

Augustine and the Platonists

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I'm not really sure what they were after when they asked me to talk to you about Augustine and the Platonists. Maybe they wanted me to talk about some specific Platonists, and the elements of Augustine's views that he adopts or adapts. And no doubt I should at least mention a couple of names. There's Plato himself, of course (428-348 BC). The thing is, it's pretty clear that Augustine had never read Plato directly, whether in Greek (which Augustine couldn't actually handle very well) or in Latin translation. The best he could do was to read what other people said about what Scotus said.

Then there were two followers of Plato whose work Augustine did read in Latin translation: Plotinus (204-270) and his student Porphyry (233-305). He probably read them in the translation of Marius Victorinus, who is discussed in Book 8 of the *Confessions*. There's a lot of debate, though, about exactly what he read and exactly how it influenced him.

I have a somewhat non-standard view about this. I call it the "Who cares what Augustine read?" view. My view is that even though Augustine read Plotinus and Porphyry rather than Plato, his version of Platonism is actually much closer to Plato himself than it is to Plotinus and Porphyry. So knowing the details of Plotinus and Porphyry doesn't really matter much for understanding Augustine, because Augustine's kind of Platonism doesn't really depend on those details. In spirit, it's much closer to the real Plato, because it adopts the overall outlook of Plato without a lot of the additions and complications of later Platonists.

And that's why I'm going to start with a story. I'm going to use this story to get across what I think is the essence of this Platonic outlook. Then I'll show you how various Platonists put the insights that this story encapsulates to work in three different aspects of philosophy. After I've laid all that out, I'll talk about how Augustine transforms this Platonic picture in the light of his Christian faith. And then to conclude, I'll take one episode from the *Confessions* that illustrates all my main points about the Platonic outlook and Augustine's Christian transformation of it.

So to begin with, here's my story. Imagine that you're a high-school senior. You're dating someone who, for purposes of gender-inclusiveness, I'll call Pat. Now Pat is *perfect* for you. Pat is everything you could possibly want. Pat has the sense of humor, the smile, the personality, absolutely everything. No one could be better for you than Pat, and you know it.

But you graduate and go to Valpo, and Pat stays back in your hometown. (If

you're actually from Valparaiso, imagine that you're not.) So here you are, involved in all the busyness of college life, but of course you try to keep in touch with Pat. Still, it's just not the same, not having Pat right here with you. And your friends see that you feel you're missing something. So they try to set you up with someone else. Of course you say no. Pat is perfect for you. No one else could possibly live up to the wonderfulness of Pat.

But it gets harder and harder to keep your mind focused on Pat. You have classes and reading and tests and activities, and even when you do have time to think about Pat, your friends are all trying to set you up. Eventually, you just figure you'll shut them up, and anyway, maybe a real date with a live person is better than nostalgic thoughts about Pat, perfect but inaccessible Pat. Of course, you're quite sure that you won't like this person, but . . .

You go out. And you know, Chris (as we'll call this person) is really not bad. In fact, Chris reminds you a lot of Pat. Chris's sense of humor is kind of like Pat's, and sometimes Chris smiles in a way that is a lot like Pat. Chris is "your type," just as Pat is — even though, of course, Pat is infinitely superior in every way. Well, every way except for one: Pat is way off in your hometown, but Chris is *right here*.

So you find yourself spending more and time with Chris, and before long you've just forgotten about Pat — it's so easy to do, amidst all the distractions of college life — even though the only you reason like Chris is that Chris is a pale imitation of Pat, a shoddy K-Mart knockoff of the designer original. But you've lost all connection with your one true love, so you're happy with this Valpo skank.

There's the story, now here's what it means. Your hometown is the world of what is perfect, unchanging, and accessible only by the mind ("intelligible," as the Platonists say). It is your true homeland, the only place in which you can have perfect peace and rest. And Pat represents something, whatever it is, in that perfect, unchanging, intelligible world that will give you that peace and rest. Valpo is the world of what is imperfect, changing, busy, the world of what can be apprehended by the senses ("sensible," as opposed to intelligible), the world we are in because we are in bodies, rather than the world of the mind. And Chris represents the imperfect sensible things that we promiscuously spend our lives chasing after, the shoddy K-Mart knockoffs that we try to be content with, even though they can never truly bring us that perfect peace and rest.

