

Oneiric Foundations of Philosophy: Saint Augustine

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Abstract

The aim of my article is to highlight the way in which dreams have influenced or prefigured Saint Augustine's conversion to Christianity. Starting from the autobiographical writing *Confessions* Augustine is paradigmatic in developing what may be defined as “an oneiric autobiography”. In Christianity dreams have been associated with heresy being subject of demonic influence, in this sense, what is revealed in a dream should be treated with utmost caution. Augustine's perspective shows that dreams may have a different significance; they might also predict a future benign choice or path to follow, such as his conversion to Christianity. The way in which one will perceive the concept of dreaming will be radically shifted among Christian approaches due to Augustine's *Confessions*. Dreaming has never been more interesting after this.

Keywords: Saint Augustine, dreams, Christian philosophy, Neo-Platonism, conversion

Between the 2nd-4th centuries AD sleeping and dreams have represented the area confiscated by individual freedom. No one may abduct someone's right to dream (Le Goff 2014, 950-968; Le Goff 1991, 219). In Christianity, the dream has been sometimes associated with heresy, becoming in a certain way suspect, or even demonized. According to this reason, dreams have been “supervised” (Le Goff 2014, 950-968). This aspect has not hindered the development of an “oneiric autobiography”, the case of Augustine being in this sense paradigmatic. Before the 4th century AD the position of Christianity related to dreams indicates interest, anxiety,

incertitude. In the beginning, until the middle of the 3rd century AD, Christians are interested in dreams and they are related to conversion, to the contact with God, to martyrdom. In *Against Celsus* (*Contra Celsum* I, 46), Origen shows that many have been converted to Christianity as a result of dreams. In *On the testimony of the soul* (*De testimonio animae*) XLVII, 2, Tertullian agrees that the majority of people know God through visions, and Saint Cyprian understands through rapture the supreme form of dream, although later observes that between prayer and dream (sleep) there is an opposition. The idea is also present at Clement of Alexandria in *The Instructor* (*Paedagogus*) (II, 9) who reminds the saying of Paul on the permanence of prayer and vigil or watch (Romans 12:12); this is one of the reasons that has determined the association of dream with heretics. A first treatise on dreams is to be found at Tertullian (*De anima*, chap. XLV-XLIX) who names dreams *negotia somni* – activities of sleep, the dream representing an accident of sleeping and not a necessity. Released during sleeping of the external demands of the body, the soul discharges its own outputs, the dreams. In contrast to Homer, Aristotle and Epicurus, Tertullian believes that there are real dreams and offers a Christian interpretation of a threefold classification of dreams: dreams sent by demons, dreams sent by God and dreams that our own soul is sending itself according to different contexts (Le Goff 1991, 226).

As Jacques Le Goff observes, between the 4th-6th centuries AD something occurs that will be known as “the genesis of Christian oneirology” represented by authors like Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville. Briefly, this process has various steps: the generalization of dreams, the prohibition of predictions after dreams, the classification of dreams after origin, the demonization of dreams, the disparagement of dreams made through sexuality – Augustine having a significant contribution in this sense (Le Goff 1991, 230).

Augustine knows that dreams have powers. He refers to them especially in the letters to Nebridius and in *De Genesi ad litteram*. He admits that God may speak to men directly through the means of their dreams, but also that dreams may be a psychological or mental reflex of the person dreaming

them. Anyway, says Augustine, people dream what they need and not necessarily what they desire. After their purpose is fulfilled, dreams disappear. The ones that do not fulfill their purpose remain and keep an appearance of a hallucinating reality.

In *Confessions*, Augustine's autobiography is also an oneiric one. In his conversion, dreaming plays an essential role. It's about a prophetic dream that does not belong to him in an immediate manner. From the oneiric-autobiographical point of view, Augustine and Monica form a couple. The fact that he attributes his mother his first dream related to conversion highlights the importance of dreaming in his existence (Le Goff 1991, 232). Chapter XI from the 3rd Book of *Confessions* speaks of *planctus et somnium matris de filio*. Monica dreams that "she saw herself standing on a sort of wooden rule, and saw a bright youth approaching her, joyous and smiling at her, while she was grieving and bowed down with sorrow" (Augustine 1955, III, XI, 19). Monica was suffering at the time for Augustine as he was ill more with the spirit, than with the body. The young man from the dream "bade her rest content and told her to look and see that where she was there I was also. And when she looked she saw me standing near her on the same rule. Whence came this vision unless it was that thy ears were inclined toward her heart?" (Ibid.) The dream continues with Augustine as he was an adept of Manicheism in that period of time: And what was the reason for this also, that, when she told me of this vision, and I tried to put this construction on it: "that she should not despair of being someday what I was," she replied immediately, without hesitation, "No; for it was not told me that 'where he is, there you shall be' but 'where you are, there he will be'?" (Augustine 1955, III, XI, 20)

