

“Bultmann Redivivus Radicalised: Augustine and Jesus as Heideggerian Existentialists” [A Response to James A.K. Smith “Confessions Of An Existentialist: Reading Augustine After Heidegger”] for *The Influence of Augustine on Heidegger: The Emergence of an Augustinian Phenomenology*, ed. Craig J. N. de Paulo (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 259-288.¹

Wayne J. Hankey, *King’s College and Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada*

Having spent more than forty years studying and teaching Augustine and never having felt it myself, I find it difficult to apprehend what compels Jamie Smith’s opening words: “Our task is to read Augustine *after* Heidegger.” I do see that, for those who would enter the argument of Augustine’s texts, insofar as Heidegger articulates what is peculiar to our present way of understanding and thus points at what separates us from Augustine, Heidegger’s philosophy and even his reading of Augustine need attention. Further, insofar as scholars have misrepresented Augustine by reading him through an Heideggerian optic, those who seek freedom from imprisonment in present horizons by reading Augustine need to discover how Heidegger has shaped (and misshaped) current interpretations—those who desire continued self-regard can escape this critique. Happily, however, in my judgment, Heidegger is neither the privileged prophet exposing what moves our minds and wills (although he illumines this), nor the philosopher or theologian who finally lifts us to that mountain top from which we might truly view the world and enter rightly the history of thought (he does not give what Satan offers in Matthew 4.8-10). Indeed, just the contrary, apart from his mates in the Anglo-American “analytic” philosophical tradition, few have given such a distorted and reductive history of Western metaphysics generally and of Platonism specifically.² A considerable part of Augustinian scholarship and of philosophical and theological reflexion on Augustine has been stimulated, shaped, and misshaped by Heidegger and care needs to be exercised, but the effects are not so total that “our task is to read Augustine *after* Heidegger.” Rather, our task is to read Augustine, and we who would read Augustine wonder why Dr Smith cannot approach him except through Heidegger. What compulsion which has seized Dr Smith?

His “Confessions Of An Existentialist” reveals he is moved by what has possessed many (especially Protestant) followers of Jesus who have rejected the Christian doctrinal tradition in the last two hundred years, namely, the quest for the historical Jesus.³ For many earlier Anglo-Americans (and others), German philosophy and the historical scholarship serving its theological reflection enabled them to meet the authentic Jesus by way of the critical study of the New Testament. Now James Smith arrives at the same end but by way of a de-Platonised Augustine. In his case, as also for Rudolf Bultmann before him, Heidegger delivers up true Christianity as an existentialism which must be separated out and rescued from the Hellenic metaphysics, conveyed through Platonism, which hid it for millennia and threatens to obscure it still. Laurence Paul Hemming, who, like James Smith,

¹ A Response to James A.K. Smith “Confessions Of An Existentialist: Reading Augustine After Heidegger.” Dr Smith’s generous openness has enabled my response; Dr Ian Stewart’s encouraging criticisms have saved it from some of its errors. I am grateful to them both.

² See Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)*, L’âne d’or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001) and my “Why Heidegger’s ‘History’ of Metaphysics is Dead” in the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, in press.

³ See my “The Bible in a Post-Critical Age,” in *After the Deluge, Essays Towards the Desecularization of the Church*, ed. W. Oddie (London: SPCK, 1987) 41-92.

works on the periphery of Radical Orthodoxy's postmodern collapse of philosophy into Christian theology, gives the essentials of a radicalised return to Bultmann in his recent *Heidegger's Atheism*.

For Hemming the doctrinal and theological Christianity developed by the Church in the Patristic period through the unification of revelation and metaphysics is dead. The nineteenth-century deconstruction of the doctrinal theology of the tradition is assumed; existential self-involvement takes its place. Heidegger, Hemming writes: "refused to objectify his faith into objects of knowledge—sentences and propositions which would be tussled over by those who followed. This troublesome refusal to theologise, which leaves open and undecided the questions which theology posed to Heidegger's thought, has been precisely that motor which has kept Heidegger's work forceful."⁴ Those who would be Christians *after* Heidegger *may* be "assisted" by the doctrines of the old metaphysical Christianity. As with Smith, self-involvement, not doctrine, is the essential. Being is only an usher to myself:

being's refusal to be thematized has been what beckons theologians to re-engage with Heidegger. Being, therefore, has no meaning: rather Heidegger thought all over again how meaning might be. ... Final resolution, on the other hand, is what theology as metaphysics has always attempted. There is no final framework for faith except itself: no set of principles, neither canons nor dogmas nor doctrines which will resolve every demand. Rather, I, as the demand that is ushered in by being, must learn theologically to reflect on faith, perhaps assisted through canons and dogma and the carefully sedimented memory of my forefathers that goes under the protective title of tradition, but nevertheless resolutely, I must, in believing, face the question of myself that being opens up.⁵

As a matter of fact, Hemming knows, even if he will not say, that the doctrines and dogmas of the metaphysical Christianity of the Church are most *unlikely* to "assist" the kind of encounter with myself which Being emptied of meaning "opens up." Such an opening requires a stripping away. Heidegger helps complete in the twentieth-century what the war of nineteenth-century Biblical scholarship against metaphysical Christianity began: the stripping away of doctrine so that the New Testament will deliver Jesus as the self I wish to find. Smith is using Heidegger to the same end by way of Augustine.