This basic contrast — between the perfect and the imperfect, the changeless and the changing, the intelligible and the sensible — is the fundamental insight that drives all the details of the various Platonist views. If you understand the story and what it means, you understand the heart of Platonism. But I do want to go into some details as well. I want now to talk about three different ways of putting this story to work.

One way to understand this story is as making a metaphysical point. (Metaphysics is the part of philosophy that asks questions about the fundamental

structure of reality.) Plato himself liked to talk about how sensible things are shadowy copies of the true realities, which he called “the Forms.” The Forms are the eternal and unchanging ideal blueprints of things, the perfect intelligible paradigms. For example, the Form of Beauty is Beauty Itself: an intelligible reality that is perfectly, unchangingly, unendingly, unstintingly, unambiguously beautiful. Sensible things can be beautiful too, but only to the extent that they “participate in” or “share in” or “try to be like” the Form of Beauty. And of course Plato emphasizes that sensible things never completely live up to the Forms. They resemble the Forms, but only in a fragmentary and deficient way, just as Chris in my story was a cheap K-Mart knockoff of Pat.

Plato talks about how the Demiurge, the Craftsman or Artisan of the Universe, formed sensible things by using the Forms as his blueprints or patterns. Whether he meant this as a mere metaphor or as a fairly literal story is not clear. Later Platonists took it as a metaphor. There is no literal Designer of the Universe. Rather, there are principles in accordance with which all things flow forth from what they called the One, which is the ultimate origin of all things. The One doesn’t actually pay any attention to the universe – why would the highest of all things befoul itself by paying attention to the tawdry things that flow forth from it? – but simply “emanates” a lower being, which in turn emanates a lower being, and so on and on until the lowest of all, matter, comes to be. The further something is from the One, the worse it is; you can think of matter as the darkest, most shadowy, coldest corner of reality, as far as possible from the central light. All this emanation is *necessary*: it could not be otherwise than it is.

Tied to this metaphysical use of the story was an epistemological use. (Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with knowledge.) Because sensible things participate in the intelligible Forms, they can remind us of the Forms. But because they are deficient, they can also blind us to the Forms.

Platonists tend to think that most people are stuck in the world of the senses. They can’t see past the sights and sounds of this world and the pains and pleasure of the body. That means that most people know nothing worth knowing. They think beauty, goodness, justice, truth can be found in this world, when in fact the Real Thing can only exist in the intelligible realm. But thanks to the body, which constantly bombards us with sensation and entices us with pleasure, we’re stuck here in the sensible world. It’s hard to get Pat on the phone when you’re constantly hanging out with your Valpo friends.

So the things of this world *blind us* to the intelligible realm, but they can also *remind us* of the intelligible realm. The imperfection of sensible things can prompt us to look for what’s perfect, the ideal exemplars that things in this world try to be like. Sensible things can prevent us from knowing what’s really worth knowing, but they can also be the first step on the path back to the intelligible realm. Maybe – in fact, *probably* – you’ll just content yourself with Chris; but there’s always the chance that one day you’ll wake up and realize that Chris can’t really be your one true love. And then you’ll have to start the painful process of disentangling yourself from Chris, and

from your Valpo friends, and finding your way back home to Pat.

This epistemological application of the story leads right into the moral application. Since what blinds us to our true intelligible homeland is sensation, and sensation is a function of the body, it is very important to the Platonist to separate the soul from the body as much as possible. In some strands of Platonism, the body is actually considered an evil, a “prison.” It is certainly the instrument of our banishment from our true home, and the antithesis of all that is most stable and enduring, as well as most valuable.

Plotinus held that it is possible for the human soul to return to the One. This possibility exists because part of the human soul has not fallen, has not been swamped by the passions, but remains above in the intelligible world. Unfortunately, the lower part of the soul is all bound up by the passions, which impose necessity on our choice. These passions in turn arise from a misconception of reality.

So there are two key requirements for us to return to the One. First, one must have the right sort of knowledge. Second, one must get out from under the control of these passions by an austere program of moral purification. Freedom for Plotinus means our freedom **from** the passions that impose necessity on our choice.

This, as I see it, is the grand picture that Augustine finds in the Platonists. He finds it attractive and compelling in a lot of ways, so much so that (like everyone else) I think it’s fair to call him a Platonist. But Augustine is not *just* a Platonist: he’s also a Christian. And he sees that Christian belief requires him to modify the Platonist picture in significant ways. I want to examine the modifications he makes in each of the three areas I’ve discussed.

