The Influence of Plotinus on the Writings of St. Augustine

Josiah Meyer

History of Ancient & Medieval Philosophy, PH 502

March 8, 2017
Introduction

If Plato and Aristotle are the most important thinkers of the ancient world, St. Augustine could be a close runner up in brilliance and importance. Far less known, however, is the vital role of Plotinus. Serving as a link between Augustine and Plato, Plotinus was to have a lasting influence on Augustine, and through him on the Christian Church, especially in the West.

This paper will bring illumination to the often overlooked intellectual contribution of Plotinus to the thoughts of Augustine. To that end, it will provide an overview of Plotinus’ thought, paying special attention to his use and modification of Plato and Aristotle. It will then turn its attention to Augustine’s appropriation of Plotinus, and the lasting mark he made on the shape of Augustinian theology.

Section One: Plotinus

Bibliography

Plotinus was a native of Lycopolis (or Lycon) in Egypt.\(^1\) At the age of 28 he became interested in philosophy and moved to Alexandria to study. After expressing dissatisfaction in several teachers, he finally found Ammonius Saccas (175 AD - 240 AD), declaring, τὸν ἐξίτουν, “This is the man I was looking for!” and became his pupil for eleven years.\(^2\) This Ammonius Saccas is identified (probably wrongly) by Eusebius as a lapsed Christian. Eusebius

\(^1\) Frederick Copleston notes that Eunapis identifies his birthplace as Lycon, while Suidas identifies it as Lycopolis, leaving the exact location a mystery. Frederick Copleston, S.J., A History of Philosophy, vol. 1, Greece and Rome, From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus, (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 463.

also records that Origen studied alongside of Plotinus: though this may not have been the Christian Origen.³

In 243 AD Plotinus accompanied the emperor Gordian on an ill-fated expedition to Persia in order to become acquainted with Persian and Indian philosophy.⁴ Gordian was assassinated, and Plotinus fled to Antioch, moving later moved to Rome.⁵ There he established a school in 244 AD, at the age of forty, where he taught for the rest of his life. Ten years later, he began to write.⁶ Plotinus enjoyed the favour of the emperor Gallienus and his wife - to the point of nearly being authorized to found a new city, as a “concrete realization of Plato’s Republic.”⁷ Not only a teacher, Plotinus was a philanthropist, supporting orphan children in his home. He served as a spiritual guide to the many who came to him for advice. Mild-mannered and well-spoken, Plotinus had, “many friends and no enemies.”⁸ Plotinus is recorded as having no less than four mystical experiences with God near the end of his life.⁹ Plotinus died in 270 AD at the age of 66.

Plotinus is remembered mostly through the efforts of his devoted disciple Porphyry, who wrote a Biography of Plotinus’ life, and preserved texts of Plotinus’ writings.¹⁰ Porphyry attempted to systematize Plotinus’ writings by recording them in a work consisting in fifty-four

³ Cross, 1310.
⁵ Vos, 571.
⁶ Cross, 1310.
⁷ Copleston, 463.
⁸ Ibid., 467.
⁹ Ibid., 464.
¹⁰ Vos, 571.
treatises, arranged in six groups of nine. The work - which became Plotinus’ major contribution to philosophy - became known as ‘Enneads’, from the Greek ‘εννεάς’ literally, ‘nines’.

Along with his teacher, Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus is usually considered the founder of “Neo-Platonism” - an intellectual movement which was to have profound impact upon both Christian and non-Christian thought.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Plotinus and Neoplatonism}

Plotinus saw himself as a faithful recipient and progenitor of the teachings of Plato. However, Plotinus also showed significant proficiency in the works of Aristotle, and applied his genius to reconciling the two systems, as well as responded to questions of philosophy and religion which had developed in the half-millennium between the Aristotle and himself. After Plotinus, all of Platonism - and even a good deal of Aristotelianism - was flavoured by Plotinus’ thoughts. It is for this reason that modern historians have attached the title ‘neoplatonism’ to Plotinus’ system.

Like Plato before him, “Plotinus attempts to give a complete account of reality and a guide to spiritual life.”\textsuperscript{12} He rejected both Gnostic dualism and the Christian vision of redemption to present his own system.\textsuperscript{13} Plotinus’ contribution has been seen as a re-introduction of a religious component into Platonic philosophy. Due to difficulties in interpretation, there is


\textsuperscript{12} Vos, 571.