Employing the work of John Macquarrie and Anthony Thiselton, Hemming describes how "Rudolf Bultmann's engagement with Martin Heidegger in Marburg in the years 1923-29 ... allowed him to raise hermeneutical theology to an entirely new level."⁶ As Hemming understands the dependence on Heidegger of Bultmann, Heidegger only *enables* the "setting apart of theology and philosophy" which will permit us to hear again the New Testament *kerygma*. Whether a more radical reconfiguration of Jesus and his message occurs for Bultmann by way of Heidegger we need not judge in this context. It is clear however that for Smith, by the *espolio* of Augustine's Platonism, Heidegger reveals an existentialist who is thereby also shown to be a true follower of Jesus.

A. AN HEIDEGGERIAN *ESPOLIO* OF AUGUSTINE

⁴ Laurence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism. The Refusal of a Theological Voice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 266.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.* 21.

Dr Smith concludes that, having taken Heidegger's "*Daseinanalytik* as the hermeneutical situation for our reading of Augustine," he has actually found in Augustine's *Confessions* "the confessions of an existentialist." This required "a certain 'deconstruction' of Augustine ... reading the existential (and Christian) lines of his thought against its Neoplatonic elements."⁷ Smith notes Heidegger's judgments that "one cannot simply strip away the Platonism in Augustine; and it is a misunderstanding to believe that authentic Christianity [*eigentlich Christliche*] can be reached through Augustine,"⁸ and Smith gives a reason from Heidegger for his conclusion. Smith tells us that Heidegger remarks: "Overall, the explication of the experience of God in Augustine is specifically 'Greek' (in the sense that our philosophy is always already 'Greek')."

Heidegger is right that Hellenism is inescapable for Christians. After all, the specific Christian Scripture is Greek, indeed, the version of the Jewish Scripture mostly used by the Patristic Church was Greek, and as Jaroslav Pelikan puts it: "It remains one of the most momentous linguistic convergences in the entire history of the human mind and spirit that the New Testament happens to have been written in Greek ... the Greek of Socrates and Plato."⁹ Nonetheless, using Heidegger to reach beyond what the Mystic of the Black Forest regarded as possible, Smith's method is to "follow Heidegger's *Destruktion* of Augustine's Neoplatonism which attempts to retrieve the elements of 'primal Christianity' still resounding in Augustine under the layers of Greek philosophy."¹⁰ As Smith represents him, according to Heidegger, what Augustine "appropriated from Plotinus and the Neoplatonic tradition" is "an appropriation which is incongruous with the originary Christian elements of Augustine's thought." It is "thus subject to *Destruktion*." When the "Neoplatonic layer" is "stripped away," we will "retrieve Augustine's analysis of the factual Christian 'struggle' and 'trial' (*tentatio*) of being-in-the-world."¹¹ We may wonder why such a difficult, indeed almost certainly impossible, route back to "primal Christianity" should be undertaken. Surely, it will be even more difficult to find the primitive deposit through someone who confessed that he could not understand the Scriptures without a *Preparatio Platonicorum* than it has proved to find it directly under the Greek text of the New Testament. Despite asserting (without providing evidence) that "for Augustine, the question of *who* I am is *answered* in the person of Christ,"¹² Smith reverses Augustine's *ordo inveniendi*. He presents Augustine as an existentialist and discovers the existential Jesus through him, rather than understanding the saint through his own model.

Governing the quest for "primal Christianity," whether taking longer or shorter routes, are astonishing and, in my view, utterly incredible convictions which have dominated a great part of Christian theology for the last two centuries. To have faith in its possible success, we are required to believe that the philosophies which have determined the theological enterprises of our centuries are closer to the mentality of Patristic Christianity than is the philosophy which enabled both its formation and propagation. We are also required to accept that, if we strip away the nearly two millennia which constructed our difference from

⁷ James A.K. Smith "Confessions Of An Existentialist: Reading Augustine After Heidegger" note 11

⁸ Ibid. note 38.

⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*, Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen, 1992-1993 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 3.

¹⁰ Smith "Confessions Of An Existentialist," note 11.

¹¹ Ibid. note 28.

¹² Ibid. note 23. There is nothing to justify Smith's use of the word "person" to translate Augustine's text at *Confessions* 10.5.7 as he does in what precedes this note in his article.

the Apostolic age, the Christian saints and their Saviour thus uncovered look more like us than they resemble their Hellenistic contemporaries because they really are more like us! Moreover, we must allow that philosophy in Antiquity and the Middle Ages has the same relation to experience as that posited by the most enervated anti-metaphysical philosophies of our own time. A successful *espolio* will require that Ancient and Medieval philosophies, even Platonism and Aristotelianism, are mere conceptual structures which neither give nor imply an experience of being. Despite what the texts themselves and the historians of philosophy teach, the anti-metaphysical (not to say anti-philosophical and anti-doctrinal) theological project requires that these philosophies can be put on or taken off by an independently established religious experience in a way comparable to our changing coats. This is to be accepted despite the well-established scholarly judgment that religion and philosophy are bound together in the Patristic period.¹³

To discover his existentialist and therefore Christian Augustine beyond the limits he assigns to Heidegger's own analytic, Dr Smith first ascribes to Heidegger a surprisingly naïve opposition between philosophical "categories" and "Christian experience": "the problem from Heidegger's standpoint is the fact that Neoplatonic categories are inadequate and inappropriate for the explication of the Christian experience of God."¹⁴ Then, having himself generalized the opposition to one between Augustine's Christian experience and "*all* conceptual frameworks" which only involve a "battle of words"—and improbably ascribing this opposition to Augustine—, Smith asserts: "Augustine was simply employing the conceptual categories which were available to him at the time, explicating an experience which resisted and pushed the boundaries of those categories." In the accompanying note what has just been ascribed to Augustine's relation to Platonism is also transferred to "the old and analogous question of Aquinas as an 'Aristotelian'."¹⁵

