ROBERT WARCHAŁ
Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow
e-mail: robertwarchal@op.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9573-3818

# Contributions to the aesthetics of St. Augustine

**Abstract.** *The following article aims to resolve the fundamental question referring to the way ideas exist in Augustine's epistemology and also to familiarize the reader with contemporary interpretations of this issue. When framing his objectivist theory, Augustine drew on ancient traditions and the Bible, referring to deliberations on astronomy, cosmology and maths among others. In order for a work of art to be beautiful, it is necessary for human reason to perceive the right proportions in it, but their perfection does not depend solely on details and harmonious selection of parts, but also on something that links all these components to a mental idea. For Augustine, number is the principle of all things, but not in the sense of an arche, but in the sense of its presence in every being for example, the unity that the mind admires and of which it is itself an image. Its essence and meaning can only be found in God and therefore He is the first creator and greatest artist giving inspiration to all the arts. The thinker of Thagaste defined ideas as unalterable forms of things. In his view, all creation bears a certain trace of resemblance to God. That leads to a conclusion in the light of which every being is a greater or lesser implementation of the rules of res intelligibiles. The harmony of nature is of similar importance to him, as well as the beauty of the human body and mind. Facing the question of the ontological meaning of beauty author upholds its objectivity alongside other transcendental properties of being. Unity, equality, number, rhythm, proportion and order constitute the core elements of his aesthetics. The significance of Augustine's doctrine lies in the fact that immaterial ideas enable achieving perfection in spiritual life, and hence bring us closer to the Creator.*

**Keywords:** *St. Augustine, being, aesthetics, human, idea, soul*

The concepts of beauty is in the areas relating to human sight and hearing, we also speak of beautiful speech, thoughts and feelings, and if we go even fur-

ther, there are also beautiful deeds and beautiful ideas. What is it, then, that makes bodies beautiful in appearance and that hearing admits to sounds, that makes them harmonious, and how is it that this phenomenon delights people and motivates them to action, while often eliciting tears? After all, some things, are beautiful not because of their subjects, but by virtue of participation, and others are beautiful by themselves. Let's analyze how Augustine explained these phenomenal things.

The issue of ideas was an extremely important topic for Augustine, both from the theoretical and practical side. Not surprisingly, this issue continues to interest scientists, who do not express a unanimous position on it. The dispute over universals echoed primarily in the Middle Ages in connection with various theological issues, but it is still current today, although in a slightly altered form. On this subject, Bernard Kälin,[1] Joseph Mausbach,[2] Johannes Hessen[3] and Martin Grabmann.[4]

Speaking of the real existence of invariable truths, it is impossible to overlook the fact that, in Augustine's view, ideas produced in the human mind do not have the same character as God's ideas. The author is less concerned with the formation of notions than with explaining the meaning of general truths. In his theory, there is no problem of universals or even the controversy arising from the considerations of John Locke and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In other words, Augustine had no need to explain the problem of universals. A question arises that the author himself does not directly answer: what does a concept become in his doctrine? According to Étienne Gilson we know of no theory of generalization in Augustinianism.[5]

Augustine considers the issue at hand on a mathematical and mental noesis. About the theorems relating to arithmetic he says (*De libero arbitrio*, II, VIII-20):

> Age, nunc attende, et dic mihi utrum inveniatur aliquid quod omnes ratiocinantes sua quisque ratione atque mente communiter videant, cum illud quod videtur praesto sit omnibus, nec in usum eorum quibus praesto est commutetur [...] quod ratio et veritas numeri omnibus ratiocinantibus praesto est, ut omnis eam computator sua quisque ratione et intellegentia conetur apprehendere; et alius id facilius, alius difficilius possit, alius omnino non possit: cum tamen ipsa aequaliter omnibus se praebeat valentibus eam capere.

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[1] Cf. B. Kälin, *Die Erkenntnislehre des hl. Augustinus*, Buch und Kunstdruckerei Louis Ehrli in Sarnen 1921, p. 64.

