

Chapter 1

The formation of Augustine's mind: Cicero, Mani, Plato, Christ

A short introduction to Augustine's thought cannot also offer biography. Partly because he wrote the most famous and influential of all ancient autobiographies, the psychology and personality of the man have naturally attracted concentrated attention. Among ancient men he had an unsurpassed power to articulate feelings. His writings are also a major source for the social history of his age. This book cannot be about that side of him, but concerns the making of his mind. That making was a drawn-out process; for he changed his mind on some points and developed his position on others. He described himself as 'a man who writes as he progresses and who progresses as he writes' (E 143). The shifts were closely related to the pressure of successive controversies in which he played a part, and reference to the historical setting is therefore essential for understanding. But beyond this we are not here concerned with his 'life and times'.

Aurelius Augustinus was born in AD 354 and died in 430. He lived all but five years of his life in Roman North Africa, and for the last thirty-four years was bishop of a busy seaport, Hippo, now Annaba in Algeria. At Hippo, only bishop Augustine had books, and his own family background was not one of high culture. That culture he acquired through education. Through his writings, the surviving bulk of which exceeds that of any other ancient author, he came to exercise pervasive influence not only on contemporaries but also in subsequent years on



1. The oldest portrait of St Augustine. Fresco in the Lateran, sixth century.

the West. The extent of that influence can be summarized by listing the debates that have been part of this man's legacy:

1. The theology and philosophy of the medieval schoolmen and of the creators of medieval universities were rooted in Augustinian ideas of the relation between faith and reason. When Peter Lombard compiled his *Sentences* (1155) to provide a basic textbook of theology, a very high proportion was drawn from Augustine. So too his contemporary Gratian cited many texts from him in making the West's principal handbook of canon law.
2. The aspirations of Western mystics have never escaped his influence, above all because of the centrality of the love of God in his thinking. He first saw the paradox that love, which is in quest of personal happiness, necessarily implies some self-renunciation and the pain of being made what one is not.
3. The Reformation found its mainspring in criticizing medieval Catholic piety as resting more on human effort than on divine grace. The Counter-Reformation replied that one can affirm the sovereignty of God's grace without also denying the freedom of the will and the moral value ('merit') of good conduct. Both sides in the controversy appealed on a huge scale to texts of Augustine.
4. The eighteenth century found itself passionately divided between those who asserted the perfectibility of man and those who saw human nature as held down by a dead weight of personal and collective egotism; in other words by what Augustine called 'original sin'. The men of the Enlightenment believed the actual perfecting of man to be hindered by belief in original sin and disliked Augustine very much. They were displeased when the philosopher Kant, who had so eloquently proclaimed the Enlightenment principle that one must dare to think for oneself, decisively assented to the belief that human nature is distorted by a pervasive radical evil.
5. In reaction against the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement

identified the heart of religion with feeling rather than with the conclusions of intellectual arguments. Augustine was not in the least anti-intellectual, but he did not think that intellect had the last word and he pioneered a highly positive evaluation of human feelings. We owe to him our use of the word 'heart' in this sense.

6. He was the most acute of Christian Platonists and did much to lay the foundations for the synthesis between Christianity and classical theism stemming from Plato and Aristotle. Plotinus in the third century AD deeply influenced him by his systematization of the Platonic tradition, but Augustine also became one of the most penetrating of all critics of this philosophical tradition to which he himself owed so much.
7. He saw more clearly than anyone before him (or for a long time after him) that issues of supreme importance are raised by the problem of the relation of words to the reality they attempt to describe. He was a pioneer in the critical study of non-verbal communication.

Augustine

Anselm, Aquinas, Petrarch (never without a pocket copy of the *Confessions*), Luther, Bellarmine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard all stand in the shade of his broad oak. His writings were among the favourite books of Wittgenstein. He was the *bête noire* of Nietzsche. His psychological analysis anticipated parts of Freud: he first explored the existence of the 'sub-conscious'.

He was 'the first modern man' in the sense that with him the reader feels himself addressed at a level of extraordinary psychological depth and confronted by a coherent system of thought, large parts of which still make potent claims to attention and respect. He affected the way in which the West has subsequently thought about the nature of man and what we mean by the word 'God'. Although as a follower of Plato he was little concerned with the natural physical environment, and wrote with fear of scientific investigations conducted without reverence and in indifference to ethical considerations, yet the modern scientist's

assumption that mathematical order and rationality are the supreme features of the world had no more eloquent advocate in antiquity than he. He therefore contributed something substantial to the attitude towards the created order that would make the emergence of modern science possible. On the other hand, he cannot be fairly read if he is treated as other than what he was, a man of the ancient world, whose mind and culture were altogether shaped by the literature and philosophy of Greece and Rome and whose conversion to Christianity set him in some degree at odds with the classical past. In relation to that past, he stood as both critic and transmitter to the medieval and modern worlds.

Just as the Greeks assumed, with some reason, that no one had written poetry to surpass Homer, or history in a way that rivalled Herodotus and Thucydides, or philosophy which was not a series of footnotes to Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicurus, so also the Romans attributed the status of a classical model to their own past masters – Cicero for prose and oratory, Virgil and Horace for poetry. In Augustine's time, there were educated people who knew entire orations of Cicero and the whole of Virgil by heart. Because the invention of printing has made books relatively inexpensive compared with manuscripts, such feats of memory appear needless and almost incredible to us today, but in the ancient and medieval worlds much school education consisted of learning by rote at an impressionable age. Cicero's prose and Virgil's poetry were so profoundly stamped on Augustine's mind that he could seldom write many pages without some reminiscence or verbal allusion. In youth he also read with deep admiration Sallust's sombre histories of the Roman Republic and the comedies of Terence. These too were part of the literary air he naturally breathed, and into his prose he would frequently work some turn of phrase taken from classical Latin literature. Many such allusions have been identified only comparatively recently, and it is certain that there are more yet to be located.

