

From *Dubitatio* to *Securitas*: Augustine's *Confessions* in the context of uncertainty*

Oscar VELÁSQUEZ, Santiago de Chile

That there is a knowledge that makes man good, and that virtue might somehow be taught, has been normally considered to be one of the anthropological principles of Platonism. Now, the access to actual virtue passes through the knowledge of truth but the final objective of life is supposed to consist in the perfection of the soul, that is virtue. Once purified, the soul unites with the divine. This seems to be in a general way the theoretical frame which supports the account of *Confesiones* VII, VIII, in relation to the vicissitudes of Augustine's conversion. Theoretical knowledge of truth nevertheless should lead man to virtuous actions if it is to prove its inner efficacy, and that is precisely what is at stake: vain would be a long journey toward the truth if it should not lead in the last end to a redeeming goodness. For this reason Augustine, at the end of book seven, says (27): 'It is one thing from a wooded summit to catch a glimpse of the homeland of peace ... It is another thing to hold on to the way that leads there' (Saint Augustine, *Confessions Translated with an Introduction and Notes* by H. Chadwick (Oxford, 1991); all the English quotations of the *Confessions* are from the same translation). In these circumstances, what seems to be at stake is not mainly the intellectual certainty (*certitudo*) about truth, but it is also an existential assurance (*securitas*), which for Augustine is, in the last analysis, in Christ and his Grace. And this *certitudo* is experienced by Augustine as a freedom from anxiety. This achievement has in the *Confessions* a concrete history, which reaches its climax in the well-known scene in the Garden.

In order to dissolve his state of uncertainty, Augustine's inquisitive soul needs to overcome doubt, which appears to him as a condition of uncertainty with regard to putting truth into practice, that is, an inner doubt in respect to action. In this situation, we can imagine why the previous state of intellectual certainty in relation to truth, however

* I wish to thank Professors Beatriz Kase and José Montserrat i Torrents for very helpful comments and suggestions.

important it may be deemed, increases the disquieting effects of his uncertainty with respect to a virtuous Christian life, continence being the most valued of virtues for him. Now, this situation allows little manoeuvring space: to accept the speculative truthfulness of Platonism, nevertheless denying its capacity of truly transforming the soul. In other words, to turn down one of the most fundamental tenets of Platonism, namely, that virtue is a knowledge that makes man good. This is what Augustine demonstrates in different ways when he refers to the absence of charity and the necessity of humility, and the subsequent inability of Platonism to discern and distinguish 'between presumption and confession, between those who see what the goal is but not how to get there, and those who see the way ...' (VII, 26). Through this criticism Augustine might perhaps have rejected the efficacy of Platonism; nevertheless, his insistence in the apparent inability of theoretical truth alone to conduce to virtue did not force him to abandon it, but rather to pursue it on the way to the acceptance of the Christian faith, especially to the acknowledgement of original sin and the existence of Grace. Now I will briefly develop some points in relation to the issue of truth and action in the *Confessions*.

Ponticianus went home and Augustine was left to himself (VIII, 18). The struggle is now in his inner house (*rixa interioris domus meae*), soon a voice in the garden will come *de uicina domo*. Truth is at present clearly in conflict with Augustine's habit; Ponticianus' accounts had set in motion a sequence of external events which will lead to the scene in the Garden, which echoes his *aegritudo animi*. This state is related to his consciousness of his hesitation, of wills in conflict (VIII, 23), which produces fluctuation in a soul which accuses itself of not breaking free from its bonds. He feels at the moment unable to force himself to accept continence (VIII, 25-27). There was the doubt, the hesitation to act. Thus Augustine 'racked by hesitations, remained undecided': *cunctabundus pendebam* (VIII, 27). From here on the motions, sounds, gestures, sensations, feelings are more important than ever, and if Plato permits, the Garden could be the religious equivalent of the Cave. But setting aside the extemporaneous, first the tears take Augustine away from Alypius and draw him to the innermost part of the Garden (VIII, 28), where the theme of weeping recurs, in contrast to what he said of the books of the Platonists: 'non habent illae paginae ... lacrimas confessionis' (VII, 27). We can now compare the voice heard 'from the nearby house' with the previous statement 'et clamasti de longinquo', when he felt far away from God, 'in the

