

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II
Scuola delle Scienze Umane e Sociali
Quaderni
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ELEATIC ONTOLOGY FROM THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD TO LATE ANTIQUITY

Edited by Anna Motta & Christopher Kurfess



Federico II University Press



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7. Augustine and Eleatic Ontology

Giovanni Catapano
(University of Padua)

ABSTRACT: In this essay, I first show the almost total absence of references to the Eleatics in Augustine's works and the scarcity of information that his Latin sources could have provided him. Then I select some distinctive theses of the ontology of the Eleatics, as it emerges from the Diels-Kranz collection of their fragments. I then illustrate the general aspects and the essential contents of Augustinian ontology. Finally, I briefly compare Augustine's main ideas on being with the previously selected Eleatic theses.

KEYWORDS: Augustine of Hippo, creation, Eleatic attributes of being, God, mutability

Although the critical literature on Augustine (354–430 AD) is very extensive, to my knowledge, it has never dealt thematically with his relationship with the philosophy of the Eleatics.¹ After all, there is no evidence that Augustine knew anything about the content of this philosophy; therefore, it is not possible to conclusively state that he consciously confronted it. However, this does not prevent us from establishing a theoretical comparison between Eleatic and Augustinian ontology, regardless of their actual historical relationship. We may limit ourselves to observing similarities and differences between the two, without explaining similarities in terms of influence/reception or differences in terms of reaction/rejection. Such a comparison is not only theoretically legitimate but also hermeneutically useful, in so far as it can highlight the peculiarities of Augustine's conception of being.

I will begin by showing the almost total absence of references to the Eleatics in Augustine's works and the scarcity of information that his Latin sources could have provided him. Next, I select some distinctive theses of the ontolo-

¹ The huge bibliographic database edited by the *Zentrum für Augustinus-Forschung* of the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, which I consulted on 23 October 2019 (<https://www.augustinus.de/literatur/literaturdatenbank/recherche>), included no titles containing the word 'Eleatic*', only two titles containing the name 'Parmenid*' but referring to Plato's *Parmenides*, and no titles containing the word 'Melissus.'

gy of the Eleatics, as it emerges from the Diels-Kranz collection of their fragments. The following two sections illustrate the general aspects and the essential contents of Augustinian ontology. Finally, I conclude by briefly comparing Augustine's main ideas on being with the previously selected Eleatic theses.

1. *The Scarcity of Augustine's Knowledge of the Eleatics*

There is only one instance in all Augustine's writings in which Eleatic philosophers are called by name: in the fourth book of the *Contra Iulianum*, dated 421 AD.² There, Augustine lists the names of the philosophers that the Pelagian bishop Julian of Eclanum (*ca.* 380–455 AD), who meant to reject the idea of carnal concupiscence as that evil by which original sin is transmitted to children, had cited in the *Ad Turbantium*. These philosophers are:

Thales of Miletus, one of the seven wise men, then Anaximander, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Leucippus, Democritus, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Melissus, Plato, and the Pythagoreans.³

For each of these "natural philosophers" (*philosophi physici*), among whom we note the names of Parmenides and Melissus, Julian had mentioned their doctrine relating to natural things (*dogma de naturalibus rebus*), that is, their opinions on natural causes (*opiniones de naturalibus causis*). What in particular did Julian say about the theories of Parmenides and Melissus? We do not know. According to Augustine, Julian said nothing that had anything to do with the subject discussed there, namely lust. Perhaps, since these were *opinions* on the causes of physical phenomena, Julian had made special reference to the *opinative* part of the doctrine of Parmenides, which regards becoming and concerns fire and earth, the cosmic crowns, or perhaps the factor that determines the sex of the offspring; on this part, Julian (like Augustine) could have been informed at least in part by Cicero and possibly by Christian authors such as Lactantius.⁴ We should not imagine that Julian provided a

² Cf. J. Anoz, "Cronología de la producción agustiniana," *Augustinus* 47 (2002) 229–312, 241.

³ Aug.Hipp. *C.Iul.* 4.75, transl. WSA 1/24, 423. Unless otherwise specified, translations of Augustine's passages are taken from *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press), abbreviated as WSA. The volume and pages are indicated in brackets. The abbreviations of the titles of Augustine's works are those of the *Augustinus-Lexikon*, available at <https://www.augustinus.de/projekte-des-zaf/augustinus-lexikon/werkeliste> (there are also specified the reference editions of the Latin text).

⁴ Cf. Cic. *ac.* 2.118 = DK 28 A35; *ND.* 1.28 = DK 28 A37; Lact. *Op.dei* 12.12 = DK 28 A54.

great deal of information; on the contrary, it is probable that the information was reduced to very little, as in the following doxographic passage of Cicero's *Academica priora* (*Lucullus*), which can be seen as a watermark in the *Contra Iulianum*:

At the head of the list Thales, the one of the Seven to whom the remaining six are stated to have unanimously yielded the first place, said that all things are made of water. But in this he did not carry conviction with his fellow-citizen and associate Anaximander; Anaximander said that there exists an infinity of substance from which the universe was engendered. Afterwards his pupil Anaximenes held that air is infinite, but the things that spring from it finite, and that earth, water and fire are engendered, and then the universe of things out of these. Anaxagoras held that matter is infinite, but that out of it have come minute particles entirely alike, which were at first in a state of medley but were afterwards reduced to order by a divine mind. Xenophanes at a somewhat earlier date said that the universe is one, and that this is unchanging, and is god, and that it never came into being but has existed for ever, of a spherical shape; Parmenides said that the primary element is fire, which imparts motion to the earth that receives from it its conformation; Leucippus's elements were solid matter and empty space; Democritus resembled him in this but was more expansive in the rest of his doctrines; Empedocles taught the four ordinary elements that we know; Heraclitus, fire; Melissus, that the present infinite and unchangeable universe has existed and will exist always. Plato holds the view that the world was made by god out of the all-containing substance, to last for ever. The Pythagoreans hold that the universe originates out of numbers and the first principles of the mathematicians.⁵

The list of philosophers here is exactly the same as that reported by Augustine. Let us suppose that Julian's source was this passage from Cicero, and let us suppose that Augustine had known this passage from the time he composed his first work left to us, the dialogue *Contra Academicos* (386 AD).⁶ What would Augustine learn from Cicero about Eleatic ontology? Concerning Parmenides, Cicero only recalls his doctrine of the active role of fire and the passive role of earth. To Melissus, instead, Cicero attributes only the thesis of the perennial existence in the past and in the future of that which is infinite

⁵ Cic. ac. 2.118, transl. H. Rackham, *Cicero in Twenty-Eight Volumes, XIX: De natura deorum, Academica* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933) 619.

⁶ On Augustine's knowledge of Cicero's works, and especially of his *Academica*, see M. Testard, *Saint Augustin et Cicéron*, 2 vols. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1958), vol. 2, 132; H. Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Alqvist & Wiksell, 1967), vol. 1, 52–70. For a long time it was thought that Augustine had known only the *Academica posteriora*: see in particular P. Drewniok, *De Augustini contra Academicos libris III* (Wrocław: Schlesische Volkszeitung, 1913); T.J. Hunt, *A Textual History of Cicero's Academici Libri* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 23. Today, although it is believed more likely that Augustine used the second version, the possibility that he had access to the first is not excluded: see e.g. M. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages 2: Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1985) 177–178; T. Fuhrer, *Augustin, Contra Academicos (vel De Academicis), Bücher 2 und 3, Einleitung und Kommentar* (Berlin & New York: W. de Gruyter, 1997) 38.

and immutable (*Melissus hoc quod esset infinitum et immutabile et fuisse semper et fore*). The link between this last thesis, properly ontological, and the thought of Parmenides is completely omitted by Cicero, also because Cicero makes no mention of the other part of Parmenides' philosophy, the one concerning truth.⁷ Nothing in this passage of Cicero's *Academica* could lead Augustine to unite Melissus and Parmenides in the same philosophical school.

