

From Knowledge to Wisdom: the Journey to a Personal Relationship with God

By
Callie R. Camper



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Gabriel Pihás, Advisor

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Introduction

What drives the desire to search for God? Why do we want to know and have wisdom of Him? The search for God began simply as a search for knowledge and an understanding of nature. Ancient pagans and polytheists created multiple gods in order to help try to explain and understand the natural phenomena and disasters that occurred in the physical world around them, but these multiple gods also provided an explanation to the spiritual world they knew existed beyond them. Mythology was replaced by philosophy as opinion concerning the natural world transformed into knowledge in regards to the eternal. Plato recognized that there was a realm that was beyond our tangible existence. Aristotle recognized that there was some indescribable being that was the first cause, before this beautiful world that we perceive and sense around us, the unmoved mover.

As pagan philosophy was replaced by Christian philosophy, the search for knowledge of a higher realm focused its inquiries into a search for God at a personal and individual level. Thinkers like Thomas Aquinas not only acknowledged a prime mover but a creator, our creator, connecting this infinite being to us as human beings in a personal manner. In this desire to know what came before us, we have transitioned from an attempt to know life around us to an attempt have wisdom of this almighty creator that gave us life. But how do we attempt to know God? He is an infinite yet all-knowing being to which many attributes and names have been ascribed. Some believe he is one being; some believe he is a multiple of beings, some believe that he is involved in a holy trinity, and there are still a multitude of ways in which God is thought to exist beyond Christian

belief. Despite the difference in beliefs and conclusions, all these traditions have made an attempt to know or possess some form of wisdom in God.

Yet not all who attempt to find Him truly reach Him. So how do we truly come to know God? How do we come to have wisdom of God? What is the difference between these two terms, 'wisdom' and 'knowledge,' and how they relate specifically to God? Some of these questions are not simple or easy to answer as they have yet to be fully answered by philosophers or theologians thus far. But one key distinction that has not been made by all philosophers or theologians is the difference between knowledge and wisdom specifically in relation to God. It is a distinction necessary to realize truly how close we as human beings can reach the immaterial and all-powerful God. Can we even grasp the essence of God utilizing an understanding of what it means to have knowledge or wisdom of God? In this inquiry, we will evaluate philosophical approaches from Plato, Plotinus, and Saint Augustine. All of these philosophers have had a different attempt to know and have wisdom in God, but not even all of these philosophers have reached the level of wisdom. Regardless, their methods will be a guide in how we as modern philosophers can attempt to have wisdom in God today.

Knowledge

Knowledge is the recognition, acknowledgment, and acceptance of some impersonal being. Therefore, when we say that a human comes to know God or gains knowledge of God, whether through private or scholarly approach, it is meant that he or she has an acceptance of God and recognition of Him. This does not mean that to know God is to know what he is or what his nature or essence is; to know God is simply to recognize his existence, his unlimited nature, his divine presence.

Knowledge of God is, in reality, a philosophical knowledge of God connecting our bodily, corporeal lives to this incorporeal, incomprehensible being. Philosophy calls for its student to look within himself or herself to find truths. Similarly knowledge of God is found when one reflects inward to connect to a higher realm. But knowledge of God as *our creator* moves beyond the pagan philosopher's realm of ideals and possible knowledge. This was not due to the philosophers' own faults but a lack of revealed truth, for example the Old Testament, the Qur'an, etcetera. The connection between God and all of his individual creations is a concept that could not be fully realized by pure discursive, logical thinking and conversations. Thomas Aquinas connected the individual human to *his* creator and this was with the aid of biblical texts. Therefore, having a philosophical knowledge of God is an impersonal action that takes place within what Saint Augustine calls our "lower" intellect, as Augustine calls it, that can appreciate and acknowledge God but cannot have wisdom in Him.

