CHAPTER ONE

Approaching Augustine

More than most authors Augustine has been the object of unjustified denunciation by those who have not read him.

(Gerald Bonner)

Bishop Augustine . . . a man predestinate.

(Possidius)

En! Que nous importent les rêveries d’un Africain, tantôt manichéen, tantôt chrétien, tantôt débauché, tantôt dévot, tantôt tolérant, tantôt persécuteur.

(Voltaire, cited by Madec)

The world of Greco-Roman antiquity came to an end both gradually and dramatically. Many attempted to transform its thought, but among them Augustine was the most radical and the most influential, though the transformation he attempted was not always the transformation he produced. To transform is not necessarily to improve, and Augustine was handicapped by his lack of knowledge of much of the best classical philosophy. In the late twentieth century we know more about the thought of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and the Stoics than he did, though we do not always convert our knowledge into understanding. Augustine’s more limited knowledge may even be thought to have left the originality of his own mind less constrained.

Unlike us, Augustine lived on the frontier between the ancient world and mediaeval Western Europe. For ill or for good, or it may be for both, the transformation he effected left an indelible mark on subsequent Western thought. Despite his lack of resources, he managed to sit in judgement on ancient philosophy and ancient culture. The present book is an account of the judgements he made: what he understood and what he failed to understand, the errors he detected, the developments he proposed, the new directions he set. Our subject, under its broadest description, is the Christianization of
ancient philosophy in the version which was to be the most powerful and the most comprehensive. A book of reasonable length can do little more than scratch the surface of such a topic, though it can scratch to more or less good purpose.

It is impossible to understand a thinker without knowing something of his biography, and Augustine’s mental history must be set against that of the religious and political events of his own times, particularly as they were experienced in North Africa and in Italy. Augustine has provided a selective account of large parts of his own life in the Confessions, and good modern biographies exist, especially that of P. R. L. Brown; hence in a work like the present a brief summary must suffice. Augustine was born in the small town of Tagaste (now Souk Ahras in Algeria) in 354 to Patricius, a non-Christian and fairly comfortable member of the ruling elite of his small town and to his Christian wife Monica who, though devout, was not so ardent on ‘divine things’ as she later became (On Order 2.1.1). The atmosphere at their home was Christian, yet Augustine was not baptized. His schooling began at Tagaste, and after a year at Madaura his parents, recognizing his talent, sent him to the metropolis of Carthage to become a student of rhetoric. There he flourished in his profession, found a concubine by whom he had a son, Adeodatus, and from 373 to 382 was a Manichaean ‘auditor’, a member of a self-styled ‘Christian’ group owing allegiance to the Mesopotamian prophet Mani. He left Carthage for Rome in 383, but kept up links with Manichaeans there until late in the following year he succeeded to the Chair of Rhetoric in Milan. Perhaps his Manichaean contacts helped him to secure this.

Augustine was first drawn to philosophy by reading Cicero’s Hortensius, an exhortation to its study modelled on the Protrepticus of Aristotle. On his own account he found it overwhelming, and it temporarily dimmed his ambition for a political career as he felt ‘an incredible burning desire’ in his heart to fly away from earthly things to God and Wisdom (Confessions 3.4.7). When his confidence in the supposed rationality of the Manichaeans began to fade, it was to the Scepticism of the New Academy, as found largely in Cicero’s writings, that he returned.\(^3\)

---

2 On Augustine’s detailed and accurate knowledge of Manichaeanism see recently S. N. C. Lieu, Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey (Manchester 1985), 117–153.
3 CA 1.3.7; DBV 4.26; Conf. 5.10.19; 5.14.25, etc.
Approaching Augustine

