AUGUSTINE: FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

- **Varieties of ‘faith’**: uninformed belief, legalism, vibrant way of life and experience; **spectrum** from rigid, fanatical to enlightened, dynamic.

- **Theology/philosophy of religion**: main approaches
  - **Natural (Reason alone)**: Aristotle, Ibn-Sina, Ibn-Rushd, Aquinas…
  - **Revealed (Reason tied to Revelation)**: systematic, doctrinal: Mu’tazilite, Ash’arite, Aquinas, Calvin, Karl Barth…
  - **Existential**: Augustine, Kierkegaard…

- **Elements of an existential (phenomenological) approach**
  - **Descriptive, non-dogmatic**, open, flexible (quote F, p 4/4)
    - “to the things themselves”; “preconceived ideas” are the ‘devil’ in this methodology (Husserl, Heidegger)
    - “Inward Empiricism”: William James
  - **Facilitates ‘dialogue’**: the subject-matter is human experience and not doctrinal positions
  - **Enhances empathy**: not agreement or adoption of the position, but rather an attempt at sympathetic understanding of the basis in experience that underlies the doctrinal formulation
  - **Result**: areas of commonality more likely to be discovered than when the discussion is purely doctrinal/theoretical
  - **Examples (Augustine)**: knowledge of God, God’s love, original sin, the problem of evil, foreknowledge and free will, trinity, incarnation…

**THE CONTEXT** (353-430 CE)


B. **Intellectual ferment: socio-political impact**

1. **Manicheans**: sex and marriage- sources of evil
2. **Donatists**: sectarianism vs. universalism: the elite, separateness of church and world, good and evil
3. **Pelagians**: divine grace not necessary for human fulfillment
4. **(later, Calvinists and Jansenists)**: no room for human merit

( Augustine attempts to avoid these and other extremes of his day. )
C. Reason and Revelation: (two sources of truth and knowledge)

1. **Two views of man** - vital and rational: “man of faith” (**love, trust, history**) and “man of reason” (**intellectual development**);
   - **two ways of life** - **covenant** and **cosmos**.

2. **Tertullian** (cf. Al-Ghazaleh, Luther): Revelation
   **Origen** (cf. Ibn-Rushd): Reason
   **Augustine**: harmonious **complementarity**, but Revelation is **beyond** Reason.

3. **Faith seeking Understanding**: “believe in order to understand” and “understand in order to believe”: (not **blind faith** but the dynamic of **experience and reason**)
   a. a **way of life** must **be lived**, experienced (belief)
   b. this provides **concrete** material for **thought** (understanding)
   c. thus **true understanding** can only come **after** belief
   d. however, true understanding is **superior** to **simple** belief
   e. also, belief must be **reasonable** in the first place.

4. **A description of his own life-experience** with various **ways of life**.

D. The **development** of Augustine's writings: “**A man who progresses as he writes and writes as he progresses.**”

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**SOURCE TEXTS**

**Faith and Understanding**

*a.* “... Unless he understand somewhat, no man can believe in God; nevertheless **by the very faith** whereby he believes, he is helped to the **understanding of greater things**. For there are some things which we do not believe unless we understand them, and there are other things which we do not understand unless we believe them.”

(*In Ps. CXVIII*)

*b.* “It is seen as **reasonable** that faith should **precede** reason.”

(*Ep. CXX*)

*c.* “Faith gives the understanding **access** to these things, unbelief **closes** the door to them.”

(*Ep. CXXXVII*)

*d.* “He who **by true reason arrives** at an understanding of what he had only believed is in a **better state** of advancement than he who still only **desires** to understand what he believes.”

(*Ep. CXX*)
EXPLORING THE LIFE-WORLD OF THE HUMAN SELF

A. **New** approach: **inward empiricism**: reflecting on and describing the immediate data of consciousness (C, 216,223).

B. **Unity** of the Self (Soul, Mind): **three** holistic modes: memory, understanding, will (existence, knowledge, love); I am, I know, I love; **one** substance (C, 318).

