

James Doull, Étienne Gilson and George Grant on Modernity and Platonism
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During this year two young academics, who teach at the University of King's College in Halifax and who regard James Doull as their master in philosophy, Neil Robertson and David Peddle, are editing a festschrift in his honour, *Situating Contemporary Freedom: A Doull Reader*. The reader will be published by the University of Toronto Press and will consist of articles selected from Doull's publications together with responses from his former students and colleagues. My own contribution to the collection will be a critical consideration of his "Neoplatonism and the Origins of the older Modern Philosophy" and is entitled: "Neoplatonism and Contemporary Constructions and Deconstructions of Modern Subjectivity." My essay begins with a comparison between James Doull, Étienne Gilson and George Grant on modernity and Platonism. Here, I adapt that introduction for *The Friend*.

James Alexander Doull, the only surviving member of my trio, comes from the same Pictou County Nova Scotia roots as George Grant. He studied at Dalhousie University, the University of Toronto, Harvard and Oxford. Like Grant, after World War 2 and Oxford, Doull taught at Dalhousie University. Grant came as Head (and only member) of the Philosophy Department. Doull was in Classics where he taught for almost 40 years, most of that time as Head (He was briefly Head of Philosophy as well after Grant left for York and McMaster). Both the Classics Department at Dalhousie and King's College remain strongly under his influence.

Not many in Canada can be compared to James Doull as the creator of a philosophical school based in an interpretation of the whole history of Western philosophy. When one adds that his school has continued to reproduce itself for a half a century through several generations of students, that it remains central to the life of vibrant institutions, and that this power of regeneration stems from its union of a linguistically and philologically disciplined reading of texts with a total system of philosophy, Professor Doull's accomplishment is virtually incomparable in our country. Only Étienne Gilson's creation of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto and George Grant's unparalleled drawing of an extraordinarily diverse and large group of Canadians into philosophical reflection on their culture and its future come to mind.

Doull and Gilson have in common that they unite textual erudition with a philosophical project and that institutions and generations of scholar disciples carried on their work. But in Canada the institutions with which Gilson is associated have failed or their scholarly work has ceased to serve his philosophical and theological enterprise. Moreover, the texts and Gilson's interpretative scheme ultimately fall away from one another because of Gilson's opposition to Neoplatonism.¹ While the criticism

of Neoplatonism unites them, our two philosophical historians also separate over its place and character. Gilson opposed Neoplatonism as part of his campaign against modern idealism. In contrast, for Professor Doull, an Hegelian whose philosophical writing has largely taken the form of giving an Hegelian account of its history, Neoplatonism, though a necessary development, must give way so that the proper freedom of philosophy can be restored in the modern world.

Situating Platonism in relation to modernity was at least as important to the thought of George Grant as it was to that of Doull or Gilson. Plato's philosophy represented for Grant the union of knowledge and love which founded a contemplative relation to the cosmos against which he set the contemporary willful nihilism of the West. Placed against Heidegger's reading of Plato (which he rejected) and Heidegger's account of Western modernity (which he accepted), Grant's Platonism was in a general way Neoplatonic. The Good is beyond knowledge and approached by love through ethical practice and religion. Though, like Doull, he moved from the United Church to the Anglican, their attitudes to Augustine, upon whom everything with these three thinkers turns, were profoundly opposed.

A quotation from Augustine, "Out of the shadows and imaginings into the truth," is chiseled into the headstone of Grant's grave, nonetheless, Augustine's identification of God with *esse* made him for Grant at best an ambiguous figure. He found in Eastern Orthodoxy the continuation of the Platonic Christianity the Latin churches had betrayed by the Augustinian *filioque* and their embrace of Aristotle. Like John Milbank and other postmodern theologians and philosophers who retrieve Neoplatonism, he saw in Aristotle a rationalism, an absolutising of ontology and a reduction of God to cause in all of which he discerned the seeds of modernity's evils.

In fact, Grant was a Christian Platonist and never wrote about Platonism itself.² He used it and the history of philosophy generally only to paint his pictures of our present.³ There was no disciplined contemplation of the texts, even the most venerated were largely starting points for his own reflections and Grant left no school of scholars to continue or engage his representation of our philosophical history.

Friends and rivals, Grant and Doull were both scions of the Pictou County Scots Presbyterian intellectual tradition which embraced modernity more fully and thought about it more critically than the Catholic and Anglican alternatives within Nova Scotia. In consequence, they divided over the relation between Plato and Hegel, about whom Grant acknowledged that he had learned much from Doull. Grant maintained that his real education in philosophy began in 1947 in conversations with Doull when they began their teaching at Dalhousie.