\textsuperscript{13} Coppleston notes that Plotinus attacks Gnosticism, but is silent regarding Christianity. His disciple Porphyry, however, authored fifteen books against Christianity. Copleston, 464, 474.
some debate as to whether Plotinus’ system was pantheistic or theistic. It is probably best to interpret it as an original religious system in its own right, which transcends both categories, but could be interpreted within either, and has, in fact, proven to be influential in both theistic and pantheistic religions.\footnote{Norman Geisler interprets Plotinus as teaching “emanational pantheism,” whereas A. W. Argyle seems to see him teaching something compatible with theism. Copleston, however, prefers a ‘middle way’, highlighting the fact that while all is connected for Plotinus, there is a deep ontological divide between the One and all else. Norman L. Geisler, “Plotinus,” \textit{Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics}, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 596; W. Argyle, “Augustine and Plotinus,” \textit{The Baptist Quarterly}, 13 no. 5 (January 1950): 211, accessed February 28, 2017, \url{https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/13-5_209.pdf}; Copleston 467; Cf. also Cross, 1310.}

Realities

\textit{The One}

For Plotinus, the highest reality is simply ‘the One’, τὸ ἕν.\footnote{Cross, 1310.} He sometimes also calls it “the Good,” “the Father,” or “The Father-Land,” but rarely God.\footnote{Vos, 571.} “The One is absolutely simple, that is, it has no parts.”\footnote{Geisler, 596.} It exists necessarily, eternally and changelessly.\footnote{Ibid.} The one is incapable of thought, action, or will.\footnote{Ibid.} Similar to Parmenides’ monad, Plotinus’ One is completely perfect, and is thus both without need of movement, and incapable of it.

One might be tempted to associate the One with Plato’s highest form, ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἱδέα (the Form of the Good). This would be a mistake, however. Plotinus is careful not to identify the

\footnote{Cross, 1310.}
\footnote{Vos, 571.}
\footnote{Geisler, 596.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Copleston, 465.}
One as a form, or to say that it has being. As this would include the One in a lower set: but
“Unity must precede Reality and be its author.”20

Another major distinction between Plato’s ‘Form of the Good’ and Plotinus’ One is that
the One cannot be described in any way. “And this name, the One, contains really no more than
the negation of plurality…. If we are led to think positively of the One, name and thing, there
would be more truth in silence”21 (3.8.101). This leads to the question of how such an entity
could create anything meaningful, how it could be meaningfully described with human language,
and how it could be approached.

With evident reference to Aristotle’s distinction between active and passive potency,
Plotinus uses the image of “emanation” to explain how an impassible entity could create. In this
way, all reality flows or emanates out of the One, but it is not diminished, altered or in any way
changed by these emanations.22 Indeed, it is not even aware of the emanations being completely
impassable and unchangeable.

---

Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 596.

21 Ibid.

22 Copleston, 466.
The Plotinian Triad: Mind

We can know something about the One through its offspring, being (6.9.5). The first level of being is Divine Mind, or Intelligence, “The One-and-Many,” or Greek νοῦς. Norman Geisler explains,

Of the emanations from the One, Nous is the first (5.1.4, 8) When the One emanates outward, and this emanant looks backward upon its source, there arises the simple duality of Knower and Known (6.7.37). This simple duality is Nous. Nous in turn gives rise to further emanations by bending inward upon itself.

The Mind has being, and gives rise to all other being. It is the least divided thing that has being, and thus is the highest form of being. Copleston associates the Nous as the Demiurge of Plato: the Platonic forms are located within this Divine Mind.

The Plotinian Triad: Soul

By bending in upon itself, the Nous gives birth to ψυχή or Soul (6.6.22). The Soul is even further from the One, and thus more divided and less “real.” There are two levels within Soul: (1) a higher Soul, which is in contact with Nous, and (2) a lower Soul, which is in contact with Matter, and animates it.

The Soul is the first emanation of Soul from Mind. It is united to Mind, and also animates all individual souls and Matter. It is very similar to the World Soul of Plato, in the Timaeus, in that Soul is the ‘formal cause’ of material things in both cases.

