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Introduction: Augustine and philosophy

> If Plato has said that the sage is the one who imitates, knows, loves God, participation in whom brings happiness, what need is there to examine other philosophers? None have come closer to us than the Platonists.[1]

Hannah Arendt once remarked of Augustine that he turned to religion out of philosophical perplexity.[2] Augustine's account in the *Confessiones* of his discovery of philosophy lends support to her judgment. In book III he recalls his reaction at age nineteen to Cicero's *Hortensius*, an exhortation to philosophy. "Truly that book," he reports, "changed my disposition."[3] Judging from the earlier sections of the *Confessiones*, Augustine's former disposition had inclined him towards experimenting with sin, a disposition so puzzling in its motivations that he can hardly recollect it with a semblance of intelligibility. When Cicero converts him to philosophy, Augustine turns the mystery of his own perversity into an object of study. Thereupon begins his intensely personal and profoundly philosophical preoccupation with evil. What was its nature, its origin, its end? – questions not unrelated in his mind to God's conceivability.

For a considerable stretch of the narrative in the *Confessiones*, Augustine describes himself as having been bound in imagination to a material God, and, by consequence, to evil as the material antithesis of God's substance. This Manichaean outlook on good and evil as eternally opposed natures seemed to

[1] *De civ. Dei* 8.5 (CCSL 47, 221, 1–7): "Si ergo Plato Dei huius imitatorem cognitorem amatorem dixit esse sapientem, cuius participatione sit beatus, quid opus est excutere ceteros? Nulli nobis quam isti propius acesserunt."
[2] *The Life of the Mind*, vol. II (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), 84.
[3] *Conf.* 3.4.7. (CCSL 27, 30, 6–7): "Ille uero liber mutauit affectum meum."

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Augustine, for a long while, to make sense of his own struggle against apparently intractable vice. Ultimately he would find the dualistic view of good and evil obfuscating, its power to explain illusory. He speaks of his perceptual breakthrough in book VII, after he has read the books of the Platonists (*libri Platonicorum*). Their words direct his attention inwards, and with his mind's eye he catches sight of God's immaterial light. No longer bound to a material imagination, Augustine removes good and evil from external space and places them in his newly discovered interior space, the realm of his will.

Most philosophers who have taken an interest in Augustine, Arendt not least among them, have looked to his creation of our modern concept of will out of the Latin *voluntas*. His conceptual innovation seems to have coincided with his departure from a crude Platonism, which would have confused knowing with willing. Augustine understood all too well from his own case that knowledge of the good did not necessarily result in the appropriate transformation of motivation. Virtue could in discomforting ways lag behind vision. The dénouement of his remarkable vision in book VII, for instance, was not conversion but the intransigence of habit: "I did not stand fast to enjoy my God; I was but carried off to you by your beauty, and soon I was torn from you by my own weight... this weight, the habit of my flesh."[4]

If we take Augustine's reason to have been the conduit of his desire for God, and his habits to have been the product of his untutored appetites (i.e., those desires of his formed independently of his knowledge of God), then his predicament in book VII cannot usefully be described as a conflict between reason and appetite. For Augustine's conflict, according to his account of his own conversion in book VIII, is resolvable in reason's favor, and were the conflict in book VII merely one of reason with appetite, the resolution never would have come. His problem in book VII, it seems, is not that he needs more or better knowledge of God, but that he lacks the ability to modify his habitual appetites to fit his new knowledge. His new knowledge,

[4] *Conf.* 7.17.23 (CCSL 27, 107, 2–4): "et non stabam frui deo meo, sed rapiebar ad te decore tuo moxque diripiebar abs te pondere meo...; et pondus hoc consuetudo carnalis."

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in so far as it is knowledge of the good, has motivational content. But if that content fails either to integrate or to eliminate his habitual desires, Augustine will find himself caught between two contrary and irreconcilable sources of motivation. Doubtless in such a conflict he would want to identify himself with his rational desires, and yet his reason's sole means of control over irrational appetite – the motivating power of knowledge – will have run up against an absolute limit.

A less-than-absolute limit suggests the presence of a mediating faculty, the will, which could determine itself in accord with either rational or irrational desires while retaining its independence from both. One way Augustine might be supposed to have opened up separate conceptual space for the will, separate from space held by knowledge and desire, is to have given choice a measure of independence from desire. Let our desires of themselves determine our disposition and activity, and what we will have is habitual action. Moreover there is no guarantee, as Augustine illustrates in his own case in book VII, that those habits will defer to rational judgment or superior knowledge. The power of knowledge to motivate is not enough to determine action. We must *choose* to be motivated by rational rather than habitual desires, and if our choice fails to carry into action, we have not the triumph of appetite over reason, but a failure of will. Augustine's commentators are fond of describing his Platonic vision of God in book VII as the conversion of his intellect, and his commitment to the Christian life in book VIII as the conversion of his will. The two conversions mark Augustine's debt to and departure from Platonism.

