The Philosophy of Neoplatonism & Its Effects on the Thought of St. Augustine of Hippo

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents, who have faithfully supported me in my endeavors:

To Fr. Deacon John C. Holoduek for all of his help and love!

&

May Matushka Donna Holoduek memory be eternal!
Reposed in the Lord: August 17, 2009
Vechnaya Pamyat!

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Abstract

The thesis of John Charles Holouduek, Jr. deals with the relationship between the philosophy of Neoplatonism and the Christian philosophy of St. Augustine of Hippo. This work has two themes: first, it examines how Augustine adapts Neoplatonism in order to develop his own Christian philosophical worldview; secondly, it investigates the status of his conversion to Christianity. Specifically, it determines whether his conversion to Christianity was complete or, as some scholars have maintained, was only superficial, concealing his true Neoplatonic identity.

The effort to converge classical philosophy with Christian thought was a standard practice with the Fathers of the Church. Some used Platonism, the works of Aristotle, or Neoplatonism. Others used a mixture of these classical philosophies. St. Augustine of Hippo, it is argued, not only used Neoplatonism to understand Christian doctrines, but it was his study of Neoplatonism that facilitated his actual conversion to Christianity.
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**Introduction**

This work deals with Neoplatonism and ultimately how the Christian philosopher, St. Augustine of Hippo, adapted some Neoplatonism into his philosophy. The founder of Neoplatonism was a third-century Greek philosopher named Plotinus. However, the title Neoplatonism was not given to the philosophy of Plotinus until the nineteenth century. Most scholars held that this philosophy was really a part of Platonism. A.H. Armstrong states that Plotinus “was an original philosophical genius, the only philosopher in the history of later Greek thought who can be ranked with Plato and Aristotle, and was impelled by a personal mystical experience of a kind and quality unique in Greek philosophical religion.”¹ Although Plotinus adapted a decent portion of Platonism, he was able to remain original.

Augustine, on the other hand, was a person who sought the truth, but he did not find what he was looking for in his early life. He then stumbled upon the *Enneads*, and he started a conversion process that ended with his adhering to Christianity as a Christian philosopher-theologian; he also became a bishop. The *Enneads* gave Augustine a way to go from being a materialist to having spirituality. Augustine, like other philosopher-theologians, was able to adapt Neoplatonic philosophy in an attempt to get sound Christian doctrine.

My thesis has two themes. The first is based on the question: Was St. Augustine of Hippo a Neoplatonist or a Christian? The second is to show the convergence of Neoplatonism with Christian doctrine in St. Augustine’s thought. This convergence took place in the Roman Empire and the dates range from the second century to the middle of the fifth century. There are three main sections of this paper: an introduction to Neoplatonism, the biography of St. Augustine, and

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Augustine as a Neoplatonist or a Christian and the convergence of Neoplatonism in the thought of Augustine.

The introduction to Neoplatonism gives a brief biography of Plotinus and lays out the Neoplatonic philosophical system. The biography of St. Augustine gives the history of Augustine’s life in a manner suited to show his search of wisdom. The third section, the heart of the paper, decides whether Augustine was really a Neoplatonist or a Christian philosopher who adapted the Neoplatonic philosophy to Christianity. The second part of the third section shows the convergence of Neoplatonism with Christian doctrine in Augustine’s thought. This part develops Augustine’s psychological philosophy and his theodicy and discusses the divine illumination at Ostia.

**Introduction to Neoplatonism**

**Brief Biography of Plotinus**

Historians do not know many details about the life of Plotinus. Plotinus is believed to have lived from 203-270 CE. These dates are speculative, for we do not even know where or when Plotinus was born. Karl Jaspers states that “the reports that he was born in Lycopolis, Egypt, did not make its appearance until long after his death.”¹² Both Armstrong and Jaspers suggest that Plotinus may have been Roman due to his name and also his inaccuracies in speaking and writing in Greek. Also, there are other reports that have Plotinus born in India. All in all, this dispute about where and when he was born shows us that we do not know that much about his life.

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One of the first facts that we know for certain about Plotinus is that he studied under Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria, Egypt. Armstrong states that “in the 28th year of his life, Plotinus went to Alexandria to study philosophy; he found no teacher there to satisfy him till, at the end of 232 or the beginning of 233, someone took him to Ammonius.” Plotinus enjoyed Ammonius’ teaching to such an extent that he stayed with him for eleven years. Ammonius is speculated to have been the first teacher of Neoplatonic thought. Yet, considering that Ammonius did not leave any writings behind, Plotinus is known as the father of Neoplatonism.

Plotinus lived his life as a philosopher-mystic and was reluctant to write down his thoughts, but in response to his students, Plotinus did eventually write down his philosophic visions. However, Plotinus normally did not make revisions. This is why Plotinus’ student, Porphyry, becomes the editor and compiler of the works of Plotinus. This compiled work eventually becomes known as Plotinus’ Enneads.

Plotinus was a profound teacher throughout his life even with the lack of desire to write down his thoughts. Many times, “distinguished men and women on the point of death brought him their children to educate and entrusted him with their fortunes to administer.” Neoplatonism is ultimately a form of philosophical mysticism. R.T. Wallis tells us that many people, who do not know the first thing about Neoplatonism, know that Plotinus was a mystic and explains this term: “Mystic is here used not in the sense of ‘irrationalist’, ‘occultist’ or ‘teacher of esoteric doctrine’, but in its strict sense of one who believes himself to have experienced union with God or Ultimate Reality.”

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In his biography of Plotinus, Porphyry informs us that Plotinus had achieved this union with the Ultimate Reality many times. This Ultimate Reality, he called “the One.” Plotinus believed that the body was an impediment to this union, for he was able to achieve the union for only a few seconds and then he would be pulled backed to the body. In the union, the mind is released from all personal limitation and is in perfect unity with the One. Porphyry also tells us through his writings that he himself only achieved this union once.

Wallis states that Plotinus’ conception of mystical union with the Ultimate Reality differs from that of other mystics. These other mystics hold that it is through some religious practice or pure faith that one achieves union with the Ultimate Reality whereas Plotinus held that “the soul’s purification is accomplished primarily through philosophy.” Philosophical speculation, for Plotinus, was the means to the end, which he held to be the union with an Ultimate Reality that transcends worldly concerns. Plotinus often neglected mundane earthly affairs, including taking care of his own body, because as we have said, he believed that the body was an impediment to the union that he desired so greatly.

After running schools for years, Plotinus’ situation changed radically. In 268 CE, Emperor Gallienus, his protector, was killed, and Plotinus fell mortally ill from his long standing battle with leprosy. Plotinus was isolated on a friend’s estate in Campania and only a physician was allowed in to see him. Plotinus died two years later in 270 CE. Porphyry recorded Plotinus’ writings in Greek. Less than a century later, Marius Victorinus translated the *Enneads* into Latin. This is the translation that Augustine had access to and most likely read. It was Augustine’s reading of these texts that began a conversion process and would eventually bring him to

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6 Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 3.
Christianity. Also, Neoplatonic philosophy provided Augustine with the intellectual framework for his understanding of Christian doctrine after his conversion.

The One

In Plotinus’ philosophy, the One is the Ultimate Reality. The Ultimate Reality is that which explains everything, including itself. According to Plotinus, the One is neither Being nor Nonbeing. The One is not a being, insofar as it transcends all particular beings. Moreover, “the One is not a being because it is precedent to all being.” All beings are contingent on the One, for it is the causal principle of all beings. The One is not nothing or nonbeing on the grounds that nonbeing cannot be the “potentiality of all existence” or have a consciousness, which the One is and has.

Therefore, one of the first pieces of information that we find out about the One is that the One is pure unity. The One is indivisible and therefore cannot be a multiplicity for multiplicity implies numerous parts. Of course, beings can and do consist in multiplicity, but in this case, multiplicity is kept together by a bond-like unity. The best way of describing this is by way of an example. The example is a baseball team. If one player is doing rather well and has a .305 batting average at mid-season but the rest of the team is not doing well, then his hopes of getting into the playoffs are slim. Yet, when all the players of the team are working as a well-functioning unit, the chances for the whole team’s getting to the playoffs are greater than when just the one player doing well. All of these players are part of a multiplicity called the team. The One is not like this for there are no parts, and therefore it does not have bond-like unity but is pure unity. Also, in order for the baseball team (multiplicity) to function, it needs its parts whereas the One has no such need.

Plotinus makes the following interesting classification of the One: “The One begets all things, it cannot be any of them – neither thing, nor quality, nor quantity, nor intelligence, nor soul.”\(^8\) Everything that exists emanates from the One. What does this emanation mean?

