

## CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN LONERGAN AND AQUINAS

### An Insight into the Augustinian Background of the Problem of Consciousness in the Western tradition of thought

The question of consciousness, and of self-consciousness in particular, is a corner-stone in Bernard Lonergan's vision of human understanding; it is at the same time a basic reference pole in his interpretation of Aquinas. This is a point of no secondary importance, if we take into consideration the role played by the latter in the development of Lonergan's thought, and all the more his explicit claim to be an Aristotelian or a Thomist, to "want to follow Aristotle or St. Thomas"<sup>1</sup>. Nonetheless, and despite this clear profession of Thomism, I believe that Lonergan is a thinker of such a depth and originality that to qualify him as purely a follower of a philosopher's system, however great this may be, would be very reductive. I rather think of him as one of the most brilliant representatives of that stream of cognitive-metaphysical realism of which Aristotle and Thomas were the main inspirers. Likewise as a great deal of philosophers from Hegel to Brunschwig and Gentile can be gathered together in the main stream of idealism, but a good number of them exhibit at the same time many a distinctive feature of their own, remarkable enough not to make of them simply the disciples of some outstanding mind.

Made these preliminary statements, a question rises at this point. St. Augustine is the genius to whom Western thought owes the first great, "rational, methodological insight" - to use an expression dear to Lonergan - into the widespread field of the manifold problems of human consciousness and self-consciousness. In spite of the various positions on how to understand and define "consciousness" in Augustine's view and on how to interpret connected questions - as, for instance, the most debated one concerning the so called "illumination theory" -, there is a consistent scholarly tradition of Augustinian studies and of historiography of philosophy that considers Augustine - however with varying nuances from one scholar to the other - as the great forerunner of the reflection in Western thought on consciousness and related problems. This tradition includes such names as Ludwig Landgrebe, Étienne Gilson, Michele Federico Sciacca, Franz Körner, Lope Cilleruolo, Wilhelm Windelband, Karl Jaspers, Johann Hirschberger, to mention only a few ones.

Similar is also the conclusion that I hope to have put in evidence in some prior studies, which I would allow myself to refer here to, dealing with the basic Augustinian notions of *memoria sui* and *memoria Dei*. Moreover I am convinced that to see in Augustine's thought "*ein Netz von Widersprüche*"<sup>2</sup> is simply - may it be said without any spite - to fail understanding its unique character and originality. This does not mean of course to ignore the limits of Augustine - this is still the case for any human being and any human work. Limits that he has as a thinker, and even as a man in so far his thought is in a very strict sense connected with his personality, with his own life<sup>3</sup>. It does not mean either to let aside or to minimize the many unilateral trends of his speculation which deeply affected some developments of Western piety and theology as, for instance, his pessimism for man's bodily and worldly dimensions, especially for sexual reality, and so on.

If we have to recognize to Augustine the first elaboration of a theory of consciousness in the history of Western thought, then the question arises if any intellectual kinship is to be established, on this particular ground, between Aquinas, hence Lonergan, and Augustine, and if so of what does it consist. The aim of this present paper is to help, however slightly it may be, to explain this question. As a methodology in considering the subject, I shall follow prevalently a theoretical path; this means, I shall try to reach the object through the analysis and the comparison of concepts, notions, ideas, logical procedures rather than through a genetic, historical analysis of the origin and of the formation of the related texts.

The origins, in the West, of the notion of "consciousness" go back to Greek philosophy. The Socratic "*gnôthi seauton*" is a turning point in the development of Western thought in that it inaugurates the great tradition of what we can call the "metaphysics of interiority". This meant in general the necessity, for the thinking subject, of an ontological and ethical reflection upon its own reality to reach truth. This Socratic challenge for a new program of wisdom determined the following evolution of philosophy from Plato through Plotinus. This latter, and the Neoplatonic movement originated by him, probably represented in antiquity the highest point of development and exploitation of the noetical implications contained in Socrates' challenge. Augustine's philosophical program, condensed in that major imperative the philosopher addresses to the searcher of wisdom: "*redi in te ipsum; in interiore homine habitat veritas*" (turn back into yourself, in the interior man dwelt truth), opened, in comparison

with the Socratic challenge, a new path in philosophy.