If anything, Augustine could see an affinity between the position of Melissus and that of Xenophanes, who posited the existence of something immutable, ungenerated and eternal: the One-Everything (*unum esse omnia*). However, we cannot say that Augustine ever made a connection between the two philosophers. He mentions Melissus only in this passage of the *Contra Iulianum*. Xenophanes, besides here, is mentioned only in two passages of the *City of God*: one (7.17) in which Augustine declares, "as Xenophanes of Colophon writes," to expose what he thinks, not what he claims; the other (18.25) in which Xenophanes is mentioned, together with Anaximander and Anaximenes, among the naturalists (*physici*) who became famous in the same period during which the Jewish people were in captivity in Babylon.

It is important that, when in Book 8 of the *City of God* Augustine describes Greek philosophers by dividing them into two genres (i.e., the Italic and the Ionic), he does not mention Xenophanes, Parmenides or Melissus (to say nothing of Zeno of Elea, whom Augustine never mentions at all in his works), whereas he pauses to expose the doctrines of Pythagoras, Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Diogenes (of Apollonia), Archelaus, Socrates and especially Plato.⁸ Not only Parmenides and Melissus are omitted; even Xenophanes finds no place in the reviews of ancient philosophers that Augustine carries out in the *Contra Academicos* and in his Letter 118.⁹ It is as if, for him, the essential lines of the history of ancient philosophy could be redrawn without referring to the Eleatics!

The historical and theoretical importance of Parmenides' thoughts on being seem to have completely escaped Augustine's attention, most probably because he knew little or nothing about them. Moreover, the sources he had at his disposal could not teach him much about this, as far as we know. We have

⁷ On the two parts of Parmenides' philosophy (κατὰ ἀλήθειαν and κατὰ δόξαν), see DK 28 A1.

⁸ Cf. Aug.Hipp. *Civ.* 8.2–4.

⁹ Cf. Aug.Hipp. *C.Acad.* 3.37–42; *Ep.* 118.14–33. On Augustine as a historian of philosophy, see G. Piaia, "Vestigia philosophorum." *Il medioevo e la storiografia filosofica* (Rimini: Maggioli Editore, 1983) 21–30; I. Bochet, "Le statut de l'histoire de la philosophie selon la *Lettre* 118 d'Augustin à Dioscore," *RÉAug* 44 (1998) 49–76.

seen what Cicero reports about Parmenides in the *Lucullus*; in that work, the Arpinates adds that Parmenides and Zeno, from whom the Eleatic philosophers take their name, followed the philosophy of Xenophanes (*eum secuti*), but Cicero does not specify in what sense.¹⁰ Seneca, in his *Letter* 88, attributes to Parmenides the thesis that nothing exists of all these things that seem to exist, except the universe alone (*uno excepto universo*), and to Zeno the denial even of this one exception.¹¹ Apuleius, in the *De Platone et eius dogmate*, recognizes Plato's debt to Parmenides and Zeno and says that Plato deepened their discoveries (*inventas*) with greater passion (but Apuleius does not specify which discoveries).¹² Plotinus, in his tenth treatise – which Augustine mentions in the *City of God*,¹³ so he knew of it in some form – is more precise in tracing a connection between Parmenides and Plato from a Neoplatonic perspective. According to Plotinus, Parmenides identified Being with Intellect, placing Being not among sensitive but among intelligible things and affirming its immobility, thus anticipating an important point in Plato's doctrine. Plato, however, in the *Parmenides*, will more carefully distinguish the One-Many which is Being/Intellect from the One in the proper sense and from the third One, the One-and-Many, which is the Soul.¹⁴ If Augustine actually read this treatise of Plotinus in a version containing the reference to Parmenides,¹⁵ he seems nevertheless to have disregarded this reference. As for the information that Augustine could have found in the doxographic sources that he certainly used but that are lost to us,¹⁶ we are not able to construct any valid hypothesis.

In short, there is nothing to suggest that Augustine was fully aware of the existence, in the ancient philosophical panorama, of an Eleatic ontology typical of Parmenides, Zeno (of Elea) and Melissus, which was anticipated in certain aspects by Xenophanes and was so relevant as to influence philosophers

¹⁰ Cic. *ac.* 2.129.

¹¹ Sen. *Ep.* 88.44.

¹² Ap. *Plat.* 1.3.

¹³ Aug. *Hipp. Civ.* 10.23.

¹⁴ Plot. 5.1.8.

¹⁵ It is extremely unlikely that Augustine read Plotinus' treatise in Greek. In all probability, if he read it at all, he used a Latin translation which, according to the most economical hypothesis, was the same translation of the "books of the Platonists" made by Marius Victorinus of which Augustine speaks in his *Confessions* (7.13; 8.3). We do not know what kind of translation it was (it is possible that it was selective and/or paraphrastic), nor do we know to what extent or in what form the "books of the Platonists" contained texts of Plotinus. See M. Erler, "Platonis libri," in Dodaro, Mayer, & Müller, *Augustinus-Lexikon* 4, fasc. 5.6 (Basel: Schwabe, 2016) 762–764; A. Smith, "Plotinus," in Dodaro, Mayer, & Müller (eds.), *Augustinus-Lexikon* 4, fasc. 5.6, 772–774.

¹⁶ See A. Solignac, "Doxographies et manuels dans la formation philosophique de saint Augustin," *RecAug* 1 (1958) 113–148.

highly esteemed by Augustine, such as Plato and Plotinus. To evaluate the relationship between Augustine's thoughts and the ontology of the Eleatics, it is necessary to set the comparison on a purely theoretical level, as I will try to do in the following sections.

2. *The main tenets of Eleatic ontology*

As all scholars of ancient philosophy know well, interpreting the content of Eleatic ontology –meaning the doctrine of being of Parmenides, Zeno of Elea and Melissus – is a complex operation, given the fragmentary state of the works of these authors and given the poetic form chosen by the founder of this school of thought, Parmenides, to express his views. For the purposes of the comparison that I intend to make with Augustinian ontology, it is nevertheless necessary to try to enunciate some theses in which the salient points of the ontological conception of the Eleatics can be concentrated, as this conception is documented by the fragments collected by Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz.¹⁷ For the sake of convenience, Eleatic ontology can be summarised by indicating the attributes that, according to it, belong to being. Among the many attributes that the Eleatics attribute to being, the following can be distinguished:

- *Oneness*: Being (τὸ ὄν) is one.¹⁸
- *Ungenerability and incorruptibility*: No being is generated or corrupted;¹⁹ being is ungenerated²⁰ and imperishable.²¹
- *Univocity*: 'Being' is said in only one sense;²² 'being' and 'one' have only one meaning.²³
- *Necessity*: All things are out of necessity;²⁴ "it is," and it is not possible that it is not.²⁵

¹⁷ Citations of DK below refer to the sixth edition of the fragments, H. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6. verbesserte Aufl. hrsg. von W. Kranz, 3 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951–1952).

¹⁸ DK 28 A24; DK 28 A28; DK 28 B8.6; DK 29 A21; DK 30 A5; DK 30 A8; DK 30 B5.

¹⁹ DK 28 A25.

²⁰ DK 28 B7–8; DK 30 B1.

²¹ DK 28 B8.3.

²² DK 28 A28; DK 28 B2.

²³ DK 29 A14.

