

## Some Ways of Reading Augustine

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## Some Ways of Reading Augustine:

### An Introduction to Augustine Scholarship

A good deal of Augustine scholarship has focused on his relationship to neo-Platonism. Generalizing somewhat, four ways of reading Augustine have dominated scholarly debate on this issue. Augustine is read as initially a neo-Platonist and then later a more consistent Christian, as fully both, as a Christian and *not* a neo-Platonist, and as fully a Christian and only a neo-Platonist to the extent that he finds it useful for understanding Christian theology. The first interpretation sometimes involves suspicion that *Confessions* is not fully honest about his 386 A. D. commitment to Christ and its aftermath. In less dramatic versions, Augustine began as an honest Christian rather enthusiastic about reason and argumentation as ways to get to God, and later became a more informed—and less philosophical—Christian.

The long debate has provided very strong support for the idea that Augustine consistently takes seriously neo-Platonic insights while being committed to Christian theology. However, it is possible that the whole debate as we have known it will be eclipsed in future scholarship by interpretations largely independent of the debate and frequently exploring new territory, especially the letters and sermons.

A brief glance at a text predating this debate sets the stage. Phillip Schaff in his 1800s *History of the Christian Church* states that the Cassiciacum dialogues and *De magistro* ‘exhibit . . . a Platonism seized and consecrated by the spirit of Christianity . . . .’<sup>1</sup> He claims that ‘The philosopher in him afterwards yielded more and more to the theologian . . . .’ Yet ‘he could never cease to philosophize.’ Schaff alleges that Augustine really did follow Platonic philosophy, but after becoming a Christian he

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<sup>1</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, chapter 10.

. . . embraced the Christian philosophy, which is based on the divine revelation of the Scriptures, and is the handmaid of theology and religion; but at the same time he prepared the way for the catholic ecclesiastical philosophy, which rests on the authority of the church, and became complete in the scholasticism of the middle age.

A debate was to emerge over how to explain and relate this reason and authority, this Christianity and philosophy. Let us overview some of the contours of the modern debate. After that, we will look at some other fine work in reading Augustine which is not so deeply involved with that debate before considering the current and future state of Augustine scholarship.

### I. The Modern Debate

O'Donnell introduces *two* sides of the debate:

The place of 'Platonism' in Augustine has been looming larger for forty-odd years, since Courcelle's first book at least. There is no comprehensive reassessment of the debate and of the underlying material. O'Connell stands for one position, Goulven Madec (whose book on Augustine and philosophy has been spoken of with eager anticipation for some years) will stand for another. There is opportunity for a fresh approach, one that I am not entirely confident I can adumbrate.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James J. O'Donnell, 'To Make an End Is To Make a Beginning;' *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), p. 234. The interested reader might also consult Kevane's fine summary in Eugene Kevane, *Augustine the Educator: A Study in the Fundamentals of Christian Formation* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1954), pp. 347-380. Also Robert Crouse, 'Paucis Mutatis Verbis: St. Augustine's Platonism;' in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honor of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless: 37-50 (New York: Routledge, 2000); Mark Boone, *The Conversion and Therapy of Desire: Augustine's Theology of Desire in the Cassiciacum Dialogues* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), chapter 1; and Mark Boone, "The Role of Platonism in Augustine's 386 Conversion to Christianity;" *Religion Compass* 9.5 (May 2015), 151-161. Portions of this article involve a reconsideration of my own earlier summaries.

McEvoy overviews *three* dominant paradigms for interpreting the relation of church fathers to neo-Platonism.<sup>3</sup> There is the ‘influence’ or ‘evolutionist’ paradigm—the dramatic development thesis. There is the ‘syncretism’ paradigm—the Christian neo-Platonism thesis. McEvoy endorses the ‘discernment’ thesis—the Platonically informed Christianity thesis.<sup>4</sup>

Van Fleteren introduces *four* sides of the debate. Courcelle had earlier shown that a simple choice between ‘Neoplatonism or Christianity’ is a false dichotomy.<sup>5</sup> Van Fleteren mentions three mistaken interpretations:

(1) Augustine is purely a theologian; (2) Augustine is a Christian thinker acquainted with philosophy; (3) Augustine possesses a philosophy not only distinct, but actually separate from theology.<sup>6</sup>

He recommends a fourth option, in which philosophy and theology are neither separate nor distinct in Augustine’s thought<sup>7</sup> and in which neo-Platonism and Christianity mutually interpret one another.<sup>8</sup>

Following Van Fleteren, I distinguish *four* ways of reading Augustine. According to the dramatic development thesis, there are two Augustines, first the younger and more philosophical

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<sup>3</sup> James J. McEvoy, ‘Neoplatonism and Christianity: Influence, Syncretism or Discernment?’, *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. Thomas Flynn and Vincent Twomey: pp. 155-170 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick E. Van Fleteren, ‘Augustine and Philosophy: *Intellectus Fidei*’, *Augustine and Philosophy*, ed. Phillip Cary, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth: pp. 23-40 (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 23. Another helpful Van Fleteren article is Frederick E. Van Fleteren, ‘The Cassiciacum Dialogues and Augustine’s Ascents at Milan’, *Mediaevalia* 4 (1978), pp. 159–82.