---

25 Geisler, 596.
26 Copleston, 467.
27 “The World Soul emanates forth when Mind reflects upon itself.” Plotinus, Enneads, 6.2.22, quoted in Geisler, 596.
28 Copleston, 469.
Human souls are a part of Soul, and similarly have a higher and a lower portion in them. The lower is in contact with Matter, and dragged down by it: the higher is united with Soul, and in communion with the Nous, and is lifted to unity and ascension by both.29

The Plotinian Triad: Matter

Unlike in Plato, Matter is not self-sufficient for Plotinus. Rather, it is produced eternally and necessarily by The One, through the emanations of the Mind and Soul. Matter is, then, the third level of reality. As the most multiple and divided of the levels, matter is the least real. It is like a shadow, or the copy of a copy of a thing. With reference to the analogy of an image being reproduced, “The further removed something is from the Source of being, the One, the less unity and being it has (6.9.1).”30 It is, in fact, “one step away from complete nonexistence,”31 and Plotinus sometimes describes matter as “non-being.” “as the privation of light,” explains Copleston, “he also adopted the Aristotelian conception of matter as the substrate of form, as an integral component of material objects.”32

Despite this apparently negative view towards matter, Plotinus had a high view of the natural world. Over against the radical dualism of Gnosticism, Plotinus elevated Creation as the beautiful workmanship of Nous and Soul.33 It is by contemplating this natural world that we can begin our ascent towards the One, as described below. However, the world is only good because of the influence of Nous and Soul: Matter, in the absence of the rationality of Nous and the

29 Copleston, 468.
30 Geisler, 596.
31 Ibid.
32 Copleston, 469.
33 Ibid., 470.
organizing properties of Soul is “evil itself,” and “so stands over against the Good as its radical antithesis.”

Evil

Matter in the visible world is imbued with Soul, and everything is thus in a sense alive (panpsychism). There is a sort of tension or battle at work everywhere in Creation, as Soul seeks to order Matter in accordance with Nous, and Matter resists the Soul. It is in this way that Plotinus explains both the perfections and the imperfections of the visible world.

It is imperative to note at this juncture that for Plotinus, evil has no positive existence, but is rather the privation of good. If it is emptied of all residue of Nous and Soul, Matter in itself, “has no residue of good in it” (1.8.7). Matter is the source of chaos, vice, dark passions, and individuality. All of these hinder the ascent of the Soul back to the One.

Human Existence

Entrapment

Humans are composed of a pre-existent soul, which has become trapped in the lower realm of matter. Each human soul has three parts: the higher soul, which is an undivided portion of Soul, and a lower soul, which is distinct from all other souls, and is attached to Matter. This divided existence implicates humans in the tension between Soul and Matter, and is the cause of all human suffering.

---

34 Copleston, 469.
35 Vos, 571.
36 Geisler, 596.
The lower portion of the soul contains all of the vices and passions which spring from Matter, contaminate the soul, and produce the seeds of personality and individuality. The higher portion of the soul is still connected to Soul, and is thus able to commune with Mind, and, eventually, to ascend (with great difficulty) to the One.

*Ascension*

The whole thrust of Plotinus’ system is to provide a path of salvation for humanity. Human souls aught to seek liberation from their contamination with matter. This liberation is possible through ethics, contemplation, and mysticism.

The first stage of ascension is achieved by sense perception, as one apprehends the “beauties of the realm of sense, images and shadow-pictures, fugitives that have entered into Matter,” and then sees that, “there are earlier and loftier beauties than these.”\(^{37}\) The quest for wisdom will lead the sage to purify himself from fleshly pursuits, and to live an ethical life. The order which is imposed on Matter by Mind (through Soul) is visible to humanity. Humans aught to follow this order to its source, and thus begin to contemplate Mind. Here, the sage studies philosophy, science and mathematics. In all of these activities, the Soul of the sage is being progressively purified and moved ever closer to the One.

