

## THE INFLUENCE OF NEOPLATONISM ON AUGUSTINE'S METAPHYSICS

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### Abstract

*The study is an attempt to explore Neoplatonism and its influence on Augustine's metaphysics. Neoplatonism is a philosophical system that developed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, based on the teachings of Plato but significantly expanded by philosophers like Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus. It emphasizes a single, ultimate source of all reality, often called "the one" or "the good" which is completely transcendent and beyond human comprehension. The study attempts to locate Augustine's metaphysics as influenced by Plotinus. Despite the influence, Augustine differs slightly in his metaphysical assertions with regard to the creation of existing beings other than God. For Plotinus everything that exists was created out of an involuntary process of emanation from the one. For Augustine, everything that existed was created by God by a free, generous act of the divine will. Augustine incorporates the Neoplatonic understanding of evil as a privation of good offering a solution to the problem of evil in a manner that fits within Christian Theology. The soul's ascent to God in Augustine's thought, inspired by Neoplatonic journey of a soul toward the one is framed in Christian terms, emphasizing divine grace. This is qualitative research drawing its data from books, articles/periodicals and other internet sources. The research used the historical method to properly situate St. Augustine's philosophy within the frame of Neo-Platonic influence. The research employed the expository method with the view to articulating particularly the influence of Neo-Platonists on Augustine. The critical method was used to bring out clearly the points of agreement and divergence between Augustine and the Neo-Platonists. The research finds out that, Augustine's metaphysical views, particularly on God, creation, time, and the nature of evil, reflect a profound synthesis of Neoplatonism with Christian beliefs, laying a foundation for medieval Christian philosophy. However, Augustine never just regurgitated Neo-Platonist philosophy but disagreed with them in certain respects.*

**Keywords:** Neoplatonism, Augustine, Metaphysics, Plotinus

## 1. Introduction

Augustine's search for a solution to the problem of evil was, in many ways, intimately linked to his lifelong pursuit of truth and wisdom and his interest in using reason to provide answers to the problems that troubled him. This search for wisdom aided by reason led Augustine through at least three religious and philosophical systems relevant to this study: Christianity, Manichaeism, and Neoplatonism, all of which contributed to how he viewed evil and accounted for its presence in the world. However, the study will focus on Neoplatonism and its influence on Augustine's metaphysics.

What then is Neoplatonism? Neoplatonism, according to Eyjolfur Emilsson, is usually defined as the philosophy of Plotinus, a third-century Egyptian Greek, and his followers, such as Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus (Emilsson, 1999, p. 356). Though the philosophical viewpoints of these philosophers were often quite different from one another – indeed, as Emilsson states, the Neoplatonism of the third-century was “no unified school of thought, but a label put on various Platonically inspired thinkers at different places during this period” (Emilsson, 1999, p. 357). However, what they all had in common was their claim to be followers, interpreters, and improvers of Plato (Sharon & Thomson, 2001, p. 7). Additionally, they held in common an interest in the metaphysical aspects of Plato's thought, as opposed to his ethical-political interests. These philosophers did not, however, confine themselves solely to the doctrines of Plato. As pointed out by O'Meara, Neoplatonism was more than just an expansion of Plato's thought, but in fact was a synthesis of Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Pythagorean elements, (O'Meara, 1980, p. 38) hence, the use of the term “Neoplatonism” to describe the views of these philosophers. We shall on behalf of the other Neoplatonists, briefly discuss the one of the notable Neoplatonists, Plotinus whose philosophy had direct influence on St. Augustine.

## 2. Plotinus's Metaphysical System: *The One, Intellect, and Soul*

The system, Neoplatonism was founded by Plotinus. He is the most notable Neoplatonist, who wrote a series of treatises which were edited and compiled by Porphyry, Plotinus's disciple, into a work known as the *Enneads*. It was so named because the treatises are arranged into six groups of nine. So, Plotinus's metaphysical system is comprised of three basic principles or hypothesis: the One, Intellect, and Soul. At the top of the Plotinian system is the One, which Plotinus equated with the Form of the Good of Plato (Plotinus, 1956, p. 311, 271). Three main characteristics of the One are relevant to our present study of Augustine's Metaphysics.

First, the One is “beyond Being” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 271). Because it is beyond Being, Plotinus tells us that it is not possible to describe or to have knowledge of the One or even to talk about it. He states, “it is . . . truly ineffable: for whatever you say about it, you will always be speaking of a “something” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 141). We can only grasp the One indirectly by deducing what it is not, or by speaking about what comes after it. The One is the supreme simplex. As the supreme simplex it is entirely without multiplicity or composition. It is simple because it is perfect, and because it is perfect, it is independent of

everything, while everything else is dependent on it (Bussanich, 1996, p. 64). In addition, because it is “altogether simple, it is self-sufficient and needs nothing,” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 311, 271) it lacks nothing, and it is the “measure and bound of all things, giving from itself intellect and real Being and soul and life and intellectual activity.” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 281). Furthermore, “it is the greatest of all things, not in size but in power” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 323) and “must be understood as infinite not because its size and number cannot be measured or counted but because its power cannot be comprehended” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 323).

