

St. Augustine's *The Confessions*: An Intellectual Pilgrimage

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Abstract

St. Augustine was bishop of Hippo in North Africa in the late Roman Empire in the 4th century AD. He displays his passionate soul in *The Confessions*, the book is the first great autobiography of the west. His book of Confessions traces his journey from the beginning of his search for the truth, until its culmination for him, in having converted to Christianity. St. Augustine acclimatized the Platonic tradition with Christian ideas that ever occurred in the Latin Christian world. His autobiography is a tale of self-renunciation. The paper explains how *The Confessions* demonstrates a profound philosophical spirit on one hand, and the sublime outpouring of devotion on the other. The research paper mainly analyzes how Augustine pulled various trends of imperial thought and used them to express for the very first time, the outlook that was to characterize the middle ages. Also, the paper helps understand to what extent the study of Neo-Platonism led to Augustine's final conversion to Catholicism.

Keywords: St. Augustine, Confessions, Intellect, Evil, Manicheanism, Neo-Platonism.

St. Augustine (AD. 398-400) draws from both, the Biblical tradition and the Greek philosophical tradition. He didn't know much of Plato or Aristotle but he did read Plotinus and was deeply influenced by Plotinus' spirituality. Therefore he is a Christian Platonist who forms the western tradition in part by providing a synthesis between Greek thought and the Biblical thought. However his arrival there was not all that simple. His book of Confessions traces his journey from the beginning of his search for the truth, until its culmination for him in having converted to Christianity.

Augustine in Book 3 of his *Confessions* discusses his fondness for the books that were written in an eloquent style. He aspired to achieve mastery in the art of oratory. During his student days at Carthage, when he was nineteen years old, he stumbled upon Cicero's book *Hortensius*. This book is unlike the books that Augustine has read before. In the *Hortensius* Cicero lays out an argument that it is the pursuit of truth through philosophy that leads a person to a truly happy existence. It transforms Augustine's vision, foregrounding in him the importance of thought rather than in how polished a style it might have been rendered in. He writes: "Every vain hope at once became worthless to me; and I longed with an incredibly burning desire for an immortality of wisdom..." (Augustine 31) The reading of this book instigates the love for wisdom in Augustine, and thus begins his search for the truth that was intellectually fulfilling as well. He asserts:

... I was thereby strongly roused, and kindled, and inflamed to love, and seek, and obtain, and hold, and embrace not this or that sect, but wisdom itself whatever it were... (Augustine 32)

Augustine tells us that there was no mention of Christ in Cicero's book however he immediately turns to holy scriptures to embrace the truth. But out of utter folly he misunderstands his inaptness for unveiling the mysteries of the texts rendered in the simplified diction for the intellectually unappealing nature of the scriptures. He doesn't find Bible like a philosophical argument in a loquacious style of Roman logic. Therefore he gives up reading holy scriptures however the quest for wisdom in him takes him into another direction. Augustine tells us about his acquaintance with the self-styled intellectuals who claimed to know truth about the world and the Christ. It is only after nine years Augustine comes to the realization that their teachings were falsehood in disguise. The group that Augustine aligns himself with were known as Manicheans. Manicheanism was a very popular religion at that time, they had very polished spiritual texts, on elaborate cosmology as well, which was more in line with what Augustine was looking for at that time. Nevertheless he is eventually disillusioned with the religion of Manicheanism:

For almost nine years passed, in which I wallowed in the mire of that deep pit, and the darkness of falsehood, often assaying to rise, but dashed down the more grievously. (Augustine 40)

Augustine's disillusionment with Manicheism happened due to many reasons. While he remained associated with this faith, he developed deep interest in astrology. However, a physician named Vindicianus, well versed in the books of astrology, tried to convince him that it didn't qualify to be an art per se. In book four of *Confessions* Augustine writes about his exchange with the physician:

he kindly and fatherly advised me to cast them away, and not fruitlessly bestow a care and diligence, necessary for useful things, upon these vanities; saying, that he had in his earliest years studied that art, so as to make it the profession whereby he should live, and that, understanding Hippocrates, he could soon have understood such a study as this; and yet he had given it over, and taken to physic, for no other reason but that he found it utterly false; and he, a grave man, would not get his living by deluding people. (Augustine 43)

