

AUGUSTINE'S ENCOUNTER WITH NEOPLATONISM*

AUGUSTINE was surely *the* main conduit whereby late Hellenistic metaphysics, in the version we call ‘neoplatonism,’ passed into the Latin West and coloured the whole of mediæval philosophy; it is hard to overestimate its influence or to overstate Augustine’s role in passing it along.¹ Likewise, neoplatonic metaphysics had an immense impact on Augustine himself and on his own philosophical development. Reading just a few neoplatonic works in the spring of 386, he tells us, rescued him from sceptical despair and Manichaean illusion,² giving him a metaphysical system that allowed him to recognize truths he had hitherto been unable even to formulate.

For all that, scholarship has had a hard time taking Augustine’s philosophical encounter with neoplatonism seriously. That is because Augustine himself, despite the momentousness he attributes to the encounter, makes it hard to take seriously. For although he is at pains to emphasize its importance, and furthermore situates his report of the experience at the very centre of the *Confessions* (the midpoint of the middle book),³ his presentation of the encounter, some eleven years after the event, undercuts its philosophical significance. Furthermore, it is unlikely that this is accidental; Augustine was far too accomplished a rhetor not to be aware of the effects of his literary devices. But why would he apparently pull the rug out from under the very point he was trying to make?

* All translations are mine. This essay is dedicated to Eyjólfur Emilsson on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. Thanks to Anna Greco and Michael Gorman for comments.

¹ Mediæval philosophy did receive other injections of neoplatonism directly from Greek sources: Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and John Scottus Eriugena being its most noteworthy conveyors. But Augustine got there “firstest with the mostest”: his authority as a Father of the Church was unimpeachable, and, as we shall see, he was the first to establish philosophical accounts of fundamental tenets of Christian dogma—trinity, incarnation, redemption—which, formulated along neoplatonic lines, definitively influenced their later philosophical understanding and development.

² Apart from the account in the *Confessiones* (ca. 399–401), see *Contra Academicos* 2.2.5 (ca. 386) and *De beata vita* 1.4 (ca. 386–387).

³ See O’Donnell [1992] II.413.

A closer look at the passage where he describes the encounter may yield some answers. Augustine addresses God:⁴

You procured for me, through a man filled with monumental arrogance, some works of the Platonists that had been translated from Greek into Latin. I read there—not of course in these words, but exactly the same thing, being proved by many and varied arguments—that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made. What was made in Him was life, and life was the light of men” [*Jn.* 1:1–4]. . . . But that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” [*Jn.* 1:14] I did not read there.

I found in these texts—stated differently, and in many ways—that “the Son is in the form of the Father, and He thought it not robbery to be equal with God” [*Phil.* 2:6], since He naturally is the very same thing. But that “He drained himself empty and took upon Him the form of a servant; made in the likeness of men and found in fashion as a man, He humbled himself, made obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross; wherefore God also raised Him up” from among the dead “and gave Him a name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in Heaven, and things in Earth, and things under the Earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord in the glory of God the Father” [*Phil.* 2:7–11], these books did not have.

The most striking thing about this passage, of course, is Augustine’s citation of Christian scripture to his own purpose. But note how oddly it serves that purpose. We are told that some “works of the Platonists” offered argu-

⁴ *Confessiones* 7.9.13–14: Procurasti mihi per quendam hominem immanissimo typho turgidum quosdam Platoniorum libros ex graeca lingua in latinam uersos, et ibi legi non quidem his uerbis, sed hoc idem omnino multis et multiplicibus suaderi rationibus, quod in principio erat uerbum et uerbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat uerbum: hoc erat in principio apud Deum; omnia per ipsum facta sunt, et sine ipso factum est nihil; quod factum est in eo uita est, et uita erat lux hominum. . . . Sed quia uerbum caro factum est et habitauit in nobis, non ibi legi. Indagauī quippe in illis litteris uarie dictum et multis modis quod sit filius in forma patris, non rapinam arbitratus esse aequalis Deo, quia naturaliter idipsum est, sed quia semet ipsum exinaniuit formam serui accipiens, in similitudinem hominum factus et habitu inuentus ut homo, humilauit se factus oboediens usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis: propter quod Deus eum exaltauit a mortuis et donauit ei nomen quod est super omne nomen, ut in nomine Iesu omne genu flectatur caelestium terrestrium et infernorum, et omnis lingua confiteatur quia Dominus Iesus in gloria est Dei patris, non habent illi libri.

ments, yet not what the arguments were—we are not told what the works were, or even who wrote them, though elsewhere Augustine (arguably) tells us that some texts of Plotinus were involved.⁵ Instead, Biblical verses are put forward as accurate summaries of the content of these works (*hoc idem omnino*). These works of the Platonists were presumably pagan in character⁶ and philosophical in method, but Augustine refers to them as though all that mattered were their stance *vis-à-vis* Christian dogma.