Scholasticism sums up this principle in the phrase “\textit{bonum diffusivum sui},” which translates as “the good diffuses itself.” “In other words, entities that have achieved perfection of their own being do not keep that perfection to themselves, but spread it abroad by generating an external ‘image’ of their internal activity.”\(^9\)

The problem with Wallis’ definition is the part of achieving perfection, for in Plotinus’ outlook, the One has never been anything but what it is. The One, already being perfect, overflows into creation for it cannot keep its perfection to itself. This giving of the One never diminishes, for it keeps giving to beings without ceasing. This overflowing is also an act of creation, for as Plotinus said, “It is because of the One that we breathe and have our being.”\(^10\)

One of the reasons why the One is able to keep giving its power away is because the One is unaffected by this pouring out and remains perfect no matter how much it gives to being.

On a side note, human souls and the One have an interesting relationship. The One cannot stop giving to all beings including human souls. On the other hand, the human soul is where it is because of its desire for independence. Yet, the individual soul, if it “stays true to itself, it would love the divinity and desire to be at one with it.”\(^11\) The way that the individual soul can stay true to itself is by hating its decision for independence and pursuing unity with the One. In reaching the One, the soul realizes that the One is the Author of Life. Thus, the soul finally seeks to be free of its bodily chains, and it wants to be united with the One for all eternity.

\(^8\) O’Brien, \textit{The Essential Plotinus}, 77.
\(^10\) O’Brien, \textit{The Essential Plotinus}, 85.
\(^11\) Ibid.
The experience of unity with the One is a “self-transcendence, a simplification, self-abandonment.”

In this experience, if the soul looks upon itself, it will see an image of the One. This image is impressed on the soul by the process of emanation. Yet, the body retains the soul in its prison and generates for the soul a multiplicity of thought. The soul is bound to the body except in the brief moments that it can gain its freedom or by the body’s death, which releases the soul from all of its bodily chains. The best way to gain union with the One is to rid or to detach oneself from all bodily cares.

Now that I have gone through the way to the One and a description of human souls, I will look at the Three Primal Hypostases.

The Three Hypostases

Hypostasis comes from the Greek word ὑπόστασις, and it means the act of standing under. The three parts to the Plotinian hypostases are the One, the Intellect (Nous), and the World-Soul (psychê). The goal of human contemplation is the One. The One “exemplifies the mystic’s paradox that the Undifferentiated Unity he experiences is simultaneously, because of its freedom from all restrictions, the most substantial and satisfying of realities.”

Once again, we need to recall that the One is not Being and is also not Nonbeing. The One is not Being for being implies limitation, and the One has no limitations. Yet, it cannot be Nonbeing for that is linked in Plotinus’ view with matter and therefore evil. So, what is the One? The One is absolute simplicity.

In keeping with the Platonic tradition, the One is also referred to as “the Good.” The reason for this is that all lower realities, including the World-Soul and the Nous, strive for the One. When we looked at the One, we assigned it multiple attributes, i.e., unity and simplicity.

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Yet, Plotinus warns us to be careful in assigning attributes to the One, for it is neither multiplicity nor plurality. Also, a plurality of attributes would diminish the One’s excellence, for its excellence is found in its simplicity. This “theoretical discussion of the One is inadequate, since its true nature is revealed only in mystical union.”\(^\text{14}\) So theoretical talk is ultimately useless, since the only way to know the One is to go through the levels of contemplation and be in union with it. The levels of completion (ascent) are with the World-Soul and realizing its imperfections, the \textit{Nous}, and finally with the One. However, the ascent of the human soul is not complete until the person is discharged fully from the body and is able to unite fully with the One permanently.

All beings and their bodies have multiplicity, which makes them subject to possible divisions. This includes the \textit{Nous} and the World-Soul as well, for they are beings. Even the basic elements of fire and water have the ability to morph into or from other elements or bodies. So Plotinus tries to look for a common feature of all elements and bodies, which he comes to call “Prime Matter.” Wallis states the following about Prime Matter: “Indeed it appears to be nothing at all but Plotinus, though he entitles Matter nonbeing in view of its formlessness and utter unsubstantiality, denies that this means absolute non-existence.”\(^\text{15}\) Matter that we see is only a mere image of this Prime Matter, and therefore matter has defects. Plotinus is asking us to reverse our vision of the universe and to accept that spirit is more real than the matter that we see, taste, touch, etc.

The fact that pure matter lacks form makes it akin to evil. Matter flows from the One, and it eventually will dissipate into nonbeing. This matter and the soul’s union with it create the wickedness of individual souls. “According to this the organization and orderly movement of the

\(^{14}\) Wallis, \textit{Neoplatonism}, 59.
cosmos, like those of the body of an individual animal, depend on the presence of a controlling soul."\(^{16}\) Each being, therefore, must have a soul that is in control of it.

The second hypostasis is called Intelligence (\textit{Nous}) and is considered the middle hypostasis in between the One and the World-Soul. The \textit{Nous} is true being, but more importantly, it is consciousness itself and is the eternal of the Platonic archetypes. As the first emanation from the One, it exhibits the tendencies inherent in being: the tendencies to move out from the One and the tendency to return to the source of all-being. It is this turning back to the One that creates the duality inherent in the nature of consciousness, the duality between subject and object, knower and known. Unable fully to contemplate infinite being, the \textit{Nous} does the next best thing: it contemplates the Ideas or the Forms, the archetypes of perfection. The \textit{Nous} as self-consciousness implies it contains both the One and the other in the unity of self-consciousness. The \textit{Nous} thus dwells in pure light and leads a life of bliss. The "Intelligence (\textit{Nous}) is the level of intuition, where the laborious processes of discursive thought are bypassed and the mind attains a direct and instantaneous vision of truth."\(^{17}\) The \textit{Nous} develops as a unity-in-plurality, which implies that the \textit{Nous} is a multiple organism that contains a plurality of Forms. Plotinus also declares that the \textit{Nous} is free from external limitations, but it imposes a limitation on itself insofar as it is other than the One.

The World-Soul is on the ground level since it is the third hypostasis. The World-Soul is a further emanation from the \textit{Nous}. As the World-Soul, it contemplates the forms within the \textit{Nous}, and it is also the creator of the world of things. The World-Soul is the animating principle within the material world. Materiality is the last emanation from the One via the World-Soul.

\(^{16}\) Wallis, \textit{Neoplatonism}, 50.
\(^{17}\) Wallis, \textit{Neoplatonism}, 53.
The World-Soul informs all living beings while retaining its connection to the *Nous*. Living things are a combination of form and matter.

In addition, the World-Soul is the locus of discursive reasoning, which Plotinus states has roots in material bodies. Although, the World-Soul participates in the One, it is not a pure unity. Yet, it gives “unity” to all the beings that it participates in creating. A distinction that can be made between the World-Soul and the *Nous* is that the World-Soul is the locus of discursive reason and the *Nous* is the locus of intuition. This brings us to a discussion of individual human souls.

**The Descent & the Ascent of the Individual Soul**

In the days of Plotinus, people interpreted the descent of the soul as the soul’s tumbling down from unity with the One or the Good and its taking on irrational faculties until it was united with a human body. Plotinus does not necessarily agree with this interpretation. In his commentary and translation of the *Enneads*, Elmer O’Brien states, “The human soul never wholly departs the intelligible realm; of the same nature as the Soul (World-Soul), by its higher part it is always there.”\(^{18}\) What O’Brien is trying to tell us is that the human soul is attached to the body but it still has a link to the One and the World-Soul no matter how corrupted it is. So Plotinus believes that the soul did not completely fall away from the One as did other philosophers of his time.

Plotinus starts this discourse on the descent by asking a simple question, which is Why did this descent from the intelligible realm ultimately happen? Plotinus looks to Plato for an answer, but instead of finding an answer, he found more questions. In order for the soul to command the body, it had to penetrate it and be interwoven with the body. The body naturally

wants to separate and go back to its original state, or back to nature. However, the soul is in itself perfection and is self-sufficient. Plotinus then goes on to speak of the union between soul and body. He says that “even though the soul gives the body existence, it is not necessarily to the soul’s hurt: providing for a lower nature does not necessarily prevent the agency that exercises it from remaining itself in a state of perfection.”

