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## THE TEACHINGS OF ST. AUGUSTINE ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT AUTHORS AND ITS RAISON D'ÊTRE IN POSTMODERNITY

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The article gives a synthetic account of the message of St. Augustine, analysing his views both in theoretical and practical dimension in reference to the postmodern reality and its characteristic features.

Following a brief investigation of the fundamental theses of the teachings of the Doctor of Grace, there is a description of postmodernity, and then a comparative review of philosophy, ethics, theology of St. Augustine with regard to the contemporary times. It is aimed at presenting the teachings of the bishop of Hippo as a chance for a modern human to free themself from the attachments of shallowness and pretence.

**Keywords:** God, love, good, truth, grace, postmodernity, corporeality

### Introduction

The teachings of St. Augustine (354–430) are a kind of borderline doctrine since they were placed in the history of philosophical and ethical thought in the era of Christian Antiquity which precedes the early Middle Ages.

The exceptional quality of St. Augustine works was influenced by both the historical period of time when that great Father of the Church happened to live, and an uneasy lot of St. Augustine.

Life in the times when the late Roman Empire was falling into decline together with coming from the areas which were always only and solely - even during the greatest *prosperity* – a Roman agricultural province, reinforced by the parents opinions, their aspirations regarding their son, as well as his own choices, were the reasons why the winding paths of St. Augustine's life led him to the honours of the altars of the Catholic Church, making him during his lifetime a bishop fighting for the authority of the Church [see: 5, p. 14].

### The outline of the teachings of St. Augustine

The teachings of St. Augustine – in their purely theoretical dimension – are, generally speaking, a study on epistemology, encompassing both epistemological issues and the

domains of knowledge. The whole existence comes from God. God is both the creator and the active factor in the universe [11, p. 151]. The genuine reality is of spiritual nature [11, p. 152]. A human soul is also a work of God and it was created in the image and likeness of God [11, p. 151]. Knowledge of one's own soul is certain [16, p. 223], hence striving for self-knowledge –apprehending one's own soul – is a means of apprehending the Creator [11, p. 151]. “God illuminates a human soul, shares with it the ideas of the divine mind [...] The ideas (present in the divine mind) are conveyed to people in the way which is apprehended by God [...] Illumination by God causes the intangible ideas [...] to become directly intelligible for a human soul” [11, p. 152]. Faith and reason complement each other [16, p. 224], as God is the source of both the ability to reason and the truths apprehended by reason [11, p. 152].

Every being has their nature which predestines them to their natural purposes [11, p. 153]. A human – thanks to having a spiritual soul – also has a supernatural purpose: contemplation of God with a sense of awe and worship. Dedication to contemplation is the only way leading to knowledge and to happiness – “mystical union with God in the state of blessing” [11, p. 153].

Hence, in the teachings of St. Augustine one can also find some purely practical tips. Such guidelines refer to the obligation to care about one's own soul, not about one's body which – as a source of sensual pleasure – distances a human from God [conf. 16, p. 223]. Lusts, pride, temptations, corruption of the body are the consequence of the human sin, the punishment for it. Original sin caused the fall of mankind which results is a tendency to give in to temptations, to do evil in the world [11, p. 153]. However God in His magnitude gave human beings the ability to overcome sin and not choose evil. This ability is faith, eager but passive acceptance of God, openness to His grace [conf. 11, p. 154]. The absolute perfection of God's creation is that He allows humans to freely decide to believe in Him and to contribute to the implementation of His plan [11, p. 153].

Therefore, one should do good [16, p. 224] and every human strives for it [1, p. 79]. In order for this to become reality, it is not enough for one to know what good is, above all, one should love it [16, p. 224]. Still, knowledge does not come from senses but it is a matter of faith. Faith, in turn – a matter of will. “Thus, value of will itself depends on love. Where one can find genuine love, there is also good will, however, if love becomes perverse, will is depraved as well. Love is a leading force and refinement of other virtues, it also brings a human closer makes him similar to God. [...] it moulds readiness to choose that is morally good and develops appropriate dispositions and habits (*Ama et fac quo vis; Love and do what you will*)” [13, p. 37].