Augustine was not unique in his age in possessing this high literary

culture. His cultural background was that of Roman Africa, rich colonial provinces which had long enjoyed peace and prosperity with highly educated people who adorned their villas with noble mosaic and sculpture such as one can see in the Bardo Museum at Tunis. Since the Muslim conquest of the region more than 200 years after Augustine's death, the north and south sides of the Mediterranean have belonged to separate cultural if not commercial worlds and have spoken different languages, except during the relatively brief period of French domination in modern times. In Augustine's age, both north and south belonged to a single world, and wrote and spoke a good Latin which the Africans pronounced with a marked regional accent. North Africa supplied Italy with much of its grain. A summer voyage from Carthage or Hippo to Puteoli (Pozzuoli) or Ostia was a short sea journey made by several ships every week, and contact with Italy was frequent and easy. The wealth of Roman Africa often exceeded that found in Italy even among well-to-do families, and the African provinces had a strong sense of being independent and of wanting to make their own decisions.

Roman Africa had produced distinguished writers: in the first century, Manilius wrote a verse handbook on astrology; in the second century there was Fronto, tutor to the emperor Marcus Aurelius; Apuleius of Madaura, best-selling author not only of the 'Golden Ass' (*Metamorphoses*) with its characteristic mixture of magic, religion, and sex, but also of long influential handbooks on Platonic philosophy; Aulus Gellius, author of the 'Attic Nights' – a kind of reader's digest guide to effective dinner-party conversation. In Augustine's age, there was Macrobius, whose commentary on Scipio's Dream (the last book of Cicero's *Republic*) became a major source of information about Neoplatonic philosophy for the medieval West; also the self-consciously pagan Martianus Capella, who, probably after Augustine's lifetime, composed 'The Marriage of Philology and Mercury' to teach his readers the elements of the seven liberal arts and to show how their study can lead one up to heaven.

During the second century, a vigorous Christian mission in North Africa established a large number of congregations for whose use the Greek Bible was translated into Latin. The converts included brilliant figures such as Tertullian at the end of the second century, creator of the vocabulary of Western theology and master of witty polemic against pagan critics or dangerous heretics; and Cyprian, elected bishop of Carthage soon after his baptism, martyred ten years later in 258, insistent on upholding the ritual purity of the Catholic Church and on the juridical authority of the apostolic ministry. In the age of Constantine the Great early in the fourth century, two African Christians wrote defences of their faith against philosophical critics; Arnobius and Lactantius were partly indebted to Greek Christian writers before them.

The population of Roman Africa was very mixed. On the farms the peasants were Berber and Phoenician, speaking Punic. At seaports like Carthage and Hippo many of the traders were Greek-speaking with close links to Sicily and southern Italy, at that age (and long afterwards) a largely Greek-speaking region. But Latin was the language of the educated, the army, and the administration. The culture of Augustine's home and school was wholly Latin, though his mother Monica bore a Berber name.

Late Roman Carthage was a successful trading city. Its population had a taste not only for animal and gladiatorial fights in the amphitheatre but also for less bloody occasions such as poetry competitions and good plays at the theatre. The city possessed well-qualified jurists, physicians, and teachers of literature – 'grammarians' as they were called. Augustine was not born and raised in this urban world. He was a provincial country boy, born at an inland hill town called Thagaste in the province of Numidia Consularis, a cross-roads and market in what is now eastern Algeria at Souk-Ahras. There his father Patrick owned a few acres and one or two slavegirls, but was far from being rich. Patrick died when Augustine was a teenager. Augustine also had a brother and a sister, but whether he was the eldest or the second or the third child is a

matter on which there is no evidence. Education at the local school at Thagaste, as at all such small towns, was in the hands of a single teacher. Augustine found the man more effective with the cane than in inspiring his pupils with interest in their studies. Soon he passed on to another teacher at nearby Madaura. After Patrick's death, he went on to Carthage, financed by a wealthy neighbour, Romanianus.

Augustine later looked back on his school days as a miserable experience, valuable only as a training for the conflicts, injustices, and disappointments of adult life. A highly sensitive and bookish boy, he felt he had largely educated himself by his reading in great authors. The punishments endured by children, however deserved, actually benefited only those disposed to be benefited, and left others merely resentful and even more antisocial than before. He never wrote with admiration or gratitude about any of his teachers.

Augustine

As a schoolboy at Thagaste he began to learn Greek. Although he disliked the toil of learning the language, he was soon able to use a Greek book whenever necessary, and in his maturity he was competent to make his own translation of quite technical philosophical texts. But he never dreamed of acquiring a mastery of Homer and Greek literature, as a number of late Roman aristocrats did. He shared a feeling not uncommon in the Latin West of late antiquity that the West ought by now to have intellectual self-respect. It needed to stand on its own two feet and should do more than merely adapt Greek masterpieces for inferior Latin speakers. People did not then know or wish to acknowledge that their hero Virgil owed a vast amount to Homer. They were, however, aware that in philosophy the Greeks were and remained the supreme masters. Cicero and Seneca had composed dialogues and 'letters' adapting Greek philosophical debates for the instruction of the Romans. Cicero's philosophical dialogues were a mine of clearly set out information about the debates between the different schools, and in his twenties Augustine came to know their content very well.

Though not ignorant of Greek, Augustine was always more comfortable with a Latin version if that happened to be available. He was familiar with the *Categories* of Aristotle, which were available to him in Latin, and with the investigations of the laws of valid inference. The knotty problem of 'future contingents' discussed in the notorious ninth chapter of Aristotle's tract on *Interpretation* was familiar to him also. In agreement with the Neoplatonists of his time he used language about the uncertainties of the future which was more determinist than the followers of Aristotle liked; he wanted to say that events which to us are 'contingent' (i.e. they would not have occurred unless something happened to cause them) are not uncertain to God (F 26.4-5). In other words, though we have minds too limited to see it, the future is as unalterable as the past. Augustine was particularly interested in Stoic logic and ethical assertions. He was fascinated by the question of how far language communicates meaning about reality. He was capable of acute analysis of the problems contained in Epicurus' hedonist contention that by 'right' and 'wrong' we really mean 'pleasing' and 'displeasing'.

