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## CONSCIOUSNESS AND INTROSPECTION IN PLOTINUS AND AUGUSTINE

Suzanne Stern-Gillet

### I. *Introduction*

Philosophers of mind and philosophical psychologists no longer care to rely on introspection as a method for investigating the human mind. From the early years of the twentieth century, introspection has gradually disappeared from the methods favored by serious philosophers and psychologists. This fading away is the object of William Lyons' well-known 1986 book, *The Disappearance of Introspection*.

Curiously, if introspection has all but disappeared from the armory of philosophers and psychologists, it has survived as an exegetical category. It continues to be used routinely in accounts of Descartes' epistemology, it is unquestioningly applied to Augustine's *De Trinitate* and *Confessions*, and it regularly slips from the pen of practically anyone who writes on Plotinus' concept of soul, theory of dual selfhood or, indeed, mysticism. More curiously still, the evaluative import carried by introspection as an exegetical category varies considerably. When it is used of Descartes, it is almost invariably derogatory. When it is applied to Plotinus and Augustine, it tends, by contrast, to be merely descriptive, although there has lately been a tendency to interpret these authors' so-called reliance on introspection as a sign of praiseworthy modernity.

Admittedly, the evaluative variations registered in the use of introspection as an exegetical category can partly be traced to differences between the philosophical traditions to which the exegetes themselves profess allegiance. While Cartesian scholars, in the Anglo-Saxon world at least, tend to work within the analytical tradition, students of Plotinus and Augustine, by and large, work outside it. In

analytical circles, if perhaps not always elsewhere, introspection tends to have a bad press.

Such evaluative discrepancy, however, cannot wholly be explained by rival philosophical allegiances. It has deeper, more respectable, roots in the philosophies of Plotinus and Augustine themselves. I shall here argue that Plotinus' 'turn within' (*epistophē*) and Augustine's *confessio* bear witness, in their different ways, to a practice that differs significantly from introspection, at least if the term is taken in the sense that it has had since its introduction into the vernacular of English and French and, slightly later, into the technical vocabulary of philosophy and psychology. Plotinus' concept of consciousness, I shall contend, is inherently inimical to the practice of introspection. In the more complex case of Augustine, my claim will be that, while the self-authenticating conception of mental states, as developed in the *De Trinitate*, renders introspection otiose, the *Confessions* contain two different models of what may be called introspection. Of these two models, the first, which I shall call confessional introspection, closely matches our own notion. The second, which I shall label contemplative introspection, differs greatly from it. So considerable, in fact, are the differences between the two that it might be tempting to speculate that Augustinian contemplative introspection is a Christianized reinterpretation of Plotinus' mystical ascent. A temptation to be resisted.

When scholars describe Plotinus' psychology as introspective, and apply the blanket term of introspection to various writings of Augustine, what exactly are they claiming? What exactly am I denying, or seeking to qualify, when I challenge their claims? As a preliminary to the detailed exegetical arguments that form the bulk of this paper, I shall outline briefly what I take to be the common understanding of the term 'introspection' and seek to unpack the theoretical assumptions and presuppositions that are built into its use. To avoid begging the question in favour of my own thesis, I shall take the term in as wide a sense as is compatible with the aim of exegesis. Furthermore, I shall assume throughout this paper that scholars who use the concept of 'introspection' to interpret Plotinus and Augustine are putting forward substantial exegetical claims, as opposed to tossing out a word that has become drained of philosophical significance through overuse.

## II. *Introspection: preliminary remarks*

It is a strangely unacknowledged fact that there are two conceptions of introspection at work in recent and not so recent philosophical literature

The first conception is *investigative*.<sup>1</sup> To introspect, in this sense of the word, is to engage in an activity which consists in directing one's attention inwards in a deliberate attempt to observe and/or to record one's own mental states and operations. The intentional objects of introspection, to which it is thought to provide direct access, include sensing, feeling, judging, supposing, inferring, imagining, willing and remembering. Like most activities, introspection need not be continuous; while we all engage in it from time to time, some people do so more often than others. Introspection is conative in nature; it cannot be guaranteed unfailingly to succeed in so far as some mental states may never be fully apprehended or even be brought to the light of consciousness at all. Furthermore, introspection, although enjoying a privileged access to its data, is nonetheless fallible in so far as its grasp of mental states cannot be assumed to be unfailingly accurate.

As a rule, introspection so conceived is undertaken for the purpose of gaining knowledge of one's own private and singular self. Its data, therefore, are subjective. Yet, it may be claimed, they need not be irremediably subjective in so far as extrapolation from one's own case to that of others is sometimes possible. After all, we know what *it is like* to be a human being even if we do not know *what it is like* to be a bat. It does not seem unreasonable, therefore, to assume that our own mental states, as accessed introspectively, do not wholly differ in kind from the mental states of other human beings.<sup>2</sup> From this, it would appear to follow that the data of

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<sup>1</sup> For this conception of introspection, see, e.g., Armstrong, D.M. (1964) and Lalande, A. (1991).

<sup>2</sup> In 'What is it like to be a Bat?' (1979: 172) Thomas Nagel writes: 'There is a sense in which phenomenological facts are perfectly objective: one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other's experience is. They are subjective, however, in the sense that even this objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to

introspection, although they are, strictly speaking, private to the introspecting subject, may nonetheless yield information on the inner mental states of other human beings. If this is so, the cognitive scope of introspection can go beyond the self of the introspecting subject to reach the selves of those who are relevantly similar. Such indeed may well have been Wordsworth's view when he wrote of the:

‘... fear and awe

As fall upon us when we look *into our minds, into the mind of man.*<sup>3</sup>

More current in the philosophical literature is what may be called a *transparent* conception of introspection.<sup>4</sup> This conception comes as a direct offspring of Ryle's attack on Cartesianism in *The Concept of Mind* (1949). According to a conception of the mind that Ryle diagnoses as paradigmatically Cartesian, mental data are, by definition, ‘self-intimating’, ‘incapable of being delusive’, and therefore, strictly speaking, ‘incorrigible’.<sup>5</sup> This ‘phosphorescence’ conception of the mental, as he calls it, Ryle presents as a direct corollary of a prevalent category mistake which consists in theorizing the mind and its operations as the inner counterparts of the body and its activities. At the source of this category mistake, which he famously dubbed ‘the dogma of the ghost in the machine’, Ryle identified the view that:

... mental processes are conscious... in the sense that their intimations of their own occurrences are properties of those occurrences and so are not posterior to them. Next it is supposed that in being conscious of my present mental states and acts I know what I am experiencing and doing in a non-dispositional sense of ‘know’; that is to say, it is not merely the case that I could, if occasion demanded, tell myself or you what I am experiencing and doing, but that I am actively cognizant of it. Though a double act of attention does not occur, yet when I discover that my watch has stopped, I am synchronously discovering that I am discovering that my watch has stopped; a truth about myself is flashed or shone upon me at the same moment as a truth about my watch is ascertained by me. (p. 160)

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be able to adopt his point of view – to understand the ascription in the first person as well as in the third, so to speak.’

<sup>3</sup> *The Recluse*, Book I, lines 791-93; my italics.

<sup>4</sup> Gerson (1997: 160-61) calls this kind of introspection ‘self-reflexivity’ or, in the manner of the author of the *Liber de Causis*, *reditio completa*.

<sup>5</sup> Ryle (1949: 158).

One might have expected Ryle to conclude at this point that the phosphorescence conception of the mind removes the need for introspection. However, the polemical intent of his book, which is to discredit any claim that the inwardness of mental states requires a *sui generis* method of investigation, prevents him from taking so simple a step. Instead, he offers an uncharacteristically tortuous argument. He first notes the extent to which the deliverances of Cartesian consciousness differ from introspection, as ordinarily conceived, namely as an intermittent, conative and heuristically motivated undertaking. Ryle's next move is to contend that the practice of introspection, however theorized, cannot but be parasitic upon a 'phosphorescence' conception of the mental. Indeed, he remarks, such are the limits of human attention that we can never synchronously grasp the contents of our mind as a whole. Although we may be able at any one time to introspect *both* the contents of our mind *and* our act of introspecting them, we could not possibly carry on introspecting *ad infinitum* an ever-increasing number of introspecting acts. It would appear, therefore, that some mental states are *de facto* unintrospectible and that introspection is not the royal road into the mind that the adherents of the dogma of the ghost in the machine claim it to be. Irresistible though this conclusion appears to be, they yet resist it – or so Ryle claims. To obviate the deficiencies of human attention and thereby to save the epistemic credentials of introspection, they appeal to the phosphorescence conception of the mental. Calling upon the self-intimating nature of mental states, they contend, so Ryle claims, that all mental operations - including acts of introspection – are synchronously present to consciousness. From this, they find themselves entitled to conclude that introspection does give a complete and reliable access to the mind. But, Ryle objects, their argument is muddled since it derives a factual statement from a definitional fiat. Far from being a *bona fide* investigative enquiry, he concludes, introspection only masquerades as one.

