love the truth, the good and the right sufficiently to face its own prejudices and to gain self-knowledge.

Critical thinking has, therefore, certain crucial preconditions, according to Augustine. The aim of this article is to clarify the structure of these preconditions. (1) In order to think critically, one has to distinguish between how reality appears to one and how it is in fact. (2) There is a close

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connection between willing and thinking, between one's deepest desires and one's view on reality. (3) One cannot distinguish reality from appearances unless one realizes how corrupt desires and prejudices distort one's perspective on reality. (4) In order to be able to face one's evil desires and become conscious of their distorting influence, one needs the courage to face one's depravity. Such a courage presupposes God's grace and his promise of forgiveness, since without divine grace human beings try to cover up the truth about themselves and remain unconscious of the distorting influence of their evil desires. (5) One needs a source of light that enlightens the deep recesses of the self and shows it in the true light but is yet external to the human being and independent of him. (6) This source of inner light has to be of a personal nature to provide the learner with the possibility of inner dialogue. Augustine assumes that God is the inner teacher of every human being. A crucial factor in the development of critical thinking is that one becomes more dialogically engaged with the inner teacher.

The inner self

According to Augustine, a person may be sure about how reality appears to her even though she may not be certain that reality corresponds to how it appears to her. After a person has first realized how reality appears to her consciousness, her central epistemic problem becomes to find out whether she sees reality in the right light. To answer this problem Augustine brought to Western thought a conception about the self that is essentially inner, not outer, and a conception of reason that is dependent on the deeper layers of consciousness. He developed the concept of a deep self, where the fundamental human problem is to see reality as it is and to know oneself as one really is.

Nothing can bypass the learner's personal perspective. This perspective in its turn depends on the condition of the learner, whether she is able to see things as they are, or whether her perspective is distorted because she is not conscious of her prejudices. Self-knowledge is, therefore, a precondition of knowledge concerning outer reality. One cannot reach the sources of wisdom if one's passions are wrongly directed and one's mind is closed within the limits of one's own selfishness.

The crucial problem for critical thinking is the direction of the human will. The truth is 'disclosed to anyone, to the extent that he can apprehend it, according to his good or evil will' (*The Teacher*, 11.38.49–50). An evil will may distort one's perspective on reality, as one may not want to see the truth. The situation is made worse if people are unaware of their unwillingness to face the truth. Human beings have a tendency to see reality distorted by their own desires and fears, and to seek to appear to themselves and others as better than they are. That is why they cannot self-evidently trust the way that reality appears to them. Therefore, they need to attain a self-critical understanding about their way of perceiving reality. If a person does not know herself, she does not understand her perspective on reality and she cannot self-critically relate to her manner of perceiving reality. A critical use of reason presupposes a self-critical grasp of one's inmost motives, desires and intentions.

The development of a more self-critical perspective occurs by focusing attention on the inner self. The world of things, which is the object of knowledge, is public and general, but the process of coming to know is individual and specific, since everyone has to understand and acquire knowledge for herself (Taylor, 1989, p. 130). The

focus of attention is not on the objects themselves, but on the self, which perceives and is conscious of various things and events. The inner self determines in what light I see and know myself and the world. The essential question becomes whether I interpret things in the right light, or whether my inner light has grown dim which prevents me from seeing reality as it is.

The Light of Truth enlightens every soul, even the one blinded by its passion, according to its capacity to comprehend, at least in a weak manner, so that it perceives a truth while reflecting on it. Whatever is true in such a reflection, is not due to this soul but to the Light of Truth. (*The Sermon on the Mount* 9.32)

Knowledge is founded on inner insight, which has moral and spiritual preconditions. While Augustine was deeply rooted in the world of Greek and Roman Antiquity, he searched the depths of Christian thought to form a new concept of the inner self. This formed the basis for a more complex view of critical thinking.

Augustine's conception of the human self differs in some crucial respects from that of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The Socratic view of the self is one-storied. The self is thought to be transparent, totally attainable by rational thought. A rational and virtuous person is free from imaginary knowledge: she does not assume to know that which she actually does not know; rational reflection frees from such illusions. To become conscious of one's ignorance is a precondition for knowledge. Mere knowledge about the good is, according to Socrates, sufficient to make a person good and to produce good actions. Consequently, education can concentrate on the development of critical thinking. A critical person does not embrace ideas without proper grounds.

