

FOUNDATIONS OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S PHILOSOPHY

Charles Nweke, PhD

Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Awka-Nigeria

nkesun2002@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.26043.64803

Abstract

This paper presents St. Augustine's philosophy to the contemporary era when interests in St. Augustine's thoughts seem to be receding consequent upon the prevalence of naturalism and humanism. With the tool of phenomenological hermeneutics, in the present context, exposition for knowledge of the theme under consideration, the paper investigates the foundation of Augustine's philosophy and found it to be resting on factors of personal desire and contact with Neo-Platonism. Knowledge of this foundation not only impacts on researches in Augustine's thought but hugely informs thinkers of the importance of highbrow originality and intellectual system building.

Keywords: Philosophy, Thought, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Desire, Manichaeism,

Introduction

St. Augustine is widely acknowledged as the first and most influential Christian philosopher. Irrespective of the ascendancy of St. Thomas Aquinas at the end of the thirteenth century, with his wide intellectual repositories, St. Augustine remains the greatest Christian thinker whose works are very essential for understanding the currents of thought in the Middle Ages. F. Copelston presents this view thus:

In Latin Christendom the name of Augustine stands out as that of the greatest of the Fathers both from a literary and from a theological standpoint, a name that dominated Western thought until the thirteenth century and which can never lose its luster, notwithstanding the Aristotelianism of St Thomas Aquinas and his school, especially as this Aristotelianism was very far from disregarding and still further far from belittling the African Doctor. (Copleston 2003: 40)

Augustine's strong passion for knowledge and fame led him into the study of rhetoric which he began at the age of sixteen and to which he was strongly devoted. Although he excelled and became a master in rhetoric, the admixture of philosophy and theology later became his field of specialty. His philosophic endeavour was premised on two notable factors - personal desire and the influence of Neo-Platonism.

Personal Desire

Augustine's contact with Cicero's now lost dialogue *Hortensius*, within his study of rhetoric, marked his initial touch with philosophy. Cicero's intellectual reputation tended to tilt more to his mastery of rhetoric than his philosophy. In *The Thoughts of Cicero*, Carrington notes that "Cicero's reputation as a writer rests largely on his speeches. It is the fashion to ignore his philosophical works and many who admire him as an orator would deny him the name of thinker." (Carrington 1974:1)

Augustine's touch with philosophy was prompted by a strong inherent desire for knowledge. It was such intense epistemic curiosity that propelled his contact with the *Hortensius* even as a student of rhetoric. Hence, "It was in Carthage as a student of rhetoric that he read Cicero's (now lost) dialogue *Hortensius*, which as he later wrote in *Confessionum Libri Tredecim* altered his sensibility and brought him under the spell of philosophy." (Routledge 1998:543-4)

The *Hortensius* redirected his desire and purposes to the love and pursuit of wisdom (philosophy). Augustine confessed to this effect that:

In the ordinary course of study I fell upon a certain book of Cicero whose speech almost all admire, not so his heart. This book of his contains an exhortation to philosophy and is called *Hortensius*. But this book altered my affections and turned my prayers to thyself O Lord; and made me have other purposes and desires. Every vain hope at once became worthless to me; and I longed with incredibly burning desire for an immortality of wisdom, and began now to arise, that I might return to thee. (Augustine trans by Pusey 1969:39)

Such providential inroad to philosophy accounts for his awareness of the problem of evil in human experience, and further inflamed his intellectual curiosity. His Christian idea of a perfectly good God and creator of all things *viz a viz* the reality of evil, rather turned his intellectual curiosity into intellectual perplexity. Stumpf notes that:

His Christian idea seemed unsatisfactory to him. He was particularly perplexed by the ever present problem of moral evil. How can one explain the existence of evil in human experience? The Christians had said that God is the creator of all things and also that God is good. How, then, is it possible for evil to arise out of a world that a perfectly good God had created? (Stumpf 1977:53)

For Augustine, such logically inconsistent situation demanded intellectual resolution. The demand is consequent upon no other factor than personal longing for knowledge. His quest for intellectual certainty was extended to the domain of Manichaeism. The Manicheans maintain:

A dualistic theory of two ultimate principles, that is, the position that good and evil are two basic co-existent aspects of reality. These principles are both eternal and their strife is eternal, a strife reflected in the world which is the production of the two principles in mutual conflict. (Copelston 2003:41)

The Manichean dualistic theory tended to provide for Augustine a more rational and logical solution to his quest than the illogical doctrines of Christianity. He found it difficult to conceive of an immaterial reality devoid of sense perception. Besides, the Manichean doctrine which is fundamentally materialistic equally provided for him an answer to his sensual passions since he felt they could be attributed to an external evil cause. But at a later encounter with some problems like that of the certitude of human thoughts and the reason for the conflict between the two co-existent principles, the solution of which proved difficult for the Manicheans, Augustine's confidence in the sect began to wane. All efforts at providing feasible answers by the sect were, for Augustine, bereft of intellectual satisfaction. As he gradually lost his tonic for Manichaeism, together with his reservations about Christianity, his intellectual frustration dragged him towards academic skepticism. Of the skeptics, he observed that, "they were of the opinion that all things are doubtful, and they decreed that no truth can be apprehended by man." (Augustine trans by Ryan 1960:126) The solution seemed to rest in his contact with Neo-Platonism.