When Augustine was writing his *Confessions* he was already a Christian for 19 years. Thus, he had no doubt anymore: the young man from the dream of his mother was God, and the dream was a prophetic one.

In the year 383, Augustine goes to Rome and approaches skepticism, but finds it insufficient. This probabilism will be criticized by Augustine in *Contra Academicos*. He does not adapt to Rome. The prefect of Rome, Symmachus, a sympathizer of the Manicheans, helps him in achieving the job

as rhetoric professor in Milan. Augustine was 30 when he met Saint Ambrose. The first impression of this encounter is related in *Confessions* (V, XIV, 24): “while I opened my heart to acknowledge how skilfully he spoke, there also came an awareness of how truly he spoke”. The consequence will be a clear one: “I resolved, therefore, to become a catechumen in the Catholic Church – which my parents had so much urged upon me – until something certain shone forth by which I might guide my course.” (Augustine 1955, V, XIV, 25) The thing that attracts him the most on Ambrose is the allegorical method and, step by step, Christianity gains a place in the heart of Augustine. He reads Plato, what was translated from him at the time, Plotinus and Porphyry as they have been translated by Marius Victorinus. In a certain sense, Plato is the one who will prepare him to become a Christian, but also the one who determines the apparition of a void in his soul, a void that for the moment could not be filled. Through Platonism (and Neo-Platonism) Augustine has the revelation of the true God but not the means to rise himself towards Him. Plato contributed in Augustine’s knowledge of the true God, and Christ showed him the way (Augustine 1955, VI, X, 16-17) (Plato is for Augustine the occasion of Christ, not his cause). Also now he reads Plotinus, Books I and V of the *Enneads*, the only ones translated into Latin at the time. Augustine discovers in them the Logos defined by John the Evangelist in the Prologue of his Gospel, but he finds nothing about the Word that incarnated himself and became a Mediator between God and man. This Mediator is the one sought by Augustine and this is the one dreamed by Monica. He reaches again the Scriptures that he despised at the age of 19. He is now 32. Simplicianus, the spiritual father of Ambrose, makes him understand that philosophy is not a barrier for faith and Augustine will no longer be troubled by this perspective. He feels that the final crisis is near, the oneiric sum fruits. He is still off the beam; he still searches for the truth. “I will set my feet upon that step where, as a child, my parents placed me, until the clear truth is discovered. But where and when shall it be sought? Ambrose has no leisure – we have no leisure to read” (Augustine 1955, VI, XI, 18). Louis Bertrand says that from this reference to

Ambrose and from others that are to be found in *Confessions*, references that contrast the encomiastic passages addressed to the Bishop of Mediolanum, would result that if God used Ambrose to convert Augustine, it is possible that Ambrose in person did nothing or not that much in the direction of this conversion (Bertrand 1913, 120). According to others, Augustine's conversion is one exclusively related to philosophy and the biggest obstacle to surpass for the real religious conversion seemed to be the final renunciation of marriage. The problem is the following one: was Augustine a Christian in Cassiciacum (the place where he retired with Monica, Adeodatus and with his friends before the conversion)? Harnack asserts in commenting the *Confessions* that Augustine projects upon the hermit of 386 the feelings of the bishop that he was in 400 when writing this major work. Other two authors, F. Loofs and L. Gourdon, affirm that the solitary man living in Milan was not a Christian of the heart, but a Neo-Platonist. The scene of the garden was indeed a conversion, not to Christianity, but to philosophy. According to Gourdon the real Christian phase of Augustine does not begin until 390 (Portalié 1931, col. 2273). What does Augustine want from the Neo-Platonists? Nothing else than to harmonize their explanations with faith; insofar as in the philosophical dialogues from Cassiciacum we do not find a Platonist speaking, as Portalié may think, but a Christian or to a certain extent, both a Christian and a Platonist. For Augustine, at that time, the truth is only one, that of the Gospels, so that the error of Loofs and Gourdon is their attempt of discovering in the spirit of Augustine our modern distinctions. What is sure is that the intellectual pride is abolished in Augustine through the readings of Neo-Platonists and the dreams of his mother.