In Milan Augustine met a different kind of thinking. Bishop Ambrose was not only able to defend the Old Testament against the Manichaeans, but urged his congregation to think of God and the soul as distinct from any material reality, and raised the possibility that belief is a prerequisite for understanding (Confessions 6.5.7–8). Ambrose himself was well read in contemporary Greek theology and had some knowledge of Greek Neoplatonism as well as its Latin derivatives, so that Augustine met for the first time a ‘platonizing’ interpretation of Christianity, but as yet he had read no such material himself. Yet it was not Ambrose who introduced Augustine to the Platonists of Milan – among them some prominent Christians, including the priest Simplicianus who had baptized Ambrose himself and was to succeed him as bishop. Somehow, through a man 'swollen with monstrous vanity', probably not a Christian himself, Augustine was introduced to a number of ‘Platonic books’ (in which Simplicianus later told him that ‘God and his Word are implied’ [Confessions 8.2.3]); some (though perhaps not all) of them were by Plotinus himself, that is, as Augustine saw it, by ‘Plato born again’ (Against the Sceptics 3.18.41). They may have amounted to only a smallish portion of the Enneads; most of what Augustine knew of Plotinus could have been derived, or intelligently inferred, from a very few of Plotinus’ earliest (and often easiest) essays: 1.6 (‘On Beauty’), 5.1 (‘On the Three Divine Hypostases’), 4.8 (‘On the Descent of the Soul into the Body’).

It is likely that Augustine’s readings in Neoplatonism were not limited to the period immediately before his conversion to Christianity. What he found in this period, however, was enough to convince him that Platonism and Christianity had much common ground. The Platonic books provided evidence about God and his eternal Word, though not about the Incarnation (Confessions 7.9.14).

The discovery of the importance of Christ as the only Way (John 14:6; Confessions 7.18.24) drove Augustine beyond the Platonic books; for while the Neoplatonists might speak the truth about God’s nature, they lacked means of access to it. Neoplatonism is incomplete; its underlying weakness is that it is theoretical, without the power to instigate right action. But notice that even when Augustine’s ‘natural’ understanding of God was bolstered by the recognition that Christ is the Way, he did not immediately convert to Christianity. He had

---

Augustine: ancient thought baptized

achieved only what Newman termed ‘notional’ assent, an assent to propositions, not that ‘real’ assent which is a willed commitment to a way of life. In Augustine’s view it is real assent which is conversion. There is only one point of conversion in the Confessions: the progress of notional assent which is described in book 7 is followed by the account of the conversion, that is Augustine’s desire to ask for baptism, in book 8. The truth of Christianity he had recognized before he became a Christian (Confessions 8.1.1).

Augustine was baptized in 387, in the presence of his mother Monnica, together with his son Adeodatus (his mother had been sent back to Africa when, only a little time before, Augustine – and Monnica – were thinking of a political marriage and a career in the civil service) and Alypius his old friend from Tagaste – later its bishop. A rather ‘Plotinian’ mystical experience in Milan had helped in the last stages of his conversion; a more specifically Christian experience at Ostia, with his mother Monnica, shortly preceded her death and Augustine’s return to Africa, where he had determined to live a lay monastic life.

But this was not to be, and after his enforced ordination to the priesthood in 391 and elevation to the bishopric of Hippo in 396 he was to spend the rest of his days combining a monastic personal lifestyle with the burdens of a bishop, influential first among his fellows in North Africa, where he took a leading role in opposing the schismatic ‘party of Donatus’, and later, both through his writings and his battle with the Pelagians, on the wider stage of world-history. He died, with his political world in ruins around him, in 430, when his see of Hippo, crowded with refugees, was being besieged by the Vandals of Gaiseric. But by then had appeared the writings which are the material of the present study.

Augustine wrote an inordinate amount, and much of it survives, though a recent estimate suggests that of his sermons ‘to the people’ we possess only 546 out of a possible 8000. Nevertheless, despite a few diminishing coteries of condoners and devotees – indeed sometimes because of them – Augustine has a dubious, even evil reputation, and not only among those who have read little or nothing of his work. One reason for that, however, is clear and singularly unimpressive. There are many genuinely Augustinian themes (about the body, or predestination, or baptism, and above all about human inadequacy and sinfulness) which ‘post-Christian’ orthodoxy merely assumes to be misguided: such can currently be acceptably rejected without benefit of scrutiny or honest attempt to understand their raison d’être. Then
there are notions attributed to Augustine, or ‘found’ in him by ‘Augustinians’ of various stripes, which are also unpopular, but which Augustine would have disowned himself. A contemporary student acquainted with his thought has a responsibility to help the modern reader identify such items.

Augustine has often been described as a ‘Christian philosopher’. Critics have sometimes wanted to object that the adjective contradicts the noun. Certainly to say that Augustine was a Christian philosopher is not the same as to say that Aristotle was a Greek philosopher, if only because Greek philosophers did not have to believe in God, whereas, at least until recently, Christian philosophers did. To say that Augustine was a Christian philosopher is rather like saying that Sartre was an atheist philosopher: Augustine accepted arguments for God’s existence, Sartre for his non-existence. If Sartre’s arguments on the matter are bad, that does not entail that he was not a philosopher, only that in that respect he was a bad one. The same could apply to Augustine.

