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What Augustine Did Not Find in the Books of the Platonists

A man with a Ciceronian desire for the truth in a profession teaching people how to manipulate the truth and avoid it; a man of passion and love for his mistress and son in a cult that devalued the body, marriage, and children; a man who desired freedom and yet felt enslaved by his own sins in a cult that embraced a fatalistic astrology: in these and other ways, the paradoxes of Augustine's life were coming to a head when he arrived in Milan in 384. His encounter with the books of the Platonists clarified some important points but brought on other problems as well.

Disillusionment with the Manichees

While he was in Milan, Augustine became increasingly disillusioned with the teaching of the Manichees. The Manichees, for all their talk about "spirit," were materialists and determinists.[1] They spoke of the good force of the universe as "Light," but this light was also a substance. This will seem odd and inconsistent until we note that many modern-day "New Age" movements that also talk a lot about "spirit" similarly conceive of the "higher" realms of human attainment in largely material terms: possessing a good "energy" or being united with the "life force" that suffuses all things. They too, like the

Manichees, often enjoy trafficking in astrology so that people can discover what their future holds. Both groups seem strangely oblivious to the frequent warnings found in ancient literature against trying to "manipulate" the gods and the fates in this way.[2] If you believe in ancient oracles or modern astrology, and they tell you, "Your business will go bankrupt," then it is foolish to think you can avoid this fate by exerting your free will. If they see the future, then what they see is what *will happen*, and free will is largely or completely an illusion.[3]

Augustine eventually rejected his early dalliance with astrology, reasoning that one cannot both have free will and not have it at the same time in the same respect.[4] If you value your freedom, then you choose freely and accept the consequences. If you are convinced there is no freedom, then you should learn to accept your fate calmly, like a Stoic. But it would be absurdly inconsistent to be convinced that one's life is determined by fate and then set out to make free choices. Augustine preferred to believe in the freedom of his choices and reject the notion of fate preached by the Manichees.[5]

Reading "Certain Books of the Platonists"

Under advice from friends, Augustine began to read "certain books of the Platonists"[6]—not the works of Plato per se, but those of the third-century A.D. Roman philosophers Plotinus and Porphyry.[7] These provided him a clearer philosophical framework to help resolve some of the confusions he had acquired during his time with the Manichees, but they also encouraged several other problems.

The Platonists helped Augustine to be able to conceive of God in immaterial terms.[8] Augustine had always thought of *things* as necessarily material.[9] A crucial step weaning him away from this view was acceptance of the Platonic notion that *forms*, like the form of "triangle," exist independently of matter; indeed, according to Plato, the immaterial form of "triangle" exists more truly and more perfectly than material ones. For which triangle is it true that the interior angles of the triangle add up to 180 degrees? Answer: Only for the

perfect triangle intelligible by the mind. All material triangles are imperfect; they only approximate the triangles described by Euclid's geometry.[10] So too, in an analogous way, whatever in this world we call just or good or beautiful or true derives its "justice," "goodness," "beauty," or "truth" from the eternal Forms.[11] The existence of the things we see is merely a participated existence, thought Plato. This was a helpful first step for Augustine to be able to conceive of how something could exist and be immaterial.

Guided by the books of the Platonists and in the spirit of the ancient Delphic dictum to "know thyself," Augustine began to search within himself and realized that he had been missing a crucial piece of evidence: his own thoughts. He could not deny the reality of his idea of "the triangle"—that perfect triangle for which all three angles added up to exactly 180 degrees which he knew existed only in his mind—or the reality of that ideal of "justice," which also existed perfectly only in his mind and not in the chaotic, unjust world of human affairs, for to do so would mean affirming that his thoughts were nothing, empty, which would have been a contradiction.[12]

Considering further, he asked where he had gotten these ideas. If not from the changeable, chaotic world around him, and if they were not created by his own mind, then they must have come from somewhere above his mind, a reality as real as his knowledge but as immaterial as his thoughts. Since he was able to recognize the relative balance or imbalance, harmony or dissonance, perfection or imperfection of things in nature based upon a standard not in material bodies and not of his own making, he had come to the conclusion that his mind was a "measured measurer."[13] And in this way, says Augustine, he was led inward and then upward: from the immateriality of his thoughts to the immaterial reality of those perfect ideas according to which he judged the perfection or lack of perfection of the objects of his sense perception.

> For when I inquired how it was that I could appreciate the beauty of bodies, both celestial and terrestrial; and what it

> was that supported me in making correct judgments about things mutable; and when I concluded, "This ought to be thus; this ought not"—then when I inquired how it was that I could make such judgments (since I did, in fact, make them), I realized that I had found the unchangeable and true eternity of truth above my changeable mind. And thus by degrees I was led upward from bodies to the soul which perceives them by means of the bodily senses, and from there on to the soul's inward faculty, to which the bodily senses report outward things—and this belongs even to the capacities of the beasts—and thence on up to the reasoning power, to whose judgment is referred the experience received from the bodily sense. And when this power of reason within me also found that it was changeable, it raised itself up to its own intellectual principle, and withdrew its thoughts from experience, abstracting itself from the contradictory throng of phantasms in order to seek for that light in which it was bathed.[14]

In *On Christian Doctrine*, the first three books of which were written shortly before the *Confessions* (c. 395 and 397 respectively), Augustine would describe language in terms of the relation between "signs" (*signa*) and "things" (*res*).[15] One problem with language thus conceived is that it may cause us to think of the word "God" as a sign signifying just another kind of thing. The books of the Platonists gave Augustine the conceptual resources to conceive of God as something other than simply another kind of material thing by showing him that words like "triangle" and "justice" could refer to something other than material things. The word "God," Augustine came to understand, did not signify a thing in the way the words "house," "dog," or "mountain" signify things. The word "God" is more like the eternal idea of "triangle" in so far as material triangles are triangles to the extent that they participate in the form of the immaterial, eternal idea of the perfect triangle. The word "God" signifies not a thing, but the source of the being of all things. "Is Truth, therefore, nothing," asked Augustine, "because it is not diffused through space—neither finite

nor infinite?" And thou didst cry to me from afar, "I am that I am."[16] "I looked around at other things," declares Augustine, "and I saw that it was to thee that all of them owed their being."[17] "And I viewed all the other things that are beneath thee, and I realized that they are neither wholly real nor wholly unreal. They are real in so far as they come from thee."[18]

Leading the Mind Inward and Upward: The Propaedeutic Role of the God of the Philosophers

Breaking open Augustine's closed and narrowly materialistic concepts to make room for a God who is not a *thing* but is the source of the being of all things was an important first step.[19] But it was merely a step. When Augustine began asking about "God," he did not exactly set out to know whether there was an immaterial source of the being of the things in the universe. Like most of the people who ask about "God," he wanted to know whether there was a "person" who cared about him directing his life and the events surrounding his life. And accepting the existence of an ultimate principle of the being of all things is not the same as having a relationship with a loving God—the kind of God to whom one could pray; the kind of God to whom Augustine had been praying all along. Plato's eternal "forms" and "ideas" were immaterial causes, but they were not conscious, capable of knowledge, love, and good will.

Although something was undoubtedly gained by Plato's process of rationalizing the Greek gods, placing them beyond and above human emotion and human strife, something was lost as well. The twentieth-century philosopher Étienne Gilson has suggested that: "Once freed by the philosophers from the care of earthly things, the Greek gods seem to have renounced, once and for all, their former interest in man and his destiny. The popular gods of Greek mythology had never ceased to perform their religious functions, but the rationalized gods of the philosophers no longer had any religious function to perform."[20] Plato thought it undignified for a man to imagine

Zeus having sorrow or pity. "A pilgrim who went to Zeus's temple to offer intercessory prayers for the healing of his sick daughter would likely have considered it undignified for a man to think that Zeus did not." "With the rational reflections of the later philosophers, says Gilson, "the Greeks had gained an indisputably rational theology, but they had lost their religion."[21] God was now safely and peaceably ensconced in heaven; it was for men, and for men alone, to take care of the world. To the extent that "God" was turned into a fundamental principle of physics, what he may have gained in rationality he lost in liveliness.

