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Neoplatonic Influences in Augustine's Confessions

At the time Augustine wrote the *Confessions*, Christianity was still in its infancy. Its main body of followers were the peasant class, for it had no philosophical foundations with which to attract the intellectuals. Augustine however, was an intellectual arriviste and was faced with the dilemma of substantiating the Christian religion in the eyes of the intelligentsia. How might he do this? Necessarily, he was forced to draw upon previous sources — the same ones that the intellectuals were familiar with and subscribed to. Augustine relied upon the authors of the Old Testament and the New Testament, also, Virgil, Cicero, and Anaximenes, but none more so than the Neoplatonists.

Even though it is highly unlikely that St. Augustine had direct access to either Socratic or Platonic modes of thought, as is evidenced by his reference to the fact that he disdained Greek as a written language (Bk.1, Ch.13) and also

because ancient Greek culture was functionally dead by the mid third century A.C.E., he did make use of the Neoplatonic ideals as they were set forth by Plotinus. (Bk.7, Ch.9) Augustine states that he "made use of a man... to procure me some of the books of the Platonists, translated from the Greek into Latin." (Bk.7, Ch.9) Upon reading these works, Augustine ascertained that the Neoplatonic and Christian doctrines ran parallel on several very important dogmas.

The Neoplatonists conceptualized a prime mover which they called "the One" or "the good." A modern definition of this enigma could be "the Absolute" (*The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, 24). They believed that from this One all things came and all things will one day return. It is both omniscient and omnipotent and it exists merely because it is and the object of its love is itself. Because of its all-powerful nature, no human can ever hope to grasp either its meaning, purpose, cause, or its effects. The One is eternal, in which the beginning and the end of all things lie. The Neoplatonists also thought that the One cannot be thought of as a physical entity, for it has no bounds.

Augustine easily incorporates most of these views into his own thought. His concept of the Christian God is one of an all-knowing, all-powerful, benevolent deity. However, the concept of God being outside of time and of having no limits physically were hard for him to grasp. After much deliberation on this topic, Augustine realized how this made sense to Christianity. The concept of God being outside of time, with our notion of time taking place within him, annulled the old argument of why God hadn't decided to make man earlier. The argument went that since God has always been and that man has not always been, God must have decided to create man. Since God had decided to make man something must have changed his mind, hence, the unmoved mover was moved. With God outside time, Augustine could solve this problem. With God having no physical limits, Augustine could then see how God could be everywhere at once.

The Neoplatonists also had a central belief in the soul. They saw the soul as eternal but not incapable of change. The Neoplatonic soul was in constant motion, beginning at a state of oneness with all other souls. Its journey proceeds from the realm of oneness downward to the realm of material being only to reverse its motion and return again to oneness after being "educated" on

the material plane of existence. Augustine also conceptualized the soul and carries the Christian view of the eternal nature of it. The Neoplatonic idea of perpetual circular motion of the soul also works for him to a point. It breaks down for Augustine at the point in time when the perpetual comes into play. Augustine's concept of soul makes one trip through the cycle and assumes its place in the eternal paradise. Augustine is very careful in his wording of this particular passage of the *Confessions*.

Augustine takes great care to mirror the Neoplatonic view of the One when describing the characteristics of the Christian god. This is done for two purposes, the first being the fact that Neoplatonism was one of the predominant philosophical views of the time period that the *Confessions* was written and Augustine was trying to show that Christianity had a valid base with respect to the beliefs and views of the time. The second point that Augustine was trying to make was that from the Neoplatonic progression of thought the Christian doctrine naturally followed, thereby attempting to entice Neoplatonists into conversion to the Christian faith. By doing this, Augustine pushes a fledgling Christian religion over the edge into a much wider range of acceptance as he has shown that Christianity has appeal to not only the lower class of society but also to the upper classes as well.

Augustine made extremely valuable use of his Neoplatonic predecessors in his writing of the *Confessions*. He not only used their philosophy, he used it to expound on his own ideas of God and meshed the two together into a more coherent and wider ranging theory than either had been before he altered them. His use of their teachings served to give credibility to the Christian doctrine and spread the faith not only to the Neoplatonists but also to the greater majority of the upper classes of Roman society. His usage worked with outstanding results. He accomplished his goals of expanding Christianity and also of building the level of acceptance and credibility of the religion which are still being felt today.

Works Cited

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