Although the soul still has its perfection, the soul is trapped within the human body and is subject to the desires and fears of the body. There is, of course, one World-Soul, however, “from the one Soul proceeds a multiplicity of different souls.” Each of these souls seeks its individuality, and this is how this multiplicity of different souls comes about. Unfortunately, these souls do not recognize what will happen to them if they attain the freedom that they so desire, so they are doomed to take care of and manage a body. They go from living with pure intellection to being chained to the corruption of a body.

Therefore, souls that are tied to a body live in two realms, the intelligible world and the realm of the senses. They can free themselves from the shackles of their choice by contemplation of the One. Remember that for Plotinus, corruption was a free choice and freedom and unity is also a free choice. The mixture of perfection (soul) and defect (body) equals confusion. It is through this confusion that the souls have to manage bodies. This also implies that “every soul needs to have a lower part directed towards the bodily and a higher part directed toward the intelligible.” The corresponding parts help to remove the confusion and for the soul to manage the human body accurately.

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19 O’Brien, *The Essential Plotinus*, 64.
Now, I am going to switch to the ascent of the soul. I have interwoven parts of the ascent in various parts of this exposition of Neoplatonic philosophy, but I now make a few parts of the ascent perfectly clear. The human soul perceives its reality as subordinate to something else, and it is shameful of its bodily state. This soul cannot use its senses to get to the higher reality, the One, for the senses are parts of the corrupted body. The human soul must use an inner sense, which is called contemplation. The first problem that the soul encounters is that it fears the unknown and regresses to the realm of the senses. Then, as the soul leaves all earthly cares behind, it begins to go through the three hypostases in ascending order. This soul will eventually realize the faults of the World-Soul, and then of the Nous, until it gets to the One, which is the perfect being. As the soul grasps the One, the soul is reclaimed to its bondage of the body. Thus the soul can only have brief moments of union with the One until it is entirely free of its bondage. Once the soul is perfectly free of the body, it can remain in union with the One forever.

Now that we have reviewed the basic structure of Plotinian philosophy, we will proceed to a look at the biography of St. Augustine of Hippo. Interestingly enough, Plotinus and Augustine share life similarities. These are not of dates or places, but I will intrigue you now with one of these items. Scholars believe that Augustine could barely read Greek if at all and definitely could not write in Greek, and we know from our biography of Plotinus that he frequently made mistakes in Greek. As some of these items come up, however few that they are, I will inform you of them.
Biography of St. Augustine of Hippo

Introduction

When we study classical Christianity, many of the Fathers of the Church in both the East and the West used philosophical systems to support their formation of theological doctrines. Many of the Fathers used Platonism, a few used Aristotelian thought, and some others used what is now known as Neoplatonism. In this study, I look at the effects that Neoplatonism had on St. Augustine of Hippo. As Jaspers states, “Plotinus was also taken over by Christian thinkers, above all by Augustine.” Before we examine Augustine’s own unique combination of faith and reason, we need to reflect on Augustine’s journey from a nonbeliever to a believer. Also we need to look for clues to his intellectual development and the factors that would play a role in his conversion to Christianity. The main source from which I draw this information from is Augustine’s Confessions.

Augustine was born in Tagaste in Northern Africa in 354 CE. Tagaste was part of the Roman North African province. Augustine was born to Monica, eventually St. Monica, a devout Christian whom many believe was instrumental to his later conversion, and Patricius, who was a Roman official and a pagan. Incidentally, Patricius was converted to Christianity albeit on his deathbed, no doubt some say due to his wife’s constant nagging. However, it took many years until Augustine was received into the Church by Baptism and Chrismation. During his youth, Augustine was much like many of the young men of today: he was into partying, having sex, and stealing items for fun. In any case, through much of his early life he remained estranged from Christianity. Augustine’s baptism took place on Holy Saturday of 387 CE at the age of thirty-three. He also received the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist at the liturgy on Pascha morn.

22 Jaspers, The Original Thinkers, 91.
After his conversion, Augustine was quickly ordained to the deaconate and then to the priesthood in 391 CE. In 395, Augustine was raised to the level of the episcopate as auxiliary bishop in the service of the church in Hippo. During his years as bishop, Augustine was a prolific writer that defended the Orthodox Catholic faith from various heresies that plagued the early church including, but not limited to, Arianism and Manichaeism. However, during the later years of his life, many of Augustine’s earlier writings began to be questioned as heretical. Augustine had to write many retractions and even appeal for the help of the pope to confirm his orthodoxy. Eventually, Augustine was cleared of any wrongdoings and continued his work as bishop of Hippo. Augustine died in 430 CE and is revered as a saint and one of the Fathers of the Church in universal Christendom.

Youth

Augustine did not enjoy his studies when he was a young boy and a teenager. He preferred to spend more time with his friends playing around than studying. His parents had hopes that he would someday become a lawyer, a greater teacher, or a rhetorician. Because of Patricius’ status as a Roman official, Augustine was able to be schooled at Carthage in the art of rhetoric with the goal of becoming a lawyer. After Augustine’s father died, he was still able to continue his studies. Yet, after a few years, Augustine stopped his schooling and went back to Tagaste to set up a school of his own.

Once during these years, Augustine got painfully sick and longed for the sacraments. In his Confessions, he states:

I was still a boy, I suddenly became feverishly ill with an oppressive pain in my stomach, and nearly died. Thou hast observed, O my God, for Thou went already my keeper, with what agitation of mind and with what faith I begged for my baptism of Thy Christ, of my
God my Lord, beseeching it from the piety of my mother and of the Mother of us all, Thy Church.  

Yet, Monica prevented him from receiving the sacraments at this time. The reasoning behind this was that Monica knew how much Augustine was tempted by frivolous affairs and how he would indulge in these actions. After a period of recuperation, Augustine got well and again drifted away from this desire to enter the Church.

One day, while Augustine was hanging out with his friends, they came to a pear tree on someone’s property. This pear tree was considered private property. They went to the tree and shook it, and it dropped many pears, which they took. In reflecting on this act, Augustine states, “I did (not) desire to enjoy the thing itself which was the object of inclination to steal but the very act of stealing, the sin itself.” These adolescents did not take the pears because they were hungry. They, however, did eat a few of the pears, but most of them were given to the pigs. Augustine and his friends took pleasure in doing these types of deeds. After his conversion, this incident would shape his understanding of human nature and the role played by God in human salvation.

**First Interest in Philosophy & Manichaeism**

While Augustine was studying the art of the orator in Carthage, he stumbled upon his first love of philosophy. The book that led him to this longing for wisdom was entitled *Hortensius*, a book written by Cicero, a Roman orator. Augustine observed that “Suddenly, every vain hope became worthless to me and I yearned with unbelievable ardor of heart for the immortality of wisdom.” The reason why Augustine mentions “every vain hope” is because

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vanity was the reason why he was studying the art of the orator in the first place. Augustine wanted to be known as the guy who spoke very well. Now, Augustine was excited by Cicero’s praise of philosophy and the pursuit of truth, as he says, “I was excited and aroused and inflamed to love, seek after, attain, and strongly embrace, not this or that philosophic school, but wisdom itself, whatever it is.” Of course, that was exactly the problem, what was the truth? Augustine does not apparently find this out until his thirty-second year, which I will review in due time.

At this time, Augustine attempted to read scripture. Yet, scripture did not spark the same interest in him as did the reading of Cicero. Augustine thought that the holy scriptures were written for children, the images of God especially in the Old Testament appeared to him to be primitive and especially anthropomorphic. More particularly, as we shall see, Christian monotheism, as Augustine understood it, generated the problem of evil, the problem of how an all good and all powerful God could create a world that contained the many evils of pain, suffering, death, and moral depravity? So, Augustine, instead of continuing to read through scripture, pursued other avenues to the truth. Augustine became acquainted with a group, actually a Christian heresy that was more to his liking, known as the Manicheans. Augustine stayed with this group for nine years until he realized the flaws in its religion.

The Manichean leaders were called “the elect.” Augustine, as a hearer, served the elect, and was not held to the same rules as the elect, specifically, he was still permitted to have his affairs with women. During these years with the Manicheans, Augustine was teaching the art of rhetoric and was still conquered by cupidity. About this, Augustine states, “In those years, I lived with a woman, not in a union which is called lawful, but one which restless and imprudent

26 Augustine, Confessions, 55-56.
27 The Manichean system will be developed in the third section of this paper.
passion had sought out.”

This relationship produced a son whose name was Adeodatus. Augustine cared for both his concubine and his son until he agreed to marry another woman. Then he had to banish this mistress, but Adeodatus apparently stayed close to his father, since he was with Augustine a few years later in Cassiciacum and is a participant in one of Augustine’s philosophical texts entitled *Contra Academicos*.