James Doull's Account of Neoplatonism

My comparisons of these three major figures in Canadian philosophy bring us to the elements of James' treatment of Neoplatonism. First, as in all Doull's writing, there

is an exemplary deep and wide reading of the primary philosophical texts pondered for decades in the languages in which they were written. This is matched by an extensive knowledge of the best present day scholarship. Interpretation for him primarily demands that philosophy be shown to be historical and that this history be the one given it by Hegel. As he represents it, the Hegelian philosophy which correctly understands the history preceding it also includes as partial moments of itself the thought which succeeds. Moreover, this comprehension of the past, shown to have included the totality of the logical moments, enables the ideal understanding of the future. What follows Hegel is only worthy of being called philosophy so far as it is written from within his system. Doull's paper excludes a proper return to the pre-modern except through this Hegelian route.⁴

Second, within the history which leads to Hegel's comprehension of it, Neoplatonism is a transitional moment of subjective freedom between Plato and Aristotle who "discovered in thought a coincidence of the objective good and individual freedom"⁵ and the restoration of that freedom in Christian form by means of what Descartes did with Augustine. In modernity "the idea is sought through a sensible world itself belonging to self-consciousness and the agreement of what is there discovered with the understanding." In consequence, Neoplatonism is properly terminated with the advent of modern philosophy.⁶

Third, Doull's treatment of Neoplatonism is determined by its beginning and its end. Nothing more divides Doull's history from that of the 20th century scholars whose work he uses, and from the philosophers and theologians who have retrieved Neoplatonism in our time, than how these are understood. For Doull the principle of Neoplatonic philosophy is the One as undivided self-consciousness. Its term is Augustine identified with Descartes.

In opposition both to contemporary interpreters and to the Neoplatonists themselves, for Doull the Neoplatonic One is the heir not of Plato's Good nor of his One Non-being but of Aristotle's God as self-conscious *Nous*. The history explicates "this point of unity beyond division where the individual had contact with the ground of his freedom."⁷ Doull writes: "The One as self-consciousness beyond the division of *νοητον* and *νοησις* and as absolute good beyond finite relations was Aristotelian and not Platonic."⁸ To this we might directly contrast, for example, Emmanuel Lévinas commenting on the *Enneads*: "The unity of the One excludes, in effect, all multiplicity, whether it be that which is designated already in the distinction between thinker and thought or even in the identity of the identical conceived under the guise of self-consciousness where, in the history of philosophy, one will go someday to find it."⁹

Augustine's place in the history is equally both exceptional and altogether essential. Already found in Augustine is what the whole development of Neoplatonism seeks.¹⁰ In consequence, Augustine is outside the history of Neoplatonism and is explicitly equated with Descartes.¹¹ Moreover, Augustine's *notitia sui* is seen as

retrieving Aristotle and they are combined.¹² For Doull “the implication of the Aristotelian divine idea has its further philosophical development in Augustine and then in the older modern philosophy.”¹³ In this sense, Aristotle is both the *alpha* and the *omega* of the history and remains above it.

Fourth, Christian modernity is the permanent result of the history of philosophy and religion and neither ought to be nor is it in fact escapable. However, modern freedom also needs correction which it has from Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism and modern philosophy are to be compared as “the primacy of the negative over positive theology.”¹⁴ These are, in effect, also two Augustinianisms. Doull writes:

the most radical difference occurs between those who saw the completion of Augustinianism in an integration with the Neoplatonism of Proclus and Dionysius and those who brought it together with Cartesianism in the seventeenth century.¹⁵

In general, Grant’s postmodern Augustine is the Neoplatonic one. Doull’s assessment of this retrieval is altogether ambiguous. Everything that is problematic in his representation of Neoplatonism as Aristotelian, in his representation of modernity as terminating Neoplatonism, and what is polemical and exclusive in his relation to contemporary philosophy and theology is found in this assessment.

If, in fact, he retains the two Augustinianisms as mutually necessary and corrective of one another, we arrive at a result which may be favourably compared to that of the most sophisticated postmodern philosophies.¹⁶ It is true that these involve Neoplatonic turnings to negative theology, the ethical and religion against the Cartesian Augustine, but, as postmodern this turn depends upon and assumes modernity. Doull could with equal justice turn back toward the modern in an recognition of the continuing mutual necessity of both Augustinianisms.¹⁷ If, however, Doull’s movement is to the Cartesian Augustine as exclusive successor to Proclus and Dionysius, Doull’s result is one-sidedly modern and the position from which he judges is ahistorical. Then Hegel, and Hegel exclusively, holds the Neoplatonic and the modern together and the postmodern retrievals of Neoplatonism are not a movement beyond Hegel. They are a retreat from philosophy to naturalistic immediacy¹⁸ and “Augustinian ‘sapientia’ appears ... more as a mixture of religion and borrowed philosophical concepts than as a strict and unified science.”¹⁹

In contrast to Doull’s celebration of the modernity which succeeds to Neoplatonism, Grant’s work is elegiac because modernity’s destructive triumph over Platonism seemed to him irresistible. In this he was close to the Catholic anti-modernism of Gilson, even if he set Plato, not existentialist and anti-Platonic Thomism, against Hegel and the modernity Doull embraces.

