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The Philosophical Conversion (Book VII)

In Book VII of the *Confessions,* Augustine focuses his attention on the concept of God and considers his need for a mediator. In between, he struggles with the problem of evil and finds the pathway that leads to his intellectual conversion. Though the young philosopher has freed himself from dualism and has become convinced that God is incorruptible, he is still unable to conceive of a spiritual substance or to speak about God except as a being extended in space. Yet after he reads certain books of the Platonists, a vision of God enables him to overcome these problems,[1] permits him to make a constructive response to the problem of evil, and helps him understand why he needs a mediator between God and the soul.

The Neoplatonic vision in which Augustine participates is both an existential and an intellectual episode. From an existential point of view, it allows him to climb a Neoplatonic ladder from the visible to the invisible, see an unchangeable light, respond when God calls out to him from afar, and catch a glimpse of a spiritual substance that stands over against him. From an intellectual perspective, this same experience helps him understand why a spiritual substance cannot be conceived in spatiotemporal terms, teaches him that figurative discourse is necessary for making access to it, convinces him that the evil he fears is not a substance, and shows him that corruption is both a privation of the good and a perversion of the will. In this chapter, we begin with the problem of framing an adequate concept of God and turn to Augustine's struggles with the problem of evil. Then we analyze the Neoplatonic vision and consider why this experience makes it necessary for him to raise the problem of the incarnation.

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THE CONCEPT OF GOD (7.1.1–7.2.3)

From a temporal point of view, Augustine is now passing into youthful maturity. According to the Roman conception of the life cycle, this means that he is emerging from a lengthy period of adolescence and moving into the fourth stage of life, which occurs between the ages of thirty and forty.[2] When he is a boy, time passes through Augustine as if he were an empty container; after the death of his closest friend, his temporal experience moves back and forth between events that are dispersed, but which he binds together by associating them with one another (4.6.11); eventually, time heals his wounds, but begins to slip away when he postpones his conversion (4.8.13); and only as he stands at the threshold of maturity does he move toward an ecstatic concept of temporality that stretches beyond itself toward the dynamic presence of God (7.1.1). This ecstatic concept of time, which Augustine develops in Book XI, begins to play a crucial experiential role for the first time in the account of his philosophical conversion.

Since he first begins to seek wisdom, Augustine knows that God does not have the form of a human body; but as a fallen creature trying to think about what transcends him infinitely, he does not know what else to believe about God except that he is incorruptible, inviolable, and immutable. Without knowing either how or why, he can see that the corruptible is inferior to the incorruptible, that the inviolable is superior to its opposite, and that the unchangeable is better than the changeable (7.1.1). Knowledge of this kind presupposes the work of a divine teacher,[3] whose existence Augustine has not yet acknowledged, but an understanding of whom will develop when he constructs the philosophical and theological framework that makes his intellectual and Christian conversions possible.

The distinctions between corruptibility and incorruptibility and between violability and inviolability generate moral and metaphysical polarities, where the first points to a contrast between what can and cannot degenerate, while the second points to an opposition between what can and cannot resist encroachment. By contrast, the superiority of what is unchangeable to what is changeable seems to be exclusively metaphysical, where the unchangeability of God presupposes a static conception of eternity and the changeability of creatures points to the vicissitudes of time. The first two polarities can be allowed to stand without further elaboration, but the third requires clarification if we are not to be misled about Augustine's philosophical intentions.

The distinction between the changeable and the unchangeable, and the corresponding contrast between time and eternity, point in two directions.

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On the one hand, immutability sometimes means impassability; when this is so, the term suggests that what is immutable is perfect, where any change would be a change for the worse. In this case, to say that God is immutable would be to claim that he is eternal rather than temporal, where eternity not only implies impassability, but seems to imply a lack of internal dynamism as well. However, it is important to notice that immutability is compatible with dynamic interaction, where what is immutable has internal dimensions that interplay with one another in unexpected and unpredictable ways. In this case, to say that God is immutable is to claim that the Godhead never changes, but that the persons of the Trinity interact in spontaneous ways that express the most fundamental meaning of the love of God. Augustine uses the concept of immutability in both ways (11.7.9,13.5.6), and we can understand the concept of a spiritual substance only if we take both interpretations into account.

Augustine does not draw these distinctions explicitly at this stage of his reflections, but turns instead in an existential direction, crying out against phantasms and trying to brush away the "unclean images" that swarm around his mind (7.1.1). False images interfere with his capacity to understand the concept of God, leading him away from an adequate conception of God in an exclusively materialistic direction. Yet as he attempts to rid himself of phantasms, they are scarcely scattered before they gather again, fluttering against his face and clouding his vision (7.1.1).

Even though he knows that God does not have a human shape when he begins his quest for wisdom, Augustine is still distracted by phantasms and imagines that God is a body extended in space. The former Manichaean believes that this incorruptible, inviolable, and immutable being is either infused in the world or diffused outside it through the infinite space that surrounds it; for he is convinced that what is not in space is absolutely nothing and is even more insubstantial than the spacious nothingness of empty space (7.1.1). Once more we find that Augustine's relation to God exhibits a spatial dimension; but more fundamentally, we sense his horror in the face of absolute nonbeing. On this occasion, the only thing that prevents him from toppling into it is an inadequate concept of God, according to which the one he worships is an infinitely extended body diffused throughout a spatial medium.