The second important characteristic of the One is that it is that on which everything depends for its existence (Plotinus, 1956, p. 271). In other words, the One is the cause of both things coming into existence and of their being sustained in existence by continuous participation in the One. As Plotinus explains it, “that which is not the perfect unity, but rather a multiplicity,” meaning everything that is not the One, “is kept in Being by this 'one'” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 133-219). All that exists, then, both visible and invisible, is a product of the One's power, which “overflows to create a succession of types of existence” (Jones, 1969, p. 14).

The third characteristic of the One relevant to this study is that it is that “to which everything aspires” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 269). As Plotinus explains it, the One “must stay still, and all things turn back to it, as a circle does to the centre from which all the radii come” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 270). This is because all things are naturally disposed to direct themselves toward that which is best, which is the Good. The Good, as the Good, “does not look or aspire to something else, but stay[s] quiet” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 269). Rather, the Good gives “other things the form of Good, not by its activity directed to them – for they are directed to it, their source” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 269). In this way, “there is an essential double movement in all being, a movement of procession outward or descent, and a movement of return or conversion to the higher generative principle” (Corrigan, 2005, p. 28).

But if the One is an unchanging simplex, how can it be the source of everything else that exists? In other words, why is there anything else besides the One, and how does the multiplicity arise from it? (Hutchins, 1952, p. 319). The answer, according to Plotinus, is that everything else is produced from an involuntary process of emanation from the One. As Plotinus puts it, “when anything comes to perfection we see that it produces, and does not endure to remain by itself, but makes something else” (Hutchins, 1952, p. 143).

The first emanation out of the "One" is Intelligence or Intellect (From the Greek word *nous*; sometimes translated as “spirit” or “mind”). The *Intelligence* is inferior to the One and cannot absorb all the energy communicated to it by the First Being in one single act of knowledge. This energy is therefore dispersed and radiated in many ideas. The ideas are not substances like in Plato but are forces clustered together which will in turn generate further activities. It is here that multiplicity occurs; as Intelligence is not the One, and therefore not

a perfect simple, the realm of Intelligence must be more than one. The realm of Intelligence corresponds roughly to Plato's realm of the Forms or Ideas. As Plotinus puts it, Intelligence “thinks the real beings [Forms] and establishes them in existence” (Hutchins, 1952, p. 297). In addition, “all the things . . . which exist as forms in the world of sense come from the intelligible world” (Hutchins, 1952, p. 309). As the One is beyond Being, Intelligence is true Being. Hence the Forms possess true Being, while the particulars which participate in the Forms possess less Being. The things of sense, as Plotinus explains it, are an “image of the real form, and every form which is in something else comes to it from something else and is a likeness of that from which it comes” (Hutchins, 1952, p. 297-299). In this way, the objects of sense are what they are called by participation, since their underlying nature receives its shape from elsewhere [the Forms].

Then emanating from the realm of Intelligence is the realm of Soul. The realm of Soul, according to Plotinus, has two levels: “a higher level where it acts as a transcendent principle of form, order, and intelligent direction and the lower where it operates as an immanent principle of life and growth” (Plotinus, 1956, p. 417). This lower level, according to Plotinus, is Nature (Plotinus, 1956, p. 371). The World-Soul generates particular souls which are the forms of all things. The World-Soul, which is the lower level, in turn generates **Matter** (Tonelli, 1967, p. 354) - with its own forces and unites itself to the Matter thus generating corporeal and sensible beings. For Plotinus, Matter is “pure possibility of being, mere nothingness”. Matter is the limit beyond which the process of generation cannot take place.

The world of senses is imprisoned in matter and is only a faint reflection of the supra-sensible principles whose unity is unchangeable. The parts of the universe are held together by a “cosmic sympathy”. Souls exist before and dwell in the World-Soul until the needs of cosmic evolution demand their union with Matter. Based on this Plotinus easily incorporates into his system Platonic theories of the survival and migration of souls, and of the “extrinsic union of soul with body” (De Wolf, 1909, p. 77). He concludes that the end of life and philosophy is to achieve a mystical return of the soul to God.

### **3. Plotinus' Influence: *A Reflection of Augustinian Metaphysical Discourse***

Augustine's initial conceptions of God were deeply rooted in his nine-year association with the Manichees. The Manichees, in order to explain the presence of evil in the world, posited the existence of two gods, one good and the other evil (Augustine, 1966, p. 15). These gods, according to Manichaean doctrine, are corporal in nature and seemingly mutable, as the good and evil gods are engaged in a constant struggle or battle for domination. When the evil god wins, evil occurs; when the good god wins, good occurs.