Paradoxically, the Greek thinker whose work most deeply entered his bloodstream was Plato, of whose works singularly little was available in Latin. Cicero had translated about half the *Timaeus*, and on this dialogue Calcidius in the fourth century had composed an elaborate commentary which Augustine could have known (but probably did not). It would not have been difficult for him to find Greek copies of Platonic dialogues at either Carthage or Rome, where he taught for a time. Both cities had citizens who knew the language. But he does not seem to have made a direct study of the original text.

The form of Platonic philosophy which eventually (when he was 31) captured his mind was the 'modern' Platonism which we now call Neoplatonism, taught a century earlier by Plotinus (205-270) to an esoteric circle, and then vigorously presented to the public by his acute pupil, editor, and biographer Porphyry of Tyre (c.250-c.305). Though

Plotinus did his teaching at Rome and Porphyry lived part of his life in Sicily, both men wrote exclusively in Greek. Despite the abstraction and complexity of the ideas, Plotinus and Porphyry came to have enormous influence, in the Latin West quite as much as in the Greek East. In Plotinus, during the flush of his first enthusiasm for Platonism, Augustine declared he saw 'Plato come to life again' (Ac. 3.41), a phrase that accurately reflects what Plotinus himself set out to do, for he regarded Plato as more than a man with great independent powers of thought. Plato ranked for him as an authority.

Augustine

Absorbing the principal doctrines of Stoic ethics and, in Porphyry's hands, much Aristotelian logic as well, Neoplatonism became altogether dominant over all other philosophical positions in late antiquity. Works by both Plotinus and Porphyry were translated into Latin by Marius Victorinus, an African who taught rhetoric and philosophy in Rome and at the height of his reputation, about the time that Augustine was born, had startled a largely pagan aristocracy by being baptized. Victorinus also translated some logical works by Aristotle and Porphyry, notably the *Introduction* to Aristotle's logic composed by Porphyry with such clarity and terse precision that the book became a standard handbook for a millennium.

Cicero

The most potent initial influence guiding the young Augustine in philosophical matters came from Cicero's dialogues. Of the many works of Cicero which Augustine knew intimately, one dialogue called *Hortensius*, vindicating the necessity of philosophical thinking for any critical judgement even for someone engaged in public and political life, exercised an extraordinary, catalytic effect. In the works of his old age he was still to be quoting phrases from this book which he first read as a nineteen-year-old student at Carthage. Cicero partly adapted for the Roman world an exhortation to study philosophy written by no less than Aristotle himself. Cicero's ideal was personal self-sufficiency and an

awareness that happiness, which everyone seeks, is not found in a self-indulgent life of pleasure, which merely destroys both self-respect and true friendships. Contemplating the paradox that everyone sets out to be happy and the majority are thoroughly wretched, Cicero concluded with the pregnant suggestion that man's misery may be a kind of judgement of providence, and our life now may even be an atonement for sins in a prior incarnation. The *Hortensius* also included a warning that the pursuit of bodily pleasure in food, drink, and sex, is distracting for the mind in pursuit of higher things.

Augustine was never a glutton or a drinker, but his sexual drive was strong. At the age of seventeen or eighteen at Carthage, he had taken to his bed a girlfriend of servile or low social class, a steady relationship that put an end to adolescent adventures. For over thirteen years, Augustine lived with her entirely faithfully. She soon produced an initially unwanted but in the event much loved son, whom they called Adeodatus or 'God's gift', equivalent to Theodore or Jonathan. The boy turned out very clever, but died at the age of seventeen.

The immediate effect of reading *Hortensius* was to make Augustine think seriously about ethical and religious issues. His father had been a pagan, baptized only on his deathbed. He was hot-tempered and not always faithful to his wife; Augustine betrays no sign of having felt close to him. His mother, on the other hand, was devout in Christian faith and practice, daily at prayers in her local church, often guided by dreams and visions. She had made him a catechumen in infancy. As a sceptical teenager he used occasionally to attend church services with her, but found himself mainly engaged in catching the eye of the girls on the other side of the basilica. At Carthage aged nineteen, he found that the seriousness of the questions raised by Cicero, especially about the quest for happiness, moved him to pick up a Latin Bible. He was repelled by the obscurity of its content and the barbarous style of the rather primitive version made by half-educated missionaries in the second century. The Old Latin Bible (the reconstruction of which by modern

scholars has been a remarkable critical operation) was not a book to impress a man whose mind was full of elegant Ciceronian diction and Virgilian turns of phrase, and who enjoyed good plays at the theatre. In disgust Augustine turned away from what seemed a naïve myth about Adam and Eve and from the doubtful morality of the Israelite patriarchs. To any prospect of his returning to the Church of his mother, the incompatibility between the two genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke gave the final *coup de grâce* (S 51.6).

So Augustine looked elsewhere for help. He was drawn to astrology, which seemed to offer a guide to life without looking too much like a religion, and then to the occult theosophy taught more than a century earlier by Mani (AD 216–77).

Mani

Augustine The religion of Mani, or Manicheism, expressed in poetic form a revulsion from the material world and became the rationale for an ultra-ascetic morality. The Manichees regarded ‘the lower half of the body’ as the disgusting work of the devil, the very prince of darkness. Sex and the dark were intimately associated in Mani’s mind; and the Dark was the very essence of evil. One would not expect such a religion to have attractions for a young man to whom sex was important (unless it were that one could attribute all one’s lower impulses to the powers of darkness and disown personal responsibility). However, the Manichee community consisted of two classes or grades of adherent. Absolute celibacy was required only of the higher grade, the Elect. The mere Hearers, whom Augustine joined, were allowed sexual relations at ‘safe’ periods of the month, and were expected to take steps to avoid conceiving a child; but if a child arrived, that was not a ground for expulsion from the society. Hearers therefore were allowed to live with wives or, as in Augustine’s case, concubines, but were not encouraged to think of sexuality in any positive light. It was the devil’s invention.