Plotinus took Plato's thought a step further, postulating the existence at the top of the hierarchy of being a single source which he called "the One." Emanating from "the One" were, first, "Mind" and then "Soul."[22] This helped in certain ways. The Platonic "demi-urge" that was responsible for making the world was not the highest principle in the cosmos. It was below the eternal forms and subject to them. It could "create" only in accord with what it found in the eternal forms above it, incorporating the forms into matter.[23]

"The One" of Plotinus, by contrast, stood at the top of the hierarchy of being and was able to produce from within itself both "Mind" and "Soul." With Plotinus, the creative first principle of Plato regained some of the "liveliness" (as Gilson called it) that had been lost earlier, with the highest principles of being no longer merely inanimate "forms," but One, Mind, and Soul. But it was Plotinus's "Mind," not the "One" that combined the role of Plato's demiurge and the realm of ideas.

Christian thinkers both before and after Augustine would employ some of these concepts to help them conceptualize how God could be three persons in one Being.[24] Among humans, one person is one being; two persons are two beings; and so on. But if God is fundamentally immaterial, there can be plurality within an essential unity. Some early Christian Fathers had gone so far as to associate the One, Mind, and Soul with the three Persons in the Trinity, believing that the One was the Source of All Being, like the Father; "Mind" was akin

to the Son, the Word (*the Logos*) by which God creates; and "Soul" was "the Spirit" which proceeds from the Father through the Son.[25]

So suggestive were these concepts, in fact, that Augustine would make some startling claims. One such claim was that he had "found in the books of the Platonists, albeit not in the same words, but to the same effect, and supported by many arguments," the notion that, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; that the Son of God was "of the same substance" as God; and that the Son is "unchangeably coeternal" with God.[26] It is certain, however, that these neo-Platonic philosophers would not have read their own works this way.[27]

What likely happened is that, once Augustine came to understand and accept the prologue of John's Gospel, he looked back at texts he had been reading from the books of the Platonists such as Plotinus and Porphyry and recognized in them elements similar to what he was learning as he was preparing for entry into the Church.[28] The "Platonic" texts had helped open up new categories for him with which to understand the verses in the Gospel of John more fully. The result wasn't either-or, but both-and. The works of the Platonists had an important propaedeutic role, providing him the conceptual resources he needed to be able to embrace Christian revelation in a more meaningful way.[29]

Why Prayer and the Polis? Love and the Limits of the God of the Philosophers

Although the Plotinian First Principle was able to generate "Mind" and may even have had in some sense an overarching "Will," it was still, like Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, essentially "self-thinking thought," whose self-referential thinking had little or no room for the particularities of human affairs, providing a devotee of this philosophical system very little reason to pray to "the One" to intercede on his behalf at this particular moment in time and in these concrete circumstances.

It would not be accurate to say that the neo-Platonists never prayed. The problem is, rather, that the claims of their philosophy make one wonder why they ever would. Belief in a god who is self-thinking thought tends to produce believers who imagine that the highest aim of human life is to imitate that god and unite ourselves to him by ascending out of and above the particularities of time, place, and history to meditate eternally on the immaterial forms and ideas in the mind of God.[30]

Belief in "the god of self-thinking thought" also makes it difficult to understand why the intellectually-gifted person capable of philosophy would devote his energies to the messy particularities of political engagement. For Plotinus and his followers, the "flight" of the soul was an individualist escape, a flight of "the alone to the Alone," as he would describe it.[31] So too, the purification rituals proposed by the neo-Platonists are not undertaken with an eye to making oneself ready for service to others, but so that "each in the solitude of himself" can "behold that solitary-dwelling Existence, the Apart, the Unmingled."[32] Even the classic Greek virtues are reoriented toward this ultimate end, as for example, in the following example of Plotinus's description of the classic Greek virtues of *sophrosyne*, courage, magnanimity, and wisdom.

> What else is Sophrosyne, rightly so-called, but to take no part in the pleasures of the body, to break away from them as unclean and unworthy of the clean? So too, Courage is but being fearless of the death which is but the parting of the Soul from the body, an event which no one can dread whose delight is to be his unmingled self. And Magnanimity is but disregard for the lure of things here. And Wisdom is but the Act of the Intellectual-Principle withdrawn from the lower places and leading the Soul to the Above.[33]

This is not to say that neo-Platonists failed to care for their city or were incapable of civic-mindedness. The question is whether their philosophical account of the "flight" of the soul provided a sufficient

account of the role of the philosopher in the *polis*; whether the admirable developments in neo-Platonic thought had left room for the Socrates who accepted death not merely to enable his flight from the world, but as an act of love for the *polis* that gave him birth.[34]

The neo-Platonic ascent of the soul was described as a "flight," an "escape," and was something accomplished by the individual. What of others? People have questioned for ages why a philosopher who had escaped Plato's cave or achieved an ascent to the top of the "divided line" would ever return to this world of shadows and illusions. Once you had made your "escape," why return to the prison? If one is motivated by the desire to rescue others, this simply means admitting the important role charity plays as a love not only for the highest knowledge, but also for the well-being of others.

But why should the philosopher care about them, especially if they are "low-born" members of the *hoi polloi*, "the many," who have very little chance of making the great intellectual ascent to the eternal Forms? It is one thing to care for the best and brightest, the ones you think capable of the heights of philosophical contemplation, but what about the poor, the crippled, slaves, children with Down syndrome? What about those who haven't the time or the disposition for philosophical dialogue and discovery? Why expend any effort on their behalf? Aren't they present in the city to take care of those at the top, not vice versa?

What role was charity to play in the intellectual schema of the neo-Platonists? The need to love God, the highest principle and source of one's being, was clear. But why love one's neighbor, especially the weak, the lowborn, and the poor? Why, to put the matter concretely, would anyone love a woman like Augustine's mistress—lowborn, uneducated, and unlikely ever to master the disciplines of philosophy? But Augustine *did* love her. He didn't send her away because she was unworthy of his love; he sent her away because his love was unworthy of her.

Still imprisoned by his desire for social advancement, he could not break the social convention that prohibited him marrying a

woman of a lower class. And since he could not bring himself to marry her, he gave her up, sent her away, and broke his own heart. His admission that he allowed his mother to arrange a marriage for him with a girl from a socially prominent family—a girl who was only twelve years old—and the fact that he took another mistress in the meantime, suggests how desperate his life had become without the mother of his child, the woman had traveled with him from Carthage to Thagaste, back to Carthage, then to Rome and finally to Milan. This woman had been nothing but faithful to him. Preoccupied with ascending to the heights of prominence in Roman society and the summit of spiritual purity, he seems not to have shared the same devotion for the woman who had served him for all those years as she had for him.

Seeking the "Higher Things" Among the Lower Things

And so, although Augustine had exchanged an untruth for a truth, he encountered a spiritual danger in the process. Following the advice of the Platonists, he directed his attention inward, searching for the Light illuminating his mind, so that, detaching himself from the material things of the world, he might ascend from his mind to the source of all light and illumination, "the One." This detachment from the need to fit God into the finite categories he used for "things" in the world was an important intellectual development. Augustine realized that God was not "big" in size; he was something more than "big." God was not "powerful" in the way kings and emperors are powerful; his power was the source of all power, including the power of the sun, the stars, and the galaxies. God was not "good" in the way a good chariot is "good" or the way a good friend is "good"; he is goodness itself, the source of all goodness. And yet, in expanding his mind, Augustine endangered his soul.