<sup>6</sup> Van Fleteren, ‘Augustine and Philosophy,’ p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

and then the older and more theological. In some versions the development is radical: Augustine begins as a neo-Platonist and *not* a Christian, then later becomes a Christian and abandons neo-Platonism. In less radical versions, he begins as a Christian optimistic about reason—more of a philosopher and less of a theologian than he would later become—yet finishes *still* a Christian and *less* an optimistic philosopher. Another way of reading Augustine is to view him as consistently both a Christian and a neo-Platonist. A third way is to view him as a Christian who is simply *not* a neo-Platonist. Finally, he is often read as a consistently Christian thinker who is informed by some neo-Platonic insights, yet without being simply or fully a neo-Platonist.

The modern debate began in 1888 when Adolph von Harnack pioneered the thesis that Augustine actually began his career in Christian writing as . . . not really a Christian!<sup>9</sup> He was a neo-Platonist who later adopted orthodox Christian theology. This is the dramatic development thesis in its more radical form.<sup>10</sup> Gaston Boissier in the same year contributed.<sup>11</sup> Later the name of Prosper Alfaric rose to prominence in this tradition.<sup>12</sup> Some continue to read Augustine in similar ways.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Adolph von Harnack, 'Augustins Konfessionen' (Geissen: 1888). A helpful commentary in English appears in John O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriguena*, ed. Thomas Halton (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> von Harnack argued that Augustine's account in the *Confessions* is intentionally inaccurate.

<sup>11</sup> Gaston Boissier, 'La Conversion de Saint Augustin,' *Revue des Deux Mondes* 85 (1888), pp. 43–69. Boissier merely argued that there is a shift in Augustine's theology between the early and the later writings.

<sup>12</sup> Prosper Alfaric, *L'évolution intellectuelle de saint Augustin* (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1918). As the cupbearer said to the Pharaoh, 'I am reminded of my shortcomings' (Gen. 41:9, NIV); I cannot read those scholarly writings in French or German. There is helpful information on Alfaric from English scholars, such as O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriguena*, pp. 121–122.

<sup>13</sup> Paula Fredrekson, 'Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Tradition, and the Retrospective Self,' *Journal of Theological Studies* 37.1 (April 1986), pp. 3–34; Leo C. Ferrari, *The Conversions of Saint Augustine* (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1984); Leo C. Ferrari, 'Truth and Augustine's Conversion Scene,' in *Augustine: Second Founder of the Faith*. *Collectanea Augustiniana* 1, ed. J. Schnaubelt and Frederick Van Fleteren (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 9–19. Leo C. Ferrari, 'Book Eight: Science and the Fictional Conversion Scene,' in *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, ed. Kim Paffenroth and Robert

Harrison comments credits Peter Brown, the great biographer of Augustine,<sup>14</sup> for popularizing a less radical version of the dramatic development thesis. This is the view that Augustine shifted from a philosophical optimism to a theological pessimism; ‘the young Augustine is seen as an optimistic devotee of a Christian philosophy which promises the attainment of perfection, moral purity and tranquility, and the contemplation of wisdom.’<sup>15</sup> Harrison notes that Brown himself later reconsidered,<sup>16</sup> although by that time many readers had adopted his interpretation.

The modern tradition of reading Augustine as a Christian neo-Platonist developed in part as a response to Alfarić. Courcelle was a trailblazer. He argued for the presence of Christian neo-Platonists in Milan in Augustine’s day—familiar names to Augustine scholars such as Ambrose and Theodorus.<sup>17</sup> Courcelle considers that Augustine himself was a neo-Platonist (and Christian) like they—although, interestingly, he follows Alfarić in treating the *Confessions* as an inaccurate presentation of Augustine’s early theology.<sup>18</sup>

The Courcelle tradition has it that Augustine is a Christian neo-Platonist. Courcelle is important, but O’Connell rivals him. O’Connell claims that the ‘Incarnation, about which

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P. Kennedy: pp. 127-136 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003). Brian Dobell, *Augustine’s Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Dobell clears Augustine of the charge of deception in writing the *Confessions*; Dobell, pp. 25–6.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (new ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967; New ed., 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, *Rethinking*, pp. 14–17.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1950) and Pierre Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1963). For English sources on Courcelle, consider O’Donnell, *The Confessions of Augustine: An Electronic Edition*, commentary on 8.12.28–29; online Edition by Anne Mahoney for The Stoa Consortium (1992); <http://www.stoa.org/hippo/>; commentary on 8.12.29.

<sup>18</sup> O’Donnell objects to Courcelle on this point; *Confessions . . . Electronic*, commentary on 8.12.29.