To pagan and empirical philosophers, one comes to know all things through corporeal objects and logical arguments connecting them to a higher, transcendent realm. This is the same whether one is coming to know something within the physical world or a higher being or realm such as God or Plato's Forms. Philosophers did not limit their contemplation to the physical realm; they simply utilized it. Similar to the creation of the Greek gods to explain the natural phenomenon, the philosopher's thinking and intellect responds to what we sense and perceive and relate it to a higher being or realm. But mythology was interested in a kind of primitive philosophy that was aimed solely at understanding nature, opposed to relating one's soul to a higher intellect. Philosophy wanted to move beyond our senses, "The excellence, the power, and the goodness of the

intelligible realm is revealed in what is most excellent in the realm of sense, for the realms are linked together” (Plotinus 68).

I. Plato

The best [and first?] example of this connection of the soul to a higher realm is seen in the Platonic Forms. Plato’s dialogues and Socrates’ words articulate an acknowledgment of a higher intellect in the usage and establishment of the Forms. The chariot of our souls strove towards the realm of the Forms, which simply put are perfections and transcendent ideals or qualities such as Beauty, Justice, and Good. But this transcendent intellect that they abstractly acknowledged was divided among many Forms. More than anything, in the search for knowledge in God specifically, there seemed to be a difficulty in recognizing one higher being that embodied all of these Forms. “The truths about God... have been subtly discussed by a number of pagan philosophers, although some of them erred” (Aquinas I.36). Beauty, most notably, is a perfect Form that contains all of the beauty that is seen in the tangible world; all beautiful objects therefore partake in the Form of Beauty. Justice as well is a Form to which all beings and objects that love or feel love partake in. The Form of Justice and the Good are examples of Forms that are not acknowledged through our sense perceptions necessarily but are recognized in our lives by examples and experiences that ultimately relate back to a Form. All of the good and perfect Forms that Plato described are later perfections found in and attributed to God through the eyes of every religion. Thomas Aquinas saw their error; “...we cannot give names to God except in terms of perfections perceived in other things that have their origin in Him” (I.24).

The closest idea to a singular God that Plato developed was his Form of the Good. “Not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power” (Plato VI.509b). All perfect Forms were embodied in the Form of Good since all being was derived from it, but the Good was not *our* creator. It did not give life to the earth or to our bodies. This detachment from the Good and the individual self is too great to overlook in considering if Plato had knowledge of God. Plato insisted on the complete detachment of the body and the individual self from the soul of the person, and this hinders him in his search.

Despite this separation, it is clear that Plato was trying to make sense and try to come to know the transcendent realm of God by connecting being to the ultimate form of good even without necessarily being aware of Him. This is as close to knowledge of God that the pagan philosopher can achieve: the ambiguous acknowledgment of a higher realm that our own intellect could never achieve or conceive.

This point is substantiated by the separation of soul and body that Plato continuously advocates for. The connection that only the soul feels in relation to the Good (God) is detrimental to the philosopher’s knowledge of God. Since only our soul is, on rare occasion, allowed to see the realm of the Forms and be able to acknowledge the Forms as eternal perfections while it is completely and utterly separated from its body, its person. This means that the soul is also disconnecting from the individual being and purely looking upwards ‘to the sky’ so to say without an inward reflection of how we, as individuals, relate to the Good (God). Plato’s version of knowledge could never lead to any for of wisdom then, but one pagan philosopher was able to get even closer.

II. Plotinus

Besides Aristotle's unmoved mover, there was no mention or acknowledgment of one singular being of a higher intelligence in pagan philosophy, although Aristotle's unmoved mover was more of a first cause and not particularly a being or creator per se. Plotinus acknowledges that there is one creator of all things that came before us all and before everything and he calls this singular higher being The One. Plotinus' One was divided among all souls and all men, but The One was still one and unified in that it cannot be divided. But again we do not see this philosopher specifically name God within *The Decent of the Soul*.