The difference between the two reveals itself already in the very formulation of both the imperatives. We can define the Socratic program as an “objective interiority”. It makes of the human person acting as an intellectual and ethical subject the main, central object of man’s intellectual and moral search. Augustine’s challenge, on the contrary, is an invitation addressed to the subject as such to be itself, to rediscover itself as a subject in its most inward reality. This is also confirmed by the developments of both the imperatives as we know them: as far as the Socratic principle is concerned, from the use that subsequent philosophers, claiming basically Socrates’ spiritual heritage, made of it, from the way how they understood it and how they behaved with it; as far as Augustine is concerned, we know the developments of his principle from his own literary legacy. A brief outline of Augustine’s investment in this field is necessary for an overall evaluation of Lonergan’s theory of consciousness and of its relationship to Aquinas.

I tried to analyze the difference between the Socratic and the Augustinian approaches in a study entitled *L’interiorismo agostiniano*<sup>4</sup>. I can sum up as follows the conclusions reached in that work. We can distinguish two basic aspects in the Socratic “principle of inwardness”: *a*) onto-noetical, and *b*) ethical. These correspond to the two basic dynamics implied in the principle, the one to know man’s intellectual nature and its fundamental requirements, the other to act according to that nature and its requirements. What is basically new in Augustine’s approach is the psychological dimension. I must immediately enter a strong caveat for the use of the term “psychological” in the present context. The primary meaning, in which I use it, is neither a psychic experimental reality as studied by modern psychology nor simply the metaphysical reality of the existence and operations of human soul as studied by classical metempirical psychology. By “psychological dimension” of the Augustinian inwardness principle I mean the fact that the thinking subject, the reflecting and operating I, is studied, analyzed, looked in by Augustine precisely *as a subject*, in its subjective entity, in its very being a subject, and not merely as an essence, a substance, an *ousia* capable of producing operations of a certain kind and level.

This centrality that the subject as such, and the human subject in the given case, acquire by Augustine and consequently, for the first time, in the Western thought has two main effects:

*i*) “The concrete form of human reality penetrates with Augustine probably for the first time, in such an impetuous and dramatic way, into the very plot of philosophical reflection”<sup>5</sup>. This fact gives to Augustine’s thought its unique existential character which has been stressed by numerous authors of different attitudes<sup>6</sup>. It goes without saying that “existential” does not mean in any way a simple equiparation to “existentialist” as referred to the existentialist philosophies of this century. Hence the ethical dimension of the principle of inwardness acquires by Augustine a strongly existential coloration, so that we can define it as “ethico-existential”<sup>7</sup>.

- i. Introspection becomes for Augustine an ordinary and primary method of philosophical inquiry that leads him to a profoundly original analysis of the psychic, phenomenological, and transcendental contents of human consciousness. We can name this introspection “psychological” in the very sense in which we have defined our contextual use of this term. “Psychic”, “phenomenological”, and “transcendental” indicate the three basic levels or spheres that outline the horizon of the Augustinian introspection<sup>8</sup>.

The psychic level is made by all those phenomena that interweave man’s psychic life: pulsions, emotions, passions, motivations, sensations and sentiments, reactions, impressions of past and present, tendencies conscious and subconscious, dreams and projects for the future, thoughts and cares that excite or depress. Needless to say Augustine’s *Confessions* are one of the most impressive monuments in world literature of such a psychic or psycho-descriptive introspection. They contain a most genuine and deep knowledge of human soul. What distinguishes Augustine’s work from other literary masterpieces of antiquity, such as the Bible or the Greek tragedies in which we equally find an outstanding knowledge of man, is that introspection becomes by Augustine a method of philosophical inquiry that leads him to build up an anthropology based on this method.

