

Søren Kierkegaard under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus and Aurelius Augustine on Time, Eternity and Truth¹

Søren Kierkegaard sob o pseudônimo Johannes Climacus e Aurélio Agostinho acerca do tempo, da eternidade e da verdade

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the relevance of Aurelius Augustine (354-430) for the intellectual environment in which Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) lived, the studies concerning the relations between these two thinkers are still incipient. In this field of investigation, one of the most intriguing questions is the fact that Kierkegaard apparently changed his view of the Bishop of Hippo, going from admiration during the decade of 1840 to disapproval during the decade of 1850. This paper intends to examine how the problems of truth and of the relations between time and eternity, as approached by Augustine in his works *Confessions* and *The Teacher*, are strongly related to the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and how the arguments developed in these Augustinian books can be read as presuppositions of the arguments that support the Kierkegaardian idea of Absolute Paradox developed centuries later by the Danish philosopher in his book *Philosophical Fragments*, published under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus in 1844, when the thinker of Copenhagen still seemed to express a great admiration for the Roman-Berber priest of Late Antiquity.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Augustine, time, eternity, truth.

RESUMO

Apesar da importância de Aurélio Agostinho (354-430) para o meio intelectual no qual viveu Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), os estudos acerca das relações entre esses dois pensadores ainda são incipientes. Neste campo de investigação, uma das questões mais intrigantes é o fato de Kierkegaard aparentemente ter mudado sua apreciação sobre o Bispo de Hipona, passando da admiração na década de 1840 à desaprovação na década de 1850. Este artigo pretende examinar como os problemas da verdade e das relações entre tempo e eternidade, tais como abordados por Agostinho em suas obras *As Confissões* e *O Mestre*, estão fortemente relacionados à doutrina cristã da *creatio ex nihilo*, e como os argumentos desenvolvidos nesses livros de Agostinho podem ser lidos como

¹ Acknowledgement: Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret ved Københavns Universitet.

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pressupostos dos argumentos que sustentam a ideia kierkegaardiana de Paradoxo Absoluto, desenvolvida séculos mais tarde pelo filósofo dinamarquês em sua obra *Migalhas Filosóficas*, publicada sob o pseudônimo Johannes Climacus em 1844, quando o pensador de Copenhague parecia expressar ainda uma grande admiração pelo sacerdote romano-berbere da Antiguidade Tardia.

Palavras-chave: Kierkegaard, Agostinho, tempo, eternidade, verdade.

Introduction: Kierkegaard and Augustine

Like every European thinker of his time, Kierkegaard is an heir of the multiseccular cultural tradition that goes back to the earliest days of philosophy in ancient Greece. This Danish author produced a particularly vast work, in which he dialogues with many of the several interlocutors that take part in this great conversation called Western Philosophy. So, the possibilities of comparative research between Kierkegaard and other representatives of this tradition are abundant and such comparisons have been constantly made by the scholarly world throughout the years.

One of the many thinkers whose relations to Kierkegaard are worthy of being studied is Aurelius Augustine (354-430). This Roman Berber thinker was one of the best-known Fathers of the Church, and his works are among the fundamental writings of Christian thinking. His influence in the tradition is felt both directly in the several commentaries on his works throughout the centuries and indirectly in the long-lasting discussion of philosophical and theological ideas that go back to the arguments found in his works.

In this sense, the relations between the ideas of Kierkegaard, the ideas of Augustine and Augustinianism can be considered under two aspects. On one hand, Kierkegaard makes direct references to the Bishop of Hippo, both in his published works and in other texts like his journals. On the other hand, there is in Kierkegaard's thought a discussion of problems and a development of arguments that can be traced back to questions first presented to the tradition by Augustine.