Much of what I discuss in this book can be described as my attempt to recollect Augustine the philosopher, to locate the knot of his philosophical perplexity and then follow his efforts at disentanglement. In large part this will be a story about Augustine's "discovery" of the will, for I firmly believe, as many have before me, that his reflections on willing brought about a revolution in philosophy. After Augustine, Plato's legacy never could be quite the same. I assess the nature of his debt to and departure from Platonism differently than most, however. The conventional wisdom, which I have suggested in brief above, credits Platonism with having introduced Augus-

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tine to his inner depths, the reality once hidden by the sensual imagery of his imagination. Having turned within, Augustine enters the labyrinth of his will, where he encounters himself torn between sin and grace, longing for reunion with God but still caught in habitual diversions. His way out is not through knowledge but through love – God's responsive love for Augustine – and there marks Augustine's departure from Platonism. He responds in will to God's willing of his redemption. If Augustine were strictly a Platonist, he should have had need for only one conversion, that of his intellect.

Augustine's debt to Platonism certainly had to do in part with its revelation to him of reality beyond the sensible. He says as much in the *Confessiones*, and there is no reason not to take him at his word. Yet Augustine owes an even profounder debt to Platonism which is easy to overlook. Plato and his interpreters introduce him to the seductive power of the good. It enters his awareness in the form of God's power to transform the being of God's beholder. When he recounts his vision of God in book VII, however, he gives no indication of having been able to retain his own power to respond or to incorporate God's agency into his own. He communicates instead the frightening experience of being transformed despite himself and therefore of feeling alienated from the person transformed: "And when I recognized you for the first time, you raised me up so that I might see the reality of what I could see, and not yet was I the person who could see."[5] In describing the dawning of his vision, Augustine uses surprisingly violent language: "You beat back the infirmity of my power of seeing, radiating your light forcibly upon me, and I shook with love and with horror."[6] The momentary vision, for all its immediate seductiveness and power, fails to take hold. Augustine, in transport, snatched up and carried off by God's beauty, finds himself not with God but in a place far removed, a *regio dissimilitudinis*, not only from God but also from himself. This time of exile cannot last. God's voice calls Augustine from on high and invites him to become like God, but

[5] *Conf.* 7.10.16 (CCSL 27, 103, 13–15): "Et cum te primum cognoui, tu assumpsisti me, ut uiderem esse, quod uiderem, et nondum me esse, qui uiderem."
[6] *Conf.* 7.10.16 (CCSL 27, 103, 15–17): "Et reuerberasti infirmitatem aspectus mei radians in me uehementer, et contremui amore et horrore."

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Augustine's habits, which express the self he has known, soon bring him back to earth. It is his memory of God, and not his vision, which must now do the work of transformation.

I do not say that Augustine's profounder debt to Platonism is easily overlooked because the sheer seductiveness of the good is easily overlooked in Augustine's experience of God. Quite the contrary: seductiveness is so overwhelmingly present in his description of God's incorporeal light that we tend to be blinded to anything else. We cannot see, in particular, the manner in which Augustine is supposed to take shape in God's light. But if as readers we are left with no knowledge of Augustine's transformation in his transport to God, it is neither because Augustine has chosen to omit the relevant details from his narration nor because his self-knowledge in transport simply cannot be communicated across the experiential gulf between first and third person. His readers admittedly might lack the benefit of incorporeal light in reading of his experience, but Augustine never leads us to believe that had we such illumination, we would know something about him which we could not otherwise learn from reading the *Confessiones*. In fact, we seem to be no more significantly alienated from Augustine's experience of God than he himself was at the time of his experience. In retrospect he tells us how little he felt a part of what he saw. It was as if he was not yet the person who had experienced the rapture of transcendent vision. As narrator of his own life, Augustine needs some intelligible way of describing this odd doubling of himself, which allowed him to be paradoxically both present and absent in the same experience. To resolve the paradox without ignoring the phenomenon on which it is based, he will need to move beyond the conceptual resources of his Platonic inheritance.

Plato, to Augustine's mind, had unified philosophy's two greatest ambitions – to know the world and its causes and to live the good life – when he discovered the world's foundation in the good, which Augustine was only too happy to redescribe as God.[7] But neither Plato nor his followers ever solved the problem of mediation. The problem emerged from the disparity

[7] See especially *De civ. Dei* 8.4.