If mental states are not synchronously present to the mind, and the transparent conception of introspection has to be jettisoned as costly and superfluous, then how can we account for the common experience of 'catching oneself' engaged in a mental activity such as daydreaming, imagining or planning ahead? As examples of retrospection, comes Ryle's reply. Unlike introspection conceived in the Cartesian manner, retrospection, so Ryle contends, retrospection is a genuinely investigative and therefore epistemically respectable process. Because it does not come hand in

glove with a concept of the mental as self-intimating, recollection need not involve privileged access. Its intentional data, although they may be private, are recollected in the same manner in which overt or public actions can be recollected. Recollection, therefore, is fallible and corrigible, at least in principle, if not always in practice.<sup>6</sup>

Is Ryle's attack on introspection as biting as he believes it to be? Could Cartesians counter it? While these two crucial questions cannot concern us here, two less crucial aspects of Ryle's adversarial account of introspection directly pertain to the present inquiry. So influential was the anti-Cartesian stance of *The Concept of Mind* that present-day philosophers often take it as axiomatic that introspection consists in receiving the self-intimating data of our mental states and operations.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Ryle's claim that retrospection differs in kind from introspection does not appear to have received much attention. The examination of some well-known Augustinian texts in section IV below will provide an opportunity for putting these two Rylean positions to the test.

It might be retorted at this point that the use of 'introspection' and 'introspective' for the purpose of exegesis need not take account of either of the above two theories. Philosophers, in their capacity as scholars and historians, or so it might be claimed, are entitled to use terms in their casual everyday sense. The answer to this objection is twofold. Firstly, in view of the fact that 'introspection' is a recent addition to the vernacular<sup>8</sup>, scholars and historians who are mindful of the risk of anachronism would do well to use it sparingly and in full awareness of the connotations of the word. This is all the more advisable since the term now bears the connotative weight of debates that have been at the forefront of both philosophy and psychology for almost two centuries. Secondly, 'introspection', even in its casual everyday use, is not an innocent term. It does carry some presuppositions, of which the following four may be singled out: (a) mental states are inner states; (b) a significant proportion of mental states are conscious states, potentially if not actually, and the function of introspection is to raise those that are latently conscious to full consciousness; (c) introspection gives us direct access to our mental states; (d) mental states are mostly private and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 166-67.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., McGinn (1991: 63-64) and Dennett (1991: 67).

<sup>8</sup> It is first recorded in English at the end of the seventeenth century and in French in the eighteenth century.

thus, in the form in which they are apprehended, accessible only to their owner. Of the two theoretical conceptions of introspection distinguished earlier, therefore, it is the investigative conception that corresponds more closely to the casual, pre-theoretical, notion outlined above.

Even if one takes the concept of introspection to presuppose no more than these four theoretical preconceptions, the question still remains open as to whether, or to what extent, they can be shown to be operative in the writings of Plotinus and Augustine.

### III. *Plotinus*

Καὶ εἰ χρὴ παρὰ δόξαν τῶν ἄλλων τολμῆσαι τὸ  
φαινόμενον λέγειν σαφέστερον.... (IV. 8 [6]. 8. 1-2)

Consciousness of one's own mental states, if not always of one's own self is a necessary condition of introspection. Any serious enquiry into a philosopher's views on introspection must therefore start with a study of the concept of consciousness that underlies these views. Unfortunately, Plotinus' views on consciousness, and the terminology that he uses to express them, are exceptionally complex, as is testified by the divergent views of scholars who have attempted to deal with this particular aspect of his philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, the present context does not require that this complex issue be addressed in all its many facets. Accordingly, the sole focus of the remarks that follow will be the level of consciousness that the human soul in its embodied condition can have of its own activities of perceiving and thinking.

Embodied human souls, Plotinus appears to have held, are not unfailingly conscious of their own states and operations: they can perceive and think without being conscious of doing so. As long as the soul remains associated with the body, consciousness, whether simple or reflexive, tends to remain an intermittent and indirect phenomenon of our psychic life.

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Arnou (1921), Warren (1964), Smith (1978), and Violette (1994).

From the evidence scattered throughout the corpus, we can be reasonably certain that such was indeed Plotinus' view in respect of the soul's thinking (*noein*). Whether or not he considered that consciousness of sensation, too, is intermittent and indirect is another matter. It may well be that he took less interest in sense perception than in the higher psychic functions, and for this reason never worked out a systematic terminology to discuss sensation, sense perception and therefore consciousness at the level of the sensitive soul. As a result, the textual evidence is unclear.<sup>10</sup> In what follows, I shall proceed on the assumption that Plotinus believed that not all sensations reach consciousness. Admittedly, this assumption is no more than an exegetical hypothesis. It is, however, a probable hypothesis for, as will presently be seen, it has strong, although not entirely conclusive, textual backing.

Plotinus' general doctrine of the impassibility (*ἀπάθεια*) of the soul *qua* soul ultimately grounds his views of the *modus operandi* of consciousness in the life of embodied human souls. As a manifestation of the hypostasis Soul, the soul in us, which of itself is extensionless, cannot receive directly the affections (*πάθη, παθήματα*) that outside stimuli cause in the body with which it is associated.<sup>11</sup> Under the heading of outside stimuli, Plotinus includes not only sense objects (*τὰ αἰσθητά*), which are located outside the body, but also such somatic affections as take place within the body (V.3[49]. 2. 4-5). Since impressions and affections are powerless to enter consciousness by themselves, the question arises as to how Plotinus can account for sense perception, whose discriminative judgment presupposes consciousness of its object. How is the gap between affection and sense perception bridged? How does our soul in its entirety come to register the affections (or impressions) received by its sensitive faculty (*τὸ αἰσθητικόν*)? At what point does the discriminative power in the soul bear on, and judge of, such affections (or impressions)?

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<sup>10</sup> As already noted by Blumenthal (1971: 68 sqq) and as testified by a very long entry in Sleeman and Pollet (1980), αἴσθησις is a protean term in Plotinus. From even a cursory examination of its semantic range, it appears that, apart from denoting sensation, αἴσθησις may also denote (1) the capacity to sense (e.g. IV.7 [2].15. 6); (2) a sensory affection unaccompanied by awareness of itself (e.g. IV.4 [28]. 8. 9-12); (3) a sensory affection accompanied by awareness of itself (e.g. IV.9 [8].2. 16-18); (4) awareness of one's appetitive and emotional states (e.g. IV.4 [28] 17. 11-13 and III.6 [26]. 3. 4-6); and finally, in a transferred sense, (5) awareness of one's higher mental states and operations (e.g. V.3 [49]. 14. 10-13 and V.1 [10]. 12. 6-7).

<sup>11</sup> For this fundamental point of Plotinian doctrine, see, e.g., III.6 [15]. 1-4.

These questions are not easily answered, if indeed they can be answered at all. Luckily, the present context does not require a full-scale examination of the issue, and the tentative suggestion, to be offered presently, will have to suffice. Before setting it out, however, let us consider the prior question as to whether Plotinus believed that the gap between an affection, which the body receives, and a perceptual judgment, which the soul forms, is unfailingly bridged. The evidence of IV.4 [28].8. 9-13 would suggest that he did not. It seems, in other words, that Plotinus allowed for the possibility that some sensations never reach consciousness<sup>12</sup>:

Ὅταν γὰρ μηδὲν διαφέρῃ, ἢ μὴ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἢ ὅλως ἢ αἴσθησις ἀπροαιρέτως τῇ διαφορᾷ τῶν ὁρωμένων κινήθεισα, τοῦτο αὐτῇ ἔπαθε μόνη τῆς ψυχῆς οὐ δεξαμένης εἰς τὸ εἶσω, ἅτε μήτε πρὸς χρείαν μήτε πρὸς ἄλλην ὠφέλειαν αὐτῆς τῆς διαφορᾶς μέλον.

