

## ***Neoplatonism in Augustine's Confessions***

by John Protevi / Permission to reproduce granted for academic use

[protevi@lsu.edu](mailto:protevi@lsu.edu) / <http://www.protevi.com/john/SH/PDF/Neoplatonism.pdf>

1. Overview
2. "Athens and Jerusalem"
3. Plato
4. Plotinus
5. Augustine and Neoplatonism: utility
6. Augustine and Neoplatonism: dissatisfaction

Preliminary Note: For the most part, this will be an "internal" reading of Augustine's contribution to the Christian tradition, as opposed to the "external" reading we posed in the previous lecture.

### 1. Overview

Augustine's recourse to the thoughts available to him in "some books of the Platonists" in Book 7 of the *Confessions* has two effects: A) it broaches the issue of the relation of philosophy to theology and to faith in general and in Christianity in particular; B) it is presented as solving some intellectual problems for him, but in so doing it creates others that will be of decisive influence in the future course of Christian theology.

A) Philosophy, theology, dogma and faith: The interrelations of these four have always been problematic. Philosophy is the demand for the examination of everything by rational argument only; theology is the rational discourse about the divine; dogma is the official doctrine of a religious institution; faith is the living experience of the person who believes in Scripture. Which of the four should take precedence should there be a conflict?

B) Neoplatonism and Christianity: Augustine the author presents Augustine the character as struggling with Manicheanism, that is, a dualistic framework in which evil is a positive substance dueling the positive substance of goodness in a sort of cosmic battle. This framework raises two problems: the relation of God to Creation and the problem of evil: how does the infinite God relate to finite Creation, and how does the infinitely good God allow a world of evil? The solutions are partially found in Neoplatonic doctrines, but the solution is itself inadequate and requires a Christological supplement. It is this necessity to mix Neoplatonism and Christology that results in a noteworthy tension between positive and negative theology: the desire to say something about God and the desire to respect His infinite alterity.

### 2. "Athens and Jerusalem"

The late 2<sup>nd</sup> C Christian writer Tertullian put the precedence of faith over philosophy bluntly: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church? What have heretics to do with Christians? ... Away with all attempts to produce a Stoic, Platonic, and dialectical Christianity."

But is it so easy to disentangle the two? What if Athens was there in Jerusalem all along? What if Scripture contains philosophy at its core? The *locus classicus* for this controversy is, of course, the beginning of the Gospel of John, as the King James puts it:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (en archēn o logos kai o logos prothōton theou kai theos ēn o logos). The same was in the beginning with God (outothen ēn archēn o logos kai theos ēn o logos). All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

Compare this with the beginning of Mark:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of the one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

One is immediately struck by the difference in scale between John's cosmic reach ("all things") and Mark's local rootedness ("wilderness"). The next point is the loaded one: while Mark's language is the traditional one of reform Judaism ("prophets," "messenger"), John has recourse to the terms *arche*, *logos*, and *outos*, words which are the *lingua franca* of Platonism. How is one to interpret John's vocabulary?

There have been, as you might expect many different strategies. Here are two extreme formulations, which may never in fact have been put in just these words:

A) John may have picked up some Platonic phrases along the way, but these function in his Gospel only to explicate, to unfold, the authentic teaching of Christ.

B) John is an example of later speculative additions to the purely ethical teachings of Jesus, as found in the synoptic Gospels. (The next step here of course is to try to disentangle the sayings of Jesus from the commentary of the synoptics.)

To grossly oversimplify, we can identify A) as the position held by many Catholic scholars and B) as the position held by many Protestant scholars. I can assure you this is a thorny issue, to which many forests of trees and many oceans of ink have been dedicated. The key difference is the notion of history: is history the unfolding of an implicated truth which preserves and amplifies that truth, or is history the degeneration from a pristine truth, the accumulation of errors and accretions that must be pruned away so that the original truth can be reborn?