All three seek freedom from contemporary historicism. For Grant, Plato represents such freedom, but this is a freedom lost. For Gilson, it is attained at one moment. Alone among philosophies the existentialism Gilson found in St. Thomas was free from the vicissitudes of history. Exodus 3:14 guaranteed Thomas' metaphysic of *esse*. Nothing philosophy or empirical science could discover could touch it. It was both metaphysical and revealed.²⁰ With Doull the freedom is in the philosophies which comprehend both what precedes and comes after them: Aristotle and Hegel (and Augustine rendered philosophical by Hegel). The question is whether this comprehension is at the cost of understanding Neoplatonism through Aristotle and Augustine and understanding Augustine through Aristotle, Descartes and Hegel in such a way that philosophical difference is extinguished.

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¹ On Gilson see W.J. Hankey, "From Metaphysics to History, from Exodus to Neoplatonism, from Scholasticism to Pluralism: the fate of Gilsonian Thomism in English-speaking North America," *Dionysius* 16 (1998): 157-188.

² See R.L. Bayer, *George Grant: A Platonist for Our Time*, Ph.D. Dissertation University of Notre Dame, Indiana (April 1999) and W.J. Hankey's review of William Christian, *George Grant: A Biography* in *The Review of Politics* 56 (1995): 173-176.

³ For a similar judgment of Leo Strauss see Neil Robertson, "Leo Strauss's Platonism," *Animus* 4 (1999), an electronic journal @ www.mun.ca/animus.

⁴ James Doull, "Neoplatonism and the Origin of the Older Modern Philosophy," in J.J. Cleary, ed., *The Perennial Tradition of Neoplatonism* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 515 and note 5. Doull's fuller version of the same paper, entitled "Neoplatonism and the Origin of the Cartesian Subject," *Animus* 4 (1999), is often fuller on points of importance to my response and I will make reference to it also. The appropriate reference here is to note 84.

⁵ Doull, "Neoplatonism and the Older," 487 and see 495: "Its freedom rests in the unity of the ideal and the sensible world."

⁶ *Ibid.*, 515 and 486.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 487.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 487 and see note 4 and pp. 486 and 499.

⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, "De l'un à l'autre: transcendance et temps," in *idem, Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 141.

¹⁰ Doull, "Neoplatonism and the Older," 505 and note 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, notes 9 and 62 and more explicitly Doull, "Neoplatonism and the Cartesian," note 1: "a free Cartesian (or Augustinian) subject" again: "Descartes (or Augustine)"; and note 2.

¹² For a treatment of Augustine in terms of Aristotle see J.A. Doull, "What is Augustinian *sapientia*?" *Dionysius*, 12 (1988): 61.

¹³ Doull, "Neoplatonism and the Older," note 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 515 and Doull, "Neoplatonism and the Cartesian," 10: "The intelligible basis of this freedom is to be sought not only in Neoplatonism but also in the older modern philosophy. Both philosophies are necessary to a correction of contemporary dogmas."

¹⁵ Doull, "What is Augustinian," 62.

¹⁶ I have in mind, for example, Jacques Derrida as represented in K. Keirans, "Beyond Deconstruction," *Animus*, 2 (1997).

¹⁷ This is my conclusion in W.J. Hankey, "ReChristianizing Augustine Postmodern Style: Readings by Jacques Derrida, Robert Dodaro, Jean-Luc Marion, Rowan Williams, Lewis Ayes and John Milbank," *Animus* 2 (1997): 81.

¹⁸ Doull, "Neoplatonism and the Cartesian," 7 and note 5.

¹⁹ Doull, "What is Augustinian," 62. The heart of Robert Crouse's criticism of Doull is that such a description exposes that Doull does not understand what philosophy is for Augustine, see his contribution to the Doull Reader: "The Augustinian Philosophy and Christian Institutions."

²⁰ See for example, Étienne Gilson, "Historical Research and the Future of Scholasticism," *The Modern Schoolman*, 29 (1951), 1-10.