(When what is perceived makes no difference, or the perception is not at all personally relevant, but is provoked involuntarily by the difference in the things seen, it is only the sense-perception which has this experience and the soul does not receive it into its interior, since the difference is not of concern to it either because it meets a need or is of benefit in some other way.)<sup>13</sup>

In these lines we find the clearest, but by no means the only, expression in the corpus of the view that sensations (*αἰσθήσεις*) are not always conscious.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I use this circumlocution to avoid the expression ‘unconscious sensation’ which, so it may be argued, is as anachronistic as it is philosophically crude. From the evidence of the passages listed in footnote 13 below, it appears that Plotinus was too subtle a thinker to have made consciousness into an either/or affair. As E.R. Dodds (1960: 5) famously put it:

... the ego-consciousness never covers the whole of this continuum: it fluctuates like a spotlight, embracing now a higher and now a lower sector; and as it fluctuates it creates an apparent, but not a real, break between the part of the continuum which is within the circle of consciousness and a part which is outside it. In ordinary life there fall below it the functions of the physiological life-principle which directly controls the body: not only are processes like breathing and digestion outside of conscious control and, normally, of conscious awareness, but Plotinus recognizes (anticipating Leibniz) that there are sensations which do not reach consciousness unless we specifically direct attention to them (4, 4, 8; 5,1,12).

The fact that I would choose different passages to substantiate the same claim in no way diminishes my agreement with Dodds.

<sup>13</sup> Quotations from the *Enneads* are in A.H. Armstrong’s translation, with occasional slight modifications.

<sup>14</sup> In IV.3 [27]. 28. 9-13, Plotinus notes that the appetitive soul can be moved by visual sensations without being able to identify the sensations in question. In VI.7[38].6. 8-9, Plotinus co-ordinates *αἰσθήσεις* and *ἀντίληψις*, thereby implying that they are two different stages in the process of sense perception. In IV.9 [8].2. 16-19, Plotinus makes a clear distinction between *πάθημα* and *αἰσθήσις*. Large sea animals, he writes, may not be able to take notice of minor sensory affections received in one

As for the precise manner in which bodily affections are conveyed to the whole soul in us, Plotinus is often content to leave it undescribed. At other times, he identifies as imagination the agency through which the affections of sense become conscious. To reach consciousness, bodily affections need to be transposed in a mode accessible to the soul as a whole. This, he sometimes suggests, is effected by the imagination (*φαντασία* or *τὸ φανταστικόν*), a messenger bringing tidings of what is received in one faculty of the soul to the soul in us in its entirety. At the lowest level, imagination, upon receiving the impressions of sense (*τὰ αἰσθήματα*), translates them into incorporeal images or mental representations (*φαντάσματα* or *φαντασίαι*) of the objects of sense which have affected the sense organs. Through the intermediary of such mental images, the soul becomes conscious of the sensory affections occurring in the body which it animates, and is able to store them in memory. Indeed, since Plotinian imagination is the terminus of perception<sup>15</sup>, there is a moment at which imagination and memory become practically, if not conceptually, undistinguishable. Through the mental representations produced by the imagination, the soul may then also become aware of itself as the recipient of sensory affections.<sup>16</sup> Depending upon the source and the nature of the messages that it carries from the body, the influence of imagination upon the soul as a whole may be beneficial or harmful. Such influence is useful in practical life. It is positively beneficial whenever it induces the soul in us to advert of the traces of the intelligible forms that it carries within itself (V.3 [49]. 2 - 3). It is harmful whenever it tends to distract the soul from its higher functions by inducing it to concentrate upon the easier and superficially more attractive data of sense (IV.8 [6]. 8. 16-22). As we are about to see, it is Plotinus' view that, on balance, the harm caused by the imagination outweighs the good.

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of their parts. This is taken as evidence that '... it is not necessary, when one part is affected (*ἐνός τινος παθόντος*), for a clearly impressed perception (*αἰσθησις*) to reach the total whole'. In this passage *αἰσθησις* denotes (conscious) sense perception, while in IV.4 [28].8. 9-13, quoted above, it designates a sensation that fails to reach consciousness. Although the discrepancy shows the extent of Plotinus' terminological imprecision in the matter, it does not affect the substantial issue. Whether Plotinus uses *αἰσθησις* or a cognate of *πάθημα* to refer to the imprints left by external objects upon the sense organs, he holds the view, as expressed in *most* texts where he addresses the issue, that human beings are not unfaithfully conscious of the affects received by their sense organs. Let it, however, be acknowledged that, occasionally, Plotinus expresses the opposite view. In V.5[32]. 1. 15-18, for instance, he writes that *αἰσθησις* comprises awareness (*ἀντίληψις*) of the image of the external object apprehended. This tangled issue is handled in various ways by Blumenthal (1971: 76-78), Emilsson (1988: 86-87) and Gurtler (1988: 140-41 and 160-63), even though they are in broad agreement.

<sup>15</sup> IV.3 [27]. 29. 22 – 26.

<sup>16</sup> I.4 [46]. 10. 5-10.

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On the issue of consciousness at the level of the higher soul, Plotinus is more forthcoming and clearer than he is when dealing with the same issue in relation to the sensitive soul. Awareness of the discursive and contemplative activities carried out in the higher parts of our soul, he unequivocally holds, is conditional upon the intervention of the imaginative faculty. It is therefore indirect. It also prone to suffer lapses since, as far as Plotinus is concerned, *phantasia* functions erratically. How does he establish these conclusions?

In IV.3[27]. 30, at the start of his extended reflections on memory, Plotinus addresses the question as to how we can remember our acts of intellection (*διανοήματα*). Since we cannot remember that of which we had no consciousness, an investigation into memory requires that a serviceable concept of consciousness be at hand. To account for this psychic function, Plotinus, once again, presses imagination into service as an intermediary between the higher (undescended) part of the soul and the whole soul, which is the seat of consciousness. A go-between is needed, since acts of intellection are essentially unextended and partless (*ἀμερής*), while the nature of imagination is to form images. First, so he suggests somewhat enigmatically, any such act of intellection, which is hidden within the intellectual part of the soul, has to be ‘unfolded’ (cf. *ἀναπτύξας*) by *logos*, a term taken by translators<sup>17</sup> to refer here to verbal expression but which, following Blumenthal, I should be more inclined to understand as ‘the discursive sequel to an act of intuitive thought’.<sup>18</sup> Once unfolded, the act of intellection – or rather, one assumes, its content – can be transposed by the imagination into quasi-pictorial images. The soul as a whole then receives these images ‘as if in a mirror’ (IV. 3[27].30.10), and it is at this point that it may become conscious of what had so far been ‘hidden unobserved within’. But, as Plotinus is quick to point out, consciousness does not invariably ensue:

<sup>17</sup> See Bréhier (1927); McKenna (1956, revised); Armstrong (1984) and Brisson (2005).

<sup>18</sup> Blumenthal (1971: 88).

... even though the soul is always moved to intelligent activity, it is when it comes to be in the image-making power that we apprehend it. The intellectual act is one thing and the apprehension of it another. (IV.3 [27]. 30. 11-14)<sup>19</sup>

Such failure of communication between the higher soul and the soul as a whole in us stems from the nature of imagination. Erratic in its operation and unreliable in its effects, Plotinian imagination is ‘a stroke of something irrational from outside’, to which the soul is susceptible ‘because of what in it is not undivided’ (I. 8[51]. 15. 18-19). Imagination by its very nature is more receptive to the messages of the lower soul than to those of the higher soul. Imagination is prone to anchor the soul in the here and now, to the extent that such consciousness as it affords the soul comes at the likely price of a loss of contemplation. Alternatively, it may happen that disease or psychological malfunction unsettles the imagination, going so far as to hamper or even disable it altogether. At such times, higher mental states simply cannot reach consciousness:

... when this [sc. the kind of thing in us which mirrors the images of thought and intellect] is broken because the harmony of the body is upset, thought and intellect operate without an image (ἄνευ φαντασίας), and then intellectual activity takes place without a mind picture (οὐκ οὔσης τῆς νοήσεως φαντασίας). (I.4 [46]. 10. 17-21)<sup>20</sup>

In the intellectual life of incarnate human souls, as Plotinus saw it, consciousness is a precarious phenomenon.

Such precariousness, he held, is not to be deplored since neither our moral nor our intellectual well-being need suffer from lapses of consciousness:

One can find a great many valuable activities, theoretical and practical, which we carry on both in our contemplative and in our active life even when we are fully conscious, <and> which do not make us aware of them. (I.4 [46]. 10. 21-24)

Thus someone engaged in the activity of reading ‘is not necessarily aware that he is reading, least of all when he is concentrating’ (24-26). Since the reader cannot but be

<sup>19</sup> For an earlier and plainer expression of the same point, see IV.8 [6]. 8. 6-11.