To Augustine's question as to how do many predictions come to be true, the physician had replied that there is the "force of chance" that governs all things, which applies as well to the study of signs and the predictions made thereof. The physician cites the example of a man to Augustine, who randomly opens some pages from a certain poet's anthology. Vindicianus says that there is a probability that what is composed by the poet in these verses might correspond with what this particular man is going through in his life or thoughts. As much this doesn't amount to becoming an art form, same holds true for the business of art-gazers. Moreover, Augustine's student Nebridius too asks him to give it up but he is still reluctant. Nonetheless in book seven of *Confessions* Augustine comes back to the discussion of astrology and here he talks about his friend Firminus, who had liberal education and was well trained in rhetoric. The two shared a great bond. Firminus tells Augustine about his father and his father's friend who shared acute passion for astrology. When Firminus' mother was expecting him, a maid of his father's friend too was with a child. His father and the friend, out of their earnestness to make progress in this art recorded too meticulously the minutes when the babies were delivered by both the women. Interestingly Firminus and the maid's son were born the same instant and the two men (Firminus' father and his friend) couldn't spot any difference in the position of their stars. However the fact remains that Firminus lead his life among high estates and the other child grew to become a servant in his master's

house. This practical example brings Augustine to give up his interest in astrology altogether, which otherwise he revered as great art projected by the Manichean faith. He writes:

thence it followed most certainly that whatever, upon consideration of the constellations, was spoken truly, was spoken not out of art, but chance; and whatever spoken falsely, was not out of ignorance in the art, but the failure of the chance. (Augustine 100)

Besides, Augustine grappled with the problem of evil. He couldn't understand how an all powerful God could be the source of evil. Manichean faith upheld the view that God was good but God was not omnipotent, and the evil too had a form probably just as powerful as the good God. The two forces according to this belief were in a constant tussle with each other. It is only much later that Augustine arrives at a conclusive solution to the problem of evil:

... in my ignorance, [I] was much troubled, and departing from the truth, seemed to myself to be making towards it; because as yet I knew not that evil was nothing but a privation of good... (Augustine 34)

Evil, he resolves, is not a presence, it is just the absence of good. Augustinian critics widely agree that he appropriated Platonist understanding of evil to Christian theology for finding it suitable to the concept of omnipotent Christian God. Platonists don't think that evil is nothingness, what they believe is that evil is not opposed to good, it is just hierarchically inferior. Platonists ascribe evil to ignorance whereas Christianity ascribes evil to sin. And for Augustine the difference between the two is that the sin is deliberate.

The solution that Manicheanism offered to the problem of evil absolves humans of any responsibility in committing a sin. Augustine had difficulty in accepting this idea. Apart from this, he had many other questions that he had reserved for an immensely revered man among Manicheans known as Faustus, he was one of the seventy-two Manichean bishops. Augustine writes: "And for almost all those nine years, wherein with unsettled mind I had been their disciple, I had longed but too intensely for the coming of this Faustus." (Augustine 63) Augustine was told by his Manichean friends that Faustus would be able to solve all his confusions since they considered him as one of the greatest preachers in Manichean faith.