Mani denied any authority to the Old Testament with its presupposition of the goodness of the material order of things and of its Maker. He deleted as interpolations all texts in the New Testament that assumed either the order and goodness of matter or the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament scriptures. Otherwise he thought his expurgated New Testament a sound book. He generously acknowledged truth in all religious systems, and rejected orthodox catholic Christianity for being too exclusive and negative towards other religious myths and forms of worship. Yet he wanted to be considered Christian, even while asserting that his revelation founded 'a distinct religion'. He was a 'heretic' in the strict sense of a person wanting to stay within the community while reinterpreting its fundamental documents and beliefs in ways unacceptable to the main body, and persisting therein when asked to correct himself. He employed some biblical themes and terms, and allowed a redemptive role to Jesus – only he understood Jesus as a symbol of the plight of all humanity rather than as a historical person who walked the earth and was crucified. A quasi-divine redeemer could not in truth have been physically born or killed (an opinion anticipating Islamic doctrine); the crucifixion was no kind of actuality but a mere symbol for the suffering which is the universal human condition.

Mani interpreted everything he took from Christianity within a dualistic and pantheistic framework: this is seen in the immensely complex and elaborate mythology in which he cast his doctrine. The central question for him was the origin of evil. He explained evil as resulting from a primeval and still continuing cosmic conflict between Light and Dark, these terms being both symbol and physical reality. The forces of good and evil in the world have strengths and weaknesses such that neither side can vanquish the other. In consequence of the damage inflicted by the powers of Dark on the realm of Light, little fragments of God, or Soul, have become scattered throughout the world in all living things, including animals and plants. Melons and cucumbers were deemed to contain a particularly large ingredient of divinity, and were therefore prominent in the diet of Manichee Elect. Food laws for the Elect were

elaborate, and wine strictly forbidden. Manichee teachers and missionaries liked to recruit from members of the Church. The infiltration of Manichee notions could be detected when Christians at the eucharist accepted the host but not the chalice. Church people could be specially impressed by the fine parchment and calligraphy of Manichee sacred books and by the special solemnity of their music.

Augustine

Although Mani accorded a high place in his myth to Jesus, supreme and infallible teaching office was located for his community not in Jesus nor in old Jewish books but in Mani himself, the Apostle of God, the very Paraclete foretold by Jesus as coming along later to reveal truths for which the altogether too Jewish disciples were unprepared. Mani had no place whatever for the particularity which the Church inherited from its Jewish matrix. By a bizarre twist, he presented his lush, partly erotic mythology with the claim that it was a rational, coherent account of revealed truth, in strong contrast to the simple faith of orthodox Christians who believed on mere authority. Manichee propaganda devoted much attention to onslaughts upon the morality and historical accuracy of the Old Testament and those parts of the New Testament that seemed too Jewish for Manichee taste. Above all, the Manichees urged that they had the only satisfactory answer to the problem of evil: it was an ineradicable force inherent in the physicality of the material world. No one could plausibly hold that the ultimate author of so uncomfortable a world could be both omnipotent and truly good. If the argument was to be coherent, either the omnipotence or the goodness must be sacrificed. Manichee teachers took it for granted that everyone knew without further definition or inquiry just what is meant by 'evil'.

During a full ten years, in teaching posts first at Carthage and then at Rome, Augustine remained associated with the Manichees. A combative critic of Catholic orthodoxy and conscious of his own intellectual superiority to members of the Church, whose bishops he held in contempt for their lack of education and critical inquiry, he converted many friends to share his Manichee beliefs. But during his twenties he

was not only teaching Latin literature and the arts of rhetoric. He was also reflecting on philosophical issues and logical problems to which studies in rhetoric naturally led. Mounting doubts came to beset him. Was Mani right when he asserted that the supremely good Light-power was weak and impotent in conflict with Dark? How could one properly worship a deity so powerless and humiliated? Moreover, the Manichee myth gave a large role to the two great and good lights of sun and moon and held a dogmatic position about the explanation of eclipses, namely that sun and moon are then using special veils to shut out the distressing sight of cosmic battles. Augustine was disturbed to find that the Manichee account was at variance with that of the best astronomers. One might demythologize orthodox Christianity and still have something of great importance left; Augustine felt that this was not true of Manicheism, where the myth was of the essence. Growing disillusion with the sect reached a climax when he put his doubts before a teacher held in high regard by the Manichees, Faustus. He found the man's eloquence greater than his capacity for thought. Further, the moral life of the Elect, who claimed sinless perfection, turned out to be less celibate than he had supposed.

He began to look about for alternatives to Manicheism. Already he had developed an interest in combining Manichee beliefs about the balance of good and evil with Neopythagorean ideas about proportion as an element in the beauty of the whole, about the good 'monad' (one is one and all alone and evermore shall be so) in contrast to the evil of infinite plurality. In his mid-twenties, he even wrote a book on this subject which in later retrospect he scorned as a half-baked piece of ill-digested stuff (C iv.20-7). Increasingly his doubts plunged him into suspense of judgement. He became intensely interested in the theory of knowledge: how do we know anything? How can we be absolutely sure? How do we communicate with each other when words can be misleading, or construed in a sense quite different from that intended by the speaker? Is everyday language, so frequently defying the rules of logic, a source of light or fog?

In this hesitant state of mind, Augustine devoured books by sceptical philosophers, dogmatically assertive about the uncertainty and inconclusiveness of all received opinions, of sense-perception, and of the power of words to tell one anything important that one does not really know already.

Augustine

This was his mind when he arrived at Milan in 384 as the city's new professor of rhetoric but with hopes of rising higher still. Milan was the imperial residence. If, despite Italian smiles at his African vowels, he could speak so eloquently as to attract favourable attention at court, and if he could gain the support of influential officials, perhaps he might aspire to be nominated as governor of a province (C vi.19). Admittedly there were obstacles to the ambition. He was a middle-class provincial without the recommendation of personal wealth to back him. Moreover, he still had living with him his 'common-law wife', his Carthaginian girlfriend, Adeodatus' mother. What would raise no eyebrow when done by a city professor of rhetoric might not be acceptable at government house. His widowed mother Monica, who had devotedly pursued him to Milan, saw that her son's much-loved but uneducated partner in bed and board was a fatal hindrance to his secular desire for distinction and honour. Eventually the woman was sent back to Carthage. The parting was with great pain on both sides. Augustine was then engaged to marry a youthful heiress, whose dowry would facilitate the realization of his hopes. Until she was old enough to marry, Augustine turned for consolation to a temporary mate; she had no deep significance for him. His feelings were numb.

