

# the first-person point of view

The idea that the words 'I exist' (or their equivalent in Greek or Latin) might be used to state a philosophically important truth would have mystified the classical philosophers of antiquity. Of course it was important to each of them individually that they existed. Moreover, the existence of each of them individually was important to the development of philosophy. Without the existence of, say, Socrates, or Plato, or Aristotle, philosophy would not be what we know it to be today. But no major philosopher of antiquity would have thought of himself as expressing anything philosophically interesting by saying, "I exist."

This observation naturally leads to a second one. No philosopher of antiquity thought of doing philosophy from his own, singular point of view. That observation may come as a surprise. "What about the ancient relativists?" you might ask. Did they not suppose they had to start from how things seemed to them? And was not that doing philosophy from one's own, singular point of view?

The answer is 'No.' According to Plato, Protagoras, the most famous ancient relativist, said, "Each thing is to me such as it appears to me" (*Theaetetus* 152a). So far it might well *seem* that Protagoras is doing philosophy from his own first-person point of view. But we should note how the passage goes on. Protagoras adds, "and is to you such as it appears to you."

Protagoras's idea is that the wind is not, in itself, either hot or cold. The wind may be hot to me and cold to you; yet, in itself it is neither hot nor cold. Thus Protagoras denied that there is an objective fact about how things in the world are, independent of how they seem to be to this person or that. But his relativism was universal. He did not give any pride of place to how things seemed to *him*. Nor did he think he needed to start his philosophy by establishing how things seemed to him before he would be justified in allowing himself to suppose that there might be other points of view.

Protagoras does not explain how he knows there even exist other points of view. He just assumes that there are. He shows no special philosophical interest in other minds; he certainly does not suggest that one needs a philosophical argument to prove that they exist. And how things seemed to him in particular was not especially important to him. His point of view was, for him, just one among many, and not a privileged point of philosophical departure. His reflections were universal from the beginning, even if universally relativistic.

All this seems to have changed with Descartes. It was Descartes who first won broad acceptance for the suggestion that each of us must work out what we know individually, from our own first-person point of view, before we can move on to questions about how the world is, or might be, independently of us. And the foundation stone for the reconstruction of what it is we know, Descartes insisted, is the invulnerability of each philosopher's claim to know what we express when we say or think to ourselves, "I exist."

Much of modern philosophy and science has, of course, rejected this Cartesian starting point. But the Cartesian proposal has so fully insinuated itself into modern ways of thinking that it cannot be ignored, even if we would now like to do so. Popular culture, as well as academic philosophy, recognizes at least something of the significance of Cartesian first-personalism. Think of the very old *New Yorker* cartoon, in which a computer technician reads aloud, in perplexity, the output of a computer tape. "It says," he reports, "*cogito, ergo sum.*" Even the unphilosophical reader of the *New Yorker* will get the joke, and hence realize something of the significance of the philosophical problem of whether a computer could have a genuine thought from its own singular point of view. In fact, it may even cross that unphilosophical reader's mind that there is a question as to whether the computer literally has a point of view of its own.

Descartes does deserve the credit (or the blame!) for convincing much of the modern world that the first-person point of view must be taken seriously. Even, or perhaps I should say "especially," diehard critics of Descartes take him seriously. Of course, the appeal of the objectivist stance, that is, of making one's thought as nearly independent as possible from one's own personal perspective, is also very attractive to many thinkers. The goal of this sort of objectivism is to gain what Thomas Nagel has called, somewhat mischievously, "the view from nowhere."<sup>1</sup> Yet the suspicion that, in fact, the idea of a view from nowhere is really a myth, or at least a fiction, and that we delude ourselves if we do not each respect the philosophical priority of our own individual perspective, has not altogether lost its appeal. Moreover, for at least some among us, the sense that deferring to objectivism denudes knowledge of deep significance continues to be compelling.

So how did philosophers ever come to think that there is even a choice between beginning philosophy with an objectivist point of view and starting instead from a resolutely first-person point of view? Did Descartes himself simply make this idea up? Did his first-personalism emerge from out of nowhere? Certainly not. It began with Augustine.