Searching for God in an intellectual ascent of the mind to the highest realities caused him to miss something crucial. In looking for God "above," he forgot to look for God "below." Striving to unite

himself with the God of the heavenly Trinity caused him to forget the God of the Incarnation and cross. This knowledge of the "things above" served, unfortunately, merely to puff him up with another form of arrogance. It gave him the illusion of having a privileged place *outside* the world from which to look down upon it. In uniting himself to the immaterial neo-Platonic god, he managed to turn it once more into a kind of Zeus-figure, above and outside the world, not intimately connected with it. Where did the Incarnate Christ teach him to find God? Not only "up" but "down": in matter and in the created realities of the world; in that which seemed to fallen man to be "lowly," "earthy," and "unworthy."

So although Augustine learned much from the "books of the Platonists," what is equally, interesting is what he says he did not find in these books. Although there was material to help him understand the immaterial character of God and the emanations of the three persons in the Trinity, something crucial he did not find there was anything to do with the Incarnation, or the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. He found nothing about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us; nothing about emptying himself and taking upon himself the form of a servant, made in the likeness of men; nothing about humbling himself and becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross; nothing about God sparing not his only Son, but delivering him up for us all.[35]

"I chattered away as if I were an expert," says Augustine—a problem not uncommon among academics—"but if I had not sought thy Way in Christ our Saviour, my knowledge would have turned out to be not instruction but destruction." Augustine was once again succumbing to the "desire to seem wise" rather than be wise with the wisdom of Christ. Rather than confessing his ignorance, as Socrates had wisely done, Augustine had become "puffed up with knowledge."[36] "Where was that love which builds upon the foundation of humility?" he asked himself.[37] This was a humility based not on despising the body, but on loving it rightly; based not on dismissing one's sins as a function of an alien flesh, but on accepting full

responsibility for them; based not on an attempt to raise oneself up to the divine, but on acknowledging one's limitations and sins and the need for forgiveness and help from above.[38]

And this was the second thing Augustine failed to find in the books of the Platonists: any account of God's grace. This was something he found instead in his re-reading of the letters of St. Paul.[39] No longer would he emulate an elite group of philosophers who, through their own ascetic practices and intellectual discipline, claimed to be able to claw their way up to the upper reaches of Plato's "divided line." That conviction was replaced by faith in the promise that the source of all Truth and Goodness had plunged himself down into the very material fabric of his creation in love to raise it up in love. And to be raised up, one first had to become "like Christ" and embrace the lowly, the poor, the meek, and the humble; one had to unite oneself to His body and die to oneself, to one's own selfishness, in order to be raised with Him into God's eternal communion of love. God had plunged down into the world to draw us up, but not entirely out.

On the Christian account, the "divided line" was no longer simply a vertical ascent. "Salvation" was now "salvation history." The line was now turned on its side, as it were, and had become the story of God's entrance into history—his self-revelation and redemption of mankind which was realized in time and in the events of actual human history.[40] On this understanding, humans must do their part, but their part was made possible by a divine love that existed beyond our merits and efforts.

Earlier, Augustine had embraced a common view of Jesus, that he was "only a man of eminent wisdom" who had been "sent to set us an example of despising worldly things." He presumed that Jesus "had merited his great authority as a leader" by his life and sacrifices.[41] "But concerning the mystery contained in 'the Word was made flesh,'" admits Augustine, "I had not a clue."[42] Was the "example" Christ set really "an example of despising worldly things"?

What would it mean to seek "the higher things" once one has

taken Christ as God's own son Incarnate? Here is what Augustine says about his attempted "ascent" to God.

> I sought, therefore, some way to acquire the strength sufficient to enjoy thee; but I did not find it until I embraced that "Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus," "who is over all, God blessed forever," who came calling and saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and mingling with our fleshly humanity the heavenly food I was unable to receive. For "the Word was made flesh" in order that thy wisdom, by which thou didst create all things, might become milk for our infancy. And, as yet, I was not humble enough to hold the humble Jesus; nor did I understand what lesson his weakness was meant to teach us. For thy Word, the eternal Truth, far exalted above even the higher parts of thy creation, lifts his subjects up toward himself. But in this lower world, he built for himself a humble habitation of our own clay, so that he might pull down from themselves and win over to himself those whom he is to bring subject to him; lowering their pride and heightening their love, to the end that they might go on no farther in self-confidence—but rather should become weak, seeing at their feet the Deity made weak by sharing our coats of skin—so that they might cast themselves, exhausted, upon him and be uplifted by his rising.[43]

What makes this passage especially noteworthy is the fact that Augustine clearly knew Plato's dictum that the gods do not deign to mingle with humans; rather spiritual *daimones* bear prayers and sacrifices to the gods, and gifts from the gods to humans.[44]

When he forced himself to consider the significance of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, the God-man mediating between God and man, Augustine came to several important conclusions. The first was that matter is not evil or the source of evil.[45] On the Christian view, this is to mistake a cause with an effect: to fail to recognize that the problems we have with our embodiment are a result of a deeper spiritual problem.[46] It is not the steak or the wine

that causes the sins of gluttony and drunkenness; it is our inability to use them properly. It is not the woman's body that causes the man to sin; it is his inability to appreciate the beauty of the whole person: body, soul, spirit, and mind.

The correct way to think about the relationship between the souls and the body, Augustine came to realize, was in terms of the relationship between the two natures in Christ: distinct, but undivided, unified in one person.[47] Granted, the fallen soul's dysfunctional relationship with the body can cause it to be attracted to created things rather than to their Creator, just as a man can become attracted to a woman's body rather than loving the whole person. But the proper relationship of the soul to the body is neither one of enslavement to the body or wholesale contempt of it, which would be an equal and opposite destructive reaction. The proper relationship follows upon the understanding that the body is not a prison, but a tool with which the soul expresses its selfless love for God and neighbor. It is for this reason and to this end that the soul must care for the body—not to make of it an instrument of power, prestige, or sensuality (which is also often enough an expression of power and/or prestige), but to use it as an instrument of love. Thus, as John Rist has said, for Augustine, "escaping from the body" would be "not only a metaphysical mistake, but a desertion of the love for the body which God has intended."[48]

As was true for the body, so for the material world as a whole: the material world is the locus of our salvation, not a prison from which we must be liberated.[49] We are not saved from the world; we are saved in and with the world. We are saved from a dysfunctional relationship with the world wherein we seek to use it for our own self-aggrandizement in an attempt at self-creation, self-deification.

Not Making the Gold of the Philosophers into an Idol

Indeed, had not the Plotinian philosophers in their own way committed the same error as the idolaters of the Old Testament—cutting and forming God to their image rather than making themselves over

into His image? So too, among pagans in classical Greece and Rome, worship of the war god was thought to bring victory in war; worship of the god of harvest was thought to bring an abundant harvest. In each case, the worshipers had cut and formed God into an image of their needs and desires. What benefit would worship of Jesus of Nazareth, even "risen" or "deified," bring to those who were not carpenters, especially to those who prided themselves on their intellect?

Indeed, it is worth noting that the most important element in the Plotinian ascent was "mind" (*nous*), the human intellect.[50] Was it any wonder, then, that the "god" of the Platonists often ended up looking suspiciously like a Platonic philosopher—indeed very much like the figure of Socrates at the end of the *Phaedo* after the hemlock had paralyzed his limbs from his feet upward, leaving him no more than a head talking from beneath a sheet, a mind without a body?[51]

How different was the neo-Platonic devotion to the contemplative "One," "Mind," and disembodied "Soul" from the farmer's worship of the "god of the harvest" or the warrior's devotion to "the god of war" or the housewife's daily sacrifice to "the goddess of the hearth"? As the warrior attempted to participate in the divine nature of the god of war by means of his rituals in order to achieve greater strength and greater fierceness in battle, so too the Platonists in their theurgic rituals attempted to participate in the divine nature of their god, who just happened to be (and is there much surprise in this?) the great Philosopher-God![52]

The error of idolatry is that humans make God over in their own image, or in the image of the "ideal" man or woman they want to be. The irony is that by essentially deifying themselves in this way they not only fail to allow God to deify them, which is the only way such a sharing in the divine nature is possible, but they also often fail to show sufficient concern for their fellow human beings.

