

Saint Augustine's Hermeneutical Universalism

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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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Hermeneutical Conversation*

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.