The threat of nonbeing not only implicates God, but also entangles the soul; for as we have noticed repeatedly, God and the soul are related closely in Augustine's thinking. Just as he conceives of God as a body extended in space, so he conceives of himself as nothing but a body that occupies a determinate spatiotemporal region (7.1.2). Otherwise, he would

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have been forced to conceive of himself as absolutely nothing, facing the abyss of absolute nonbeing, not only in the case of God, but also in relation to himself.

Augustine does not understand that the act of thinking that gives him access to material objects is not itself material in the same sense (7.2.2). Yet he is correct in believing that thinking is a measurable activity, even if this belief eventually requires him to extend the concept of measurement beyond the physicalistic framework in which it is usually employed. This will be important when we turn to Augustine's discussion of the nature of time; for since he believes that the past, the present, and the future presuppose acts of thinking, measuring time will make it necessary for him to "measure" the mind in an appropriately analogical sense of the term (11.28.37). This will force him, in turn, to drive figurative discourse into the heart of metaphysics, not simply as a rhetorical embellishment, but as a necessary way of expressing his most important philosophical insights.

Before Augustine learns to speak the figurative language that will permit him to make philosophical progress, he imagines that his creator is a corporeal substance stretching out through infinite space, penetrating the mass of the world, and reaching out beyond it in all directions. As a result, he believes that the earth contains God, that the heavens contain him, and that he is present in everything else, where God, who is not limited at all, limits every finite being. This leads him to compare God with light rays that penetrate everything and fill it entirely, permitting all things to receive its presence without being restricted to a particular place (7.1.2).[4]

Until it is made possible by a Neoplatonic vision and until the fires of philosophical reflection refine it, this step toward the light is impeded by Augustine's tendency to transform spiritual entities into evanescent phantasms. Indeed, the young philosopher is unable to conceive of a spiritual substance until he encounters God, where only the *reality* of what he sees can convince him of its *possibility*. Truth is prior to meaning for Augustine; and for this reason, forging an adequate concept of God depends on experiencing his reality rather than the other way about.[5]

Augustine is reluctant to abandon thinking about God as a material substance; for as the Manichaeans understand so clearly, materiality gives solidity to substance and appears to provide a stable foundation for a metaphysical system. A literal definition of the concept of substance implies that it is a stable foundation standing underneath an entity; and it is this implication that makes it so difficult for Augustine to reject his Manichaean heritage intellectually, even after he has repudiated it volitionally. As his reflections unfold, the discovery of the importance of figurative discourse

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will enable him to move away from philosophical literalism, and from the dyadic way of thinking that undergirds it, to a new way of thinking that gives him access to the concept of a spiritual substance. According to this way of understanding the concept in question, a spiritual substance not only lies beyond dualism, but can only be expressed in a metaphor of infinite richness. However, at this stage of his life, Augustine is searching for stability; and he cannot understand how God construed as an immaterial entity can provide it.[6]

Despite the influence that the concept of material substance continues to exercise on him, Augustine remembers an important objection against the Manichaeans that comes from his friend, Nebridius, when they are still in Carthage several years before. At this relatively early stage of their involvement with the sect, Nebridius asks, " 'What would that unknown nation of darkness, which the Manichees are wont to postulate as a hostile mass, have done if [God] had refused to contend with it?' " (7.2.3). Nebridius concludes that if the power of evil could hurt him, he would be corruptible; but if this power were harmless, there would be no reason for him to fight. In either case, the Manichaeans are mistaken in claiming that the world is a battleground between Good and Evil in which goodness is defined in relation to its opposite (7.2.3).

Because of the impact of Academic Skepticism, Augustine has already turned away from Manichaean dualism through an act of the will; but now he sees the force of an argument that refutes it. If God is incorruptible, the story of a battle that embroils him with the power of evil is false; and if he is corruptible, this same story is false because it would entail that he would not be God at all. In either case, Manichaeism can be rejected, not only volitionally, but intellectually as well. As a consequence, the last vestige of Augustine's commitment to the Manichaean solution to the problem of evil collapses; and he moves beyond it to a new way of understanding the concept of God, the problem of evil, and the language appropriate to them.

The Problem of Evil (7.3.4–7.8.12)

Augustine begins his discussion of the problem of evil, not by focusing on it as an autonomous theoretical issue, but by placing it within the context of creation *ex nihilo,* by remembering the nature of God, and by pointing to a practical implication of the question that he is about to consider. Beginning with creation *ex nihilo,* he claims that God creates

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not only our *souls,* but also our *bodies,* and not only our souls and our bodies, but also our *beings* as composite entities embedded in the natural order (7.3.4). These claims are important because they imply that however central the problem of God and the soul may be, the soul and the body are united and have a natural place within the world as a product of God's creative act. In discussing the pivotal experiences that bring Augustine's journey toward God to completion, we must never forget this; for the transformation of the soul is connected intimately with the reorientation of the body and with a way of speaking that points beyond them to the ground of their existence. According to this way of reading Augustine, the relation between the soul and the body is depicted most adequately by figurative discourse that binds them together and holds them apart, rather than by metaphysical categories that construe them as separate substances that are somehow connected and separated from one another.