At Milan Augustine met, for the first time in his life, a Christian intellectual with ability not far short of his own: Ambrose the bishop, a man of high education, who also knew his way about the corridors of power at the court. He received Augustine kindly, and Monica held him in deep respect as a pastor. Before becoming bishop in 374, he had been provincial governor of that part of northern Italy. His education in an

aristocratic and Christian household had made him fluent in Greek. For his sermons he drew ideas and inspiration not only from Greek Christian theologians like Basil of Caesarea and the Jewish theologian Philo, elder contemporary of St Paul, but also from Plotinus. Ambrose's debt to Plotinus was combined with caution about pagan philosophy as a guide to truth.

Another Christian intellectual at Milan who influenced Augustine was an older man named Simplicianus, through whom he became drawn into a group of laymen of high education and social standing, who met to read Plotinus and Porphyry. They much admired Marius Victorinus, whose last years had been devoted to the deployment of Neoplatonic logic in defence of orthodox Trinitarian belief. Augustine was never greatly influenced by the obscure theological writings of Victorinus. But his readings in Plotinus and Porphyry, translated by Victorinus, set his mind on fire. That may seem surprising to the modern reader, for whom Neoplatonism can easily seem intricate and esoteric. The Neoplatonic philosophy of Being has presuppositions or axioms very different from those of modern scientific method: its starting point is mind, not matter.

Plotinus and Porphyry

Porphyry's biography of Plotinus portrays the awe in which the great philosopher was held, at least in his inner circle of pupils. Porphyry wrote the biography to accompany his edition of Plotinus, partly because he wanted everyone to know how right his hero had been to entrust him with the publication of his treatises; how profoundly Plotinus had admired his pupil's critical mind and capacity for composing inspired ecstatic verses; and how at the age of sixty-eight Porphyry himself had on one blissful occasion attained mystical union with the One, an experience which came only four times in life even to the divinely illuminated Plotinus. Plotinus is represented as a man of unique genius, whose guardian spirit was no inferior power, and whose

mind never relaxed its concentration on the highest peaks of the intellect.

Like his elder Christian contemporary Origen, Plotinus lived an ascetic life of minimal food and sleep, given to vegetarianism and no baths. 'He always seemed ashamed of being in the body', and never celebrated his birthday. To his numerous male and female pupils, Plotinus became a father figure, consulted on major and minor decisions of life. He had a preternatural discernment of mendacity and, like Christian bishops, was asked to arbitrate in disputes. He successfully dissuaded the highly strung Porphyry from suicide.

Augustine

In his philosophical system, Plotinus set out to paint a kind of word-picture of the entire structure of things on the assumption that there is intimate correspondence between reality and the process of human thought. He attached high importance to the dialectic of Plato's dialogues, *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, especially Plato's analysis of identity and difference. That is, if we say x and y are 'the same', we imply distinction between them if the assertion of identity is to be interesting. Conversely, to point out that x and y are different implies an underlying bond of identity between them. So, beyond the multiplicity and the differences perceived and experienced in this world, there lies a unity and a permanence. Likewise the world of perceived appearances is one of perpetual change; but change presupposes a substratum which remains permanent.

Plato attributed changelessness to the higher world of Being grasped by the mind, in contrast to the ever-changing flux of Becoming discerned by the bodily senses. Hence Plato's theory of Forms (or Ideas), eternal absolutes: whatever in this world we call just or good or beautiful or true, is so in so far as it derives from the respective absolute. The Forms are the objective, constant, and universally valid reality. Moreover, these universals are perceived not by the five bodily senses, but by an austere mathematical process of pure mental abstraction. Bloodless as

these abstractions may appear, Platonism understands these universals as highly causative: individual existents cannot be accounted for in isolation, but only as members of a prior class. Therefore, for a Platonist, the universal is more real than any particular instance – a doctrine countered by Aristotle with the criticism that universals are mental classifications with reality only as they are embodied in particular existents. In his 'Introduction' Porphyry pursued his theme of reconciling Plato and Aristotle by juxtaposing these two opinions and carefully abstaining from giving a verdict between them.

Aristotle had been interested in self-consciousness, in which the knower and the object known are identical. Plotinus took this observation a stage further to form a theology, many themes of which came to seem self-evident axioms to Augustine. At the summit of the hierarchy of being is the One, God, the unknowable and Absolute, yet apprehended by the soul as a presence transcending all knowing. In the great chain or continuum of being which Plotinus identified as the structure of things, the higher level is cause of whatever is immediately lower. Plotinus spoke of the evolution or development of the hierarchy of being as 'emanation', a strongly physical image. In the process of emanation there is gradual loss; for every effect is slightly inferior to its cause. Nevertheless the imperfection inherent in its inferiority can be overcome as it returns towards its cause. And the cause itself is always undiminished by its timeless giving of existence to the inferior effect.

This way of thinking of causative emanation in the great chain of being enabled Plotinus to achieve several things at once. On the one hand it solved the problem of how to keep the transcendent One and the world from losing all relation to each other, without the Absolute ceasing to be Absolute, and without the world logically dropping out of existence altogether. It expressed a kind of redemption by 'conversion' to the source of being. On the other hand, it alleviated a problem which caused acute mental gymnastics for all Platonists, namely answering the question how evil could ever have entered into the continuum of

things, when that was an overflow of supreme goodness and power.

Plotinus taught that at the apex of the hierarchy are three divine existences: the One, Mind, and Soul. The One is supremely Good, and therefore all lower levels of the hierarchy below the One must be also distinct from the Good; in short, less than perfectly good. Even Mind has some inferiority about it, some delusions about its own grandeur. Soul, still further down the scale, has the power to produce matter. Matter, being at the opposite extremity of the hierarchy from the good One, is in cosmic terms utter evil, formless non-being.