No being would exist if The One remained shut up in itself. More than that, the multiplicity of being issued from The One would not exist as they do if there did not issue from The One those beings that are in the rank of souls... The One is the foundation of all other things and gives them, at one and the same time, existence and location... (68, 81)

Plotinus describes God, here personalized as The One, just as Plato and previous philosophers had described the Forms, by the perfections seen in the tangible world around them. Although we do not receive the satisfaction of hearing Plotinus say God's name forthrightly, His name can easily be substituted for The One and the meanings and conclusions can be comprehended just the same.

The One is infinite... It is necessarily the most powerful, the most self-sufficient, the most independent of all... The One cannot aim at any good or desire anything: it is superior to the Good; it is the Good, not for itself, but for other things to the extent to which they can share in it" (81).

As God is non-human, "The One must differ from Being" which it created (Plotinus 75). As God is prior to all creation, The One similarly "is the first existent" (Plotinus 75). This singularity of the One helps Plotinus connect himself to the One in a deeper sense than

Plato was able to connect to the multiplicity of the Forms and the difference in naming God is seen throughout modern religions. Yet no matter the name or multiplicity, all look up to a higher intellect. Therefore, Plotinus truly had a philosophical knowledge of God in his recognition and acknowledgement of this higher being, the One.

However, Plotinus did not believe that the One was our personal creator though. This separation of soul from individual self as a person in order to reach the One limits the possible personal connection that we can have with our creator. But again, the One isn't *our* creator but our soul's creator. Our souls, then, have a personal connection to The One when separated from our selves. This implication of complete separation from the soul and the self will be explored more in the next section.

Wisdom

Having wisdom relating to God is most definitely not the same as the conventional knowledge of God. Wisdom is a transcendent knowledge that is solely concerned with the "eternal, unchangeable and spiritual things," as Augustine concluded in *The Trinity* (331). This "higher intellect", as he coins the term, brings one closer to God and establishes a richer connection between the created and the creator than conventional or philosophical knowledge could. But it is easy to see the relationship between wisdom and knowledge of God when it is taken into account that one must first have knowledge (recognition) of Him in order to have any form of wisdom (transcendent personal relationship) of Him. This correlation seems very logical—how could one attempt to have a higher knowledge of God if they do not first acknowledge his existence?

To make an exact definition of what it means to have wisdom in God, then, it is to have an enlightened or transcendent knowledge concerning Him solely in the eternal in

such a way that a personal relationship is formed. This happens when one transcends the self yet maintaining the individual in the transcendence and making a personal connection to God. This transcendent knowledge not only transcends our sense world, as the definition of 'transcendence' usually implies, but it transcends the whole self. We see two different interpretations of "transcending the self" with Plotinus and Augustine, but only Saint Augustine's methods leads to an individual and truly personal connection with God. The paradox between this transcendence of the self and the individual and personal connection is one that will be explored when speaking of Saint Augustine's journey to wisdom in God. This personal relationship that wholly transcends the self is what truly separates knowledge and wisdom though, for knowledge did not and could not establish a personal relationship that is found between our creator and us as his personal creations.

I. Plotinus

Plotinus' philosophy and the knowledge of God as our souls' creator intimated the beginnings of a personal relationship with the One that was truly concerned with the One through a transcendent intellect; "it must forget everything" (83). But this relationship could hardly be called personal in the full sense to each individual human or even to Plotinus himself because only the soul can have this knowledge and relationship when it is completely detached from the self. The knowledge and relationship between the creator and the created being is intimate and individual, but Plotinus' acknowledgement that the One as "being's begetter" is more similarly related to Plato's acknowledged that the Good gave being to all beings than it is related to a individual connection (Plotinus 107). The One, similar to the Form of the Good, was the eternal entity that gave being to all other beings, but neither the One nor the Good have the attribute of being our or even

the world's creator. The One did create a part of us, our souls, but our souls can only reach the One by complete detachment from the individual self. True, this does involve detachment from the corporeal and tangible world, eliminating our senses and perceptions, but Plotinus calls for the detachment of our opinions and self-recognition as well.