Plato rejected Socrates' conviction that mere knowledge is sufficient to guarantee virtuous activity. Since human emotions may work contrary to the knowledge of the good, virtuous activity requires the proper habituation of emotions. The irrational part of the soul must be habituated to act in accordance with reason and to desire the right things. Aristotle developed this thought further. Through education, desires and emotions are habituated to function so as not to prevent behaviour conducive to the good life through an activity that is either too excessive or too minor. The good life is founded on the cooperation between virtues of character and reason. A virtuous person follows reason while a vicious person employs bad reasoning (Knuuttila, 1989, pp. 220, 226).

Augustine directs attention to the inner processes of knowing and gaining insight. He did not assume that reason could ultimately solve the problems of self-knowledge, because rational thinking is not self-sufficient: it is directed by the deeper layers of the self. Reason is not by itself sufficient to provide answers to ultimate questions without spiritual light. Human reason needs enlightenment in order to become aware of desires that distort its thinking and to become liberated from their distorting influence.

The Aristotelian exercise of character does not solve the essential problem: mere habituation and intellectual exercise is not able to orientate the will in the right attitude. The human will may be overpowered by the love for the evil. One does not

necessarily desire the good even when one clearly sees it and understands its significance. One may turn away from the good that one sees clearly and become attached to evil.

Evil impulses are a threat to critical thinking because they distort one's perspective on reality. The problem of evil cannot be solved through mere thinking. In the eighth book of his *Confessions* Augustine describes his own powerlessness to change the direction of his life. He wanted to change his way of life, but continued according to his old habits. While it is true that he voluntarily continued his life in vice, it is also true that he continued his life in vice against his will because he desired that he would have the desire to reject the vice. He desired to desire differently, but his will to will was without effect and it was, as he said, partial and imperfect. Only God's mercy can orientate the soul towards the good and help to preserve it (Knuuttila, 1998, pp. 109, 118).

In his *Confessions* Augustine reflects on the reasons for the power of evil in his innermost being and discovers that a human being can be motivated by the attraction of evil itself (*Confessions* 2.4). Evil has a power of attraction over the human soul that can overpower and control it. Such an attraction to evil shows that the inner depths of the human being cannot be fathomed rationally (*Confessions* 2.8–9). Its enigmatic depths determine the direction of human thinking and of the whole life.

Augustine deepened Socratic self-examination by focusing on the dark sides of the human being and the power of self-deception. Love for the evil hides under the cover of the good. It is not sufficient to know what is good. One must become aware of evil desires in the depths of one's heart and of their tendency to mask themselves, in order to be able to discover the inner forces that distort one's perspective on reality. In this respect Augustine receives his inspiration from the gospels. Jesus' most powerful criticism was directed against hypocrisy, against the human tendency to appear to be different than one is in reality. The Socratic theme repeats itself in the moral realm. The biggest problem is to regard oneself as good even though one is not, as the distorting influence of one's evil desires then remains hidden. A false conception of one's goodness makes it impossible to see oneself and others in the right light.

The confession of sin becomes, therefore, a way of sharpening one's critical capacities, if it isn't merely an outward confession of wrong deeds, but grows into a consciousness of the penetrating power of evil in one's innermost being, which distorts one's perspective on reality. The human heart does not become sincere through mere intellectual reflection but through confessing its attraction for evil. The purpose of such a confession is to purify the heart in order to be able to see reality in a clear light. The failure to understand the depths of one's evil nature leads to mistaken perceptions and thinking. One's cognitive processes can be influenced unawares. Critical thinking presupposes an awareness of the distorting influence of evil in one's thought and action. Without inner light, human thought in all its sharpness is not able to understand the ultimate foundations of life.

God's forgiveness offers a foundation for critical self-examination: human beings do not dare to see their evil nature unless they can be sure of acceptance and

forgiveness. Complete forgiveness is the only adequate starting point for critical self-examination, because only complete forgiveness provides for complete honesty.

In addition to being a precondition for knowledge, the inner light is a precondition for human integrity and happiness. Without inner light the human soul is incurably torn between contrary aspirations but through it a human being may reach an inner peace and 'an inexpressible joy' (*The Sermon on the Mount* 3.14).