The phenomenological level of introspection is determined by the fact that the inquiring attention is centered, at this level, on what makes the subject a subject, and lays the foundations of human intersubjectivity: that is the *I* and *You* relationship. Once again Augustine appears, in the history of Western thought, as the great discoverer of the

phenomenology of intersubjectivity. Even more: such an excellent interpreter of modern phenomenology as Ludwig Landgrebe considers Augustine as the very discoverer of the priority of *You* with respect to *I*; he adds furthermore that the rediscovery of this priority by modern phenomenology has been a return of the Western thought to its most genuine substance<sup>9</sup>. There is, however, a difference between the two approaches: for Augustine, *You* laying the foundations of whatever intersubjectivity is the Divine *Thou*, while in modern phenomenology it appears as being human *You*.

With the third and deepest step of the Augustinian introspection we reach its metaphysical-transcendental level. While the prior two levels develop on the plane of conceptual knowledge, this third level develops, on the contrary, on a plane of pre-conceptual knowledge. In fact, we have to do here not with data appearing in the conscience or involved in some psychic experience, but with those a priori conditions that make possible consciousness itself and conscious activity<sup>9a</sup>. Thus Augustine arrives at formulating explicitly the notion of *memoria sui* and at suggesting those of “Illumination”<sup>10</sup> and of *memoria Dei*<sup>11</sup>. A distinctive feature of these notions is that they represent an inner, immediate, total knowledge of experience or an “experience-knowledge” which takes essentially place *per modum subjecti*. We can render this concise expression, and difficult indeed to translate, as “subject-wise”. It means “in a way exclusive to the subject”, that is “functioning wholly as a subject”, and said in a still clearer way: “to know and to be known in the same and unique function of subject”. In other words the knowledge in question is not and cannot be objectified at all. Moreover it is an experience-knowledge concomitant of any other knowledge, of any act produced by the human soul. Hence it does not belong to the order of conceptual knowledge. It precedes - of course not in a temporal sense - all concepts, judgments, reasonings. It is necessarily pre-conceptual<sup>12</sup>. It is a true *knowledge*, although in an analogical sense<sup>13</sup>, nor can it be regarded as an “unconscious knowledge” without an inner contradiction<sup>14</sup>. *Memoria sui* is then the self-consciousness of the knowing subject as pure presence to itself, as pure transparency to itself in a pre-conceptual, inner, immediate, total experience-knowledge, without any objectivation. *Memoria Dei*, which has the same functional characteristics as *memoria sui*, is the experience-knowledge of those eternal principles and supreme values in whose light human mind proceeds to its judgments; an experience-knowledge that is also concomitantly, identically, and indivisibly the metaphysical-structural opening, the unquenchable thirst of the rational creature for the Infinite, for God<sup>15</sup>. This is also, I believe, the deeper meaning of the Augustinian illumination<sup>16</sup>. However, beyond any controversial interpretation, there can be no doubt, I think, on the following points:

- a. Augustine introduced a profoundly new dimension into the tradition of Socratic inwardness;
- b. this new dimension is due to a greater extent to Augustine’s methodology of psychological introspection, in the sense in which we have defined the contextual meaning of the qualification “psychological”;
- c. Augustine produced a comprehensive and subtle theory of human consciousness. This is expressed mainly by the notion of *memoria sui*;
- d. anyway may be interpreted, the Augustinian notion of illumination implies an immediate pre-conceptual experience-knowledge of the eternal truths and values.