First, Augustine completely buys the story about participation. That is, he agrees that sensible things are imperfect copies or manifestations of a perfect intelligible reality. Like some Platonists (although not Plato himself), Augustine regards Plato’s Forms as ideas in the mind of God.

What he does not buy, however, is the business about emanation. Unlike “the One,” Augustine’s God is intimately concerned with the material creation. He actually creates it, designs it, shapes it according to his will. And this is not a matter of necessity. God *freely* creates.

This is a bigger difference than it might sound like at first. For one thing, Augustine cannot agree with Plotinus that every step away from the One involves a kind of fall. Instead of emanation, with the central light gradually petering out, we have creation, in which God lights up the whole universe with his own goodness. God deliberately and freely brings into being the whole variety of beings, from the most impressive to the least. So we have to regard the whole of creation as good: less good than God, of course, but still good. God, so to speak, has an investment in the material order. Its existence is not a departure from God’s perfection or a diminution of God’s perfection but a *demonstration* of God’s perfection.

You can immediately see how this is going to affect the moral picture as well. 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. Its dangerousness lies not in its distance from the Good, but in its tendency to monopolize our attention and pervert our imagination. Morally speaking, the goal is not to deny the body but to discipline the body. We can love bodily things – in fact, we *should* love bodily things – because God made them for our enjoyment. We just have to take care to love them in the right way, for the sake of greater goods, and ultimately for God’s sake.

Another way in which Augustine’s metaphysical revisions lead to moral revisions is that he has to insist on a sharp difference between metaphysical distance and moral depravity. Mere metaphysical distance is not a fall, as it is for Plotinus. It is in accordance with God’s perfect will that there be highly limited, changeable, material beings, including bodies. But moral depravity *is* truly a fall. This is the moral revolt against God’s ordering of things, the deliberate choice to prefer the lower to the higher, or to choose the lower for its own sake rather than for God’s sake.

Consistent with the spirit of these changes, Augustine also adapts the epistemological picture. Remember that the Platonists’ picture is somewhat ambivalent about the relationship between our knowledge of sensible things (which hardly deserves to be called knowledge, since its object is material things, which are barely real) and our knowledge of intelligible things (which is the genuine sort of knowledge, since its object is fully and ultimately real). On the one hand, sensible things *blind* us to intelligible realities; on the other hand, their deficiencies *remind* us of the intelligible realities that they so imperfectly mimic. Augustine agrees on both counts, but I think there’s a subtle shift of emphasis. At least in the *Confessions*, he seems much more interested in the *reminding* aspect than in the *blinding* aspect. That is, he doesn’t talk all that much about how sensible things blind us to intelligible realities – perhaps because when he’s concerned about the threat posed by sensible things, he’s far more concerned with the *moral* danger than the *epistemic* danger. Instead, he concentrates on ways in which we can use sensible things as a springboard for coming to know intelligible reality, gradually withdrawing our minds from their imperfection and mutability and coming to know the perfect and immutable God who created and sustains them.

Now so far I’ve stated several ways in which Augustine takes over the Platonist picture and modifies it so as to accommodate his Christian faith. But I haven’t yet dealt with the most important difference, the one that Augustine himself identifies as the one key thing he didn’t find in the Platonists. That is the Incarnation. Book 7, chapter 9 offers a wonderful summary of what he did, and what he did not, find when he read the Platonists.

The Incarnation has huge implications for every aspect of Augustine’s thought. In terms of the metaphysical picture, Augustine has to reject the crucial Platonist notion that the perfect intelligible reality can never be adequately realized in the imperfect

sensible world. For the doctrine of the Incarnation says that God himself took on a body, that the eternal entered time, that perfection was fully expressed within the material order. So now we have another mode of access to the truth. We don't *have* to engage in mystical meditation. We can just look at Jesus. "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9).

I don't know that I can express adequately what a difference this makes. The intelligible reality that Platonic ascent reveals is an abstraction: Truth with a capital T, Goodness with a capital G. But the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a *person*. Epistemologically, the emphasis is still on knowing the truth, but now the Truth is not an abstraction but a person, who claims to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And morally, our perfection does not come from denying the body and purifying our minds, but from entering into a relationship with a person.

This is why there's such a difference between the Platonist meditations of Book 7 and the Christian vision of Book 9. I want to look closely at the details of the two experiences as a way to draw together the various threads of my talk today.