Augustine

The Neoplatonists cordially hated theosophy, and its Manichee form more than all. Plotinus' treatise 'Against the Gnostics' (ii.g) inaugurated a series of Neoplatonic essays in polemic against Manicheism. By seeing the cosmos as a great chain of being, Plotinus could declare that evil is no more than a defect of being-and-goodness, inherent in the mere fact of an inferior level. But two other explanations of evil were also prominent in his thinking. Of these the first answer looked towards the consequence of misused free choice grounded in a potentiality for weakness in the soul. The second answer looked towards matter. Weakness in the soul tended to make it absorbed in external and material things. Thereby the cosmic, non-moral evil of defect of being inherent in matter becomes a root of moral evil in the soul. 'Without matter there can be no moral evil' (Plotinus i.8,14). The presence of matter to the soul brings out its weakness and causes its fall. At the same time, Plotinus wished to speak of the coming forth and descent of the soul as necessary for the fulfilment of its potential powers and for the service that soul has to render to the inferior world of the senses (iv. 8,4-5). It is fair to deduce that even Plotinus failed to achieve a clear and consistent position. After his conversion Augustine sought to correct Plotinus' mistakes.

The doctrines of Porphyry were similar to those of his master Plotinus.

In the Neoplatonic school there was disagreement about the cult of the gods. Plotinus and Porphyry felt reserve towards participation in sacrifices to propitiate the spirits. Porphyry wrote a treatise *On the Soul's Return* (that is, to God), to Augustine profoundly exciting reading; this presented a compromise position. He allowed that good philosophy could be extracted at shrines from inspired oracles uttered by Apollo through his prophetesses. But he wrote critically of fellow-pagans who supposed that the soul could be purified directly through participation in temple sacrifices or external ritual acts. Animal sacrifices were too earthbound. Moreover, the custom of eating the meat afterwards was not congenial to vegetarian principles. So Porphyry urged that the soul's purging could be achieved only by 'flight from the body', to which it had become united by a chapter of sad accidents. By abstinence from meat and from sexual activity, the soul could be gradually emancipated from its bodily fetters.

Porphyry taught that happiness consists in wisdom, which is found by obeying the ancient command of Delphi, 'Know yourself'. Admittedly, wickedness in the soul makes man impotent to practise continual intellectual contemplation, so that at best such moments are transitory. But 'exercise yourself to return to yourself; gather from the body all the spiritual elements dispersed and reduced to a mass of bits and pieces'. 'The soul is thrust into poverty, the more that its ties to the flesh are strengthened. But it can become truly rich by discovering its true self, which is intellect.' 'Our end is to attain the contemplation of Being.' 'He who knows God has God present to him. He who does not know is absent from God who is everywhere present.' Augustine's *Confessions* echo this language.

Porphyry taught that God contains all things but is contained by nothing. The One is present to all that participates in the existence flowing from its source in God. Goodness must be self-diffusive. But all plurality depends upon and seeks to return to higher and prior unity. In the hierarchy of being it is axiomatic that it is good to exist, and that

degrees of being are also degrees of goodness. Porphyry wrote that 'everything which has being is good in so far as it has being; even the body has its own beauty and unity'. (Augustine says the same, VR 40.) Between material things and the higher realms of intelligible reality, the soul occupies a median position. By neglect and an inexplicable act of self-assertive defiance, it is capable of sinking to pride, envy, and carnal things. But by ascetic restraint and by introspective contemplation, the soul can ascend to its true fulfilment. This fulfilment is 'the enjoyment of God'. This last phrase Augustine was to make his own.

Augustine

Porphyry drew from Plotinus the concept that at the apex of the chain of being there lies, beyond the reach of our five senses, a divine triad of being, life, and intelligence, all reciprocal, defined as a unity within which one can discern distinctions. The structure of things is that of a rhythmic procession out from the ultimate principle of being, from potentiality to actuality, from abstract to concrete, from identity to that otherness which is also a diminution in the level of being. The destiny of eternal souls is to return whence they have come. Souls are inherently immortal. The doctrine of return or conversion is the meaning of Plato's doctrine of Reminiscence, i.e. that all knowledge is a recalling to mind of what one once knew (in a previous existence) but had forgotten. This doctrine the Neoplatonists, and Augustine after them, largely replaced by the notion of divine illumination directly shining within the soul.

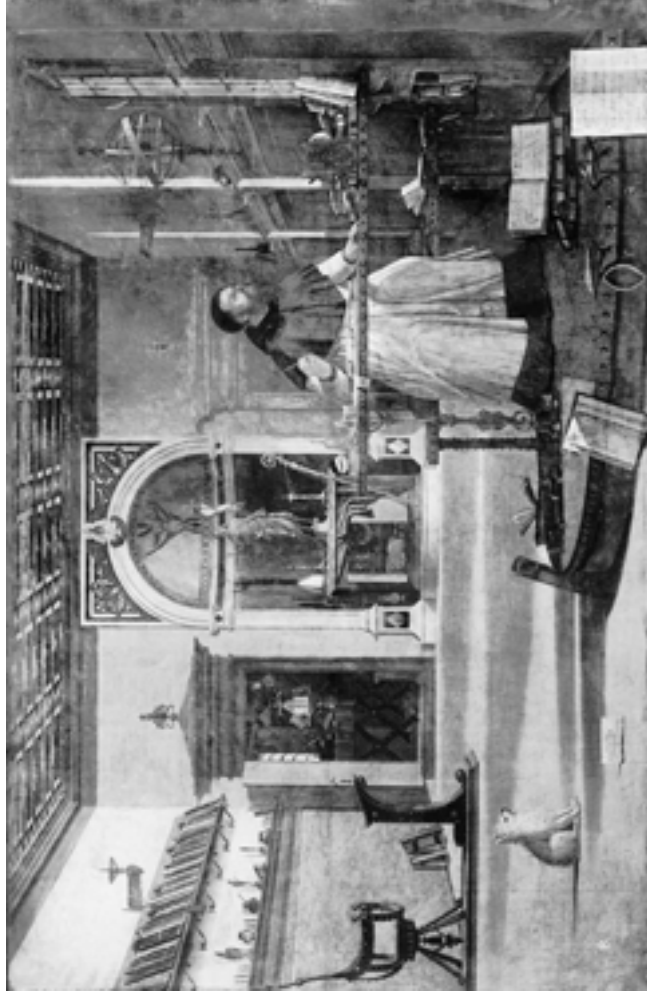
Near the end of his life Porphyry (who is reported by some Christian writers to have been a Christian in his youth and then to have apostatized) composed a lengthy and bitter attack on Christian beliefs and on the historical trustworthiness of the biblical books. His book against the Christians was not known to Augustine. Porphyry's works, however, may fairly be described as offering an alternative religious philosophy, designed, whether consciously or unconsciously, to provide a rival and antidote to Christianity.