Worse yet, representing neoplatonic theses with Biblical verses not only subverts their philosophical merit, it is so jarring that whilst it highlights Augustine's claims—surely an effect he intended—it also throws their apparent lack of plausibility into sharp relief, scarcely his intention. Étienne Gilson sums up the consensus of modern scholarship on this point in a tart comment: “Qu’Augustin ait lu dans Plotin toutes ces choses, c’est incontestable, mais il est beaucoup moins certain qu’elles y soient.”⁷ Indeed, rather than take Augustine at his word, most modern scholars have found it more rewarding to ignore what he *says* and instead to work on what he is careful *not* to say, that is, to identify the texts he read and their author(s), even unto the “man filled with monumental arrogance” who conveyed them to Augustine. This scholarly enterprise has borne fruit: we may now take it as settled that around this time Augustine became acquainted with the contents of at least some half-dozen treatises of the *Enneads*, among them 1.6 (‘On Beauty’ Περὶ τοῦ καλοῦ) and 5.1 (‘On the Three Hypostases’ Περὶ τῶν τριῶν ἀρχικῶν ὑποστάσεων), the former describing the ascent/return of the soul and the latter the fundamental structure of reality.⁸ What

⁵ In *De beata vita* 1.4, Augustine narrates how he read a few books or treatises by Plotinus (*lectis autem Plotini paucissimis libris*) that set him on the right track after his disillusionment with Manichaeism and subsequent sceptical despair, which is close enough to his account in the *Confessiones* to support the identification—though whether he read Plotinus in *ipsissima uerba* or in summary form is still open to debate: Augustine might have read works by several different neoplatonists of whom Plotinus was only one; he might have read a work or works that included extracts or detailed summaries of Plotinus; or both; to say nothing of what he might have picked up in conversation or by listening to Ambrose or Simplicianus.

⁶ The works were translated by Marius Victorinus (*Confessiones* 8.2.3); it is possible that they were not strictly translations but instead doctrinal summaries, and if Victorinus wrote the summaries himself they might have been Christian in flavor. Modern scholarship finds this unlikely, however: see Beatrice [1989].

⁷ Gilson [1943] 260. Mediæval scholarship was likewise dismissive: “Et ideo Augustinus, qui doctrinis platoniorum imbutus fuerat, si qua invenit fidei accommoda in eorum dictis, assumpsit; quae vero invenit fidei nostrae adversa, in melius commutavit” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I^a q. 84 art. 5 *corp.*).

⁸ He also knew of 3.2–3 (‘On Providence’), 4.3–4 (‘On the Soul’), 5.5 (‘That Intelligibles

else Augustine might have read, and the relative influence of Porphyry and Plotinus, are topics still hotly debated, with no end in sight to the debates. But modern scholarship passes over in silence what Augustine does say in *Confessiones* 7.9.13–14, presumably agreeing with Gilson that Augustine's claims can't be taken seriously. Discussion of his likely source-texts rages on.

But in all this the *philosophically* exciting part has gone missing, I think. Whatever the source-texts may have been in which Augustine found intellectual enlightenment, for the philosopher the primary question has to be: What were the arguments? More exactly: What were the philosophical doctrines Augustine thought neoplatonic metaphysics managed to establish through sound arguments, doctrines he thought (rightly or wrongly) expressible in terms of Christian dogma? And in what ways *qua* philosophy did neoplatonic metaphysics fall short?

In dogmatic language, Augustine claims in *Confessiones* 7.9.13–14 to have found in these unnamed works proofs of the Christian Trinity but no mention of the Incarnation/Redemption—roughly, that he found neoplatonism correct and demonstrative in metaphysics but flawed in ethics.⁹ Now if Augustine's dogmatic language is not to be taken literally but rather to be understood in non-dogmatic terms, we need to uncover what he was driving at. While Augustine says no more about the philosophical content of the works, we who can read Plotinus and Porphyry directly are able to get

Are Not Outside Intelligence'), and 6.4–5 ('How What is One Can Be Everywhere'). For these claims see du Roy [1966], TeSelle [1970], and Beatrice [1989]. For my argument here it is enough that Augustine knew 1.6 and 5.1, which no scholar denies. He likely knew more. It seems to me unexciting yet prudent to hold that Augustine was generally familiar with the contours of neoplatonism as he would have found it in his day: Plotinus the outstanding figure and Porphyry the most well-known, with others such as Iamblichus, Apuleius, and Nicomachus of Gerasa eventually filling out his knowledge.