This contemplation is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but takes on a mystical tone: “Human mind must identify with Mind. Knower and known must become one. This is done through meditation.”\(^{38}\) From there, the senses and even rationality is left behind. To achieve union with the ineffable One, a soul cannot use their intelligence, because the One is beyond all


\(^{38}\) Geisler, 597.
description or rationality. Rather, one must make a mystical leap, and arrive at union with the
One through intuitional knowledge and ecstatic experience. Logically, it would seem that this
union with the One would be the end of personhood for the individual, as in Buddhism and other
Eastern religions. Perhaps inconsistently, however, Plotinus seems reticent to relinquish
individuality: “Can we suppose that Socrates, who existed as Socrates on this earth, will cease to
be Socrates, just because he has reached the best of all abodes?”39 Resorting to paradox, Plotinus
affirms that personhood will be maintained, even in the radical unity of oneness with the One,
stating that they will “all be one, but will be one together.”40

The process of ascension is a natural one: for as the One emanates outwards, reality
expands into multiplicity, then contracts back into unity - rather like an elastic band which can be
stretched, but returns with equal force to its original shape.41 Although natural, this path is very
difficult. The ascension is made entirely by human effort, in the ascetic life of the philosopher.
Those who are not able to live this life cannot be saved and even for the philosopher there is a
danger of failure: “As for violent personal sufferings, he will carry them off as well as he can; if
they overpass his endurance they will carry him off.”42 Anyone who is pulled down and
overcome by the force of matter will fail to ascend, but will necessarily be reincarnated, to begin
the process again.

39 Copleston is here paraphrasing Plotinus, from Enneads, 4, 3, 5. Copleston, 468-469.
40 Copleston, 468-469.
41 This metaphor by Geisler, 596–597.
classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.mb.txt.
Evaluation and Critique

Logical Critiques

In his article on Plotinus, Norman Geisler identifies two positive aspects of Plotinus’ system, and five negative ones. Positively, Plotinus’ system highlights the transcendence and immateriality of God, and human immortality. Negatively, it seems to suffer from five logical flaws.

First is the problem identified by Parmenides, namely that being cannot come from non-being. If the One is outside of being, it cannot bring anything into being, since “out of nothing comes nothing.” Recourse to Aristotle’s passive and active potency does not seem to help here, since a non-being cannot have the ability to bring being into existence. A second problem is that in this schema, “the effect turns out to be greater than the cause.” Mind arises from non-mind, being from non-being, rationality from irrationality, etc. This violates the principle that an effect will never be greater than its cause.

A third problem arises from the principle of analogy, which states that a cause will always share some elements of similarity with its effects. Certainly, a cause cannot be identical to its effects: but for it to have a causal relation, it must share some of its attributes with the effect. Thus, for Plato, ultimate Being and the Forms caused all lesser beings and reality. The effects are not identical, but analogous to their causes. However, in Plotinus, the cause shares absolutely no attributes with the effects. It is completely ‘other’. This appears to violate the principle of analogy.

---

43 Copleston, 48.

44 Geisler, 597.
A fourth critique is anticipated by Plotinus himself. If nothing can be known about the One, why is Plotinus taking great pains to write about it, and educate others? His response is that nothing can be known positively about the One: we can approach knowledge only in speaking about what the One is not. “And this name, the One, contains really no more than the negation of plurality…. If we are led to think positively of the One, name and thing, there would be more truth in silence” (3.8.101).45 His writings are, he says, a “call to vision,” which “urge towards the One.”46 Although nothing can be known directly about the One, something can be known about its offspring, Being. Once this has been understood rationally, one can take an irrational and intuitional leap into the One through a mystical experience. However, it seems that only absolute mutism and mysticism is the appropriate approach to a One such as Plotinus describes.

Christian Critiques

As will be seen, neoplatonism became an important fountainhead of ideas for Christianity. However, his thoughts would need to be significantly modified by Augustine and other Christian and Muslim scholars before a significant appropriation would be possible.

A problem which is probably more apparent to post-Reformation readers is that Plotinus’ salvation is, in the categories of Luther, ‘a works-based salvation.’ Perhaps even more pressingly, Plotinus’ influence on Origen lead him to see the Trinity as analogous to Plotinus’ Triad. Origen was the first to apply Plotinus’ word hypostasis to the Godhead, assigning to the Father the place of the One, and to Jesus (the Logos, of John’s Gospel) the place of Nous.47 This lead, however, to

45 Geisler, 596.

46 Ibid.

an ontological distinction between God and Jesus which lead in turn to the Arian controversies, and earned Origen the epithet, “the father of all Orthodoxy, and the Father of all Heresy” - a title which might have been more justly awarded to his neoplatonic tutors.

Neoplatonism was to yield rich rewards for Christian theology. But it would need a more skilled theologian even than Origen to finally harmonize all of the difficulties between the two systems.