The metaphysical way of understanding Augustine's concept of the relation between the soul and the body construes the soul as a substance, the body as a substance, and the unity of the soul and the body as a substance as well.[7] According to this view, human beings are composites; the soul is the higher part of the composite; the soul uses the body as an instrument; and the soul is to be identified with the "true man." There can be no doubt that Augustine sometimes speaks this way, giving encouragement to those who wish to emphasize the dualistic dimension of his thinking.[8]

However, it is important to notice that he often speaks about the relation between the soul and the body in a radically different way. According to this way of speaking, the human being is to be understood rhetorically by using figurative discourse rather than by understanding it as a whole made up of parts (7.1.2). When Augustine speaks in this way, the person is identified with the soul, with the body, and with the soul and the body taken together, where in each case, we are what we are in different senses of "is." In addition, metaphors bind the soul and the body together; analogies hold them apart; and the interplay between these ways of speaking undergird the richly evocative use of language in which Augustine engages as he speaks about the relation between God and the soul.

We will return to Augustine's solution to the problem of the soul and the body in a later chapter; but for the moment, we must turn to his discussion of the problem of evil in relation to the concept of God and with reference to one of its most important practical implications. We have noticed already that by contrast with the entities that come to be and pass away, Augustine conceives of God as incorruptible, inviolable, and

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immutable; but against the background of this stable set of beliefs, he does not have an explicit and orderly knowledge of the cause of evil. Nevertheless, he knows that whatever its cause, his understanding of it must not entail that God is mutable, lest in trying to solve the problem of evil, he become evil himself by falling into the sin of presumption. The Manichaeans are mistaken in understanding evil as an independent principle that challenges the sovereignty of God, and their malice surfaces when they insist that the creator is subject to the encroachments of evil rather than admitting that they are responsible for the evil in their own actions. Thus, Augustine focuses on the problem of evil, recognizing that it is not an isolated theoretical problem, but a problem that has a bearing on his concept of the nature of God and that points to an existential predicament into which he must not fall as he attempts to deal with the perplexing issues it raises (7.3.4).

The philosopher takes a crucial step in struggling with the problem of evil when he remembers what he has often heard about the freedom of the will. According to this approach to the problem, an act of the will that originates within the open space between good and evil is the cause of evil doing; and the judgment of God in response to our negative volition is the cause of the suffering we experience as a result of our own actions. However, Augustine does not understand what he has heard about freedom; he cannot "draw the eye of his mind" out of the spiritual chasm into which he has fallen; and his failure to do so plunges him down again and again into an existential and theoretical abyss that continues to separate him from the light that flows from God (7.3.5).

Despite his failure to grasp the connection between the problem of evil and the freedom of the will, a single conviction lifts Augustine toward the light: he knows that he has a will just as clearly as he knows that he is alive and that when he wills or is unwilling to do something, it is he alone who is either willing or unwilling (7.3.5). As a consequence, he begins to understand that he is not a spectator observing the conflict between two competing principles within his soul, but a moral agent who is responsible for his own actions. He also concludes that what he does against his will is something done to him rather than something he does himself. This means that what he does against his better judgment is not his fault, but his punishment, and that because this punishment comes from God, it is just (7.3.5). Later Augustine will understand that even what he does against his will is an act for which he is responsible, not simply because he is the agent of the action, but because the acquisition of the habits to which he succumbs in such cases are his own

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responsibility (8.5.10–11). However, even at this preliminary stage of his reflections, facing the question of moral responsibility clears the ground for him to make progress in dealing with the theoretical and practical dimensions of the problem before him.

Augustine struggles with these issues, not by solving the problem of evil in a single stroke, but by raising questions about it that continue to perplex him as he tries to turn toward God. These questions reflect the dualistic tendencies that he still exhibits and implicate both God and the devil. If God has created Augustine and his creation is good, why does he sometimes will to do evil rather than good? And if the cause of his evil actions is the devil, who created him; and why does the devil who has been created good fall into evil himself? These persistent questions, and the infinite regress to which they lead, crush Augustine's intellect; but they do not force him to reembrace Manichaean dualism. The adherents of the doctrine he has repudiated prefer profession to confession, and Augustine denounces them for placing the blame for their mistakes on an evil principle that encroaches on God rather than accepting responsibility for their own actions (7.3.5). In doing so, the "Prodigal Son" who has wandered away from his origins is beginning to discover that only by saying, "I am to blame,"[9] will he ever be able to go back home.