However, concerning the academic discussion of Augustine and Kierkegaard, as Robert Puchniak says, "one finds surprisingly few resources, though what has been written is certainly rich with insight" (Puchniak, 2008, p. 15). In fact, the list of secondary literature about the relations between Kierkegaard and Augustine is not extensive (Puchniak, 2008, p. 21-22), and not many contemporary researchers dedicate themselves to this subject. The names of Lee Barrett, George Pattison and the aforementioned Robert Puchniak can be highlighted. Another scholar worth mentioning, who wrote about this theme some decades ago, is Jørgen Pedersen. In his text *Augustine and Augustinianism* he wrote:

When SK's relation to Augustine claims special attention, it does so not only because

of his own direct, though limited knowledge of the great Christian thinker and Church Father; nor because of his sporadic, yet important, estimates of him; nor because of the interest which will always be aroused by a direct and systematic comparison of the two great representatives of spiritual life, two of the most distinguished representatives of Christian faith. In the juxtaposition of Augustine, – the bishop in his church, in his work with his practical contribution and achievement, the advocate of the growing church unified on its way to the celestial city of God – and SK – the individual and solitary figure confronted with Christianity in crisis, break up and decline – in this juxtaposition, there is also a special and comprehensive historical coherence, a perspective of tradition and idea which brings into consideration many aspects of Augustinian spirit and thought (Pedersen, 1981, p. 54).

The relations between Kierkegaard and Augustine, therefore, can be investigated in two major ways. There is the possibility of analyzing Kierkegaardian texts that make direct reference to Augustine, to quotes of Augustine or to themes and ideas clearly related to Augustinianism; and there is also the possibility of a comparative investigation of aspects of both authors' ideas in which the "juxtaposition" and the "historical coherence" mentioned by Pedersen are identifiable, even in writings of the Danish author that make no direct reference to that Roman priest.

The study of the relations between these two thinkers can also emphasize two different kinds of approach. One is the broader and more general study of both thinkers' thought as a whole, like the already quoted texts by Pedersen and Puchniak, or Lee Barrett's recently published book, *Eros and Self-Emptying* (Barrett, 2013). The other approach is the comparative analysis of one specific problem or philosophical-theological subject in both authors, like in George Pattison's article *Johannes Climacus and Aurelius Augustinus on Recollecting the Truth* (Pattison, 1994).

The studies that comparatively investigate the ideas of Augustine and Kierkegaard can certainly find points of convergence, as stated by Pedersen's words quoted above. However, some divergences can be found among scholars concerning some specific issues, like how much of Kierkegaard's

knowledge about Augustine came from a direct reading of the works of the Bishop of Hippo and how much was derived from the reading of secondary literature or from Kierkegaard's familiarity with academic discussions about Augustinianism that took place in his time. Lee Barrett, for example, emphasizes Kierkegaard's familiarity with the several debates and interpretations of Augustine's works in the philosophical and theological academic discussions of that time, pointing out that echoes of these debates can be noticed, for example, in the discussion about Pelagianism and hereditary sin in Haufniensis' *The Concept of Anxiety* (Barrett, 2013). Puchniak, in turn, emphasizes the profound thematic and argumentative similarities between works like *The Sickness unto Death* and the *Confessions*, concluding that this well-known book by the Bishop of Hippo is a direct source for Kierkegaard (Puchniak, 2011, p. 184; 2007, p. 14-15). The already quoted text by Pedersen, in turn, seems to be closer to Lee Barrett's opinion when it states that "his knowledge of Augustine is always obtained mainly from manuals and summaries" (Pedersen, 1981, p.71), or that "his knowledge of Augustine is essentially based on secondary and scattered sources" (Pedersen, 1981, p. 60), even taking into consideration that Kierkegaard had purchased the complete works of Augustine in 1843 (Pedersen, 1981, p. 60).

Another point of discussion is about the esteem Kierkegaard had for Augustine. The direct mentions of Augustine in Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers* are not numerous, and in them one can read the expression of quite different judgments about the Bishop of Hippo. The most evident contrast can be seen when one compares a journal entry made in 1848 with another one made in 1854:

But reduplication is almost never seen. I really do not know one single religious author (except perhaps Augustine) who actually reduplicates his thought (SKS 20, 418, in Puchniak, 2007, p. 198).

[...]

Augustine has nevertheless done incalculable harm. The whole system of doctrine through the centuries relies essentially upon him – and he has confused the concept of "faith" (SKS 25, 432, in Puchniak, 2007, p. 202).