<sup>20</sup> See also V.1 [10]. 12. 1-12.

aware of the content of what he is reading, Plotinus' meaning cannot but be that what the reader is unaware of at the time of reading is that he himself is engaged in the act of reading. The same point applies to our moral life. Of all practical activities, none is more valuable than the practice of the virtues. Yet it, too, need not be adversely affected by the absence of self-awareness: 'the man who is being brave [is not necessarily aware] that he is being brave and that his action conforms to the virtue of courage' (26-27). Surprising as it may seem to the modern reader of Plotinus, who tends to value consciousness in and for itself, Plotinus did not rate highly its contribution to the life of embodied human souls. His insistence on the occurrence, in both simple and reflexive consciousness, of lapses such as the above amply shows that, in his outlook, consciousness is but an epiphenomenon in the life of embodied souls.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, he went further than that and claimed that consciousness of our mental states can even become an indirect cause of the self-alienation of the soul:

... the souls which are partial and of a part have also the transcendent element, but they are occupied with sense-perception, and by their faculty of conscious apprehension (*ἀντίληψις*) they apprehend many things which are contrary to their nature and which grieve and trouble them, since what they care for is a part, and defective, and has a great many alien and hostile things around it ... (IV.8 [6]. 8. 16-21)

As Plotinus was later to emphasize, contemplative activities, too, stand to suffer from being brought to consciousness:

Conscious awareness, in fact, is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness; only when they are alone are they pure and more genuinely active and living.' (I. 4.[46] 10. 28-31)

How can this be so? Is the higher soul, in which these activities are carried out, not our very self? How can becoming conscious of our higher self, which is our true self, enfeeble the activities of that self? Plotinus' answer comes in the lines that

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<sup>21</sup> The fact that passages in which the role of consciousness is played down are spread out, chronologically, throughout the *Enneads* prompted Armstrong to remark, in a comment to his translation of IV.3 [27]. 30, that 'Plotinus seems to have held this doctrine consistently throughout his writing period.'

immediately follow: ‘... when good men are in this state [i.e. a state of purity] their life is increased, when it is not split out into perception, but *gathered together in one in itself* (ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ ἐν ἑαυτῷ συνηγμένον)’ (31-33). In Plotinus’ Greek, συναγειν (to gather together) is often commendatory. It is especially so when, as in the above lines, it designates a dynamic process of unification of psychic elements that had previously been discrete and dispersed. By contrast, in such a conception, self-awareness and self-dispersion tend to go together.

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The study of Plotinus’ conception of consciousness in perception and thought should, by now, have led one to suspect that introspection is unlikely to play a significant role in his psychology.

Of the two conceptions of introspection distinguished earlier, the transparent conception of introspection, which is based on the phosphorescent conception of the mental, is clearly inapplicable to Plotinus’ theory of the soul in so far as, in the *Enneads*, the operation of consciousness is consistently presented as intermittent. As for the investigative conception of introspection, it is, at least in principle, compatible with the psychology of the *Enneads*. Yet it is rendered almost nugatory by Plotinus’ displacement of consciousness from the centre of our mental life. Dependent upon the image-making faculty, consciousness tends to lead the soul outwards, to what is other than itself (V.3[49]. 2-3). To the extent that the data of consciousness constitute the natural hunting ground of investigative introspection, its practice would be liable to focus the attention of the scrutinizing agency onto mundane inner states while leaving acts of contemplation unobserved within. Ill suited to scan the depths of the (incarnate) soul, introspection might even have the unfortunate consequence of encouraging the natural bias of incarnate souls towards the world of sense.

It is no wonder therefore that Plotinus denied, forcefully albeit occasionally, that self-scrutiny should properly be accounted a function of the soul at all. ‘Does ... this reasoning part of the soul itself return upon itself?’, he asks in the course of a complex

argument on the nature of self-knowledge. His answer is unequivocal: ‘No, it does not’ (V.3 [49]. 2. 23-24 ). ‘Why do we not give self-thinking (τὸ νοεῖν ἑαυτό) to this part, and finish with the subject?’, he asks in the following chapter, this time with a rare touch of petulance. Again, his answer comes clear and curt: ‘because we gave this part [τὸ λογιζόμενον] the task of observing what is outside it and busying itself with it’ (3. 15-17). Admittedly, self-knowledge and self-awareness are worlds apart in Plotinus. All the same, it is significant that he should characterize the sphere of the soul as ‘outside’ and resort to the dismissive πολυπραγμονεῖν (‘to busy oneself’) to describe its specific activities.

Plotinus’ construction of the dichotomy between inner and outer casts further doubt on the applicability of introspection to the life of the soul, as he conceives it. From his doctrine that body lies in soul - not soul in body<sup>22</sup> – it can already be inferred that his version of this dichotomy is unlikely to match our own, in which the concept of introspection is grounded. Although this is too large and too intricate an issue to be discussed in the present context, a few of the more pertinent dissimilarities between the Plotinian distinction and our own may be noted. Firstly, being ensouled is, for Plotinus, no sufficient qualification for being ‘inner’ since the animated body, and all that pertains to it, is nevertheless classed as outer. Thus, most unexpectedly from a modern point of view, emotions such as shame, fear and lust, although brought about by the soul, are said to be, not in the soul, but ‘in the other structure’, namely the body, (III. 6[26]. 3.10-11). Of emotional disturbances and their external causes, we become conscious through the agency of the imagination, which forms mental images of their nature and likely effects upon the soul-body compound. Far from holding such mental images to be a suitable object for inner observation, Plotinus dismisses them as inappropriate because foreign to what is the best part in us. He urges the soul to free itself from these images as a first stage in a process of purification aimed at separating (χωρίζεῖν)<sup>23</sup> the soul from its bodily ‘other’:

... the purification of the part subject to affections is the waking up from inappropriate images and not seeing them, and its separation is effected by

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g. IV[27].3. 9. 36-51.

<sup>23</sup> As Plotinus is at pains to explain in V.1[10]. 10, the vocabulary of ‘separation’ does not refer to spatial or physical separation but to a process of dissociation, carried out by the soul upon itself, from the more compromising effects of its association with a body.

not inclining much downwards and not having a mental picture of the things below. (III.6 [26].5.22-25)<sup>24</sup>

Plotinus' suggestion, as expressed in the above lines, that we should move closer to our true self by distancing ourselves from the soul-body compound, which is the seat of consciousness, imagination and emotion, would seem to make it clear that he did not identify the domains of the inner and the private. To the extent that the private domain is mentioned at all in the *Enneads*, it is so only negatively, as a set of concerns to be overcome and transcended.<sup>25</sup> Does conversion not require of the aspiring knower that he progressively discard the personal and evanescent data which crowd the gates to his inner life? Only by so discarding (or ignoring) such data will he progress towards the goal of the ascent. From an aspiring knower he will become an actual knower by apprehending that which other knowers also apprehend, namely the eternal Forms in Intellect. As for the ultimate goal, he will have reached it when, having overcome all particularity, he has become, albeit fleetingly, an 'other self' to the One (V. [10]. 11.10.).

Notwithstanding the superficial similarities between them, Plotinian conversion (*epistrophē*) and investigative introspection are therefore different processes. The superficial resemblance lies in the fact that both require an introvertive turn. The differences stem, in the main, from their respective conceptions of the goal of the introvertive turn. Similarities and differences are well brought out in the following lines:

If ... there is to be conscious apprehension (*antilepsis*) of the powers which are present in this way, *we must turn our power of apprehension (antilepsis) inwards, and make it attend to what is there.* It is as if someone was expecting to hear a voice which he wanted to hear and withdrew from other sounds and roused his power of hearing to catch what, when it comes, is the best of all sounds which can be heard; so here also we must let perceptible sounds go (except in so far as we must listen

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<sup>24</sup> As Gerson (1994: 150] well said: 'The subject of emotional states is an image of the true ideal self which, in its disembodied state, is incapable of emotional experiences.'

<sup>25</sup> From the evidence of the *Vita Plotini* I, it appears that Plotinus did not set much store by the private domain in his own life either. On the famous episode of the portrait, which Porphyry presents as typical of Plotinus' attitude in this matter, see Stern-Gillet (2000).

to them) and keep the soul's power of apprehension pure and ready to hear the voices from on high. (V.1[10].12. 12-20)

Although Plotinus is here advising us to turn our power of apprehension inwards, it is not for the purpose of seeking to apprehend the data of consciousness. Though the data of consciousness are necessarily within us, they are, even so, a manifestation of the process of dispersion that had led audacious and narcissistic souls to forget 'their father'. To be reacquainted with themselves in a state of intelligible perfection, incarnate souls must by-pass everything that ties them to the world of sense. To apprehend the higher realities in themselves and thus to come within hearing of the 'best of all sounds', the aspiring self-knower must withdraw from the many fleeting images and subjective impressions that crowd his private world at any single moment of his incarnate life. He must silence the inner voice of what has been called 'the normal, investigative self'<sup>26</sup>. Only so might he come within hearing of the purer sound of voices which are in him, although they are not in any way private to himself or subjective.