region of dissimilarity'. That was the occasion when he finally said, 'I heard in the way one hears within the heart, and all doubt left me' (VII, 16): that was possible because having been admonished to come back to himself, he could then measure, so to speak, the proximity of a God still distant. Now, in the Garden, all is nearer; as in the Cave, beyond the *bagatelles* (ϕλουαριαί *Rep.* VII 515d; cf. *nugae nugarum*, VIII, 26, *nugarum murmura*, 27) one is 'nearer to reality and turned toward more real things' (*Rep.* 515d). In the Garden all is either heard, seen or read. That is *tolle, lege*. First, it is evident that the phrase has not an obvious sense for those who do not know the context, the combined circumstances, the sequence of the words. Augustine doesn't know their context, and he wonders if the words are about a children's game; and the main problem is, I think, that Augustine simply ignores both the context of those two imperatives and their grammatical complements. They could correspond, for the sake of illustration, to what Aristotle would consider as things 'without combination' (Aristotle *Categories* 1^a 16: ἀφευ συμπλοκῆς as 'man' or 'runs'); although as a verbal form, 'no part of it signifies something by itself' (*Poetics* 1457^a 15; cf. *De Interpretatione* 16^b 6-7, 16^b 19-25). In these circumstances, the important thing is how they sounded to St Augustine and how he understood them (we leave aside for the present the *Sessorianus* and its reading *de diuina domo*), because it is precisely here where Augustine's acts of reading reach the highest point. From the *Hortensius* on, books and lectures were moulding the route of his life. It is God who 'through a man of monstrous pride' brought to Augustine some books of the Platonists (*procurasti mihi*, VII, 13); an initial variant of the coming *tolle, lege*. After receiving them Augustine starts reading; *et ibi legi* is from now on a very recurrent phrase.

In the Garden *tolle* has, in my opinion, an independent (though consecutive) meaning from *lege*. Augustine at that very moment is lying on the ground under the tree where he has thrown himself, so that even he doesn't remember well how he did it (VIII, 28). If it is so, *tolle*, as an expression without combination, being in a way 'a sign of things said of something else' (Aristotle *De Interpretatione* 16^b 7) and interpreted as coming by divine agency (*diuinitus interpretans*), could mean 'you lift', 'you raise', 'you rise' (would there be perhaps an echo of the last word of Plotinus?). To lift what? We do not know — and he didn't know either— but perhaps this word suggested to him something like 'raise yourself up', or 'hearten your soul'. 'Take' or 'pick up' is not in any case the most common

sense of *tollo*, unless it would correspond to something which is picked up from the ground; moreover, the book is not there under the fig-tree: it was perhaps 'on top of the gaming table' (*supra mensam lusoriam* VIII, 14), where Ponticianus had previously left it. With a terseness peculiar to Caesar, Augustine says that Ponticianus *tulit, aperuit, invenit* <*apostolum Paulum, inopinate sane*>. In response now to his own interpretation, Augustine himself, once he checked 'the flood of tears', says accordingly, 'I stood up' (*surrexi*). If he stopped weeping it was, I think, because of the comforting meaning which he granted to the word *tolle* which harmonized so well with his state of physical dejection.

A few lines above, in VIII, 19, he has used the same verb *tollere* with a similar sense. At the end of those intense experiences, Augustine leaves Alypius behind and goes to cry in the further corner of the garden, next to the fig-tree. Now comes *lege*. That Augustine interprets this imperative as an invitation to read is plain, this is exactly what he does next. To read the text Augustine must go back to that place where he had been sitting until recently with Alypius in the *hortulus*: 'So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting'. The book is there, and again Augustine states three consecutive actions: 'I picked up, opened, and read'; it was St Paul, Romans XIII, 13.

The feelings expressed by Augustine after his encounter with Ponticianus reveal sincerity. I am puzzled nevertheless by my perception of a degree of imbalance between the process of the mind which finds the truth and the route he has recently covered in his quest for perfection. In both cases Augustine was prompted by books, by readings which urge, by circumstances which admonish. The truth is revealed to him as an inner light, and the strong radiance of its rays made him tremble with love and awe (VII, 16); but now in the Garden the sensual reverberates everywhere, and the processes of reasoning take the form of 'a profound self examination' which drags and gathers in the sight of his heart all his misery. He now hears voices which he has to interpret, and reading, rather than being the beginning of movement, represents its climax. Without giving to *tolle, lege* a purely supernatural sense, 'Augustin en reconnaît le caractère insolite' (A. Solignac, *Les Confessions* 1-VII (Paris, 1980), p. 549).

The explanation gleaned by Augustine follows a series of stages, because he interprets *tolle, lege* there as a divine injunction to raise, to pick up, open and read the book of the Apostle, which is next to Alypius; he has to turn his eyes to the *capitulum*, that is, the

brief section at the top of the page. That phrase somehow contains a signal of God's will. All this goes beyond the ordinary rational processes; fortunately, the final sentence in the text does not say '*certitudo*' but *securitas*, that is to say freedom from anxiety: 'At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. And all shadows of doubt were dispelled' (VIII, 29): which does not rest upon rational certainty alone.

Artículo publicado en *Studia Patristica* Vol. XXXVIII, Papers presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1999

St Augustine and his Opponents

Other Latin Writers

Edited by M. F. Wiles and E. J. Yarnold, Peeters Leuven 2001, pp. 338-341.