⁹ There is a question how to read the *Confessions* here. Augustine the narrator tells us about the life of Augustine the lead character in his story sometimes in the terms Augustine-the-Character could or did use, sometimes from the later perspective of Augustine-the-Narrator (and not infrequently Augustine-the-Narrator offers a 'real-time' comment on the events he is recounting), the whole of course written by Augustine the author, the newly-installed Bishop of Hippo. Scholars have generally taken *Confessiones* 7.9.13–14 to be the tale told from the point of view of Augustine-the-Character: that in the spring of 386 Augustine (the historical figure) actually read some neoplatonic works, and said to himself something along the lines of: "These arguments validate the Christian Trinity but I can't find the Incarnation/Redemption anywhere!" I find it a much better interpretation to take this passage from the perspective of Augustine-the-Narrator, not representing his own understanding of the Platonic works at the time he read them.

around this roadblock. By looking at their arguments and conclusions, we can perhaps recognize the propriety of Augustine's dogmatic language and evaluate his claims directly.

Unfortunately, when we do that, Augustine looks to be philosophically bankrupt. Take first his claims about the Trinity. Plotinus, for instance, holds that there are three primary cosmological principles: the One (τὸ ἓν) or Being (τὸ εἶναι), Intelligence (νοῦς), and Soul (ψυχή) or Life (ζωή). The first of these, the One, is ineffable and even beyond being strictly speaking; from its overflow there 'emanates' Intelligence, simultaneously dependent upon the One and distinct from it, sometimes characterized as (aristotelian) self-thinking thought, involving a basic duality. Here again by 'overflow' and emanation the third cosmological principle comes into being, namely Life or Soul, which itself vivifies or imparts life to the rest of the universe, which itself is an emanation. These three principles are all divine—Plotinus calls them 'gods'—and occur in a straightforward ontological hierarchy,¹⁰ related to one another and to the rest of the universe by necessity. It all seems a far cry from the one God of Christianity, who personally creates the world freely and with love for each creature. In a nutshell, while neoplatonic metaphysics may be *triadic* it is scarcely *trinitarian*.

Matters are no better for the Incarnation/Redemption. Augustine is right to note its absence from neoplatonic texts. Of course, it isn't in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, either; nor in Sophocles, Euripides, or Cicero; nor anywhere else, for that matter, outside the narrow and largely unphilosophical (at the time) Christian tradition. Augustine does not give us any reason for thinking that the absence of the doctrine of Incarnation/Redemption is a peculiarly philosophical failing, that the neoplatonists *should* have had it for some reason. Instead, Augustine seems to be driven by a non-philosophical Christian agenda, ticking off boxes on a doctrinal scorecard. It is not even clear what sense can be given to Incarnation in a neoplatonic metaphysics: the ineffable One becomes human, an emanation of itself? The One surely self-differentiates through emanation into the multiplicity of the universe, but that has nothing at all to do with Christian doctrine. Once again Augustine seems to have played us false with promises of philosophy. Gilson was right after all.

Or was he?

We may legitimately press questions about the philosophical content of Augustine's encounter with neoplatonism; in *Confessiones* 7.9.13–14 he says

¹⁰ Not entirely straightforward: O'Meara [1996] has some salutary reminders on exactly how to treat these claims about ontological hierarchies.

as much himself. Given his reticence about the neoplatonic arguments and conclusions, it is also legitimate to look to the texts themselves for philosophical enlightenment, to the extent they can be securely identified. But for this method to be successful we cannot appeal to our modern way of reading and interpreting the “works of the Platonists,” given in summary form above. We must instead ask how *Augustine* would have read these texts. And that changes everything.

I shall argue first that we can take Augustine at his word. When he says that neoplatonic metaphysics logically reasons its way to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, he means literally that: the Bible and the works of the Platonists say “exactly the same thing” (*hoc idem omnino*).¹¹ Once his dogmatic language is ‘un-translated’ into its native neoplatonic tongue,¹² we will see that it’s plausible for Augustine to have read neoplatonic texts as propounding a trinitarian (not merely triadic) metaphysics, despite the apparent difficulties in such a reading. Secondly, when Augustine says he didn’t find the Incarnation/Redemption in those works, he is not merely noting its absence but charging neoplatonic ethics with a philosophical failure in not arriving at that doctrine. I shall argue that his diagnosis is correct: neoplatonism was faced with internal philosophical difficulties the Incarnation/Redemption would have resolved, and its not seeing so was a failure.

