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A Thoroughly Modern Man

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Of what interest is a fourth-century theologian to those of us living in the 21st? How could a person of such antiquity relate to us? The answer could be surprising.

Modern psychology owes a debt to Augustine in that his study of the human will provides much of the foundation for the study of identity. Augustine's theology removed his Greek-speaking contemporaries' study of the will from the field of ontology to that of psychology—that is, from the study of being to the study of mind. He has been credited with a new genre of writing in that his autobiographical work, *Confessions*, invited the reader inside his thinking rather than just recounting his life story. These were not simply confessions in the sense of guilt or, as it became established in the church, the confessional; rather they were based on the meaning of the Latin *confiteri*—in its best sense, testimony to God and His existence. *Confessions* was probably the first autobiography in which the author sought to examine his own motives, predating Freud's similar efforts at the turn of the 20th century.

To Augustine, the nature of the mind and its psychological processes was an extension of his own preoccupation with the spirit world, which was the real world of his philosophical mentors. According to professor of historical theology Andrew Louth, Augustine viewed Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, as a master of mysteries, especially those that relate to the interior life (*The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 1981). Augustine sought episodes of mental awareness, or “ecstasy,” as he labeled them. As a result, much of medieval mysticism is indebted to him. But the effect does not stop there. His interest in the psychological workings of the mind and what he considered the spirit world continues to influence our society in greater ways.

Today we would associate Augustine's notion of ecstasy with the idea that only that which the individual experiences subjectively in the mind is significant. This is an idea that the existentialists and phenomenologists of the 19th and 20th centuries promoted. But their ideas came from a stream of philosophy that goes back through Søren Kierkegaard and Edmund Husserl to René Descartes and Augustine.

Augustine's identification of words as symbols also finds support in analytical philosophy based on the work of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein in the early 20th century, and in postmodern literature with writers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

Augustine was in effect a modern man, simply 1,500 years ahead of his time.