If you're taking notes, you might find it helpful at this point to start on a new page and make two columns. You could label the column on the left "Milan" and the one on the right "Ostia," but underneath "Milan" you should write "Platonism" and under "Ostia" you should write "Christianity."

Both experiences are provoked by a question, so you can write that in both columns. But the two questions are quite different. In Milan Augustine asks how he makes certain intellectual judgments, and he discovers the intellectual standard by which he makes them:

For in asking how I came to appraise the beauty of bodies, whether heavenly or earthly, and what was wholly present to me when I passed judgment on mutable things and said: "This is as it ought to be; that is not" – in asking, that is, how I came to make such judgments when I did make them, I discovered the unchangeable and true eternity of Truth above my changeable mind. (7.17.23)

Here, as throughout Book 7, the emphasis is on the immutability of the Truth that Augustine discovers above his mind. Perhaps because the immutability of Truth makes it seem alien to our changeable minds, Augustine seems to have no sense of how Truth might be related to his mind other than as providing a standard for judgment. He finds, in fact, that he is exiled from Truth in "the land of unlikeness," and he hears Truth speaking to him "from on high" and "from far away."

When he comes to the end of the Milan "ascent," he reaches "that which is." Note that what he finds is abstract and impersonal. This is not the "I am who am" of Exodus, but the "that which is" of the Platonists. There is a jarring, almost comical shift in language in the words that conclude this section:

You called from far away, "Indeed, I am who am." And I heard, as one hears in the heart, and there was no longer any room for me to doubt; I could more easily

have doubted that I was alive than I could doubt the existence of that Truth which is perceived to be understood through the things that have been made. (7.10.16)

The God of Moses calls out to him, but he hears only the bloodless, featureless God of the philosophers.

Both the starting-point and the destination of the Ostia experience could hardly be more different. Consider the question that provokes the vision at Ostia:

In the presence of that Truth, which you yourself are, we were asking each other what the eternal life of your saints would be like, that life which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man. (9.10.23)

The emphasis in the discussion that follows is again on the immutability of Truth – not, however, as an alien standard of intellectual judgment set over against our changeable minds, but as a place of rest. Eternity is our home, Truth our food, Wisdom our life.

And we entered into our minds and passed beyond them so as to reach that land of never-failing plenty where you feed Israel for ever with the food of Truth, where life is that Wisdom through whom all these things were made. (9.10.24)

Thus at the end he arrives at the eternal food that satisfies, the heavenly banquet of which the Eucharist – which as a baptized Christian Augustine now shares – is a foretaste and a pledge. The “ascent” at Milan, by contrast, left him hungry; being as yet unconverted, he could not eat that food:

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 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. (7.17.23-18.24)

The images of homecoming and banqueting that crown the Ostia narrative emphasize another important divergence from the Milan experience. These are images of fellowship and community. We are no longer dealing with “the flight of the alone to the Alone”; here is an ascent of the together to the Together. At Milan Augustine begins in solitude, gets just close enough to Truth that he can hear it calling to him “from afar,” and quickly falls back into solitude. At Ostia, however, when he sets out he is *already* “in the presence of the Truth,” not to mention the presence of his mother. Moreover, Monnica is no mere adjunct to the experience; nor do Augustine and Monnica have independent experiences while (coincidentally but irrelevantly) side by side. It is a shared experience arising out of their conversation about the life of their heavenly homeland.

The stark differences between these two experiences encapsulate Augustine's final judgment about the Platonists, and about his own relationship to them. On the one hand, he acknowledges that much of his own intellectual outlook was formed by the Platonist picture. The parallels between the two experiences show that: the fact that both take the form of the Platonist-style "ascent" from mutability and imperfection to immutability and perfection. But on the other hand, he thinks the Platonists are ultimately incapable of doing anyone any good. Mere Platonism leaves you empty, hungry, unfulfilled. It occupies the mind with cold abstractions, which you meditate upon fitfully in solitude as you try, however briefly, to get your head above the murky water of the sensible world and glimpse the intelligible reality so far above it. The problem, Augustine tells us, is that Platonists know the goal, but they refuse to acknowledge the Way, which is Jesus himself. Apart from the right relationship to the Way, no amount of knowledge of the goal will accomplish anything. But since Christianity offers him the Way, it allows him to reach the goal that the Platonists merely glimpse from a distance. They can merely smell the food, but he can feed upon it in his heart by faith, with thanksgiving.