Books sometimes appear with titles like *The Philosophy of Augustine* or *Augustine’s Philosophy of Whatever*. So titled they may unintentionally mislead, suggesting as they do that Augustine’s range of intellectual concerns was limited to those of a typical member of an Anglo-American philosophy department – though in his view philosophy is not a game or a job but a way of life (*Against the Sceptics* 2.2.5). They may also suggest that a book about Augustine’s philosophy would have little to say about what we would style theology. A book entitled *The Theology of Augustine*, on the other hand, would risk being treated as platitude for the cleric or para-cleric, hence of no interest to anyone else; some would assume that it had nothing to do with argument, or even with reason. In any case, to call Augustine a philosopher rather than a theologian is not merely to admit a distinction which he would not have accepted; it is to propose a distinction which he did not know. For while in antiquity a ‘philosopher’ is usually someone who tries to live a life governed by reason, a regular sense of the word ‘theologian’ (*theologos*) is someone who talks about ‘the divine’, and ‘the divine’ is whatever is eternal and unchanging, or, at a cruder level, more long-lasting or just plain stronger than we are: so ‘theologian’ might refer to a metaphysician, a physicist, a mythographer or an

---

In the hope of avoiding some of the pitfalls surrounding the distinction between philosophy and theology in Augustine, I have usually left the philosophy embedded in its often very obviously theological context. The price of this avoidance of anachronism may seem to be the introduction of too much merely 'theological' matter, and not only of what is now styled 'philosophical theology'. That is a price which has to be accepted if Augustine is to be taken seriously. However, it has been possible to omit much revealed or 'church-order' matters such as 'sacraments' and 'ecclesiology' without gross distortion, since my primary concern is with Augustine's evaluation and transmission of Greco-Roman 'philosophical' ideas.

To include a good deal of theology in a book on Augustine's thought, and at the same time to say that he would not recognize himself as a philosopher in a modern, or at least modern Anglo-American sense, is not to assume that he should be approached with any anachronistic preconceptions about his being a philosopher, or would-be philosopher, in some other, older or better sense; for example as to his being in anticipation a Thomist or Thomist manqué. Here too he has been misrepresented and distorted, for obviously Augustine's work enormously influenced Aquinas – so much so that where they differed, for example about politics and the state, Aquinas' efforts to explain such differences away remain a common cause of the misreading of Augustine – but to read Augustine with thirteenth-century problems to the fore must be to read him through a distorting lens.

Clearly Augustine would have agreed with much in Aquinas, but commonsense and a sense of history make us aware that he cannot be a Thomist in the way that Aquinas can be an Augustinian. A sane theory of a philosophia perennis is that later thinkers develop the work of their predecessors, not that later work reveals what is fully implicit in what went before. To say that Aquinas builds on Augustine is not to say that Augustine would have regarded Thomism as the only possible, let alone the best possible, development of his ideas. The philosophical world from which Augustine comes, and in which to some considerable extent he remains, is hardly even Aristotelian: it is

---

⁴ For interesting recent comment on 'theologians' in antiquity see J. M. Dillon, 'Philosophy and Theology in Proclus', in From Augustine to Eriugena: Essays on Neoplatonism and Christianity in Honor of J. J. O'Meara, eds. F. X. Martin and J. A. Richmond (Washington 1991), 66–76. Dillon notes (p. 67) that the word first appears in Plato, Rep. 2.379a5. See also G. Madec ('Théologia: note augustinor-érigenienne', ibid., 117–125) who comments on Augustine's remark that theology is speech or reasoning 'about the divine' (CD 8.1).
Approaching Augustine

primarily Stoic and Platonic, though often in unusual mutations of these systems.

Ideological reasons for assimilating Augustine to Aquinas are obvious enough – Aristotle has often been assimilated for the same reasons – but beneath them lurks a substantive point of considerable interest. Aquinas inherited and appropriated two traditions, one Augustinian and the other Aristotelian, but the historical Augustine also appropriated an amalgam of ancient philosophy, of which Platonism was the principal ingredient, into his Christian synthesis. That should tell us that, quite apart from 'theological' matter, much purely philosophical material assimilated by Aquinas in the thirteenth century had already been assimilated by Augustine in the fifth. This makes the areas where they diverge of particular interest philosophically; and it is essential to avoid confusing Augustine and Aquinas in precisely these cases.