The limits of education

Education faces a difficult problem, since it is not sufficient that a child learns to reason and receives knowledge of what is good and right. In spite of all her knowledge and technical capacity for critical thinking she may become attracted to evil. How can education transmit not only the knowledge of the good and the habit to do good deeds, but also such a love for the good that helps one to do good deeds from right motives?

Augustine assumes that every student is a person who has her own inner world where others have no access. Even though an educator can control the external behaviour of the child, she can never determine the child's innermost love. No knowledge, discipline or persuasion can make the child love the good. The exercise of thinking skills and cognitive capacities may give the child the readiness to understand the consequences of her actions, but they do not determine what she loves. The love controlling the depths of a person's being controls her thinking as well. Love for the evil perverts one's perceptions, feelings and thoughts. The intellectual-technical skill of critical thinking may be used either constructively or destructively. The more gifted one is while being devoted to evil, the more destructive one can be.

A person's deepest self cannot be educated except by forgiveness and love. Forgiveness gives one the courage to know oneself, including one's evil tendencies. The crucial question is whether a person comes to know God as a loving father, to whom she may express all her rebellion and hate, or whether she becomes a mere slave that blindly submits to God. The God of Augustine does not create voiceless slaves but free people, who are capable of taking their position by their creator, to disagree with him and even to rebel against him (cf. Bakhtin, 1991, p. 20).

The insight model

Since knowledge is dependent on inner insight, Augustine rejects the idea that teaching involves the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. Instead Augustine defends an insight model for learning and teaching. A person may be awakened to knowledge by presenting her with questions and activating her independent reflection. In this respect Augustine is close to Socratic education.

Augustine developed various arguments against the model of knowledge transmission and ends up with a surprising conclusion: no one can teach another person any new knowledge with words. New knowledge is always based on an insight received through critical reflection. Teaching can merely transmit beliefs. The learner must

assess the truth value of the claims made and assess whether the beliefs in question constitute knowledge (*The Teacher* 10.33, 11.37).

While emphasizing the significance of the inner teacher, Augustine strengthens the independence of the individual against all external teachers. He opposes the view that people ought to follow external authorities or the common opinion instead of their independent personal assessment.

Augustine does not claim, however, that one does not need a teacher at all. The teacher may activate the student with questions and promote her cognitive development. Rightly posed questions guide the student's search for knowledge. Since knowledge, however, involves insight and understanding, no external teaching can transmit it. A person must be activated internally to gain insight.

A dialogue with the inner teacher

Even though teachers cannot transmit knowledge to their students, they can help students by inspiring them to independent reflection.

Now it often happens that someone denies something when questioned about it, and is brought around by further questions to admit it. This happens because of the weakness of his discernment. He can't consult that light regarding the whole matter. Yet he is prompted to do it part-by-part when he's questioned about the very parts that make up the whole, which he didn't have the ability to discern. If he's guided in this case by the words of his questioner, the words nevertheless do not teach him, but they raise questions in such a way that he who is questioned learns within, corresponding to his ability to do so. (*The Teacher* 12.39.5–12.40.45)

Understanding requires active reflection. Questions posed by the teacher provoke the learner to reflect on issues from various perspectives. Independent reflection is encouraged, since truth is close to a human being. Every human being has an inner teacher who helps her when she becomes active in the search for knowledge.

Since reality is dependent on God, the origin of knowledge is in God. God is not merely a transcendent being who has set reality in order but one on whom human cognitive processes are constantly dependent. God is not merely a being whom a human being desires to see, but one who makes seeing possible. That is why God is not merely the one who enlightens the order of cosmos external to the human being, but also an inner light of the soul (Taylor, 1989, p. 129).

There is one light which we perceive through the eye, another by which the eye itself is enabled to perceive; this light by which [outer things] become manifest is certainly within the soul. (Taylor, 1989, pp. 129–130)

Human cognitive faculties do not function independently, but finite human beings need interaction with the creator of the universe. Through this kind of dialogical reflection, a human being can come to know herself and acquire a self-critical view of the reliability of her perception and reasoning processes. The discovery of oneself, of one's inner being is not promoted by passive self-observation but by active inner dialogue in order to break the distorted shells of one's own image which muddy the clarity of self-consciousness.

