

~Other Speakers A-F: St. Augustine:

6. But if, O Lord, I am to confess to thee, by my mouth and my pen, the whole of what thou hast taught me concerning this unformed matter, I must say first of all that when I first heard of such matter and did not understand it--and those who told me of it could not understand it either--I conceived of it as having countless and varied forms. Thus, I did not think about it rightly. My mind in its agitation used to turn up all sorts of foul and horrible "forms"; but still they were "forms." And still I called it formless, not because it was unformed, but because it had what seemed to me a kind of form that my mind turned away from, as bizarre and incongruous, before which my human weakness was confused. And even what I did conceive of as unformed was so, not because it was deprived of all form, but only as it compared with more beautiful forms. Right reason, then, persuaded me that I ought to remove altogether all vestiges of form whatever if I wished to conceive matter that was wholly unformed; and this I could not do. For I could more readily imagine that what was deprived of all form simply did not exist than I could conceive of anything between form and nothing--something which was neither formed nor nothing, something that was unformed and nearly nothing.

Thus my mind ceased to question my spirit--filled as it was with the images of formed bodies, changing and varying them according to its will. And so I applied myself to the bodies themselves and looked more deeply into their mutability, by which they cease to be what they had been and begin to be what they were not. This transition from form to form I had regarded as involving something like a formless condition, though not actual nothingness.[462]

But I desired to know, not to guess. And, if my voice and my pen were to confess to thee all the various knots thou hast untied for me about this question, who among my readers could endure to grasp the whole of the account? Still, despite this, my heart will not cease to give honor to thee or to sing thy praises concerning those things which it is not able to express.[463]

For the mutability of mutable things carries with it the possibility of all those forms into which mutable things can be changed. But this mutability--what is it? Is it soul? Is it body? Is it the external appearance of soul or body? Could it be said, "Nothing was something," and "That which is, is not"? If this were possible, I would say that this was it, and in some such manner it must have been in order to receive these visible and composite forms.[464]