The ‘Hypostatic’ Interpretation

Modern scholarship has conclusively established that Augustine knew from early on¹³ the key neoplatonic treatise on the structure of reality, *Enneads* 5.1: Περὶ τῶν τριῶν ἀρχικῶν ὑποστάσεων, that is, on the three fundamental... what? ‘Hypostases’? What would Augustine, or a Latin translator of his day, make of this word?

Etymologically the term ‘ὑπόστασις’ is equivalent to the Latin *substantia*,

¹¹ Augustine’s version of his encounter with neoplatonism is told so that we are meant to take it literally. What is more, he held that “the Platonists” could easily have been Christians by changing “just a few words and opinions” (*De vera rel.* 4.7), a view he held for the rest of his life: see for instance *Confessiones* 7.9 or *De civitate Dei* 10.30.

¹² The literalist interpretation is exactly what we should expect, given Augustine’s view of philosophy and of ‘authority’ at the time. He tells us repeatedly in his early works that philosophy and faith are two sides of the same coin, equivalent though cognitively different ways of attaining the truth (one through reasoning and the other through belief): “when the obscurity of some matter disturbs us we use a twofold method, namely reason and authority” (*De ordine* 2.5.16).

¹³ See p. 3 above, especially n 8. Augustine even refers to *Enneads* 5.1 by title in *De civitate Dei* 10.23: sicut Plotinus ubi de tribus principalibus substantiis disputat...

meaning what underlies or is the foundation of something, or perhaps what something really is at bottom. In this latter sense it is often explicitly equated to οὐσία (itself sometimes rendered *essentia*), as Augustine himself later noted:¹⁴

I say 'essence' where the Greeks say οὐσία, which we more typically call 'substance'; they indeed also say ὑπόστασις, but I don't know what difference they want to mark between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις.

But this doesn't get us very far, since the meaning of 'substance' itself is considerably elastic. Yet in a way that's the point. For 'ὑπόστασις' kept a root meaning of something basic, fundamental, primary; but it could be pressed into (flexible) service as a term of art. And so it was, though only in post-aristotelian philosophy. Nevertheless, its extensions had to be at least roughly consonant with its root meaning, or obvious developments from it.

The definitive history of the term 'ὑπόστασις' has yet to be written.¹⁵ Liddell & Scott give it a mere three columns, for they confine themselves to classical times; Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon* on the other hand devotes fourteen densely-packed columns to its various senses—although by the time of Augustine only three senses seem to be primary:

- (a) something fundamental or primary
- (b) a concrete reality or individual (especially in the Cappadocian Fathers)
- (c) the being or actual existence of thing.

Not infrequently (a)–(c) were combined, so that 'ὑπόστασις' meant an Aristotelian primary substance, such as Socrates: the existing concrete individual. Thus we find Hippolytus, in discussing Aristotle's claim that things are generic or specific or individual, saying that the individual (ἄτομον) is an οὐσία ὑποστατική, and that this is what Aristotle "primarily and above all calls οὐσία."

The combined sense (a)–(c) of 'real individual' seems to be found as well in Origen—by some accounts, with Plotinus a fellow-pupil of Ammonius Saccas—when he describes the Father and the Son in *Contra Celsum* 8.12 as distinct individual realities, that is, as "two things in hypostasis" (δύο τῆ

¹⁴ *De Trinitate* 5.8.9–10: "Essentiam dico quae οὐσία graece dicitur, quam usitatus substantiam uocamus; dicunt quidem et illi ὑπόστασις sed nescio quid uolunt interesse inter οὐσίαν et ὑπόστασις." There is a similar expression of bafflement in Jerome, *Ep.* 15.4: "tota saecularium litterarum schola nihil aliud ὑπόστασις nisi οὐσία nouit."

¹⁵ Three fundamental works that begin this project are: Dörrie [1955], Wolfson [1956], and the entry in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*. None is completely satisfactory from a philosophical point of view; the overview provided in Boys-Stones [2001] suggests how philosophy, philology, and theology could be combined into a single account that does justice to the complexity of the issues.

ὑποστάσει πράγματα). From Origen the term passes into a complex history that includes the Cappadocians (who are, as noted, clear that ‘ὑπόστασις’ designates an individual reality all the time); Arrius and his followers; and much else as well. But put that later development aside for now. Even without its complications, we can see that Augustine would have understood Plotinus in *Enneads* 5.1 to be talking about (admittedly divine) individual realities.