²⁴ DK 28 A32.

²⁵ DK 28 B2.

- *Identity with thinking*: To think (νοεῖν) and to be (εἶναι) is one and the same thing.²⁶
- *Existence*: Being (εἶναι) is.²⁷
- *Wholeness*: Being (ἑόν) is a whole.²⁸
- *Immobility*: Being is immobile.²⁹
- *Beginninglessness and endlessness*: Being has no beginning and no end.³⁰
- *Presentness*: Being was not once nor will it be; it is now altogether.³¹
- *Indivisibility*: Being is indivisible.³²
- *Fullness*: There is not somewhat more here and somewhat less there, but all is full of being;³³ being is full.³⁴
- *Continuity*: Being is continuous.³⁵
- *Sameness*: Being, remaining the same and in the same, lies by itself.³⁶
- *Completeness*: Being is complete from every side.³⁷
- *Equality*: Being is like the mass of a well-rounded sphere, equal from the middle everywhere;³⁸ what exists is entirely equal;³⁹ being is all equal.⁴⁰
- *Eternity*: If something exists, it is eternal.⁴¹
- *Infinity* (according to Melissus): What exists is infinite;⁴² being is infinite.⁴³
- *Absence of suffering and pain*: Being neither feels pain nor suffers⁴⁴

²⁶ DK 28 B3; DK 28 B8.34. The meaning of this identity is not clear.

²⁷ DK 28 B6.

²⁸ DK 28 B8.4 (οὐλομελής, literally ‘with whole limbs’, according to the variant attested by Plutarch and Proclus). Simplicius’ reading οὐλον μουννογενές is preferred by Tarán and Graham, who translate ‘whole, unique’ and ‘a whole of one kind’ respectively. See L. Tarán, *Parmenides, A Text with Translation, Commentary, and Critical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) 82 and 85; D.W. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy. The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 216–217.

²⁹ DK 28 B8.4 and 26; DK 29 A15; DK 30 A8; DK 30 B7.

³⁰ DK 28 B8.27; DK 30 B2.

³¹ DK 28 B8.5.

³² DK 28 B8.22; DK 30 B10.

³³ DK 28 B8.23–24.

³⁴ DK 30 B7.

³⁵ DK 28 B8.25.

³⁶ DK 28 B8.29.

³⁷ DK 28 B8.42–43.

³⁸ DK 28 B8.43–44.

³⁹ DK 30 A5.

⁴⁰ DK 30 B7.

⁴¹ DK 30 A5.

⁴² DK 30 A5.

⁴³ DK 30 A8; DK 30 A11; DK 30 B2.

⁴⁴ DK 30 A5; DK 30 B7.

- *Indiminisability and unincreasability*: Being cannot lose something nor become bigger.⁴⁵
- *Intransformability*: Being cannot change shape.⁴⁶

Among these multiple attributes, it is possible to select the most important, relying on the main fragments of Parmenides (DK 28 B8) and Melissus (DK 30 B1–10) reported by Simplicius in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*. For Parmenides, the main attributes seem to be ungenerability,⁴⁷ fullness,⁴⁸ immobility,⁴⁹ identity with thinking,⁵⁰ and equality;⁵¹ for Melissus, they are ungenerability,⁵² infinity,⁵³ oneness,⁵⁴ fullness,⁵⁵ and immobility.⁵⁶

The sources, moreover, seem to treat the Eleatic Being as synonymous with other terms: the whole, God and the divine, the intelligible, the cosmos, the one. In fact, many of the same attributes that the Eleatics attribute to being are also attributed to these things. The whole (τὸ πᾶν), for example, is said to be eternal,⁵⁷ one,⁵⁸ ungenerated,⁵⁹ spherical,⁶⁰ immobile,⁶¹ equal,⁶² infinite,⁶³ unalterable⁶⁴ and full.⁶⁵ God, who is said to have no past and no future⁶⁶ and to be spherical⁶⁷ and immobile,⁶⁸ is explicitly made to coincide with the one⁶⁹ and with the whole.⁷⁰ The intelligible (τὸ νοητόν) is also said to be one, eternal and

⁴⁵ DK 30 B7.

⁴⁶ DK 30 B7.

⁴⁷ DK 28 B8.1–21.

⁴⁸ DK 28 B8.22–25.

⁴⁹ DK 28 B8.26–33.

⁵⁰ DK 28 B8.34–41.

⁵¹ DK 28 B8.42–49.

⁵² DK 30 B1.

⁵³ DK 30 B2–4.

⁵⁴ DK 30 B5–6.

⁵⁵ DK 30 B7.

⁵⁶ DK 30 B7.

⁵⁷ DK 28 A7; DK 28 A22–23.

⁵⁸ DK 28 A7; DK 28 A8; DK 28 A22–23; DK 28 A25; DK 30 A1; DK 30 A12; DK 30 A14.

⁵⁹ DK 28 A7–8; DK 28 A22–23.

⁶⁰ DK 28 A7; DK 28 A23.

⁶¹ DK 28 A8; DK 28 A22–23; DK 28 A25; DK 28 A29; DK 30 A1; DK 30 A8.

⁶² DK 28 A23; DK 30 A1.

⁶³ DK 30 A1; DK 30 A9.

⁶⁴ DK 30 A1.

⁶⁵ DK 30 A1.

⁶⁶ DK 28 A30.

⁶⁷ DK 28 A31.

⁶⁸ DK 28 A31.

⁶⁹ DK 29 A30; DK 30 A14.

⁷⁰ DK 29 A30; DK 30 A13.

incorruptible.⁷¹ Even the cosmos (κόσμος) is called eternal, ungenerated and incorruptible.⁷² The one (τὸ ἓν), finally, is said to be motionless,⁷³ and it alone is eternal and infinite.⁷⁴

Finally, there are other theses that do not concern being or its synonyms; rather, they concern its opposite: non-being and becoming:

- Becoming (γένεσις) is among the things that seem to be according to a false opinion.⁷⁵
- Non-being (τὸ μὴ ὄν) does not exist at all.⁷⁶
- What is not cannot be known.⁷⁷
- Movement (κίνησις) does not exist.⁷⁸
- Nothing can arise from nothing (ἐκ μηδενός).⁷⁹

For the purposes of this study, I define Eleatic ontology as the sum of the following three theoretical positions: the attribution to being of the predicates outlined above, with a special emphasis on ungenerability, fullness and immobility; the identification of being with the whole and the one, as well as the identification of these with God; and the denial of existence and knowability to movement, becoming (including the derivation of being from nothing) and non-being in general.

3. General aspects of Augustine's ontology

Before comparing Augustine's ontology with Eleatic ontology as I have defined it in the previous section, it is good to remember some general aspects of Augustine's conception of being, namely its purpose, its method, its sources of inspiration, and its textual basis.

In reference to purpose, we can say that Augustine did not develop an ontology as an end in itself, but he elaborated ideas about being in order to better know what for him were the two main objects of philosophical research, name-

⁷¹ DK 28 A34.

⁷² DK 28 A36.

⁷³ DK 30 A5.

⁷⁴ DK 29 A30; DK 30 A13.

⁷⁵ DK 28 A22; cf. DK 28 B1.

⁷⁶ DK 28 A22; DK 28 A24; cf. DK 28 B6.

⁷⁷ DK 28 B2; cf. DK 28 A8.

⁷⁸ DK 29 B4; DK 30 A1.