What is then the significance of the inner teacher for cognitive processes? According to Augustine, the significance is not in a mechanical transmission of new knowledge into the mind of the learner. Augustine rejects the model of knowledge transmission with regard to the inner teacher as well. If the relationship of the learner to the inner teacher is passively adaptive or blindly submissive, it does not lead to insight. The inner teacher does not approach the human being monologically but dialogically. He awakens the human being from her self-deception to assess her own perspective critically. The endeavour is not to merge the learner with the inner teacher, but to inspire a genuine dialogue, where the learner becomes conscious of her individual perspective. A genuine inner dialogue can help one to find the truth about oneself, about one's own prejudices, desires and fears.

An open dialogue provides access to new knowledge. An immediate contact with God, the inner teacher, makes it possible to know that God exists. One can become critically convinced that one's experience is not a mere projection or wishful thinking, but an encounter with a real person. The more honest the interaction, the clearer the understanding about the character of the inner teacher. In this context the word-revelation has a central significance, because it orientates the interaction with the inner teacher.

A critical perspective on totality

Finite human reason can understand, according to Augustine, that the visible reality is not self-sufficient: it cannot be the cause for its own existence. Therefore, one has to presuppose a source that is sufficient to explain its existence. Such a source has to be an infinitely wise, all-powerful and perfectly good intelligence. The order of creation, human intelligence and moral sense bear witness to this.

Plato presupposed the system of eternal and immutable ideas. According to Plotinus, ideas are the thoughts of the divine world reason (*Nous*). Augustine develops this thought further. There is an eternal consciousness, an absolute reason that fathoms eternal truths. This eternal reason or God is present in the innermost being of every human being and enlightens her consciousness as the sun with its light enables one to see things in the material environment. In this light one can see rational truths. Without such a foundation one is closed within the world of one's subjective experiences and interpretations, unable to acquire reliable knowledge about the external world.

Augustine specifies his view by identifying the inner teacher with the Christ of the gospels. He ascribes to Christ the position that Neoplatonic philosophy ascribes to the divine world reason (*Nous*). In place of the cosmic reason of the Neoplatonic philosophy, Augustine sets the Christ of the gospels, whom the gospel of John calls the Word of God, through whom everything exists and is ordered.

Regarding each of the things we understand, however, we don't consult a speaker who makes sounds outside us, but the Truth that presides within over the mind itself, though perhaps words prompt us to consult Him. What is more, He Who is consulted, He Who is said to *dwell in the inner man*, does teach: Christ—that is, *the unchangeable power and*

everlasting wisdom of God, which every rational soul does consult, but is disclosed to anyone, to the extent that he can apprehend it, according to his good or evil will. (The Teacher 11.38.45–50, emphasis in the original)

Human cognitive processes are supported by an inner teacher, the Christ of the gospels. When Augustine identifies cosmic reason with a historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, he makes a fundamental change in Neoplatonic theory. Augustine claimed that cosmic reason, the origin of the whole of reality, becomes a concrete human individual in time and place. Specifically Augustine claimed that divine wisdom has been expressed most clearly in a historical event, the crucifixion of Jesus. Why did Augustine regard it as necessary to concretize an abstract theory in such a radical way? In the following I shall present one possible way of understanding Augustine's thought in this respect.

Why does the Logos of God, Christ, have such a central significance in human cognitive processes? A possible answer is that as an innocent sacrifice for human depravity the person of Christ unites contrary aspects of reality and thereby creates a foundation for constructive cognitive tensions. Cognitive tensions activate the learner to become a critical thinker. This is concretized in the crucifixion of Christ, where certainty and doubt, good and evil, power and weakness, honour and shame are brought into conflict with each other.

What does this mean from the point of view of concrete processes of critical thinking? Intellectual activation is based on a tension between faith and doubt, certainty and questioning, human fallibility and the possibility of acquiring knowledge. The strongest faith allows the deepest doubt, a systematic doubt offers a basis for the development of strong convictions. At the cross Jesus expressed both his deepest doubt ('My God, my God, why did you forsake me?') and his greatest trust by leaving himself in the hands of God in death ('Father, into your hands I commit my spirit').