Jamie Smith's Heideggerian *espolio* of Augustine's Neoplatonism, leaving us with the naked purity of his existentialist Christian experience, thus depends on two oppositions. The first is between Platonism which becomes a conceptual framework which one might "simply" employ as an external means for explicating something else, namely, "Christian experience," which is possessed independently of the Platonic categories. The second is between philosophical concepts and religious experience. (Perhaps, for Smith, there is yet another opposition between reading texts, which goes with philosophy, and experience, but this would surely not work for a "biblical" religion and a conversion effected by "Tolle lege, tolle lege.")¹⁶ Happily, if we wish to preserve the real conditions for understanding Augustine's Christianity as the author of the *Confessions* himself represents them, Smith is not consistent in maintaining these oppositions. He writes of "an ultimate incommensurability between Greek philosophy (which is always already *religion*) and Christian faith." This implies, of course, that philosophy is not a conceptual framework which may be employed in opposition to religious experience, but rather it contains religious experience. Again, Smith writes that "In Book VII we see the beginning of Augustine's conversion (or *another* conversion for those who are counting; cf. Bk III) and the experiences which precipitate his return." In a note he explains:

¹³ Of many such treatments perhaps one of the most balanced and compact is Pierre Hadot, "La Fin du paganisme," reprinted in Pierre Hadot, *Études de philosophie ancienne*, L'ane d'or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998) 341-74.

¹⁴ I shall not endeavour to judge whether Smith's representation of Heidegger is correct what interests me is what he does with Heidegger as he understands him.

¹⁵ Smith "*Confessions* Of An Existentialist," note 40.

¹⁶ See *ibid* note 52 and *Confessions* 8.12.29.

Unlike, for instance, St. Paul, Augustine's conversion is not constituted by a single, cataclysmic event, but rather involves a process: a conversion to the search for Wisdom through reading Cicero's *Hortensius* (Bk III); a conversion to Neoplatonism through the 'platonic books' (Bk VII), and finally the "climax," according to his account, in the garden in Milan, through the reading of Paul (which he had also begun earlier) which effect his conversion to Christian faith.¹⁷

Here, Smith gives us many "conversions": to philosophy, to Platonism, and to Christian faith, and, crucially, all the conversions at least *may* include experience. Augustine himself represents them all as really involving experience, and indeed in such a way that the Christian experiences and doctrines depend upon the philosophical experiences and concepts. My response to Dr Smith examines what Augustine wrote in the *Confessions* about the philosophical conversions which Smith lists in order to show that the kind of oppositions Smith makes between Platonism and Christianity and between philosophy as conceptual framework and Christian experience are not the differentiations Augustine makes. The "books of the Platonists" intended to teach all who read them properly a way of ascending from the sensuous and merely human to higher and higher levels of divinity. What Augustine imbibes from them does in fact teach him a way of ascending to God. They are not a mere "*occasion*" for his Christian conversion. Instead, the doctrine, the conceptual content, and the spiritual method which he learned from "quosdam Platoniorum libros" are both the *sine qua non* condition of his Christian conversion and also give his Christianity essentials of its experienced and conceived content as well as of its spirituality.¹⁸

B. WHAT AUGUSTINE REQUIRES FROM PHILOSOPHY

It is hard to know how Augustine's conversion to philosophy as he represents it in Book III of the *Confessions* could more completely unite reading with real transformation of the mind and experience, on the one hand, and religion with philosophy on the other. Augustine tells us that, in contradistinction from his other literary studies, he did not read the *Hortensius* to refine his style or expression (*ad acuendam linguam*) but for the sake of its content (*quod loquebatur*). He writes that Cicero's "exhortation to philosophy (*exhortationem ad philosophiam*)" literally "changed my feelings" (*mutavit affectum meum*). It changed his experience, religious practice, values, and desires in respect to God himself (*ad te ipsum, domine*): "It altered my prayers, (*mutavit preces meas*) and created in me different purposes and desires (*et uota et desideria mea fecit alia*)." Inflamed by philosophy, he repented his vain hopes; in their place, he writes: "I lusted for immortal wisdom with ardour of the heart (*immortalitatem sapientiae concupiscebam aestu cordis incredibili*)." This philosophical moment is the point at which the conversion which is both the Platonic and Christian—which he represents in Neoplatonic language as the return to the divine source—, begins for him. Augustine wrote: "I began to rise up so that I might return to you (*surgere coeperam, ut ad te redirem*)."¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid. note 51.

¹⁸ Augustinus, *Confessions*, ed. L. Verheijen, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 27 (Turnhout 1981) 7.9.13; best on the unity of spiritual method, doctrine, and content and how Augustine acquires them from Plotinus is Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) on which see my "Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine: Problems for a Postmodern Retrieval," *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 4 (1999): 83-123 and "Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes: More than a Source of the Self," *Augustinian Studies* 32:1 (2001): 65-88.

¹⁹ *Confessions* 3.4.7.