Plotinus himself may never have dreamt, Augustine fits neatly into the scheme of the Plotinian universe.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere he notes that ‘the *Confessions* are far more “philosophical,” and the early dialogues far more “Christian” than tenants of the “two Augustines” view ordinarily admit.’<sup>20</sup> O’Connell develops his thesis in an interesting direction by studying Augustine’s views of the fall of the soul, which he argues are much the same as Plotinus’—a theology involving a disembodied sinless life for the soul, a disembodied sin, and resulting embodiment. This account entails that embodiment is an evil, that salvation involves escape from it, and that we should live accordingly. The complication of some development in Augustine’s own thought (which every scholar recognizes) is doubled by some development in O’Connell’s thesis. I can only recommend that the reader interested in more information consider reading some of the sources in the footnote at the end of this sentence.<sup>21</sup> In any case, O’Connell’s influence has been immense.

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<sup>19</sup> Robert J. O’Connell, ‘The Enneads and St. Augustine’s Image of Happiness.’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 17.3 (September 1994), p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> Robert J. O’Connell, ‘The Visage of Philosophy at Cassiciacum,’ *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> A good short introduction is Robert J. O’Connell, ‘Augustine’s Rejection of the Fall of the Soul,’ *Augustinian Studies* 4.0 (1973), pp. 1-32. A study of the early writings of Augustine and some ideas of Plotinus is Robert J. O’Connell, ‘Enneads VI, 4–5, in the works of St. Augustine.’ *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 9 (1963), pp. 1–39. O’Connell refutes the Alfarcic reading in O’Connell, ‘The Visage of Philosophy.’ On the fall of the soul see O’Connell, Robert J. O’Connell, *Saint Augustine’s Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386–391* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); *St. Augustine’s Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul* (New York: Fordham, 1989); and *The Origin of the Soul in St. Augustine’s Later Works* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987). Mary Clark and O’Daly critique O’Connell in Mary T. Clark, Review of *St. Augustine’s Early Theory of Man, A. D. 386–391* and *St. Augustine’s ‘Confessions’: The Odyssey of Soul*, by Robert J. O’Connell. *International Philosophical Quarterly* 11 (1971), pp. 427–39 and Gerard O’Daly, ‘Did St. Augustine Ever Believe in the Soul’s Pre-existence?’ *Augustinian Studies* 5 (1974), pp. 227–35. Vaught critiques O’Connell in his trilogy on the *Confessions*; see Carl J. Vaught, *Access to God in Augustine’s Confessions: Books X–XIII* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); *Encounters with God in Augustine’s Confessions: Books X–XIII* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); and *The Journey toward God in Augustine’s Confessions: Books X–XIII* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); for example, *Journey*, pp. 33-34. Rombs summarizes O’Connell’s work and its significance in the Introduction to his *Saint Augustine and the Fall*. Rombs observes that under the influence of O’Connell scholars have tended towards a ‘neglect of the context of Augustine’s assimilation of that Plotinian thought. Such Plotinian elements are found in Augustine’s early texts alongside competing or incompatible metaphysical principles;’ Ronnie Rombs, *Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul: Beyond O’Connell and His Critics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2006), p. xxiv. Other O’Connell readings of interest are

Others in this tradition include Van Fleteren, Teske, O'Meara, and De Vogel.<sup>22</sup> Let us take a closer look at two more. Chadwick writes of the early Augustine: 'Ambrose has convinced him of the incorporeality of God, and preached so profound a fusion of Christianity with Platonic mysticism that Augustine thinks of Christ and Plato as different teachers converging in the same truths, complementary to each other.'<sup>23</sup> In his description of the famous Milan garden scene, Chadwick shows some visible influence of Courcelle when he considers the 'Neoplatonic circle at Milan' and their view that certain New Testament passages 'offered a biblical foundation for a Christian Platonism.'<sup>24</sup> He says, 'Soon Augustine was convinced that from Plato to Christ was hardly more than a short and simple step, and that the teaching of the Church was in effect "Platonism for the multitude," a pictorial and figurative way of addressing unphilosophical minds with the effect of making them rational at least in conduct.'<sup>25</sup>

This is a common theme in the Courcelle-O'Connell tradition: Augustine thinks that neo-Platonism got its metaphysics and ethics more or less right, but that we needed the Incarnation to bring the truth to minds poorly trained for understanding non-physical reality, and biblical commands to help them live according to the soul rather than for physical pleasures. The neo-Platonists had the mental furniture arranged, leaving a blank space on the wall to hang the picture of Jesus.

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Robert J. O'Connell, 'On Augustine's "First Conversion": factus erectior (*de beata vita* 4);' *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986), 15–29 and *Saint Augustine's Platonism: The Saint Augustine Lecture, 1981* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1984).

<sup>22</sup> Roland Teske, *To Know God and the Soul: Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), p. 70. O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Erigena*, pp. 130–131, 136–138, 155–156. Cornelia De Vogel, 'Platonism and Christianity: A Mere Antagonism or a Profound Common Ground?,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 39.1 (March 1985), pp. 1–62.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 29–30.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 25–26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.