Unlike introspection, the ascetism of attention that is described in these lines has ethical and intellectual prerequisites built into it. Ethically, it is conditional upon the re-orientation of desire that is fostered by the practice of the virtues, both civic and intellectual. Ultimately, however, it is philosophical understanding that will motivate the soul to undertake the voyage that will return her to her origins and real home in Intellect. That such was Plotinus' view emerges from the fact that his persuasion of the soul, which constitutes the focus of the eleven chapters that precede the above-quoted lines, takes the form of a long and carefully articulated lesson in metaphysics. It does not take the form, on his part, of an introspective report in which he would expect his audience to recognize elements of their own experience. Together, ethical virtues and philosophical understanding can, so he thought, prepare the soul for that which is both its goal and its destiny, namely self-transcendence into Intellect. The prize for achieving that goal is perfect and effortless self-knowledge, a knowledge in which knower and known coincide.

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<sup>26</sup> The expression is taken from E.R. Dodds, who used it in the course of a discussion of a paper by H.-R. Schwyzer, "'Bewusst" und "unbewusst" bei Plotin', *Les Sources de Plotin, Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique*, V, Vandœuvre-Genève, Fondation Hardt, 1960, pp. 385-86.

Because investigative introspection is grounded in the very duality that Plotinian conversion aims at annihilating, it cannot apprehend what lies deepest within the soul. This is especially so since, according to Plotinus, we cannot truly apprehend what lies within the soul unless we become that which we apprehend and thereby cease to be in a position to practice introspection. Such is the clear message of one of the most spiritual passages in the *Enneads*, to which I turn in conclusion. In V.8 [31]. 10-11, Plotinus combines his favorite metaphor of vision with his version of the dichotomy of inner and outer. Having devised, in the preceding chapter, a pedagogic exercise aimed at helping his audience to form a mental image of the intelligible realm, Plotinus now turns to the description of the mental state of those who are capable of contemplating sun-like Intellect. There are two such groups.

The first group consists of those whom he celebrates as beloved by god. Rather than seeing only this or that particular aspect of the Intelligible realm, they behold it in its entirety. So suffused are they with its radiance that they have become merged in the object of their vision. They no longer merely gaze upon it. Intellect, which was the object of their striving, is no longer different from, and outside, them:

... there is no longer one thing outside and another outside which is looking at it, but the keen sighted has what is seen within, although having it he for the most part does not know that he has it. (V.8[31].10. 35-37)

The disappearance of the inner-outer distinction marks the state of unity with themselves which such contemplators have achieved (11. 4). It follows that unity with the higher principles, a unity which in Plotinus' scheme of things is unity with oneself, is conditional upon loss of self-awareness. However, because incarnate souls are in time, their achievement of self-unity – with its concomitant loss of self-awareness – can never be more than temporary.

The second group comprises those who, unwilling to lose 'the advantage' (*κέρδος*) of self-consciousness, seek both to be and to see the object of their vision, whether synchronously or sequentially. Plotinus' disparaging diagnostic of the state of mind of one of their number is unequivocal: 'If he sees it [the vision] as something different, he is not yet in beauty, but he is in it most perfectly when he becomes it.' Far from self-awareness being a good in itself, Plotinus continues, it is comparable to a diseased condition which produces heightened self-awareness of its own symptoms.

By contrast, ‘the quiet companionship of health’, a condition of well-being and repose, has no need to bring itself to the attention of those who enjoy it. In like manner, Plotinus concludes, ‘we understand ourselves better when we have made our self-knowledge one with ourselves’ (11. 20-21).

For Plotinus, self-awareness, as promoted by what later became known as introspection, is not a path to self-knowledge.

#### IV. *Augustine*

Where then should he see himself, if not  
within himself? (*DT*, VIII.6)

Augustine invented the inner self, subjectivity and the first-person standpoint.<sup>27</sup> So goes the currently received interpretation. To warrant the accolade of ‘received’, an interpretation must have the general approval of the many and the wise and, to that extent, be presumed to have verisimilitude on its side. Whilst not wishing altogether to dispute the merits of this particular received interpretation, I shall here argue that it stands in need of qualifications and distinctions.

If the claim that Augustine provided ‘the earliest account of introspection’ is regularly rehearsed, it is not always justified by appeal to the same aspects of his philosophy. Philosophers interested in epistemology and working within the analytical tradition tend to appeal to Augustine’s view, as expounded in the *De Trinitate*, that mental states are conscious and self-intimating by definition.<sup>28</sup> Philosophers with other interests or working outside the analytical movement, by contrast, ground Augustine’s introspective credentials in the fact that he was the first writer in our tradition to have turned inwards to scrutinize his own private mind (or soul), and reported what he there found. In the exegesis of Augustine’s works,

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<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., E.R. Dodds (1927-28: 460), C. Giasson, (1988: *passim*), C. Taylor (1989: 127-143) and P. Cary (2000). For a critical assessment of such claims and a sober re-statement of them, see Madec (1988).

<sup>28</sup> So, e.g., W. Lyons (1986: 1-2).

therefore, we come across the same two concepts of introspection which are distinguished and analyzed in section II of this paper. To what extent are these two concepts of introspection truly exemplified in the Augustinian corpus?

As seen above, it was Gilbert Ryle who first associated introspection with what he called the ‘phosphorescence theory of the mental’, according to which mental data are ‘self-intimating’. He traced this conception to Descartes. However, he would have been better advised, exegetically speaking, to trace it to Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, for there can be no doubt that Augustine, long before Descartes, presented the mind as transparent to itself. Does this view commit Augustine to introspection? Let us turn to some canonical passages in the *De Trinitate*.

Augustine holds, firstly, that the mind is incorporeal:

... the nature of the mind is a substance, and certainly not a corporeal one, that is, it does not occupy a less extension of place with a less part of itself, and a greater with a greater part... (*D.T.*, X.7.10)<sup>29</sup>

The body, by contrast, is defined as ‘that of which a part is less than the whole in the extension of place’ (*D.T.*, X.7.9).

Augustine holds, secondly, that mental states are conscious by definition:

...every mind knows and is certain concerning itself.... who would doubt that he lives, remembers, understands, wills, thinks, knows, and judges? For even if he doubts, he lives; if he doubts, he remembers why he doubts; if he doubts, he understands that he doubts; if he doubts, he wishes to be certain; if he doubts, he thinks; if he doubts, he knows that he does not know. (*D.T.*, X.10.14)

In these lines, Augustine asserts what Plotinus had denied, namely that whenever we perceive or think, it is a matter of definition that we are conscious of doing so. Although we can mis-identify the object of our perception, or make logical errors in our thought processes, we cannot fail to be conscious that, at the time of perceiving or thinking, we are perceiving or thinking. Translated into modern terminology, his view is that the human mind has immediate, non-representational, knowledge of

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<sup>29</sup> All quotations from the *De Trinitate* are in S. MacKenna’s 1961 translation, as revised by G. Matthews’ in his 2002 edition of *On the Trinity, books 8-15*.

itself.<sup>30</sup> By this Augustine does not mean that the mind cannot ever be in error about its own nature. As he knew well, the mind can be deceived by its own attachment to sensible things, to the point of mistaking them for its own self. From such confusion, he wrote, ‘arises its shameful error, that it can no longer distinguish the images of sensible things from itself, so as to see itself alone’ (*D.T.*, X.8.11). The remedy, he advises, is to fix the attention of one’s will upon the mind itself so as to disengage it from all associative images of external things. How, one might ask, will the befuddled person dissociate his mind as it is from his mind as he mistakenly takes it to be? Because Augustine holds that there is ‘never a time when it [the mind] did not know itself’ (*ibid.*), he does not see this as a major difficulty. Indeed, he writes, what the befuddled person will find at the end of his quest - should he be minded to undertake such a quest - is ‘that of which he was not thinking’, not that which ‘he did not know’ (*D.T.*, XIV.5.8). Although Augustine describes the error as ‘shameful’, the guidance he offers to the befuddled person takes the form, not indeed of ethical advice, but of an extended philosophical exposé on the nature of the mind.