**Augustine**

**Bibliography**

**Overview**

St. Augustine (354 AD - 430 AD) was an African-born Roman, with a Christian mother and a pagan father. He was raised as a catechumen, but he lost his faith when he went to study rhetoric in Carthage in 370 AD, taking a mistress and fathering a son. He later read Cicero’s *Hortensius*, a now-lost call to philosophy, which set the 18-year-old Augustine on a quest for truth: a quest which the later Augustine would describe as a God-ward journey. This journey lead him to Manichaeism, and for nearly a decade he followed the dualistic system. In 384 AD, after teaching rhetoric in Tagaste, Carthage and Rome, he accepted a position as professor of rhetoric at Milan. Here, a number of factors conspired to bring Augustine back into the Christian fold.

Among these factors was contact with the bishop St. Ambrose, whose life and teaching impressed him. A meeting with the foremost living Manichean scholar, Faustus, had left Augustine disillusionment with the movement. Augustine was now flirting with the beliefs of the

---

Skeptics, who had recently taken up residence within Plato’s Academy. Significantly, Augustine found a group of Christian and agnostic neoplatonist who met to read the works of Plotinus.\(^{49}\) This discussions helped him to resolve two decisive issues essential for his conversion to Christianity: the immateriality of God, and the problem of evil.

Doing a great disservice to the sophistication of Christian thinking, Manichaeism portrayed Christians as believing in a purely materialistic God. As evidence, they read all of the anthropomorphic language in the Old Testament (OT) as literally referring to the hands, feet, eyes, wings, etc. of God, and mocked Christianity accordingly. Ambrose was able to explain to Augustine that many passages of Scriptures can justifiably be interpreted metaphorically, whereas Plotinus helped Augustine conceive of the immateriality of God.\(^{50}\) Writes A. W. Argyle, “Plotinus made clear, as never before, the non-spacial non-material, non-quantitative nature of God and the soul.”\(^{51}\)

An even more significant contribution was in regards to the ‘problem of evil,’ or the ancient problem of *theodicy*. In 386 AD Augustine wrote *De Ordine* chronicling his intellectual wrestlings with this question. This appears to have been one of the main reasons he resisted his mother’s persistent call to leave Manichaeism for Christianity: if all of reality comes from a single, good Deity, then whence comes evil? Either God is not almighty, or He is not all-good. One of the main attractions of Manichaeism was its ability to explain both good and evil in the world: it did so by assigning to each real and equal ontological existence. Both good and evil are competing forces in the world, thus apparently explaining what Christianity could not. Plotinus,


\(^{50}\) Allen.

however, was able to explain how evil could exist in a schema where all comes from one good source: that is, evil is a privation of good. This solution was satisfactory to Augustine, and has become an important apologetic argument to the present day.\footnote{Cf. C.S. Lewis, \textit{Mere Christianity}, “The Shocking Alternative,” (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 47-52 where Lewis provides an answer to the Problem of Evil with heavy reference to Augustine’s solution.}

In a climactic event described in book VIII of his \textit{Confessions}, Augustine finally became a Christian in 386 AD. He was baptized the next year, and was ordained a priest in 391 AD. For the rest of his life, Augustine devoted his formidable intellect to the task of defending and expanding the Christian faith: in doing so, he made heavy use of on of his favourite philosophical tutors, Plotinus, thus bringing Platonic philosophy with him into the Church.

\textbf{The Influence of Plotinus on St. Augustine}

Augustine likely did not have good access to Plato and Aristotle, owing to his poor Greek.\footnote{Augustine’s dislike of the Greek language was significant enough to merit two entire chapters of soul-searching in his \textit{Confessions}. Augustine seems genuinely perplexed at the deep antipathy he bears towards the language and literature of Greece. Cf. \textit{Confessions}, 1:8-9.} He did, however, have access to a good Latin translation of Plotinus.\footnote{Thomas Williams, “Augustine and the Platonists,” \textit{A lecture given to the Freshman Program of Christ College, 23 October 2003}, 8, accessed online, February 28, 2017, \url{http://shell.cas.usf.edu/~thomasw/aug&plat.pdf}, 1.} Like most Platonists after Plotinus, Augustine’s apprehension of the Greek masters seems to have been significantly coloured by the contributions of Plotinus.\footnote{Ibid.}