Still a very brief comment on Augustine’s relationship to Plotinus to complete this schematic arrangement of his vision of consciousness. As I have alluded to, Plotinus, and in general Neoplatonists, and among these Porphyrius<sup>17</sup> in a special way, present, in ancient philosophy, the most developed, even somehow sophisticated, elaboration of the Socratic tradition of inwardness. There is, however, a basic difference between them and Augustine. This basic difference is not only the correction Augustine introduced in the Neoplatonic doctrines in the light of Christian faith, as it has been and still is repeatedly asserted as a stereotype even by great and greater scholars. There is in Augustine something basically new already on a purely philosophical ground<sup>18</sup>. This resides in his great discovery of the absolute unity of the subject in its self-consciousness excluding even the only functional duality of subject and object. The discovery, in other words, of the *cognitio per modum subjecti*, of the subject-wise knowledge. For Plotinus not even the *Nous*, the Mind, which is the first and highest subject of knowledge in so far knowledge is excluded from the One, avoids the purely functional subject-object duality. For Porphyrius, who does not at all exclude knowledge from the One, the same functional duality is not alien to the human soul<sup>19</sup>.

Now, if we turn our look to Bernard Lonergan’s work, we see that his idea of consciousness is patently Augustinian. It was not certainly at a venture that one of Lonergan’s best disciples, Salvino Biolo, wrote his most significant work

on Augustine's theory of consciousness in *De Trinitate*. I myself was deeply impressed, during my studies at the Gregoriana, on one hand by the acumen of Lonergan's analysis of consciousness during his lectures *de Trinitate* and *de Verbo Incarnato*, on the other hand, by his allusions to Augustine. It is true, the main reference was Aquinas. But it was not difficult to perceive that in this very question Lonergan's approach had something more in common with Augustine than what he shared with Thomas. This "something more" shared with Augustine was precisely the attention to the subjective dimension of the problem of consciousness introduced by Augustine's psychological introspection. This also was what gave Lonergan's approach its touch of modernity. At the same time it puts once again in light Augustine's position as a great forerunner of many approaches typical of modern post-Renaissance thought: with a peculiar regard, in the given case, to the question of consciousness that will make a central issue in modern philosophy.

Although the question of consciousness, and of self-consciousness in particular, is a corner-stone, I said, in Bernard Lonergan's vision of human understanding and it makes a major issue of his entire philosophical production, there are, however, some titles in Lonergan's literary production that are either wholly dedicated to or treat extensively of the question: the author himself refers to them explicitly in later works as main landmarks<sup>20</sup>. In this respect two of his books hold a special position: *De Constitutione Christi ontologica et psychologica*, one of his earliest and fundamental works, published in Rome, by the Press of the Pontifical Gregoriana University, in 1956; the second, probably the most important one among all Lonergan's writings, is *Insight*. In this latter chapter XI entitled "Self-affirmation of the knower", which is the first chapter of Part II entitled "Insight as knowledge", is an overall and penetrating exposition of Lonergan's vision on the issue. I believe it will not be useless at this point to briefly summarize this vision. To do so, Lonergan himself can be our best guide, as he too did a similar operation at the beginning of his *Method in Theology*. In the following sentences which are almost literal quotations from this book (pp. 7-9) we find the substance of Lonergan's thought on consciousness.

- i. "He [the reader] will have to evoke the relevant operations in his own consciousness";
- ii. "... by the operation one becomes aware of the object. The psychological sense is what is meant by the verb, intend, the adjective, intentional, the noun, intentionality";
- iii. "The operator is subject not merely in the grammatical sense ... He also is subject in the psychological sense that he operates consciously";
- iv. "The operations then not only intend objects. There is to them a further psychological dimension ... by them the operating subject is conscious ... they make the operating subject present to himself";
- v. "... the presence of the object is quite different from the presence of the subject. The object is present as what is gazed upon, attended to, intended. But the presence of the subject resides in the gazing, the attending, the intending. For this reason the subject can be conscious, as attending, and yet give his whole attention to the object as attended to";
- vi. "I spoke of the subject experiencing himself operating. But do not suppose that this experiencing is another operation to be added to the list, for this operation is not intending but being conscious ... It is that very operation which, besides being intrinsically intentional, also is intrinsically conscious";
- vii. "Just as we move from the data of sense through inquiry, insight, reflection, judgment, to statements about sensible things, so too we move from the data of consciousness through inquiry, understanding, reflection, judgment, to statements about conscious subjects and their operations. That, of course, is just what we are doing and inviting the reader to do";
- viii. "... different levels of consciousness and intentionality have to be distinguished. ... There is an *empirical* level on which we sense ... an *intellectual* level on which we inquire ... the *rational* level on which we reflect ... the *responsible* level on which we are concerned with ourselves ...".