When Augustine asked about "that love which builds upon the foundation of humility," he showed himself to be questioning whether he should really consider "mind" or "intellect" as the only or the most important element of the human person and its perfection the sole

quality leading to human flourishing. It would, after all, be possible to admit that the intellect is indeed important while maintaining that it is not the only thing that characterizes us or makes us who we are. How about our virtues? How about the character of our love and our devotion to others?

Quite frankly, Augustine, the young man who had proclaimed himself "in love with being in love," was perhaps simply too passionate a soul to find this view adequate in the end.[53] Perhaps there simply wasn't room in the Plotinian worldview and ethos for the passion of love for which Augustine yearned.[54]

What is especially ironic here is that, although the error of the philosophic idolaters was cutting and forming God to their image—exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being—the sticking point for them intellectually was the Christian teaching that God became man, a specific man, a simple carpenter, who lived at a certain time and place—thereby setting "the salvation of man and of the world on the pin-point, so to speak, of this one chance moment in history," as Cardinal Ratzinger has written.[55]

In arrogantly cutting and forming God to their image, they glorified themselves and divinized their own desires. What they needed to do was to cut and form themselves to God's image as he had revealed himself in and through his incarnate Son—as a God of love, forgiveness, sacrifice, and service, as both the Creator and Redeemer of the world, the Author of both Nature and Grace.[56] In the end, the neo-Platonists of Augustine's day suffered from the same difficulty as did the Manichees: their view entailed a diminution of the importance of the material world, of flesh, the body, and all that comes along with them.[57]

Augustine had learned much from the books of the Platonists. He had, as the saying goes, "plundered the gold of the Egyptians," taking from those books the wisdom that was properly God's.[58] But what he would not do was to make the mistake the Israelites made when they took that gold and fashioned it into an idol, declaring "But I did

not set my mind on the idols of Egypt which they fashioned of gold, 'changing the truth of God into a lie and worshiping and serving the creature more than the Creator.'"[59]

"Thus, though they know God," says Augustine of the Platonists, "yet they do not glorify him as God, nor are they thankful." That is to say, they know (conceptually) *of* the immaterial "One," "Mind," and "Soul," but they do not know him. They do not know God as a loving, personal God who has come not be served but to serve, and thus they do not know him as someone who embraces us and is to be embraced in *love*. "Therefore," says Augustine, "they 'become vain in their imaginations; their foolish heart is darkened, and professing themselves to be wise they become fools.'"[60]

Redemption as Transformation, not Obliteration

Augustine's newly-acquired Christian faith told him that the destructive results of Adam's sin are reversed in Christ's redemptive sacrifice.[61] In this act, God had made clear that he does not intend to allow his creation to be overcome by sin and death; that he will not allow human selfishness to uncreate what he selflessly created.[62]

God has given an order to creation, and it is important that we conform to the order he has given it.[63] We do not achieve our flourishing by an escape into another world, or by forcing an alien order onto this world. We flourish, and the world flourishes with us, when we understand the order God intended and discipline ourselves to preserve and extend that order.[64]

And yet it is important to understand that, for Augustine, this new life, this access to a new order and harmony, is not something we create or attain ourselves; it is something given to us from beyond the world, by a fundamental power of creative love which transcends our own capacities.

And so we might wonder whether the struggles of any one person are really all that significant? Can we really "make a difference" in the cosmic scope of things? What the Incarnation revealed to Augustine

is that the whole of creation is bound up with the life and death of a particular man at a particular moment in history, whose sacrifice points us forward to the end of history, when that man's victory over sin and death is universalized in the general resurrection of mankind from the dead and the full restoration of the divine order of the universe.[65]

So too, the first shall be made last. The great kingdoms of the earth shall be brought low. But the small, the meek, the out-of-the-way, those forgotten by history, they are making significant changes. History may not take account of them; we may not notice them; but God does.

The Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of God's own Son is a sign that God has remained faithful to the covenant he made with his creation at its beginnings and that this divine order, with mankind in its proper place within it, is to be totally restored at the last. If we unite ourselves to him and to his sacrifice, we too have a significant part to play in that restoration. A single person, even one who is unknown to history, whose sacrifices go unnoticed by others, can and does make a difference, a difference with cosmic dimensions, because that sacrifice is a participation in the sacrifice God himself has made in loving communion with his creation.

Redemption, on this view, is a transformation of creation and of the person, not an obliteration or a negation. We cannot destroy nature to realize our human destiny. Nor can we control nature completely and harness it to our own selfish ends without concern for the well-being of others. The Christian message is that we can only realize our human destiny when we live in accord with the natural order God created, treating it "sacramentally," as an "instrument" of God's love and grace.

Augustine came to the conviction that, in becoming "Christian," he was not meant to lose himself. The "death to self" of which Christianity speaks is a death to the selfish self, not an obliteration of the self as God created it. The effect is transformation, not negation. By becoming more "like Christ," one becomes less like the false self we

often portray to the world: the one who poses as having power and control over everything when we know we do not. Instead, we are meant to steadily allow ourselves to be transformed into that person we say we want to become: compassionate, caring, a faithful friend, a good neighbor, someone who makes a "difference" in the lives of other people, someone who wants to leave the world and nature better off and not worse. We become, in a word, more "like Christ."

Salvation, therefore, is not, as the Manichees and Platonists believed, a rescue out *of* the world, but a redemption of the world. Just as God enters lovingly into history, into the story of mankind, but not always through the rich and powerful, so Christians are to serve as a leaven within society, not conforming to it, but not forsaking it either. This made Christian political involvement not only a possibility, but a responsibility. [66]

Politics and the Platonic Philosopher

And yet, the Christian political involvement envisaged by Augustine was not to be undertaken on exactly the same terms as those of even the best of his pagan interlocutors. In Virgil's epic historical vision, to what does fate lead? Answer: The establishment and glory of Rome. But what would Plato and Socrates say? Would they not warn that Rome is "great" (as Athens is "great") only to the extent that it brought itself into accord with Justice, Goodness, and Truth?

In acting as the gadfly of the city, annoying those in power by trying to show them how they were in error, Socrates took himself to be doing the greatest service possible to the city. Was he an unfaithful citizen, corrupting the morals of the *polis*, or the most faithful citizen Athens ever knew?

Were he and his fellow Christians "unfaithful" to Rome when they refused to do things contrary to justice, or were they rather the most faithful, most "Socratic" citizens in the empire? Who really were the Socrates and Plato of imperial Rome? Plotinus and Porphyry? Or Ambrose and Augustine?

Otherworldly religions and Platonic philosophies that counsel an "escape" from this world or favor a "spiritual" or anti-political "philosophical" attitude that take no account of political or social realities rarely run into conflict with governments. But they are also rarely helpful in correcting the grievous moral errors of a society either. One wonders whether it would have made things clearer if one of the Church fathers had, at his trial, suggested as Socates had that, as his punishment, the Roman imperial government should pay him a salary for challenging the presuppositions of his fellow Roman citizens.[67]

What Augustine did not find in the books of the Platonists were things essential to redeeming the times. What Augustine did not find in the books of the Platonists and had to find in Christian revelation was a personal God who was a God of justice, but not an immaterial form; a God of love who would listen to prayers and respond; a God of history who entered into history to redeem it, not a God who remained blissfully apart. Christians were being called upon, he believed, to be just and virtuous in all their dealings, not for their own glory or even on behalf of the rather dubious glory of Rome, but out of a selfless love for their neighbors, especially the lowest and weakest among their fellow citizens and others throughout the world.