The idea of love plays in the teachings of St. Augustine “the role of a creative principle of the objective world of moral values” [13, p. 37]. The basic moral imperatives are commandments which are valid to all Christians [1, p. 77]. Among them, a fundamental one is the commandment to love – love God and love your neighbour. “Through obeying the commandments and showing love to their neighbour a human can also love them self

Theoretical teachings of St. Augustine as epistemology		Domains of knowledge		
Theory of knowledge (epistemology)	Orthology (phenomenology)	Cosmology (natural philosophy)	Metaphysics (the issue of Absolute)	
<b>1. One apprehends some form of reality</b> One apprehends: <sup>1)</sup> general and immutable truths, and <sup>2)</sup> external matter [16, p. 220].	<b>1. The existence of the ideal substance</b> In God, there is an ideal model of the real world – God is a prototype – Christian Platonism [16, p. 222].	<b>1. The general concept of the world</b> All of the beings, even spiritual ones, consist of the matter and the form [4, p. 104].	<b>1. The source of all being. God and the world.</b> God is the cause of all being and He retains that being [16, p. 222]. God is a prototype of all existence. Creation is a free act of His will. Created beings are an imperfect imitation of the Divine Person – personalism – [4, p. 104]. God – “infinitely good Providence governs everything” [4, p. 104].	
<b>2. The object of knowledge is not a product of the one who apprehends</b> Human intellect is a recipient, not a creator of the truths, and thoughts are a reflection of the eternal truths [16, pp. 220-221]. God is the source of the truth [16, p. 222].	<b>2. The notion of the matter</b> A human soul is self-existent matter [16, p. 223]; it is purely spiritual and unique [4, p. 104]; it is eternal since by realising eternal truths it participates in eternity [16, p. 222].	<b>2. The structure of bodies</b> A human consists of soul and body. Purely spiritual soul is joined with the body in a dynamic way, as a mobile and leading being. Soul possesses three powers: reason, will and memory, among which the first is will [4, pp. 104-105].	<b>2. The existence of the Absolute</b> God exists since: “(a) mutability of the world requires accepting the immutable Absolute, (b) the world order implies Providence (stic proof), (c) conscience itself directly states that God exists. Finally (d) [...] since there is truth, there must also be something what establishes truth. Similarly, since there are beauty and good, there must be absolute Beauty and Good” [4, pp. 103-104].	
<b>3. One can apprehend the truth</b> A human thought can establish some truths [16, p. 219]. However, a believer has already possessed the eternal truth (contained in the Holy Scriptures) [conf. 5, p. 10]: “Enter your inner self, in the inside of a human, there is truth” [16, p. 220].	<b>4. There is a path of knowledge</b> Human intellect comes to the truth directly without reasoning, through intuition, contemplation, increasing cognitive abilities. This takes place thanks to God who gives knowledge to a human soul by means of illumination, grace [16, p. 221]. Therefore, faith is a source of knowledge [5, p. 9].	<b>3. The philosophy of life</b> God, while creating the matter, placed in it a kind of creative potentialities ( <i>rationes seminales</i> ), causing development of new forms – evolutionism. In nature, there are immanent powers which allow for its development and progress. Development of the world is at the same time its progress [4, p. 104].		
<b>5. Levels of knowing</b> St. Augustine differentiates between corporal and intellectual vision. Only intellectual vision – as a result of God’s interference – accesses immutable truth, that is ideas [4, p. 105].	<b>6. There is a purpose of knowledge</b> Knowledge is necessary to achieve happiness. It is about apprehending God and one’s own soul since: only God can give a human happiness [16, p. 219], which will be achieved by the unity with God. The unity, in turn, can be attained by doing good [4, p. 105]; - a soul has an advantage over a body because of its participation in eternity [16, p. 222].	The normative teachings of St. Augustine		
		1. You shall do good and avoid evil, adopt the attitude of “constant readiness to set above good which is truly best and therefore permanent, irreversible” [13, p. 35]. God is the highest and perfect good [13, p. 36]. 2. Love and do what you will! [2, p. 461; 13, p. 37]. 3. Unless you believe, you will not understand [5, p. 9].		

in an appropriate way (*se ipsum diligere*)” [1, p. 79]. A human was somehow naturally endowed with self-love (*amor sui*) which in its negative dimension is related to pride (*superbia*). However, a conscious attempt to overcome that weakness by referring to rational nature and practicing virtues allows a human to spread that love to other people [conf. 1, p. 79]. Love to neighbour implies awareness that one is loved and a wish to be loved [1, p. 79]. One can become a virtuous human only through directing one’s love towards God and obeying Him [1, p. 80]. A human as a rational being is created in such a way that obeying God is beneficial for them, while following one’s own will – detrimental for them [1, p. 79] since a potentiality of sin is an inevitable consequence of the existence of free will [11, p. 153].

Detailed issues of the teachings of St. Augustine refer to the doctrine of lie and the subject of suicide. St. Augustine advocates the absolute inadmissibility of lying, including a “useful lie, that is a lie aimed at achieving good without doing harm to anyone” [13, p. 38]. He also condemns suicide since such an action is contrary to the Decalogue and the principle “thou shalt not kill” [13, p. 38; 1, p. 78].