Augustine goes on to describe his new love, the love which is philosophy, the love of wisdom (*amor sapientiae*), the wisdom which itself is God. He continues to employ the language of passionate feeling: “How I burned, my God, how I burned (*Quomodo ardebam, deus meus, quomodo ardebam*).”²⁰ Hardly language anyone would use about adopting a contentless categorical framework which one will “employ,” this representation of himself as an erotically inflamed lover of philosophy is not one of which Augustine will repent later. At the point in Book VIII when he is about to describe the *Tolle lege* conversion, he recollects the conversion to philosophy which enabled and will soon be completed by the decisive new movement of his will in the Milan garden. He writes that he had been “excited” to the study of wisdom by reading the *Hortensius* (*lecto Ciceronis Hortensio excitatus eram studio sapientiae*).²¹ What lies between the conversion of Book III and that of Book VIII is a long philosophical journey which reached its positive result in the Neoplatonism described at the center of the *Confessions*, Book VII. This journey enables unifying a division which the conversion to philosophy created and which Book III also reports. This division has to do with a *failed* attempt to read another text, surely an essential *locus* of Christian experience, the Scriptures.

Augustine tells us that, although delighted by Cicero’s exhortation “so that his words excited me, set me on fire, and enflamed me (*excitabar sermone illo et accendebar et ardebam*)”, one thing held back his enthusiasm from being total: he did not find the name of Christ among them. Having taken in that name with his mother’s milk, no book could “totally captivate (*totum rapiēbat*)” him which lacked it.²² In consequence he turned to the “holy Scriptures (*scripturas sanctas*).” These, however, proved unsatisfactory to his newly sophisticated mind because it lacked a hermeneutic by which what philosophy will later enable him to regard as metaphors could be rightly interpreted. Cicero’s Stoicism did not supply Augustine with that by which “the sharp point of my mind could penetrate their interiority (*acies mea non penetrabat interiora eius*).”²³

Augustine always thinks within the mutual connection of the subjects and objects of knowledge which the Platonic analogy of the line images and which the Neoplatonists elaborate. In consequence, reaching the spiritual interior of Scripture where God is known as incorporeal substance depends for him on discovering his own interiority. This discovery is not only (1) the finding of a spiritual method, it is also (2) the discovery of a positive philosophical conception, one which will enable him to understand (i) his own nature and (ii) the nature of God, (iii) the nature and cause of evil, (iv) human freedom and (v) his own responsibility for his sins. In Book VII he tells us that he owed the method and the concept to what he read in the “books of the Platonists.”

This is the conception of incorporeal substance which will give him knowledge of “what truly is (*vere quod est*).”²⁴ The philosophical method and the positive philosophical doctrine which will unlock the knowledge both of true being and of his own being to himself, and will also enable him to have an orthodox Christian experience when he reads Scripture, is Neoplatonism—precisely because, as scholarship agrees, in Plotinian Neoplatonism interior experience and acquisition of conceptual content are united in a profound, exemplary, and original way.²⁵ Without this Neoplatonism Augustine confesses that “I did not know that

²⁰ Ibid. 3.4.8.

²¹ Ibid. 8.7.17.

²² Ibid. 3.4.8.

²³ Ibid. 3.5.9.

²⁴ Ibid. 3.7.12.

²⁵ See for example, Stanislas Breton, “Actualité du néoplatonisme,” *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 5 (1972) reprinted in *Études néoplatoniciennes* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1973): 110-26 at 110-111; A.H. Armstrong,

God is spirit, not a body whose members have length and breadth (*non noueram deum esse spiritum, non cui membra essent per longum et latum*).²⁶ Until its method and doctrines can break down his externality, he dwells outside himself and sees only with the eye of the flesh (*foris habitantem in oculo carnis meae*).²⁷ In that subjective externality, he supposes that the words of *Genesis* depicting the human as made in the image of God require God to be “confined in a bodily form and to have hair and nails (*forma corporea deus finiretur et haberet capillos et ungues*).”²⁸ As long as he lacks the method of interior introspection and has this corporeal conception of God and of himself, Augustine’s limited philosophical sophistication holds him to the limited Christianity of Manicheism. Its dualist and corporeal amalgam of philosophy and religion possesses Augustine until he arrives at the Skepticism which is the antechamber to the Platonism both for himself and for Plotinus—and of their followers like Descartes.²⁹ The philosophical steps carrying Augustine out of Manicheism to the brink of orthodox Christian experience occur in Book V.

Augustine’s first move towards escaping Manicheism is the philosophical study of nature. He writes about a process like that in Plato’s *Timaeus*, the Platonic *Physics*, which having begun with fables about the gods and the universe only arrives at “probabilities as likely as any others.” It urges that we mortals must accept in respect to the knowledge of nature no more than “a probable myth (*ton eikota muthon*).”³⁰ For Platonists there can only be probability in respect to the realm of *genesis*, where opinion reigns. Nonetheless, it is crucial that Augustine finds the stories told about nature within the philosophical disciplines to be more probable than the fables of the Manichees. Augustine tells us that he “read many works of the philosophers (*multa philosophorum legeram*)” and having compared them to the “long fables of the Manichees (*manichaeorum longis fabulis*),” he judged what the philosophers said “seemed more probable to me (*mibi probabiliora ista uidebantur*).”³¹ By “their own minds and ingenuity (*mente sua . . . et ingenio*)” given them by God, the natural philosophers “have found out much (*multa inuenerunt*)” and can predict celestial events far in the future. Augustine follows Paul in the first chapter of *Romans* in juxtaposing their ingenious ascent to knowledge with their retreat from God “through impious pride (*per impiam superbiam*)” in an irreligious quest (*non religiose quaerunt*).³² The spirit with which the scientific quest is undertaken and its successes received is the religious matter here. The “mundane things themselves (*mundana ista*)” have nothing to do with religion (*ad doctrinam religionis ista non pertinent*), indeed it was sacrilegious for the Manichees to mix them up (*ausus eius sacrilegos fuisse*)³³—a judgment to which Galileo referred during his struggles with the Church. Here Augustine has found a kind of philosophy which is authoritative in its own sphere but must be confused neither with the content, nor the dignity, nor the certainty of what religion

“Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus,” reprinted in idem, *Plotinian and Christian Studies* XVII (London: Variorum, 1979).