Augustine spent nine years within the sect of the Manicheans, and during this time he became obsessed with astrology. Yet, he started to become disillusioned with astrology when a physician named Vindicianus suggested that Augustine should stay away from this false art, because the doctor stated that he had studied the texts of the art and found them to be false. Also, the doctor concluded that many things that come to be by their foretelling are not genuine predictions but simply the product of chance. One of Augustine’s students named Nebridius also told Augustine to stay away from astrology. Eventually, Augustine did come to the conclusion that astrology was a game of chance and not an art per se.

When Augustine was twenty-nine years old, he got to meet and to speak with Faustus, who was one of the seventy-two Manichean bishops. While attending a few of Faustus’ talks, Augustine states, “I made a comparison with the statements of Mani, but I did not come upon the rational explanation of the solstices, or of the equinoxes, or of eclipses or anything such as I had learned in the books of profane wisdom.” (Mani was the fundamental founder of the Manichean religion.) Actually, Augustine was looking forward to having a discussion with Faustus. He had many questions about the Manichean religion that the elect and the hearers were not able to answer, and they told him that Faustus would be able to answer these questions.

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28 Augustine, *Confessions*, 75.
29 Augustine, *Confessions*, 106.
After some of Faustus’ speeches, Augustine attempted to approach Faustus, but there was normally a mob of people that prevented him from getting close to Faustus. However, Augustine did not stop trying, for he was on a pursuit of knowledge. Also, Augustine had the following opinions about Faustus’ speech making: “Moreover, that his daily practice in speaking endowed him with an eloquence which grew more attractive and more seductive through his control of his talent and a certain natural charm.” When Augustine finally got hold of Faustus, Augustine wanted to get an explanation of the lengthy numeric understandings of the heavens, the stars, the sun, and the moon that was in Mani’s books. Faustus had a problem giving answers to such questions, for he knew of his own ignorance in these matters, and he decided not to discuss them with Augustine.

Augustine and Faustus eventually switched roles. Augustine wanted to be the student of Faustus in Manichean matters, but in his overall ignorance, Faustus became the student of Augustine in classical literature. In Manichean matters, Augustine became hopeless due to Faustus’ ignorance. The noose of Manichaeism began to loosen from Augustine's neck. After teaching Faustus for some time, Augustine was called to Rome in order to accept another teaching position and to further his career.

While in Rome, Augustine once again became seriously ill and had to regain his health over a period of time. Augustine recovered in one of the homes of the Manichean elect. At this time, Augustine enunciated the following peculiar definition of sin: “it seemed to me that it is not we who sin, but some other unknown nature within us which sins.” This appears to be a way of avoiding responsibility for his actions. Also, Augustine began to follow the tenets of Manichaeism even more loosely than before. The only reason that Augustine was following any

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30 Augustine, Confessions, 111.
31 Augustine, Confessions, 119.
of the tenets while in Rome was because of whose house where he was staying. More importantly, as we shall discuss more fully later, Manichaeism provided Augustine with a simple solution to the problem of evil. The Manicheans endorsed a dualistic worldview in which two opposing materialistic cosmic powers, the power of good and the power of evil, engaged in an eternal struggle, with humans as victims and collateral damage. This macrocosmic war was mirrored in the human person and in the experience of the opposition between mind and body, reason and passion, a struggle with which Augustine was well acquainted in his own life. This solution also was consistent with his naïve materialistic assumptions about the world.

The Influence of St. Ambrose

After some time, there was a request from Milan that the people were looking for a master of rhetoric. So Augustine went to Milan to see if he could become this professor that Milan needed. Augustine also wished to meet Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, who was renowned for his oratorical skills. Augustine was interested to go and hear Ambrose because of these skills in rhetoric and not because he was looking for a novel doctrine to follow. Yet, after hearing Ambrose, Augustine knew that he had found a far more brilliant man than Faustus. Yet, “more important was the discovery that the bishop was able to expound the Old Testament in a manner that was new to Augustine, but which seemed rather reasonable.”32 The way that Ambrose expounded on the Old Testament was an allegorical interpretation, whereas Augustine had been reading the Old Testament literally. This allowed Augustine to accept the morals of the Old Testament without worrying about apparent contradictions, e.g., in Genesis, we find the story of

the mark of Cain, which was due to his fear of the outside world, as well as two variant Creation stories.\textsuperscript{33}

Augustine recognized that Bishop Ambrose was revered as the Lord’s holy servant by the people of Milan. Speaking of Ambrose’s sermons, Augustine states that he was “delighted by the sweetness of his language […] it was less diverting and charming than that of Faustus.”\textsuperscript{34} Augustine began to open his heart to the faith of the Church through listening to the preaching of St. Ambrose for “he was now ready to return to his boyhood status as a catechumen in the Catholic Church, though he was not yet convinced that the Catholic way was that of the wisdom he was seeking.”\textsuperscript{35}

Augustine, on this quest for wisdom, was still searching out the things of the world, even though his interest in the Catholic faith was awakened. Augustine still desired such things as honor, marriage, and wealth. Augustine seems to have come to a conclusion that “Many great men, well worthy of emulation, have been dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom in the married life.”\textsuperscript{36} In wanting all of these material possessions, Augustine kept putting off his conversion. He also told himself that Ambrose had no time to discuss the faith with him. Augustine was convinced of this because of all the people who fluttered around Ambrose with questions and concerns.

Monica frequently urged Augustine to take a wife. She hoped that marriage would restrain Augustine’s sensual appetites. She also believed that marriage would lead Augustine quickly to baptism. Eventually, Augustine did succumb to Monica’s urgings and became engaged. It was at this time that Augustine banished his concubine. Augustine was willing to

\textsuperscript{33} Both of these issues occur in the \textit{Book of Genesis}.
\textsuperscript{34} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, 125.
\textsuperscript{35} Bourke, \textit{Augustine’s Quest of Wisdom}, 51.
\textsuperscript{36} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, 153.
wait to get married for two years, since his fiancée was two years short of the legal age to marry. However, it did not take long before Augustine grew weary of the wait and started again to have affairs.

Augustine continued to read philosophical treatises and to discuss philosophical matters with his friends. One of the main problems that he struggled with at this time was the problem of evil. Augustine, at this point, needed to find an explanation of this problem. In giving up on Manichaeism, Augustine also gave up its dualism and explanation of evil. This problem remained an impediment to his accepting Christianity. Augustine will eventually find the answer to this problem in Neoplatonic treatises, which is discussed below. Augustine now comes to a crucial point in his life, and this is where he encounters Neoplatonism.

Books of the Platonists & Shift from Materialism to Spirituality

In Book Seven, Chapter Eight of the Confessions, Augustine mentions that he has read “certain books of the Platonists.” Augustine also makes the note that these texts were translated from Greek into Latin. The reason for this is that Augustine barely knew Greek if at all. Yet Augustine’s Latin capabilities were excellent considering that this was the language in which he taught. The translator of these works was Marius Victorinus, whom we will bring up in short order. Vernon Bourke believes that these texts included some of Plotinus’ Enneads and also “some of the minor works of Porphyry.” This idea is consistently held in the scholarly world.

These texts helped Augustine to see the world in a new light. First of all, Plotinian philosophy provided Augustine with a response to Manichaeism. The Manicheans held that all real things were material bodies, whereas the Ultimate Reality for Plotinus is the One and it is a spiritual reality beyond Being and Nonbeing. Moreover, whereas Manichaeism limited

37 Augustine, Confessions, 177.
38 Bourke, Augustine’s Quest for Wisdom, 55.
Augustine to the realm of sensory experience, Neoplatonism offered a supernatural vision of reality so that “when a man comes to doubt the ability of his natural powers to know about things, there is but one other pathway to truth.” This is the path of contemplation mentioned earlier. So, in accepting Plotinian doctrine, Augustine began to comprehend spirit for the first time.

This understanding of the “spirit” gained through the “books of the Platonists” was the basis for Augustine’s intellectual conversion. It was this intellectual conversion that later allowed him to accept Christianity hook, line, and sinker! This conversion from Manichean materialism to Neoplatonic spirituality, and eventually to Christianity, is also symbolic of the Roman Empire’s conversion to Christianity. How can this be? The Roman world, prior to Constantine, was polytheistic, meaning that the people of Rome believed in multiple gods. These gods were able to take bodily form whenever they chose and were able to do almost anything that they wanted to. The Romans, like the Greeks before them, believed in gods that, in a way, resembled the attributes of the people. Roman polytheism is a form of materialism, insofar as the gods were conceived of in bodily form. When, in the name of the Roman Empire, Constantine denounced the Roman religion of polytheism and accepted Christianity, he, like Augustine, denounced this materialism in favor of some form of spirituality. This may not be the grandiose spirituality of Neoplatonism, but in Christianity, God is fundamentally spirit.