Deciding on this point is not the end of the story however. John's Platonic vocabulary may have been innocent explication or it may have been speculative distortion of an originally ethical message. In any event, despite where and when one locates the introduction of philosophy into Christianity and how one judges the value of that addition, the question remains: why did Christianity as a social movement feel the need to render its doctrine in a philosophically acceptable manner? In other words, why did they want to make sense of mysteries rather than just leave them as mysteries to be believed in spite of, or even because of, their recalcitrance to philosophical logic? As Tertullian also said: "I believe because it is absurd" (*credo quia ineptum*).

These are difficult questions. To again pose two extreme formulations:

A) Philosophy, theology, dogma and faith have only superficial differences. They are ultimately grounded in the same reality which is open to both rational explanation and to Scriptural revelation. The same God is behind both. The necessity of reaching a popular audience in Scripture necessitated the use of various images that at first resist rational explanation; this recalcitrance is only temporary and can be overcome by theologians using philosophical tools.

B) Philosophy and faith are antithetical, and faith is clearly superior. The mysteries revealed in Scripture are the only true test of faith; philosophical quibbling about logic is the work of idle hands. However, to be realistic, we can admit that the philosophic rendering of faith did serve two useful worldly functions. It was 1) a recruiting strategy of the early Church, which had targeted wealthy and educated citizens of Rome, who were also the targets of recruitment by other proselytizing faiths ("heresies" and Jews). These people, who prided themselves on their rationality, wanted to be convinced of the rational ground of faith. Perhaps they should have just believed right away, but they didn't, and since they were useful to the Church in providing the material support for the social charity network that helped recruit the poor, it was understandable why they made the effort to

persuade them. 2) The assent to the philosophic rendering of faith in dogmatic theology also fostered cohesion within the Church.

There's an awful lot more to be said on these and related topics, but let's move on to discuss the Platonic background to Neoplatonism.

### 3. Plato

First, a look back at Plato. First, here's a link to a lecture of mine on Book 6 of the *Republic* if you want more details: <http://www.protevi.com/john/FH/Rep6.html>

In this section of his masterpiece Plato has Socrates describe to Glaucon how the "Idea of the Good" enables our understanding. The details are fascinating, but we can't go into them in all the depth they deserve. We can focus on two things: 1) the action of the Good in the realm of the Ideas is compared to the action of the sun in the realm of the "visible"; 2) the Good is "beyond being."

In the so-called analogy of the sun, the Good is said to allow for understanding in the same way the sun allows for generation and growth of living things. For Plato, true understanding of things is gained not by observing their changeable state, that is by looking at them with the bodily senses, but by understanding the "forms" in which they participate, that is, by "seeing" their essential characteristics with the "mind's eye." Now Plato also thought teleologically, that is, he understood the essence of things to be their role in an inter-related system, that is, how they functioned as parts to allow the whole in which they operated to function coherently. The "good" of any one thing then was its contribution to the system in which it worked-what it was "good for." The Idea of the Good, the Good itself, was then the principle of functionality: that which guarantees that all subsystems of the universe ultimately cohere and are thus ultimately rationally explicable. The Good allows us to know that all our partial explanations, all our preliminary guesses as to the good of individual things, are ultimately susceptible of being judged as to their correctness and, at the limit and in principle-even if we finite creatures may never accomplish this-that the surviving true judgments are able to be systematically ordered.

Now in a fateful turn, contested vigorously by Aristotle, Plato takes the epistemological superiority of essential intuition and makes its object, the form of the thing, ontologically superior to the object of sensory vision, the "visible thing." In other words, from this decision stems the "two world" reading of Plato, that stability and identity, the hallmarks of a form, are the hallmarks of true being, and that visible things are less "real" than invisible things.

Now Plato is quite clear that the Idea of the Good is not a thing, but a principle. He expresses this by saying that the Good is "beyond being." There can be no positive investigation of the properties of the Good: it is not a substance in the ontological sense nor a subject in the logical sense. In other words, the Good is not God or even a god.