Perhaps what drew Augustine to Christianity in the end was its distinctive combination of the material and the immaterial, the body and the soul, the transcendent and the immanent, the historical and the eschatological; its affirmation of both the transcendent destiny of the human person and the common destiny of all mankind.[68] Centuries later, Henri de Lubac would write: "For if the salvation offered by God is in fact the salvation of the human race, since this human race lives and develops in time, any account of this salvation will naturally take a historical form—it will be the history of the penetration of humanity by Christ."[69] So too, for Augustine, history was no longer to be seen as a "moving image of unmoving eternity," as Plato had described it, or as an unfortunate "dispersal" of the eternal, or an eternal cycle of re-birth.[70] Becoming Christian meant those

cycles had been "exploded."[71] The events of history were affirmed as meaningful in their own right. History was not a "dispersal" from a primitive state of perfection; rather history as a whole and each human life had a direction, an aim, a purpose, established by God and toward which humans were graciously being nurtured.

Augustine had come to believe and confess (most powerfully in the book he called his *Confessions*) that, in spite of all of his sinful mistakes and through all the vicissitudes of his life, God had not abandoned him and was instead guiding him to a new life in love. So too, that personal journey had convinced him that, in spite of all of mankind's sinful mistakes and through all of the vicissitudes of its history, God would bring them home. Romans of an imperial bent continued on their head-long quest to dominate history, other nations, and each other. This, in the end, led to their downfall, as it will lead, unless corrected, to ours.

Notes

1. For a short introduction to the thought of the Manichees, see the entry under "Mani, Manicheism" in Fitzgerald, Allan, OSA, et al., ed., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 520–25 or in J. J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 69–83. For a longer, more thorough introduction, see Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 157–92.
2. One of the many infamous stories in this regard is Herodotus's story of Croesus, the Greek King of Lydia in Asia Minor, renowned for his wealth, whom Herodotus tells us sent off to the Oracle at Delphi to ask what would happen if he attacked the Persians. The enigmatic answer came back: "If you attack the Persians, a great empire will fall." Croesus attacked, and his own empire fell, revealing once again the wisdom of the words written over the doors to the Temple of Apollo in Delphi: *Gnothi Seauton*, "Know Thyself." See Herodotus, *Histories* 1.85–89.
3. Another famous story of a man who simultaneously believed and disbelieved the proclamation of an oracle was Oedipus. He believed the oracle that he would "kill his father and marry his mother" enough to flee the man and woman he assumed were his father and mother, but by fleeing, showed that he also disbelieved that this would be his fate. And of course, in fleeing his fate, he ran right into it.
4. See, for example, *Confessions* 7.6.8, trans, Albert Outler: "By now I had also repudiated the lying divinations and impious absurdities of the astrologers." Now in the

public domain, Outler's translation may be found here: https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/conf.pdf. I will be quoting this version throughout the article. On Augustine's early embrace of and later rejection of astrology, see "Astrology" in Fitzgerald et al., eds. *Augustine through the Ages*, 76–77.

5. *Conf.* 7.3.5: "But one thing lifted me up toward thy light: it was that I had come to know that I had a will as certainly as I knew that I had life. When, therefore, I willed or was unwilling to do something, I was utterly certain that it was none but myself who willed or was unwilling." For an overview of Augustine's defense of free will against Manichean determinism, see Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo*, 207–14.
6. *Confessions* 7.9.13. Augustine narrates his encounter with "the books of the Platonists" in book 7 of the *Confessions*. See esp. 7.9–20..
7. Scholars continue to argue over which "Platonists" Augustine is referring to here and which books. Albert Outler notes that "The most reasonable conjecture, as most authorities agree, is that the 'books' here mentioned were the *Enneads* of Plotinus, which Marius Victorinus (q.v. *infra*, Bk. 8, chap. 2, 3–5) had translated into Latin several years before." See n. 186 at *Confessions* 7.9.13. For a different view, see J. J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: An Introduction to the* Confessions *of St. Augustine* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1954), who argued that Augustine knew the texts of Porphyry better than those of any other Platonist. For a nice outline of the debate, see James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine Confessions*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 421–24.
8. Cf. *Confessions* 7.20.26: "By having thus read the books of the Platonists, and having been taught by them to search for the incorporeal Truth. . ."
9. *Conf.* 7.1.1: "For I could not conceive of any substance but the sort I could see with my own eyes. . . . I no longer thought of God in the analogy of a human body, yet I was constrained to conceive thee to be some kind of body in space."; *Conf.* 7.5.7:

   > I marshaled before the sight of my spirit all creation: all that we see of earth and sea and air and stars and trees and animals; and all that we do not see, the firmament of the sky above and all the angels and all spiritual things, for my imagination arranged these also, as if they were bodies, in this place or that. And I pictured to myself thy creation as one vast mass, composed of various kinds of bodies.

10. For more on the argument that the mind is not limited spatially because the objects of its knowledge, such as the objects of mathematics, are not limited spatially, see *On Free Choice of the Will*, 2.8.23.
11. Cf. Plato, *Rep.* 6.510c-511b. For Augustine's comments on the immateriality of justice and the mind, see *On the Magnitude of the Soul*, 4.5.
12. *Conf.* 7.10.16: "And I said, "Is Truth, therefore, nothing, because it is not diffused through space—neither finite nor infinite?"
13. *Conf.* 7.1.2: "For at that time my mind dwelt only with ideas, which resembled the forms with which my eyes are still familiar, nor could I see that the act of thought, by which I formed those ideas, was itself immaterial, and yet it could not have formed them if it were not itself a measurable entity."

14. *Conf.* 7.17.23.
15. Cf. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.2.2: "Omnis doctrina vel rerum est vel signorum, sed res per signa discuntur." The confusions brought about by not understanding the various ways in which language signifies—metaphors, parables, myths, figures of speech, even the various ways of narrating history—was a repeated challenge for Augustine early on, with regard to understanding both God and the Scriptures. Attempting to resolve these conundrums, in addition to his concern to find the proper relationship between rhetoric and truth, is likely why he wrote the first three books of *On Christian Doctrine* at nearly the same time he was writing the *Confessions* (both circa 397).
16. *Conf.* 7.10.16.
17. Ibid. 7.15.21
18. Ibid. 7.11.17. Another translation (that of R. Pine-Coffin) adds: "I saw too that all things are fit and proper not only to the places but also the times in which they exist." The addition of *time* and *place* here is noteworthy. God's creative action is not static, it is dynamic; it is not merely "vertical" (imparting being), it is "horizontal" (including time and place). God not only creates, He providentially directs. I will have more to say about God's providential role *in time* and *in history* in the latter part of this article.
19. Lewis Ayres and Michel Barnes suggest that reading the "books of the Platonists" at the same time he was returning to Christianity, "Augustine came to a new account of God" involving five interrelated and inseparable elements.