[2] Cf. J. Mausbach, *Die Ethik des heiligen Augustinus*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg  im Breisgau 1929, p. 136.

[3] Cf. S. Zabielski, *Święty Augustyn i fenomenologia. Historycznofilozoficzna analiza stanowiska Jana Hessena w kwestii intuicji augustyńskiej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2003, p. 28.

[4] Cf. M. Grabmann, *Des hl. Augustinus, Quaestio de ideis*, Mittelalterliches Geistesleben, Bd. II, München 1936, pp. 28–29.

[5] Cf. É. Gilson, *Wprowadzenie do nauki świętego Augustyna*, transl. Zygmunt Jakimiak, Pax, Warszawa 1953, p. 144.

As Józef Brudz rightly points out, some of these notions persist permanently in our mind.[6] Of course, this does not mean eternity in the strict sense, as if ideas have an infinite existence without beginning or end, but a broader understanding referring to their immutability. For Augustine, the truth embodied in numerical relations does not belong to the realm of sensory cognition, since viewing it belongs collectively to all human beings.[7] Of sorts, a person can arrive at certain statements through empiricism, but their generality always remains transcendent to the viewer, in other words, the absence of sense cognition cannot affect the veracity of verdicts derived from arithmetic. The above views seem justified, especially when we consider the statements of the author himself, who defines ideas by *res intelligibiles* (mental realities). In one of his works, Augustine declares (*De Trinitate*, XII, XIV, 23):

> Non enim sic fuerunt ut esse desinerent, aut sic futura sunt quasi nunc non sint, sed idipsum esse semper habuerunt, semper habitura sunt. Manent autem, non tamquam in spatiis locorum fixa veluti corpora; sed in natura incorporali sic intellegibilia praesto sunt mentis aspectibus [...]. Neque enim sicut manet, verbi gratia, quadrati corporis incorporalis et immutabilis ratio, sic in ea manet hominis cogitatio; si tamen ad eam sine phantasia spatii localis potuit pervenire.[8]

This position was well understood by Martin Grabmann. The German theologian rightly emphasized that Augustine was not the first thinker to locate eternal ideas in the mind of God. Philo of Alexandria had already presented a similar concept earlier, saying that the world of ideas takes place in the divine Logos.[9]

In Hippo's writings we find a rich nomenclature by which the author defines this issue. Most often he uses the terms like *ideae*, *formae* and *species*. It is clear from Augustine's statements that ideas are immutable and perpetual.[10] The above concept has been argued on the grounds that *res intelligibiles* participate directly in the very nature of God. According to the Bishop of Hippona, the patterns-formulae of things are transcendent to the human person, which consequently translates into the view that man has no influence on their nature. The above interpretation is justified, especially when we consider the statements of some scholars. Of particular note is the commentary of Frederick Copleston, who writes: "Just as a mathematical number begins with unity and ends with a number that is itself some kind of

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[6] Cf. J. Brudz, *Dowód św. Augustyna na istnienie Boga z prawd wiecznych*, in: *Alma Mater Tarnoviensis. Księga pamiątkowa z okazji 150 rocznicy założenia Instytutu Teologicznego i Seminarium Duchownego w Tarnowie (1821–1971)*, eds P. Bednarczyk, F. Gawlik, Kuria Diecezjalna, Tarnów 1972, p. 106.

[7] Święty Augustyn, *O wolnej woli*, II, VIII-24, in: *Dialogi filozoficzne*, Pax, Warszawa 1953, transl. Anna Trombala, vol. 3, p. 135.

[8] Święty Augustyn, *O Trójcy Świętej*, XII, XIV, 23, transl. Maria Stokowska, introduction Józef Tischner; afterwords and footnotes Jan Maria Szymusiak, Znak, Kraków 1996.

[9] Cf. S. Zabielski, *Święty Augustyn i fenomenologia…*, p. 32.