Having begun to understand the incorruptibility of God, and having begun to bring himself into an existential correlation with it, Augustine attempts to establish further facts about God's nature to which he can commit himself without reservation. First, he anticipates Anselm by claiming that we cannot conceive anything better than God. Then he reasons that if what is incorruptible is better than what is corruptible, he could conceive something better than God if God were corruptible. On this basis, he claims that the incorruptibility of God follows as a necessary truth from his recognition of the facts that the incorruptible is better than the corruptible and that he is unable to conceive anything greater than God. Finally, he concludes that if he ought to seek God by focusing on what is incorruptible, he ought to seek the source of evil by looking in the opposite direction. This suggests that if God is good because he is incorruptible, evil can be understood by locating the source of corruption (7.4.6).

Augustine attempts to do this by interlacing penetrating comments about the nature of God and about the goodness of creation with equally penetrating questions about the origin of evil. First, he claims that God is good and that he surpasses everything he creates. Then he insists that because God is good, the finite products of God's creative act are good as well. Finally, he asks a series of questions that express the problem of evil more acutely than he has ever formulated it before:

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> Where then is evil, and whence and by what means has it crept in here? What is its root, and what is its seed? Or has it no being whatsoever? Why then do we fear and shun what does not exist? If we fear it without cause, that very fear is evil. By it our stricken hearts are goaded and tortured, and that evil is all the more serious in so far as what we fear does not exist, and still we are fearful of it. Therefore, either there is an evil that we fear, or the fact that we fear is itself an evil. Whence, therefore, is evil, since God the good has made all things good? (7.5.7)

Augustine's questions about the root and the seed of evil suggest that he is attempting to plunge into the heart of the problem and trace it back to its origins. Unfortunately, the attempt to do this encounters a seemingly insurmountable obstacle that expresses itself in the possibility that evil has no being at all. If this proves to be the case, the problem of evil would lead us to the problem of absolute nonbeing, where this problem is not to be solved theoretically, but to confronted experientially as a threat to our existence. Nevertheless, Augustine makes progress in answering his questions by noticing that if we fear what has no being at all, the fear itself is evil (7.5.7). This is an advance in the discussion because it shifts his attention away from the search for a substance and reinforces his earlier recognition that the orientation of the soul is the crucial element in the attempt to deal with the problem of evil. Augustine begins to see what he will elaborate later: the fear of what is *not*, and the existential disorientation it expresses, is evil, not because it is a substance, but because it points to a distinctive way of living that is *oriented away* from the ground of its existence.

Having considered the possibility that matter as an independently existing principle is the source of evil, and having rejected this view because it is incompatible with God's omnipotence, Augustine shifts abruptly from the theoretical to the existential level, overwhelmed by the fear of death and by the fear that he will never find the truth about the issue with which he is struggling (7.5.7). The fear of dying that emerges when he faces the death of his closest friend (4.6.11) and that he regards as the only obstacle that prevents him from becoming an Epicurean (6.16.26) continues to haunt him, this time as a way of bringing his attempt to understand the problem of evil to an impasse. Yet in spite of his fear of death, Augustine insists that faith in Christ that is to be found in the Catholic Church is "firmly fixed within [his] heart," and that though he is unformed and wavers on many points of doctrine, he not only does not turn away from it, but drinks more of it in day after day (7.5.7).

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Augustine's reference to faith in Christ is important because it is the foundation of attempts to demonstrate that he is not only a catechumen of the Catholic Church, but that he has already become a Christian before he reads the books of the Platonists[10] and participates in the ascent toward God to be considered in the next section of this chapter. If this is so, it is reasonable to conclude that he reads these books from a Christian point of view, and that Neoplatonism is subordinated to Christianity in the three pivotal episodes that bring his journey toward God to an experiential culmination.[11] Before we try to reach a conclusion about these issues, let us reconsider the stages of Augustine's religious and philosophical development in which his relation to Christianity is a crucial factor.

The first significant stage is the occasion when Augustine begs his mother for baptism, for it suggests that the name of Christ is important to him and his mother even when he is a child (1.11.17). This suggestion is confirmed by the fact that after Augustine reads Cicero's exhortation to embrace philosophy, he is unable to commit himself to it completely because the name of Christ that he has drunk in "with [his] mother's milk" is not in it (3.4.8). After he decides to abandon the Manichaeans some eleven years later because he believes that the philosophers are superior to them in giving an account of the order of nature, he refuses to commit the cure of his soul to them because they lack "the saving name of Christ" (5.14.25). As a consequence, he decides to continue as a catechumen of the Catholic Church until something certain enlightens him.

Though all of these stages of Augustine's development are important, none of them is sufficient to make him a Christian. This becomes evident when we consider his reaction to the preaching of Ambrose soon after he refers to himself as a catechumen of the Church. On this occasion, he says that though he is in the process of being refuted and converted, he refuses to be cured and resists the healing hand of God, who has applied the remedies of faith to the diseases of the world (6.4.6). The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this passage is that the catechumen is in the process of becoming a Christian, but that this process has not been completed. Augustine also tells us that from this time forward, he prefers Catholic teaching (6.5.7). However, in the light of his refusal to be cured, this does not mean that he has become a Christian, but only that he believes certain Christian doctrines.