A final and more theoretical point about the distinction between philosophy and theology in Augustine must be addressed. Very roughly, philosophical discussions have two constant features: arguments from premises and the premises from which the arguments derive. Modern philosophers may suggest that their premises form possible models as a basis from which to proceed. These possible models may first arise from ‘thought-experiments’ which generate a number of premises the consequences of which can then be inspected. As a result of such inspection, judgements can be made about the usefulness of the original model and consequent assumptions in explaining the puzzling phenomena which originally called them forth. The generation of such helpful models is a work of philosophical imagination. Augustine's 'philosophical models' were, increasingly, theological hypotheses, teased out of the Scriptures and the belief and practice of the Church. They were like any modern model in that their purpose was to make sense of what lies around us. It is their continuing success in doing that, which makes them not only interesting possibilities, but worthy of close and detailed inspection. To attempt to make sense of Augustine's thought without taking such theological models at least as seriously as one takes a modern philosopher's models is to emasculate the thought itself, and to deprive Augustine of his philosophical integrity.

Like any other thinker, whether of Greco-Roman antiquity or of the present day, Augustine wanted to understand the world in which he lived, or at least what mattered in that world, and so he wanted to
avilh himself of any evidence which might be useful to that end. Such evidence might be provided by the senses, by reason and argument, and by authorities, if such there were. For Augustine, after his conversion to Christianity, such authorities were the Scriptures, read within the Church tradition, and ‘Catholic’ writers. These were accepted because they appeared to contribute to the solution of problems which otherwise seemed insoluble. Before reaching this conviction Augustine had tried other authorities such as the writings of Mani.7 He had found them unsatisfying both to reason – on which they especially vaunted themselves – and to his experience of the world; above all they failed to explain human nature, and thus the nature of moral evil.8

All the texts of Augustine which we possess are Christian. Before his conversion he had written a book On the Beautiful and the Suitable – perhaps in 381 – and a number of panegyrics on or before famous people,9 but of these none survives. The extant writings are the compositions of a Christian reasonably familiar with a selection of standard philosophical ideas. Long before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine, who at this time knew rather little Greek, had learned much of what he knew of the classical and Hellenistic periods of Greek philosophy – as we have suggested – from the writings of Cicero,10 his master in rhetoric, and from Cicero’s contemporary Varro. From such sources, and from more potted handbook collections, he also learned most of what he knew of the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Sceptics, and of Plato (as distinct from later Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic authors).11 His ‘Platonism’, as we shall call it, runs deep,

7 For the problem of reason and authority in Augustine’s anti-Manichaean writings see J. Burnaby, Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine (London 1938), 74. Augustine recalls (Sermon 51.5.6) that concern about the incompatibility between the genealogies of Matthew and Luke was a factor in his turn to Manichaeanism.


9 There seem to have been Manichaean elements in the De Pulcro et Apto, but despite G. Stanes (Augustine’s Confessions (Waterloo, Ontario, 1990), 102–104) I am disinclined to emphasize them.

10 For Cicero’s own philosophical shifts and his (incomplete) return to Scepticism in his later years, see most recently J. Glucker, ‘Cicero’s Philosophical Affiliations’, in The Question of Eclecticism, eds. J. M. Dillon and A. A. Long (Berkeley, London and Los Angeles, 1986), 54–69.

11 See M. Testard, Saint Augustin et Ciceron (Paris 1958) and H. Hagensdahl, Augustine and the Latin Classics (Göteborg 1967), and for Varro, I. Hadot, Arts libéraux et philosophie dans la pensée antique (Paris 1984), 156–190. For the manuals, see A. Solignac, ‘Doxographies et manuels dans la formation philosophique de saint Augustin’, RA 1 (1958), 113–148. Augustine’s knowledge of the Neoplatonists is more controversial. He had read some books ‘of the
but his acquaintance with Plato’s own writings was largely second-hand: for example, key passages of the *Meno* about knowledge as recollection seem to have reached him via Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* (1.57-58).12