Having thus freed itself of all externals, the soul must turn totally inward; not allowing itself to be wrested back towards the outer, it must forget everything, the subjective first and, finally, the objective. It must not even know that it is itself that is applying itself to contemplation of The One. (82-83)

Nonetheless, his separation of the soul from the body is still somehow *within* oneself.

This divinity, it is said, is not outside any being but, on the contrary, is present to all beings though they may not know it... But the man who has learned to know himself will at the same time discover whence he comes. Self-knowledge reveals to the soul that its natural motion is not, if uninterrupted, in a straight line, but circular, as around some inner object, about a center, the point to which it owes its origin. (83)

How can we reconcile this separation yet coming together of the soul and individual self?

The answer is found in how Plotinus utilizes our intellect and what realm the soul lies in.

The soul, to Plotinus, lies "within the intelligible realm", meaning that the soul is inherently above and detached from the body by his definition.

Raising ourselves above the body by the part of us that is not submerged, we are, by our center, attaching ourselves to the center of all... Bodies are by their [physical] bodies kept from union [to the One], but the bodiless [souls] are not held by this bodily limitation" (84).

Therefore only our souls can connect to the One by virtue of their transcendent nature.

This transcendent soul then reflects inward to our principal being, realizing its place in the "natural motion" and around a center "to which it owes its origin" (83). This does not

mean that we reflect on our inner senses or even taking our senses and perceptions into consideration. "Soul must not incline towards body even in imagination" (102). Plotinus believes that we can raise the lower parts of the soul that are still attached to the body by raising them up to the intelligible realm. But doing this, the soul has turned inwardly and has raised itself above and apart from the individual person to connect to the One.

The disconnections, reconnections, and "raising" of the soul are far from near a personal relationship with our creator. The soul has to struggle desperately and grow just to perchance make this connection since some of us "may not know [this divinity within themselves]" or be able to recognize it (83). But even though the soul and the self have to work very hard to know this divinity, some do ultimately establish a relationship that is transcendent in nature and inward to their souls. Therefore Plotinus has knowledge of God but also the beginnings of wisdom.

Although Plotinus' philosophy was inward and reflexive, it was not personal or individual to our person. Our individual souls are connected to the overarching Soul and this Soul is our only connection to the One. The Soul, ultimately, is how we can establish this quasi-personal relationship to God or the One. Time and time again Plotinus makes a point to say that our souls know the One and that the One created our souls, the Soul, and all being. But there is not any mention that the One, also known as God, created each individual person. Once Christian texts surfaced, this connection between God and our individual selves became much more individual and special than pagan philosophers had the capacity to establish.

II. Saint Augustine

We see this individual and personal connection blossom within Saint Augustine's works *Confessions* and *The Trinity* as he personally as well as solitarily tries to connect with his creator. He does so on a more personal level than he felt his philosophical roots could allow him. He spoke about philosophy helping him come to find wisdom in God and not hindering him, just as Plotinus did. As he studied Platonist philosophies he claimed that he found philosophy to be a "correct mean, the middle ground in which I would find health, that I should remain 'in your image'... By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself" (120, 123). Reflecting inwardly allowed him to be able to raise his intellect to a transcendent state. But as he reflected inwardly, he felt that he got stuck part of way to his wisdom in and personal connection to God.

Part of the reason he felt stuck was because philosophy was a religion to Augustine, a religion that required his own "conversion". Opposed to Plotinus who believed philosophy was a stepping-stone, using it as an educational tool, that the soul and intellect needed to utilize in order to find the One, Augustine claimed he required a conversion from philosophy to Christianity as though he was converting from paganism to Christianity, though he did believe in God prior to this "conversion" of his, "...already I loved you, not a phantom surrogate for you" (*Confessions* 127). In this conversion he was faced with a personal dilemma that he could not understand.