**Marius Victorinus & Further Conversion**

The next step in Augustine’s long process of conversion to Christianity was to speak with Bishop Simplicianus, who was the starets of St. Ambrose. In one of their discussions, Augustine was applauded for reading the work of Plotinus. Augustine writes the following of this event:

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39 Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest for Wisdom*, 55.
When I mentioned that I had read some books of the Platonists, which Victorinus had translated into Latin, he congratulated me that I had not happened on the writings of other philosophers, filled with errors and deceptions, according to the elements of this world.40

Bishop Simplicianus also tells the story of the conversion of Marius Victorinus, a former Platonist. Marius Victorinus was a learned man and skilled as a teacher. Victorinus followed the cult of Osiris, like most Roman nobility. Then one day, he began to read scripture in order to refute it. Yet this is not what happened. In later conversations with Simplicianus, Victorinus would say to him, “Do you know that I am already a Christian?”41 Victorinus is suggesting that he had accepted the faith but was not baptized for fear of the Romans. Simplicianus would refute this by stating that he has never seen him in a church. They would banter on this topic for a while during a few visits, and then suddenly Victorinus said to Simplicianus, “Let us go into the church; I wish to become a Christian.”42 Simplicianus responded to this statement by taking him into the church and making him a catechumen. The priests of the parish offered to allow Victorinus to make his profession of faith privately, which was unlike the custom where the catechumen professes the faith in a church during the holy liturgy. The reason for this was that these priests knew that he might lose his public teaching position. Yet Victorinus did not take them up on the offer, and he did it publicly. The people in the church rejoiced in his conversion and baptism. Victorinus gave up his civil teaching career and worked on using his skills to defend the faith.

After hearing this story, Augustine was edged a little closer to accepting the orthodox Catholic faith. Augustine continued on his search for the truth, and “St. Anselm of Canterbury’s

40 Augustine, Confessions, 198.
41 Augustine, Confessions, 199-200.
42 Augustine, Confessions, 200.
pithy slogan: *fides quaerens intellectum*” applies to Augustine. Augustine now believed in some of the truths of the faith and was now seeking understanding. Augustine will use Neoplatonism as a tool to clarify these truths both at Cassiciacum before his final conversion and after he was baptized as well.

The final conversion before his baptism occurred after Ponticianus and his friend visited Augustine at Cassiciacum. While Ponticianus and Augustine were conversing, Ponticianus saw a book on a nearby table, picked it up, and realized it was the Epistles of St. Paul. Augustine told Ponticianus “that I was devoting much attention to these writings.” So, Ponticianus informed Augustine of the story of St. Anthony of Egypt, which was written down by St. Athanasius. Ponticianus then said that he and his friends, after reading the *Life of St. Anthony*, gave up their positions at court to live their lives as monks in service of God.

At this point, Augustine got up and retired to the garden that was attached to the house. Augustine began to contemplate about his life up to this point, and he began to despise it. Then Augustine asked God to give him the ability to be chaste and to have self-restraint. After a while of beating his head and making other strange gestures, a mystical experience occurred. Augustine “heard from a nearby house the voice of someone – whether boy or girl I know not – chanting, as it were, over and over: ‘Take it, read it! Take it, read it! [tolle lege, tolle lege].” After hearing this, Augustine tried to figure out whether this was said in a children’s game, and to the best of his knowledge, no game had these words.

So Augustine took this to be the voice of God telling him to pick up the Epistles of St. Paul and to read them. Augustine then went to where Alypius was sitting and picked up his copy

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45 Augustine, *Confessions*, 224.
of the Epistles and opened the book and read the passage that he saw there. When he opened the text, he came to Romans 13:13, which says, “Not in revelry and drunkenness, not in debauchery and wantonness, not in strife and jealously; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and for the flesh, take no thought for its lusts.” Augustine decided to read on and read Romans 14:1, which states “But him who is weak in faith, receive.” Augustine took these two passages to indicate that God wanted him to revamp his lifestyle and that God’s grace would be sufficient to give him strength in his weakness. This was the last feather in his hat that he needed to convert. Augustine was baptized by St. Ambrose on April 25, 387.

I am almost finished with Augustine’s biography, but I promised a couple of provocative similarities between Augustine and Plotinus, and so far, there has been only one, which was Augustine’s and Plotinus’ ignorance of Greek. The other similarity is that each of these philosophers found something that changed their lives forever at a certain time period. Plotinus found Ammonius Saccas at age twenty-eight, and Augustine “was awakened to Neoplatonism with his reading in his thirty-second year of some ‘books of the Platonists’.” In a sense, both of these individuals found the essential concept or person that they needed when they reached the mid-point of their lives. Both stem from Neoplatonism. Plotinus found Saccas, who was a supposed author of Neoplatonism, and Augustine read the Neoplatonic works. The last part of the biography is about Augustine’s works.

Augustine’s Opuses

Augustine’s two most famous works to this day are the City of God and the Confessions. Yet Augustine was a rather prolific writer, for he wrote at least fifty-five works. A few of his other works include Against the Academics, On Christian Doctrine, On Grace and Free Will, On

the Trinity, and The Retractions. The reason that Augustine had to write retractions was that some of his earlier work had too much influence from outside Christianity and were against Christian belief, so he had to set these works on the correct path before he was held in question of being heretical. Actually, Pelagius accused him of still being a Manichean, and because of this, he had to submit to the pope for help.

Now, I move to the heart of this study in the third section. I show that Augustine’s ultimate conversion to Christianity is held in question. Also, I demonstrate key elements that purport a convergence of Neoplatonism and Christianity in Augustine’s thought. A few of these key elements are humanity: soul and body; evil; and the divine ascent.

St. Augustine as a Neoplatonist & the Utilization of Neoplatonic Ideas by St. Augustine

Introduction

Augustine was converted to the philosophy of Neoplatonism prior to his baptism into the Church. Frederick J. Copleston states that the “reading of Neoplatonic works was an instrument in the intellectual conversion of Augustine, while his moral conversion, from the human viewpoint, was prepared by the sermons of St. Ambrose […] and confirmed and sealed by the New Testament.” In this account of Augustine’s conversion, Copleston describes a two part process of conversion, the first being an intellectual conversion primarily facilitated by Augustine’s reading and embracing of Neoplatonic ideas about the nature of reality, which is brought to completion by a more direct moral, perhaps emotional and personal, conversion to the truth of Christianity. This raises questions about the exact nature of these “conversions” and the actual connection between them. It is well known that after his conversion to Christianity,

Augustine developed a Christian worldview in which Neoplatonic ideas were intertwined with orthodox Catholic doctrines.

Moreover, it is Augustine’s interpretation of many of these doctrines that becomes the orthodox view for at least Latin Catholics. It is also readily acknowledged that many of these interpretations have a decidedly Platonic twist. Augustine particularly uses the theory of evil as a privation of the good to solve the problem of evil as well as a advancing a clearly Platonic interpretation of human nature in terms of a radical dualism between soul and body that seems to be more consistent with Neoplatonic texts than with Biblical texts. I shall review these utilizations later on in this paper. Looked at differently, these issues raise significant questions about the nature of Augustine’s conversion to Christianity, questions that are evident by the abundant literature on this problem.

Was Augustine’s conversion to Christianity in 386 CE genuine? When scholars – such as John J. O’Meara, Brian Dobell, and Frederick J. Copleston – speak of Augustine’s conversion to Christianity, they are not referring to his baptism and Chrismation on Holy Saturday in the year 386 CE. These scholars are referring to the garden episode and his so-called “moral” conversion, which even according to Augustine’s Confessions is an important moment in Augustine’s overall spiritual conversion. As we have seen, this scene occurs in Book Eight of the Confessions, after hearing of the conversion of Marius Victorinus from Augustine’s friend Simplicianus and of the conversions of Ponticianus and his associates.

After Augustine reads Romans 13:13-14:1, it appears that all of Augustine’s doubts about becoming a full-fledged Christian were vanquished and peace came to him. As believable as the garden event is in the Confessions, some scholars have come to question the real meaning of it,
especially in the context of Augustine’s intellectual odyssey. Their questions boil down to the one that we asked earlier: Is the conversion of Augustine in 386 CE genuine?