While O’Connell focuses on the idea of the fall of the soul, Cary focuses on the idea of the soul as having an inner space where one may meet with God.<sup>26</sup> In *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self*, he considers Augustine’s discovery of this idea of the soul, a soul thought to be divine in the early writings. (Teske also looks into this theory.<sup>27</sup>) In *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul*, Cary explains how Augustine’s developing doctrine of grace was not a shift away from neo-Platonism but resulted from a better understanding of neo-Platonism—as well as of the Bible! Moreover, he thinks of grace as an inward gift within the soul. It does not come from or through any outward things. Cary elaborates in *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine’s Thought*, arguing that Augustine only knows of the inner grace within the soul, of which outer things, even sacraments, can only be signs.

One possible way of reading Augustine is to subtract the Platonism from the Courcelle-O’Connell reading. This is rarer. Conybeare, as I understand her, has sometimes interpreted Augustine thus, and others sometimes come close.<sup>28</sup> While O’Connell’s Augustine is something like an Enlightenment character, all reason and rationality, Conybeare’s Augustine is something like a postmodern character skeptical of reason.<sup>29</sup> In *The Irrational Augustine*, she argues that Augustine is less given to rationality as a means of knowing God and more interested in

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<sup>26</sup> Phillip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Phillip Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine’s Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Cary explains that Augustine was in 386 converted to Platonist philosophy and to orthodox Christianity; afterwards, his ‘Platonism grew in tandem with his Christian orthodoxy,’ *Augustine’s Invention*, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Teske, ‘Augustine’s Theory of Soul,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Krutzman: pp. 116-123 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 117-118.

<sup>28</sup> Such as, at least according to my working understanding, Stewart-Kroeker and Rowan Williams.

<sup>29</sup> I was given this interesting observation from Michael P. Foley.

Christian thought and practice.<sup>30</sup> This would seem to make Augustine rather like a Christian *non*-Platonist or *anti*-Platonist. In *The Routledge Guide to Augustine's Confessions*, Conybeare seems to shift towards the fourth way of reading Augustine—as a Platonically informed Christian. She states that Augustine at Milan had ‘moved gradually back towards a Christianity now flavoured with an intense Neoplatonism.’<sup>31</sup> There is still a ‘Plotinian ascent.’<sup>32</sup> It shows him ‘the ontological completeness of God’ and the truth that ‘God is invisible, but God is a spiritual reality, both being itself and the source of all being.’<sup>33</sup> Yet even here Conybeare reads Augustine as thinking in ways suggestive of a Christianity which rejects neo-Platonism. She emphasizes his way of knowing God by *questioning*,<sup>34</sup> not by neo-Platonic contemplation. More tellingly, she says that the passage in *Confessions* VII in which Augustine recounts his reading of the neo-Platonists presents some Platonic notions but promptly rearranges them within Christianity.<sup>35</sup> In particular, to say that Christ the Word *is* God the One ‘is fundamentally to rearrange Plotinus’s thought.’<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the emphasis on the soul’s need for grace and mediation to return to God is ‘most un-Plotinian.’<sup>37</sup> Likewise the idea of a communal ascent to

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<sup>30</sup> Catherine Conybeare, *The Irrational Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Catherine Conybeare, *The Routledge Guidebook to Augustine's Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84-88.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

God.<sup>38</sup> She observes that ‘The strange thing about the way Augustine’s “conversion” to Platonism is narrated in the *Confessions* is that we never quite get there.’<sup>39</sup>

So is Conybeare’s Augustine a Christian who accepts some principles of neo-Platonism or a Christian who rejects neo-Platonism? Maybe both. Where should we place Conybeare—as a representative of the third or of the fourth way of reading Augustine?<sup>40</sup> Maybe neither. A strong version of one reading is not so different from a weak version of the other. For that matter, Conybeare emphasizes the questioning and apophatic aspect of Augustine’s thought. She thinks *he* was not always committed to stacking ideas neatly in little boxes, and perhaps she would prefer not to classify Augustine in the same way, or so to be classified herself. Fair enough. Indeed, this whole classification scheme can reasonably be challenged, as we shall consider shortly.

But first we must take a look at another way of reading Augustine.

The Platonically informed Christianity thesis has developed largely in response to the dramatic development and Christian neo-Platonism theses. The general idea here is that Augustine is consistently as much of a Christian as he knows how to be, and as much of a Platonist as he finds useful for understanding Christian truth. For example, we might take his remark that no worldview lacking the name of Christ could hold his loyalty (*Conf.* 3.4.8) as a North Star in our interpreting—a sign of his priorities even in the early writings. When we read in *Sol.* 1.2.7 the one-sentence summary of his philosophical-theological project—‘I yearn to know God and the soul’—we may well think that his notion of God and the soul originated from

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107. Also helpful on this theme are pages 99-103.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> I placed her as simply a representative of the third reading in *Conversion and Therapy*, but perhaps this was a mistake!

church experience and from his Christian mother. When we then consider the interest he takes in neo-Platonism, we may conclude that his goal is to understand Christianity better—particularly with respect to God and the soul and to answering the problem of evil. (By contrast, an interpreter in the Courcelle-O’Connell tradition may begin by noticing some Platonic notion, or Augustine’s interest in Plotinus, and then interpret Augustine’s Christianity in light of *them*.<sup>41</sup>)

In any case, this way of interpreting Augustine rivals and apparently overcomes the Christian neo-Platonism thesis in terms of the number of scholars who adhere to it. I consider, to name only some, McEvoy, Bonner,<sup>42</sup> Mary Clark,<sup>43</sup> Fortin,<sup>44</sup> Stewart-Kroecker,<sup>45</sup> Rowan

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<sup>41</sup> And perhaps vice versa as well—as Van Fleteren advises.