As the exposé unfolds, it becomes clear that Augustine holds, thirdly, that the mind ‘is present to itself *as a whole*’ in each single act of cognition. Although this view may have been a borrowing from Aristotle and/or an adaptation of the Neoplatonist concept of intellect (*nous*), Augustine provides his own, original, explanation for it:

... it is absurd to claim that it [the mind] does not know as a whole what it knows. I do not say that it knows wholly, but that what it knows, it knows as a whole [i.e. not as or by a part of itself]. When it, therefore, knows something of itself which it cannot know except as a whole, it knows itself as a whole. But it knows itself as knowing something, nor can it, except as a whole, know anything. Therefore it knows itself as a whole. (*D.T.*, X.4.6)

For all its metaphysical abstruseness, Augustine’s view that the human mind can wholly apprehend itself in a single act of cognition had, from his point of view, notable advantages. It enabled him to by-pass the difficulties traditionally associated

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<sup>30</sup> As already noted by Matthews (2002: XIX).

with the Socratic injunction ‘Know thyself’.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, on most other conceptions of the mind, full self-knowledge would appear to be impossible on the ground that the mind would inevitably be split into a part that observes and a part that is observed, and that the observing part would escape its own grasp by this very fact. No investigating agency can investigate itself. On most conceptions of knowledge, therefore, the duality between knowing subject and known object presents a stumbling block in the path of self-knowledge properly so-called. In so far as Augustine held that, in cognition, the knowing mind is identical with what it knows, he could sidestep this stumbling block. The second advantage of the view that the mind can apprehend itself as a whole is that it renders self-knowledge immune to the infinite regress that would otherwise be generated by any attempt, at any one time, at introspecting one’s mind as a whole. But for the phosphorescence conception of the mental, as Ryle indeed saw, introspection would inevitably involve an infinite regress since it would require of the introspecting subject that he attend to an ever-increasing number of mental acts. Since the Augustinian self-knower apprehends his mind completely, and since he is conscious not only of every cognitive act that he performs but also of the fact that it is he himself who is performing them, no infinite regress is generated.

What is the place of introspection in such a philosophy of mind? More appositely, is there a place for introspection in such a philosophy of mind? The question is pertinent because the phosphorescence conception of the mental would appear to make introspection otiose: what need is there to introspect if mental states inevitably present themselves to their owner, all present and correct, whenever he happens to be conscious?

Admittedly self-knowledge, as it is theorized in the *De Trinitate*, does present some features that are characteristic of introspection. To begin with, Augustine stresses that a mind that would know itself must *turn inward*. Clearly, to turn inward is to take the first step towards introspection. Secondly, in Augustine’s classically dualistic outlook, this movement of introversion is to be followed by concentration upon what is within the mind (or soul) to the exclusion of what is without.

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<sup>31</sup> These difficulties had long been recognized by the time Augustine came to write the *De Trinitate*. See, e.g., Plato, *Charmides* (164 D-169 C), Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* (VII, 310). In *Ennead* V.3 [49].1, Plotinus presents his ‘solution’ to this problem.

Concentration upon inner states, too, is a defining feature of introspection. Lastly, Augustine, the first philosopher in the Western tradition to have formulated the ‘other minds’ problem and to have ‘solved’ it by the argument from analogy, held the view that first person reports of mental states differ from third-person reports.<sup>32</sup> While one’s own mental states are accessed directly - each mind has a privileged access to itself - the mental states of others are accessed indirectly. Again, this distinction is built into the very notion of introspection, so much so that psychologists could once hope that introspection would transform private awareness into public knowledge.

So, do the movement of introversion, the focus on inner mental states and the privileged manner in which they are accessed make introspection an integral part of the philosophy of mind expounded in the *De Trinitate*? If it is argued that they do, then the kind - or kinds - of introspection featured in that treatise differ fundamentally from the kind whose practice is described in the *Confessions*, in spite of the fact that the *Confessions* is built upon foundations that include the above three assumptions. If, on the other hand, it is held that introspection forms no part of the philosophy of the *De Trinitate*, then the reason would seem to be either that the phosphorescence theory of the mental renders introspection otiose or that introspection cannot be reduced to the reception of the data of consciousness. Whatever the reason turns out to be, it is significant that in the course of helping the befuddled mind to search for itself, Augustine never once suggests having recourse to what I have labeled in section II above ‘investigative introspection’<sup>33</sup>.

A parallel reading of the *Confessions* and the *De Trinitate* lets us see how profound are the dissimilarities between confessional introspection, conceived as the deliberate scrutiny of one’s own mental states, and the reception of the self-intimating data of consciousness. While the former is deliberate, conative and ethically charged, the latter is effortless and ethically neutral. Once the self-knower of the *De Trinitate* has effected the turn within and discarded extraneous associative images, he enjoys direct and immediate cognition of his own mental states. He does not need to toil at accessing his mind as it is in itself, which in any case he knows even when he is not

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<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., *D.T.*, VIII.6 and *Conf.*, I. 6 and I. 8.

<sup>33</sup> See above pp. 3-4. This point is also noted by Matthews (2002:XX), who refers to this kind of introspection as ‘introspective self-scrutiny’.

actively attending to it. Never can he miss his target, or misinterpret his data, or be biased. The self-authenticating character of mental states precludes the need for effort or vigilance on his part in the process of self-scrutiny. Neither need he guard against self-deception and other forms of mendacity. The phosphorescence theory of the mental renders introspection immune to such intellectual and moral failings.

Confessing what he was, and is, within<sup>34</sup>, by contrast, proved a toilsome task for Augustine. The reason, as he spelled it out, did not lie in the humbling gravity of the failings that he had to confess but rather in the difficulties involved in getting to know his own mind (*animus*, X.15) and, more generally, in plumbing the depths of human conscience (*abyssus humanae conscientiae*, X. 2.2). As he wrote:

O Lord, I am working hard in this field, and the field of my labors is my own self. I have become a problem to myself, like land which a farmer works only with difficulty and at the cost of much sweat. For I am not now investigating the tracts of the heavens, or measuring the distance of the stars, or trying to discover how the earth hangs in space. 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? (*Conf.*, X, 16, 25, tr. R.S. Pine-Coffin)

The difficulties recorded in these lines are undoubtedly those of investigative introspection. If the confessing self is to succeed in raising his mental states to consciousness, Augustine suggests, he must be prepared to devote toil and effort to the task. He must not take success for granted. But why should success prove so elusive in this case? After all, the closer the enquirer is to the object of his enquiry, Augustine notes rhetorically, the easier his task should be. Yet, it is not so. Although the object of enquiry is as close to the enquirer as could be, this very proximity seems only to exacerbate the difficulty of the enquiry.

It is intriguing to place Augustine's surprise at the difficulties of introspective self-scrutiny in the context of his epistemology. In the *De Trinitate*, as noted above, Augustine professes that the mind enjoys immediate and full knowledge of itself. In the *Confessions*, by contrast, as we have just seen, he writes at length of the mind's

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<sup>34</sup> Adapted from 'volunt ergo audire confitente me *quid ipse intus sim*' (*Conf.* X.4.5).

opacity to itself. Could this striking contrast between the two works be due to a shift that occurred in his epistemology between the writing of the *Confessions* and that of the *De Trinitate*? This is unlikely since the Cassiciacum writings already more than hint at Augustine's late epistemology. To mention but one example, the view that mental states are self-intimating already featured in the strategy that Augustine deployed against the skeptics of the New Academy in one of his earliest dialogues.<sup>35</sup> Augustine's own confessional practice as well as the theoretical positions that he maintained throughout his writing life amply show that, in his view, the arduous process of self-scrutiny cannot be assimilated to the automatic reception by the mind of its own self-intimating mental states. Alternatively, could Augustine's difficulties in introspecting his own mind be due to the fact that the *Confessions* are focused on his past affective life and present spiritual quest, rather than on his purely intellectual concerns? Although true, this cannot be the whole truth since, in the *Confessions*, Augustine expresses puzzlement at the difficulty of understanding not only the passions and movements of the human heart (IV. 13.22) but also the human mind itself in its entirety (X. 15).

Could Augustine's difficulties, lastly, be due to the fact that confession is an exercise not so much in introspection as in retrospection, and that the recollection of past mental states presents its own problems? *Prima facie*, this explanation would seem more plausible than the previous two, although, as we shall see, it will ultimately fail to account, on its own, for Augustine's difficulty in scrutinizing his own mind. There is, Augustine knew, one obstacle that the practice of retrospection could never overcome: some past experiences simply cannot be re-enacted. Although we can, as he noted, recall the presence in us of certain emotions, we cannot, strictly speaking, re-live them.<sup>36</sup> While we may, for instance, recollect that, at a certain time in the past, we were angry, we cannot, at the time of recollection, feel again the very anger that we once experienced. Recollection of emotion, in other words, is propositional rather than affective.

This particular complication apart, however, the difficulties of retrospection, as Augustine records them, are fundamentally similar to those of introspection. Indeed,

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<sup>35</sup> *Against the Academicians*, 3.11.26.