²⁶ Ibid 3.7.12.

²⁷ Ibid 3.6.11.

²⁸ Ibid 3.7.12.

²⁹ See my “Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine”: 111-22; “Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes”: 77-80; Dominic J. O’Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 39-41 and *La Connaissance de soi: Études sur le Traité 49 de Plotin*, sous la direction de Monique Dixsaut, avec la collaboration de Pierre-Marie Morel et Karine Tordo-Rombaut, Tradition de la Pensée classique (Paris: Vrin, 2002).

³⁰ Plato, *Timaeus* 29d2.

³¹ *Confessions* 5.3.3.

³² Ibid. 5.3.4.

³³ Ibid. 5.5.8.

knows. However, his discovery of this mundane philosophy has religious consequences insofar as it leads him to Skeptical suspense.

Skepticism, as Augustine represents it, requires not "making a judgment but rather doubting everything and fluctuating between all (*dubitans de omnibus atque inter omnia fluctuans ... non arbitrans*).” In his soft version of Skepticism where it remains a position within the Platonic school (thus the “Academics”), arriving at the required suspension of judgment demands that something positive be set against his negative opinion about the Manichee account of nature.³⁴ This positive experience is his encounter with the Platonic interpretation of Scripture by Ambrose of Milan. The attractions of the Bishop were many, and it took some time before Augustine began to pay attention to the content of what he was teaching; however, as with Cicero, he eventually got beyond attending to the rhetoric. Then, he confesses: “I heard first one, then another, then many difficult passages of the Old Testament interpreted figuratively (*aenigmate soluto de scriptis ueteribus*). ... After many passages of these books had been interpreted spiritually (*spiritualiter*), I now found fault with that despair of mine caused by the belief that there was nothing at all to counter the hostile mockery of the Law and the Prophets.”³⁵ In sceptical suspense between these negative and positive experiences, Augustine could not continue anything as definite and partisan as his identification with the Manichees. Consistently with his scepticism, he also refused to take positive steps; he will not even identify himself with the Skeptics as a school. He will not entrust himself to these philosophers whom he preferred to the Manichees and for the same reason as before, namely because, like Cicero, these philosophers were “without the saving name of Christ (*sine salutari nomine Christi*).” Nor, at the same time will Augustine move from his state as a Christian catechumen to baptism. What would a genuine positive movement take? Augustine tells us: “conceiving spiritual substance (*spiritalem substantiam cogitare*).”³⁶ Book VII reveals how he conceived incorporeal and true being by way of reading the Platonic books.

C. THE PLATONISM WHICH ENABLES AND FORMS AUGUSTINE’S CHRISTIANITY

Giving a full account of Augustine’s Platonism is well beyond the scope of my dialogue with Dr Smith. I shall, however, endeavour to show that the Platonism at which Augustine arrives in Book VII gives what he demanded of it. It could not do so were it to remain within the bounds Smith’s existentialism sets for it: i.e. that it be a contentless framework opposed to an experience which employs it externally.

Augustine’s conversion to Neoplatonism coincides with another maturation: he ceases to be an adolescent and reaches young manhood. The continuing imbecility of his mind “dwelling outside in my corporeal eye,” (3.6.11 and 7.1.1) becomes an embarrassment. He confesses that the greater his age so much the greater his shame that he is not able to think (*cogitare*) any substance which he cannot see with his eyes (7.1.1). Having reminded us in the initial words of Book VII that his incapacity to think incorporeal substance is the fundamental problem upon which all the others depend, he elaborates at length the problems and the problematic. By this deepening of the drama, Augustine leads us to the moment when he tells the story of the transforming period in which he read “certain books of the Platonists.” When we reach that point in his narrative, he confesses that he “read there not the same words but entirely the same content (*ibi legi non quidem his uerbis, sed hoc*

³⁴ Ibid. 5.14.25.

³⁵ Ibid. 5.14.24.

³⁶ Ibid. 5.14.25.

idem omnino)” of the greatest part of the Prologue of the *Gospel of John*, and indeed that he read “the same” together with the addition of “many and various reasons by which to be persuaded” of the common doctrines.³⁷