<sup>42</sup> Gerald Bonner, *God’s Decree and Man’s Destiny: Studies on the Thought of Augustine of Hippo* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1987), pp. 149-150.

<sup>43</sup> Clark, Review, pp. 427-439. Also numerous passages in Mary T. Clark, *Augustine* (London: Continuum, 1994).

<sup>44</sup> *Contra* O’Connell, see Ernest L. Fortin, Review of *Saint Augustine’s Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386–391*, by Robert J. O’Connell; *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought*, ed. J. Brian Benestad: pp. 309-11; in Ernest Fortin: *Collected Essays 1* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996). Another good introduction to Fortin is Ernest L. Fortin, ‘Reflections on the Proper Way to Read Augustine the Theologian,’ *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought*, ed. J. Brian Benestad: pp. 95–114; in Ernest Fortin: *Collected Essays 1* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> See below.

Williams,<sup>46</sup> Kevane,<sup>47</sup> Foley,<sup>48</sup> Gilson,<sup>49</sup> Levering,<sup>50</sup> McDermott,<sup>51</sup> Curley,<sup>52</sup> Vaught,<sup>53</sup> Kolbet,<sup>54</sup> and Ayres<sup>55</sup> to be in this interpretive tradition. We will take particular notice of Harrison, who we should note recognizes Madec as an influence.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). For example, we cannot be converted to God by neo-Platonic vision, but need the love of God taught through the Incarnation; *On Augustine*, Kindle location 477-493. Williams suggests that one lesson of the *Confessions* is that neo-Platonism ‘serves first to liberate desire’ from service to inferior objects, but does not accomplish a necessary ‘second purification’ for the soul—its learning to love the right things. This requires the life of the church; Kindle location 1318.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Augustine’s philosophy, remaining philosophy, is a philosophizing within the biblical revelation, . . .’ Eugene Kevane, ‘Christian Philosophy: The Intellectual Side of Augustine’s Conversion;’ *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986), p. 64. Also see Kevane, *Augustine the Educator*.

<sup>48</sup> Michael P. Foley, ‘Cicero, Augustine, and the Philosophical Roots of the Cassiciacum Dialogues;’ *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 45 (1999), pp. 51–77; Michael P. Foley, ‘The Other Happy Life: The Political Dimensions to St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues;’ *The Review of Politics* 65.2 (2003), pp. 165–183; and Michael P. Foley, ‘The Sacramental Topography of the *Confessions*;’ *Antiphon* 9:1 (Spring 2005), pp. 30-65.

<sup>49</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960).

<sup>50</sup> Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine: an Introductory Guide to His Most Important Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> Gerald McDermott, *The Great Theologians: A Brief Guide* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), chapter 4.

<sup>52</sup> Augustine J. Curley *Augustine’s Critique of Skepticism: A Study of Contra Academicos* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

<sup>53</sup> *Journey Toward God, Encounters with God, and Access to God*.

<sup>54</sup> See below.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For a helpful summary of the importance of Ayres’ work in context of other scholarship, see Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 63-68.

<sup>56</sup> The English reader may consult Goulven Madec, ‘The Notion of Philosophical Augustinianism: An Attempt at Clarification;’ *Mediaevalia* 4 (1978), such as page 126: ‘. . . ideal Augustinianism is nothing other than Christianity. . . His entire doctrinal activity consisted in a defense and illustration of Christian truth in its entirety.’ Other writings from Madec available in French include Goulven Madec, ‘Connaissance de Dieu et action de graces. Essai sur les citations de l’Épître aux Romains, pp. 1, 18–25;’ *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 2 (1962), pp. 273–309; *Introduction aux ‘Révisions’ et à la lecture des Œuvres de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1996); and *Saint Augustin et la philosophie* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1996).

Harrison's *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*<sup>57</sup> argues against the dramatic development thesis, which she critiques in its more moderate form articulated by Brown. According to Harrison, there is only one Augustine, informed of and accepting some neo-Platonic insights. Yet he is also a Christian and privileges Christian theology over pagan philosophy. Neo-Platonism's insight into immateriality is helpful in answering the problem of evil and in understanding Christian theology, which stands independently of neo-Platonism.<sup>58</sup> It is a theology of sin and grace, present in the early writings as well as in the later. Although Augustine's thoughts on this subject develop, this is 'less a revolution' than a 'natural evolution.'<sup>59</sup> He is distinctively (though perhaps not in all respects *thoroughly*) Christian.