It would be no exaggeration at all if we speak of a perfect correspondence between Lonergan's understanding of consciousness and that of Augustine. I would even add, Lonergan reveals himself as an excellent interpreter of Augustine probably without having intended it, and even without having thought about it. Once again I do not think it is only casual that some of Lonergan's disciples devoted themselves to a thoroughly study of Augustine, not with regard to whatever aspect of his doctrine, but precisely with a very special regard to his doctrine on consciousness, fascinated by its depth and originality<sup>21</sup>. They also brought their substantial contribution to put in a clearer light some debated questions on the matter as, for instance, the one concerning the very nature of *memoria sui*, whether it must be considered as a knowledge or not<sup>22</sup>, or if it is really consciousness or rather an "unconscious knowledge"<sup>23</sup>, or the

debate on the legitimacy itself of the expression *memoria Dei*<sup>24</sup>.

Let us know to clear up, as much as possible, Aquinas' role or position in all this issue. As we have seen, no doubt that Lonergan claims to be a Thomist. It is obvious, however, that Lonergan did not ignore Augustine and his doctrine on consciousness explained by the Church Father in the most comprehensive way in his treatise on Trinity, a topic of Lonergan's main interest as a theologian. But apart this obvious fact, Lonergan himself, in full maturity, gives us a very important testimony on his own philosophical itinerary. However circumstantial, as part of a reply given by Lonergan to some question during the discussions that followed his Lectures at the Halifax Seminar on *Insight* in the summer of 1958<sup>25</sup>, this testimony is all the more precious in that it sheds light on the author's extraordinarily multidimensional formation as a thinker. He says: "My philosophic development was from Newman to Augustine, from Augustine to Plato, and then I was introduced to Thomism through a Greek, Stephanos Stephanou, who had his philosophic formation under Maréchal"<sup>26</sup>. It is even suggestive that a Greek, who later became a great and empathetic searcher of Orthodoxy and of the Patriarch Photius in particular, may have guided him who has been considered "to be the finest philosophic thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century"<sup>27</sup> to the treasures of one of the most emblematic representatives of Medieval Latinity.

On the basis of this testimony by Lonergan himself, I would suggest that his understanding of human consciousness substantially derives from his Augustinian background and his Augustinian culture that certainly did not fail, but became deeper, as years went by. The main reason for such a suggestion is not only the perfect resemblance between the two visions. But also the fact that it would be not easy to explain some features of Lonergan's approach only with regard to a Thomistic source. So, for instance, Lonergan's strong insistence upon the subject, and still more his great attention to the psychological-subjective dimension of consciousness. The issue is not if we have by Lonergan something like the *Confessions*. That is not the case. But such a stressing of the subject's own psychological experience, as we have it in Lonergan, seems rather difficult to be explained within a purely scholastic tradition, so much less along its Thomistic line. In fact in Aquinas' treatment of consciousness the main accent is put not so much on the presence of the subject to himself, on what Lonergan calls the self-affirmation of the knower, as on the relationship of the knower to the first principles, the *prima principia*. Of course, the presence of soul to itself and its knowledge of itself in virtue of its pure presence to itself is not an unknown thematic for Aquinas. The capital text of the *Summa* and its parallels, especially in *De Ver. op. X, a. 8* and *C. G. III, 46*, are well known not to doubt about it: "*Nam ad primam cognitionem de mente habendam sufficit ipsa mentis praesentia quae est principium actus, ex quo mens percipit seipsam; et ideo dicitur se cognoscere per suam praesentiam*" (*Summa* I, 87, a. 1, c.). But while in Augustine this is an absolute Leitmotiv, as it is by Lonergan too, it certainly has not the same role, the same centrality and prominence in Aquinas who moves in a different intellectual climate and with different concerns. It is not meaningless, I think, that in a recent collective work on the state of current research on Aquinas not even one chapter is dedicated to the question of self-knowledge and self-consciousness of the human soul<sup>28</sup>.