What problems will this reading solve? After having set the problematic of Book VII in terms of how he should conceive God (*te cogitare*),³⁸ Augustine links his inability to conceive the divine to his lack of self-knowledge and puts the problem in the familiar Platonic terms, i.e. the subject and object of knowledge conform to one another: “I was so gross of mind and I was so completely unable to see clearly into my own self that I thought that whatever was not extended in space ... was nothing at all (*Ego itaque incrassatus corde nec mihi met ipsi uel ipse conspicuus, quidquid non per aliquanta tenderetur ... nihil prorsus esse arbitrabar.*)”³⁹ Next Augustine brings us back to the question of evil which has preoccupied him from the very beginning of the *Confessions* and which up until now, following the Manichees as he represents them, he had also pictured in terms of body. Having left them, he now “holds no explicit and clear grasp of the cause of evil (*non tenebam explicatam et enodatam causam mali*).”⁴⁰ Augustine tells us that he “has heard its cause is in the free choice of the will (*audiebam liberum uoluntatis arbitrium causam esse*),” but he has by no means acquired the metaphysics that would allow such an explanation to work. As he comes to understand it, for this explanation to succeed he will need to think that the soul is superior to the body and to corporeal things generally. In the superiority of the soul as incorporeal lies its activity and freedom in respect to bodies, both his own body and those of the external world.⁴¹ Moreover, before he can get the cause of evil into the will he must get it out of bodies. Further to make bodies objects of the will, he must find the goodness of their cause and of them. Although Augustine continues to find elements of the solution as he moves step by step toward Platonism, he cannot put the parts together rightly for the ever persistent reason, the correspondence of knower and known: “I sought the origin of evil, but I sought in an evil way, and I did not see the evil in my own search (*Et quaerebam, unde malum, et male quaerebam et in ipsa inquisitione mea non uidebam malum*).”⁴² Without the knowledge of himself as incorporeal he cannot rightly understand God or evil. In consequence, despite many considerations—including his earlier rejection of astrology and the acquisition of a more likely story about the cosmos (7.6.8)—, until his reading of the Platonists, he tells us: “I sought the source of evil and I found no way out of the problem (*quaerebam unde malum et non erat exitus*).”⁴³

The way out is through the Platonic books and those doctrines found there which are *idem omnino* with the Gospel.⁴⁴ Crucially moreover, because of the persuasive reasonings with which philosophy accompanies its teachings, Augustine is led by them to the concepts and also to the experience, as well as to the method for attaining both, which will enable him to become an orthodox Christian. The absolutely critical transforming event constituted by reading those books and attaining sight must be, in the eyes of Augustine, a work of God’s good providence and, before confessing the gracious event, he represents it in that way: “By

³⁷ Ibid 7.9.13.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid 7.1.2.

⁴⁰ Ibid 7.3.4.

⁴¹ Ibid 7.4.5.

⁴² Ibid 7.5.7.

⁴³ Ibid 7.7.11.

⁴⁴ For a partial history of how the problem of evil is dealt with in the Hellenistic schools see Proclus, *On the Existence of Evils*, translated by Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel, *The Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), Introduction 10-45.

inward goads you continually stirred me, so that I would be restless until you would become certain to me by way of interior sight (*Stimulis internis, ut impatiens essem, donec mihi per interiorem aspectum esses*).⁴⁵ This representation of what the Platonic books gave and how he was brought to them from sceptical restlessness immediately precedes his account of their conformity with the Prologue to *John*.

The Prologue of *John* gives a conceptual knowledge of God and the books that teach the same doctrine do the same. How except in terms of positive conceptual knowledge are we to represent Augustine's proposition that "before all times and above all times your only begotten Son immutably abides coeternal with you (*ante omnia tempora et supra omnia tempora incommutabiliter manet unigenitus filius tuus coaeternus tibi*)"?⁴⁶ This proposition is easily identified as a statement about the Plotinian *NOUS*; an identification confirmed by how it goes on: "because souls receive of its fullness they are happy, and because by participation in wisdom abiding in them they are renewed to be wise."⁴⁷ Augustine is confessing what amounts to a sketch of the nature of *NOUS*, of its relation to the One, and of the role it plays as source and illuminating power of the rational soul. His sketch is *simultaneously* a conceptual map of the spiritual cosmos and Gospel truth. How is it known? Augustine tells us this in what follows.

What he discovered in the Platonic books, riches which God's people are to take from Egypt,⁴⁸ "admonished me to return into myself, and I did enter into my inward self (*admonitus redire ad memet ipsum intraui in intima mea*)."⁴⁹ At this point Augustine begins one of the many accounts of mystical ascent which we find in the *Confessions*.⁵⁰ They are all importantly modified reworkings of Plotinus—as a consultation of the references to the *Enneads* provided by Henry Chadwick will confirm in respect to the first of the ascents described in Book VII.⁵¹ In general, the modifications belong in the direction Plotinus is given when transmitted by Porphyry and Victorinus, i.e. there is a trinitarian reduction of the One toward *NOUS* and Being. *Vis-à-vis* his Plotinian source, Augustine intellectualises 1) the ascent, 2) the experience of the Principle, and 3) the self which experiences God.⁵² Rather than seeking union with the radically other, i.e. the One Non-being, Augustine is in search of self-subsistent Intellect and Being. He finds a trinity of aeternal being, truth, and love (*O aeterna ueritas et uera caritas et cara aeternitas*.) At the conclusion of the first inward and upward ascent he speaks of a vision of Being: "When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is Being (*esse*), and that I who saw it am not yet Being (*nondum me esse*)."⁵³ He goes on to name God through Exodus 3.14: "Now I am who I am (*immo uero ego sum qui sum*)."⁵⁴ This intuition, conceiving, and naming of God in terms of *idipsum esse* is

⁴⁵ Ibid 7.8.12.

⁴⁶ Ibid 7.9.14.

⁴⁷ This would be confirmed by many passages from the *Enneads*; a sceptic might look at 5.1 which scholarship generally judges Augustine read.

⁴⁸ *Confessions* 7.9.15.

⁴⁹ Ibid 7.10.16.

⁵⁰ Others begin at 7.17.23, 9.10.23, 10.6.9, 10.40.65; this is not a complete list.