As interesting as this debate is, could it be a mistake? Possibly, but probably not. Of course, we must keep in mind that classifying scholarly traditions in this manner almost inevitably involves some oversimplification. We are painting in broad strokes. A scholar in the Courcelle-O'Connell tradition with a strong emphasis on Augustine's Christianity might be virtually indistinguishable from someone in the Madec-Harrison tradition with a strong emphasis on neo-Platonism. And a scholar from the latter tradition with a strong emphasis on Augustine's differences from neo-Platonism might fall into something very much like the Christian *non-Platonist* reading.

We might consider this debate in terms of two lists, one containing points of neo-Platonic philosophy and the other orthodox Christian points of theology (with some points on both lists).

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<sup>57</sup> Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology*.

<sup>58</sup> Carol Harrison, *Rethinking*, chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

We could define the Christian neo-Platonism reading as the theory that Augustine accepts many points from the first list and lacks a few from the second. We could define the Platonically informed Christianity reading as the theory that he accepts fewer points from the first list and a few more from the second. We could define the Christian non-Platonism reading as the theory that he accepts still fewer from the first and more from the second. There would be some gray areas in between.

We might include in the first list the doctrine of immateriality (which all agree Augustine holds), the pre-existence of the soul, its divine aspect, a disembodied afterlife, and the idea that all created things are fallen things. We might include in the second list the doctrines of the goodness of material creation, grace, the Trinity, the Incarnation, and creation *ex nihilo*. The challenge in interpreting Augustine is not only that his own thought develops, opening up at least a possibility of different lists for different stages of his career, and not only that whether he accepts a particular point for one list at some era is sometimes disputed. The challenge is also that what doctrine goes on what list is debatable. For example, Harrison emphasizes Augustine's awareness of the importance of grace.<sup>60</sup> Suppose one follows Cary<sup>61</sup> in thinking neo-Platonism also has a notion of grace? Would this force a reader of Harrison into the Courcelle-O'Connell tradition? If the reader also follows Vaught in thinking that Augustine teaches that created things are not by definition fallen, does that move him back into the Madec-Harrison column? One wonders whether dispensing with the idea of these traditions might be best.

For my part, I think not; I readily speak of the traditions myself, and tend to follow Vaught and Harrison (with great appreciation for Cary, Chadwick, Conybeare, and other

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<sup>60</sup> *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology*.

<sup>61</sup> *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul*.

disputants). There are some real differences not only in what conclusion scholars reach concerning Augustine, but also in how they reach these conclusions. Still, we must keep in mind that these distinctions are generalizations. Moreover, a scholar might well read Augustine without choosing between these interpretive frameworks. And there are other lenses for looking at Augustine which may be combined with or lead to the same conclusions as these interpretations, or might sidestep the issue altogether. Let us look, accordingly, at some other lenses.

## II. Other Lenses for Reading Augustine

The terms of this debate are concepts prominent in Augustine's intellectual milieu and in which he himself was very interested—the Trinity, the Incarnation, immateriality, reason, virtue, etc. So a debate about how to relate these concepts puts us in close proximity to Augustine. All the same, it can distract us from what he was thinking. He was not in the habit of asking, 'Am I really a neo-Platonist or am I something else?' He was thinking about other matters, such what is morally right and what makes us happy (which he did not see as separate or conflicting priorities). Well-written were Fortin's words about Augustine scholarship: 'Fascinating as many of these studies may be, they leave untouched and may even obscure some of the deeper layers of Augustine's thought, inasmuch as the questions with which they approach his works are their own and not those of Augustine.'<sup>62</sup>

In short, giving a reading of Augustine as part of this debate is a way of reading Augustine, and this debate has been central to modern Augustine scholarship; however, getting involved in this debate is certainly not the *only* way to read Augustine.

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<sup>62</sup> Ernest L. Fortin, Foreword to *Augustine's Contra Academicos: A Study* by Augustine J. Curley (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. ix–xi.



Thus it can be helpful to read Augustine through a different lens from time to time, especially those that get right to the heart of his own heart, that attend to his own conscious priorities. Let us take a quick look through a few other lenses employed by some Augustine scholars, which are quite interesting whether or not they get directly involved in this debate.

Kevane's *Augustine the Educator* is rarely read, but very good. Kevane explains that education is a high priority for Augustine at each stage of his career, from Cassiciacum on. When he gave up his post as a professor of rhetoric, he did not cease to be a teacher but became a *Christian* one. His educational priority was to impart a Christian worldview to the student and to transform classical education in the light of the Gospel. Kevane's book is delightfully written and very insightful.

Topping's *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine's Early Theology of Education* is a delightful and insightful study of how Augustine was interested in (and contributed to) the transformation of classical education in the light of Christian theology.