Neo-Platonism

Augustine's disenchantment with Manichaeism as well as the anxiety raised by skepticism paved way for his contact with Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism is a form of idealistic or theistic monism based on the teachings of Plato and founded by third century scholar Plotinus. It is noteworthy that:

Neoplatonists would have considered themselves simply "Platonists", and the modern distinction is due to the perception that their philosophy contained enough unique interpretations of Plato to make it substantially different from what Plato wrote and believed. (Wikipedia, Neo-Platonism)

It is generally a religious and mystical philosophy which strongly influenced many Christian thinkers of the medieval era like Boethius, John Scotus Eriugena, Augustine, Bonaventure and Pseudo-Dionysius. As a form of mysticism, Neo-Platonism:

... contains theoretical and practical parts, the first dealing with the high origin of the human soul showing how it has departed from its first estate, and the second showing the way by which the soul may again return to the Eternal and Supreme. The system can be divided between the invisible world and the phenomenal world, the former containing the transcendent One from which emanates an eternal, perfect, essence (*nous*), which, in turn, produces the world-soul. (Wikipedia, Neo-Platonism)

While in Milan, Augustine encountered and read the Latin translation of some writings of Plotinus who claimed to be perfecting the works of Plato. In *Augustine and Neo-Platonism* Buzzard noted that:

Augustine gave himself to a prolonged reading of Plotinus and Porphyry whose philosophy became grafted almost imperceptibly into Augustine's writings as the ever present basis of his thought. The Neo-Platonic atmosphere in which Augustine ministered was as fundamental to his age as the idea of evolution is to our own. His reading of Scripture was not surprisingly colored by his Platonic presuppositions. There was a precedent for this fusion of philosophy with the Bible. (Buzzard 1981:7)

Sipe is also of the view that:

Augustine made continuous reference to the books of the Platonists throughout his *Confessions*, and so we know that he considered Neoplatonism to be an essential phase in his own philosophical development; this can also be observed from the fact that Augustine's philosophy shares a similar metaphysical backbone with that of the Neoplatonists, so much so that he is commonly referred to as a Christian Neoplatonist. Further, Augustine and Neoplatonists such as Porphyry even employ parallel metaphor to describe the hierarchical dualistic relationship of body and soul. (Sipe 2005:4)

With the combination of many sermons of St. Ambrose, the then bishop of Milan which he heard, Augustine met with the greatest influences of his life. Copelston notes that:

The effect of Neo-Platonism was to free him from the shackles of materialism and to facilitate his acceptance of the idea of immaterial reality. In addition, the Platonian conception of evil as privation rather than as something positive showed him how the problem of evil could be met without having recourse to the dualism of Manicheism. In other words, the function of Platonism at this period was to render it possible for Augustine to see the reasonableness of Christianity. (Copleston 2003:42)

Thus, the initial role of Neo-Platonism in Augustine's philosophy was to convert and reconcile him to Christianity, of which he had had reservations consequent upon its seemingly intractable problem of evil. With Neo-Platonism, Augustine discovered a common ground between philosophy and Christianity. Buzzard comments that:

Augustine found no unbridgeable gap between his Platonism and traditional Catholic teaching. In talking philosophy he had in fact unwittingly been talking orthodox theology. The phenomenon of an explicit Platonist influence in Augustine is widely recognized. (Buzzard 1981:9)

Augustine's philosophy could be said to draw significantly on Christian revelation as well as philosophy of late antiquity. His thought could be termed the confluence of Neo-platonism and Christianity. In *Neo-Platonism in Augustine's Confessions*, Protevi gleaned that in the *Confessions*:

Augustine's recourse to the thoughts available to him in "some books of the Platonists" in Book 7 of the *Confessions* has two effects: A) it broaches the issue of the relation of philosophy to theology and to faith in general and in Christianity in particular; B) it is presented as solving some intellectual problems for him, but in so doing it creates others that will be of decisive influence in the future course of Christian theology. (Protevi 2004:1)

In further consideration, he was of the view that:

Augustine the author presents Augustine the character as struggling with Manicheism, that is, a dualistic framework in which evil is a positive substance dueling the positive substance of goodness in a sort of cosmic

battle. This framework raises two problems: the relation of God to Creation and the problem of evil: how does the infinite God relate to finite Creation, and how does the infinitely good God allow a world of evil? The solutions are partially found in Neoplatonic doctrines, but the solution is itself inadequate and requires a Christological supplement. It is this necessity to mix Neoplatonism and Christology that results in a noteworthy tension between positive and negative theology: the desire to say something about God and the desire to respect His infinite alterity. (Protevi 2004:1)