Augustine was twenty-nine years old while he was teaching at Carthage and chance has it that Faustus visits the same place during that time. Augustine attends many of his talks but he wishes to have a detailed discussion on matters that were not clear to his understanding. Faustus would be usually surrounded by a crowd of people but Augustine kept trying to have an access to him and at last he succeeded. Augustine enquired about the elaborate discussion of numeric understandings of the heavens, the stars, the sun, and the moon that was in Mani's books. But to Augustine's utter disappointment Faustus is unable to provide Augustine with any answer. In subsequent meetings Augustine grows hopeless due to Faustus' ignorance, he says : "... it was clear that he was ignorant of those arts in which I thought he excelled, I began to despair of his opening and solving the difficulties which perplexed me..." (Augustine 64) Infact their supposed roles get reversed in reality, it is Augustine who begins tutoring Faustus in classical literature. Eventually Augustine leaves Carthage for Rome for a better job and later moves from Rome to Milan.

He [Augustine] rejected one system of belief after another because each one of them proved too narrow, when tested by the facts of life. His account of the spiritual evolution is not a portrait, but a movement in perspective. The various scenes that Augustine describes indicate a new creative experience of the author, through which he understands himself. This is to say that Augustine conceives life as a process, an endless sequence of affirmations and negations. (Ramakrishnan 2)

Augustine arrives in Milan around 384, when he is about thirty years old. Here he meets the highly acclaimed churchman famous for his oratory skills and his devotion to Christianity, the Bishop of Milan called Ambrose. Since Augustine aspired to become the professor of rhetoric, he therefore attends the sermons of Bishop Ambrose with an intension to get benefitted from the eloquence of his language. However, upon hearing his sermons Augustine is not only mesmerized by his rhetorical skills rather he is enthralled by the allegorical and spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament that Bishop Ambrose provides in the course of his sermons. Augustine thus admits: "And while I opened my heart to admit "how eloquently he spake," there also entered "how truly he spake"; but this by degrees." (Augustine 72) Infact Augustine compares Faustus with Ambrose, based on his experience of hearing both the preachers, he comments: "Of the matter, however, there was no comparison; for the one

was wandering amid Manichaeian delusions, the other teaching salvation most soundly.” (72) Bishop Ambrose proves out to be a remarkable influence on Augustine’s mind since his way of reading biblical texts frees Augustine from the bondages of reading a text literally, something cultivated in him by the Manichean doctrine. Nevertheless this paradigm shift doesn’t lead to Augustine’s abrupt commitment to the Catholic faith, he is still unsure as he points out: “one who has tried a bad physician, fears to trust himself with a good one, so was it with the health of my soul...” (Augustine 78, 79) In book five of the *Confessions* Augustine announces his complete renouncement of the Manichean faith. Here he resolves to become a Catechumen (a convert to Christianity receiving training in doctrine and discipline before baptism) to explore more about the Christian faith. In Augustine’s words:

I determined therefore so long to be a Catechumen in the Catholic Church, to which I had been commended by my parents, till something certain should dawn upon me, whither I might steer my course. (Augustine 73)

The next advancement that Augustine refers to, that proves to be a greater instance for him to dive deep in the Neo-Platonist tradition, is mentioned in book eight of *Confessions* is his decision to consult Simplicianus, an old Catholic who has been and continued to be the spiritual guide of Bishop Ambrose. Here, Augustine tells us that at this point he wished to attain discipline to commit himself in the way of God: “nor did I now desire to be more certain of Thee, but more steadfast in Thee.” (Augustine 113) It dawns upon Augustine that he should go to Simplicianus since he is famous for his devotion to Christianity from an early age, and Augustine wishes to benefit from his experience. In one of their meetings Augustine reveals to Simplicianus that he had read “certain books of the Platonists” which Victorinus (Rhetoric Professor of Rome) had translated into Latin. Simplicianus expresses his joy after knowing this, infact he is glad that Augustine didn’t read other deceitful philosophers about the beginning of this world. About Platonism Simplicianus believed: “Platonists many ways led to the belief in God and His Word.” (Augustine 115) This opens a new window for Augustine, one where he went on to give unprecedented contribution. His interpretation of Bible became more nuanced and philosophically aligned with Platonists. Commenting on this, Habib writes:

To discover the meaning of the scriptures, suggests Augustine, we must consider both things and signs, in other words, the things which should be taught to Christians, and the signs and modes of expression of these things. He distinguishes things from signs by saying that the former are never employed to signify anything else.(158)

Here, it becomes important to understand Plotinus' impact on Augustine, after Bishop Ambrose influenced him to follow his ideas. Infact, in the 4th century BC after Plato's death, for many centuries that followed, there developed a cult of philosophers who were particularly interested in amplifying Plato's metaphysical and religious aspects. This spiritual study in the Platonic tradition, termed the highest transcendent principle as "The One". These philosophers paid increased emphasis on the 'flight from the body', which they thought as essential for the soul's philosophical ascent to the divine reality, and the force that made it possible began to be located in the divine mind. One peculiar thing that the study obsessed over was the problem of evil and its relationship with matter.

Plotinus (204-270 CE), referred to as the father of Neo-Platonism, attempted at incorporating more mystical elements into the Platonic framework, universal in scope with considerable intellectual power. Porphyry, student, editor and compiler of Plotinus' works eventually came up with Plotinus' *Enneads* in Greek. Less than a century later, Marius Victorinus translated the *Enneads* into Latin. Neo-Platonism is arguably the last school of Greek philosophy, that received its definitive shape in the pagan mystic philosopher Plotinus in the third century A.D. The ancient stream of philosophers who could be generally referred to as Neo-Platonists simply classified themselves as 'Platonists'. Similarly the philosophers of the Renaissance and the 17th century who follow ancient Neo-Platonic ideas too call themselves Platonists.

Nonetheless, it is in Plotinus that Greek rational philosophy reached its climax in one sense, that is, it passed over into another more thoroughly transcendental spirit. The core of the Plotinus' thought upheld that the rationality of the world, of the philosopher's quest is only a preparation in order to comprehend a more transcendent existence that lies beyond reason. Plotinus performs a blue-print of the world, similar to what Plato was talking about in his world of ideas. The three hypostases of Plotinus' philosophy are : i. The One (The Good) ii. The Intellect (Nous) and iii. The World-Soul (Psyche). The One, The Intellect and The

World-Soul are not literal entities rather spiritual dispositions just as the ideas are not distinct objects but different states of being of the divine mind.

The Neo-Platonism conceived of cosmos as the result of a divine emanation from the pure, indivisible, independent unity called “The One”. The One is the causal principle of all beings, the potentiality of all existence and consciousness, therefore it is the ultimate reality. It transcends all particular beings yet is a precedent for all being. “The Intellect” or Nous is the pervasive wisdom of the universe. It contains the archetypal forms and is responsible for the order in the world. From The Nous comes “The World- Soul” or The Psyche, the source for souls for all living beings. It constitutes the intermediate reality between the spiritual intellect and the world of matter.

The intellectual practice among Christian theologians of aligning classical philosophy with Christianity had developed even before Augustine. There have been examples when the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus were taken recourse to, for the more nuanced interpretation of the Biblical texts. However, Neo-Platonism dominated the most abstract Christian theology between 200 and 1200 A.D.

To the Christian, the Other World was the Kingdom of Heaven, to be enjoyed after death; to the Platonist, it was the eternal world of ideas, the real world as opposed to that of illusory appearance. Christian theologians combined these points of view, and embodied much of the philosophy of Plotinus. (Russell 284)

In Augustine the practice takes its most serious form for his tremendous contribution to the exegesis of the fundamental ideas of the Christian doctrine. He pulled various trends of imperial thought and used them to express for the very first time the outlook that was to characterize the middle ages. Also, on a strictly personal level, the study of Neo-Platonism led to Augustine’s final conversion to Catholicism.