    First, Augustine realized that God was the "light" of truth itself: immaterial, eternal, and everywhere indivisibly present. God was the immaterial source of all perfections and all truth. Second, Augustine realized that God was distinct from all, and yet calling to and drawing all things toward truth through a benevolent providence. Third, Augustine realized that God was Being itself. "Truth itself" was identical with the real source of all existence, and thus the incorporeality and infinity of truth itself did not mean that God was literally nothing (*nihil*). Fourth, Augustine realized that all things that are not being itself exist only by participation in God and through the gift of being from God. Thus he can say of himself, "unless my being remains in Him, it cannot remain in me." Fifth, Augustine discovered the paradoxical relationship between the soul and God. On the one hand, the soul was immaterial and "above" the material reality of the body, and when discovered to be such served as a pointer to the nature of God. On the other hand, the soul was still mutable and served only to reveal the incomparable and infinitely surpassing reality and light' of the divine. See L. Ayres and M. Barnes, "God," in *Augustine through the Ages*, 384.
20. Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 34–35.
21. Ibid., 34.
22. Key texts can be found in *The Essential Plotinus*, trans. E. O'Brien (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1964), esp. 72–106.
23. Cf. Tim. 28a-29d.
24. The bibliography on "Christian Platonism" is vast. For a good introduction to the

topic, see Hilary Armstrong, *St. Augustine and Christian Platonism*, St. Augustine Lecture (Philadelphia, PA: Villanova University, 1966). But for a more robust on-line resource on the entire history of "Christian Platonism and Christian Neoplatonism: Christian Platonists and Platonizing Christians in History," see http://www.john-uebersax.com/plato/cp.htm.

25. See, for example, Origen, *On First Principles*, bk I (citation).

26. *Conf.* 7.9.13.

27. R. O'Connell sums the matter up nicely, declaring (415): "Porphyry would *not* have been pleased with A.'s reports of Platonic teaching."

28. It is R. O'Connell again who has summed the matter up nicely (392): "Here A. rather puts on paper the view of God that he had carried with him unconsciously through Manicheism and skepticism and that he become aware of in terms like those reported here only when the *platonicorum libri* brought to light a new and different view."

29. *Conf.* 7.20.26:

> I now believe that it was thy pleasure that I should fall upon these books before I studied thy Scriptures, that it might be impressed on my memory how I was affected by them; and then afterward, when I was subdued by thy Scriptures and when my wounds were touched by thy healing fingers, I might discern and distinguish what a difference there is between presumption and confession—between those who saw where they were to go even if they did not see the way, and the Way which leads, not only to the observing, but also the inhabiting of the blessed country.

Using an image that by his time had become well known, Augustine also refers to his appropriation of the intellectual riches of the books of the Platonists as analogous to the Jewish people "plundering the gold of the Egyptians" when they fled Egypt because it belonged properly to God. See *Conf.* 7.9.15.

30. Cf. Plato's *Theatetus* 176a-b: "Therefore we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise." Note here the theme of *escape*, which will become even more central in the writings of Plotinus and Porphyry.

31. *Enn.* 6, tr. 7, c. 34: "The very soul, once it has conceived the straining love towards this, lays aside all the shape it has taken, even to the Intellectual shape that has informed it. There is no vision, no union, for those handling or acting by any thing other; the soul must see before it neither evil nor good nor anything else, that alone it may receive the Alone." Plotinus, *Enn.* 6, tr. 9, c. 11: "This is the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of earth, the passing of solitary to solitary." English translations from the *Enneads* and "The Life of Plotinus" are taken from: S. MacKenna and B. S. Page, trans., *The Six Enneads of Plotinus* (London: P.L. Warner, 1917–1939; repr. Great Books of the Western World, vol. 17 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1955).

32. *Enn.* 1, tr. 7, c. 7.
33. Ibid., 1, tr. 6, c. 6 and 7
34. Plotinus, for example, maintains that an essential property of the happy life is self-sufficiency. See *Enneads* 1.1.4–5.
35. *Conf.* 7.9.13–14.
36. Ibid., 7.20.26: "For now full of what was in fact my punishment, I had begun to desire to seem wise. I did not mourn my ignorance, but rather was puffed up with knowledge."
37. Ibid.
38. As T. S. Eliot writes in *East Coker*:

> Do not let me hear
> Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
> Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
> Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
> The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
> Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

39. *Conf.* 7.21.27:

> With great eagerness, then, I fastened upon the venerable writings of thy Spirit and principally upon the apostle Paul. . . . And I found that whatever truth I had read [in the Platonists] was here combined with the exaltation of thy grace. Thus, he who sees must not glory as if he had not received, not only the things that he sees, but the very power of sight—for what does he have that he has not received as a gift? By this he is not only exhorted to see, but also to be cleansed, that he may grasp thee, who art ever the same; and thus he who cannot see thee afar off may yet enter upon the road that leads to reaching, seeing, and possessing thee.

He also found, importantly, in Ephesians 5:29, Paul's admonition that "No one hates his own flesh." Cf. *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.24.24–25.

40. Augustine had two major schemes into which he divided human history, both of them ways of understanding salvation history. The first scheme divided history into six ages, from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to David, David to the Babylonian Captivity, the Babylonian Captivity to Jesus, and from Jesus's death to His Second Coming. See, for example, *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 22. The second scheme is a simpler, tripartite one, adopted from the Pauline letters, which divides history in the age before the law, the age under the law, and the age of grace. In either case, with Christ's coming, we have entered "the final age," so that now,

> the spiritual grace, which in previous times was known to a few patriarchs and prophets, may be made manifest to all nations; to the intent that no man should worship God but freely, fondly desiring of Him not the visible rewards of His services and the happiness of this present life, but that eternal life alone in which he is to enjoy God Himself: in order that in this sixth age the mind of man may be renewed after the image of God, even as on the sixth day man was made after the image of God. For then, too, is the law fulfilled, when all that it has commanded is

> done, not in the strong desire for things temporal, but in the love of Him who has given the commandment. (*On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, 22)

For a good description of Augustine's historical consciousness, see Paul Archambault, "The Ages of Man and the Ages of the World: A Study of Two Traditions," *Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques*, January 1966, vol. 12 (3–4), esp. 203–211.

41. *Conf.* 7.19.25.
42. Ibid., although I have altered Prof. Outler's translation slightly.
43. Ibid., 7.18.24
44. Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 203a, where Diotima tells Socrates that Love (Eros) is a "very powerful spirit" (*daimon*),

> and spirits, you know, are halfway between god and man. . . . They are the envoys and interpreters that ply between heaven and earth, flying upward with our worship and our prayers, and descending with the heavenly answers and commandments, and since they are between the two estates they weld both sides together and merge them into one great whole. They form the medium of the prophetic arts, of the priestly rites of sacrifice, initiation, and incantation, of divination and of sorcery, for the divine will not mingle directly with the human, and it is only through the mediation of the spirit world that man can have any intercourse, whether waking or sleeping, with the gods. . . . There are many spirits, and many kinds of spirits, too, and Love is one of them.

Another thing the immortal gods do not do, of course, is *die*, another obvious sticking point for the Greeks and Romans.

45. Cf. Rist, 96, 102–104: "It is the soul which sins," and "sins committed 'with' the body are inflicted on the body by the soul." "It is tempting," observes John Rist, "if matter is a necessary condition for evil acts, to persuade ourselves that by detaching ourselves from matter we shall remove ourselves entirely from moral evil." "Sinlessness," then, "might be viewed merely as a return to the immaterial world, or as a freeing of the pure immaterial core of the self."
46. See Rist's comment on 97: "[Augustine's] Christian tradition is supported by Neoplatonic writings, above all Ennead 5.1.1, where what caused the souls to forget their father is, substantially, pride (*tolma*) and 'wishing to belong to themselves', that is, to be self-creators."
47. On Augustine's later discovery and use of the Latin term *persona* for the soul-body composite, see Rist, 97–104, esp. 100. Cf. also Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 47:12: "For in the same way that one man is soul and body, is one Christ both the Word and man. Consider what I have said, and understand. The soul and body are two things, but one man: the Word and man are two things, but one Christ. Apply, then, the subject to any man."
48. Rist, 110. Rist also notes that, in later writings, Augustine would further develop his understanding of the love the soul was supposed to exhibit toward the body, claiming, for example, in *The Usefulness of Fasting* 4.5 that there is a "kind of conjugal union of flesh and spirit." So too, in *Letter* 140, Augustine speaks of the "sweet

marriage-bond" (*dulce consortium*) of body and soul. And in *The Soul and its Origins* 4.2.3, he calls those who want to separate the body from human nature foolish.