In listing these doctrines, the catechumen says that he believes that God exists and that God cares for us. However, he also tells us that he does not know what should be thought about God's substantial being, or which way leads up to God or back to him. Thus, even though the name

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of Christ continues to be an important element in his thinking, he is not yet aware of the fact that Christ is the pathway that leads to God (6.5.8). On the other hand, he commits himself to the authority of Scripture, claiming that God would have never given it such authority throughout the world unless he had wished for us to believe in and seek him within this context (6.5.8). In doing so, he takes a step toward the living Word of God to which he will respond in the garden in Milan by acknowledging the written Word that will give him access to it. Yet even so, Augustine says that he is still wretched, indicates that he has not yet been converted, tells us that his "very vitals" are torn apart by care, and acknowledges the fact that pride is the fundamental problem that separates him from God (6.6.10).

Augustine laments the fact that eleven years after he had been inspired by Cicero's book to seek wisdom, he is still unable to find it. Though the doctrines of the Church no longer seem to be absurd to him, and though he decides to turn toward the authority of the Church until he finds the truth he has been seeking for so long, he is unwilling "to abandon worldly hopes and devote [himself] wholly to seeking God and a life of happiness." Thus, he remains a catechumen who has not yet become a Christian, still vacillating and delaying "to be converted to the Lord" (6.11.19).

The tenuous state in which Augustine remains at this juncture is reflected in the uncertainty that he expresses at the end of Book VI about the ultimate causes of good and evil. There he says that he would have become an Epicurean if he had not believed in a life after death; and even given the assumption that the soul is immortal, he wonders why a life of perpetual bodily pleasure would not make him happy. In doing so, Augustine indicates once more that he has not become a Christian; and he confirms this conclusion by saying that his soul turns on its "back and sides and belly," unable to find rest until it finds rest in God (6.16.26).

At the midpoint of his discussion of the problem of evil in Book VII, Augustine returns to the turmoil with which Book VI concludes by claiming that he is overburdened with cares that spring from the fear of death and from a fear of not finding the truth about the problem of evil (7.5.7). However, in this same context, he writes the puzzling passage about his faith in Christ that has prompted us to retrace some of the earlier stages of his religious and philosophical development. Let me quote the crucial passage once more, this time in its entirety:

> Yet the faith of your Christ, our Lord and Savior, the faith that is in the Catholic Church, was firmly fixed within my heart. In

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> many ways I was yet unformed and wavered from the rule of doctrine. But my mind did not depart from it, nay, rather, from day to day it drank in more and more of it. (7.5.7)

The passage before us is important because it points to two ways of understanding Augustine's relation to Christianity. On the one hand, we might embrace the view that in the brief period between the end of book VI and the middle of Book VII, Augustine becomes a Christian without indicating either how or why this occurs. On the other hand, we might be convinced that his experience as a catechumen of the Catholic Church has given him sufficient time to reach the conclusion that Christ is the pathway to God, even though he has not yet decided to embrace it. I believe that the weight of the evidence points toward the second of these two conclusions.

To see why this is so, it is important to distinguish three kinds of commitment that characterize Augustine's relation to Christianity. First, when he reaffirms his status as a catechumen of the Catholic Church, he puts himself on an institutional pathway that leads eventually to faith in Christ. Let us call this first kind of relation to Christianity *institutional commitment*. Second, when he claims that he prefers Christian doctrine, that the faith of Christ is fixed firmly in his heart, and that he drinks in more of the Church's doctrine day after day, he begins to move along an intellectual pathway that leads back to God. Let us call this second kind of relation to Christianity *notional commitment*.[12] Finally, when we find that Augustine has no experiential warrant for accepting the religious direction in which he is moving, and when this continues to be the case until his conversion in the garden in Milan, it becomes evident that he has not yet embraced the faith to which he has begun to make an institutional and notional commitment. Let us call this third kind of relation to Christianity *existential commitment*.[13] To say that Augustine has not yet become a Christian is to claim that even though he has decided to pursue an institutional commitment to the Church, and has expressed a notional assent to some of its doctrines, he has not yet made an existential commitment to it.

At this stage of his development, Augustine believes four things that are relevant to his eventual conversion: first, he believes that God exists; second, he believes that God is immutable; third, he believes that God cares for human beings and passes judgment on them; and finally, he is convinced that in Christ and the Bible, God provides a way of salvation that leads to eternal life. Against the stable propositional background, he begins to speak to God from the center of his soul rather than to his friends about the religious and philosophical problems that perplex him

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(7.7.11). This suggests that he is finally moving into a private realm of meditation analogous to the one presupposed by Ambrose's silent reading, the one into which he will move when he has the mystical experience that the Platonic books made accessible (7.10.16), the one he embraces when he reads the passage from the book of Romans in the garden in Milan (8.12.29), and the one he will share with his mother during their mystical experience in Ostia (9.10.23–26). In all these cases, there is no public confirmation of what occurs in terms that would satisfy a historian, but a vertical transaction between God and the soul that only those who have experienced something similar can appreciate.