There is another piece to the puzzle, hinted at above. An ὑπόστασις is a concrete individual, it is true, but a rather special one: it is a person (*persona*), in the sense that term had in trinitarian discussions. We might have expected the Greek term for ‘person’ to be ‘πρόσωπον,’ but this usage appears to have been imported back into the Greek from its common Latin use; Augustine himself later explains that the Greeks don’t use ‘πρόσωπον’ but rather ‘ὑπόστασις’ in the Trinitarian formula (one οὐσία and three ὑποστάσεως), due, he conjectures, to the influence of ordinary usage (*De Trinitate* 7.6.11):¹⁶

Perhaps they are more appropriately called ‘three persons’ rather than ‘three substances’. But lest I seem to favour [the Latins], let’s make this further enquiry. Although [the Greeks] might also, if they pleased, as they call three substances three hypostases, so call three persons ‘τρία πρόσωπα,’ they however preferred the word which, perhaps, was more in accordance with the usage of their language.

The confluence of the terms, at least cross-linguistically, was fostered by the fact that ‘*persona*’ had lost (some of) its original connotations of ‘façade’ or ‘mask’ and was now used to denote an individual: it had become the standard term in law to speak of someone accorded status in the law courts, a juristic person. This is the source of our English term ‘person’ applied to Socrates the concrete individual, with a residual sense of legal standing and entitlements—think of contemporary arguments about whether, say, the fetus is a person, with its close connection to legal status.

There is a complex ecclesiastical history about ‘ὑπόστασις’ and ‘*persona*’ in various trinitarian formulae, a history in which the Council of Nicaea (325) plays a leading role. But for our purposes we can ignore that history, since whatever the status of Augustine’s Christian faith at the time of his encounter with neoplatonism—by no means certain—he is not likely to have known the details of subtle theological controversies about the proper mode

¹⁶ Fortassis igitur commodius dicuntur tres personae quam tres substantiae. Sed ne nobis uideatur suffragari hoc quoque requiramus, quamquam et illi si uellent, sicut dicunt tres substantias ‘τρεις ὑποστάσεις’ possent dicere tres personas ‘τρία πρόσωπα’. Illud autem maluerunt quod forte secundum linguae suae consuetudinem aptius diceretur.

of speaking about the Trinity.

The upshot, then, is that Augustine or a contemporary Latin translator would have most naturally read *Enneads* 5.1 as a treatise not about three distinct beings or essences,¹⁷ as we do, but instead about the nature of the divine as manifested in three persons, understanding ‘ὕποστασις’ to mean ‘person’ (or something very close to it). This reading is in keeping with the mainstream philosophical usage of both ‘ὕποστασις’ and *substantia* = *persona* in Augustine’s day; it is not specifically Christian. Indeed, the lines of explanation run the other way: the terms are used as they are in Christian doctrine because of their contemporary philosophical usage, not conversely. The three ‘primaries’ of neoplatonism are therefore persons of the divine itself.¹⁸

If we grant Augustine this ‘hypostatic’ interpretation of neoplatonism, completely natural at the time, what earlier appeared to be the rank implausibility of his account simply vanishes. Consider: what seemed to be differences among distinct beings who occupy or mark out an ontological hierarchy, according to Plotinus, is on this interpretation a matter of relative dependency among the persons of the neoplatonic Godhead. Furthermore, the emanation of Mind/Intelligence (νοῦς) from the One is simply the eternal generation of the Word (λόγος), and likewise for the production of Life (in the Holy Spirit). These are real relations of dependence, but they hold among the persons of the unitary Divine Nature. Likewise, the necessity that seemed troublesome in the Plotinian cosmology poses no difficulties on the hypostatic interpretation. Necessity doesn’t have to do with the successive ‘creation’ of beings at different levels, but rather describes the inner nature of divinity. That is, Augustine reads Plotinus as proving that the divine is necessarily and essentially triune—indeed, trinitarian.¹⁹

Yet even if we grant to Augustine this hypostatic interpretation of neoplatonism, why did he think that the Plotinian Triad was the Christian Trinity, as suggested above? In particular, why did he think that the three hypostases are correctly identifiable as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, before he became a devout Christian?

¹⁷ That is: three different concrete beings, three different gods. Augustine himself always rendered ‘*essentia*’ as οὐσία, what we would think of as an Aristotelian primary substance.

¹⁸ Plotinus encourages this interpretation by saying things that emphasize divine unity-in-multiplicity, e. g. *Enneads* 5.1.5: Πολλὸς οὖν οὐτός ὁ θεὸς (“This God [singular] is plural”).