C. Myself as **Understanding**: “believe in order to understand” and “understand in order to believe”; not blind faith but a description of the actual interaction of experience and reason; authentic understanding is a function of both faith and reason.

D. Myself as **Will**: new locus of the core of the human personality; love as our essence and concrete principle of movement; “well-directed” and “ill-directed” love as fundamental determinant of man, society and history; the true character of a person and of a people (C, 317).

E. Myself as **Memory**: Not just my ability to recall specific details: my capacity to be aware of myself as a historical creature: the fluidity and continuity of my existence: the whole world of my history is presented and preserved (C, 215-216).

1. Memory as myself in its **ultimate** dimension: as channel of access to God (C, X: 16, 17, 20, 24).

2. **Encounter with God** as living source of existence through the self as memory; but God is not to be identified with the self: beyond (C, X: 25, 26, 27).

3. God experienced as **personal** Providence not impersonal Fate (Necessity): dynamic source of connectedness and meaning for personal history: linear notion of history.

F. Some **results** of this existential exploration of the human subject: God and evil are realities to be experienced, not abstract concepts to be argued about theoretically.

1. **Encounter with God** (E.2 above): a real, dynamic relationship in which the human gets his knowledge (existential) of God: origin; on-going source of his existence; personal Providence; absolute, ultimate; experienced as life-transforming Love, Mercy, stimulus to excellence...

2. **Immediate experience** (knowledge) of human existence as Will reveals the concrete source of evil (vs. abstractions: an evil God, the stars, no evil; or false accusations: matter, the body, emotions, feelings, desire); personal responsibility: the phenomena of “loving evil for its own sake” and the “divided” will: the power to freely receive or reject God’s grace (C, II, VII, VIII passim).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mysterium Caritatis / Mysterium Iniquitatis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mysterium = a rich reality non-reducible to rationalist formulae</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caritas = Agape transforming Eros = Love</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iniquitas = Evil</td>
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REFERENCES

A. "...men go out and gaze in astonishment at high mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad reaches of rivers, the ocean that encircles the world, or the stars in their courses. But they pay no attention to themselves." (p.216)

"...the field of my labors is my own self. I have become a problem to myself...I am investigating myself, my memory, my mind. There is nothing strange in the fact that whatever is not myself is far from me. But what could be nearer to me than myself?" (p.223)

B. "I knew that I had a will as surely as I knew that there was life in me. When I chose to do something or not to do it, I was quite certain that it was my own self, and not some other person, who made this act of will..."

"...so that I was on the point of understanding that herein lay the cause of my sin." (p.136)

C. "My inner self was a house divided against myself... I was... overcome with violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant. Yet in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do. In my heart of hearts, I praised it to the skies. I need not even walk as far as I had come from the house... to reach this goal I needed no chariot or ship... no more was required than... a resolute and wholehearted act of the will." (pp. 170-1)

"The mind orders itself to make an act of the will, and it would not give this order unless it willed to do so; yet it does not carry out its own command." (p. 172)

D. "... as I rise by stages towards the God who made me. The next stage is memory, which is like a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse... (an) inner hiding place..." (p. 124)

"All this goes on inside me, in the vast cloisters of my memory. In it are the sky, the earth, and the sea, ready at my summons, together with everything that I have ever perceived in them by my senses, except the things which I have forgotten. In it I meet myself as well. I remember myself and what I have done, when and where I did it, and the state of mind at the time. In my memory, too, are all the events that I remember, whether they are things that have happened to me or things that I have heard from others. From the same source I can picture to myself all kinds of different images based either upon my own experience, or upon what others have told me. I can fit them into the general picture of the past; from them I can make a surmise of actions and events and hopes for the future; and I can contemplate them all over again as if they were actually present... The power of the memory is prodigious, my God. It is a vast, immeasurable sanctuary. Who can plumb its depths?" (pp. 215-16)

E. "See how I have explored the vast field of my memory in search of you, O Lord. And I have not found you outside it... It is there that I find you when I am reminded of you and find delight in you." (p. 230)

F. "... these are tentative theories... not downright assertions." (p. 266)

"Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? ...even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you." (p. 23)