[10] Święty Augustyn, *Księga osiemdziesięciu trzech kwestii*, 46, 2, transl. Ida Radziejowska, Wydawnictwo Marek Derewecki, Kęty 2012, p. 83.

whole number, so the hierarchy of entities-begins with the highest Unity, with God, who brings into existence and is reflected in more or less perfect beings."[11] It is not, of course, a matter of seeing the ideas themselves like a direct insight, for their cognition is not a direct view of God. As Franz Körner rightly mentions, the cognition of these patterns comes about through thought focusing on itself.[12] In view of this, it is in vain to find in the views of the Bishop of Hippona the principle of *esse est percipi*. Such a position may resemble some of the assumptions of subjective idealism, which also assumes in external, object cognition the forms imposed on experience by the conditions of the subject himself. A more extensive development of this theme will be included in one of George Berkeley's Works, where reflective knowledge, like Augustine's, is separated from sensual object cognition.[13] Admittedly, we can assume that senses is a product of the soul, but only on the assumption that its cause is in the external world.[14] Augustine makes a distinction between cognized things, which we discover through the help of the body's senses, and mental ones, given through intuition or reason. He explicitly states (*De Trinitate*, XII, XV, 24):

> Unde Plato ille philosophus nobilis persuadere conatus est vixisse hic animas hominum, et antequam ista corpora gererent; et hinc esse quod ea quae discuntur, reminiscuntur potius cognita, quam cognoscuntur nova. Sed si recordatio haec esset rerum antea cognitarum, non utique omnes vel pene omnes cum illo modo interrogarentur, hoc possent [...] sed potius credendum est mentis intellectualis ita conditam esse naturam, ut rebus intellegibilibus naturali ordine, disponente Conditore, subiuncta sic ista videat in quadam luce sui generis incorporea, quemadmodum oculus carnis videt quae in hac corporea luce circumadiacent, cuius lucis capax eique congruens est creatus. Non enim et ipse ideo sine magistro alba et nigra discernit, quia ista iam noverat antequam in hac carne crearetur.

Based on the above statement, it should be said that his understanding of ideas is not identical to Plato's theory of reminiscence. This is because in Augustine's philosophy, cognition does not mean recalling the original state of things even before incarnation.

An interesting position on this subject was presented in his work by J. Brudz. The approach that the author proposes differs from the previous ones. In fact, from his term it appears that some mental principles may be the product of man. In the words of the author human reason captures the reality around us, the products of

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[11] F. Copleston, *Historia Filozofii*, vol. II: *Od Augustyna do Szkota*, transl. Sylwester Zalewski, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 2000, p. 93.

[12] Cf. S. Zabielski, *Święty Augustyn i fenomenologia...*, p. 37.

[13] See: G. Berkeley, *Alkifron*, transl. Mikołaj Olszewski, "Biblioteka Europejska", Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, Kęty 2008, p. 255.

[14] Cf. É. Gilson, *Wprowadzenie do nauki świętego Augustyna*, p. 107.

this activity of the mind are concepts, or ideas.[15] Some of these, St. Augustine further reasoned, do not arise in our mind only when we perceive a given object, of which the idea is the spiritual image, nor do they cease to exist when the object disappears, but continue to abide in our mind. For they do not imply the actual existence of the object, but only express the correspondence of the essential characteristics of the concept and notions. According to J. Brudz, the starting point is eternal truths in the sense of concepts and judgments. The author argues that the way in which ideas exist takes place on two levels: ontic and intellectual. The first attributes the patterns in question to participation in the nature of God, while the second refers exclusively to the affirmative-cognitive order. J. Brudz concludes that eternal truths understood as immutable judgments have no ontological basis in Augustine's philosophy, since they exist only in human mind.[16] A consequence of this view is the recognition of the semiological parallel between the role and property of the sign.