⁵¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an Introduction by Henry Chadwick (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 123.

⁵² See W. J. Hankey, "Ratio, reason, rationalism (ideae)," in *Saint Augustine through the Ages: an Encyclopedia*, edited Allan Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 696-702.

⁵³ *Confessions* 7.10.16, Chadwick's translation.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

altogether in accord with how Augustine treats God elsewhere.⁵⁵ He has attained the very knowledge of himself and of the divine he had confessed himself to be in need: “I entered and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw above the same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind (*intraui et uidi qualicumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam lucem incommutabilem* [7.10.16]).” There is a mental seeing, a mental experience of intelligible non-corporeal realities. As a result Augustine is able to solve the intellectual problems for which he needed answers and the subsequent chapters of Book VII manifest the consequent solutions.

Augustine moves Neoplatonic theology decisively toward its kataphatic pole.⁵⁶ In accord with this move to the affirmative way, union is represented as what human effort can attain and, precisely because it is only what the human can attain, what human effort must lose. Because the transcendence sought by Augustine is reduced as compared with what pagan Neoplatonists sought, Augustine speaks of union, although only instantaneous, as our own work in a way the pagan Neoplatonists themselves cannot allow.⁵⁷ In a way characteristic of Christian polemic in this period, Augustine projects human pride onto the mystical ascent, and then denounces what he represents. His initial words about the source of the decisive philosophical books are typical of follows: for Augustine the grace he receives by way of the Platonists comes from “a man swollen up with the most enormous gigantic god-defying pride (*per quendam hominem immanissimo typho turgidum*).”⁵⁸ With such rhetorical overload, no one can miss the polemical point.

Augustine’s intellectualization of the soul which seeks, the means she employs, the goal she attains, and his drawing of the ascent more within human power does not eliminate such essential elements of Plotinian mysticism as transcendence (7.10.16: *supra mentem meam lucem incommutabilem*; 9.10.24: *transcendimus*), love (7.10.16: *caritas novit eam*), step-by-step movement through forms of apprehension (7.17.23), union in an instant which carries us out of time (7.17.23: *in ictu trepidantis aspectus*; 9.10.24: *remeauimus ... ad ubi uerbum et incipitur et finitur*), touch (9.10.25: *atingimus aeternam sapientiam*), self-transcendence and self-forgetfulness (*ibid.: ipsa sibi anima sileat et transeat se et non se cogitando*).⁵⁹ The same texts in which Augustine describes what is common also present what contrasts. Augustine writes “In the flash of a trembling glance it [our power of knowing and judging] arrived at that which is (*peruenit ad id quod est* [7.17.23]).” In that flash, receiving what Romans 1.20 concedes to philosophy, he saw the invisible things of God (*inuisibilia tua per ea quae facta*), but confesses that “I did not possess the strength in the pinnacle of my mind to hold on, and in my weakness I returned to the banal (*aciem figere non eualui et repercussa infirmitate reditus solitis*).” Things turn out the same in the vision at Ostia. Mother and son sigh, they touch the pinnacle slightly by a

⁵⁵ See for example my “Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine”: 85 note 10 and *De trinitate* 1.1.2, 1.8.17, 2.16.27, 2.18.34, 3.2.8, 5.2.3, 7.5.10.

⁵⁶ See my “Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine”: 116-22; from the immense scholarly literature I mention only these recent efforts all of which emphasise (and even sometimes overemphasise) these features: D. Bradshaw, “Neoplatonic Origins of the Act of Being,” *Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1999): 383-401; R.D. Crouse, “*Paucis mutatis uerbis*: St. Augustine’s Platonism,” *Augustine and his critics*, edited R.J. Dodaro and G.P. Lawless, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 37-50; Phillip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self. The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁷ For reflections on the relative places of grace and nature in pagan Neoplatonism and pre-modern Christianity see my “Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion Virtue and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 59:2 [*Le Néoplatonisme*] (Juin 2003): 193-224.

⁵⁸ *Confessions* 7.9.13.

⁵⁹ This is a very incomplete list.

moment of total concentration of the heart (*atingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis*) and then fall back to time and the realm of human noise.⁶⁰

The Plotinian descriptions of how the human soul experiences the One differ significantly from Augustine's mystical ascents. In *Ennead* 5.3, evidently dependent on the *Alcibiades* of Plato, we find Plotinus' last description of illumination by the One.⁶¹ He tells us that the one who knows himself is double. One of our selves is reasoning, having knowledge according to soul: "Another one is up above this man. He knows himself according to Intellect because he has become that intellect; and by that Intellect he thinks himself again, not any longer as a man (*oukē hōs anthropon eti*)."⁶² When we mount beyond Intellect to the One, the language is denuded of any rational self-elevation.⁶³ Then Plotinus speaks of belief in a way which suggests to Philippe Hoffmann that it may have inspired Proclus' teaching on faith.⁶⁴ Plotinus says that there is a "sudden reception of a light" which compels the soul "to believe" that "it is from Him, it is Him." There is a breaking in; the illumination "comes." With this arrival of the "true end of the soul," it "contemplates the light by which it sees," but it is equally no longer operating by a power over which it has control.⁶⁵ Pierre Hadot's analyses of Plotinian mysticism clarify this loss of a self-possessed power; he writes that "into the soul's consciousness irrupts an activity of which it was unconscious."⁶⁶ Again, Hadot tells that for Plotinus mystical experience itself is a overthrowing of our being because it is of completely different order from the preparations by which we dispose ourselves for it. Our preparations cannot suffice to bring about the union. The experience is a gift not given to all.⁶⁷ The irruption in the consciousness "effects a kind of explosion of the consciousness ... one has the impression of participating in another."⁶⁸