Descartes himself denied that his thought had been influenced in any significant way by Augustine<sup>2</sup> – or by anyone else, for that matter! Scholars have debated whether that could possibly be true. A good way to appreciate its implausibility is to read Stephen Menn’s intriguing book *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). My purpose here, however, is not to trace out Augustine’s influence on Descartes. It is rather to introduce the philosophical thinking of the first thinker in Western philosophy actually to *do philosophy* from a genuinely first-person point of view.

There will, of course, be many references in my account of the philosophy of Augustine to Descartes, as well as to later modern thinkers, even to philosophers of the last century. But my treatment of Augustine is meant to be philosophy, not the history of ideas. To appreciate Augustine’s originality one needs, of course, to have some conception of what went before him. And to appreciate its philosophical value we may need to make reference to what came after him. But it is the direct challenge of Augustine’s own thinking that will be my primary focus in this book. I shall refer to philosophers who came before him and philosophers who came after primarily as a way of framing more clearly his own thought.

Throughout Augustine’s corpus we find a striking appreciation for the philosophical importance of what each of us expresses by saying or thinking, “I exist.” Thus, for example, in Book 2 of the dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine seeks to show how it can be made clear, and by ‘made clear’ he seems to mean ‘proved,’ that God exists. But as his starting point for that ambitious project he asks his interlocutor in the dialogue, Evodius, whether he, Evodius, exists. “Or are you, perhaps, afraid,” he goes on, “that you are being deceived by my questioning?” Augustine adds, as if to reassure Evodius, “But if you did not exist, it would be impossible for you to be deceived” (2.3.7.20).

Augustine encourages Evodius to erect a number of conclusions on his unshakable conclusion that he himself exists. “Since it is clear to you that you exist, and since this would not be clear to you unless you lived,” Augustine points out, “it is also clear to you that you are alive.” He adds, “And this third point is also clear: you understand” (2.3.7.21). When Evodius agrees that these truths are clear to him, that is, have been proved to his satisfaction, Augustine lists the conclusions that Evodius has so far agreed to:

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- (1) I exist.
- (2) I live.
- (3) I understand that I exist and that I live.

On these three foundation stones, each certified by Evodius from his own first-personal point of view, Augustine invites him to reconstruct a skeletal account of the nature of the world, and eventually, a proof of the existence of God. Implicitly, Augustine invites readers of his dialogue to follow along and reconstruct their own account of the world, and, eventually, to accept their own proof of the existence of God. We shall return to Augustine's proof of the existence of God in chapter 10.

Other chapters to follow will bring out other philosophically interesting lines of reasoning in Augustine, most, although admittedly not all, of which are informed by a first-personal point of view in philosophy. Thus Augustine recognizes from this point of view what in modern philosophy is called "the problem of other minds" – the problem of how one can be assured that there are other minds in addition to one's own. So far as I know, he is the first philosopher to bring up this problem. Appropriately, Augustine also proposes a solution to the problem of other minds. His thinking on these matters will occupy chapter 7.

The account of time Augustine offers in Book 11 of his *Confessions*, perhaps his most widely admired contribution to philosophy today, is inconceivable apart from a thoroughly first-personal point of view. That topic will occupy us in chapter 9.

Augustine's account of the meanings of words in his dialogue *The Teacher*, and his thoughts about language acquisition in his *Confessions*, are both written from the speaker's or learner's point of view. His account of language acquisition, as we shall see, rests on an assumed recollection of what it was like for him as an infant to learn his first natural language. And his explanation of how we learn the meanings of new words aims to take seriously, in a philosophical way, the apparent limitation that each of us, as language learners, has no direct access to the mind of our teacher. We shall consider some of these issues in chapter 4.

The fact that we have dreams poses interestingly philosophical problems for Augustine. Thus he tries to respond to the old skeptical question "How do I know that I am not now dreaming?" More surprisingly, he also concerns himself with the question of what moral responsibility, if any, one bears for the actions of one's dream self. Augustine seems to be preoccupied especially with the sexual activity he has dreamt having. But the moral question about responsibility for the acts of one's dream self is, in fact, perfectly general. His concern could hardly arise for him in the way it does unless he considered himself actually *to be* his dream self, rather than a mere spectator of the dreams. He sees himself as

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isolated epistemologically from all other beings except God. These matters will be discussed in chapter 8.