Since Augustine saw (along with Clement of Alexandria, but in contrast to Tertullian) Christianity as the fulfillment and perfection of the Greek Philosophical quest, he feels no compunction in quoting favourably from philosophers, or alluding to texts that would have been well-known at the time. Care should be taken here, however, to distinguish between the
vocabulary and the substance of Augustine’s neoplatonism. In general, Augustine’s positivism towards philosophy was tempered by his submission to Scriptures and to Catholic doctrine: for him, conversion included a commitment to belief in the core doctrines of the church.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, while Augustine at times utilizes with some liberality the terminology and imagery of neoplatonism, he often redefines these terms in radically new directions. As a result, one could justifiably say that Augustine had as much of an impact on Western neoplatonism as the movement had on him, and that the neoplatonism to which Augustine opened the door of the Church through his works was a significantly different entity to that which had existed without.

\textit{The Nature of God}

Augustine drew on Plotinus at numerous points to describe the essence of God. As has been mentioned, it was Plotinus who helped Augustine apprehend the \textit{immateriality} of God.\textsuperscript{57} He also drew on Plotinus in seeing God as \textit{eternal}: “When Augustine wrote: ‘In the Eternal there is neither anything past, as though it had passed away, nor any future, as though it not yet, but whatever is, IS,’ he was freely quoting Plotinus.”\textsuperscript{58} Following Plotinus, Augustine referred to God’s \textit{omnipresence} in that His centre is everywhere, and His circumference nowhere.\textsuperscript{59} Augustine also makes use of the concept of \textit{unity} as a defining characteristic of God, sometimes speaking of multiplicity as a descent away from God, and salvation as a ‘losing’ of one’s self

\textsuperscript{56} The quotation often attributed to Augustine, "If you believe what you like in the gospels, and reject what you don't like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself" is likely spurious, although based on a similar saying in \textit{Contra Faustum}, Book XVII. His absolute devotion to catholic doctrine comes out with special force in his anti-Donatist writings, for example \textit{On Baptism: Against the Donatists}.

\textsuperscript{57} Allen.


\textsuperscript{59} Argyle, 210.
back into the unity of God. Augustine also followed Plotinus in affirming the ineffability of God. “We can know what God is not, but not what He is,” writes Augustine.  

In his important work, *De Trinitas*, Augustine made free use of Plotinus’ terminology of hypostasis to define the Trinity. As has been mentioned, this move was not original to Augustine, having already been crucial in the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century. What had become clear through the Arian controversy was that there could be no ontological distinction between the Father and the Son: all three hypostasis of the Trinity were one ousia or being (that is, they were ‘οµοούσιος). Rather, the great ontological distinction must be made between Creator and Creation. This was a distinction that Plotinus could not make, and represents a significant reworking and ‘Christian appropriation’ of his system.  

Augustine followed Plotinus by locating the Forms in the mind of God. Further, he made this Truth or Mind the true telos of the philosopher’s quest. But here, again, is a significant difference: “The Truth as it is in Jesus is no other than the Truth which the true philosopher seeks.” This is nothing short of a Copernican Revolution for the neoplatonic Mind. It is the very “foolishness” of which Paul speaks (1 Cor. 1:8). For Plotinus, personhood is at the bottom end of the scale: it results when Soul comes in contact with Matter, and is left behind as souls look first to Soul, then to Mind and finally become re-united with the One. But for Augustine, God Himself is personal!

---


61 Allen.

62 Ibid.

63 Augustine, *De Magistr.* 38.
Further to differences of opinion on the nature of God, (the so-called ‘immanent Trinity’) Augustine also differed from Plotinus in the actions of God (the so-called ‘efficient Trinity’). Plotinus’ One created involuntarily and necessarily: but the God of Augustine creates volitionally. He did not need to create, but in love and goodness, He chose to do so, at a definite point in the finite past. This difference has huge ramifications for how Augustine was to see the related themes of matter, sin, humanity, the incarnation, and redemption.

*Matter & Body*

Along with Plotinus, Augustine sees Creation as the outworking of a benevolent and intelligent Deity. Together, then, they reject the radical Gnostic rejection of the world. However, Augustine saw the World in an even more positive sense than Plotinus. For Augustine, the very Matter of the World is a good creation of the all-good God. As that part of Matter which presents itself most immediately to us, the body is itself good. For Augustine, writes Williams, “The body is not this evil, shadowy pseudo-reality that only gets in the way of our true happiness. The body is a divine creation.”