This kind of description moves Jean-Marc Narbonne to ask if there is, in Neoplatonism: "an abandoning of the territory proper to philosophy." After conceding that Platonism generally is "a combination of science and revelation," he concludes that "the Neoplatonists conceive philosophy as a servant duty-bound in respect to a divine vision which, at one and the same time, summons all her efforts and yet does not entirely depend on her. Plotinus is very clear about this."⁶⁹ Philosophy cannot give the end for which she prepares us: "Philosophy in Neoplatonism leads to her own proper self-suppression and must bow before a higher form of experience for which she prepares but for whose strangeness

⁶⁰ *Confessions* 9.10.24.

⁶¹ Ham in Plotin, *Traité 49 (V.3)*, Introduction, traduction, commentaire et notes par Bertrand Ham, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 2000) 17.

⁶² *Ennead* 5.3.4 lines 8-12, (Loeb Armstrong, p. 82).

⁶³ See Ham's comments at Plotin, *Traité 49*, 274.

⁶⁴ Ph. Hoffmann, "La triade Chaldaïque ερος, αληθεια, πιστις de Proclus à Simplicius," in *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne. Actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998) en l'honneur de H.D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink*, éd. A.Ph. Segonds et C. Steel, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy De Wulf-Mansion Centre Series I, XXVI (Leuven and Paris: Leuven University Press and Les Belles Lettres, 2000) 459-489 at 469.

⁶⁵ Plotin, *Traité 49*, 17 and 29-38; *Ennead* 5.3.17 lines 28-38 (Loeb Armstrong, p. 134).

⁶⁶ Plotin, *Traité 9: VI, 9*, Introduction, traduction commentaire et notes par Pierre Hadot, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 1994) 43.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 48. See also his Plotin, *Traité 38: VI, 7*, Introduction, traduction commentaire et notes par Pierre Hadot, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 1988).

⁶⁹ Jean-Marc Narbonne, "EPEKEINA THS GNWSEWS, le savoir d'au-delà à savoir chez Plotin et dans la tradition néoplatonicienne," *Metaphysik und Religion: Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens. Akten des Internationalen Kongresses vom 13.-17. März 2001 in Würzburg*, Herausgegeben von Theo Kobusch und Michel Erler (München – Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2001) 477-490 at 487.

nothing can prepare her, because the One does not come in the way for which we await it.”⁷⁰ Another argument making the same point is given at length in Giovanni Catapano’s *Epékeina tês philosophías: L’eticità del filosofare in Plotino*⁷¹ which explores how Plotinus used “philosophy” and her cognate forms. Catapano concludes that for Plotinus himself there is a surpassing of philosophy and her moral value because her work prepares us for a good she cannot herself supply.

The *Alcibiades* which, following Iamblichus, the Neoplatonists made the first book read by those entering upon the curriculum of the School, so that until the nineteenth-century it was the best known of all the dialogues of Plato, is very clear about our need for God’s aid in any successful ascent.⁷² It first demonstrates the necessity of self-knowledge and then shows that knowledge of ourselves is attained only in and through the knowledge of God.⁷³ At the conclusion of the dialogue, Alcibiades suggested that it would be by the will of Socrates, assisting him to self-knowledge, that he will achieve virtue. Socrates insists that this is not well said. Rather Socrates insists that virtue requires “that God will it (*hoti ean théos ethele*).”⁷⁴ Self-knowledge goes with “temperance.” Thus, in fact, Plato in the *Alcibiades* agrees with Augustine that, as Dr Smith opines, “Contenance is a gift.”⁷⁵

In judging what Christians owe to Hellenism, philosophy, and Platonism, it is appropriate to conclude by reminding ourselves of that upon which Platonists would insist: Augustine’s Platonic self-knowledge and its co-relative knowledge of God, both essential to his Christianity, come to him only by God’s gracious leading. We should also remember that the Platonists showed more gratitude to those by whose hands they received the gift of Wisdom than Augustine exhibited to those who conveyed to him what turned out to be saving philosophical knowledge.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 488 see also J.-M. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)*, L’âne d’or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001) 274-275.

⁷¹ Giovanni Catapano, *Epékeina tês philosophías: L’eticità del filosofare in Plotino* (Padova: CLEUP, 1995).

⁷² On the history of the reception of the dialogue, see Plato, *Alcibiades*, ed. Nicholas Denyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 14-26 and Platon, *Alcibiade*, présentation par J. -F. Pradeau (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1999) 22-29 & 219-220. For a comparison of Augustine and Iamblichus on grace see Hans Feichtinger, “**Oujdevneia** and *humilitas*: Iamblichus and Augustine on Grace and Mediation,” *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 123-160.

⁷³ For the doctrine of the dialogue and its place in the history of the *Gnothi seauton* see Ham in Plotin, *Traité 49* 15-20 and W. J. Hankey, “‘Knowing As We are Known’ in *Confessions* 10 and Other Philosophical, Augustinian and Christian Obedience to the Delphic *Gnothi Seauton* from Socrates to Modernity,” *Augustinian Studies* 34:1 (2003) 23-48 at 40.

⁷⁴ Plato, *Alcibiades* 135D6 see also 127E5. I use Denyer’s text.

⁷⁵ *Alcibiades* 133C18.