Chapter III

Saint Augustine: The Place of Happiness

PLOTINUS AND ST. AUGUSTINE

Whoever possesses God is happy.

—The Happy Life, 5,34

Saint Augustine's name appears only infrequently in Camus' writings. He is mentioned explicitly in La Peste (1937)1 and implicitly in L'Homme révolté (1951)2; and his name appears, for example, in a notebook entry dated October 19463 as well as in an interview published in the Revue du Caire (1948).4 If Augustine's name appears only rarely in Camus' writings, however, Augustinian themes abound in those same writings. Le Mythe de Sisyphe and L'Etranger have, as one of their major concerns, the theme of human autonomy. La Peste is about the problem of evil, and contains an explicit rejection of Augustine's free will defence.5 L'Homme révolté has as one of its main themes that of a substitute universe and is concerned, to a large extent, with the Augustinian notion of moderation. La Chute is about Original Sin. And in a talk which was delivered in 1948 and published as L'Incroyant et les Chrétiens,6 Camus mentioned, as Archambault says,7 two themes which were of great concern to him: that of man's desperate need of grace and that of the damnation of unbaptized children. He insisted, moreover, that he himself was not the author of those themes.

It is not I who invented the wretchedness of creatures, nor the terrifying formulas of divine malediction. It is not I who cried this Nemo bonus, or who proclaimed the damnation of unbaptised children. It is not I who said that man was incapable of saving himself by his own efforts alone, and that, from the depths of his misery, his sole hope lay in the grace of God.8

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What is particularly significant, however, is the centrality and ubiquity of the Augustinian concept, natural desire for God, in the thought of Camus. As we have pointed out, it is not possible properly to understand Camus' thinking on the absurd, as it is expressed in _Le Mythe de Sisyphe_ and _L'Étranger_, without realizing that, in his opinion, man is made for "something similar to the Christian heaven." This point is at least implicit in his assertion that existentialism has its origins in Saint Augustine. In _La Peste_, moreover, Camus claims that man is made for totality; and in _L'Homme révolté_ he insists that it is man's desire for God that drives him to create a substitute universe.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to say something of Camus' _Métaphysique chrétienne et Neoplatonisme_, insofar as it relates specifically to Augustine's thought; and to elucidate the meaning of the concept of the natural desire for God in Camus' philosophy, by examining the part it played in Saint Augustine's philosophical anthropology.

The final chapter of Camus' thesis is devoted entirely to the thought of Saint Augustine. It has three sections, which deal in turn with "Saint Augustine's psychological experience and Neoplatonism," "Hellenism and Christianity in Saint Augustine," and the latter's thoughts on "faith and reason." The second of these sections is divided into two parts which deal respectively with Augustine's reflections on the closely related notions of evil, grace and freedom, and with his thoughts on the Trinity.

The first section of Camus' final chapter is concerned, essentially, with the extent of Saint Augustine's Platonism, or, more precisely, with the role of Plotinus in Augustine's conversion. Camus argues that the Plotinian influence on Augustine was considerable and, in particular, that it was Augustine's encounter with the _Enneads_ of Plotinus that provided him with the conceptual framework he needed in order to understand and formulate the Christian doctrine of the Logos, as that is expressed in the prologue of Saint John's Gospel. The second hypostasis of Plotinus, he says, became one with the _verbum caro factum_ of Saint John.

If, according to Camus, Augustine was indebted to Plotinus for his doctrine of the Word as mediator between God and man, he was no less indebted to him for his teaching on the nature of physical evil. The problem of evil had, of course, been a particularly difficult one for Augustine; to such a degree, indeed, that it explained his lengthy adherence to Manichaean philosophy. It was Plotinus who enabled Augustine to find an answer to this problem, for the former taught that evil was "linked to matter" and that its reality was "entirely negative."