*Evil*

In a radical break from Plotinus, *metaphysical distance* for Augustine does not equate *moral depravity*. Rather, it is the turning of the creature away from the creator to himself that effects the “fall” of man. This is not to say that the ‘World’ is all good. The Creation presents a

---

64 Allen.
65 Williams, 3.
66 Ibid., 5.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
certain possibility of temptation and evil to every human. First, there is the danger that humanity turn from worship of the Creator to worship of His Creation (Rom. 1:21-23). Further, the business and ‘worldliness’ of embodied existence can have the effect of distracting one from the Divine. In a distinctly neoplatonic citation, Augustine writes that, “The multiformity of temporal things did by the senses distract fallen man from the unity of God”\textsuperscript{69} This turning of the Creature away from the Creator, to fold in upon itself in selfishness is the Augustinian definition of Evil, and here Augustine returns to the neoplatonic language of a ‘fall,’ and of our need to ‘rise’ back to God.\textsuperscript{70} However, this neoplatonic language must be read within the larger Christian framework of Augustine: for him, evil is \textit{ethical} and not \textit{ontological}.

\textit{The Soul}

Whereas Augustine’s view of the body represented a significant elevation of humanity, his teaching as regards the soul represented a sort of demotion. In Plotinus, as in most Greek religion and philosophy, the human soul is in some way divine: but in Christianity, there is an ontological distinction between God and man.\textsuperscript{71} Further, the Augustine came to reject, with some difficulty, the idea of the pre-existence of the soul, teaching instead that souls are generated through copulation. This belief became very important for his doctrine of original sin

\textit{A Hunger for God}

Although humans are not a part of God, we were made in His image (Gen. 1:27). Sin has “made a separation” between God and man, (Isa. 59:2). It is this reality that sets up the hunger to


\textsuperscript{71} Allen.
be reunited to God, spoken of by Plotinus. In what has been described as “probably the most oft-repeated prayer in Christendom after the Lord’s Prayer,” Augustine begins the confessions with the prayer, “Thou didst make us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it rest in Thee.” Like Plotinus, Augustine too lays out a path towards unity with God: but both the path and the destination show marked differences.

*A Godward Quest*

Augustine’s *Confessions* is not mere biography, but is at least in part a sort of tract or manual, using his own life as a road-map towards salvation. In this path, Augustine described his quest towards God in terms very similar to the Plotinian quest. First, in a love of nature one can see the handiwork of the Divine Mind, and from there move to contemplation of the Maker. This contemplation aught to be coupled with a separation from worldliness, and ever-higher speculations, leading finally to mystical experiences with God. All of this is mere preparation for the true adventure, however, which is unity with God Himself.

In a passage rich in literary significance, Augustine contrasts two philosophical/mystical experiences he had. The first occurred in Milan, before his conversion, and seems similar to the sorts of mystical unions experienced by Plotinus. Augustine makes much of the short and ultimately unsatisfying nature of this experience, contrasting it with an experience he shared with his mother after his conversion in Ostia. Of the differences between the two he says,

> I lacked the power to fix my gaze there. My weakness was rebuffed, and I returned to my accustomed ways, taking nothing back with me but a loving memory and the desire for a food that I had smelled but could not yet eat. And I was seeking some way of gathering a strength that would fit me to enjoy you, but

---


73 Argyle, 210.
I was not to find it until I embraced the Mediator of God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who is God above all, blessed for ever, calling out and saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life;” and mingling with flesh the food that I was too weak to eat.74

Ever the evangelist, Augustine was writing directly to the Plotinian disciple in this passage. Making much of the short and transient nature of the experiences that Plotinus described, Augustine explained that the weakness of our humanity needed to be complemented with the strength of the Incarnation, in order for true Salvation to take place.