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between the sublime perfection of the good and the human mind's powers of representation. Supposing that we were to have the representation of the good as sublimely perfect, still we could do nothing with the representation until we managed to connect it with our habitual pursuits of goods. In other words, to appropriate the good into our power of agency, we would have to be able in some way to include *ourselves* in the good's representation. The flawless Platonic God, more real to Augustine than his own fleeting existence, called back to itself the perfection in Augustine. But since Augustine's identity was as much a matter of his infirmities as his virtues, most of him was left behind. When his conversion does come, and its moment is famously described in the garden scene of book VIII, when Augustine answers to a command to "take up and read" ("tolle, lege"), we need to ask as readers why so much more of Augustine seems to be included in this turn to God rather than in the other. Why does an unmediated vision of God bring him internal division, while a mediated calling ushers in his conversion?

Augustine's extended discussion of his will's internal division in book VIII, which sets the stage for his moment of inner healing, draws our attention to the importance of his concept of will. We would not be wrong to expect to find his departure from Platonism somewhere in the elaboration of this concept. We would be wrong, however, and fundamentally wrong, were we to suppose that Augustine introduces room for the will by diminishing his Platonic confidence in the power of knowledge to motivate and thereby to conform human agency to the good. He retains this confidence undiminished not only in the *Confessiones*, but for the remainder of his career as a theologian, and it is what I have referred to as his profounder debt to Platonism. Most of Augustine's commentators, I think it fair to say, would disagree with me wholeheartedly. They tend to read him in the *Confessiones* and especially in his later polemical works against the Pelagians, his archenemies in theology, as having denied the sufficiency of knowledge for personal transformation. And so where I see a debt to Platonism, they would mark a departure.

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I admit that there is an immediate appeal to the reading contrary to my own. The moral of Augustine's description of his vision of God in book VII seems to be that even the most compelling presentation of knowledge cannot determine the response of the knower to the knowledge. God's reality is the most compelling reality imaginable, and yet when this reality presents itself to Augustine's inner gaze, his vision effaces his will, and he becomes passive instead of receptive to what he is seeing. His bypassed agency, left out of the encounter, soon interrupts his vision with its customary claims on his attention. What better way for Augustine to reintroduce his human response to God than in book VIII to add choice to knowledge? He could (and should) still retain a modest confidence in the motivational contribution of his knowledge, but not so much that his knowledge alone could be supposed to unify his will. When he enters the scene of his conversion with his divided will, let God be supposed to strengthen his resolution to live up to his knowledge, but let Augustine retain the capacity to refuse the help. He will not refuse, of course, since his knowledge of the good confirms his desire to conform himself to God, but his power to refuse will allow him to be receptive to transformation. *Voluntas* enters into Augustine's conversion as his commitment to his knowledge of the good, a commitment informed but not determined by the motivational contribution of his knowledge. At this point we will have come to an understanding of the will as the power of choice – the power to choose one's own motives. In order for this sort of power to exist, willing will have to be conceptually distinct from desiring. If it were not, we would will to have some desire determine our action only to have our will determined by some prior desire.

There are at least two reasons for rejecting this account of the will. The first is that it is incoherent. The second is that it is not Augustine's. I mention both reasons because Augustine worked through the notion of will as choice before finding it unserviceable and moving on to a far more complex understanding. He never denied, of course, that we make choices and can be held responsible for what we choose. But choice did not capture for him the way in which our wills registered knowledge

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of the good. Whenever we act, Augustine would contend, we act under some representation of the good. If we willfully refuse to act in accordance with what we judge to be best, then we become unintelligible to ourselves, at least in so far as our refusal outruns our available motives. It adds absolutely nothing to the attribution of agency, then, to incorporate an unexpressed power of refusal into every agent's consent to whatever good has served to motivate a particular course of action. The theory of will as the power of choice, informed by but independent of desire, makes every action to some degree unintelligible, for if the theory were true, no action would ever be sufficiently explained by its motives. We would have to add the agent's free-floating choice of motives to complete the explanation.[8] Augustine condemned the Pelagians for this reification of choice, not only because it gave them rather than God the last word on their redemption, but because it amounted in essence to a denial of God's power to transform human agents. No matter what God could supply human beings with in the way of motives, they could hold back from acting on their motives, even if it meant refusing to acknowledge what they knew for themselves to be good. The Pelagian will, as I shall describe it for the time being, did not merely exacerbate the problem of mediation; it rendered it insoluble in principle. I submit that the Pelagian will is a fiction. There is no faculty of will, distinct from desire, which we use to determine our actions.