This contrast makes Puchniak conclude that Kierkegaard's opinion about Augustine was complex, with a mixture of criticism, when Augustine behaves as an apologist and indoctrinator, and admiration, when Augustine reduplicates "his thought with existential pathos in his writing" (Puchniak, 2007, p. 16). Pedersen, on the other hand, suggests that Kierkegaard's appreciation of Augustine could possibly have changed during his life since Pedersen claims that the Danish author's agreement with the thought of the Bishop of Hippo reached a "climax" with the aforementioned journal entry of 1848 (Pedersen, 1981, p. 59). Indeed, it is not absurd to think that Kierkegaard could have changed his appreciation of Augustine, considering

the events of the Danish author's last years. It is noticeable that until 1851 the mentions of Augustine in Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers* are not expressions of disapproval or criticism. However, after 1851 Kierkegaard makes severe criticisms of Augustine like the one quoted above. Consider, for example, this statement made in 1854:

Take the much acclaimed Augustine! Somewhere he argues with the Donatists something like this: What do a dozen men like you think you are against the whole Christian Church, as if a dozen men like you possessed the truth. O Socrates, can this be called a philosopher! He argues concerning truth on the basis of numbers. And a Christian thinker! (SKS 26, 31, in Puchniak, 2007, p. 204-205).

Even considering all the differences between the two historical contexts of the end of the Roman Empire and the Golden Age of Denmark, there is an analogy, at least regarding the argument on the basis of number, between Kierkegaard's position in the polemics he waged against the Danish Church during the last years of his life and the position of the Donatists towards the Church represented by the Bishop of Hippo. Therefore, even if this hypothesis is not fully demonstrable, it is also not impossible that Kierkegaard, in his last years, changed his former mostly positive opinion about Augustine.

The purpose of this paper is not to give an answer to these questions, even though they must be taken into consideration when someone intends to think about the relations between Kierkegaard's and Augustine's ideas. The aim of this study is to propose a reflection about the affinities between these two thinkers' ideas concerning a specific and very relevant theme in Kierkegaard's thought: the idea of Absolute Paradox as it is developed by Johannes Climacus in his book *Philosophical Fragments*. The discussions mentioned above are relevant considering that the intention here is to emphasize a specific idea developed in a specific work published in 1844, during the period when, according to the aforementioned hypothesis, Kierkegaard's view of Augustine was more favorable. This hypothesis will be taken into consideration along with the existing juxtaposition and historical coherence, as Pedersen puts it, between several aspects of those thinkers' thought.

Considering that the Kierkegaardian idea of Absolute Paradox is indissolubly linked with the problem of the distinction between time and eternity, as well as to the notion of truth, these subjects are going to be discussed here comparing the perspectives of Climacus and Augustine about them. Although several other texts of Kierkegaard and Augustine can be related to these subjects (and will be quoted here), this presentation will focus on three main writings: Johannes Climacus' *Philosophical Fragments*, the Eleventh Book of Augustine's *Confessions* and Augustine's *De Magistro*, or *The Teacher*.

Time and eternity

In his article *Of Time and Eternity*, Louis Dupré makes the following statement: “In contrast to the Greeks and the ‘moderns,’ Christianity presents the eternal *as distinct from the temporal*” (Dupré, 1985, p. 125). This statement may sound as an oversimplification of the way Greeks and “moderns” deal with time and eternity, but it points out an important feature of Christian thought and can be taken as a starting point for the comparison between Kierkegaard’s and Augustine’s approach to this theme.

A complete and absolute distinction between time and eternity is a logical condition for the Paradox presented by Climacus to be truly absolute. The absoluteness of the distinction between time and eternity is a logical premise of the paradox and is also a corollary of the arguments developed by Climacus and Augustine in two texts: the Interlude of *Philosophical Fragments* and the Eleventh Book of the *Confessions*. One could object to this claim by saying that to establish a distinction between time and eternity is not the main purpose of both texts, since Augustine intends to deal primarily with the analysis of the first verse of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” and Climacus intends to refute the idea that the past is more necessary than the future. However, it is pertinent to quote Paul Ricoeur here:

[...] the analysis of time is set within a meditation on the relations between eternity and time, inspired by the first verse of Genesis, *in principio fecit Deus...* In this sense, to isolate the analysis of time from this meditation is to do violence to the text (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 5).