To prepare the way for his resolution of the problem of evil, for his response to Neoplatonism, and for the Neoplatonic vision that he is about to recount, Augustine gives a visual formulation of his existential predicament. "Hordes and heaps" of images rush in on him from every direction; and as he turns away from them to return to himself, they mock him by asking where he is going (7.7.11). Then he formulates his predicament in a graphic metaphor that implicates both his soul and his body: "By my swelling wound I was separated from you, and my bloated face closed up my eyes." Finally, even though he is blind from bloated cheeks, he trusts that God will have mercy on him and reach down to reform his deformities; and he tells us that God arouses him by "inner goads" so he cannot rest until his creator stands before his "inner sight" (7.8.12). The need for inner vision is Augustine's overriding concern at this stage of his development, and it is this fact that makes him so receptive to the teaching of the Neoplatonists.

NEOPLATONISM AND CHRISTIANITY (7.9.13–7.9.15)

Before Augustine gives an account of his intellectual conversion and refers to the Neoplatonic books that make it possible, he draws a radical distinction between pride and humility. In doing so, he points to the eternal dimension of experience, where one's attitude toward God is the most important issue with which he is concerned. At the center of Book VII, God reveals himself to the eye of Augustine's mind; but the author of the *Confessions* insists that God also resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. Thus he tells us that the man who gives him the books of the Platonists is "puffed up" with "pride" and that this attitude stands opposed to the humility expressed when the Word " 'was made flesh, and dwelt among us' " (7.9.13).[14]

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The contrast between pride and humility is important because it points to the limitations of Neoplatonism as a way of approaching the relation between God and the soul and calls our attention to the attitude required of those who want to participate in it. However, it is easy to overlook the limitations of Neoplatonism from an Augustinian point of view, and fail to understand the significance of the distinction between pride and humility. In fact, his reading of the books of the Neoplatonists and the intellectual conversion that emerges from it are the foundation for a way of understanding Augustine that overemphasizes the influence of Plotinus on his thinking.

This interpretation reflects the conviction that Augustine had extensive contact with a group of Neoplatonists in Milan long before his conversion to Christianity. According to this view, philosophical and social interaction with Neoplatonic intellectuals predisposes him to approach the distinctive doctrines of the Christian faith from a Neoplatonic point of view. Thus, the temporal and spatial parameters of Augustine's life come into play once again, where his transition toward philosophical maturity is mediated by contact with Neoplatonic philosophers, and where the reflective community in which he participates is saturated with Neoplatonic teaching.[15]

It is not surprising that the view in question has informed so many interpretations of Augustine, for the author of the *Confessions* suggests that Neoplatonism and Christianity share a cluster of important philosophical presuppositions. For example, in the books of the Platonists, he finds the thoughts if not the words expressed in the prologue to the Gospel of John:

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him nothing was made." (7.9.13)[16]

In these books, he also reads that life is to be found in the Word of God, that this life is the light of men, and that though the light shined in the darkness, the darkness did not comprehend it. These latter two remarks come dangerously close to attributing his own doctrine of divine illumination to the Neoplatonists; and if he were not so determined to call our attention to the radical differences between Neoplatonism and Christianity, what Augustine says about the many similarities between them might be enough to convince us that from his perspective, they are virtually identical.

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One commentator suggests that the author of the *Confessions* projects certain crucial doctrines of Christianity onto the Neoplatonic tradition. Gilson says that Augustine attributes the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to Plotinus and that he believes that the identity of the first and the second persons of the Trinity is a doctrine to be found in Plotinus as well. There is more than one way of insisting that Augustine is a Christian Neoplatonist; and this way of doing so not only acknowledges his participation in a community of Neoplatonists, but also suggests that he misinterprets Neoplatonism along distinctively Christian lines.[17]

The passage that Augustine quotes from the Gospel of John suggests that the relation between the first and the second persons of the Trinity can be correlated with the relation between the One and the Divine Intellect, if not in word, at least in thought. If we accept a sufficiently flexible conception of correlation, there is no reason to reject this view; for it is evident that a formal correspondence obtains between the persons of the Trinity and the Neoplatonic hypostases. However, formal correspondence does not entail material equivalence; and there is no reason to believe that Augustine does not grasp the difference between the identity and difference between the Father and the Divine Word, and the derivative relation between the One and the Divine Intellect in which the Word is derived from the Father by generation. However, the more important question is whether he knows the difference between emanation and creation *ex nihilo* when he writes the *Confessions,* leading us to ask about the plausibility of the claim that he projects the doctrine of creation onto the writings of the Neoplatonists.

Neoplatonists and Christians agree that God makes the world in a suitably broad sense of the term, but this scarcely entitles us to assume that Augustine believes that the way this occurs is identical in the two cases. For example, when he claims in Book XII that God creates prime matter *ex nihilo,* he takes an explicit stand against Plotinus, suggesting that he has read the *Enneads* carefully enough to know the difference between emanation from the One and creation from nothingness (7.9.13). Throughout the *Confessions,* Augustine gives adequate evidence for believing that he understands the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and that he grasps the distinction between creation and emanation as cosmological alternatives.