49. Cf. Stroumsa's apt critique of a common, modern misconception (39–40):

> At this point, one may cast doubt upon the truth of the rather commonly held conception according to which Christian asceticism, that is, since the fourth century, monasticism in its various forms, together with Gnostic dualist trends and in opposition to the more sober asceticism of the philosophers, manifested in the extreme, in the words of E. R. Dodds, "a contempt for the human condition and a hatred of the body" that was an endemic disease of the period. There is no denying that Christian ascetical attitudes sometimes took aberrant forms. But norms, even when those of rather marginal groups or situations, should be dealt with here, rather than aberrations. We shall see how much of Christian anthropology crystallized around the vehement rejection of Gnostic dualist attitudes. Suffice it here to note that Christians, more often than not, conceived of asceticism as an effort to strengthen and not to weaken the body. So does Athanasius, in his Life of Saint Anthony, one of the most influential books in the history of Christianity, describe how the father of all monks underwent fasts and vigils in order to fortify his body for the fight against the demon, not to mortify it. . . . . If the Christian holy man, whose imposing figure we have learned to recognize as rising over the horizon of late antiquity like a stylite saint on his column, could have become a total incarnation of values, it is precisely because he appeared in popular consciousness—in stark contrast with the pagan holy man, the philosopher—as an entity of body and soul, a 'Christ- bearing exemplar.'"

Tertullian expressed a common sentiment of this North African spirituality in the phrase *caro salutis cardo*: "the body is the hinge of salvation" (*De resurrectione mortuorum*, 8.2).

50. Porphyry held that the rigorous study of philosophy and the liberal arts needed to purify the mind for its ascent to the One was only for an elite few. What then of the rest of mankind? Porphyry believed that *theurgy*, the performance of ritual acts, prayers, humans, incantations, and sacrifice to the demons (*daimones*) was the means by which the majority of people, unable to sustain the rigors of the contemplative life, could enjoy in ritual ecstasy at least a partial escape of the "spiritual" soul from the body. Cf. Augustine, *The City of God*, 10.9; 10.27; 10.32, and Robert Dodaro, OSA, "Theurgy," in Fitzgerald et al., ed. *Augustine through the Ages*, 827–28. R. O'Connell remarks in his commentary on the *Confessions* (vol. 2, 415), that "the function of theurgy is to bring about the presence of God, visibly," and then asks: What does Christianity have that would have appealed to a half-Christian Plotinus/Porphyry reader as the rough equivalent of theurgy? Eucharist: making the god be present." At this point, Prof. O'Connell asks cryptically: "The Mass as Christian theurgy? Or as Christian counterpart to theurgy?" The answer, ultimately (and I think importantly) is *no*. For one reason (among others) because the goal of theurgy is to free the worshiper as much as possible from the "chains" of the body—an enslavement that is a primary cause of

moral evil among humankind. This neo-Platonic "escape" from matter has never been a widely-accepted goal of the Eucharistic celebration. The purpose of the Mass has never been an "escape" from the body or the world. For another, at the heart of the Mass is the *person* of Jesus Christ, a real historical person who lived in time in the flesh.

51. Cf. *Phaedo*, 118b:

> The man—he was the same one who had administered the poison—kept his hand upon Socrates, and after a little while examined his feet and legs, then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. Socrates said no. Then he did the same to his legs, and moving gradually upward in this way let us see that he was getting cold and numb. . . . The coldness was spreading about as far as his waist when Socrates uncovered his face, for he had covered it up, and said—they were his last words—Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget.

52. There is no clear, set understanding of the relationship between the various parts of 7.9.13–15. My reading is based on the supposition that there is a connection and continuity between the first sentence in 7.9.13, Augustine's assertion that God wanted to show him (Augustine) that He "resists the proud, but gives graces to the humble," (James 4:6) and the last sentence in 7.9.15 that they (the philosophers) "become vain in their imaginations; their foolish heart is darkened, and professing themselves to be wise they become fools" (Rom 1:21, 22). This last quotation from Paul's Letter to the Romans refers quite explicitly to pagan idolatry. Paul's claim is that, although the invisible God has, since the creation of the world, made himself known through the visible things of creation, the pagans, rather than worshipping the Creator, worshipped his creation. "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being" (Rom 1:22). And it was in this way that "their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom 1:21), even though they "claimed to be wise." So too, the pagan philosophers, although they did not make the mistake of envisioning God as a "four-footed beast or creeping thing," they still, on Augustine's account, although claiming to be wise, "became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God" for an image made to look like a mortal human being: a Philosopher-God.

53. Cf. *Conf.* 2.2.2.

54. To imagine that Augustine became a philosophical neo-Platonist of a Porphyrian disposition, to imagine that his "love" had become an entirely disembodied ascent to God having little or nothing to do with his fellow human beings, is to propose such a significant break in identity with the passionate man of eros we know that he was in his past and which he admits to being even in Book 8 of the *Confessions*, simply strains credibility.

55. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (Kent, UK: Burns & Oates, 1969; repr. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 28–29:

> At first glance this really seems to be the maximum degree of revelation, of the

disclosure of God. The leap which previously led into the infinite seems to have been reduced to something on a human scale, in that we now need only to take a few steps, as it were, to that person in Galilee in whom God himself comes to meet us. But things are curiously double-sided: what at first seems to be the most radical revelation and to a certain degree does indeed always remain revelation, *the* revelation, is at the same moment the cause of the most extreme obscurity and concealment. The very thing which at first seems to bring God quite close to us, so that we can touch him as a fellow man, follow his footsteps and measure them precisely, also became in a very profound sense the pre-condition for the "death of God" which henceforth puts an ineradicable stamp on the course of history and the human relationship with God. God has come so near to us that we can kill him and that he thereby, so it seems, ceases to be G for us. Thus today we stand somewhat baffled before this Christian "revelation" and wonder, especially when we compare it with the religiosity of Asia, whether it would not have been much simpler to believe in the Mysterious Eternal, entrusting ourselves to it in longing thought; whether God would not have done better, so to speak, to leave us at an infinite distance; whether it would not really be easier to ascend out of the world and hear the eternally unfathomable secret in quiet contemplation than to give oneself up to the positivism of belief in one single figure *and to set the salvation of man and of the world on the pin-point, so to speak, of this one chance moment in history.*" (emphasis added)

Cf. also the judgment of G. G. Stroumsa, "*Caro salutis cardo*: Shaping the Person in Early Christian Thought," *History of Religions*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1990): 38:

> More precisely, what shocked pagan intellectuals in the idea of incarnation was not only the desire of the invisible God to appear in the world-after all, this was a well-known problem of pagan theology, emphasized by the all-too-present statues of the gods-but the idea of flesh and its corruptibility and the fact that, according to Christian doctrine, incarnation had happened once, and only once, in history. This disturbed the pagan thinkers most. Here again, the uniqueness of the divine paradigm, the unity of the person of Jesus Christ, formed the core of the pagan argument against Christianity.