### 4. Plotinus

As a representative of neoplatonism, we can take Plotinus, who, although an Egyptian, writes in Rome in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> C. Plotinus' thought is recorded in the *Enneads*, six books of 9 essays each. It's a huge, sprawling work, combining Aristotelian as well as Platonic themes. Nonetheless, we can distill two basic principles: all things desire the Good; all things strive to become One. The two principles are basically the same, though: the One and the Good are synonymous. A similar duality-in-identity is found in the direction of "movement" of the universe: the upward (and inward) way and the downward (and outward) way. I want to emphasize the word "way," for as an ancient philosopher, Plotinus sees philosophy as a way of life, an orientation one gives to one's movement through life by following spiritual exercises that allow an ordered series of experiences.

The upward way, from dispersion to unity, from weakness to strength, from exteriority to interiority, following an ever-increasing intensity of experience, is a series of attacks, similar to the path up the divided line in Plato:

First, the attack on "ordinary experience" and its reliance on the reality of matter. You think that material things, accessible by the senses, are real, but matter has no definite properties, and since stability and identity are the hallmarks of reality or true being, matter is nothing. Rather, it is the limitation of the unlimited material substrate by form that lends being to things; thus we are lead upward and inward from matter to form.

Two, the attack on the understanding of the realm of the forms by discursive reason. Now that we know that only form, not matter is real, the question is how do we know the forms? We cannot be satisfied with knowing them one after the other by the discursive reasoning of premise and conclusion, as in scientific demonstration, the experience of the individual theoretical soul. Rather we must experience the intellect's instant grasping of the forms.

Three, the attack on the usual conception of intellect. The intellect knows the Platonic forms, but not, as one might think, as external objects of dialectical reason (the experience of the "world-soul"), but as the very structure of intellect. Plato's doctrine of recollection is interpreted by Plotinus to mean true knowledge is the intellect coming to know itself in the "medium" of identity: only the same can know the same.

Four, the attack on the usual conception of the One. You might think that intellectually grasping the principle that the One is the ground of all things (nous) is the final step. But you'd be wrong: there's still too much difference here, the One is still the object of something different from it.

Five, the experience of the One. Rather than rest content with intellectual insight, the wise one must experience a becoming-One, a moment of fusion. Plotinus, following Plato, uses the language of desire here: the One is the Good is the Beautiful; it pulls us into an fusion that dissolves all individuality, all difference. This doctrine of union with the One thus cannot easily be reconciled with any Christian doctrine of personal immortality.

Recap of the upward way. Spiritual exercises allow us to move beyond each of the first four levels of ordered experiences, following the cosmic desire, ever-striving to become One, ever-increasing the intensity of experience to the melting point:

1. experience of reality of material things (everyday life: embodied souls)
2. experience of forms as accessed by discursive reason (science: individual theoretical souls)
3. experience of forms as separate object of Intellect (dialectic: world-soul)
4. experience of One as object of Intellect (intellectual intuition: nous)
5. experience of the One (desiring fusion: One)

But how can Plotinus survive this experience? And how can we trust his account of absorption into identity, written as it is in language whose different words we read through in time?

Here we follow the downward way. We have followed the upward and inward way to fusion with the One. The turnaround on the downward path is as much a feeling as anything: having been united with the One, the wise one feels the way the One freely and without reasoning overflows itself outward and downward, increasing its differentiation, letting go its unity, lowering its intensity. In following this path we must be clear that the downward way is not temporal, but logical; the One does not become the Intellect, but the Intellect depends on the One. The One is not prior in time, but more complete, more full, more intense-so intense that it overflows

itself, allowing "emanation" of itself as the Intellect, which in turn opens out into the world-soul with its temporal dispersion and dialectical array of forms. In turn, the world soul has something of a love of dispersion and hence attaches itself to different bodies, allowing the perspectival differences of individual souls and their discursive reason and even more loosely, the illusion of materiality. This love of self on the part of the soul, this dissolution into difference and slacking off of intensity, is a bit of a rebellion against the One, a bit of a fall, but it is also beneficial to some extent as only a materially dispersed individual soul can nurture its desire to turn about and ascend to the One by carefully following philosophical exercises!