In a certain way, what Ricoeur said about Augustine’s text is also applicable to the Interlude, since these relations between time and eternity are fundamental elements, even though implicitly, in Climacus’ text, and the similarities in the way they are developed in both texts are noticeable in some important points.

Two of these points must be highlighted. First, there is the “aporetical character of the pure reflection on time” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 5) of any attempt to fully understand time within existence and history. Considering the existent human being’s immersion in time and the fact that time is one of their constitutive elements, it is impossible for the human understanding to fully encompass or define time. Second, even if neither time nor eternity can be completely apprehended by the intellect, it is possible to establish a qualitative distinction between them.

Beginning with Augustine’s argument, one can see that his point of departure is the distinction between God and creation. If God is absolute perfection, He is not subject to changes and variations. Heaven and earth, however, “are changeable and variable” (PL 32, *Confessionum* XI, 4)³. According to Étienne Gilson, when he comments on the distinction between Manichaeism and Christianity in Augustine’s thought, “between the divine and the changeable, therefore, the opposition is irreducible” (Gilson, 2010, p. 358). What is unchangeable cannot change, and therefore creation, where change and corruption are easily observed, cannot be originated from the substance of God. If so, either God would be corruptible or creation would be incorruptible. The only logical solution to such a problem is the affirmation of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation from nothing.

A cosmology that presupposes creation from nothing and that presupposes an absolute distinction between time and eternity certainly raises the difficulty involved in the implicit idea that creation had an initial moment in time. In a cosmology based on the Neoplatonic assumption that the world is an emanation of the Divine and, therefore, that it is part of the substance of the Divinity, this difficulty is not so intense, since the opposition between Divinity and eternity on one side and world and time on the other is not posited as a problem.

Because of this, Christians were often confronted by Manicheans and Skeptics with questions like the one Augustine exposes: “What was God doing before he created heaven and earth?” (PL 32, *Confessionum* XI, 10). His answer to this question is simple: “What I don’t know, I don’t know” (PL 32, *Confessionum* XI, 12). In doing so, Augustine expresses the limits of his knowledge. However, he is capable of developing his argument based on the premises previously established. First, God’s will is unchangeable because it is part of Him. Time, on the other hand, presupposes change. If God is the creator of all things and if time is the very sphere of change in which created things have their history, then time must be a creature. With such realization, the Skeptic and Manichean question is now devoid of meaning. In other writings, Augustine also expresses this conclusion, like in his *Unfinished Literal Commentary about Genesis*, where he says “every creature has a beginning and time is a creature, and therefore it had a beginning [...] and it is not coeternal with God” (PL 34, *De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber*, 3), or in *The City of God*, where the association of time and motion is discussed, and time is understood as a consequence of the creation of moving beings (PL 41, *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos Libri XXII*, 15-16).

Then, from this finding, Augustine can think about other problems that come from the realization that time is a creature. The first one is the very definition of time. Not feeling capable of defining time, Augustine tries to analyze

³ References to Augustine’s writings are from Jacques Migne’s edition, *Patrologia Latina* (PL, followed by the volume, the work’s title and the notation), easily available to researchers online at <http://www.augustinus.it>. According to Pedersen (1981, p. 95) and Gilson (2010, p. 467), Migne’s edition is a copy of the Venetian one owned by Kierkegaard.

it, decomposing it in past, present and future. These components of time must exist, since if nothing comes to happen, there would be no future, and if there is nothing now, there would be no past or present. The difficulties, however, increase, since “past does not exist anymore, and future does not exist yet” (PL 32, *Confessionum* XI, 14). As for the present, the attempts to decompose it in parts lead to the obvious impossibility of establishing a minimum measure of time that could be called present, and this is the very impossibility of definition and measurement of the moment or of *Øieblikket* in Kierkegaard’s thought, as one can see in Vigilius Haufniensis’ *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 81-93, SKS 4, 384-395), where the Kierkegaardian pseudonymous author exposes an argument remarkably similar to that of Augustine’s Eleventh Book of the *Confessions*.