Augustine's primary purpose in drawing our attention to the parallels between Neoplatonism and Christianity is not to blur the distinctions between them, but to lay the groundwork for appreciating their differences. The first of these differences is expressed in the claim that the Word of God came unto his own, but his own did not receive him; and

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it is expressed more forcefully in the assertion that as many as received him, " 'to them he gave power to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in his name' " (7.9.13).[18] In both cases, the incarnational focus of Christianity sets it apart from Neoplatonism; and the acknowledgment of its centrality in Augustine's enterprise places a considerable strain on the suggestion that he confuses the doctrines of the Neoplatonists with the teachings of the Bible in his attempt to appropriate Neoplatonism.

The quotations to which we have referred launch a series of contrasts between the aspects of Christianity Neoplatonism anticipates and the parts it does not. The Neoplatonists know that the Word is the offspring of God, but they do not understand that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. They also believe that the Word is equal to God in some appropriate sense of identity, but they do not know that he empties himself and takes the form of a servant (7.9.14). In fact, Plotinus never says anything even faintly comparable to the *kenosis* passage from Paul's *Epistle to the Philippians*:

> "[He] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man," and . . . "he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause, God also has exalted him" from the dead, "and has given him a name which is above all names: that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bend down of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth: and that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus is in the glory of God the father." (7.9.14)[19]

The incarnation and the humiliation to which this passage refers are crucial elements in Augustine's conversion to Christianity; and it is only by attending to both elements that we will be able to understand his claim in Book VIII that he puts on a new garment called, "Jesus, the Christ." However, this passage is important at this juncture because it allows Augustine to compare the pride of the Neoplatonists with the humility of Christ. The philosophers know that the Word of God is coeternal with the Father, and they understand that human wisdom is achieved by participation in it. Yet they do not realize that " 'Christ died for the ungodly,' " nor do they understand that God did not spare his son, but " 'delivered him up for us all' " (7.9.14).[20] Indeed, it is probable that Augustine has the Neoplatonists in mind when he insists that God hides these things from "the wise and prudent" and that he reveals them only to children (7.9.14).[21]

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One of the best ways to point to the difference between the Neoplatonic and Christian dimensions of Augustine's thinking is to note what he does and does not do with Neoplatonism. Augustine's reference to our participation in the Word of God allows him to embrace a Neoplatonic continuum between God and the world and points to the permanent truth in the claim that he is a Christian Neoplatonist.[22] However, his unequivocal commitment to creation *ex nihilo,* and his suggestion that the incarnation, the death, and the resurrection of Christ bridge the chasm between God and the world make it evident that when he writes the *Confessions,* his Christianity takes precedence over his Neoplatonism from both cosmological and soteriological points of view. Indeed, Augustine departs from Neoplatonism in the realization that both creation *ex nihilo* and the redemptive work of Christ are expressions of the grace of God without which the metaphysical chasm between God and the world could neither be generated nor mediated.

By contrasting the wisdom and the prudence of the philosophers with the humility required by Christianity, the great rhetorician attacks the heart of Neoplatonism. According to the Neoplatonist, the two most important attributes of the philosopher are the theoretical and practical wisdom they display; and Augustine has both concepts in mind when he says,

> But those men who are raised up on the heights of some toplofty teaching do not hear him as he says, "Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you shall find rest to your souls."[23] "Although they know God, they do not glorify him, or give thanks, but become vain in their thoughts, and their foolish heart is darkened; for professing themselves to be wise, they became fools." (7.9.14)[24]

The criticism that Augustine levels against the Neoplatonists has both theoretical and practical implications. On the one hand, they do not know that the God they long to see has spoken to them in his son and that he has accommodated himself to the weakness of their intellects. On the other hand, their hearts are darkened because they fail to glorify and thank the creator for permitting the divine word to redeem their fallen wills. The principle defect of the Neoplatonists is their failure to understand that the Word of God addresses both their intellects and their wills, allowing him to speak to the sin that manifests itself in both contexts. This will become especially important in Book VIII, where the problem Augustine faces is both intellectual and volitional, and where the

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Neoplatonic vision that we are about to consider is supplemented by his transformation in the garden in Milan.[25]

Despite the limitations of Neoplatonism, Augustine's last word about the philosophical position that makes it possible for him to become a Christian is positive. Though Neoplatonism falls short of Christianity in failing to embrace the incarnation, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, its teaching not only takes him beyond materialism, but also encourages the "eye of his mind" to catch a glimpse of the glory of God and of the immaterial substance he struggles for so long to conceive. The Neoplatonists realize that finite beings are tempted to transform the spiritual substance of God into idols and images; and because they know this, they seek the same "gold" God allows his people to take from Egypt to the Promised Land. When Augustine reads the books of the Neoplatonists, he learns about Egyptian gold, not from a Christian text, but through the natural revelation available to everyone (7.9.15).[26] Thus, it is almost impossible to overestimate the profound impact that the Neoplatonists make on Augustine's philosophical development.[27] The quotations in which he compares their writings with the Bible, and the philosophical concepts in which so much of his writing is saturated indicate this, however careful he may be to call our attention to the differences between Neoplatonism and Christianity.