¹⁹ Augustine, unlike other philosophers, held that God was necessarily and provably triune.

Start with the easy case, the Second Hypostasis. It isn't a big jump to move from νοῦς (mind or intelligence) to reading it as the λόγος (*verbum*), especially in light of *John* 1:1, which explicitly identifies the λόγος as a principle: Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος = *In principio erat verbum*.²⁰ In part that's due to the slippery meaning of λόγος, granted. But not entirely. The connection between minds and thoughts or reasons is tight, and so the move from one to the other is altogether plausible.

The First Hypostasis in Plotinus is the One (τὸ ἕν). He also calls it Being (το ὄν or τὸ εἶναι). But Plotinus himself also often calls the First Hypostasis the 'Father' (ὁ πατήρ). The reason he has for doing so is obvious; the First Hypostasis is the 'father of all' in that all else comes from it. To put the point suggestively, the First Hypostasis is the begetter of all else. Again, 'father' was a standard honorific title given to the chief among (pagan) deities; Zeus was Zeus the Father, after all, though most Olympian gods were his brothers and sisters rather than his children. But whatever reasons Plotinus may have had for this usage, it clearly set the alarm bells ringing for Augustine. For where there is a Father—most naturally understood as a being with personality, or, as we might say, a being who is also a full-fledged person—there is also a Son, namely what the Father (immediately) generates or begets. We already know that this is Plotinus's Second Hypostasis, identified above as the Word. Hence the Son is the Word.

Augustine doesn't need that last bit of reasoning. He could easily read in Plotinus not only the constant references to the First Hypostasis as the Father, but also a common turn of phrase Plotinus used in *Enneads* 5.1 and elsewhere in talking about the Second Hypostasis: "the Father's Intellect/Mind" (πατρικός νοῦς), a phrase Augustine later cites explicitly (*De civitate Dei* 10.28). If we accept the identification of νοῦς with λόγος, unavoidable for Augustine, then the Second Hypostasis is clearly what is generated by the Father, *i. e.* the Son.

The Third Hypostasis in Plotinus, Soul (ψυχή) or Life (ζωή), is (probably) meant to be the World-Soul of Plato's *Timaeus*. But Augustine reads it more metaphorically as the 'life everlasting' that is the gift and the distinctive feature of the Holy Spirit, in keeping with *John* 1:4, "What was made in Him [the Son] was Life [the Holy Spirit]."²¹ Once again the 'hy-

²⁰ See also the first chapter of Augustine's *Tractatus in Iohannis evangelium*. Simplicianus, a Milanese platonist, is said by Augustine to have wanted to inscribe *John* 1:1–4 in letter of gold on Christian churches: *Confessiones* 8.2 and *De civitate Dei* 10.29.

²¹ There is a question of orthodoxy here. On the 'hypostatic' interpretation this passage might be read as claiming that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son (alone); Augustine arguably held this 'origenist' view in those days, long before the addition of the

postatic' reading of Plotinus seems natural: the triune divinity has as one of its (personal) aspects life itself, which is readily assimilated to the Holy Spirit, even to the point of being a necessary but dependent feature of the Godhead. Augustine could straightforwardly read Plotinus as describing the Holy Spirit, alongside the Father and the Son, with hardly a stretch. Furthermore, *Enneads* 5.1 describes how individual souls seek to join the divine Soul, that is, how all ensouled beings strive to return to the Eternal Life (the Third Hypostasis) that is their proper end.

It is therefore plausible for Augustine to understand neoplatonic metaphysics to be trinitarian at bottom. The 'hypostatic' interpretation he would have brought to the texts, in light of what those texts actually say, make Augustine's reading intellectually, and in particular philosophically, respectable. We can therefore take him literally, as holding that the neoplatonic texts proved the essentially trinitarian structure of reality "by many and varied arguments," as he says.

Intermediaries and Mediators

Augustine also claims in *Confessiones* 7.9.13–14 that it is a philosophical shortcoming of neoplatonism not to have the doctrine of the Incarnation/Redemption. He seems to take the two doctrines, Incarnation and Redemption, as a pair: the Incarnation is made necessary by sin, and is intended to bring us Redemption from sin. Apparently there would be no need for Incarnation in the possible world in which there is no sin (and hence no Redemption)—though Augustine does not address the case directly. But how is the lack of these doctrines a philosophical problem?