Critical thinking presupposes a combination of faith and questioning. It is necessary to be aware of human fallibility in order to be able to have a critical attitude towards one's convictions. One must not, however, emphasize human fallibility to the extent of adopting total scepticism about the possibility of gaining knowledge. The emphasis on human fallibility must be taken to its logical conclusions without losing faith in the possibility of acquiring knowledge. The learner needs to become deeply conscious of her fallibility, because the deeper the awareness, the better she may avoid error and the more trustworthy her thinking becomes. At the same time she must maintain faith in the possibility of acquiring knowledge; otherwise she loses the motivation to seek knowledge and to avoid error.

Christ inspires critical thinking because he liberates one to believe and to question simultaneously. Since Christ's presence through the word produces faith, a believer does not need a dogmatic starting point in the form of abstract formulas. Faith liberates the believer to question because of the secure foundation that it provides. Reason must test ideas by all possible counter-arguments since the only way to become intellectually convinced of the truth is to take doubts to their ultimate conclusions. This process of becoming rationally convinced is almost endless, since reason constantly finds new counter-arguments. That is why the faith of the heart and the dialogical

process of reasoning are parallel and complementary processes although they are partly independent of each other. The faith of the heart gives a definite direction to rational inquiry, but in order to form intellectually justified beliefs one has to reason by evaluating the validity of arguments and counter-arguments. The endeavour is to 'understand with the light of reason what was previously held by faith' (*Epistolas* 120, 2). In this way faith inspires a rational search which makes previously unknown truths comprehensible (Kirjavainen, 1983, p. 75).

Christ, the paradigm of a truthful witness who was misunderstood and mishandled, gives both the conviction that it is possible to acquire knowledge and a deep consciousness of human fallibility. Faith in Christ liberates an individual to systematic doubt, because it liberates from the illusion that the exercise of human reason would guarantee true conclusions. Such an illusion would hinder the open testing of hypotheses. Faith is a gift that cannot be preserved unchanged. It is renewed in an encounter. If it is made into a dogmatic starting point, it loses its dynamic nature. Faith offers the daring to dash into the abyss of doubt in order to test ideas and become intellectually convinced about them. That is why faith does not liberate from intellectual reflection but into critical thinking. Genuine faith inspires a passionate endeavour to know the truth.

If one had to justify the possibility of knowledge without a preceding trust, one would have to build an argument even though one would lack a motive for building such an argument in the absence of trust in the possibility of knowledge. In addition, this argument could function as the basis of trust only if it could be regarded as indubitable. It can be regarded as indubitable only if it is regarded as incorrigible and unquestionable. How can one establish something as indubitable and incorrigible if one lacks a solid foundation? Furthermore, such a supposedly indubitable argument would limit the freedom of thought, as it would deny the fact that all human ideas can be set in question with good reason.

Another way in which Christ functions as the foundation of critical thinking is in the area of self-knowledge. Since Christ offers forgiveness, people receive the courage to face their self-interested desires and evil tendencies. In this way people become conscious of depraved attitudes that distort their perception and mislead their thinking. Becoming conscious of one's depraved attitudes is an important self-critical means for recognizing the prejudices at the background of one's thinking. The possibility of forgiveness encourages honesty, since it offers a new beginning. In this way an individual can acquire self-knowledge that is a necessary precondition for being self-critical. An example of such a process is provided by psalms of vengeance, where an individual expresses to God her desire for revenge and thereby learns to see this attitude in a self-critical light.

Christ unites and holds together cognitive tensions in a way that provides a foundation for critical thinking. The tension between contrary factors of intellectual inquiry works towards cognitive activation. Learners receive a vision of the moral ideal while understanding their own corruption. They can maintain a belief in the possibility of knowledge while understanding their own fallibility. This kind of tension activates them mentally, which is a precondition for critical thinking. Christ

is the light just because he makes it possible to take these tensions to their utmost conclusions without losing their ultimate coherence. A critical thinker is not satisfied with superficial answers but reflects on things thoroughly.

Conclusion

Augustine's account of the preconditions of critical thinking is complex and many-sided. As finite thinkers human beings need support in constructing a totality view into which they can place their detailed observations. They need inner enlightenment in order to have a self-critical view of their prejudices which distort their thinking. Augustine avoided both dogmatism and relativism, because he saw faith and critical scrutiny as two complementary aspects of the process of acquiring knowledge.

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