The above examples should be considered philosophical interpretations, since in fact there are no suggested divisions in Augustine between synthetic judgments and objective truth which is the fundamental issue of the Christian religion. The last term refers to the Hebrew word *emet*, which is related to the word *amen* and indicates living faithfulness.[17] There is an important difference between the formula referring to what the corresponding object should be and truth in theological terms, for a different starting point is taken by philosophy and another by Scripture, which understands this concept in a more sublime way, i.e. in the person of Jesus Christ. To underscore his point, Augustine refers to man's self-consciousness and direct experience; in his view, the soul can attain God through an act of thought, since truth is accessible to the human mind, albeit its cognition takes place in a multidimensional manner, i.e. through the involvement of the mind, heart and will. From this principle, the philosopher draws interesting conclusions, in light of which the issue under discussion will be defined in Christological terms (*De civitate Dei*, XI, II,):

> Sed quia ipsa mens, cui ratio et intellegentia naturaliter inest [...] fide primum fuerat imbuenda atque purganda. In qua ut fidentius ambularet ad veritatem, ipsa veritas, Deus Dei Filius, homine adsumpto, non Deo consumpto, eamdem constituit et fundavit fidem, ut ad hominis Deum iter esset homini per hominem Deum. Hic est enim mediator Dei et hominum, homo Christus Iesus.

An analysis of Augustine's work entitles us to the conclusion that we come to the knowledge of ideas and immutable truths under the influence of the action of the artificer, who himself possesses these qualities in an indispensable way. As in Plotinus' philosophy, ideas are not a sensual multiplicity that can be referred to

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[15] J. Brudz, *Dowód św. Augustyna na istnienie Boga z prawd wiecznych*, in: *Alma Mater Tarnoviensis...*, pp. 103–104.

[16] Cf. ibidem, p. 108.

[17] Cf. G. O'Collins, E.G. Farrugia, *Leksykon pojęć teologicznych i kościelnych*, transl. Jan Ożóg, Barbara Żak, WAM, Kraków 2002, p. 256.

self-contained things. The Christian writer accentuates the universal nature of the laws that relate to the cognitive order, reaching out, as it were, to the mental nature of man. As a result, it is possible to replicate them in a certain type of creation, but not in a complete way, since, insight into their immutable nature does not mean that we come to know God's essence directly. It is correct to say that, for Augustine, these concepts are the basic vehicles of theological truth.

The issue of beauty is a secondary topic for the Bishop of Hippona and is not a primary way in his philosophy. However, it should be noted that Augustine does not reject considerations of a purely aesthetic nature, i.e. he discusses the issue in various aspects, among which he touches on the topics of number, similarity, proportion, harmony and order, linking them to existential experience. The reference to the mathematics has a peculiarity somewhat less theological which means that the author dealt with it even in the pre-Christian period.[18]

Addressing the question of aesthetic experience, it is necessary to state one very important fact and that is that beauty never remains at the level of the image, but refers to consciousness and the action of the mind, which gives the senses a certain content.[19] In his views, the author link the Platonic idea of beauty with the biblical exegesis of the different status occurring between the Creator and the recreator.[20] In this context, John Paul II mentions that God's action is proper only to the Absolut, while the artist uses something that already exists and to which he gives form and meaning.[21] The main question is a metaphysical category for Augustine, since it exists in an objective way.

Augustine's statements indicate that the essential qualities of beauty are unity and the concept of harmony. All other formal qualities remain certain aspects, but only to the extent that they result in unity in the viewed object. In one of the dialogues, the author writes (De vera religione, XXX-55):

> Sed cum in omnibus artibus convenientia placeat, qua una salva et pulchra sunt omnia; ipsa vero convenientia aequalitatem unitatemque appetat, vel similitudine parium partium, vel gradatione disparium: quis est qui summam aequalitatem vel similitudinem in corporibus inveniat, audeatque dicere, cum diligenter consideraverit quodlibet corpus vere ac simpliciter unum esse [...]. Porro ipsa vera aequalitas ac similitudo, atque ipsa vera et prima unitas, non oculis carneis, neque ullo tali sensu, sed mente intellecta conspicitur.

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[18] Cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki*, vol. 2: *Estetyka średniowieczna*, Arkady, Warszawa 1989, p. 49.