⁷⁹ DK 30 A5.

ly God and the soul.⁸⁰ Most of his statements concerning being are found in theological contexts, in which Augustine's attention is not focused on being as being, but on the being proper to God and its difference and superiority with respect to the being of creatures. Therefore, Augustine's ontology qualifies as a "theological ontology," to use an expression of Dominique Dubarle.⁸¹ A minority, but not a negligible part, of Augustine's ontological affirmations are found in contexts that focus on the human soul and its relationship with God and with other creatures. In these other contexts, Augustine is moved by the intention not only to describe the specific being of the soul but also to show how the soul is subject to variations depending on whether it behaves in one way or another with respect to God and creatures. In these cases, Augustine's ontology can be defined as a "spiritual ontology,"⁸² not only in the sense that it has as its object the specific being of the human spirit but also in the sense that it aims to give moral indications that are useful to the inner life of the soul, to its spirituality.

Second, as far as the method is concerned, we must not forget that Augustine theorised and consistently practiced the union of faith and reason, of *au-toritas* and *ratio*. To reach the knowledge of God and of the soul as closely as possible, he considered it practical to make use of the initial adherence to an authority worthy of trust and then to proceed through rational investigation toward the intellectual understanding of things. It is typical of Augustine's way of thinking, especially in his more mature works, to rely on something believed (for good reasons) and try to understand it, that is, to make it evident or at least reasonably plausible.

Thirdly, this peculiarity of Augustine's philosophical method – which refers to a conception of philosophy different from that to which we are accustomed today and not yet clearly distinct from theology⁸³ – explains why one of the main sources of inspiration for Augustinian ontology is the sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Catholic Church. In fact, the Bible and

⁸⁰ Aug.Hipp. *Ord.* 2.47: "The investigation (*quaestio*) of philosophy is twofold: one concerns the soul, the other God" (my transl.). On this passage, see G. Catapano, *Il concetto di filosofia nei primi scritti di Agostino. Analisi dei passi metafisologici dal Contra Academicos al De vera religione* (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2001) 242–248.

⁸¹ D. Dubarle, "Essai sur l'ontologie théologique de saint Augustin," *RecAug* 16 (1981) 197–288; repr. in D. Dubarle, *Dieu avec l'Être : De Parménide à Saint Thomas. Essai d'ontologie théologique*, présentation de J. Greisch (Paris: Beauchesne, 1986) 167–258.

⁸² É. Zum Brunn, "Le dilemme de l'être et du néant chez saint Augustin. Des premiers dialogues aux *Confessions*," *RecAug* 6 (1969) 3–102, 98.

⁸³ On Augustine's idea of philosophy, see G. Catapano, "Philosophia," in Dodaro, Mayer, & Müller (eds.), *Augustinus-Lexikon* 4, fasc. 5.6, 719–742.

the ecclesiastical magisterium contain “the authority of Christ” (*auctoritas Christi*), which Augustine had recognised as the most valid authority to which to entrust himself since the first work composed after his conversion, the dialogue *Contra Academicos*.⁸⁴ The biblical verses that Augustine most often mentions in the ontological ambit are Exodus 3.14 (“I am who I am”) and Psalms 102(101).27–28 (“They will perish, you remain; they all wear out like a garment, you will change them like clothes and they will disappear. But you are always the same and your years have no end”). In the same dialogue, *Contra Academicos*, Augustine also declares himself confident of finding rational instruments compatible with the Christian faith among the Platonists.⁸⁵ Among the ancient philosophical schools, Platonism is undoubtedly the one that most influenced Augustine’s conception of being. Augustine himself acknowledges this in the *Confessions*, when he says that he finally managed to see, after reading “certain books of Platonists,” the incommutable light of God as a transcendent and eternal Truth and the fact that all other things “are” (in that they receive being from God) and “are not” (in that they do not possess the incommutable being of God).⁸⁶ Christianity and Platonism are not two alternative sources of inspiration for Augustine’s ontology; on the contrary, in accordance with his theorisation of the collaboration between faith and reason, they cooperate together, in the sense that Augustine refers to the Christian faith to found and confirm his own ontological theses and derives from Platonic thought terms, concepts and schemes to enunciate and structure in rational form a Christian vision of being. Augustinian ontology is neither a biblical ontology nor a Platonising ontology but a *Christian ontology*, which is Christian thanks to Scripture and an ontology thanks to Platonism.

Fourth, the texts documenting Augustine’s ontological thought are short, numerous and heterogeneous. Augustine never wrote a whole work of ontology or even a section of a work, such as a book or a substantial part of a book. Augustine’s ontological texts are short, usually a paragraph, and at most two consecutive paragraphs, according to the subdivision into paragraphs introduced in the Maurine edition of the *opera omnia* (Paris, 1679–1700).⁸⁷ These texts are also numerous. So far, several dozen have been identified in the critical liter-

⁸⁴ See Aug.Hipp. *C.Acad.* 3.43.

⁸⁵ See again Aug.Hipp. *C.Acad.* 3.43.

⁸⁶ Aug.Hipp. *Conf.* 7.13–17. On the *Platoniorum libri*, see the footnote 15 above.

⁸⁷ As is well known, the Maurine edition provided the basis for Migne’s edition of Augustine’s works in the *Patrologia Latina* (vols. 32–47, Paris, 1845–1849).

ature.⁸⁸ The works with the highest number of attestations found by scholars are the *De immortalitate animae* (387 AD), the *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* (388–389), the *De vera religione* (390), the *Confessiones* (397–403), the *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (391–post 422), the *De natura boni* (ca. 400–405), the *De trinitate* (400–post 420), the *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* (406–420) and the *De civitate dei* (412–426). These works differ in chronology, genre, subject and purpose, which makes the textual dossier of Augustinian ontology very heterogeneous. Despite this, the fundamental ideas of Augustine’s ontology are easily recognisable because they are repeated with few variations in different contexts. In the next section, I will set out the main ideas, citing some particularly significant texts in which they are contained.

4. Essential content of Augustine’s ontology

The essential content of Augustine’s ontological doctrine can be summarised in relatively few propositions, which can be divided into four groups:

⁸⁸ In particular, I have consulted the following studies: F.-J. Thonnard, “Caractères platoniciens de l’ontologie augustinienne,” in *Augustinus Magister: Congrès International Augustinien. Paris, 21–24 septembre 1954*, vol. 1 (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1954) 317–327; T.M. Bartolomei, “Il problema dell’essere e del divenire dai presocratici a s. Tommaso d’Aquino,” *Divus Thomas. Commentarium de philosophia et theologia* 61 (1958) 407–444; J.F. Anderson, *St. Augustine and Being: A Metaphysical Essay* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1965); É. Zum Brunn, “L’exégèse augustinienne de ‘Ego sum qui sum’ et la ‘métaphysique de l’Exode’,” in *Dieu et l’être: Exégèses d’Exode 3.14 et de Coran 20.11–24* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978) 141–164; A. Trapè, “S. Agostino: Dal mutabile all’immutabile o la filosofia dell’*ipsum esse*,” in *Cinquant’anni di Magistero Teologico: Scritti in onore di Mons. Antonio Piolanti nel 50.mo del suo sacerdozio* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1985) 46–58; C. Stead, “Augustine’s Philosophy of Being,” in G. Vesey (ed.), *The Philosophy in Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 71–84; W. Beierwaltes, “La dottrina agostiniana dell’Essere nell’interpretazione di ‘Ego sum qui sum’ (Esodo 3.14) e alcune precedenti concezioni,” in W. Beierwaltes, *Agostino e il neoplatonismo cristiano* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1995) 91–119; L. Ayres, “Being (*esse/essentia*),” in A.D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999) 96–98; R.M. García, “*Magis esse y minus esse* en San Agustín y una posible influencia neoplatónica,” *Revista agustiniana* 41 (2000) 625–636; G. Madec, “Ego sum qui sum,” in C. Mayer (ed.), *Augustinus-Lexikon 2* (Basel: Schwabe, 1996–2002) 738–741; C. Pietsch, “Esse, essentia,” in C. Mayer (ed.), *Augustinus-Lexikon 2*, 1120–1133; J.-L. Marion, “*Idipsum*: The Name of God according to Augustine,” in G. Demacopoulos & A. Papanikolaou (eds.), *Orthodox Readings of Augustine* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008) 167–189; D. Doucet, “Enquête pour une étude d’*idipsum*’ et de ses enjeux dans l’œuvre d’Augustin,” in M. Caron (ed.), *Saint Augustin* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2009) 159–187; M. Caron, “Être, Principe et Trinité,” in Caron, *Saint Augustin* 591–636; E. Bermon, “Grammar and Metaphysics: About the Forms *essendi, essendo, essendum*, and *essens* in Augustine’s *Ars grammatica breviata* (4.31 Weber),” in M. Vinzent (ed.), *Studia Patristica 70: Papers presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2011, vol. 18* (Leuven et al.: Peeters, 2013) 241–250; D. Doucet, “*Idipsum* chez Augustin jusqu’en 390,” in D. Doucet & I. Koch (eds.), *Autos, idipsum: Aspects de l’identité d’Homère à Augustin* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2014) 129–147.