The Incarnation

Augustine, famously, championed the doctrine of Original Sin in his Confessions, and defended the doctrine in his later, anti-Pelagian writings. Augustine’s view that all humans are non posse non peccare, that is, “not able not to sin” dashed any hopes of a self-effected salvation through contemplation and asceticism such as Plotinus offered. It also gave definite form, and a reason for the “weakness” that both Augustine and Plotinus seem to have experienced in the presence of God. Why are humans unable to dwell in the presence of God? The problem, for Augustine, is original sin, and the solution is Jesus.75

Augustine’s Christian view of the Body made possible what would have been μωρία, absurdity or foolishness to Plotinus (1 Cor. 1:18). In an illuminating passage, Augustine writes that much of the Logos theology of John 1 he found in Plotinus, but “‘the word was made flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:13-14) I did not find there.”76 The Incarnation was the greatest affirmation possible of the validity of the material world. Not only was Matter created by God,

74 Augustine, Confessions, 7.17.23-18.24.
75 Cross, 1310.
76 Augustine, Confessions, 7:13, 121.
but it was capable of being conjoined to God in Christ, in whom, “dwells all the fulness of the
Godhead bodily,” (Col. 2:9). Because the Divine was able to join himself to Matter, He could by
that union draw humans up to Himself, providing a way of salvation.

**Lasting Plotinian Effects on Augustinianism**

As has been mentioned, Plotinus had an effect on Augustine in regards to language and
symbology. Since much of Augustine’s writing was either explicitly or implicitly apologetic in
nature, much of these superficial similarities can be dismissed as Augustine seeking to present
the unchanging Gospel in a culturally acceptable form. However, there were at least three ways
in which Plotinus was to inject a foreign element into the church through his effect on Augustine.

In regards to the soul, Augustine made a conscious break from Plotinus when he came to
understand the soul as created during copulation (traducianism) and not eternal or pre-existant.
However, Augustine was to retained the notion that human beings are a soul, which merely
possesses a body. 77 Further, Augustine continued to consider the soul as complete in itself, and
able to apprehend knowledge through access to the Forms in the Mind of God, without recourse
to sensory information. This rationalistic tendency “encouraged Augustine towards an
‘inwardness,’” produced a tendency, like Plotinus, to turn away from the material world to the
inner world, with an effect which, “tends to etherealize the Christian life.” 78

Augustine further taught that sin is passed from parents to children through copulation,
and specifically through the male seed. This, apparently, explains why Mary did not pass on
original sin to Jesus. This belief, in addition, to an ascetic comportment of life which was a

---

77 Geisler, 63.

78 Allen.
holdover of his Manichean and Neoplatonic heritage predisposed Augustine to have a negative view of sex and the body: a belief which was to have large consequences especially for the Western Church in years to come.79

A final influence of Plotinus on Augustine was in regards to the *ineffability* of God. While maintaining that we could know much about God, due to His Self-Revelation, Augustine followed Plotinus in affirming the final unknowability of God. This aspect of Augustine’s neoplatonism was to join other tributaries of Christian thought to create the broad river of apophatic theology, later known as the *via negativa*.

**Conclusion**

Alfred North Whitehead is famously known as characterizing all of Western Philosophy as a series of footnotes on Plato. If this be true, it cannot be insignificant that the vision of Platonism that Augustine received was viewed, as it were, through the spectacles afforded by Plotinus. As has been shown, the Platonism of which Augustine was made familiar was one which brought elements of Aristotle in harmony with Platonism, and proposed some original elements, such as the religious element of salvation through asceticism and contemplation.

Since Augustine became, in some ways, a conduit of Platonism into the Western Church and philosophy, it is also significant to note the influence of Plotinus upon Augustine, and vice versa. As has been shown, Augustine was no passive recipient of Plotinus, but significantly reworked his system. That being said, Plotinus left several very significant marks on Augustine. These marks include the vocabulary of *hypostasis*, and the uniquely Platonic imagery of ‘rising’ and ‘falling’ as analogies for describing one’s relation to God. More significantly, Plotinus was to

---

79 Geisler, 63.
have a lasting impact on Augustine’s view of the soul, of the body and human sexuality, and on the ineffability of God.

Without a doubt, however, the most important effect of Plotinus on Augustine was that of facilitating his conversion from Skepticism to Christianity. For this reason, whatever the adverse effects which Plotinus may have had, it should be concluded that the net result of Plotinus on Augustine was an overwhelmingly positive one, leading to the conclusion that Western Christianity owes a debt of gratitude to the pagan, non-Christian Plotinus, who was used of God to aid in the conversion of one of the most important Doctors of the Church.