<sup>36</sup> *Conf.*, X.14.21 and 22.

as testified by his choice of metaphors to describe his attempts at retrospective self-scrutiny, his memory did not always yield its contents easily.<sup>37</sup> If, echoing St Paul<sup>38</sup>, Augustine wrote that ‘no one knows what goes on inside a person except the spirit of that person within him’, he nevertheless acknowledged that memory is fallible<sup>39</sup>. He also knew how seriously its operation could be jeopardized by self-deception:

... whatever discernment there is in me is shrouded by dismal darkness and hidden from my sight, so that when my mind questions itself about its powers it can scarcely trust any reply it receives. (X.32.48, tr. M. Boulding)

Clearly, in Augustine’s viewpoint, privileged access, which he held to be enjoyed by both introspection and retrospection, cannot guarantee either the accuracy or the reliability of memory.

In Augustine’s theory of memory, as developed in book X of the *Confessions*, a sharp cannot be drawn distinction between introspection and retrospection. Because memory is the faculty through which we retain the ever vanishing present and recall the past, it is the main integrating factor of our selfhood. Linking our present to our past, it enables us to project ourselves into the future.<sup>40</sup> It is our mind, our very self: ‘... profound, infinite complexity, what a great faculty memory is, how awesome a mystery! It is the mind, and this is nothing other than my very self’ (X, 17.26, tr. M. Boulding). Let us already take note of the paradox, to which we shall return, that in Augustine’s description memory, while being the self, is also said to exceed the capacity of the self. As he is led rhetorically to wonder in X.15: ‘is the mind then too narrow to contain itself?’ Suffice it for now to remark that retrospection, the very nerve of confessional practice, is the means through which Augustine brings back his past erring self to the forefront of his present consciousness. Retrospection, in other words, is what makes possible for him to scrutinize his past mental states from the

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<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., *ibid.*, X.8.12 and 13: memories come are lodged in ‘the fields and vast mansions of memory’ (*in campos et lata praetoria memoriae*), they are dug out ‘from remote crannies’ (*de abstrusioribus quibusdam receptaculis*), and ‘the huge repository of the memory, with its secret and unimaginable caverns’ (*grandis memoriae recessus et nescio qui secreti atque ineffabiles sinus eius*) keeps all impressions of sense.

<sup>38</sup> I *Cor.* 2.11.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, the famous description of forgetfulness in *Conf.* X.16.24.

<sup>40</sup> *Conf.*, X.14..

vantage point of his present post-conversion persona.<sup>41</sup> In Augustine's *Confessions* introspection and retrospection do slide into each other.

But why did both introspective and retrospective self-scrutiny, especially when bordering on the examination of conscience, prove so difficult for Augustine? To answer this question fully would require explaining why Augustine wrote the *Confessions*, a task that would lead us far beyond the present enquiry.<sup>42</sup> Let it only be noted here that Augustine combined a rationalist epistemology with a Christian conception of sin. He held that, all too often, human beings compound the burden of original sin by their personal sins. While all personal sins have the effect of occluding the God-given light of reason, the sin of mendacity is of especial relevance to the project of the *Confessions*. Mendacity in its various forms, from straightforward lies to hypocrisy and self-deception, Augustine believed, is best cured by self-scrutiny, followed by what he calls confession or the task of 'making truth'<sup>43</sup> from, and with, one's past and present being. Arduous and humbling though this kind of introspective self-scrutiny often is, it opens the self to the action of the divine physician of the soul. Augustine's belief in the power of investigative introspection, accounts for the advice he later gave his flock:

... there is nothing which anyone ought to consider more important than to fix his attention on himself, to learn his own case, to examine himself, to scrutinize himself, to search into himself, to discover himself...  
(*Sermon 72, On Almsgiving*, tr. D. Kavanagh)

In Augustine's outlook, therefore, confessional introspection is difficult to practice because of the particular function that it serves. The obstacles that it encounters are not so much epistemic as ethico-theological, stemming as they do from the sinful nature of human beings. The difficulties involved in this form of introspection show plainly that the reception of the self-authenticating data of consciousness in no way precludes the need for confessional introspection.

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<sup>41</sup> As O'Daly (2001: X.32) well said of this passage and 17.26: 'Augustine is ... directing the whole enquiry towards introspection'.

<sup>42</sup> This question is briefly addressed in my 'Augustine and the Philosophical Foundations of Sincerity', forthcoming, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> *Conf.* X.1.1 'veritatem facere'. For a commentary on this striking phrase, see O'Donnell (1992, vol. I: XVII-XVIII).

Confessional introspection, however, is no more than a propaedeutical cleansing of the soul. Its function is to purify the penitent soul and open it to the previously unheeded presence of God in itself. Yet, if God is present in the soul, He is also above it. This is the paradox mentioned earlier: while God is in our mind (or memory), our finite and time-bound mind (or memory) cannot circumscribe His infinite and eternal being. Time and again, in the *Confessions*, Augustine returns to this paradox. In one of his pithiest phrases ever, he apostrophizes the divine: *tu autem eras interior intimo meo, et superior summo meo* ('You were deeper within than my own deepest self, and higher than my own highest self', III, 6.11<sup>44</sup>). Elsewhere, in what may well be an adaptation of the Plotinian dichotomy of inner and outer, he writes: 'You were within and I was without, and this is where I was searching for you.' (*intus eras et ego foris et ibi te quaerebam*, X, 27.38, tr. M. Boulding, modified)

If the sinful self is a displaced self whose care is for external things, as these words suggest it is, then the aim of confession is a re-centering of the self so as to make it aware of the divine presence in the soul. Upon discovering the 'books of the Platonists', Augustine had a foretaste of this kind of inner vision:

These books served to remind me to return to my own self. Under your guidance I entered into the depths of my soul, and this I was able to do because your aid befriended me. I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the Light that never changes casting its ray over the eye of my soul, over my mind. It was not the common light of day.... It shone above my mind ... it was itself the light that made me ... (VII,10, tr. Pine-Coffin)

While the type of introspection outlined earlier is *confessional*, the kind of introspection described in these lines is *contemplative*. In Augustine's outlook, the fastidious scrutiny of one's sinful self frees the mind and enables it to rejoice in the contemplation, from within itself, of a presence superior to itself. Far from being reflexive, this kind of introspection takes God as its intentional object. It is the aim to which confessional introspection is undertaken.<sup>45</sup> As Augustine was to write in the *Retractations*:

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<sup>44</sup> This felicitous rendering is taken from O'Brien (1968).

<sup>45</sup> By calling contemplative introspection the aim to which confessional introspection is undertaken, I do not mean that, in Augustine's life, confession preceded contemplation 'in the order of time'. I mean

The thirteen books of my Confessions praise the just and good God for my evil and good acts, and lift up the understanding and affection of men to Him. At least, as far as I am concerned, they had this effect on me while I was writing them and they continue to have it when I am reading them. (II, 32)

While confessional introspection has much in common with the modern concept of introspection defined as investigation of one's inner self, contemplative introspection differs significantly from it. In contemplative introspection the individual self of the introspecting subject has been displaced from the focal position that it had occupied in confessional introspection. From object of the inner gaze, the penitent self has been demoted to being one of the myriad effects of the object of his quest. While the introspecting turn is performed in time, that which it seeks to apprehend is eternal. To come within reach of what lies deepest within, therefore, the self, as ordinarily conceived, has somehow to transcend the spatio-temporal limitations of the physical conditions of its own awareness. Although the eye of the mind may remain turned inward, the object that it seeks would not differ from one suitably disposed introspecting subject to another. God is not private to the seeker, nor can it be said that there is 'privileged access' to God, at least not in the sense that Ryle *et al.* give to this phrase. If Augustine, as we are regularly told<sup>46</sup>, invented the inner self, subjectivity and the first-person standpoint, it is important to note that it was ultimately in order to promote a form of contemplative, or mystical, introspection in which the self reaches beyond itself.

Having distinguished two kinds of introspection in the *Confessions*, we can now briefly return to the *De Trinitate*. Can the reception of self-intimating mental states be said to be a form of introspection, and, if it is, which of the two forms is it?

It should by now be clear that it involves neither form of introspection. To claim that it does so can result only from confusing cognitive states, such as perceiving and thinking, with psychological motives and conditions, such as vanity

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that confession comes first 'in the order of knowledge', as Aristotle would say (*Met. Z.1*, 1028a32-33). Admittedly, before confessing, one must have an notion, however vague, of what confession may make possible. The books of the Platonists gave that notion to Augustine.