One of the central doctrines of neoplatonic ethics, grounded squarely on its metaphysics, is that blessedness or true happiness is provided by mystical union with the One, a union described metaphorically as the soul's flight home to its Fatherland (*ἡ πατρίνη*), a description adopted so wholeheartedly he later regretted it (*Retractationes* 1.1.2). This mystical union takes place by the soul's (upward) ascent.²² Yet it is not so clear that we can speak of a single theory here. John Rist has even written of a 'crisis' in the

²² 'Filioque' caused the split between the Eastern and Western churches. He certainly thought it was the correct way to read Plotinus—see *De civitate Dei* 10.23, where Augustine explicitly declares that for Plotinus the Third Hypostasis is for Plotinus "after" the Son, though for Porphyry "intermediate" between them. But the passage need not be read that way; we might take the Life that is made in the Son to be made by the Father, such that the Father and the Son jointly produce (spirate) the Holy Spirit. The point is delicate.

²² See Dillon [1996] for an overview of neoplatonic ethics.

neoplatonic theory of ascent.²³ Very roughly, that's what I think Augustine is referring to in *Confessiones* 7.9.13–14 when he speaks of the absence of the Incarnation/Redemption. To see how this works, we have to branch out a bit from Plotinus alone and talk about the contemporary state of neoplatonism. For on this score, Plotinus is rather anomalous among the other 'platonic philosophers' of the time.

Plotinus, especially in *Enneads* 1.6 (another treatise Augustine is known to have read early on), seems to have held that the individual human soul is (a) pure, and thereby ready to merge with the One; and (b) capable, though only with difficulty, of attaining such mystical union. But this position was a minority view among neoplatonists, and it's not hard to see why. If the soul is 'connatural' with the Divine—if in itself the human soul is pure—then why did it ever suffer its *descent* from the One in the first place?²⁴ What is more, once human souls are separated from the divine (through descent), then to the extent that the neoplatonic Godhead is transcendently (and ultimately) other, it will be implausible to think of human souls as themselves either divine or capable of radical self-transcendence. Well, rather than replicating perfect divinity in imperfect matter, it seemed to other neoplatonists that it was better to deny that human souls are intrinsically pure, and hence that human souls are not capable of achieving mystical union without some kind of further purification. That is, they denied (a) and (b).

Thus Iamblichus, Porphyry, and Apuleius (among others) proposed an alternative account in which the human soul was somehow tainted at its origin, and so, as matters stand, not able of its own efforts to achieve union with the Godhead. Instead, the soul requires purification to prepare it for such union, and even then it has to be slowly passed up through the ranks, as it were. This is accomplished with the assistance of dæmons and through ritual practises of theurgy, apparently rites of propitiation, though our sources are annoyingly vague on the details. Augustine later read up on the matter and devoted *De civitate Dei* 9–10 to an account of it. But it's likely Augustine would have known in 386 about his fellow African, Apuleius, who was considerate enough to write his *De deo socratis* (an analysis of dæmonology) in Latin. It's even possible that at the time of his encounter with neoplatonism Augustine knew about Porphyry's views, since

²³ See Rist [1996], and the references there.

²⁴ *Enneads* 5.1 is addressed to the problem of why human souls "forget" their divine origins, a pressing problem for Plotinus if the soul is naturally pure. Note that Plotinus even calls us 'gods'!

his differences with Plotinus on this score were well-known.²⁵ But whatever the details, Augustine would certainly have known of the debate over how to explain the possibility of the soul's ascent, required by neoplatonic ethics.

There were two deep philosophical shortcomings in the common theurgical account of the soul's ascent. First, it's unclear how beings, even when situated at a higher level of reality, *could* make lower-level beings better, as the account demands. Second, even if they can do so, it's unclear why higher-level beings *should* make lower-level beings better, since the practises of theurgy aren't in any obvious way related to the nature of divinity.

So far, then, Augustine is merely following the common consensus in pointing out that neoplatonism needs to solve these problems about ascent. But he says something more, namely that it was a failing or shortcoming of neoplatonism not to see in this debate the need for a solution along the lines of the Incarnation/Redemption. Turn the question around. How could the doctrine of the Incarnation/Redemption provide a philosophical solution to these abstruse neoplatonic problems?

The key, Augustine thought, was to understand the metaphysics of the Incarnation properly, for only then could one see that what neoplatonism needed was not to identify some sort of intermediary between the human and the divine, as dæmonology would have it, but instead to find a mediator: ὁ μεσίτης = *mediator*.²⁶ Not something halfway between human and divine, such as a dæmon, for what could be "halfway between" finite humanity and transcendent divinity? But rather something that is simultaneously human and divine, and, even more than that, something that is completely human and also completely divine. That is what Augustine came to recognize in the Incarnation, as he tells us in *Confessiones* 7.18.24:²⁷

I was searching for a way to gain enough strength to delight in You,
but I did not find it until I embraced "the one mediator between
God and men, the man Christ Jesus" [1 *Tim.* 2:5].