The possible conclusion for Augustine is that time is a kind of distension not subject to intellectual apprehension. This conclusion, however, does not define time. Transitoriness and mortality, these aspects of temporal human life, are thus expressed: “*distentio est vita mea*” (PL 32, *Confessionum* XI, 29), my life is distension. God, on the other hand, is for Augustine the eternity: “Eternity is the very substance of God, in which there is nothing changeable, no past that is no more, and no future that is not yet”, says the Roman philosopher in his *Commentaries to Psalm 101* (PL 36, 10, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 101).

For Augustine, hope in the face of this distension is belief in Christ, the Mediator between time and eternity, because there is no possibility of understanding these questions for one who lives and exists in time. Augustine concludes his argument reaffirming the absolute difference between the intelligence of God, “eternal creator of all intelligences” (PL 32, *Confessionum* XI, 31), capable of understanding all the times, and the limited human understanding. Consider now the words of Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*:

A system of existence [...] cannot be given. Is there, then, not such a system? That is not at all the case. Neither is this implied in what has been said. Existence itself is a system – for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and conclusiveness correspond to each other (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 118, SKS 7, 114).

In these words there is the acknowledgement of the aporetic character of any questioning about time that comes from those immersed in existence. Time is the sphere of inconclusiveness, of the past that is no more and of the future that is not yet. Consider, then, the questions that open the Interlude of the *Philosophical Fragments*: “Is the Past More Necessary than the Future? Or Has the Possible, by Having Become Actual, Become More Necessary than It

Was?” (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 72, SKS 4, 272). These questions already announce explicitly the following discussion about past, future, necessity and possibility, but they also imply the subjects of change and the process of becoming. Therefore, the problem of time is an essential presupposition of the discussion in the Interlude.

In order to deal with the questions that open the Interlude, Climacus needs to establish some essential aspects of time, even though the very idea of time is not subject to complete apprehension by the human understanding. Change and the process of becoming are, in fact, fundamental points for Climacus to logically prove that it is impossible to associate necessity and time, be it past or future. Change is equated with motion (*κίνησις*) (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 73, SKS 4, 273), but the distinctive change of the process of becoming is very specific and is not to be mistaken for any other kind of change or movement. The process of becoming, or coming into existence, implies a passage from non-being to being, from simple possibility to actuality. Such change is so specific that anything that comes into existence, when it comes into existence, cannot suffer any other kind of change, or else it would be something different at the moment it comes to existence. The only change of the process of becoming, therefore, is the passage from non-being, or the mere non-actualized possibility, to being, to the actualized possibility. At this point, it is already possible to notice the parallels with the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. If the process of becoming is the passage from non-being to being, then the things that exist in time, changeable by nature, cannot have been part of the unchangeable substance of God, who is out of time and is eternal. God does not come into existence. Necessarily⁴, God is. And everything that exists in time, everything that came into existence, is not necessary because it came from non-being and, by pure possibility, went to the sphere of being, thus suffering a change that the necessary cannot suffer. “[...] the essence of necessary is to be”, says Climacus, while “possibility and actuality are not different in essence but in being” (SKS 4, 274, Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 74).

Climacus, therefore, establishes an essential distinction (and essential both in the logical and ontological sense) between what comes into existence and what does not come into existence. Moving forward in his argumentation, Climacus claims that everything that came into existence is historical, and that nature itself, even when considered in its totality, is historical. “But the historical is the past” (SKS 4, 275, Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 76), says Climacus, associating one of the elements of time with nature or, in other words, with creation. Having established these premises, Climacus can present the corollaries of his argumentation. The past is unchangeable, but this unchangeableness is distinct from the unchangeableness of necessity,

⁴ One has to be aware of God understood as “pure possibility” or as “everything is possible” in Kierkegaard’s writings under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, but that is another discussion.

since the unchangeableness of the past is due to the process of becoming and it cannot be necessary.