<sup>46</sup> See note 27 above.

and self-deception. While the former, in Augustine's outlook at least, are self-intimating and indubitable, the latter tend to lie hidden and unobserved in a part of the mind that human beings mostly shy away from investigating. While, in Augustine's scheme of things, there is no need to turn inwards to be apprised of the content of one's own cognitive states, there is every reason to investigate the hidden springs of one's actions. Being self-intimating, cognitive states are received as they occur. Their reception is a formal feature of their very occurrence. Psychological states, by contrast, need to be retrieved from the depths to which human beings tend to relegate them. They cannot be retrieved unless the lucid (or penitent) self turns inwards, deliberately and actively, in an attempt to uncover what would otherwise stay hidden.

That the confusion should have occurred at all is, of course, unfortunate. That it should continue to prevail is a regrettable result of the compartmentalization of philosophical approaches and disciplines. As early as 1956, in an article published in *Mind* under the title of 'Consciousness and Evidence', M. Chastaing had shown, mostly by exegetical means, that the English *consciousness* is no exact match for the Latin *conscientia*, as it occurs in philosophical writings from Augustine to Descartes. In those writings, Chastaing argued, mental states, when expressed verbally in the first person singular, are states that are by definition self-intimating and therefore, *conscii* (conscious) by definition. Rather than an extraneous element that mysteriously grafts itself onto such states, consciousness is but an aspect of those states themselves. In such a conception, therefore, there is no need to investigate or to seek to prove the presence in oneself of mental states:

Since "to suffer", "to feel one's suffering" and "to know evidently one's own suffering" are all expressions which have the same meaning, the word "evidence" does not mean a testimony which proves the existence of my supposedly invisible suffering ... To say, then, that the truth of utterances, such as "I am in pain", "I am thinking", or "I am", is evident, is to say that it is senseless to ask for an enquiry, a trial and a judgment which would make it possible either to invalidate or to validate them. (p. 354)

Eight years later, the very same point was made by A.C. Lloyd in '*Nosce Teipsum and Conscientia*', an article which appeared in *Archiv für die Geschichte der*

*Philosophie*. The arguments that Lloyd deployed to show that the Augustinian (and Cartesian) concept of consciousness is a *formal*, not a *psychological*, concept of consciousness, owed more to logical analysis than to exegesis. But Lloyd's conclusion turned out to be identical with Chastaing's:

The proposition that I know I am sad (or know I hear) and the proposition that I am aware it is I who am sad (or hear) are *deducible* from the proposition that I am sad (or hear); such consciousness is part of the grammar ... of verbs of feeling and perceiving. (p. 188)

Unfortunately philosophers in the analytical tradition do not often concern themselves with the findings of historians of philosophy. In this, too, they follow Ryle's lead. And so it is that what he called 'the phosphorescence conception of the mental' continues to be mistaken, in certain quarters, for a species of introspection.<sup>47</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Plotinus and Augustine are poles apart on the issue of the role and the value of consciousness in our mental life. While consciousness is for Plotinus a contingent, indirect, and not especially valuable concomitant of the life of the incarnate soul, it is for Augustine an integral and important aspect of our mental and spiritual life since it ultimately enables us to find the God who is both within and above us. From these different conceptions of the contribution that consciousness makes to our life stem their respective attitudes to what has since become known as introspection.

Plotinus' movement of *epistrophē* (turning within), so I have argued, should not be assimilated to the modern conception of introspection. While the function of the Plotinian soul, 'the wanderer of the metaphysical world'<sup>48</sup>, is the ordering of the realm of sense, its destiny and goal lie with its originating principle in Intellect, whose

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<sup>47</sup> That Chastaing's article should have been published in *Mind* during Ryle's editorship testifies to Ryle's broadmindedness. Unfortunately, Chastaing's arguments do not appear to have made much impression on the author of *The Concept of Mind*. When, in the early seventies, I was working on a French translation of Ryle's work, I had the opportunity of consulting the author on a number of points. The Cartesian concept of consciousness, which is a direct descendant of Augustine's own, was not an issue over which Ryle reported having had second thoughts.

<sup>48</sup> In the famous formula of Inge (1928, vol. I: 203).

imprints she bears within herself. Paradoxically, so I have tried to show, introspection would be for the Plotinian incarnate soul an occasion to neglect her higher, undescended, nature. Instead of easing her return to Intellect, introspection would encourage the soul to concentrate on the immediate data of consciousness, as they come to her mediated by the body-bound faculty of imagination. Rather than help the soul to fulfill its destiny, which is to transcend its incarnate self, introspection would induce her to ‘forget the father’, as the famous Plotinian formula has it in V.1[10]. 1.1-2.

With Augustine, matters stand otherwise. In the *De Trinitate*, as seen above, Augustine presents consciousness as an inherently concomitant aspect of mental states. Such a commitment to a theory which Ryle would later label the ‘phosphorescence conception of the mental’ makes introspection redundant in the context of the *De Trinitate*. In the *Confessions*, by contrast, two proto-conceptions of introspection are to be found. Confessional introspection, a probing of the sinful self, is aimed at purifying the soul and preparing it to ascend to the divine, as it is to be found both within and beyond the self. The Augustinian ascent, however, unlike the Plotinian one, does not require of the soul that it abandon the body in order to fulfill its destiny and find its beatitude in the contemplation of the divine. Unlike Plotinus, in other words Augustine holds that the body-soul compound can overcome otherness. Through contemplative introspection, the creaturely self as a whole, in all its individuality and affectivity, is enabled to rejoice in its relation to God.

The two forms of introspection (or proto-introspection) that are described in Augustine’s *Confessions* had a long and intriguing after life. Contemplative introspection did not, as one might have expected it would do, turn out to be a direct ancestor of medieval mystical writings.<sup>49</sup> But it later surfaced in unexpected contexts, of which one only can be mentioned here. In seeking to meet the challenge of the Skeptics, Descartes, who had learned much from the philosophy of mind elaborated in the second half of the *De Trinitate*, adapted the description, in the *Confessions*, of the upward progress the divine from within the soul. Once secularized, Augustine’s ‘divine within’ served as Descartes’ anchor for grounding knowledge claims. As for

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<sup>49</sup> For an account of the disparity between Augustine’s concept of selfhood and the medieval notion of individuality, see, e.g., Bynum (1982).

Augustine's confessional introspection, which initially also seemed to suffer an eclipse of several centuries, we can speculate that it re-emerged later, in a secularized form, as the modern conception of introspection'. And so it would be that, by a curious paradox of the history of philosophy, confessional introspection, which, in Augustine's outlook, was a mere handmaid to contemplative introspection, became the only form of introspection that survived the invention of the word and the theory.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> This article is an expanded version of a paper given at the *Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* on March 16, 2006. An earlier version of the section on Augustine had previously been read at a conference on *Religious Emotions*, held at the University of Antwerp in September 2005. In both cases, I benefited from the discussion that ensued. In addition, I should like to thank warmly the friends and colleagues who took the trouble to discuss with me various aspects of the thesis of this paper: Luc Brisson, Louis Caruana SJ, Gary Gurtler SJ, John Kenney, Lawrence Moonan and, in his customary vigorous manner, Denis O'Brien. Lastly, I should like to record my gratitude to the anonymous referee for a careful and incisive reading of the penultimate draft of this paper.

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Colloquium 7: Attention Deficit in Plotinus and Augustine: Psychological Problems in Christian and Platonist Theories of the Grades of Virtue. Charles Brittain - 2003 - Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy 18 (1):223-275.details. Augustine in Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy. Plotinus argues that if self-consciousness is divided into subject-object relation then one will know oneself as contemplated but not as contemplating and no real self-knowledge obtains in this case. ...kara, who constitutes an (...) important representative of Advaita thought, points out that the self cannot know itself as an object because what is called an object to be known becomes established when it is separated from the self, the subject. Consciousness in Plotinus. Uploaded by Gilberto López González. Copyright: Attribution Non-Commercial (BY-NC). Following the terminological analysis I will attempt to show how consciousness functions within Plotinus' philosophy. The word "consciousness" may be used. 83 This content downloaded from 181." presented to the Johns Hopkins University in June. as for so many ancient and mediaeval writers. Here. referring to human awareness. and sunaisthesis. I think. we note the curious fact that we can be unaware of our bodies. It follows. by nature straddling appearance and reality. parakolouthesis. too. 2 A more complete statement of these essential notions may be found in my unpublished Within The Enneads , Plotinus claims all existence derives from an entirely immaterial and benevolent source which he calls the One. 1 At the same time, he also states matter corrupts that which is immaterial, and one should not understand it as being good. 2 Therefore, how can one state that Plotinus is being consistent when he claims that all things derive from an all-good One, yet bodies are defective in nature?