The Milan group of Platonists gripped their new professor of rhetoric

with Victorinus' translations of tracts by Plotinus and Porphyry. The language Augustine found there about the problem of evil and about mystical experience of the immaterial transcendent realm had an immense impact. The Neoplatonists were telling him that the soul has an immediate and inherent power of self-knowledge; moreover, that this power can be realized only as and when the perceptions of the five senses are set aside and the mind undergoes a purification, by dialectic, which purges it of physical images and elevates it to the beatific vision of which Plato spoke. They believed this to be a natural power of the soul, realized as it gradually opens itself to divine light and truth.

Augustine was later to describe, in the seventh book of the *Confessions*, how at Milan he attempted deep meditation on the Neoplatonic method. Platonism liberated him from the Manichee notion of God as subtle luminous matter. By introspection in solitude and by practising the way of dialectical regress from external to internal, from inferior and physical to superior and mental, he briefly attained a vision of eternal truth and unchanging beauty. He was disappointed by the extreme transience of an experience so profound, and by the fact that afterwards he found himself as consumed with pride and lust as before. Nevertheless, he knew that in that 'flash of a trembling glance' he had attained a dazzling glimpse of the immutable and eternal Being, an immaterial reality wholly transcending his own all too changeable mind (C vii.23). There is no hint of a suggestion in his later retrospect written as a Christian that this preconversion experience was anything less than authentic. Later in the *Confessions* (xi.11) he would use almost identical language about the union of love and dread, the dread induced by the contemplation of the unapproachable Other so distant and 'unlike', the love by the awareness of the Other who is so similar and so near; the dread corresponding to negative and impersonal attributes, the love asking to be expressed in frankly personal terms.

At the heart of the experience he described lay the conviction that the finite creature has an insatiable longing for a fulfilment that can be



2. *St. Augustine's vision of St. Jerome* by Vittore Carpaccio, Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice.

found only in what lies beyond itself, and indeed beyond human capacity for definition or description.

Neoplatonic exhortations to suppress the passions and the physical senses took Augustine back to Cicero's warning that sexual indulgence does not make for mental clarity. Porphyry's tract on vegetarianism taught that, 'just as priests at temples must abstain from sexual intercourse in order to be ritually pure at the time of offering sacrifice, so also the individual soul needs to be equally pure to attain to the vision of God'. Augustine knew himself to be 'dragged down by the weight of a carnal life'. He was not a Christian; yet it was through Christians like Simplicianus of Milan that he had discovered an experience of deep psychological importance to him, giving him both a sense of total certitude and also an awareness of his own impermanence in contrast to the eternal Being of the One. He found himself torn in a struggle between a meditative philosophy which called his soul to higher things than the body, and his habit of sexual activity, by which he felt himself bound and in which he had long found a source of physical, if not psychological, satisfaction. He began to hope and pray that he would eventually attain continence, 'but not yet' (C viii.16). It was both a comfort and a stimulus that Cicero's *Hortensius* had taught that 'the mere search for higher happiness, not merely its actual attainment, is a prize beyond all human wealth or honour or physical pleasure'.

The formation of Augustine's mind

Towards conversion

If the paradoxical effect of Cicero's *Hortensius* when he was nineteen had been to drive him to Manicheism, the effect of his Platonic readings when he was thirty-one was to impel him towards Porphyry's greatest object of hatred, the Church. The Neoplatonic circle at Milan was particularly interested in parts of the New Testament, such as the prologue to St John's Gospel or St Paul's strongly Platonizing language in 2 Corinthians 3-4, which offered a biblical foundation for a Christian

Platonism. The Christians in this group were concerned to interpret St Paul's epistle to the Romans in a way that averted Manichee determinism and dualism. As a Manichee, Augustine had interpreted the apostle as being inconsistent not only with the Old Testament but also with himself. Pauline language about the conflict of flesh and spirit (Galatians 5 and Romans 7) was taken by the Manichees as a charter for their belief that the body's sexual impulses are at the root of all evil. The Milan Neoplatonists took a slightly less pessimistic view. Soon Augustine was convinced that from Plato to Christ was hardly more than a short and simple step, and that the teaching of the Church was in effect 'Platonism for the multitude', a pictorial and figurative way of addressing unphilosophical minds with the effect of making them rational at least in conduct. To the end of his days, long after his reservations about certain elements in the Platonic tradition had become specific and explicit, Augustine would not fail to make handsome acknowledgement of his indebtedness to the Neoplatonic books. As he lay dying at Hippo during the long Vandal siege of his city, his last recorded words were a quotation from Plotinus.

Neoplatonic spirituality and the stress on interiority and on liberation from the distractions of the external world sharpened Augustine's feeling of being pulled in two different directions, with his sexual drive as a downward pull. As he read the letters of St Paul, he began to think his condition wholly understood by the apostle. He found himself in a whirlpool of inward conflict. The consciousness of his wretchedness was one day poignantly enhanced as he walked in a Milan street past a laughing beggar happy under the anaesthetic of liquor (C vi.9). He realized that his feeling on contemplating the man was not pity but envy. The professor of rhetoric found that his copy of the Pauline letters was becoming important to him.

At the end of July 386 in the garden of the house in Milan where he was living with his mother and with his former pupil Alypius (a competent lawyer who in 386 was still shedding Manichee beliefs, and later became

bishop of Thagaste), Augustine finally came to the point of decision. His health had become poor with asthmatic trouble on his chest and loss of voice; whether this was a symptom of his malaise or a contributory cause of his decision cannot be determined. He decided to abandon his teaching post, and therewith ambitions for a secular career. The crux was the abandonment of all intention to marry. Could he bring himself to live without a woman? From an African friend working in the court bureaucracy he learned of the existence of a community of ascetics living in Milan and of the renunciation of wealth by Antony, the Egyptian hermit, whose biography had been written by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, and was quickly translated into Latin for Western readers. If they could achieve continence, then he could also. Or was his will too weak?