At this point, Climacus has already answered the question that opens the Interlude, but he goes ahead. The same reasoning about the past can be applied to the future. There is a movement, a change in the future, because it becomes past. The future is constituted by movement, by the process of becoming of things that, going from possibility to actuality, come into existence. Climacus, thus, expresses a perspective that does not allow any dissociation between past and future as components of time. Future becomes past, and the actualization of things that came into existence in this process becomes irreversible, but this is different, and absolutely different, from the unchangeableness of the necessary and the eternal.

Climacus, then, makes clear the absolute distinction between the sphere of time, represented by the past, by the future, by motion and by the process of becoming, and the sphere of what is unchangeable by necessity. This specific unchangeableness is an attribute of eternity only. It is what Climacus sometimes refers to as “the absolutely different,” like when he claims that “the actual is no more necessary than the possible, for the necessary is absolutely different from both” (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 75, SKS 4, 274). Like C. Stephen Evans puts it, “eternity for Climacus represents perfection. The eternal is that which is full and complete. The temporal, on the contrary, is that which is incomplete and ‘on the way’” (Evans, 1983, p. 227).

Truth

As mentioned above, George Pattison approached a specific problem concerning the relations between Kierkegaard and Augustine in his text *Johannes Climacus and Aurelius Augustinus on Recollecting the Truth* (Pattison, 1994). To deal with this problem, Pattison chose precisely Climacus’ *Philosophical Fragments* and Augustine’s *Confessions* and *De Magistro*, or *The Teacher* (Pattison, 1994, p. 246).

Before dealing specifically with the question raised by Pattison, it is pertinent to point out some more evident similarities between the *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Teacher* concerning the theme of truth. The most evident point of similarity is, of course, the identification of the Teacher with truth itself in both books, and the arguments they use to get to such an identification have much in common, even if the works seem to have different purposes.

De Magistro is one of the texts written by Augustine before his priestly ordination in 391, a few years after his conversion to Christianity in 386. Much of the book is dedicated to reflections concerning words and knowledge, which makes this book a representative of the philosophy of language like Plato’s *Cratylus*. *De Magistro* is a dialogue between Augustine himself and his son Adeodatus. The dialogue begins with a discussion about the purpose of language and the act of speaking, and it soon evolves to questions about the relations between teaching and learning.

Augustine leads his interlocutor to see the distinction between signs, either words or gestures, and the things themselves. Signs and things, in turn, are also different from knowledge itself, be it knowledge of things or knowledge of signs. As the dialogue goes on, a hierarchy of values is established, in which knowledge is superior to things, and these are superior to words and other signs. Words are unable to really teach or transmit knowledge to the learner, because words depend on things to be learned.

Augustine also distinguishes between sensible, or carnal, and intelligible, or spiritual, things, claiming that intelligible things are only learned when the person turns themselves to inwardness, but even sensible things, which the human being contacts with their senses, are only part of the person’s knowledge because they are present in memory, and so they too must be sought in inwardness. In the end, Augustine concludes that the source of every knowledge is the Teacher, Christ, “*sempiterna Sapientia*”, “inner light of truth” (PL 32, *De Magistro*, 12, 40) that dwells in inwardness and from there teaches human beings. Christ is the “eternal Wisdom that every soul consults, but that reveals himself to each soul in accordance with the soul’s capacity to get it by its good or evil will” (PL 32, *De Magistro*, 11, 38). According to Augustine, Christ is, indeed, the only one who deserves being called Teacher, since under the perspective presented in the dialogue neither things, nor words, nor signs, nor anything else that is located in outwardness is the true source of knowledge:

[...] we must not call anybody teacher on earth, for the only teacher of everybody is in heaven. But the one who inwardly admonishes us will teach us what is in heaven by means of signs and by means of men so we can be taught turning ourselves to him in inwardness (PL 32, *De Magistro*, 14, 46).