Platonism is an enduring platform upon which Augustine's philosophy rolled on. The first fruit of this philosophy was a satisfactory answer to the pestering problem of evil. Platonism upholds the existence of one reality whereby:

From the transcendental One arises self-conscious mind or spirit; from mind come soul or life; and soul is the intermediary between the spheres of spirit and of sense. Matter is the lowest and the last product of the supreme unity; and since the One is also the real and the good, the potentiality of evil is identified with unformed matter as the point of maximum departure from the One. Evil itself is thus the least real of all things being simply the privation or absence of good. (Britannica 1978:365)

For Augustine, evil is non-existent because since God is good and created everything that exists, it follows that everything that God created is good, and there could be no all powerful, perfectly malign being continually thwarting God's efforts. He maintains that "evil is not the presence of something that exists but rather the absence of something, namely, goodness." (Cahn 1977:343)

The discovery of Platonic spiritual monism also affords Augustine a solution to his quest for the good. It is the position of the Platonic mysticism that "in order to reach for the good, which is the real, return to oneself is necessary, for it is the spirit of the heart of man's inmost self that links him to the ultimate unity." (Cahn 1977:343) In a committed response to such introspective requirement, Augustine found God, "the changeless light at once immanent and transcendent, which is the source of every intuitive recognition of truth and goodness." (Cahn 1974:343)

Augustine adopted the Greek etymological definition of philosophy 'love and wisdom'. Since God is wisdom, love of wisdom is love of God. Hence, philosophy for him is love of God whose wisdom informs all knowledge. And knowledge is only but the revelation of that wisdom. Thus for Augustine, "the

knowledge of eternal truth should bring the soul by reflection to knowledge of God Himself and God's activity." (Copleston 2003:52)

The influence of Neo-Platonism on Augustine's philosophy is glaring. Apart from the fact that it was for Augustine a factor of reconciliation between philosophy and Christianity, it equally accounts for his general theo-centric thought. Hence:

Central tenets of Neoplatonism, such as the absence of good being the source of evil, and that this absence of good comes from human sin, served as a philosophical interim for the Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo on his journey from dualistic Manichaeism to Christianity. When writing his treatise 'On True Religion' several years after his 387 baptism, Augustine's Christianity was still tempered by Neoplatonism. (Wikipedia)

Augustine's inclination to Neo-Platonism generated subtle controversies among scholars who were confused on whether he was a Christian or a philosopher. O'Meara posits that: "For a long time, it was thought by some scholars - such as Harnack and Bossier - that Augustine was converted not to Catholicism but to a Neo-Platonism with a tincture of Catholicism." (O'Meara 1985:35)

Conclusion

It is the position of this paper that St. Augustine's prominence as the primus of Christian philosophy is not in dispute. His thoughts, although a marriage of faith and wisdom permeated the general thoughts of medieval scholastic era in leaps and bounds. His influence on Western Philosophy spanned not only to the 13th century but to the contemporary era even when it is thought to be antiquated by the prevalence of naturalism and humanism.

Augustine's inroad to philosophy are identifiably informed by two main factors. His inner personal desire for knowledge saw him sojourn from the plenitude of rhetoric to the abode of Manichaeism. His contact with Platonism through the instrumentality of Cicero's *Hortensius* provided for him a viable critical platform not only for appraisal of the Manichean doctrine, but for launching his intellectual repository which resonates beyond the frontiers of time. The import of refreshing philosophic minds of this crucial foundation cannot be overemphasized.

References

- Augustine, 1960. *The Confessions*. Trans. J. K. Ryan, New York: Image Books.
- Augustine, 1969. *The Confessions*, Trans. E. B. Pusey, London: Collier Macmillan Ltd.
- Buzzard, A. 2009. *Augustine and Neo-Platonism*, <http://www.abc-coggc.org/jrad/volume10/issue4/Augustine%20and%20Neo-Platonism.pdf> (Accessed 02 December 2009).
- Cahn, S. M. 1977. *Classics of Western Philosophy*, Indianapolis: Hakkett Publishing Company, Inc..
- Carrington, R. C. 1974. *The Thought of Cicero*. London: G. Bell and Sons Limited.
- Copelston, F. 2003. *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*. London: Continuum.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1978. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. 2. 365.
- Neoplatonism*, 2009. Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoplatonism> (Accessed 02 December 2009).
- O'Meara J. 1985. *An Augustine Reader*, New York: Image Books.
- Protevi, J. 2009. *Neoplatonism in Augustine's Confessions* protevi@lsu.edu / <http://www.protevi.com/john/SH/PDF/Neoplatonism.pdf> (Accessed 03 December 2009)
- Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 1998. London: Routledge. 1. 543-44.
- Sipe, D. 2006. *Struggling with Flesh: Soul/Body Dualism in Porphyry and Augustine* <https://concept.journals.villanova.edu/article/viewFile/266/229> (Accessed 27 May 2017).
- Stumpf, S. E. 1977. *Philosophy: History and Problems*, New York: Macgraw Hill Company.