In the introduction to the translation of Augustine’s Against the Academics (Contra Academicos), John J. O’Meara contends that “the Confessions mislead us: Augustine’s baptism in 386 was not a serious affair – certainly not as serious as we are led to believe that it was; Augustine was first and foremost a Neo-Platonist.”⁴⁸ There are arguments that are in favor of and against the idea that Augustine really did not convert to Christianity or that his essential conversion did not occur until a later time. I will first look at the essence of Augustine’s conversion, both intellectually and spiritually, and then I will develop how Augustine used Neoplatonism in his understanding of Christianity.

**Augustine as Neoplatonist/as a Christian**

In our search for the answer to our question of whether Augustine actually converted to Christianity, I look to Augustine’s Confessions first. In Chapter Seven of Book Seven, as Augustine became disillusioned with the dualism of the Manicheans, he began to search for another solution to the problem of evil. The following is how Augustine describes the problem:

addressing God, he writes:

In this way, I conceived of Thy finite creation as finite, yet full of Thy infinity. And I said: “Here is God, and here is what God has created. God is good and He is unquestionably and by far superior to these things. Yet, as a good Being, He created them good. And see how He surrounds and fills them. Whence, then, is evil? From what source and where did it break in here? What is its root, what its seed? Or is there none at all? [...] either the evil which we fear does exist, or the fact that we do fear it is evil.”⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ Augustine, Confessions, 168-69.
The problem of evil is among other ideas that led Augustine first to the Manicheans all those years before at the age of nineteen in the city of Carthage. At that time, the Manichean solution seemed viable to Augustine.

The Manicheans held that good and evil are two principles that are fighting each other within the human person. Their perspective was convenient for those that believed in it, like Augustine, because “[…] the evil agent sometimes became dominant (over the human person), there was nothing to do but observe, in a dispassionate way, the interesting psychological struggle.” This worked for Augustine, because it allowed him to state that he was not in control in doing sinful acts and therefore not wholly responsible for his actions. Fundamentally, the Manichean doctrine suggested that “A principle of darkness was working within him that he could no more control himself then he could restrain the cosmic struggle of good and evil.”

On the macrocosmic level, according to the Manicheans, there is an eternal evil that coexists with the principle of eternal goodness. This evil, known as the Principle of Darkness (Ahriman), is a coeternal cause of the universe along with the Principle of Light (Ormazd), which was commonly referred to as “God.” These dual causes of the universe were in a constant struggle. Therefore, “it was not necessary to ask why a good God would cause, or permit, evil; it came into the world in spite of Him.”

The Manichean universal duality also spilled over into the human being; therefore, humans have two aspects – one good and the other evil – that are in conflict. The soul represents the good principle, while the body the evil principle. In order for Manicheans to keep the good soul free of the evil body, they must mortify their bodies with various ascetical practices, such as

50 Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest of Wisdom*, 18.
51 Ibid.
52 Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest of Wisdom*, 20.
fasting from anything that comes from animals. In rejecting the Manichean dualism of good and evil, Augustine once again found himself face to face with the problem of how to explain evil.

In the *Confessions*, Chapter Nine of Book Seven, Augustine states. “Thou [God] didst provide for me, by means of a man who was puffed up with the most monstrous pride, certain books of the Platonists which were translated from the Greek tongue into Latin.”

Many scholars, including Brian Dobell, believe that these “books of the Platonists” were composed of Plotinus’ *Enneads* and some of Porphyry’s writings. The man that Augustine calls “puffed up” is assumed by many scholars to be Porphyry, and the translator of these texts is Marius Victorinus.

There are quite a few scholars who believe that Augustine was never fully converted to Christianity, and therefore he was first and foremost a Neoplatonist behind a thin shroud of Christianity. One scholar, S. Loofs, came to the conclusion that “even in 391, five years after his ‘conversion,’ Augustine was nothing more than a Neo-Platonist with a tincture of Christianity.”

Wilhelm Thimme also contends that “the *Confessions* were not to be trusted; that Augustine in 386 was neither a sincere Christian, nor free from Academic doubt; and that it was only gradually that he became first a complete Neo-Platonist and still later a Christian.” The difference between Loofs and Thimme is that Thimme maintains that Augustine eventually did convert to Christianity whereas Loofs states that Augustine never fully converted.

On the other side of this debate, Charles Boyer and Pierre Courcelle defend the sincerity of Augustine’s conversion. As noted by Dobell, Courcelle, in his landmark *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin*, “demonstrated that the intellectuals in Milan had forged a

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53 Augustine, *Confessions*, 176-77.  
54 O’Meara, “Introduction: The Importance of the *Contra Academicos*,” 19.  
synthesis of Neoplatonism and Christianity.” The other intellectual to whom Courcelle refers is Ambrose, who had begun the process of synthesis by blending Christian and Neoplatonic ideas in his sermons. Augustine was, of course, exposed to Ambrose’s sermons in 386 CE during the period before his baptism. So it might not be surprising that Augustine followed in his advisor’s footsteps by seeking a convergence of Christianity with Neoplatonism.

Courcelle, therefore, argues that “Alfaric was mistaken in claiming that Augustine was converted to Neoplatonism rather than to Christianity in 386. Alfaric’s claim presupposes an anachronistic distinction between the two entities; in fact, Augustine would have converted to both.” Alfaric, it is worth noting, is the one who first proposed the question of whether the early Augustine was a Neoplatonist or a Christian. Courcelle’s opus on the matter appeared to silence the debate for a while.

Yet Courcelle left at least one question unanswered, a question raised more recently by Dobell. The question that Dobell asked is “what exactly was the difference between Neoplatonism and Christianity for the new convert in 386?” At first blush, the main difference is the Incarnation of the Christ (Logos), which does not appear in any Neoplatonic texts even according to Augustine. For Augustine states, “But, that ‘the word was made flesh and dwelt among us’ – I did not read that there.” In fact, even when Augustine describes the concepts of Neoplatonism in the Confessions, he primarily quotes not from Neoplatonic texts but from the Gospel of John 1:1-5, and John 1:13-14. The Gospel of John 1:13-14 reads: “οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρός ἀλλ’ ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. Καὶ

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Augustine, Confessions, 178.
ὁ λόγος σάρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πληρῆς χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.” The translation of John 1:13-14 is the following: “who were born, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

The application of this quote to Neoplatonism by Augustine has perplexed scholars for centuries. The only reasonable answer is that Augustine wanted for there to be less of a schism between Neoplatonism and Christianity, and this quote accomplishes that. According to Mary T. Clark, Augustine “is obviously interpreting Neoplatonic texts by means of the Christian doctrine he knows, and not vice versa.” Augustine equates the Christian Logos with the Neoplatonic Nous. The Nous flows out from the One, and the Christ (Logos) was begotten of the Father and not made. This is where Augustine purports a similarity between Neoplatonism and Christianity. It is this similarity that allows Augustine to hold onto a Neoplatonic worldview even after converting to Christianity. Yet the answer that Dobell finds to the question of difference is one that cannot be resolved by this connection and that is the Incarnation. Nowhere in Neoplatonic philosophy does the Nous become manifested in flesh, but the Logos does. Thus, the schism reappears in the very mystery of the Incarnation.

Augustine does write of a solution to this in the Confessions. He states in Book Seven, Chapter Twenty that:

I could perceive and distinguish what a difference there is between presumption and confession, between those who do indeed see where they must go, but do not see the way, and the Way that leads to that happy land which is not only to be observed but to be believed in.61

60 Augustine, Confessions, 178.
61 Augustine, Confessions, 191.
Augustine is not the first to suggest that the people that came before him were ignorant of the way. Christianity also suggested this of the Hebrew texts, for Christians see certain passages that not only apply to the time period that they were written for but also as prophetic premonitions about the Messiah, e.g., 2 Samuel 7:16 about David’s line being eternal. Augustine’s solution, like those that came before, fits the scenario that they were made for.

Dobell pursues the same line of reasoning followed by Thimme. He believes that Augustine did gradually convert to Christianity, but Dobell does not believe that Augustine’s baptism removed Augustine from Neoplatonic ideals. Dobell claims that “Augustine was not intellectually converted to Christianity until c. 395.”62 That would be eight years after his official baptism. Dobell claims that Augustine did not fully understand Christological concepts when he was baptized so it was not until some years later that Augustine began to grasp the full meaning of many orthodox Catholic concepts.