[19] See: J. P. Manoussakis, *Theophany and Indication*, *Reconciling Augustinian and Palamite Aesthetics*, "Modern Theology" 2009, no. 26/1, p. 77.

[20] Cf. Święty Augustyn, *O wierze prawdziwej*, XXXII-59, in: Święty Augustyn, *Dialogi i pisma filozoficzne*, vol. 4, transl. Jerzy Ptaszyński, Pax, Warszawa 1954, p. 122.

[21] Cf. Jan Paweł II, *List Ojca świętego Jana Pawła II do Artystów*, Drukarnia Watykańska, Watykan 1999, pp. 4–5.

In this statement, mental action is classified using the categories of reference and proportion, that is, the common harmony of the various elements. The bishop of Hippo attempts to define aesthetic value, for this purpose he refers to the Bible and personal experience.[22] In his opinion, properly selected proportions and their conformity speak in favor of the viewed phenomenon. According to this state of affairs, unity is the principle of all beauty, hence it may happen that the assessment of the value presented is not decided by one part, but by their relationship to each other. Thus, it seems that the concept of measure and numbers is not for the author a principle in the strict sense. The above thought applies not only to what we mean by a visible image, but also to symphonic quality and poety.[23] This position is in line with the theory of transcendentals in the sense that man will never exhaust the values associated with the face of beauty, which does not remain a subjective experience of the individual, but is a mental and objective reality.

According to the Bible, the world is treated as Opus Dei, which is also the first work of art. There is no doubt that Augustine, when considering the issues at hand, drew not only on the achievements of Scripture, but also referred to ancient philosophy, especially to the thought of the Pythagoreans and the doctrine of Plato.[24] In his philosophy, he combines the experience of beauty with the Platonic understanding of the triad, in which three inseparable elements (truth, good and beauty) constitute one reality. However, in contrast to the views of the Greek philosopher, Augustine shows that the idea of goodness can elevate the human soul to the level of evangelical virtue expressed in biblical instruction.

In his writings, the author attempts to define mathematical aesthetics by means of the proper order and reference of the various parts.[25] After all, the ancient theory of γνῶσις is to understand certain patterns, the evaluation of which is not a simple reflection of reality given by the senses, but always carries a specific meaning, which can be described as existential-phenomenological. Understood in this way, the issue is the subject of all Augustinian aesthetics. The philosopher saw in the concept of unity the archetype of all beauty, but not in the sense of noetic reductionism, since the value of creation always remains a secondary relation to the Creator.

It is also characteristic of his thought that we perceive beauty through the idea of order, but it is not only about the sensations of narrow empiricism, but primarily about the experience, which has epistemic specificity, referring to the sphere of human notions, abstractions, as well as intuition.[26] Understood in this way, the issue

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[22] Cf. Święty Augustyn, *O wierze prawdziwej*, XLI-77, p. 135.

[23] See: Święty Augustyn, *O muzyce*, XII-34, in: Święty Augustyn, *Dialogi i pisma filozoficzne*, vol. 4, transl. Danuta Turkowska, Pax, Warszawa 1954, vol. 4, s. 53. Cf. Święty Augustyn, *O wolnej woli*, II, XVI-42, p. 153.

[24] Cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki...*, p. 50.

[25] Cf. Święty Augustyn, *O muzyce*, XIII-38, p. 56.

[26] Cf. Święty Augustyn, *Wyznania*, IV, 13, transl. Zygmunt Kubiak, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1987, p. 77.

is the difference of opposites. The Tagasta thinker cites this rule when he Wites: "Ita quasi ex antithetis quodammodo, quod nobis etiam in oratione iucundum est, ex contrariis, omnium simul rerum pulchritudo figuratur."[27] The issue of appropriateness defines the antithesis relationship for the sake of utility, since the same thing can be appropriate for one purpose and inappropriate for another. Difference and contrast can also determine the beauty of a world made of opposites. The mental factor, consolidating the human imagination, makes it possible to properly recognize the cause of distinctiveness of individual things. The Christian writer distinguishes between two aspects in the matter at hand: sensory and noumenological, and although he does not omit important topics relating to the category of perceptions, the latter plays a decisive role. In the dialogue De vera religijne (XXXII-60), the author uses the following example:

> Nunc vero cum dicit corporibus: Vos quidem nisi aliqua unitas contineret, nihil essetis, sed rursus si vos essetis ipsa unitas, corpora non essetis; recte illi dicitur: Unde istam nosti unitatem, secundum quam iudicas corpora, quam nisi videres, iudicare non posses quod eam non impleant: si autem his corporeis oculis eam videres, non vere diceres, quamquam eius vestigio teneantur, longe tamen ab ea distare? Nam istis oculis non nisi corporalia vides: mente igitur eam videmus.

The second important issue in aesthetic experience is the volitional-existential moment. The cognitive view of *res intelligibiles* involves not only the will of the viewer, but also has an additional quality, namely an ontological modality of existence. Augustine's proposal transcends any subjective horizon of interpretation, which means that beauty is not merely a creation and construction of thought. Probably, man creates works of art, but only in the sense that they are influenced by the natural world and God. Augustine writes about this as follows: „quoniam pulchra traiecta per animas in manus artificiosas ab illa pulchritudine veniunt, quae super animas est, cui suspirat anima mea die ac nocte."[28] In such an understanding, the experience of art transcends subject-object dualism and is turned toward an idea that transcends the experiencer. The way of beauty has another but equally important characteristic, namely rhythm.[29] Augustine distinguishes five categories, among which he describes the functions of speaking and singing, as well as hearing, linking them to the activity of memory and will. The philosopher distinguishes the interior reason for the operation of judgments from the domain of perception, the latter he defines as an innate predisposition that affects the intellectual analysis of all other sounds.[30]

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[27] Święty Augustyn, *O porządku*, I, VII-18, in: *Dialogi filozoficzne*, vol. 1, transl. Józef Modrzejewski, Pax, Warszawa 1953, p. 161.

[28] Święty Augustyn, *Wyznania*, X, 34, p. 257.

[29] Cf. Święty Augustyn, *O muzyce*, IV-5, p. 25.

[30] Cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki*..., p. 53.

The bishop of Hippo did not deny the fact that in the created world there is also a place for what is referred to as ugliness. With him, the above notion is closely related to the theory of theodicy, according to which evil does not have a positive character, but is only the antithesis and ontic absence. In the author's view, every thing has some positive meaning, but spiritual beauty is more perfect than material aesthetics.[31] Thus, the premise of ugliness is the absence or departure from the idea of beauty. This ontological deduction clearly applies to the inferior being and therefore to the one that is conditioned.

In his writings, the philosopher does not reduce the value of art to one specific theory, since, as has been shown, his views and range of considerations encompass many separate areas beyond the problem under analysis.[32] The content of beauty is not just about viewing things with the senses alone, but is primarily concerned with the world of axiology, including the involvement of such qualities as truth and virtue. The key element of this doctrine becomes the pursuit of harmony of life and therefore the realization of God's beauty in human being. Augustine, referring to the First Letter of St. Peter, recommends the following (1 P, 3, 3–5): Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. This declaration is a major contribution to the overall perception of human nature, in which *musica humana* becomes a theological anthropology that enters the realm of eschatology, while *musica instrumentalis* extends the concept of harmony to a higher level of contemplation of God himself.[33]

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[31] Cf. Święty Augustyn, *O wierze prawdziwej*, XXXII, 59–60, pp. 122–123.

[32] See: J. Puzio, *Teoria poznania zmysłowego u św. Augustyna*, KUL, Lublin 1947, p. 41.

[33] Cf. A. Karpowicz-Zbińkowska, *Harmonia Bożego dzieła stwórczego w dialogach filozoficznych św. Augustyna*, "Studia Theologica Varsaviensia" 2006, no. 44/2, p. 84.

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