Augustine offers several arguments for soul–body, or mind–body dualism. His most interesting argument for the dualism thesis rests, not on the difference between the idea of a mind and the idea of a body, as in Descartes, but rather on something else. His reasoning has to do with his conviction that nothing bodily need be present to a mind that is, nevertheless, fully present to itself. (See chapter 6.)

Augustine tells us that it was a work of Cicero’s, now lost, that first turned him onto philosophy. Cicero not only awakened in Augustine the desire to seek philosophical wisdom; he also introduced him to philosophical skepticism. As we shall see in chapter 3, Augustine’s response to skepticism itself takes a strikingly first-personal turn.

I have already pointed out reasoning in Augustine’s *On Free Choice of the Will* that is remarkably similar to Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am.” Chapter 5 focuses on two additional passages in Augustine that display this same sort of reasoning. But, as we shall see, the role of such reasoning in Augustine is rather different from its role in Descartes.

It is not, however, just the philosophical problems Augustine recognizes, or the solutions he offers to those problems, that find their basis in his first-personal orientation. It is also the literary form of some of his most important works that takes this point of view. Thus his *Confessions*, which is the first important autobiography in Western literature, takes the literary form of an extended prayer to God. Since, as Augustine supposes, God already knows what is in the heart of the person praying and God never answers back, except in quoted verses of Scripture, the *Confessions* is actually a self-revelation that readers are allowed to, as it were, “overhear.”

Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, another work of great originality, takes the literary form of a dialogue. Yet the participants in this dialogue are not two different human beings, but rather Reason and the Soul. So, again, we have a work that reveals the self to the self. Interestingly, the Latin word *soliloquium* seems to have been coined by Augustine himself by putting together the Latin word for ‘alone,’ *solus*, and the word for ‘speak,’ *loquor*.

I do not mean to suggest that Augustine’s only claim to philosophical distinction is his innovative resolve to do philosophy from his own singular point of view (with, of course, the implicit invitation to each of his readers to do the same thing, individually, for themselves). It is an exaggeration, but an excusable exaggeration, to say that Augustine was the father of modern philosophy of religion. Anyone who takes a course in the philosophy of religion in a college or university today can reasonably expect that the course, whatever else it covers, will at least take up these four topics: (1) Faith and Reason; (2) Arguments for the Existence of God;

(3) the Problem of Evil; and (4) the Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will. As we might expect, Augustine's discussion of each of these topics bears some important relation to the thought of some earlier philosopher. But Augustine's way of presenting and discussing these problems is so close to the way they get introduced in a modern course in the philosophy of religion that passages from his writings can easily be used in an introductory philosophy class today. I take up these topics in chapters 10, 11, and 12. I have included a chapter on Augustine on wanting bad things (chapter 13) to show how Augustine's view of the dark side of human motivation anticipates modern thinking and breaks with a tradition inaugurated by Socrates and Plato. I have included a chapter on Augustine on lying (chapter 14) to show how he initiates the philosophical discussion of the perplexities that plague any attempt to understand truthfulness, a topic largely neglected in classical Greek philosophy. Then there is a final chapter on Augustine on happiness (chapter 15), which, I hope, makes interesting connections both with Aristotle and with British empiricism.

Augustine is widely recognized as a great theological dogmatist. He delineated three important Christian heresies and in this way did as much as any single person to define Christian orthodoxy. He was therefore one of the greatest theological dogmatists of all time. At the same time he found some of the doctrines he defended, and the concepts in which they are expressed, philosophically perplexing. His sensitivity to philosophical perplexity makes his way of doing philosophy unmistakably Socratic. This Socratic side to his thinking is something I try to bring out as we go along.

Augustine is widely recognized to be a great theologian. That recognition is entirely appropriate. But Augustine is not so widely recognized today as an important philosopher. I hope this book will make a modest contribution toward correcting that imbalance.

### further reading

Lynne Rudder Baker, "The first-person perspective: a test for naturalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998): 327–48. This article offers a refreshing perspective on the importance of the first-person point of view in philosophy.

### notes

- 1 Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 2 See, e.g., his letter to Colvius, November 14, 1640, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, tr. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2: 159–60.