Some reflection on the intellectual conditions of the time may shed some light on this perplexing problem of ascertaining the relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity in Augustine’s own mind. At this time in the history of the early Christian Church, there were many heresies and considerable differences in interpretation of many Christian doctrines. Ascertaining which interpretations were to become the official orthodox teachings was still a matter of opinion for some doctrines, with the exception of those truths already declared by the first two ecumenical councils. This is part of the problem when determining Augustine’s grasp of orthodox Catholic concepts.

Some scholars say that Augustine’s inability to comprehend true Christological doctrine was due to the fact that the doctrine itself was in a state of flux. However, the Councils of Nicaea

and Constantinople had already occurred by the time of Augustine’s baptism. These councils gave us the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which holds that Jesus Christ was begotten of the Father before all ages and he was not created and that he is consubstantial with the Father and incarnated of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. So, there was already solid Christological doctrine at the time of Augustine’s conversion.

Nevertheless, there were many who did not embrace these orthodox doctrines and held fast to doctrines that would eventually be proclaimed heresies. Actually, an example of this is that Ambrose’s own church in Milan was held by Arian bishops prior to Ambrose’s being made a bishop, and the empress wanted Ambrose to give up the church to an Arian bishop. The Arian heresy states that “the Logos and the flesh unite directly in such a way as to exclude a human soul in Christ.” Arians, therefore, have a problem with the human and divine natures of Christ coexisting in the same person. The Arian heresy would correspond with the theory of the Nous. The reason for this is that the Arians did not accept that the Christ was the pre-existent Son but that he was created and not begotten. Similarly, the Nous was simply created by the process of emanation, albeit prior to other created beings and not begotten. Now, I will return to the conversation of whether Augustine was really a Neoplatonist or a Christian.

I do not believe that we can ever know for certain exactly when Augustine intellectually converted from Neoplatonism to Christianity. I do believe, with Copleston, which “the function of Neoplatonism […] was to render it possible for Augustine to see the reasonableness of Christianity, as he began to read the New Testament again, particularly the writings of St.

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Paul. Also, I will not deny the sanctity or the integrity of St. Augustine’s writings, including the *Confessions*. What I can say is that Neoplatonism initiated Augustine’s intellectual conversion to Christianity, it allowed him to understand Christian doctrines, and in the end, Augustine’s Platonic worldview shaped what eventually became orthodox Christian teachings in the western world, that is, Christian doctrine is more often than not a function of Augustine’s Platonic reading and interpretation of basic Christian ideas and problems.

The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate this convergence of Christianity and Neoplatonism in Augustine’s writings, and it is this task to which I now turn. In order to illustrate this synthesis best, I focus on three topics: (1) Augustine’s philosophical psychology, i.e., the doctrine of soul-body dualism; (2) Augustine’s now famous Neoplatonic solution to the Christian problem of evil; and (3) the divine ascent at Ostia.

### Augustine’s Synthesis of Neoplatonic Concepts and Christian Doctrines

#### Man: Soul and Body

The significance of the body appears to be different for Neoplatonists and Christians. Early Christian philosophical psychology was initially rooted in its middle-eastern origins, which tended to see human beings as living bodies. The story of humanity’s creation in Genesis focuses on the importance of embodiment and develops the understanding of the human condition. It is not surprising that a key Christian doctrine refers to the resurrection of the body, in keeping with Christ’s own bodily resurrection. Hence, Christians, as an article of faith, look forward to the resurrection of the body on the last day.

In contrast, Neoplatonism is rooted in Platonic dualism, the radical distinction between soul and body. For a Neoplatonist, the human person is essentially a spiritual being, or a soul,

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64 Copleston, *Augustine to Scotus*, 43.
that has condemned itself to a body. The body is at best a defect, an obstacle to the achievement of philosophical wisdom. Plotinus follows Plato insofar as they both refer to the body as a tomb or a prison cell. So, to this degree, Neoplatonism and Christianity appear to disagree.

Yet when Augustine works through his own understanding of human nature, his interpretation reflects his acquaintance with Platonic dualism. The Augustinian Christian conception of philosophical psychology appears to embrace a qualified dualism between soul and body, even insisting that the soul is on a higher level of being than the body. At the same time, Augustine argues that the soul is naturally directed towards the body and without that body, the soul is incomplete.

Augustine holds that there are three levels of reality: the lowest level, the second level, and the highest nature. The lowest level consists of bodies and is thoroughly mutable. The second level holds in existence the soul, which is mutable in regards to time but not in regard to place. The highest level contains God, who is purely immutable. The soul, on the second level, has the ability to keep focus both on the lower realm called “inferior reason” and the higher realm called “superior reason.” This is much like the human soul of Neoplatonism that must manage the body and concern itself with seeking unity to the One. “This threefold hierarchy constitutes what might be called the Augustinian geography of being.”

Now I will develop the Neoplatonic doctrine of union without confusion. The Neoplatonic notion of “union without confusion (unio sine confusia),” as observed by R.A. Markus, was developed precisely “to recognize the apparent union of soul and the body.” Nevertheless, Neoplatonists still viewed this union of soul and body as a temporary relationship

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65 Bourke, Augustine’s Quest for Wisdom, 225.
to be transcended by union with the One. The notion of “union without confusion” was quickly grabbed by Christians to “defend the union of divine and human natures in the person of Christ.” Augustine was, of course, in on the Christological debate.

Augustine uses this notion to stress the union between soul and body. When the soul animates the body, it creates a union that is harmonious and therefore secures the integrity of the union. Augustine follows the thought of Plotinus in assuming that the soul is a different substance than the body but nevertheless the soul and body are united in one human. “The union has well been called ‘hypostatic’.” Augustine’s discussion of human nature also assumes the idea of “union without confusion” but insists that the soul is present throughout the body in each of its individual parts. “Such a union is more than a mere juxtaposition,” but at the same time, “it excludes any notion of the mixture of two substances. The union is a kind of hypostatic one.” In this union, neither the soul nor the body is diluted. So, the soul and the body remain separate, but they together make one whole without any mixing.

This discussion of the soul-body relationship, as previously noted, parallels one of the key problems of Christology, namely the dual nature of the Christ. Neoplatonists and many others did not understand, or refused to understand, that Christ had two natures: God and human. How could the non-Christian Neoplatonists not understand this doctrine since they understood that humanity and soul are formed in a hypostatic union? Also, as we have just seen, this union in Christ comes to be known as the hypostatic union. The “Augustinian Christological formula una persona – utraque natura reached its maturity in 411 A.D.” at the council of Chalcedon.

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68 Ibid.
70 Dobell, Augustine’s Intellectual Conversion, 77.
The formula is simply “one person with two natures.” Jesus of Nazareth is the one person who contained the two natures, which were that of divinity and humanity. The problem with Neoplatonists’ accepting this was not so much the hypostatic union. It was that God took a human body and thus the idea of one and the same essence being both finite and infinite at the same time.

The main issue with God’s taking a human body is that of explaining how the infinite could possibly become finite or that perfection could take on imperfection. Neoplatonists hold that the goal for each and every human is to separate oneself from one’s body and unite with the One. As Augustine says of the Neoplatonists, they “have seen that no material body is God, and therefore they have transcended all bodies in seeking for God.”71 Augustine shares this goal that humans must seek God by spiritual reflection and prayer whereas Neoplatonists call this seeking contemplation.

Yet the Christian God differs from the One in that the One is impersonal while the Christian God is personal. Actually in accepting spirituality through Neoplatonism, Augustine converts to Christianity because of his desire for a personal God. Augustine even found this to be more the case with the Christ’s being the Second Person of the Trinity. In coming down to the level of human nature, Christ bore everything that we bear except for sin. None of us can get more personal than the following: God-the-Father gave his only Son on the cross so that we may be redeemed to our original status before the Fall of humanity, which is the pure innocence of a clean slate.

This appeal to a personal God goes against Plotinian doctrine. Augustine goes even further in creating this schism between his thought and that of Plotinus. Augustine accepts the

Resurrection of Christ’s body and that of all of us in the Second Coming of Christ. The Christ that rose from the grave in three days after his crucifixion was not just mere Spirit. He took his flesh back and ascended with it forty days later as well. Also, Augustine accepted that after we die, we will once more rise again with our bodies at the Second Coming of Christ.

Now that I have explored Augustine’s understanding of the human person, I now turn to his Neoplatonic solution to the problem of evil.