- A. Propositions concerning the use of the verb ‘to be’;
- B. Propositions concerning the being of God;
- C. Propositions concerning the being of creatures;
- D. Propositions concerning the being of that particular creature that is the rational soul.

To illustrate each of the propositions set out below, I quote short passages from Augustine’s works.

A.1) Being is preached par excellence of that which remains without being able to change.

For to be means to remain. Therefore, that which is said to be in the highest and greatest way is said to be such by remaining in itself.⁸⁹

What truly is remains unchangeably, for whatever has undergone change was something other than it presently is and will be different from what it now is.⁹⁰

What is Being-Itself? That which always exists unchangingly, which is not now one thing, now another. What is Being-Itself, Absolute Being, the Self-same? That Which Is. What is That Which Is? The eternal, for anything that is constantly changing does not truly exist, because it does not abide –not that it is entirely nonexistent, but it does not exist in the highest sense.⁹¹

Anything that changes does not keep its being, and anything that can change even though it does not, is able to not be what it was; and thus only that which not only does not but also absolutely cannot change deserves without qualification to be said really and truly to be.⁹²

Let him tell the heart what being *is*, let him say it within, let him speak within; let the inner self listen, let the mind grasp what true being *is*: always being in the same manner. Anything, in fact, anything at all [...], no matter how distinguished or excellent, if it is changeable, truly *is* not. After all, no real, true being is found where nonbeing is also found. Whatever can change, in fact, once changed, is not what it was; if it is not what it was, a kind of death has taken place; something that was there has been destroyed, and *is* not. [...] Anything that changes and is what it was not, I see there a kind of life in what it is, and a kind of death in what it was.⁹³

‘Is’ is a name for the unchanging. Everything that changes ceases to be what it was and begins to be what it was not. ‘Is’ is. True ‘is’, genuine ‘is’, real ‘is’, belongs only to one who does not change.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Aug.Hipp. *Mor.* 2.8, transl. WSA 1/19, 72.

⁹⁰ Aug.Hipp. *F. et symb.* 7, transl. WSA 1/8, 160–161, modified.

⁹¹ Aug.Hipp. *En.Ps.* 121.5, transl. WSA 3/20, 18.

⁹² Aug.Hipp. *Trin.* 5.3, transl. WSA 1/5, 190.

⁹³ Aug.Hipp. *Io.ev.tr.* 38.10, transl. WSA 3/12, 582–583, modified.

⁹⁴ Aug.Hipp. *S.* 7.7, transl. WSA 3/1, 237.

A.2) Everything that is said to have ‘been’ (in the sense that it is no longer) and everything that ‘will be’ (in the sense that it is not yet) is changeable.

Everything that changes and fluctuates, and does not cease at any time at all to alter, was and will be; you can never catch hold of *is* in it. But God doesn’t have any *was* and *will be*. What was, no longer is; what will be, isn’t yet; and what is coming in such a way that it will pass, will be in such a way that it never is.⁹⁵

So if you say of a thing that it was, it isn’t any longer; if you say of a thing that it will be, it isn’t yet.⁹⁶

B.1) Only God is absolutely immutable and always remains identical to Himself.

He is the Selfsame, and to him another psalm sings, *You will discard them, and they will be changed, but you are the Selfsame, and your years will not fail*. If, then, he is the Selfsame, incapable of any change, we who participate in his divinity shall ourselves be immortal and shaped for eternal life.⁹⁷

God however is what he is, which is why he kept as his own name *I am who I am*. In line with this, the Son says, *Unless you believe that I am*; also related is: *Who are you? The beginning*.⁹⁸

B.2) Being is truly attributable only to God (as a results of A.1 and B.1); that is, being is attributed to God in the greatest, first and highest way.

After all, that should be said to exist most of all, which is always in the same way, which is in every respect like itself, which can in no respect be corrupted and changed, which is not subject to time, and which cannot now be otherwise than it was before. For that is what is said to exist more truly. Now, under this expression there falls what is meant by the nature of that which remains in itself and exists immutably.⁹⁹

For he is the one who supremely and primordially is, being absolutely unchanging; and so he was able to say in the fullest possible sense, *I am who I am*; and *You shall say, He who is has sent me to you*.¹⁰⁰

Our God, therefore, said in a magnificent and divine manner to his servant, *I am who I am*, and, *You shall say to the children of Israel, He who is sent me to you*. For he truly is because he is immutable. Every change, after all, makes that which was not to be. He who is immutable, then, truly is.¹⁰¹

He is, he truly is, and, because he is true being, he has no beginning and no end.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Aug.Hipp. S. 223/A.5, transl. WSA 3/6, 208.

⁹⁶ Aug.Hipp. S. 293/E.2, transl. WSA 3/8, 178.

⁹⁷ Aug.Hipp. *En.Ps.* 146.11, transl. WSA 3/20, 430.

⁹⁸ Aug.Hipp. *Io. ev. tr.* 39.8, transl. WSA 3/12, 592.

⁹⁹ Aug.Hipp. *Mor.* 2.1, transl. WSA 1/19, 69.

¹⁰⁰ Aug.Hipp. *Doctr.chr.* 1.35, transl. WSA 1/11, 121.

¹⁰¹ Aug.Hipp. *Nat.b.* 19, transl. WSA 1/19, 329.

¹⁰² Aug.Hipp. *En.Ps.* 134.6, transl. WSA 3/20, 196.

Now other things that we call beings or substances admit of modifications, by which they are modified and changed to a great or small extent. But God cannot be modified in any way, and therefore the substance or being which is God is alone unchangeable, and therefore it pertains to it most truly and supremely to be, from which comes the name 'being'.¹⁰³

He alone truly is, because he is unchanging, and he gave this as his name to his servant Moses when he said *I am who I am*, and, *You will say to them, He who is sent me to you*.¹⁰⁴

In the beginning was the Word; it is the same, ever in the same way; as it is, so it always is; it cannot change; that is what *is* means. That is the name he declared to his servant Moses: *I am who I am*; and *He who is sent me*.¹⁰⁵

O God, o Lord of ours, what are you called? "I am called He-is," he said. What does it mean, I am called He-is? "That I abide for ever, that I cannot change." Things which change are not, because they do not last. What is, abides. But whatever changes, was something and will be something; yet you cannot say it is, because it is changeable. So the unchangeableness of God was prepared to suggest itself by this phrase, *I am who I am*.¹⁰⁶

He alone has true being to whom it is said, *You will change them and they shall be changed, but you are the selfsame*. What is "I am who I am" if not "I am eternal"? What is "I am who I am" if not "who cannot change"?¹⁰⁷

When it says 'is', it's a true 'is', a genuine 'is', that can never and nowhere be changed. This is what God is, what the Son of God is, what the Holy Spirit is.¹⁰⁸

B.3) God is described properly only in terms of the 'is,' not the 'was' (in the sense of 'is no longer') or the 'will be' (in the sense of 'is not yet') (as it results from A.2 and B.1). He is eternal.