## 5. Augustine and Neoplatonism: utility

The extent to which Augustine knew Plotinus' writings is unclear. Certainly he picked up something of the Platonic school in his readings. Augustine explicitly testifies in Book 7 that the Platonists helped him understand the relation of an infinite God to a finite Creation, and to understand evil.

A. Infinite God and finite Creation. Augustine recounts a series of images he had used to try to understand this relation, the most memorable being the infinite sea (God) and the finite sponge (Creation). Finally however Augustine realizes that it's not that he has the wrong image, but that imagination is the wrong faculty to use! Imagination will always be of bodily images, extended in space and dispersed in time. But God is neither of these. Rather, He is like the light that allows us to understand. This is known as Augustine's "illumination theory": the flash of insight, the eureka experience, is due to God's light shining within our minds. The experience by which Augustine realized the ground of insight-his insight into insight, as it were-is recounted in *Confessions* 7.10:

... with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw Your unchangeable Light shining over that same eye of my soul, over my mind. It was not the light of everyday that the eye of flesh can see .... Nor was it above my mind as oil above the water it floats on, nor as the sky is above the earth; it was above because it made me, and I was below because made by it. He who knows the truth knows that Light, and he that knows the Light knows eternity.

Augustine is here clear that the relation of God to man is not spatial or temporal, but of Creator to created, which can be expressed as the relation of light to understanding, of truth to belief.

There are clear Neoplatonic resonances here: remember the analogy of the sun and Good in Plato's *Republic*.

B. The problem of evil. This is of course a notorious problem for Christianity. How can an all-knowing, all-powerful, and loving God have created a world with so much manifest evil? As we know the Manicheans had their answer. Augustine sketches his answer in *Confessions* 7.12-16; this has been a standard resource in Christian apologetics ever since. Rather than a positive substance in its own right, evil is the privation of good. All things, in so far as they are, are good; evil is only a misperception caused by our inability to see the whole of God's Creation. Certain parts of that Creation do not harmonize with other parts, but the whole is harmonious. The source of that disharmony is the swerving of the will away from God to the things of the world.

The Neoplatonic echoes are perhaps not as clear here, due to the limits of my presentation. Nevertheless, I hope you can see that the Platonic doctrine that the good of individuals is their role in the function of the whole serves as the basis of Augustine's argument.

## 6. Augustine and Neoplatonism: dissatisfaction

The help that Neoplatonism offers Augustine is welcome, but not enough. Three basic problems are 1) that the One is not a personal God; 2) that emanation is not creation; and 3) that the ascent on the upward way is strictly philosophical, not religious. We can't go into the first two issues, but we can see easily how the prideful self-

reliance of the Platonists, their belief that they can ascend solely by a meditative reason, that is, without grace, with the help of the sacrificed Christ, is unacceptable to Augustine, steeped as he was in Paul. *Confessions* 7.17 tells of Augustine's unaided ascent and its failure: "Thus in the thrust of a trembling glance my mind arrived at That Which Is ... but I lacked the strength to hold my gaze fixed ..."

The next chapter (7.18) tells how Augustine's embracing of Christ gave him that strength. This embrace, a supplement to the Neoplatonic meditative practice, however must be itself be supplemented (7.19) by the doctrine of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh. But here we have further problems for philosophy and theology, which we'll have to leave in abeyance.

We'll end with the following scheme: To the extent that Christian theology has recourse to Neoplatonic philosophy to rationally explicate Scripture it will always have to deal with the notable reluctance of the Platonists to give a positive account of the Good or the One. In so far as it is "beyond being," the One/Good resists discussion in any mundane language oriented to discussing the properties of beings. Explicating the God of Scripture with the Neoplatonic One/Good will thus always run the risk of 1) removing any personality from God by pushing Him too far "beyond being"; or 2) distorting the reality of the One/Good by use of mundane metaphors.

The various interplays of positive, negative and superlative theologies, brought to the fore by the Pseudo-Dionysius in the mid 5<sup>th</sup> C, and used by Christian theologians ever since, are the attempts to deal with this basic problem of the relation of Neoplatonic philosophy and Christian theology. Here as always Augustine lays out the basic questions for the Christian tradition.