Kolbet's *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* is a very fine study of how Augustine transforms an ancient practice, *psychagogy*—'philosophical therapy' or the use of oratory to cure souls.<sup>63</sup> This book is nicely attentive to Augustine's use of rhetoric and to his sermons.

Vaught has the rare distinction of being a philosopher skilled in Hegel and other Continental European philosophers, able to bring their ideas into dialogue with Augustine's. Vaught emphasizes *place*, which in this case is a non-physical concept such as may be seen in the philosophy of Leibniz. This is an important idea in Augustinian thought, and turns up in

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<sup>63</sup> Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 7-9.

other scholars. (For example, Cary notes that Augustine's concept of an inner space is 'something more than a metaphor.'<sup>64</sup>) Perhaps a brief word of explanation of the notion of a non-physical place might be in order. In physics, we can chart the location of an object in three-dimensional space, but we have learned from Einstein not to think of three-dimensional space as an absolute and independent reality. Rather, it exists in relation to other realities. So place is at least partially relative. Well, in some immaterialistic accounts in metaphysics (particularly those of Plato, neo-Platonism, Augustine, and Leibniz), place is relative to certain *immaterial* realities, in relation to which a thing's location may be charted. Even what we think of as physical space itself may be relative to immaterial realities (as in Leibniz).

In his trilogy on the *Confessions*<sup>65</sup> Vaught gives a (mostly) non-physical account of place in three dimensions. The *temporal* dimension is that of time. The *spatial* dimension includes both our location on earth and our relations to other humans. The *eternal* dimension is our relation to and distance from God. Vaught explains Augustine's travels in the *Confessions*, moving closer to God while traveling in all three dimensions. These books are challenging, but they are insightful and rewarding even to those who struggle to understand Vaught's method.

Stewart-Kroeker focuses on Augustine's understanding of spiritual pilgrimage. She argues that he develops the Plotinian notion of a journey towards God, which Plotinus himself could only understand in a spiritual and immaterial sense, as literally 'a journey for the feet.'<sup>66</sup> This is, of course, because of the Incarnation. In her recent book, she argues that the Augustinian journey towards God is thoroughly shaped by the Incarnation. Christ unites heaven

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<sup>64</sup> *Augustine's Invention*, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Journey Toward God, Encounters with God, and Access to God*.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, 'Augustine's Incarnational Appropriation of Plotinus: A Journey for the Feet;' *Studia Patristica* 63.11 (2013), pp. 165-178.

and earth, and the heavenly destination is not in conflict with the earthly way we travel—nor the love of God with the love of fellow human travelers.<sup>67</sup>

Erik Kenyon's *Augustine and the Dialogue* might plausibly be classified alongside the developmentalist reading,<sup>68</sup> but his strategy is to sidestep the debate and consider Augustine's early dialogues on their own terms. He studies them as coherent works, taking seriously their dialogue form and their moral and pedagogical lessons. Kenyon interprets them as passing through phases of 'aporetic debate,' 'reflection on the act of debating,' and 'the revelation of a final plausible conclusion'<sup>69</sup>—presenting the valuable lesson that the pursuit of truth itself, even when unsuccessful, may point to plausible views concerning the truth.

Mark Ellingsen's *The Richness of Augustine* is an impressively thorough study of Augustine from the perspective of Christian theology.<sup>70</sup> He explains that Augustinian inspiration and precedent exist for virtually every major stream of theological community, doctrinal tradition, and hermeneutical perspective within western Christianity. He helpfully explains how these different aspects of theology all meet in Augustine—emphasized or expressed differently by Augustine in response to different theological, polemical, or pastoral situations.

Joseph Clair's *Discerning the Good in the Letters and Sermons of Augustine*<sup>71</sup> is a helpful look at the Augustinian way of applying moral principles in everyday life. Clair's analysis is

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<sup>67</sup> Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, *Pilgrimage as Moral and Aesthetic Formation in Augustine's Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>68</sup> See Erik Kenyon, *Augustine and the Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 4-5.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>70</sup> Mark Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine: His Contextual and Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Joseph Clair, *Discerning the Good in the Letters and Sermons of Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

well informed of ancient philosophical discussions in ethics, such as the debates between Stoics and Aristotelians depicted in Cicero's writings. Clair studies the relatively neglected sermons and letters, showing how Augustine weighs competing goods—ultimately developing an integrated account of goods.

Jason Byassee's *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine*<sup>72</sup> aims to reintroduce us to an old way of reading the Bible—Christologically and allegorically. Byassee finds Augustine's interpretations of the Psalms a compelling model. The book focuses on the *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and is a very helpful introduction to them as well as to the Christological and allegorical work of Augustine's sermons. A word on the *Enarrationes*: Six volumes in translation from New City Press, the *Enarrationes* are composed entirely of Augustine's commentaries on the Psalms, and largely of his sermons on the Psalms.

And that brings us to Byassee's scholarly forbears. Michael Cameron and Michael Fiedrowicz have led the way in the study of Augustine's *Enarrationes*.<sup>73</sup> They have been particularly helpful in teaching us how Augustine reads the Psalms according to the idea of the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ. As Cameron puts it, 'For Augustine the voice of the *totus Christus* is the radiating hermeneutical center of the Psalms.'<sup>74</sup> This is the doctrine that the

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<sup>72</sup> Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*.