The Problem of Evil

Evil has been in the world since the dawn of humanity. Yet, does this not propose a problem to those who believe in God? For how could an omniscient, omnipotent, and all-good God allow evil to exist in the world? If God is creator of all that exists, then how did evil come to be in the world in the first place? If evil exists, it would seem that God is not God. Would not an all-good and all-powerful God seek to eliminate evil from the world? Yet, we see evil in the great catastrophic events, i.e., the Holocaust, hurricanes, plagues, the Rwanda Genocide, and volcano eruptions. So, those with faith in God, and even those without faith, have tried to understand the problem of evil.

An interesting distinction occurs in the examples of evil that I gave. There are two different types of evil: natural and moral evil. Moral evil comes about by the will of humans; in other words, humans choose to commit evil acts. The natural evil comes in events like the earthquake in Haiti, which also causes great destruction to humanity. Pain and suffering are prime examples of natural evils that afflict humanity. Evil has been a stumbling block to the faith for many people over many centuries. Many of these people either believe that God does not exist or that if he does exist, then he does not care about humanity.
Those with and without faith have searched for a way of explaining evil. An early twenty-century existentialist, Albert Camus, was among those that were on the hunt. Camus writes *The Plague* in order to examine the concept of evil in its moral and natural dimensions. Rev. Paneloux, S.J., a character in the story, gives a common explanation in his first homily for the natural evil of the plague. The plague is divine retribution. This divine retribution implies that God is seeking to punish human beings for their detestable actions. Yet, as the story develops, even Fr. Paneloux shifts positions and states that this experience is not an appropriate explanation, for the plague even takes the innocent.

There are two reasons why I have started this section on the analysis of the problem of evil with Camus’ story of *The Plague*. The first reason is to show that the problem of evil is still relevant to the world of philosophical inquiry. The second is to remind us that Camus is struggling with the same problem that St. Augustine did prior to his conversion. Actually, in a speech given to Dominicans at a monastery in Paris, Camus gave an analogy that referred to this in response to one of the priests’ inquiries. During the question and answer session of Camus’ speech, one of the Dominicans, an ex-revolutionary, stated, “I have found grace, and you, Mr. Camus, I’m telling you in all modesty that you have not.” Camus responded with only one statement: “I am your Augustine before his conversion. I am debating the problem of evil, and I am not getting past it.” Yet, Augustine, unlike Camus, did believe that he had a sufficient explanation of evil, an explanation grounded in ideas derived from Neoplatonism.

Evil was clearly part of Plotinus’ conception of reality. Jaspers argues that Plotinus distinguished two kinds of evils: “The first evil is the disorder of matter; the second evil is that

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which becomes disorder by assimilation to matter, or the participation in matter.”74 With respect to the second kind of evil, as Jaspers explains, evil attaches to the soul by the way of matter; moreover, the desire for independence makes the soul descend to the material realm in the first place. According to Plotinus, there is a way for the soul to get out of this evil state through the process of contemplation and ascent. Yet, not all people are capable of doing this and therefore the evil condition of the soul’s embodiment is the result of a weakness within the soul itself.

The fall of the soul results in an attachment to the body, and the only way to rid itself of this body is for the soul to rise upward and focus on the One through contemplation. Looked at this way, the body and the material world in general appears to be the locus of evil. However, a student of Neoplatonism in the Athenian School, named Proclus, rejected this definition of matter as evil because this would make the One responsible for creating evil. According to R.T. Wallis, Proclus defined evil as “a mere absence of good; more precisely it is a parhypostasis, a term denoting, first, that evil is a mere by-product or perversion of the universal aspiration towards the good, and, secondly, that evil has no genuine existence.”75 Augustine embraces this definition advanced by Proclus.

As we previously saw, Augustine had struggled with the problem of evil for much of his life. At first, Augustine readily accepted the solution offered by Manichean dualism. “As a Manichean, he had thought of evil as a real substance, existing in opposition to the good.”76 Yet, after Augustine separated himself from the Manicheans, he was once again confronted by this problem. Augustine, in reading “the books of the Platonists,” found an adequate answer to this problem.

74 Jaspers, The Original Thinkers, 74.
75 Wallis, Neoplatonism, 157.
76 Bourke, Augustine’s Quest of Wisdom, 58.
It is worth noting that this answer to the problem of evil was suggested by Plotinus himself. “Plotinus’ simple suggestion was that evil was not a substance; it was non-being.”\textsuperscript{77} Proclus expanded on this simple suggestion by developing the idea of evil as both a nonbeing and a byproduct of being. With this analysis in mind, Augustine comprehended that evil is a privation, or a lack of the good. It is not a substance, a real being, as he originally believed. Therefore it does not require God to create it or conserve it in existence. When God created the universe, everything that he made was good. Being itself is good.

Although all of creation is good and as perfect as it can be, it cannot be perfect in the same way that God is perfect and good. God is the eternal unity of infinite perfection, while creation is a spatial-temporal representation of that perfection found in God as a simple unity. Creation therefore takes the form of a hierarchy of being, of different degrees of mutability, change, and temporality. Thus a kind of imperfection enters into the world, which “implies a lack of harmony in created things.”\textsuperscript{78} But viewed as a whole, creation is good. In contrast, evil is an absence of some good that should exist. For example, the physical evil of blindness is not a positive property that a being might possess; in this case, blindness is the lack of sight. With respect to moral evil, the evil that characterizes human acts, this is explained by a lack of proper order in the human will, the result of a freewill choice to choose a lesser good to the exclusion of the highest good, i.e., God.

Now that I have developed the problem of evil, I will explore the concept of divine ascent.

\textsuperscript{77} Bourke, \textit{Augustine’s Quest of Wisdom}, 58.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
Divine Ascent at Ostia

One day in the early summer, after Augustine was baptized, he was walking with Monica in Ostia. This walk took place not too long before Monica’s death that very year. They were speaking of divine matters and had an opportunity to be in spiritual ecstasy. Let us now turn to the text at Book Nine, Chapter Ten of the *Confessions*:

We were talking to each other alone, very sweetly, for between us, in the present truth, which Thou art, we tried to find out what the eternal life of the saints would be, which eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has entered into the heart of men [...].

When our talk had reached the conclusion that the greatest delight of the bodily senses, in the brightest light, was not capable of comparison with the joy of that life and, moreover, did not seem worthy of being mentioned, then, lifting ourselves up in yet greater ardor of our feeling toward the selfsame, we advanced step by step through all bodily things up to the sky itself from which the sun, moon, and stars shine out over the earth, and we ascended still farther in our cogitation, conversation, and admiration of Thy works and came into our own minds.

Then, we transcended them, so that we might touch that realm of unfailing abundance in which Thou feedest Israel eternally on the food of truth. There life is wisdom, through which all these things come into being, both those which have been and those which will be. Yet, it is not made, but is as it was, and thus it will be forever. Or, rather, to have been in the past, or to be in the future, do not pertain to it, but simply to be, for it is eternal.

Then, Augustine and Monica descended back to the earthly realm. It is worth noting that the description of this experience of ascent is clearly reminiscent of Plotinus’ *Enneads* and his description of what the ascent should be to the One. While one would not expect a verbatim account of this experience, the event’s description does appear to be drawing from Plotinus, and it is possible that Augustine was vexed on how to describe what happened at Ostia.

Some scholars such as Alfaric attest that this passage is just “an essay in Plotinian philosophy.” Bourke believes that this is an unreasonable suggestion that Augustine would deceive his readers like that. Boyer gives a moderate position on the matter, saying, “we can,

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80 Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest for Wisdom*, 87.
then follow Augustine’s account in full confidence, knowing full well that we are present at the interior scene which he is describing.”\textsuperscript{81} This experience that Augustine and Monica had was a religious experience of great significance. Monica and Augustine achieved brief unity with God and longed for more. Many Christians do not have this type of experience on a personal level during their lifetime. One should be hopeful and persistently pray in order to try to have this experience. Nevertheless, the experience was reflective of a Plotinian ascent.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this essay shows that it may ultimately be impossible to determine the status of Augustine as a Neoplatonist or as a *bona fide* Christian. The extent to which Augustine actually converted to Christianity is still an open question. However, I side with the philosophers who believe that Augustine at least fully converted to Christianity by 395 CE, while conceding that conversion is a gradual process that really never ends. In fact, it was this process that allowed Augustine to develop fully his understanding of Christianity itself, an understanding that remains with us to this day. So I do believe that Augustine’s conversion experience in the garden was genuine. Yet Augustine does eventually develop a Christian philosophy that converges Neoplatonic concepts and Christian doctrines into a unified whole. Thus, based on all these elements, it is correct to say that Augustine was a genuine Christian-Neoplatonist.

\textsuperscript{81} Bourke, *Augustine’s Quest for Wisdom*, 88.
Bibliography


