



Psychology in the Middle Ages

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Part III - St Augustine (354-430CE), the First Western Psychologist

Into this Christian belief system arrived St. Augustine, often labeled as the first psychologist, although he was also a superb philosopher who studied political systems and the idea of morality. Augustine derived much of his knowledge from his earlier life, where he studied the great Greek philosophers before converting to Christianity at the age of 33.

Psychology in the Middle Ages Part II

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Europe in Turmoil

St. Augustinus in the St Augustin Church, Paris

Adopting a monastic life, he devoted himself to study, and his work spanned the transformation of European thought as it moved away from the influence of the Greeks and Romans to the new Judeo-Christian society.

During this period of history, Western Europe was in turmoil as the Roman Empire fell, and barbarian raids, war, famine, and disease shaped society. Against this backdrop, and with the destruction of everything he knew, Augustine ceased trying to make sense of what was happening. Instead, in a quest for stability, he instead tried to visualize a perfect, peaceful society, in a reflection of Plato's *Republic*.

This particular period of history provided the spark for his interest in psychology as he tried to reconcile his new, Christian beliefs with the world around him, combining the abstraction of Plato with the pragmatism of Aristotle. Overall, Augustine had difficulty in reconciling the paradise and spiritual riches promised by Christian doctrine with the intense suffering he saw around him.

Philosophy, Psychology and Theology

This conflict drove his interest in the study of the human mind, because he believed that the mind was the interface between the divine and earth, something he pointed out in his treatise, *Confessions*. Adopting an introspective line, he reasoned that studying the mind would allow him to understand the divine. In many ways, Augustine was the first philosopher to propose that humans had an 'inner self,' believing that a healthy person has inner unity, whereas inner disunity led to inner malady. Trained in rhetoric, Augustine used his *Confessions* to relate his own life and struggles, but he cleverly used this to paint a wider picture, that an individual can escape materialism and find spirituality and salvation.

As a neo-platonist, Augustine touched upon many psychology-based areas, blending them with philosophy and theology. For example, he touched upon the motivations of infants, as well as memory, the origins of grief, and the unconscious desires and motivations of dreams. Augustine pointed out that infants are self-centered and not socially aware. He also argued that the fear of punishment was a barrier to learning in children, because fear of castigation curbed curiosity, which he believed was the easiest way to learn. When discussing grief and emotions in general, he portrayed these as part of his wider idea of inner turmoil and the battle between God and self. Augustine looked at mind-body, believing that both were essential for making up a person, with the mind superior and the body inferior.

The Dualism of Memory and Dreams

Augustine of Hippo and his mother Saint Monica by Johann Dréo from Chartres

Image not found. Augustine believed that memory was the single-most important aspect of the mind, because it was the root of psychological functioning. He reasoned that all skills and habits derived from memory, and that even animals must have the power of recall if they are to function. Expanding upon this, he proposed a dual memory, reasoning that there were distinctions between recognition and recall. Humans only remember the images of things in sensory memory, but the mature of these images would be obscured in the affective memory.

This dual memory was based upon the principle that a recalled memory was different from the original. For example, the recollection of an event would not necessarily carry the same emotions as felt at the time, therefore recognition and recall were different processes.

He developed this interesting duality because he recognized that the processes behind memory were extremely complex, namely that some things were easily recalled, some took a little effort to find, and others refuse to come forth. Some memories are orderly and sequential, whereas others are disorganized and overwhelming.

He even looked at the paradox of forgetfulness: if something is forgotten but later remembered, how do you know that it is knowledge you possessed but forgot? To overcome this paradox, Augustine added that there must be a memory for forgotten things that works alongside the memory. Finally, Augustine believed that humans were born with some innate knowledge, although he rejected the idea of carrying knowledge from previous existences, as this did not match his theological worldview.

Augustine looked at the nature of dreams, recognizing that thought and impulses that are suppressed while awake can be extremely strong in dreams. He argued that there was no sin in dreams, so they should not affect the conscience of a Christian, but he also pointed out that past experiences could arise in dreams. Memory could be buried in the unconscious mind, and resurface in dreams, where they could not be tempered by thought or reason.

Predestination and Inner Turmoil

Scan from the original book by Michel Wolgemut

Image not found Augustine also looked at the issue of predestination, namely that an all-knowing, omnipotent God potentially takes away free will if it knows what you are to do. Augustine believed in free will, proposing that it lay at the core of the human being and that an individual had the freedom of choice to obey or deviate from God's plans. A person has control of their thoughts, and therefore can choose to exercise will and self-discipline or choose to follow lust, this carnal desires battling against spirit. This creates habits based upon past experiences and the grace of God was needed to help man break away from compulsion and base urges.

He proposed that all people had an internal struggle, a battle of the inner self against God, and he extrapolated that to mean that the struggles and chaos of the world around him were also manifestations of that particular conflict. He believed that character defects and defense mechanisms fueled this inner turmoil between what a human should do and how they should behave against how they actually acted.

Augustine believed that love lay at the center of happiness, that desire led to disorder and that this was the source of suffering: for example, the desire for something that you cannot have fuels inner anguish. He believed that the key to repairing this damage was through the development of unconditional love, which would reorder the mind.

Naturally, he also had some ideas that were incorrect and based upon theology, namely that curiosity stemmed from original sin and could be spiritually dangerous. Naturally, the idea of original sin led him to believe that all humans were born sinners, often referring back to his own childhood. This view would influence the church for centuries, and may have hampered

studies into the mind until the dawn of the Renaissance.

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