So, Augustine presents a perspective that establishes the essential character of the Teacher, opposing it to the instrumental character of signs, words and human beings, that can admonish the learner, but that are not to be confounded with the teacher himself. And the words used by Johannes Climacus in his Thought-Project, in the first chapter of the *Philosophical Fragments* (SKS 4, 224), express this distinction: “the condition for the truth is an essential condition” (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 15). Thus, under this perspective, it is not possible for the learner to find the truth by themselves if it does not come from the Teacher. This realization that the Teacher is essential to the learning of truth is precisely the distinctive element between the two projects, A and B, that Climacus comparatively analyzes in his “Thought-Project” (SKS 4, 224): “the teacher, then, is the god, who gives the condition and gives the truth” (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 15).

Climacus begins the first chapter of his *Philosophical Fragments* with a problem similar to that of Augustine’s dialogue:

“can the truth be learned?” (SKS 4, 218, Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 9), and he presents two different approaches to the problem. One of them makes direct reference to Socrates and to texts of the Platonic tradition, such as *Meno*. The other one is a perspective that implicitly, but also clearly, makes reference to Christianity and opposes itself to the Socratic-Platonic view. The fundamental distinction pointed out by Climacus in this first chapter is precisely the essentiality of the teacher in the Christian perspective and the non-essentiality of the teacher in the Socratic perspective regarding the learning of truth. And here it is possible to go back to the problem presented by George Pattison in his comparison between *De Magistro* and the *Philosophical Fragments*. Pattison acknowledges that those two perspectives in Climacus’ Thought-Project are very different. His problem, however, is whether they could be respectively associated with Socrates and Christianity:

The question to be asked here, however, is this: is Climacus correct in equating the distinction between these two views of truth – a distinction which, it should be said, is for him always strictly hypothetical, being made under the rubric ‘thought experiment’ (not ‘dogma’) – with Socrates and Christianity; or, to ask the question another way: is he correct in claiming that Christianity must repudiate the doctrine of recollection? (Pattison, 1994, p. 246).

Pattison then proposes a comparison between the model B, that must represent Christianity, and the ideas developed by Augustine about memory and the Teacher in the *Confessions* and *De Magistro*. After all, Augustine has been traditionally considered an example of Christian thought for both Catholics and Protestants for centuries. In the end, the problem put forward by Pattison is closely related to another question: is Christianity essentially distinct from Platonism? Pattison suggests to the reader that the distinction made by Climacus between Socratism-Platonism and Christianity is more intense and radical than the distinction present in Augustinian thought itself. According to Pattison, Augustine

is wanting to have it both ways: both that the mind “remembers” God in such a way that it is able to recognize him when it “finds” him (so that, to say, the moment lacks decisive significance) and that God transcends the mind in such a way that only he can provide the condition whereby the subject can come to know him (Pattison, 1994, p. 252).

Pattison, thus, identifies a “dis/agreement” (Pattison, 1994, p. 260) between Climacus and Augustine concerning the relation of the learner to the truth: the source of truth,

the Teacher, is God, but Augustine would still be somehow bound to a Platonic way of thinking that would not be as radically distinct from Christianity as the distinction presented by Climacus in his Thought-Project.

However, Pattison’s position is untenable and it is possible to demonstrate that Climacus’ radical distinction between Platonism and Christianity is, indeed, present in Augustine, and that in this respect the Bishop of Hippo and the Kierkegaardian pseudonym do agree more intensively than it seems at first glance. In disagreement with Pattison, one can say that the moment, for Augustine, is as significant and decisive as it is for Climacus. The key to this proximity between Climacus and Augustine is precisely the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, mentioned above in its relation to the distinction between time and eternity.

Augustine is, indeed, an heir of the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition just like Kierkegaard is an heir of the Western philosophical tradition, but Augustine, in many of his writings, repeatedly refutes several points of this tradition that he sees as discordant with Christianity. Augustine, too, was a polemist and *creatio ex nihilo* was one of the most relevant points of discordance between him and those who thought that the soul and the world had been created from the very substance of the divine, like the Neoplatonists. In his book *On the Soul and Its Origin*, for example, Augustine reproaches those who refuse to acknowledge that the soul was created from nothing, even if they believe that God created the soul (Cf. PL 44, *De Anima et eius origine libri quatuor*, 4.4).

