MP_C09.qxd 11/17/06 5:27 PM Page 83

Illumination vs. Abstraction, and Scientific Knowledge

9

Augustine on Divine Ideas and Illumination

Divine Ideas as Prototypes

Plato is known as the first to have named the Ideas. Not that if this name were nonexistent before he established it, the things that he called Ideas would not have existed, or would not have been understood by anyone – but they were probably called by different names by different people. It is permitted to give to any known thing that lacks an accepted name, whatever name one wishes. . . . But enough has previously been said about the name; let us examine the thing which is principally to be considered and understood, leaving each person free, as far as the terms are concerned, to give whatever name he wishes to the object of his knowledge.

So, in Latin we may call Ideas forms or species, to make it clear that we are translating word for word. But, if we call them "reasons," we are departing somewhat from a strict translation; reasons are called *logoi* in Greek and not Ideas. However, if a person chose to use this term, he would not be far from the real meaning. In fact, Ideas are the primary forms, or the permanent and immutable reasons of real things, and they are not themselves formed; so they are, as a consequence, eternal and ever the same in themselves, and they are contained in the divine intelligence. And since they never come into being or go out of it, everything that can come into being and go out of it, and everything that does come into being and goes out of it, may be said to be formed in accord with them.

It is denied that the soul can look upon them, unless it be rational, in that part whereby it excels, that is, in its mind and reason, as it were in its face or interior and intellectual eye. And for this vision not everyone is suitable but only that rational soul which is holy and pure, that one which keeps the eye in which such objects are seen, healthy, clear, serene and like unto those objects to which its view is directed. What religious man, infused with the true religion, even though not yet able to contemplate these objects, would nevertheless dare to deny and even refuse to confess that all things that are – that is, whatsoever things are constituted with a nature of their own in their proper kinds – were created by God as their source, so that they might exist? And that all living things are alive by virtue of the same source? And that the whole of things is preserved, and the very order in which they change, as they manifest their temporal courses according to a definite pattern, is main tained and governed, by the laws of the highest God? When this is established and admitted, who will

MP_C09.qxd 11/17/06 5:27 PM Page 84

dare to say that God established all things in an irrational manner? Now if this cannot be said or accepted in any proper sense, the conclusion remains that all things were founded by means of reason. Not that a man is based on the same reason as a horse; this would be an absurd notion. So, each one of these is created in accord with its own reason. Now, where would we think that these reasons are, if not in the mind of the Creator? For He did not look to anything placed outside Himself as a model for the construction of what he created; to think that He did would be irreligious.

Now, if these reasons for all things to be created, or already created, are contained in the divine mind, and if there can be nothing in the divine mind unless it be eternal and immutable, and if Plato called these primary reasons of things Ideas – then not only do Ideas exist but they are true because they are eternal and they endure immutably in this way; and it is by participation in these that whatever exists is produced, however its way of existing may be.

* * *

Book II, Chapter VIII
The Order of Numbers, Known as One and Unchangeable, Is Not Known by the Bodily Senses

AUGUSTINE: Come! Listen and tell me whether we may find anything that all reasoning men see with their reason and mind in common with all others, while what is seen is present in all and, unlike food or drink, is not transformed into some use by those to whom it is present, instead remaining uncorrupted and complete whether on not men discern it. Perhaps you think that nothing like this exists?

EVODIUS: On the contrary, I see that many such things exist, one of which is quite enough to mention: the order and the truth of number [*ratio et veritas numeri*] are present to all who think. Everyone who calculates tries to understand the truth of number with his own reason and understanding. Some can do this rather easily; others have more difficulty. Yet the truth of number offers itself to all alike who are able to grasp it. When a man understands it, it is not changed into a kind of nourishment for him; when he fails to grasp it, the truth of number does not disappear; rather, it remains true and permanent, while man's failure to grasp it is commensurate with the extent of his error.

AUGUSTINE: Correct! I see that you are not inexperienced in this, and have quickly found your answer. If someone were to say to you that numbers were impressed upon our spirit not as a result of their own nature, but as a result of those objects which we experience with the bodily senses, what answer would you make? Or do you agree with this?