### **The postmodern world**

The beginning of postmodernity (i.e. postmodernism) dates back to 1917 when Rudolf Panwitz (1881-1969) – a German writer, poet, and philosopher – published the book entitled *The Crisis of European Culture* where he put the characteristics of “a postmodern man”, who is physically fit, wise, self-aware, trained after military service, religiously prepared, who is an armoured wimp, vacillating between being a barbarian and a decadent. In 1934 Federico de Onís Sánchez (1885-1966) – a philologist and a literary critic – used the word “postmodernism” to describe a minority response of Spanish literature to modernist literature. Over the period 1947-1978 postmodernism became a highly general and significantly heuristic term, stabilising in various domains. At the end of 1947 the work of Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975) – a British historian and a philosopher – entitled *A Study of History* was released, in which the word “postmodernism” relates to both crisis and an era. Arnold Joseph Toynbee is convinced that the era of the Western, that is Euro-American, domination, so Jewish-Christian culture and its last heir – industrialism, is coming to an end. According to him, there was the end of “Europeanisation” of the world in favour of the beginning of the genuine world of the worlds, where there will be a process of blend and syncretism of values and senses of different cultures of the planet [14, p 357].

“Postmodernism – described by F. Jameson as “the cultural logics of late capitalism” is usually associated with economic and political transformations [...]: with the decline of economic role of the nation states and takeover of their functions by transnational corporations, with the collapse of a colonial structure of economic dependence in favour of neo-colonialism basing mainly on cultural dependence and specific “policy of identity”, and with revolutionary transformations in terms of communications and information

processing techniques changing both the way the world and a human are perceived, and the nature of political relations [12, pp. 27-28]. Such phenomena are accompanied with the collapse of the “great narrative” ideologies of domination legitimising the entire current political and social order (e.g. the ideology of progress, great aesthetic revaluations (the end of the division into “low” and “high” culture connected to the collapse of authorities) and in the sphere of cultural means of communication (the dominance of visual culture, “the end of the culture of writing”), change of the way of perception and the social functions of science (the collapse of the myth of scientific truth, the commercialisation of research). The postmodern approach abandons apprehending truth as a “faithful representation of reality”. “The idea that there is a power called “Truth” which can set us free, is here abandoned, in return, though, it is said that we are left on our own, yet free in discovering ourselves anew” [10, p. 98]. Instead of “Pursuit of Truth” we need to focus on the ideals of “Tolerance” and “Imagination” [10, p. 100]. As “tolerance towards the ones who do not agree with the current opinions is the best way to ensure that our descendants know more truths than ourselves” [10, p. 102].

After the modernist dominance of Reason, the main subject and the main addressee of the texts of popular culture is body (drives, affections, anxiety, pleasure) [12, p. 37]. Fast development of the textile and chemical industry caused the appearance of fashion which, thanks to seasonal variability, led to complete decline of relative stable beauty standards [7, p. 156] and evolution of a model of beautiful body not so much from a century to another century, but from a decade to another decade [15, p. 51]. “Promoting beauty standards is accompanied by persistent instilling the conviction that a change is everyone’s obligation. You must do something about that. If you do not, it will be treated as a sign of slovenliness, psychic splitting, letting go, collapse” [9, p. 83]. In addition, there are also comparisons in reference to beauty. Such comparisons incline people to do something with themselves and the situation is escalating [conf. 9, p. 83].

Shaping a body under the influence of cultural factors results in a currently reigning cult of youth [6, p. 60]. It leads to the change, devaluation of the sense of existence of a human, the sense of their corporeality [8, p. 70, 75, 82]. While in premodern societies a human was aware of being corporeal, had a sense of incarnation [conf. 8, pp. 73-75], since “the procedures related to care, shaping and modifying a body were an integral part of a stable set of senses” [18, p. 69] and principles, according to which on the basis of appearance one could determine the social status of an individual, were clear and commonly known, in postmodern reality a human is aware of owning a body [conf. 17, p. 195], clear-cut structures of senses disintegrated “and a human found themselves in the world which can be interpreted and evaluated in various ways” [18, p. 70]. What is left at a human disposal, turns out to be only their body. It is becoming a matter which is not only possible but also necessary to be in charge of, control, modify [18, p. 70].

Corporeality accompanies a modern human due to its tangible structure and nothing more than that [conf. 8, p. 75]. Therefore the body care and beautifying methods, both

natural and unnatural, have been extended on a massive scale. Hairstyle, face, arm and leg embellishments, “refined” or casual clothes, tightly covering or irresistibly revealing, sometimes even completely exposing particularly attractive body parts – all of that is strictly regulated [7, p. 153], referring to an unattainable ideal, a currently reigning standard [6, p. 61]. “Even worse, beauty standards are evolving in a completely unrealistic direction” [9, p. 83]. To enjoy life to the fullest means not to be embarrassed about one’s looks. Nowadays one takes care of one’s body in order to be able to fully experience the world in an intensive and sensory way. While controlling one’s looks, one should pay attention to the impression which is made on others [18, pp. 74-77; see 3]. Relationships with others depend on one’s appearance. Therefore, they are being pushed to the background [18, p. 73].