The Christian doctrine of Incarnation seems clearly addressed to the prob-

²⁵ Porphyry was reportedly dissatisfied with Plotinus's theory, but also unhappy with theurgy on the grounds that there ought to be some way for everyone to achieve mystical union (see *De civitate Dei* 10.32), a "universal path."

²⁶ The Latin term '*mediator*' is a late coinage, and indeed it is more amply attested in Augustine than anywhere else: see O'Donnell [1992] II.461. For an exhaustive treatment of Christ as mediator in Augustine's thought, see Remy [1979]. The Greek term shows up with recognizably this sense in *Galatians* 3:19; see also Liddell & Scott 1106A s. v. ὁ μεσίτης, II.2.

²⁷ Et quaerebam uiam comparandi roboris quod esset idoneum ad fruendum te, nec inueniebam donec amplecterer mediatorem Dei et hominum, hominem Christum Iesum.

lems faced by the neoplatonic theory of ascent. In place of the flawed attempt at solution of dæmonic intermediaries, the Incarnation provides a mediator that can interact with the human and the divine since it is at once completely human and completely divine. Now exactly how Christ as mediator can make the (tainted) human soul capable of ascent to and 'union' with the divine—that is, prepare it for the Afterlife and the Beatific Vision—is the other half of the pair, namely the doctrine of Redemption. I'm not going to try to work through the answer here, since whether it is in fact an adequate solution, it's clear that Augustine thought it was, and that the neoplatonists should have seen it.²⁸

On this reconstruction, it's clear why Augustine would take the absence of the Incarnation/Redemption to be a philosophical flaw in neoplatonism. The 'crisis' in the theory of ascent cried out for resolution, and to Augustine's eyes the only way to avoid the problems was precisely the way posed by a mediator who could purify the soul: in short, for an Incarnation and Redemption. These Christian doctrines are put forward as the best philosophical solutions to fundamental problems in neoplatonic metaphysics and ethics. But the neoplatonists didn't see it, and therefore don't have it in their works; Augustine thus didn't read it there, and so did not believe it. He tells us that he fell into the view of Photinus, thinking Christ to be an admirable man, but no more (*Confessiones* 7.19.25). Augustine-the-Narrator, who recognizes not only the problem—as presumably Augustine-the-character did after reading the works of the Platonists—but also its solution, criticizes neoplatonism harshly for not having reaching the solution too. But note that the criticism, though harsh, is philosophical in nature. Augustine's complaint about neoplatonism's lack of the Incarnation/Redemption was thus more than a mere test for dogmatic orthodoxy: it rests on a solid philosophical basis.

Conclusion

Augustine, therefore, can be taken literally when he describes his encounter with neoplatonism. He found in it a ready-made trinitarian metaphysics established on sound philosophical grounds, which simply dazzled him. He also found that it was attached to ethical doctrines that were

²⁸ Why then didn't they see it? Augustine offers a psychological explanation: the pride (*superbia* = *τόλμα*) of the neoplatonist philosophers prevented them from recognizing the truth, or, having seen it, from accepting it. They could not accept humility, either in God or the Second Hypostasis to become flesh and voluntarily lower itself to the human condition, or in themselves. The end of *Confessiones* 7 is devoted to this psychological explanation, as is *De civitate Dei* 10 (at far greater length and directed explicitly at Porphyry).

philosophically flawed, but which could be (and should have been) corrected. With these amendments he accepted the resulting system, which became the fundamental metaphysical scheme of Christianity in the Middle Ages and beyond. Whatever other flavors of philosophy came into fashion, Augustine's legacy was unavoidable. But he did more than simply find a haven for neoplatonist metaphysics in Christianity; he also gave Christianity intellectual respectability by showing that it really was platonism perfected. And that makes philosophy central to Augustine's thinking, as he himself declares in *Contra Academicos* 3.20.43:²⁹

As for what is to be sought out by the most subtle reasoning—for my character is such that I'm impatient in my desire to apprehend what the truth is, not only through belief but also through the understanding—I'm still confident that I'm going to find it with the Platonists, and that it won't be opposed to our Holy Writ.

²⁹ Quod autem subtilissima ratione persequendum est—ita enim iam sum affectus, ut quid sit uerum non credendo solum sed etiam intellegendo apprehendere impatienter desiderem—apud Platonicos me interim, quod sacris nostris non repugnet, reperturum esse confido.

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