EVODIUS: No, I do not. Even if I did perceive numbers with the bodily senses, I would not be able to perceive with the bodily senses the meaning of division and addition. It is with the light of the mind that I would prove wrong the man who makes an error in addition or subtraction. Whatever I may experience with my bodily senses, such as this air and earth and whatever corporeal matter they contain, I cannot know how long it will endure. But seven and three are ten, not only now, but forever. There has never been a time when seven and three were not ten, nor will there ever be a time when they are not ten. Therefore, I have said that the truth of number is incorruptible and common to all who think.

AUGUSTINE: I do not disagree with your answer, for you spoke truly and clearly. But you will easily see that numbers themselves are not drawn from the bodily senses, if you realize

MP_C09.qxd 11/17/06 5:27 PM Page 85

how any number you please multiplied by one is that number. For example, two times one is two; three times one is three; ten times one is ten; any number times one is that number. Anyone who really thinks about the number one realizes that he cannot perceive it through the bodily senses, for whatever we experience through a sense is proven to be many, not one. This follows because it is a body and is therefore infinitely divisible. But I need not concentrate upon each small and indistinct part; however small such a bodily part may be, it has a right, left, upper, and lower side, or a farther and nearer side, or ends and a middle. These, we admit, must be in a body, however small it is; thus, we concede that no body is truly and purely one. Yet all these parts could not be counted, if they had not been distinguished by the concepts of one. When, therefore, I look for one in a body, I do not doubt that I will not find it. I know what I am seeking there and what I shall not find there. I know that I cannot find one, or rather that it does not exist in a body at all. How do I know that a body is not one? If I did not know what one is, I could not count the many parts of the body. Moreover, however I may know one, I do not know it through the bodily senses, because through the bodily senses I know nothing except a body which, we have proven, is not really and simply one. Furthermore, if we have not perceived one through a sense of the body, we have not perceived by a sense any number of those numbers which we discern only through the understanding. There exists no number which does not get its name from the number of times it contains one. The perception of one does not occur through any bodily sense. The half of any body whatsoever, although the whole body consists of two halves, also has its own half; therefore, there are two parts of a body which are not simply two. Moreover, the number which is called two because it is twice what is irreducibly one, cannot be two parts of one, in other words, that which is simply one cannot again have a half or a third or whatever part you please, since it is simply and truly one. In observing the order of numbers, we see after one the number two, which is twice one. Twice two does not follow next in order; rather, three comes next, and then four, which is twice two. This order [*ratio*] continues throughout all the rest of the numbers by a fixed and unchangeable law. Thus after one, the first of all numbers, when one itself is excepted, the first number is the double of one, for two comes next. After this second number, that is, after two, when two is excepted, the second number is the double of two; for after two the first number is three, and the second number is four, the double of two. After the third, that is, after the number three, when it is itself excepted, the third number is the double of three; for after the third number, that is, after three, the first number is four, the second five, and the third six, which is the double of three. So after the fourth number, when it is itself excepted, the fourth number is the double of four; for after the fourth number, after four, the first number is five, the second is six, the third is seven, and the fourth number is eight, which is the double of four. Through all of the rest of the numbers you will find the same thing that is found in the first pair of numbers, one and two, namely, the double of any number is as many times after this number as such a number is from the beginning.

How do we discern that this fact which holds for the whole number series is unchangeable, fixed, and incorruptible? No one perceives all the numbers by any bodily sense, for they are innumerable. How do we know that this is true for all numbers? Through what fantasy or vision do we discern so confidently the firm truth of number throughout the whole innumerable series, unless by some inner light unknown to bodily sense?

Men to whom God has given ability in argument, and whom stubbornness does not lead into confusion, are forced to admit that the order and truth of numbers have nothing to do with the bodily senses, but are unchangeable and true and common to all rational beings.

MP_C09.qxd 11/17/06 5:27 PM Page 86

Therefore, although many other things could occur to us that are common and, as it were, public for rational beings, things that are seen by each individual with his mind and reason and still remain inviolate and unchanged, nevertheless, I am not unwilling to accept the fact that the order and truth of number are the best possible examples that you could have given when you wished to answer my question. Not without reason was number joined to wisdom in the Holy Scriptures where it is said, "I and my heart have gone round to know and to consider and to search out wisdom and number" [Eccles. 7:26].