It is, of course, by an observation of the mind that I eliminate every kind of change from eternity and perceive no intervals of time in eternity itself, because intervals of time go with the past and future movements of things. But there is nothing past in the eternal and nothing future, because what is past has ceased to be, and what is future has not begun to be. Eternity, however, simply is, nor ever was as though it is not any longer, nor ever will be as though it is not yet.¹⁰⁹

But in God's nature there will not be anything which does not yet exist, or anything that was, which is not now; there is only that which is, and that is eternity itself.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Aug.Hipp. *Trin.* 5.3, transl. WSA 1/5, 190.

¹⁰⁴ Aug.Hipp. *Trin.* 7.10, transl. WSA 1/5, 228.

¹⁰⁵ Aug.Hipp. *Io.ev.tr.* 2.2, transl. WSA 3/12, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Aug.Hipp. S. 6.4, transl. WSA 3/1, 229.

¹⁰⁷ Aug.Hipp. S. 7.7, transl. WSA 3/1, 237, modified.

¹⁰⁸ Aug.Hipp. S. 293/E.2, transl. WSA 3/8, 178.

¹⁰⁹ Aug.Hipp. *Vera rel.* 97, transl. WSA 1/8, 94–95.

¹¹⁰ Aug.Hipp. *En.Ps.* 9.11, transl. WSA 3/15, 147.

God's substance is in every respect unchangeable. There is no 'was' or 'will be' in God, but only 'is'.¹¹¹

God's years are not something different from God himself. God's years are God's eternity, and eternity is the very substance of God, in which there is no possibility of change. In him nothing is past, as though it no longer existed, and nothing is future, as though it had not yet come to be. There is nothing in God's eternity except 'is'. There is no 'was', no 'will be', because anything that 'was' has ceased to be, and anything that 'will be' does not yet exist. Whatever 'is' in God simply *is*. With good reason did God dispatch his servant Moses in these terms.¹¹²

Debate the way things change, you will find 'was' and 'will be'; think about God, you will find 'is', where there can be no 'was' and 'will be'.¹¹³

But in the case of what is eternal, without beginning and without end, in whatever tense the verb is put, whether in the past, or present, or future, there is no falsehood thereby implied. For although to that immutable and ineffable nature, there is no proper application of Was and Will be, but only Is: for that nature alone *is* in truth, because incapable of change; and to it therefore was it exclusively suited to say, "I Am That I Am," and "Thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, He Who Is hath sent me unto you:" yet on account of the changeableness of the times amid which our mortal and changeable life is spent, there is nothing false in our saying, both it was, and will be, and is. It was in past, it is in present, it will be in future ages. It was, because it never was wanting; it will be, because it will never be wanting; it is, because it always is. For it has not, like one who no longer survives, died with the past; nor, like one who abideth not, is it gliding away with the present; nor, as one who had no previous existence, will it rise up with the future.¹¹⁴

God doesn't have any *was* and *will be*.¹¹⁵

B.4) God has no contrary, because that which is in the highest degree is contrary to that which is in the lowest degree, i.e., that which is not.

If no independent reality has a contrary, insofar as it is an independent reality, much less does that first reality which is called truth have a contrary insofar as it is an independent reality. Now the first proposition is true. For every reality is a reality for no other reason than that it exists. Now, the only contrary which being has is non-being. Therefore the contrary to reality is nothing. In no way, then, can anything be contrary to that reality which exists in the greatest and most fundamental way.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Aug.Hipp. *En.Ps.* 89.3, transl. WSA 3/18, 304–305.

¹¹² Aug.Hipp. *En. Ps.* 101/2.10, transl. WSA 3/19, 71.

¹¹³ Aug.Hipp. *Io.ev.tr.* 38.10, transl. WSA 3/12, 583.

¹¹⁴ Aug.Hipp. *Io.ev.tr.* 99.5, transl. J. Gibb & J. Innes, *St. Augustine: Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John*, in P. Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1888) 1–452, 383.

¹¹⁵ Aug.Hipp. *S.* 223/A.5, transl. WSA 3/6, 208.

¹¹⁶ Aug.Hipp. *Imm.an.* 19, transl. G. Watson, *Augustine: Soliloquies and Immortality of the Soul* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1990) 153.

We can call this nature nothing other than God, and, if you look for something contrary to it, there is absolutely nothing. For being does not have any contrary except non-being. There is, therefore, no nature contrary to God.¹¹⁷

Consequently, I trust it will be obvious to those who are spiritually minded that no nature can possibly exist which is contrary to God. [...] If we were asked what the opposite of black was, we would reply white, and we would say that cold is the opposite of warm, slow the opposite of speedy, and so on. But when we are asked what the opposite of what exists is, we rightly respond: what does not exist.¹¹⁸

For, since God is the supreme being – that is, he supremely *is* and is therefore immutable – he gave being to the things he created out of nothing, but not supreme being such as he himself is. To some he gave being more fully, and to others he gave it less fully, and so he arranged created natures according to their degrees of being. (Just as the word ‘wisdom’ comes from the verb ‘to be wise’, so the word ‘being’ [*essentia*] comes from the verb ‘to be’ [*esse*]; it is, of course, a new word which was not used by Latin authors of old, but has come into use in our times to give our language a term for what the Greeks call *ousia*, for which it is a literal equivalent.) Thus the only nature contrary to the nature which supremely is, and by which everything else that is was made, is a nature which has no being at all. For it is obvious that the contrary of that which has being is that which does not. And it follows that there is no being contrary to God, that is, to the supreme being, who is the author of all beings of any kind whatsoever.¹¹⁹

B.5) God is all that He has: He coincides with his substantial attributes, and these coincide with each other.

God is not great by participating in greatness, but he is great with his great self because he is his own greatness. The same must be said about goodness and eternity and omnipotence and about absolutely all the predications that can be stated of God, because it is all said with reference to himself, and not metaphorically either or in simile but properly.¹²⁰

God however is indeed called in multiple ways great, good, wise, blessed, true, and anything else that seems not to be unworthy of him; but his greatness is identical with his wisdom (he is not great in mass but in might), and his goodness is identical with his wisdom and greatness, and his truth is identical with them all; and with him being blessed is not one thing, and being great or wise or true or good, or just simply being, another.¹²¹

He is what he has, therefore, with regard to what is said of him in himself, not what is said of him in relation to another. Thus it is in himself that he is said to be living, because he has life, and he himself is that very life.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Aug.Hipp. *Mor.* 2.1, transl. WSA 1/19, 69.

¹¹⁸ Aug.Hipp. *F. et symb.* 7, transl. WSA 1/8, 160–161.

¹¹⁹ Aug.Hipp. *Civ.* 12.2, transl. WSA 1/7, 38–39.

¹²⁰ Aug.Hipp. *Trin.* 5.11, transl. WSA 1/5, 196.

¹²¹ Aug.Hipp. *Trin.* 6.8, transl. WSA 1/5, 211.

¹²² Aug.Hipp. *Civ.* 11.10, transl. WSA 1/7, 11.