Augustine abandons this fiction when he comes to the conclusion, early in his long career as a theologian, that God can call sinners irresistibly to a new way of life.[9] The irresistibility of grace ensures that God's presentation of the good to human agents necessarily meets with the appropriate response – the conformity of living to knowing. Augustine's

[8] This point needs minor qualification. If the action to be explained were habitual, we could bypass choice and appeal directly to the agent's unreflective acquiescence to familiar patterns of behavior. This, however, would be to explain the habitual action *qua* habit. If we wished to explain the habitual action *qua* action, we would have to trace the habit to an original intentional action, whose motives could then be attributed to the agent. The theory of will, as I have outlined it above, purports to account for the attribution.

[9] See Augustine's second response to Simplician in *Ad Simpl.*, written circa 396. I discuss this work and its relationship to the *Confessiones*, which comes on its heels, at length in chapter 4.

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interpreters, especially the philosophically minded, have as a rule tended to distance him from his theological commitment to the sufficiency of grace for moral regeneration. They reserve his intimations of God's unlimited control over human redemption for his doctrine of predestination, whose final form awaited his last years, when the old bishop, having tired of controversy, supposedly gave into an authoritarian impulse and preached the value of human slavery to God. Even Arendt, who praised Augustine for having held on to philosophy throughout this life, disavowed any interest in his doctrine of predestination, which she dismissed in passing as "the most dubious and also most terrible of his teachings."[10] Predestination, to hear Augustine tell of it, is simply grace from God's point of view.[11] As a doctrine it has little more content than the assertion that human freedom poses no limit to God's power to redeem. It cannot be dismissed altogether, however, without the dismissal of the philosophical interest of grace. Arendt and like-minded commentators do Augustine the dubious favor of saving his philosophy from his theology. They take grace's irresistibility to indicate Augustine's abdication of human freedom and sacrifice of philosophy (worldly wisdom) to God, when in fact it better expresses his attempt to salvage Platonism's naive and uninformed confidence in the power of knowledge to motivate. God is the good guaranteeing its own reception in the human will. Described from the human point of view, this reception can be called grace.

It is in his brilliant theological analyses of grace that Augustine "discovers" the will and suggests an answer to the problem of mediation. We cannot, however, hope to understand him here, unless we first reduce the antagonism between where he starts in philosophy and where he finishes in theology. Recollecting Augustine the philosopher will require bringing into continuity his two distinct personae, long familiar to scholars – that of the young devotee of philosophical knowledge and that of the elderly doctor of grace. We must, to achieve this, call to mind his unresolved philosophical perplexities before we seek to determine the direction and end of his theological

[10] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. II, 105. [11] *De praed. sanct.* 10.19.

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development. Otherwise we will tend to "compensate" for the apparent extremity of his doctrine of grace and read back the Pelagian fiction into his conception of *voluntas*.

Pelagius and Augustine shared the same ambition in philosophy. Each wanted to describe the way in which human beings were capable of defining themselves in a world not of their own making. This ambition merged normative and metaphysical concerns, for it was metaphysical in its attempt to fathom the source of human autonomy and normative in its attempt to identify the good life with the autonomous life. Augustine and Pelagius were in their common ambition the heirs of Hellenistic thought, and their respective theologies took root in the soil of its philosophy, especially Stoicism, whose unbounded confidence in the autarky of reason colored the ethics of an entire era. Because Pelagius seemed in the end to deny that there were ever significant obstacles to living the good life, once reason had illuminated its nature, he stood in more obvious continuity with the philosophical tradition than Augustine, who came to disparage the worldly wisdom of pagan philosophy for its overconfidence. In book XIX of *De civitate Dei* he denies that the *philosophi* will ever be able to secure human happiness in the embrace of wisdom. Cutting at the heart of philosophical ambition this way, he seems at the same time to be severing himself from philosophy. But Augustine's invective against philosophy should be set in the context of his family quarrel with past philosophers and not dramatized into his rejection of philosophy per se. The elderly doctor of grace remained a Platonist to the end, and he pursued his quest for the source of human autonomy and well-being in his own unique variant of Platonism.

When I insist on Augustine's Platonism, I allude broadly to his philosophical orientation and not narrowly to his ties to the Neoplatonism of Porphyry and Plotinus. I do not dismiss the importance of the latter by any means, but nor have I found it terribly useful for my purposes to take Augustine's measure as a Platonist against standards set by the third-century Neoplatonists. Stoic rather than Neoplatonic influence informed his early views of virtue, autonomy, and the good life, and disposed him to think Stoically about ethics throughout his career as a

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