The conversion occurs in 386 and it is described in *Confessions* (VIII, XII, 29). A controversy arises when one has to establish how much of the story is a pure depiction of real facts and how much it represents only a fiction. Of course one may find a literary element present here at work. The conversion follows after a certain preparation, an oneiric one as well; this is why Augustine compared it to labor. "The choice marked a change of content, a rather ethical one than

intellectual” (Chadwick 1986). He hears in the garden the voice of a child: *tolle, lege; tolle, lege*. He opens the book of the Apostle Paul and reads in silence the following chapter: *ambulemus, non in comessationibus et ebrietatibus, non in cubilibus et impudiciis, non in contentione et aemulatione, sed induimini Dominum Jesum Christum, et carnis curam ne feceritis in desideriis* (Romans 13:13-14). “I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away” (Augustine 1955, VIII, XII, 29).

Disconcerted, Augustine stops from his reading at the above mentioned passage not knowing what follows next. His friend, Alypius, will read what follows: “receive the one who is weak in faith” (Romans 14:1) and Alypius will believe that this passage refers directly to him. This scene is extremely and strongly contested. We may assert that it represents an auditive revelation, although Augustine himself will be reserved in expressing his ideas towards this vision (related to the dreams in which dead people appeared in, to a certain extent, the aversion towards the body/ sensuality). This was happening around 421 (*De cura pro mortuis gerenda liber*), nine years before his death. In other words, as he grows older, Augustine trusts less and less the dreams. In conclusion, Augustine reduces the dream to a psychological phenomenon and his credit is that he observes that the oneiric does not represent a recommended path to access the truth. Augustine will always feel certain awkwardness related to dreams. He feels a state of discomfort regarding them, an oneiric discomfort that he will assume in an autobiographic manner. Anyway, Augustine is not a knight of oneiric certitude. And after him, maybe as well because of him, dreams enter under a form of surveillance (I remind the fact that Augustine has a short chapter on signs, dreams and revelations in *De catechizandis rudibus*, VI, 10).

The final chapter from the third book of the *Confessions* (III, XII, 21) speaks about the encounter between Monica and Saint Ambrose, who is not explicitly named by Augustine. Augustine relates to him with certain deference in this text.

Augustine says about Ambrose that he is a servant of God and that he is familiar with the divine books (*sacerdotem tuum, quemdam episcopum nutritum in Ecclesia, et exercitatum in Libris tuis*). Ambrose, instead, relates to Augustine in a more prudent manner when he is to correct his errancy and considers him indomitable (*esse indocilem*). At last, at the instance of his mother that wanted for Ambrose to discuss with Augustine, the Bishop of Mediolanum is infuriated and tells her disgusted (*ille jam substomachans taedio*): “go away from me, woman, and do as I have told you, because it is not possible for the son of all these tears to perish” (*vade, inquit a me; ita vivas: fieri non potest ut filius istarum lacrymarum pereat*) (cf. François 1845, 7-8). It is notable that Augustine is not very delighted of this episode despite the ending of the third book.

When God chooses someone He firstly takes him to the desert. Jesus, after the baptize, spent 40 days in the desert; Saul, converted on the road of Damascus, spent two years in the desert of Arabia; Augustine retires in Cassiciacum and in the Easter night of April 24th 387 (he was then 33 years old) is baptized among Adeodatus and Alypius by Saint Ambrose in the cathedral of Mediolanum. The writings of Augustine from this period lead to the idea that he was no longer disappointed by philosophy, but by his own self. This is the main reason of his conversion as long as he accepts, now, the solution of double authority: the authority prior to time (Christ) and the authority prior to the order of reality (reason). If we are correct, we have to assert that Augustine has never differentiated philosophy from theology very clearly, maybe because his Platonism (to which it is added the oneiric situation) has decisively contributed to his conversion.

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