But my soul hung back. It refused, and had no excuse to offer. The arguments were exhausted, and all had been refuted. The only thing left to it was a mute trembling... What is wrong with [me]? Uneducated people are rising up and capturing heaven, and [I] with [my] high culture without any heart... (*Confessions* 146)

As Augustine was translating the Platonists works he could see very clearly and almost obviously how God could be found within the pages. “God and his Word keep slipping in” (*Confessions* 135). He could not understand at first why looking inward was not enough.

The problem lied in the pagan philosophers’ separation of soul and body while continuously reflecting or redirecting one’s intellect and soul inward. Interestingly, this dilemma Augustine had with purely looking inward was Plotinus’ solution to an actualized connection with the One: separating the soul from the individual. Although philosophy allowed Augustine to look inward thus ultimately leading to a slightly convoluted knowledge of a higher power, he felt personally for himself that this inward reflection was not enough. Purely looking inward, as Plotinus argued for, would not bring Augustine close enough to God as he believed he could be. He could not truly come to have wisdom in God by solely looking inward. He needed to be redirected upwards, but he could not do so without God’s grace.

With you [God] as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and with my soul’s eye, such as it was, saw about that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind—not the light of every day, obvious to anyone... It transcended my mind, not in the way that oil floats on water, nor as heaven is above earth. It was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it. (*Confessions* 123)

Philosophy taught him to look inward, but Saint Augustine himself had to learn to redirect his soul upward towards God on his own and with the grace of God. This upward and transcendent contemplation of God was only possible when his soul transcended his mind. “And so step by step I ascended from bodies to the soul which perceives though the body, and from there to its inward force... This power, which I found in myself... raised

itself to the level of its own intelligence" (*Confessions* 127). Augustine speaks of himself ascending, not simply his soul. When I say Augustine himself, I mean that he as a whole person—a whole constituting his mind, body, and soul—ascends and transcends. This is not talking into account his individuality amongst other men, only his being as a composite whole.

This transcendence sounds similar to Plotinus' ideals of how the Soul can reach the One except Plotinus made the separation of the soul and the individual. Here we can see that Saint Augustine held the connection between the soul and the whole self (mind and body) firm and together. But this transcendence still did not fully bring him to wisdom of God. Augustine had followed all of his predecessors' stepping-stones and had even gone a step further himself, but something was still missing to him: a personal and individual connection to *his* creator. He had made the association that God created him as a whole being, but simply recognizing that he is below God does not mean he had established a personal and individual connection with God, and this is exactly the struggle Augustine felt within himself. He wanted more.

In this desire to create a personal and individual relationship with God, there is a paradox established. How can one man as a whole being (mind, body, and spirit) transcend the self and make a personal and individual connection to God at the same time? Saint Augustine struggled with maintaining the connection between himself as an individual whole while transcending and raising his lower intellects, but the problem lied within his philosophical roots.

The Word of God as well as the Word made flesh was the missing step that he needed in order to reach God and create a truly personal relationship with God in

Augustine's eyes. "I sought a way to obtain strength enough to enjoy you; but I did not find it until I embraced 'the mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus', 'who is above all things, God blesses for ever'" (*Trinity* 128). Augustine needed to understand that God did not only make him personally, but he needed to read and hear the lesson of the gospels and the scriptures. He needed to understand that God's own son died for all of our sins and for his own personal sins. The lessons that Jesus spoke of while spreading the Word of God and the scriptures with these lessons set down through the Bible to Augustine were all important details in him finding complete wisdom of God.

... The Lord Jesus Christ Himself, in order to teach greater things to the astonished spectators, and to turn those who were eager for and dependent upon these unusual things to eternal and interior things, said: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you". And He did not say: "Learn from me, because I raise up those who are dead for four days," but "Learn from me, because I am meek and humble of heart". (*Trinity* 7.11)

The humble nature of Jesus Christ touched Augustine and made him humble himself. As he read more and more, it seemed that Augustine truly took every lesson to heart in order to be pure as humanly possible. This humility, this humbling of the self allowed him to again reflect on his inward nature and raise the lower intellect to the higher realm of the "eternal, unchangeable and spiritual things" (*Trinity* 331). Within *The Trinity*, he describes a separation between two distinct yet unifying functions of our intellect. While only looking inward, Augustine says we are contemplating God utilizing the former part of our intellect, contemplating him "in the part that is drawn off for temporal activity one may perhaps find a trinity, but certainly not the image of God" (*Trinity* 324).