This difference of approach between Augustine and Thomas is put in evidence by Salvino Biolo, however in the frame - as he asserts - of a substantial convergence. For instance, a comparison is established by him between the *intelligentia* that resides in the Augustinian *memoria sui* and the Thomistic *omnis scientia originaliter indita*. The very notions or denominations, used by both authors, contain already a clear indication of the differences of perspectives, concerns, registers, finalities. Biolo's conclusion, in the given case, is that on one hand such a comparison "seems to confirm the *substantial* convergence between S. Augustine and S. Thomas". But at the same time "we have to easily recognize a priority to S. Augustine in that he put in evidence since his first inquiry, with an expressed insistence, what is *pre-conceptual* as an *insight* of the psychological subject which is *already present* to itself"<sup>29</sup>. In fact, Aquinas is "less penetrating - affirms Biolo - than S. Augustine in the field of psychological introspection"<sup>30</sup>.

Concluding this few lines my hope is they may present a small contribution to understand better:

- a. why such a great philosopher as Karl Jaspers has considered Augustine, beside Plato and Kant, as one of the "*fortzeugenden Gründern des Philosophierens*"<sup>31</sup>, one of "seminal founders of philosophical thought";
- b. why such a reserved thinker as Bernard Lonergan, alien at all to the mass media and to all semblance of worldliness has been greeted as "the finest philosophical thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (*Time*), or as

“the twentieth century counterpart of the Renaissance man (Hugo Meynell, University of Leeds), or still his *Insight* has been qualified as “a philosophic classic comparable in scope to Hume’s *Inquiry*” (David Burrell, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*)<sup>32</sup>;

- c. and last but not least, why Aquinas, being altogether a great creative philosopher and a great innovator with regard to the Patristic age, is at the same time a bridge thrown towards past and future like the Gothic cathedrals that linked together “Barbarians” and Romans, East and West. May it be enough only to mention with what kind of deference Thomas treats Augustine or Dionysius the Areopagite!

Time is mature, I think, to renounce once for ever to that depauperating attitude and methodology very common in the Western Catholic thought in these last hundred years, and applied especially for internal wear and tear, whose main concern has been to stress, in an onedimensional way, the importance of the Thomistic revolution as opposed to earlier Augustinianism, or to strive to “justify” Augustine for his “errors”, sometimes real, and mostly presumed, forgetting in the meanwhile the outstanding achievements of the Eastern Christian thought while almost never could one hear of Aquinas’ eventual “errors”! To consider Augustine and Thomas as well as the many other giants of Western Christian tradition in their continuity and mutually complementary function - of course without ignoring absolutely their many diversities and peculiarities - will also help, I think, to integrate in a more balanced and comprehensive perspective the treasures of Eastern Christian wisdom into the main stream of a great and multiform tradition of Christian thought, all the more enriched by the flow of its many affluents.

This should be, I think, the mission of this country for the coming century. Since it is rooted in Western tradition but is also permeated by all kinds of Eastern and Southern contributions that can make of it a unique meeting point of cultures and civilizations for a mutual enrichment and constructive syntheses. At one condition, however, that ambition for power and material progress may not obscure the higher values of thought, of mind, of spirit which remain the last hope for mankind. The diffusion itself of its language, like a new *koine*, seems to be a signal and an imperative at once to build up, in virtue of those very spiritual values, a new and truly human *oikumene*. I would like to see in Bernard Lonergan, a son of this subcontinent, a humble prophet of this mission, and in his constant smile a sign for our hope.

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