Intellectual Traditions as Predecessors to St. Augustine

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The use of existing works has obvious advantages for an author. Since the first written word, a tradition has been created that authors can exploit to lend greater meaning to their own work. This use of a predecessor is not confined to a single work or author, however, but may encompass a whole philosophy or tradition. St. Augustine utilizes this device in his *Confessions*, relying for a predecessor upon several existing intellectual traditions. In particular, his use of the Neoplatonists is evident, as well as his use of the rhetorical and epic traditions. This use of intellectual traditions that were commonly studied by the scholars of his time helped St. Augustine to present Christianity as a respectable religious choice for his audience of Roman intellectuals. Augustine did this in several ways. He defended Christianity on an intellectual level in addition to surrounding it with familiar tropes to create respectability by association. "He (Augustine) was the most acute of the Christian Platonists and did much to lay the foundations for the synthesis between Christianity and classical

theism stemming from Plato and Aristotle." (*Aug.*, 3)

Neoplatonic philosophy was created by a group of philosophers who studied, and extrapolated from, the works of Plato. St. Augustine's familiarity, or lack of it, with the works of Plato is uncertain. Therefore, in the *Confessions*, much of the Platonic images and concepts utilized by Augustine seem known to him through works by the Neoplatonists, not necessarily because of any direct knowledge on his part of a certain Platonic dialogue. Thus, it is probably more accurate to consider the Neoplatonic philosophers as the major influence on Augustine.

This use by Augustine of the Neoplatonists is apparent in several of the themes in the *Confessions*. The concept of ascending levels, in which the body is the lowest level and God the highest, is used many times by Augustine. Thus, the soul as an intermediate entityproceeds up this symbolic ladder from a concentration on the corporeal to a unity with God. This theme echoes that of Diotima's speech in Plato's *The Symposium*, God replacing Beauty at the pinnacle. The contents of this speech would have been known to Augustine through the Neoplatonists, and are extrapolated and made into Christian doctrine by Augustine as he shows that Platonism and Christianity are not mutually exclusive.

Another use of the Neoplatonists is in Augustine's analysis of time. Time was a recurrent theme for the Neoplatonists, possibly due to Plato's emphasis upon it in the *Timaeus*. But the Neoplatonic view of time developed in opposition to another view proposed by the Stoics and was, therefore, consciously selected by Augustine as the view he wanted to engage. The Neoplatonic view emphasized man's free will, which is in agreement with Augustine's description of his move towards conversion through conscious decisions and accepting responsibility for his own actions. The concept of free will, it applies to the committing of sins, is an important Christian concept, and, in this instance, is shown to be validated, by Augustine, through Neoplatonic philosophy.

The work of one prominent Neoplatonist, Plotinus, is used to a large degree by Augustine. In selecting which portions of his life to include in the *Confessions*, Augustine chooses those parts which demonstrate Plotinus' theory of the triadic fault of the soul. The soul, emanating from what Plotinus referred to as the One, and on its way to the realm of matter, can be guilty of three faults: pride,

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concupiscence, and curiosity. In Augustine's *Confessions*, pride is demonstrated in his childhood, concupiscence in his following stage of lust, and curiosity in his subsequent search, in all directions, for something to give his life meaning. According to Plotinus, the soul is turned back toward the One by *pro videre*, or providence. Augustine describes a touch by the hand of God, which turned him around. In drawing this parallel with Plotinus' philosophy, Augustine is removing any emotional elements from his experience, making it possible to accept simply on the basis of the existence of Plotinus' philosophy, not on the basis of any belief in Christianity. The next step is left for the reader, which is to realize that God must be Plotinus' providence. This use of Neoplatonist philosophy validates both God's existence and Christianity.

Another use of the Neoplatonists is in the scene in Book IX in which Augustine and his mother share a vision. This vision incorporates the Ascension theme, mentioned earlier, but is also remarkable in that: "St. Augustine expressly noted that he was using language in his book that they did not actually use at that time. The passage is rich in phrases drawn from Plotinus, and illustrates how the Neoplatonists provided a language for talking about his experience." By casting this important scene in the language of the Neoplatonists, Augustine is wrapping it in a familiar, acceptable form for the intellectuals.

The form the arguments Augustine in the *Confessions* also demonstrates this use of familiar existing tradition. When Augustine says, "I can mention forgetfulness and recognize what the word means, but how can I recognize the thing itself unless I remember it? I am not speaking of the sound of the word, but of the thing which it signifies." (*Conf.*, 222), his concentration on the meaning of words and solving apparent paradoxes is reminiscent of the structure of Neoplatonic arguments, copied from the form of the Platonic dialogues. The question and answer form used in many places, "Am I to say that what I remember is not in my memory? Or am I to say that the reason why forgetfulness is in my memory is to prevent me from forgetting? Both suggestions are utterly absurd." (*Conf.*, 223), is also reminiscent of the Neoplatonists. The Neoplatonists believed that the soul has a power of self knowledge, and that through the use of dialectic and argument the mind is purified of the physical and elevated to the

beatific vision of which Plato spoke (*Aug.*, 22). Augustine lends validity to his arguments, in the eyes of the intellectuals, by using these familiar forms of argument, and also aids readers in reaching Plato's vision by using the dialectic and argument forms.

A final use of the Neoplatonists occurs in Book VIII, where the conversion of Victorinus is related. This conversion story is important due to who Victorinus was: a Neoplatonist who translated the works of the two leading Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Porphyry, into Latin. This conversion story helps Augustine on his own pathway to conversion, but also sets the example of a student of the Neoplatonists who can function as a Christian.

St. Augustine was well schooled as a rhetorician, and he uses these skills in several ways in the *Confessions*, to accomplish the same goal as his use of the Neoplatonists. The work as a whole functions as a rhetorical argument as Augustine offers his story as an example of a conversion, as opposed to the dialectic, logical proofs that are some of his smaller arguments within the work. Augustine also borrows from the rhetorical tradition in the scene at Ostia. The experience is described as transcending language, as Augustine notes by saying, "Then with a sigh, leaving our spiritual harvest bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own speech." This use of the rhetorical tradition allows Augustine to show a mastery of this technique, in order to lend credibility to his work.

The epic tradition is borrowed from by Augustine's creation of an ongoing theme of travel throughout the story, reminiscent of the mythic journeys found within the epic tradition. This theme works in Augustine's physical travels certainly, but is more remarkable in his philosophical journey. Augustine is a baptized Christian, but moves from a Ciceronian Stoicism to Manichaeism to Neoplatonism finally to become a practicing Christian. The the mythic journey, borrowed from the epic tradition, was familiar to the intellectuals of the time, and in incorporating this metaphysical journey in his work, Augustine is presenting Christianity, an upstart in the eyes of many intellectuals, in the familiar guise of the epic tradition, making it easier to accept.

The use of existing intellectual traditions by Augustine, in particular the Neoplatonists, but also the rhetorical and epic traditions, is an attempt to blend Christianity and these traditions in a way that would appeal to Roman intellectuals of the time. Augustine manages to show that these traditions and Christianity

are not mutually exclusive, that it is possible to be one of the intellectually elite, while also holding these beliefs. In the process of his own conversion, "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.'" (*Aug.*, 24). In the *Confessions* Augustine demonstrates by his own example and, in his use of these traditions in his book supporting Christianity, that the two can operate together.

Works Cited

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