<sup>73</sup> Among other works, Michael Cameron, 'Enarrationes in Psalmos,' in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), pp. 290-6; Michael Cameron, 'The Christological Substructure of Augustine's Figurative Exegesis,' in *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. Pamela Bright; vol. 2 of *The Bible Through the Ages*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), pp. 74-103; Michael Cameron, 'The Emergence of *Totus Christus* as Hermeneutical Center in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*,' in *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*, ed. Brian E. Daley and Paul R. Kolbet (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), pp. 205-26; and Michael Fiedrowicz, *Psalmus Vox Totius Christi: Studien zu Augustinus Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Freiburg: Herder, 1997); and Michael Fiedrowicz, General Introduction to *Expositions of the Psalms: 1-32*, translation and notes by Mariah Boulding; in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Part III, Vol. 15*; edited by John E. Rotelle, Introduction by Michael Fiedrowicz (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2005), pp. 13-66.

<sup>74</sup> Cameron, 'Enarrationes in Psalmos,' p. 293.

unified Christ—both the Head, Christ Jesus the messiah, and his body, the church—speak in one voice in the Psalms. Not only does the Psalmist speak the words of Christ, but Christ also gives utterance to the voice of the church. The Psalms thus not only teach about Christ, but they also teach us how to understand the church's identity in Christ.

### III. FUTURE PROSPECTS

One certain conclusion from all this is that Augustine literature will continue to be interesting. Debate will continue. Reconsiderations of old interpretations will continue, and the field is likely to undergo continual renewal and reformation.

A few additional conclusions and predictions may be made.

First, we may note that a central feature of both the Courcelle-O'Connell tradition and the Madec-Harrison tradition is that Augustine is held in all stages of his career to be serious about his Christianity, and at least neo-Platonic enough to accept certain insights and patterns of thought from neo-Platonism. A strong majority of scholars concur on these points.

Second, the Madec-Harrison tradition appears to have an advantage over the Courcelle-O'Connell tradition at least in terms of the number of scholars who represent it.

Third, however, there is a good chance that scholarship will move some distance away from this debate. Scholars will continue to find other ways of reading Augustine—fresh perspectives, or perhaps more ancient ones, but in either case independent of the modern debate.

Along the same lines, and fourth, future scholarship is likely increasingly to explore less familiar Augustinian territory. O'Donnell wrote in 2001 that an undiscovered Augustine may perhaps just be coming into view. This is the Augustine who revealed himself at vast length in his letters and sermons, texts which constitute over 45% of the bulk of his surviving works. These texts have been mined for facts that fit the pre-determined

structure of biographical narrative, but have received far too little attention for their literary and philosophical content.<sup>75</sup>

The letters and sermons will probably be the new wave of Augustinian scholarship, aided by new English translations from New City Press. In addition to Clair, Byassee, Cameron, and Fiedrowicz, recent work in this area by the likes of Byers,<sup>76</sup> Ployd,<sup>77</sup> McLarney,<sup>78</sup> and Kamimura<sup>79</sup> is only the beginning.<sup>80</sup>

For my part, I am grateful for the old ways of reading Augustine, in which everyone reads bits of the standard canon—the *Confessions*, *Teaching Christianity*, *On the Trinity*, and the *City of God*—in which familiarity with some of the main ideas from these books is a mark of the person educated in the western cultural heritage, and in which debate over his Christianity and neo-Platonism are prominent. Things might have been different, however, had we spent recent decades and centuries with everyone reading from a different standard canon. We would have known a different side of Augustine had the canon been drawn from the pastoral writings, had familiarity with ideas like the *totus Christus* instead been emphasized, and had debates more focused on such ideas enjoyed greater prominence. Fortunately, prospects are good for knowing

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<sup>75</sup> James J. O'Donnell, 'Augustine: His Time and Lives,' *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann: pp. 8-25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 23.

<sup>76</sup> Sarah Catherine Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> Adam Ployd, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>78</sup> Gerard McLarney, *St. Augustine's Interpretation of the Psalms of Ascent* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

<sup>79</sup> Among other works, Naoki Kamimura, 'Augustine's *Sermones ad Populum* and the Relationship Between Identity/ies and Spirituality in North African Christianity' and *Praedicatio Patrum: Studies on Preaching in Late Antique North Africa* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2017), pp. 429-460; 'The Relation of the Identity of North African Christians to the Spiritual Training in the Letters of Augustine,' *Studia Patristica* 98 (2017), pp. 221-238.

<sup>80</sup> Clair overviews some of the relevant new literature in Clair, *Discerning the Good*, pp. 3-4.

Augustine better in the future with a greater awareness of a broader corpus. There is a bright future in which we get to know better not only Platonically inspired philosopher and the polemical theologian but also Augustine the friend, pastor, and shepherd.