Thus, though Augustine’s extant writings are entirely Christian, and his theology from the first is based on the absolute supremacy of an immaterial God and on the unhellenic notion of the creation of all things by God from nothing,13 it is essential to know something of his philosophical and theological history, and of his concerns and presuppositions at the time – soon after his conversion – when he began to write as a Christian. It might then seem a reasonable procedure to progress through his works in chronological order, trying to establish and explain changes as they occur. For he himself said that he was a man who writes as he progresses and progresses as he writes (*Letter 143*); and that if we read his writings in sequence we shall be able to discern the progress of his mind (*Reconsiderations*, prologue 3).14 With some thinkers, to follow such a chronological progression would be a very suitable course; in the case of Plato it is essential. With Augustine it would undoubtedly have considerable advantages: one of the greatest would be that we should be able to study the *Confessions* as a unit – an advantage which a work of the present sort has to sacrifice. Indeed, to approach every book of Augustine as a single whole would deliver similar, though less extensive, rewards. Yet a study of that sort would often degenerate into a tedious catalogue and would require thousands of pages. Our present project must remain more modest. Readers with sufficient Platonists’ (i.e. Neoplatonists) – the plural suggests more than one author – before his conversion, and these included at least a few essays from Plotinus’ *Enneads* (1.6.5.1; etc.). It is possible that he extended his reading of Plotinus in the course of the 390s.

Many commentators believe that at the time of his conversion he had already also read some Porphyry: perhaps the *Sententiae* is the best candidate, published as an introduction to (some of) the *Enneads*. He had certainly read a good deal of Porphyry by the early 400s, but massive scholarly attempts to pinpoint earlier direct acquaintance with Porphyry are not compelling. By the time of the *City of God* (begun c. 413) Augustine also knew the Latin *Asclepius* (which he wrongly believed to be by Apuleius), and *Apuleius* himself.


14 Cf. his remarks about his ‘erroneous’ views of the origins of faith before 396 (*DDP* 20.53-21.54).
time can pursue their interests further elsewhere, in editions and commentaries on individual Augustinian texts.

The principal obstacle to a detailed chronological approach to Augustine's thought (as distinct from his biography) was set up by the very nature of his life as a priest and a bishop. Unlike most ‘philosophers’, he was a man who had great and constant public responsibilities, and he wielded considerable power. Much of his time was taken up by his liturgical and pastoral duties, his episcopal role and that which de facto followed from it as a magistrate, and by ecclesiastical politics. Completion of large books, such as The Trinity and The City of God, was constantly delayed, partly in the former case because of radical changes of plan and the sheer difficulty of the subject-matter, but also to allow for time to satisfy pressing local concerns and the constant demands of correspondents. Of these there was an enormous variety: small-town know-alls looking for recognition, prominent politicians and soldiers, Christian thinkers and writers (like Jerome), a variety of influential bishops known to Augustine only through their letters, old friends like Simplicianus and Evodius, the former now successor of Ambrose in the see of Milan, the latter a one-time secret policeman (agens in rebus)\(^{15}\) turned bishop of Uzalis, and a close associate of Augustine's from his early Christian days who was always urging serious problems about evil and the nature of the soul. As a result of all this Augustine's life was hectic, as his writings bear witness. Important evidence for his key beliefs is often widely scattered; arguments are left incomplete and revived years later; problems are raised and pushed aside.

Certainly there are systematic treatises of Augustine, most obviously The Trinity; but other long books (The Literal Commentary on Genesis, The Confessions, The City of God), though more or less organized around broad themes, are often discursive, prompting complaints, in impatient times, about Augustine composing badly.\(^{16}\) But Augustine’s procedures, for which he can hardly be blamed, have not satisfied the writers of ‘Augustinian’ manuals – the first of which, a handbook on more than eighty heresies, he churned out himself in 428. It was a bad precedent, and frequently followed. Systematic (and often systematically

---

\(^{15}\) On the work of the agents see A. Giardina, Aspetti della burocrazia nel Basso Impero (Rome 1977). Other members of the corps included Ponticianus, who much impressed Augustine at a crucial moment before his conversion by recounting how two of his colleagues at Trier had been inspired by tales of St Antony to take up the monastic life (Conf. 8.6.13–15).

\(^{16}\) So H. I. Marrou, Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique, 4th edn (Paris 1958) 61 (recanted, 665–672).