Augustine’s whole outlook was influenced by Plato’s doctrines as they were transmitted to him through Plotinus. His encounter with these doctrines played a crucial role in his spiritual development. He could liberate himself from the last shackles of the false Manichaean view when he finally came to see God and the soul as immaterial. (Taylor 127)

Plotinus articulated an elaborately coherent rationalist and idealist metaphysics which found its fulfilment in a unitary mystical apprehension of the supreme Being. Basing his philosophy on the Platonic doctrine of transcendent ideas he then added teleological dynamism, hierarchy, emanation and supra-rational mysticism. In this form Neo-Platonism became the final expression of classical Pagan philosophy and assumed the role of Platonism's historical carrier in subsequent centuries. There is one fundamental difference between the philosophical ideas and the Christian ideas, as Plotinus pointed out that the philosophical truth is based on reason and logical argument where as the Christian truth is based on divine revelation. This kept strict Pagan philosophers from accepting Christianity but it didn't prevent Christian thinkers from reading and using philosophical arguments.

As discussed earlier in the paper that Augustine was introduced to Neo-Platonism by Bishop Ambrose. He gave Augustine to understand that there are semi- autobiographical matters in Paul's letters and also in New Testament especially in the Gospel of John. Therefore, there was no reason why philosophy couldn't be used to explain some of the Christian teachings as long as it didn't come in conflict with the core ideas. Augustine thus, is interested in Plotinus but as an orthodox Christian, therefore he cannot accept all of Neo-Platonism.

The first point to realize, if his answer is to be understood, is that creation out of nothing, which was taught in the Old Testament, was an idea wholly foreign to Greek philosophy. When Plato speaks of creation, he imagines a primitive matter to which God gives form; and the same is true of Aristotle. Their God is an artificer or architect, rather than a Creator. Substance is thought of as eternal and uncreated; only form is due to the will of God. As against this view, Saint Augustine maintains, as every orthodox Christian must, that the world was created not from any certain matter, but from nothing. God created substance, not only order and arrangement. (Russell 353)

Nonetheless, Augustine is attracted to the idea of turning inward to self in order to be driven to God with the love of God inscribed in the self, rather than finding God out there in the physical world. The Platonic image of the Divine Sun (shining through the intellectual vision) that dazzles above one's mind is appropriated by Augustine to the spiritual understanding of

the God's image in the Bible, since God made the mind therefore, He is the one who stands above it.

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo is thus married with a Platonic notion of participation... Augustine, in explaining the Christian notion of the ontological dependence of things in Platonic terms, here as elsewhere makes a synthesis with striking new possibilities. The conception of an order of creation made according to God's thoughts merges with the great Johannine image of creation through the Word, and hence links Platonism with the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity. (Taylor 127)

Augustine refers to Trinity in *Confessions*, he says that when people speak of it, they do not really understand what they are talking about. In order to simplify it, he equates Christian Logos with the Neo-Platonic Nous, that flows out from The One.

Now the three I spake of are, To Be, to Know, and to Will... In these three then, let him discern that can, how inseparable a life there is, yea one life, mind, and one essence, yea lastly how inseparable a distinction there is, and yet a distinction... in Thy Name do we baptise, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, because among us also, in His Christ did God make heaven and earth... (Augustine 242, 243)

However, Christ was begotten of the Father, not made, and Logos does manifest in flesh while as the Neo-Platonist Nous does not:

... the archetype of Likeness-to-God can only be God's Word itself, begotten from him and of one substance with him, ie., the Second Person of the Trinity, by whom all things were made. (Taylor 128)

Neo-Platonists theory of the human nature explains that the soul is tied to body in two realms, one is the intelligible world and another is the realm of the senses. In simpler terms, human soul manifests its existence in the human body in mind's yearning for knowledge and in heart's desire for peace. St. Augustine's *Confessions* is a rigorous explication of these two essential streaks as Ramakrishnan puts it, "Augustine addresses himself to such basic questions as the cause of the sin, the reality of evil and the nature of faith because his mind operates in an existential frame-work underlying which is the dialectics of the self's

evolution.” (2) *The Confessions*, therefore, demonstrates a profound philosophical spirit on one hand, and the sublime outpouring of devotion on the other.

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