According to the narrative in the eighth book of the *Confessions* written fourteen years later, he picked up his copy of St Paul, opened it at random and, in the manner of those who sought guidance for the future from Virgil, took guidance from the first text he saw – the concluding words of Romans 13, contrasting sexual wantonness with the calling to ‘put on Christ’. He described his decision in exquisite literary language, with echoes from the poet Persius, a striking phrase from Plotinus, and a symbolic allusion to fallen Adam in the garden of Eden. He recounted how he heard as it were a voice like a child’s bidding him to ‘pick up and read’ (*tolle, lege*). How much of the narrative is plain prose and how much is literary or rhetorical decoration has been a matter of controversy. That there is a literary element is certain. It is also certain that in Milan at the end of July 386 he made a decision to abandon marriage and secular ambition and to be baptized. He resigned his city teaching post.

The conversion was no sudden flash, but the culminating point of many months of painful gestation. He himself was later to compare the process of conversion to pregnancy. The choice marked a shift more ethical than intellectual in content. The story told in the *Confessions*

presupposes that in 386 he understood sexual passion as the one obstacle between his soul and union with eternal incorporeal truth. What Plotinus and Porphyry had taught him was now being made possible and actual with the help of a text from St Paul. Fifteen years later he would be writing of the 'illusion' some have that in this life it is possible for the human mind so to detach itself from the physical world as to grasp 'the unclouded light of unchanging truth' (CE iv.20). Nevertheless, at the time he had the sensations of 'coming into harbour after a stormy passage'. Monica's prayers for his conversion and baptism were answered. The son of so many tears could not be lost.

Augustine

A few months later he declared that, although old desires did not cease to disturb his dreams, nevertheless he was beginning to make progress, for he now regarded sexual union with revulsion as a 'bitter sweetness' (Sol. i.25). His ascetic aspirations did not make him wish to be a hermit. His longing was to be with a community of lay friends sharing his enthusiasm for Plato and St Paul with some Cicero (especially the *Tusculan Disputations*) thrown in. Eight months passed between his decision in the Milan garden and Easter 387 when he was baptized by Ambrose together with his natural son Adeodatus and his friend Alypius the lawyer. During these months he and Monica with a group of friends and pupils were lent a villa at Cassiciacum in the hills near Como. There he could recover his health and think out his position.

His conversion does not appear in his writings at the time as motivated by a desire to escape the painful uncertainties of philosophical scepticism by taking refuge in the dogmatic authority of the Church. The source of his misery and dissatisfaction lay in himself. Nevertheless the problem of authority was prominent in the controversies between Catholics and Manichees, and he acknowledged that he was submitting to Christ and his community. A claim to self-determination he came to see as pride (C x.58). From the autumn of 386 onwards, his writings would contain frequent allusions to the Bible and Christian doctrine. At Cassiciacum he wrote of authority and reason as parallel routes to the



3. *Scenes from the life of St Augustine: Baptism of St Augustine*, 1645, by Benozzo Gozzoli. Fresco, San Agostino, San Gimignano, Italy.

truth, authority being Christ, reason being represented by Plato. Authority can give directions which reason subsequently understands. Authority is prior in time, reason prior in the order of reality. The well educated prefer to follow the philosophic path of reason; but even there reason cannot be sufficient to provide all the guidance needed. On the other hand, an exclusive reliance on authority must be beset by great danger. Without reason how can one discriminate between competing claims to authority? How can one distinguish between authentically divine authority and that of inferior spirits venerated by pagans who claim to predict the future by divination and soothsaying? The divine authority of Christ, however, is demonstrated by being simultaneously the highest reason. He is the very Wisdom of God, identical with the Mind of Plotinus' supreme triad (O ii.26-7).

Augustine

Finally, one must ask what specific ideas about God and man were accepted by Augustine in consequence of his baptism and confession of faith. Reduced to its most basic and skeletal elements, the Christian faith invited him to make the following affirmations. First, the ordered world stems from the supreme Good who is also the supreme Power, not merely the best that happens to exist, but a perfection such that our minds cannot even frame the idea of any superior being. Therefore 'he' is the proper object of awe and worship. We should not think of God as involved in a process of struggling from lower to higher as human beings do (and as the Manichee Light-power), but rather as having a consistent creative and redemptive purpose in relation to the universe in general and the rational creation in particular. The supreme level in the ladder of value is the love which is the very nature of God.

Secondly, human nature as now experienced fails to correspond to the Creator's intentions. Human misery is perpetuated by social and individual egotisms, so that man is haunted by ignorance, mortality and the brevity of life, weakness of will, above all by the arrogant and wilful rejection of his true good. In short, humanity needs the remedy of

eternal life and the forgiveness of sins, or restoration under the love of God.

Thirdly, the supreme God has acted within the time and history in which we live, and which 'he' transcends, bringing to us knowledge, life, strength, and (greatest gift of all) humility without which no one learns anything. This act has its culminating focus in Jesus, model to humanity by his life and wise teaching and by his unique filial relation to the supreme 'Father'. Jesus embodied the gift of God's love by the humility of his incarnation and death. Access to this movement of God to rescue fallen man is found through the assent of faith and through adhesion to the community of Jesus' followers, a structured community entrusted by him with the gospel and with sacramental covenant signs of water, bread, and wine. Thereby the Spirit of holiness unites man to God, to give hope for the life to come, of which Jesus' resurrection is the ultimate pledge, and to transform the individual's personal and moral life to be fit for the society of saints in the presence of God.

Through these themes, Christian preaching spoke to Augustine in strongly other-worldly terms which linked arms with Platonic morality and metaphysics. It was momentous that he brought together Plotinus' negative, impersonal language about the One or Absolute and the biblical concept of God as love, power, justice, and forgiveness. It is cardinal to theism that the mystery of God is known not only in the grandeur and glory of nature but also by a self-disclosure – on the analogy of a person making known to others what they could not find out for themselves. From 387 onwards, Augustine took these ideas as first principles.