Why is this point so relevant to the problem proposed by Pattison? Because the assertion that the subject was created from nothing makes the moment, as it is understood by Climacus, decisive and essential. The idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, the way it is developed and defended by Augustine, gives meaning to the process of becoming, to the coming into existence that Climacus emphasizes so much in his argumentation. It also gives meaning to the moment (*Øieblikket*) in which the learner becomes the follower of truth, because conversion is analogous to creation, a passage from non-being (closely related to evil and sin) to being (closely related to the good). Without *creatio ex nihilo* it would not be even possible to think about the process of becoming, a fundamental point for the comprehension of the historical and the temporal and for the establishment of its absolute distinction from eternity. So, in this regard, even though the role of memory is discussed by Augustine and even though there are similarities with Platonic thought, the premises are radically different: in one perspective, the truth, endowed with being, is part of memory itself and of the soul itself, and is a constitutive element of the learner; in the other perspective, truth is not a component of the learner; it may be present in their memory but it is always brought to them by the Teacher.

Climacus writes about the state of “untruth” (SKS 4, 227, Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 18), and equates it to the state of “not

to be”: “but this transition from ‘not to be’ to ‘to be’ is indeed the transition of birth” (SKS 19, 227, Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 9). This can be understood as creation and is precisely the transition of the process of becoming, of the passage from simple possibility to actuality and existence, in perfect agreement with the Christian thought represented by Augustine and distinct, at least in this fundamental respect, from Platonism and from the Greco-Roman tradition.

Conclusion

Paradox, for Climacus, is equated to truth: “[...] truth is index sui et falsi [the criterion of itself and of the false]” and “the paradox is index and judex sui et falsi [the criterion and the judge of itself and of the false]” (SKS 4, 254, Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 51). This paradox is absolute only if it unites in itself what it distinguishes absolutely, namely time and eternity. This absolute distinction cannot be reconciled by reason and understanding and makes the paradox one of the most important distinctive features of Christianity: the dual nature of Christ, fully God and fully man, the one “begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father” of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, in contrast with every other created human being who came into existence in a certain moment in time.

Could this Kierkegaardian Absolute Paradox be a criterion to define whether an idea is in conformity with Christianity or not? Maybe yes, but this would demand further and broader investigation of the history of ideas. Nevertheless, these comparative arguments about time, eternity and truth allow some considerations about Kierkegaard, Augustine and their relations to their respective cultural contexts. It is not uncommon to read claims that Augustine’s thought is a kind of “Christianization” of Plato. If it is taken superficially, this claim could lead the reader to disregard the important distinction between the ideas of Augustine and the Platonic tradition. It is certain that Augustine lived in a cultural context strongly influenced by Platonism and Neoplatonism, and it is certain that he is an heir of this rich cultural legacy. However, the specific Christian aspects of his thought cannot be disconsidered because the distinctions are radical in important aspects, like God and world, and time and eternity. Consider, for example, what Pistorius says about Plotinus and Neoplatonism: “The temporal is immanent in the eternal. There is no clear line of demarcation between the Absolute and the Particular. God and the universe are one” (Pistorius, 1952, p. 26). And then, in the same paragraph, still writing about Plotinus, Pistorius says: “We must think of Hegel and the very clear resemblance between him and Plotinus. God and His creation cannot be thought of separately” (Pistorius, 1952, p. 26).

Analogously, the same can be said about Kierkegaard’s thought. Even though he was immersed in a cultural context heavily influenced by Hegel’s thought, and even if the spirit of

his age can be noticed in his writings, some important features of his ideas can be opposed to his contemporaries. Consider, for example, what Hegel says in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself (Hegel, 1977, p. 11).

But truth, for Climacus and for Augustine, is not something subject to a development. In its absoluteness, truth can paradoxically be sought by those who, in temporality, experience the development of the process of becoming. But truth itself is neither subject to motion nor a result. Both in Augustine and in Climacus, truth is the Absolute, and it is not a function in the dynamics described by a system, it is not the mere epiphenomenon of a dialectical process.

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Submitted on March 23, 2018

Accepted on June 8, 2018