C.1) Every nature essentially different from God is a creature of God, and every creature is essentially different from God and inferior to Him.

“Why did he make them?” So that they might be. Just being, after all, in whatever degree, is good, because the supreme Good is being in the supreme degree. “What did he make them out of?” From nothing, since whatever is must have some kind of specific look, however minimal. Thus even the minimal good will still be good and will be from God, for, since the supreme specific look is the supreme good, the minimal specific look is the minimal good. Now, every good is either God or from God; therefore even the minimal specific look is from God.¹²³

The nature that has been made is always less than the one that made it.¹²⁴

C.2) God creates creatures by making them be, that is, by radically giving and preserving their being; therefore, only God is a ‘creator’ in the proper sense.

How much the more, then, ought we to say that God alone is the creator of natures. For he makes nothing from any material that he did not make himself, and the only workers that he has are those which he created himself. And if he were to withdraw his constructive power from things, those things would not exist at all, just as they did not exist at all before they were made. When I say ‘before’, however, I am speaking with reference to eternity, not time.¹²⁵

C.3) Creation is different from the generation by which the Son is derived from the Father and from the procession by which the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Son and the Holy Spirit are in fact of the same substance as the Father – that is, they are God – whereas creatures are essentially different from God.

Every nature is either God who has no author or is from God, because it has him as its author. A nature that has God as the author of its being is either uncreated or created. That which is uncreated and yet has being from him is either begotten by him or proceeds by him. That which is begotten is the only Son; that which proceeds is the Holy Spirit. This Trinity is of one and the same nature, for these three are one. Each one alone is God, and all together they are one God, immutable, everlasting, without temporal beginning or end. But that nature which is created is called a creature, while God, its creator, is the Trinity. A creature, then, is said to come from God in such a way that it is not made out of his nature; after all, it is said to come from him precisely because it has him as the author of its being, not so that it is born from him or proceeds from him, but so that it is created, constituted, made by him.¹²⁶

¹²³ Aug.Hipp. *Vera rel.* 35, transl. WSA 1/8, 51.

¹²⁴ Aug.Hipp. *Trin.* 15.26, transl. WSA 1/5, 417.

¹²⁵ Aug.Hipp. *Civ.* 12.25, transl. WSA 1/7, 65.

¹²⁶ Aug.Hipp. *An. et or.* 2.5, transl. WSA 1/23, 482.

C.4) God creates every creature according to an eternal reason (idea) that God has in Himself.

Once this has been established and conceded, who would dare to say that God created all things without good reason? If this cannot be rightly said and believed, it remains that all things were created in accordance with reason, but humankind in accordance with a different reason than the horse, for it is absurd to think this [i.e., that they were created in accordance with the same reason]. Individual things, then, have been created in accordance with their own reasons. But where should these reasons be thought to exist if not in the very mind of the creator? For it is sacrilegious to imagine that there was something located outside of himself that he looked at, so that in accordance with it he could create what he created. If the reasons for all the things that will be created and that have been created are contained in the divine mind, and if there can be nothing in the divine mind that is not eternal and unchangeable, and if Plato refers to these principal reasons of things as ideas, then ideas not only exist but are themselves true because they are eternal and remain the same and unchangeable. It is by participation in them that a thing exists, in whatever way it exists.¹²⁷

C.5) God created some things (formless matter, the causal reasons of material things, angels, at least the soul of the first man) instantly from nothing and creates other things over time from the things originally created from nothing.

There is a created nature that comes from no other, that is, that comes from absolutely nothing, such as heaven and earth or, rather, all the matter of the whole worldly mass created along with the world. And there is a created nature that comes from another nature already created and existing, for example, the man from the mud of the earth, the woman from the man, a human being from parents.¹²⁸

C.6) All creatures are mutable (by virtue of B.1 and C.1).

And for this reason he alone is immutable, while all the things that he has made are mutable because he has made them from nothing.¹²⁹

Hence, since he [i.e., God] is immutable, it is not surprising if what he has made is not immutable but mutable, because it is not equal to him.¹³⁰

Nothing simple is changeable; everything created is changeable.¹³¹

And so, these latter [i.e., creatures] can change, either because of the will, as the rational creature could, or because of their own qualities, as the other things, precisely because they were made out of nothing, not out of God, though only God made them, that is, because they are

¹²⁷ Aug.Hipp. *Div.qu.* 46.2, transl. WSA 1/12, 60.

¹²⁸ Aug.Hipp. *An.et or.* 2.5, transl. WSA 1/23, 482.

¹²⁹ Aug.Hipp. *Nat.b.* 1, transl. WSA 1/19, 325.

¹³⁰ Aug.Hipp. *C.Fel.* 2.18, transl. WSA 1/19, 313.

¹³¹ Aug.Hipp. *Trin.* 6.8, transl. WSA 1/5, 211.

not the same thing as that nature which was not made and which, for this reason, is alone immutable.¹³²

All things, nonetheless, which were made, are mutable because they were made out of nothing; that is, they were not, and now they are, because God makes them.¹³³

C.7) Corporeal creatures are changeable in space and time, whereas incorporeal creatures are changeable only in time.

There is a nature mutable in terms of places and times, such as a body. There is also a nature mutable in no way in terms of places, by only in terms of times, such as the soul. And there is a nature which cannot be changed either in terms of places or in terms of times; this is God. What I have here said is mutable in some way is called a creature; what is immutable is the creator.¹³⁴

C.8) Creatures, compared to God, are not.

Contemplating other things below you, I saw that they do not in the fullest sense exist, nor yet are they completely non-beings: they are real because they are from you, but unreal inasmuch as they are not what you are. For that alone truly is, which abides unchangingly.¹³⁵

We must not on this account deny true existence to the things he has made, for to deny real existence to his creatures would be to insult their maker. Why did he make them, if anything he has made does not exist? And what did he make, if anything he made has no being? The things he has made do exist; yet, when we compare them with him, we know that he alone is true being. Thus he said, *I AM WHO I AM*, and, *Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, HE WHO IS has sent me to you*. He did not say, "I am the Lord, the omnipotent, the merciful, the just one," though, if he had said that, he would have spoken truly. Instead he set aside all those names that could be applied to God and answered that he was called Being-Itself, as though that were his name. *Thus shall you say*, he ordered, *HE WHO IS has sent me*. His very nature is to be, and so true is this that, when compared with him, all created things are as though they had no being. When not compared with him they do exist, for they derive their being from him, but compared with him they do not exist, because he is true being, unchangeable being, and this can be said of him alone.¹³⁶

Whatever else there is, in comparison with him it is not.¹³⁷

¹³² Aug.Hipp. *C.Iul.imp.* 5.44, transl. WSA 1/25, 569.

¹³³ Aug.Hipp. *C.Iul.imp.* 5.60, transl. WSA 1/25, 585.

¹³⁴ Aug.Hipp. *Ep.* 18.2, transl. WSA 2/1, 51.

¹³⁵ Aug.Hipp. *Conf.* 7.17, transl. WSA 1/1, 128.

¹³⁶ Aug.Hipp. *En.Ps.* 134.4, transl. WSA 3/20, 193.

¹³⁷ Aug.Hipp. *S.* 223/A.5, transl. WSA 3/6, 208.

C.9) Having been created from nothing, or from things created from nothing, creatures can tend towards nothing; that is to say, they can fail (deficere).