Once he was able to raise this lower intellect and truly see the Holy Trinity in all its transcendent glory, his personal connection was fully made and he was able to fully find

wisdom in God in His transcendent glory. "... It is grasped with the knowledge of absolute certitude, and proclaimed by knowledge of the self" (*Trinity* 343-344). This wisdom Augustine found, although within himself, could not be explored or reached on his own accord but with the grace of God and the help of the Holy Scriptures and teachings.

The wisdom that Augustine found is very far beyond the realm of the pagan philosopher's realm of potential wisdom. Not only was it a transcendent intellectualization of God in the sense that it transcends our natural world, but Augustine transcended himself. With God's grace, Augustine's soul, mind, and body raised above himself to have a purely transcendent connection to Him. In this, he had made the ultimate personal connection to his creator. He was able to attain a wisdom that is personal, individual, transcendent, and enlightened, building off of the knowledge of God that was attained by pagan philosophers prior to him.

Conclusion

Man has searched and continues to search for God in a multitude of ways. Even in our modern world where paganism, polytheism, monotheism, and agnosticism all are very customary and prevalent, man continues to try to find knowledge and wisdom in the Almighty through philosophical, religious, and personal struggles. Philosophy, whether based in pagan or religious roots, has proven to be a wonderful starting point for this daunting search though.

Philosophy is the essential starting point, in fact. It was the method of finding the Forms for Plato and the method in which he strove to search for even more transcendent and eternal ideals. Philosophy was what brought Plotinus extremely close to a personal connection and wisdom in God. Although he was not able to reach the wisdom and

personal connection that Augustine did, philosophy was truly the only method of investigation for Plotinus and it got him extremely close. As well, without philosophy, Saint Augustine might not have been directed to look completely inward and to connect his soul to God. His reading of Platonist authors and philosophers began his search for God by asking him to truly look within himself before venturing into the realm of the eternal. And without this inward reflection, he would not have gone through the struggle that lead him to the deepest wisdom and personal connection to God attainable. Philosophy is not only the correct method of searching, but it was the only method for all the men above mentioned. Must it be the only way for us as modern philosophers?

Let's revisit the wisdom of God that Saint Augustine attained through the philosophical investigation and utilizing biblical texts. He is the ultimate example of a man that has struggled and succeeded in finding a personal wisdom in God. His philosophical background propelled him into a deep knowledge of God that satisfied his lower intellect. Ultimately the Bible and its teachings lead him to wisdom of God by allowing him to hear the Word of God and to learn the teachings that he sent His son down to deliver. It is evident then that philosophy itself was not sufficient enough to reach wisdom of God—the Word of God was necessary to make the final, individual connection that lead to ultimate wisdom of God. The triumph over the doubt and searching that he had gone through is a testament to the strength of the human mind, body, and soul. And the philosophical method of searching was the essential starting point that lead Augustine to this ultimate wisdom.

We cannot obtain a personal or deep connection to God solely through philosophy, as we have seen with Plato and Plotinus. Philosophy, rather, invigorates the mind, body,

and spirit to want to search beyond their physical realm. Philosophy asks its student to truly look high and low to find the answers to the simple and difficult questions. When the philosophy student's attentions have been directed upwards towards the "eternal, unchangeable and spiritual things," the mind, body, and soul alike must go beyond their personal realm of knowledge or wisdom (*Trinity* 331). The wisdom of God, being the most personal relationship with our creator, is beyond philosophical methods and cannot be reached by cognitive reasoning. This wisdom is coupled with His own words, His teachings, His son. Without the acknowledgment and understanding of these biblical texts, man would never come to have any transcendent wisdom.

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