One of Augustine's deepest philosophical problems is how to unify the power and the structure of the divine word in a single principle; and he finds a way of doing this by embracing the logos of the Neoplatonic tradition. This tradition binds the performative and the intelligible dimensions of the word together; for the Word that emanates from the One is not only an intelligible principle, but also a dynamic source from which finite beings unfold continuously. Neoplatonic emanation is a surrogate for divine creation; its dynamic conception of the Divine Intellect is an important dimension in the background of Augustine's thinking; and the dynamic word to which the Neoplatonic books call his attention makes it possible for him to embrace the Truth he has been seeking for so long.

THE NEOPLATONIC VISION (7.10.16–7.17.23)

Augustine responds to the dynamic word of Neoplatonism in a mystical experience[28] that unfolds in two stages.[29] In connection with the first of these stages, consider one of the most memorable passages in the *Confessions*:

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> Being thus admonished to return to myself, under [God's] leadership I entered into my inmost being. This I could do, for [God] became my helper. I entered there, and by my soul's eye, such as it was, I saw above that same eye of my soul, above my mind, an unchangeable light. It was not this common light, plain to all flesh, nor a greater light, as it were, of the same kind, as though that light would shine many, many times more bright, and by its great power fill the whole universe. Not such was that light, but different, far different from all other lights. Nor was it above my mind, as oil is above water, or sky above earth. It was above my mind, because it made me, and I was beneath it, because I was made by it. He who knows the truth, knows that light, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it, O eternal truth, and true love, and beloved eternity! You are my God, and I sigh for you day and night! (7.10.16)

In continuing to describe this first stage of his vision, Augustine emphasizes its tenuous nature by claiming that God lifts him up so he can see that there is something to see, though he is not yet fit to see it. He also says that God beats back the weakness of his sight by sending dazzling beams of light on him, causing him to tremble in love and amazement. In this moment, the young philosopher realizes that he is still far away from God, hears God's voice from a distance, and begins to understand that he can draw closer to him only as he matures. Yet as he slips away from the relation that he longs to enter, God cries out to him from afar, "I am who I am"; Augustine hears the voice of God in his heart; there is no room for doubt about God's nature and existence; and the philosopher exclaims, "It would be easier for me to doubt that I live than that there is no truth, which is 'clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made' " (7.10.16).[30]

This stage of Augustine's Neoplatonic vision calls for careful reflection. First, when he turns inward, his vision of the light presupposes a Neoplatonic community; but this spatial context is counterbalanced by the fact that Augustine also participates in a solitary relationship with God that does not implicate this community directly. In doing so, he transcends space and time and encounters God along the vertical axis of experience. Second, Augustine says that the light he sees is not simply different in degree from all other lights, but different in kind; and he elaborates this difference by identifying the light in question with the

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creator who brings him into existence. This suggests that the light to which he refers is not on a continuum with him, but that it transcends him infinitely, pointing to an infinite chasm between God and the soul. Third, the fact that God lifts him up to see that there is something to see, though he is not yet able to see it, and the fact that the light he glimpses "beats back his feeble sight" suggests that it is not only an intelligible content to which he makes access, but also a principle of illumination and concealment that stands over against him. To the extent that Augustine is a (finite$\overset{\uparrow}{\perp}$infinite) being in whom the image of God has not been effaced, he has access to unchangeable light; but because he is also a (finite$\underset{\downarrow}{\top}$infinite) being, who has fallen away from God,[31] God "speaks" to him from a distance, suggesting that he will be unable to sustain his vision until he is fully developed.

When Augustine sees the light, the language of seeing displaces the language of speaking and hearing, at least momentarily. However, he describes the light that transcends him infinitely in figurative language, suggesting that it cannot be reduced to either mathematical or scientific terms. This suggests that the turn inward and the principle of illumination that makes it intelligible are accessible only in the kind of metaphorical and analogical discourse that Augustine has been using from the outset. Finally, at the end of this state of vision, Augustine returns to auditory metaphors, claiming that God cries out to him from afar, "I am who I am," and suggesting that what he hears is even more important than what he sees when he glimpses the immutable light. In this moment, a hole is blown in the circle of the first stage of his Neoplatonic vision,[32] not only by Augustine's incapacity to contemplate what he glimpses, but also by the voice of God that addresses him from afar. At this crucial juncture, Augustine is not drawing a conclusion from an argument from God's existence. Rather he is responding to what he hears from what exists beyond his soul where the truth that stands over against him can be seen and understood through the things that are made.

The first stage of the Neoplatonic vision is not only an important part of Augustine's intellectual conversion, but also a crucial element in his response to the problem of evil. He does not first solve the problem of evil as a philosophical enigma, and on this basis, catch a glimpse of the light that flows from God. Instead, he locates the problem of evil in the sphere of corruption and incorruptibility, sees that there is something incorruptible to be seen, hears God calling to him from afar, and begins to resolve the problem of evil on the basis of his mystical experience (7.10.16). In doing so, he suggests that finite things are neither wholly real nor wholly

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