But you say to me: “Why are they failing?” Because they are subject to change. “Why are they subject to change?” Because they do not have being in the supreme degree. “Why not?” Because they are inferior to the one by whom they were made. “Who is it that made them?” The one who *is* in the supreme degree. “Who is that?” God, the unchanging Trinity, since he both made them through his supreme Wisdom and preserves them through his supreme Kindness.¹³⁸

But every defect tends toward destruction, and even if it is not clear that a particular thing comes to destruction it is, nonetheless, clear to everyone that destruction brings it to the point that it is no longer what it was. Hence, the soul concludes that things fail or can fail for no other reason than that they were made out of nothing.¹³⁹

D.1) The rational soul is changeable; therefore, it is a creature (by virtue of C.6); therefore, it is not of the same substance as God (by virtue of C.1).

Every soul, since it is something subject to change, and even though it is a magnificent creature, is still a creature. Even though it is better than the body, still it is something made. So then, every soul is subject to change; that is, in one moment it believes, in the next it does not believe; in one moment it wants something, in the next it does not; in one moment it is adulterous, in the next it is chaste; in one moment it is good, in the next it is bad; the soul is changeable.¹⁴⁰

D.2) The rational soul, being incorporeal, ‘is’ more than the body (by virtue of C.8).

God is an immutable spirit; a mutable spirit is a nature that has been made, but one better than a body.¹⁴¹

But if a body is only that which stands still or is moved through an area of space with some length, breadth and depth so that it occupies a larger place with a larger part of itself and a smaller place with a smaller part and is smaller in a part than in the whole, then the soul is not a body.¹⁴²

D.3) The rational soul ‘is’ more if it comes close to God, whereas it ‘is’ less if it moves away from Him.

For if the soul exists more fully when it is turned towards *ratio* and clings to it (it does so because it clings to something unchanging which is the truth, and this is being in the greatest and most fundamental fashion), when it turns away from the truth it has less being, and that is loss.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Aug.Hipp. *Vera rel.* 35, transl. WSA 1/8, 51.

¹³⁹ Aug.Hipp. *Ep.* 118.15, transl. WSA 2/2, 113.

¹⁴⁰ Aug.Hipp. *Io.ev.tr.* 39.8, transl. WSA 3/12, 592.

¹⁴¹ Aug.Hipp. *Nat.b.* 1, transl. WSA 1/19, 325.

¹⁴² Aug.Hipp. *Orig.an.* 4, transl. WSA 2/3, 80.

¹⁴³ Aug.Hipp. *Imm.an.* 12, transl. Watson, *Augustine: Soliloquies*, 143.

In that way the soul perceives that it is less stable to the extent that it clings less to God, who exists in the highest way, and that he exists in the highest way because he neither makes progress nor fails because of any mutability. The soul perceives, however, that it profits from that change by which it makes progress so that it clings to God perfectly and that the change that consists in its failing is full of defects.¹⁴⁴

To these propositions we can add, for the sake of completeness, a fifth group, formed by those that summarise Augustine's meontology (i.e., his doctrine of nothingness):

E.1) The term 'nothing' has a meaning, either because it means the state of mind in noticing the absence of something or because it means that which absolutely does not exist and yet is thinkable by deprivation with respect to that which exists, as the void is thinkable by deprivation with respect to that which is full.

Shall we, instead of saying that this word signifies a thing which does not exist, rather say that it signifies some state of the mind when it sees no reality, yet finds, or thinks that it finds, that the reality does not exist?¹⁴⁵

People who think like this pay insufficient attention to the way in which all sorts of things unknown may be understood through their contraries which are known, so that no hearer is flummoxed when the names of things that do not exist are introduced into the conversation. What does not exist at all, I mean, is called '*nihil*' ['nothing']; and nobody fails to understand these two syllables who hears and speaks Latin. How so, if not because their common sense has a grasp of what does exist, and so recognizes what does not by subtracting it? In the same way too, when the word 'empty' is uttered, by considering the fullness of a body we understand 'empty' as meaning its contrary lack or subtraction, just as with our sense of hearing we make judgments not only about sounds and utterances, but also about silence.¹⁴⁶

E.2) Nothingness does not exist at all; it is not something.

And for this reason nothing is neither a body nor a spirit, nor something that pertains to these substances, nor any formed matter, nor an empty place, nor darkness itself, but absolutely nothing.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Aug.Hipp. *Ep.* 118.15, transl. WSA 2/2, 113.

¹⁴⁵ Aug.Hipp. *Mag.* 3, transl. J.M. Colleran, *Saint Augustine: The Greatness of the Soul, The Teacher* (New York & Mahwah, New Jersey: The Newman Press, 1950) 133.

¹⁴⁶ Aug.Hipp. *Gn litt.* 8.34, transl. WSA 1/13, 366, modified.

¹⁴⁷ Aug.Hipp. *C.Iul.imp.* 5.44, transl. WSA 1/25, 569.

5. *Conclusions: Similarities and differences between the ontology of Augustine and that of the Eleatics*

If we assume for Augustinian ontology the set of propositions just enunciated and for Eleatic ontology the propositions laid out in the earlier section “The main tenets of Eleatic ontology,” we can finally compare them, observing similarities and differences. I will limit myself to the most macroscopic similarities and differences, which I will present in extreme synthesis.

Let us start with the similarities. Both ontologies argue that being, considered in its most proper meaning, does not admit of becoming in itself. What ‘is’ in the proper sense does not change, whereas ‘becoming’ means precisely changing. From this point of view, all the Eleatic predicates of being that imply immutability, or that are implied by it, are accepted in principle in Augustine’s ontology. Examples of this are presentness and eternity. Augustine and the Eleatics also agree that nothingness does not exist at all.

However, alongside these similarities, which can be seen immediately, there are equally obvious differences, the greatest of which is undoubtedly the idea of creation as bringing into being of what did not exist before. For Eleatic ontology, this is impossible, whereas for Augustine, creation is precisely the act by virtue of which something other than God’s immutable being exists. That which changes – even if it ‘is’ not in the most meaningful sense of this verb, which belongs exclusively to God – nevertheless has a lower degree of being, because it is not a pure nothing. Change is not only apparent but real: Creatures really change. If ‘to be’ means to remain eternally identical to oneself by virtue of oneself, then only God ‘is’; but if ‘to be’ means ‘to be something real,’ ‘to exist’ or ‘to be there,’ then not only God but also creatures ‘are.’ Between the supreme being of God and nothingness (i.e., the absolute non-being), there is something intermediate, the creatures, which ‘are’ (because they exist) and ‘are not’ (because they do not remain). God therefore does not coincide with the totality of what exists, but He is only a part of this totality, the part to which the other parts owe their existence. The totality of beings does not constitute something one and homogeneous; it is diversified and articulated in a hierarchical way. It does not coincide with the intelligible, because in addition to the intelligible (incorporeal) beings there are the sensible (bodily) beings, which are located at the lowest level of the hierarchy. Besides, for Augustine, something can be born out of nothing, if the expression ‘out of nothing’ means ‘being derived from nothing pre-existent,’ because God Almighty can make creatures without obtaining them from anything

pre-existent, not from other creatures and not even from Himself. Having been drawn from nothing, creatures can also tend towards nothingness (i.e., fail and lose something of their reality).

The root of evil lies in this possibility for creatures to be deprived of part of their being and therefore of their goodness, that is, to be corrupted. For this reason, some beings may be defective, imperfect or corrupt; thus, no created being is completely perfect. In particular, the rational soul, which participates in divine stability if it adheres to God, can, by virtue of its free will, distract itself from the immutable Good that is God and turn to changing goods, which are not permanent and make the soul lose its participated stability; that is, they make it 'be' less. In Augustine's vision, all the moral life of the human soul and its destiny of happiness or unhappiness are based on the soul's ability to 'be' more or less, meaning to be spiritually united to God or separated from Him.

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