

Foreword

This book might seem to respond to a necessity manifested long ago in the itinerary of those that preceded it. For, if one starts out from Descartes in order to broach the question of the status of metaphysics, establish its constitution, and mark its separation from Christian theology, how can one not end up returning to Saint Augustine, an obligatory reference, whether it be accepted or denied, for the entire seventeenth century? Yet the necessity, if there was one, was entirely other: the somewhat more precise identification of metaphysics attained by studying Descartes led, beyond the question of his sources, references, and context, to an investigation into the limits of metaphysics and a glimpse of their possible transgression. Now this question is posed more obviously in the terms of phenomenology than in those of the history of philosophy: if one wants to leave behind generalities, that is to say approximations, indeed ideological distortions, it is necessary to discover phenomena, describe them, and recognize those that make an exception, partially or radically, to the objectivity and beingness practiced by metaphysics. This work led only to sketching a phenomenology of givenness, phenomena as given, in particular saturated phenomena, including even the erotic phenomenon, in which Saint Augustine did not yet play a part.

It took chance, then, for this necessity to present itself—more exactly, for Saint Augustine to appear suddenly as the privileged interlocutor and, in a sense, inevitable judge, of the project of accessing phenomena irreducible to the objects and beings of metaphysics. This chance, or rather this fortunate occasion, came from the Conseil scientifique de la “Chaire Gilson,” which the Faculty of Philosophy at the Institut Catholique de Paris had set up more than ten years ago, when it did me the great honor of inviting me to deliver the six lectures anticipated for 2004. When it came time to set the theme of this series, I hesitated to take up what had

been the theses of my more recent works, in particular *Étant donné* (1996), *De surcroît* (2001), and especially *Le phénomène érotique* (2003), in the fear of wearying my listeners and boring myself, too. I preferred, therefore, to risk another course: read and interpret the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine in a resolutely nonmetaphysical mode, by using to this end the major concepts that I had just elaborated in a logic of radically phenomenological intent. The stakes of this project were in my eyes twofold. First, it would test the hermeneutic validity of the concepts givenness, saturated phenomenon, and the gifted, by applying them to a reference text, supposedly well known yet remaining highly enigmatic. Next, it would enter more deeply into this aporetic work, whose strangeness increases to the measure of the efforts made to appropriate it—whether one translates ever again anew by imposing on it each time the more or less conscious prejudices of impassioned choice, contemporary fashion, or ideological rectification; or one buries the brilliant kernel in a coffin of precise but peripheral information, so as to prudently protect oneself from it by keeping it at a distance. For the problem of reaching the heart of the *Confessiones* resides—at least this was the hypothesis—in the absolute inadequacy of the point of view, or rather, in situating Saint Augustine within the metaphysical conditions of thought, which are still essentially our own. The entire question then became, quite quickly, to approach the site from which Saint Augustine thinks, so as to find there what he tries to think: the itinerary of an approach to the place of self—to the place of the self, the place most foreign to he who, proximally and for the most part, I am, or believe myself to be.

As soon as these lectures were delivered, in the winter of 2004, I understood that the ambition and the difficulty of their attempt demanded of me a work far more vast. In the first place they demanded my reading, as far as possible, the Augustinian texts in their own language, not in ours. By this I do not mean merely Latin (though *this* Latin in and of itself, in the virtuosity that so to speak uproots it from all previous Latin, gives one to think, at least as much as the languages supposed to be by nature the best for thinking) but especially the lexicons that our spontaneous metaphysics is forever imposing on us. To succeed in this, I was obliged to renounce resting on already available translations. This was necessary, first, to maintain coherence when passing from one work to another and,

next, because however illuminating they might appear and useful they might remain to us, most of the time they do not avoid the uncontrolled and almost unconscious importation of the concepts of metaphysics into a language that is not only rhetorical and Roman (a double handicap in the eyes of those who, in this case, do not think farther than the end of their prejudices) but, above all, is irreducible to the lexicon of metaphysics.¹ I was therefore obliged to take the risk of producing a new translation of each text cited and to impose on the reader by preceding my translation in each case with the text of the original Latin.

Second, it was necessary to lose myself in the hardly virgin forest of the immense commentary on Augustine, so as to orient myself in the (good and bad) aporiae and commonplaces, so much has the stratification illuminated and at the same time hidden for centuries the text of Saint Augustine, by opening on it larger and larger and also more numerous points of entry, but also closing access to its center—be it only by suggesting that at bottom there is none. I therefore had to take up the entire work from its beginning, to free myself for something like the redaction of a new thesis (and the last). In this task of sometimes despairing slowness, I realized quite quickly that the outcome would be at best approximate: somewhat ignorant and surely incomplete but, above all, falling incomparably short of the terrifying gravity of the project undertaken by Saint Augustine—of his advance toward God, more exactly of his harsh discovery that, in fact, God always advances from all eternity toward me, and therefore also of the abyssal deconstruction of self that must be consented to in order to receive this *self* finally from God. Moreover, without this feeling of profound inadequacy, no reader of Saint Augustine has the slightest chance of ending up with even the least result—the reason why the most exact investigations can understand nothing about it, while the thinkers who are apparently most distant often succeed in doing so, be it only in a brief and isolated remark.

To execute this plan, or, more exactly, to proceed with it to the point of admitting why there is no great sense in imagining that one could execute it fully, I received as much help as possible. First, Philippe Capelle agreed to offer me the delay required for transforming the sketch of six lectures into a more ambitious book, extending his generosity so far as to approve my publishing it in the series “*Épiméthée*,” rather than the one he

himself directs at PUF. I would like to acknowledge him here. Next the Université Paris-Sorbonne and the CNRS granted me a long posting with “Études augustiniennes” in the framework of the “Laboratoire d’études sur les monothéismes” (UMR 8584—CERL), directed by, respectively, Vincent Zarini and Philippe Hoffmann. Their cordial welcome at Villejuif and the library of the Institut à l’abbaye de Saint-Germain-des-Prés made me, by chance, ascend into the illustrious train of French erudition, which, ever since the founding of the *Bibliothèque augustinienne*, has dominated the field of Augustinian studies. Finding oneself thus in the tutelary shadow of great forerunners, like P. Solignac encountered in the aisles of the defunct library “des Fontaines” at Chantilly in the time of my theses on Descartes, who punctuated the advance of this large project under the firm but kind control of G. Madec, constitutes a somewhat frightening honor, one not tempered by the authorities of P. Brown, W. Beierwaltes, K. Flasch, or J. J. O’Donnell (especially when one dares sometimes to dispute things with them). Finally, and as always, my students helped me by constraining me to work for them and by enduring my studies and my hesitations: those at the Université Paris-Sorbonne, as well as those at the University of Chicago, the Johns Hopkins University, and the University “La Sapienza” (Rome), particularly T. Alferi, R. Calderone, A. Guiu, K. Hefty, J. Manoussakis, and E. Tardivel. I also owe as usual, great thanks to V. Carraud (who reread my text and allowed me to correct it a little), J.-L. Chrétien, M. Fumaroli, J.-Y. Lacoste, C. Romano, H. de Vries, and especially to D. Tracy.

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