56. In *On the Trinity*, 13.17.22, Augustine details some of the beneficial things mankind learns from the incarnation which are "displeasing to the proud" (*quae superbis displicet*). First, "it has been demonstrated to man what place he has in the things which God has created; since human nature could so be joined to God." Second, we learn "that those proud malignant spirits, who interpose themselves as mediators" as if to help, deceive. They "do not therefore dare to place themselves above man because they have not flesh, chiefly because the Son of God deigned to die also in the same flesh, lest they, because they seem to be immortal, should therefore succeed in getting themselves worshipped as gods." Third, we learn "that the grace of God might be commended to us in the man Christ without any precedent merits" on our part. Fourth, we learn "that the pride of man, which is the chief hindrance against his

cleaving to God, can be confuted and healed through such great humility of God." Fifth,

> man learns also how far he has gone away from God; and what it is worth to him as a pain to cure him, when he returns through such a Mediator, who both as God assists men by His divinity, and as man agrees with men by His weakness. For what greater example of obedience could be given to us, who had perished through disobedience, than God the Son obedient to God the Father, even to the death of the cross? Nay, wherein could the reward of obedience itself be better shown, than in the flesh of so great a Mediator, which rose again to eternal life?

Sixth, we learn that "it belonged also to the justice and goodness of the Creator that the devil should be conquered by the same rational creature which he rejoiced to have conquered, and by one that came from that same race which, by the corruption of its origin through one, he held altogether."

57. Cf. Rist, 109–110: "It is clear that as soon as Augustine began to give serious consideration to the dogma of the Resurrection of the body, he found good reasons to conclude that, although the Platonists were right to insist on the subordination of the demands of the body to the demands of the soul, they were wrong and even begin to look 'Manichaean,' when they wish to be rid of the body so far as possible." Porphyry's famous dictum was "every body must be fled" (*omne corpus fugiendum*). And Porphyry's "Life of Plotinus" begins with the words "Plotinus, the philosopher our contemporary, seemed ashamed of being in the body." According to Porphyry, Plotinus refused to sit for a painter or sculptor, saying, "Is it not enough to carry about this image in which nature has enclosed us? Do you really think I must also consent to leave, as a desired spectacle to posterity, an image of the image?" "So deeply rooted was this feeling," recounts Porphyry, "that he could never be induced to tell of his ancestry, his parentage, or his birthplace." This refusal to recognize the "historical" dimension of the human person is also significant.

58. The account in Exodus where Moses instructs the Jews to request gold and silver vessels and clothing from their neighbors for use later (cf. Ex 3:21–22; 11:2–3; and 12:35) was commonly interpreted allegorically in the early Church as a *figure* of Christians taking truth from pagan, mostly classical Greek, sources and using it in their own theology. On this, cf. *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.40.60:

> Moreover, if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority, but by the command of God, the Egyptians themselves, in their ignorance, providing them with things which they themselves were not making a good use of; in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and

> superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad, and are perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of devils. These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel. Their garments, also,—that is, human institutions such as are adapted to that intercourse with men which is indispensable in this life,—we must take and turn to a Christian use."

I will have more to say in due course about this "Christian use" of things in what I will describe as a "sacramental" view of creation.

59. *Conf.* 7.9.15. Cf. Ex 32:4. Cf. also O'Connell's caveat (415), that although the *platonicorum libri* enjoy unparalleled prestige among scholars, to whom they have become a talisman for location the secret springs of A.'s spiritual life," yet is important to note a few things Augustine did not do with them. He does not identify the books he read; he does not quote them at Cassiciacum (where he quotes scriptural texts and Virgil explicitly); he does not make them the objects of explicit discussion with quotation; he does not write commentary [sic] upon them (the way he comments upon scripture); the never become part of his explicit, spontaneously quoted literary life; there is no sign of continuous contact with them, for the extended discussion in civ. 8–10 reflects a return to old studies rather than a constant occupation; there is no sign in his correspondence of his handling them, recommending them, or using them as authoritative; and he does not remain in correspondence with any of his Platonic acquaintances from Milan days—the break with those times on his return to Africa is nearly total (Simplicianus is the sole, and very ecclesiastical, exception). The dialogues he records under the influence of Platonic ideas involve without exception A. and others of his African entourage, never any of the so-called neo-Platonic circle of Milan, except as dedicatees. The intellectual movement of his recorded writings, beginning at Cassiciacum and lasting until his death, is consistently and continuously away from neo-Platonism.

60. *Conf.* 7.9.13. This is not to say that the Platonists never spoke of loving god[Should this be capped since it would refer to the One?], merely that it would have been a strange imposition into their system to speak of the One loving them back.

61. For a nice overview of Augustine's position on the Fall and the debates over it, see Katherin A. Rogers, "Fall," in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 351–52.

62. For a good overview, see Lewis Ayres, "Augustine on Redemption," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. M. Vessy and S. Reid, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 416–27.

63. Cf. *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean* 22.27–30, e.g.: "Sin, then, is any transgression in deed, or word, or desire, of the eternal law. And the eternal law is the divine order or will of God, which requires the preservation of natural order, and forbids the breach of it." "Referring, then, to the eternal law which enjoins the preservation of natural order and forbids the breach of it." And *The City of God* 19.15, where Augustine again speaks of "that law which enjoins the preservation of the natural order and forbids its disturbance." Cf. also *The City of God* 19.10, where Augustine says, in heaven, "we shall enjoy the gifts of nature, that is to say, all that God the Creator of all natures has bestowed upon ours—gifts not only good, but eternal—not only of the spirit, healed now by wisdom, but also of the body renewed by the resurrection."
64. An excellent contemporary discussion of our obligations to the created order can be found in Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986, 1994), esp. 31–45, which begins:

    > In proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, the apostles proclaimed also the resurrection of mankind in Christ; and in proclaiming the resurrection of mankind, they proclaimed the renewal of all creation with him. The resurrection of Christ in isolation from mankind would not be a gospel message. The resurrection of mankind apart from creation would be a gospel of a sort, but of a purely gnostic and world-denying sort which is far from the gospel that the apostles actually preaching. So the resurrection of Christ directs our attention back to the creation which it vindicates.

65. For more, see the penetrating discussion in the chapter on "History and Eschatology" in Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 53–75.
66. As is well known, the working out of this insight is one of the major tasks of Augustine's monumental work on *The City of God*.
67. Cf. Plato, *Apology*, 36d.
68. For a powerful statement of this theme, see Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (Kent, UK: Burns & Oates, 1950; repr. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), esp. 140–47.
69. De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 141. Cf. Augustine, *De ver. rel.*, c. 7, n. 13: "In following this religion our chief concern is with the prophetic history of the dispensation of divine providence in time—what God has done for the salvation of the human race, renewing and restoring it unto eternal life."
70. Cf. Plato, *Tim.*, 37–39; Plotinus, *Ennead* 3, tr. 7, nn. 1–13. For fascinating presentation on this theme, see Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), with numerous reprintings.
71. Cf. Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 12, c. 20, n. 1–4:

    > And if they maintain that no one can attain to the blessedness of the world to come, unless in this life he has been indoctrinated in those cycles in which bliss and misery relieve one another, how do they avow that the more a man loves God, the more readily he attains to blessedness,—they who teach what paralyzes love itself? For who would not be more remiss and lukewarm in his love for a person

whom he thinks he shall be forced to abandon, and whose truth and wisdom he shall come to hate; and this, too, after he has quite attained to the utmost and most blissful knowledge of Him that he is capable of? Can anyone be faithful in his love, even to a human friend, if he knows that he is destined to become his enemy? . . . Porphyry, Platonist though he was, abjured the opinion of his school, that in these cycles souls are ceaselessly passing away and returning, either being struck with the extravagance of the idea, or sobered by his knowledge of Christianity. As I mentioned in the tenth book, he preferred saying that the soul, as it had been sent into the world that it might know evil, and be purged and delivered from it, was never again exposed to such an experience after it had once returned to the Father. And if he abjured the tenets of his school, how much more ought we Christians to abominate and avoid an opinion so unfounded and hostile to our faith? But having disposed of these cycles and escaped out of them, no necessity compels us to suppose that the human race had no beginning in time . . . And now . . . we have *exploded* these cycles which were supposed to bring back the soul at fixed periods to the same miseries." (emphasis added)