### **Raison d'être of St. Augustine's philosophy in postmodernity**

The teachings of St. Augustine seem to stand in considerable opposition to commonly prevailing cultural trends. What comes to the fore in terms of the discrepancies is the attitude to truth which, according to St. Augustine, is one and incontestable, and his duty as a preacher is to “shed light at it revealing its inner rationality” [5, p. 10]. Human intellect is a reliable instrument of knowledge since “God is the source of both the ability to reason and the truths apprehended by means of reason” [11, p. 152]. That truth is first cause of everything. A human can participate in God’s plan. In postmodernism the situation is different – there is no one and only truth. There are many truths and everyone has the right to have their own. Provided that one is able to defend it in discussion and others are tolerant of them. The value of intellect is questioned – myth, magic, esoterica, fiction are gaining importance and in addition, possibility of controlling supernatural forces by the initiates. The chosen ones by means of spells have the power of controlling the supernatural forces and shaping the reality. A human is becoming someone who, equally to the powers ruling the world, is able to create this world.

Another difference lies in the approach to a body. While St. Augustine sees the cause of the fall of man in the temptations of the flesh and commands us not to care about the flesh itself but about the soul as it participates in eternity and is aware of intangible divine ideas, the postmodern culture mainly focuses on the body. The majority of economy is based on the cult of the body or at least refers to that body, willing to attract a customer. Food, medical, pharmaceutic, textile industries are dedicated to body. Body, its quantity and quality, are important. The lowest body weight of the best quality! Good quality means youth, firmness, springiness, suppleness, joy, etc. Having a beautiful body should allow for gaining profit, making money from it, promoting oneself, advertising, being successful, selling. The question is what to sell – oneself or one’s own truth (about oneself)? An attractive body, when taking advantage of temptations, is an instrument of having an impact on others, manipulating, abusing them. Rational arguments are pushed into the background since what matters it the “wow!” effect. Sometimes it is

good to support these arguments by one's own attractiveness since in the face of the large number of competitive offers, the visual aspect may turn up to be decisive. One's own body should be controlled, disciplined, shown, its assets should be highlighted. Thanks to it, one can be noticed (for a while – a shorter or a longer one). However, it should be remembered that we exist not thanks to our body. We can be temporarily stored in memory, we can be talked about, but we can exist – only in people's hearts – thanks to what we are like for them.

Faith, hope, love – St. Augustine's three theological virtues, were added to four classic ones: justice, courage, temperance and prudence [1, p. 80; conf. 13, p. 37]. To St. Augustine, the issue of faith is a fundamental aspect of (the meaning of) life, but in postmodernity it is put in question. In postmodern times it is said that faith is for the weak, although a man without faith seems to be deprived of hope and filled with sadness, not love. The remaining virtues are subjects of utilitarian discussion and made situation-dependant. Thus, there is nothing certain one can rely on.

Love is compared to pleasure of being with others, enjoying one's own sensuality, enjoying superficiality. In case of sadness, boredom, it can be easily given up.

Does it have to be like that? In spite of many discrepancies, there is a chance for return to universal truths and values. The world has turned but it has not gone mad. The initial fascination with postmodern ideals of arbitrariness and individuality resembles intoxication followed by conscious willingness to restore relative homeostasis. In the contemporary world, there has to be room for universal values and unbreakable principles. Everyone needs clear limits – the limits of freedom, the limits of intimacy. It is important to be able to set them and not to be afraid to protect oneself and one's own personal value.

It seems that the turn towards a more profound self-reflection, thought on a person in oneself may restore human's faith in God and in people. An attempt on considering who we are and what we strive for, what will be left behind us and in what way we will be remembered, may contribute to changing our life attitude from purely superficial, dependent on trends, to the attitude of mindfulness.

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## ВЧЕННЯ СВЯТОГО АВГУСТИНА ЗГІДНО З РІЗНИМИ АВТОРАМИ ТА ЙОГО ОБГРУНТУВАННЯ У ПОСТМОДЕРНОСТІ

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У статті запропоновано синтетичний розгляд послань св. Августина. Його погляди проаналізовано як у теоретичному, так і в практичному вимірі з проекцією на постмодерну реальність та її характерні ознаки. Спершу розглянуто фундаментальні тези із спадщини мислителя та окреслено загальний опис постмодерної дійсності, а згодом запропоновано порівняльну проекцію філософського, етичного, теологічного вчення святого Августина у призмі нашої сучасності. Такий дослідницький підхід має на меті показати його ідеї як альтернативну можливість для життя постмодерної людини у її прагненні звільнитися від стереотипів поверховості та вдаваності.

**Ключові слова:** Бог, любов, добро, правда, благодать, постмодерність, тілесність