But having being formed with this Neoplatonic conception of reality, Augustine arrived at a new understanding of the nature of God and acquired the starting point for his solution to both natural and moral evil. Indeed, as we shall see, Augustine's solution to the problem of

evil is intimately linked to this new understanding of God. With the aid of the Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysical conceptions of reality, however, Augustine was able to come to a new understanding of God and Being. First and foremost, Augustine accepted the two worlds of Plato: “an intelligible world where truth itself resides,” which includes God and the Forms, and the “sensible world that we . . . sense by sight and touch,” that is made in the image of the true world (Augustine, 1955, p. 87)

Second, Augustine accepted the Platonic view of the simple Good: that “there is a Good, which alone is simple and therefore immutable” (Augustine, 1998, p. 462). This simple Good for Augustine is God. From this simple Good, all other goods were created, that is to say, “made, not begotten.” They are made, because if they were begotten, they would be simple and equal to God. These other goods, however, are not simple, and therefore, they are not immutable (Augustine, 1998, p. 462).

Third, Augustine came to the realization that that which is incorruptible is better than that which is corruptible, and that that which is incorruptible in any way would be the most perfect and the most Good, God. Augustine comes to this conclusion by contemplating the Goodness of God. His discussion on the topic can be outlined in the following way:

1. God is Goodness itself, utterly and entirely better than the things which he has made.
2. To be corrupted is not good.
3. Therefore, the substance which is God cannot be corruptible since, if it were, it would not be God (Augustine, 1955, p. 137)

Thus, the goodness of God implies God's incorruptibility.

Fourth, with the assistance of the Platonic and Neoplatonic conception of the One and the Forms, Augustine was able to appreciate that that which is immaterial is more real and possesses more Being than the particulars of the physical world experienced with the senses. With this new understanding Augustine could now conceive of God as an incorporeal, infinite, immutable, and incorruptible being. In addition, with the help of the Neoplatonic conception of the One, Augustine was able to conceive of God as the source of Being for all that exists (Augustine, 1955, p. 136).

It should be noted that there is one important difference in Augustine's understanding of God. While the Neoplatonists conceived of the One as beyond Being, Augustine conceived of God as possessing full Being. Augustine provides support for his divergence from the Plotinian account by quoting Exodus 3:14 where God reveals his name to Moses as “I am the God who *is*” (Augustine, 1955, p. 136). In other words, according to Augustine, God names himself Being itself – *ipsum esse* – as unqualified existence. Using this passage of Exodus as a starting point for his discussion of God's metaphysical nature as it relates to created beings, Augustine tells us in the *Confessiones* that when he considered the things that are of a lower order than God, he saw that they possess neither absolute Being, nor are they entirely without Being. They are real in the sense that they derive their Being from God, but unreal in the sense that they are not pure Being. For, as Augustine tells us, “it is only that which remains in Being without change that truly is” (Augustine, 1955, p. 138)

Augustine discusses the same passage from Exodus in *De Civitate Dei*. Here he clarifies: (1) the distinction between God and created beings; (2) the distinction between created beings from one another; and, (3) his use of the word “Being”:

For God is the Supreme Being – that is, He supremely is; and He is therefore immutable. He gave Being to the things that He created from nothing, then, but not a supreme Being like His own. To some He gave being more fully and to others he gave it in a more restricted way; and so he arranged natural entities according to their degrees of Being. (Just as the word 'wisdom' [*sapientia*] comes from 'to be wise' [*sapere*], so from 'to be' [*esse*] comes 'Being' [*essentia*]: a new word, indeed, which was not used in the Latin speech of old, but which has come into use in our own day so that our language should not lack a word for what the Greeks call *ousia*; for this is expressed very exactly by *essentia*.) (Augustine, 1998, p. 500).

Thus, while God possesses pure Being, everything else that has been created by God possess degrees of Being, depending on where they are ordered in the hierarchy of creation.

Augustine's metaphysical hierarchy, however, is more complex than just a distinction between the Being of God and the Being of created things. Augustine's metaphysical outlook also divides all existing things into three layers of reality (Vernon, 1992, p. 3). At the top of the hierarchy is God; in the middle are created spirits, such as angels and human souls; at the bottom are living and non-living physical objects, such as bodies, plants, and rocks. Within the hierarchy, God possesses full Being; angels and souls possess less Being than God, and physical objects possess less Being than angels and souls. Additionally, there is an ontological hierarchical order of created beings. Those that have life, according to Augustine, are placed above those that do not and those that have the power of generation are placed above those that do not have this capacity. Among living things, sentient creatures are placed above those that are not sentient. As such, animals are placed above trees. Among sentient creatures, those that possess intelligence, human beings for example, are placed above those that lack this capacity, such as cattle. Lastly, among the intelligent creatures, immortal creatures, such as angels, are placed above human beings who are mortal (Augustine, 1998, p. 470).

Augustine also distinguishes each level in the hierarchy in relation to the “quality of immutability” (Vernon, 1992, p. 3). God, existing at the top of the hierarchy of Being, is eternal and immutable. Since the Forms, according to Augustine, exist in the mind of God, the Forms are also eternal and immutable (Augustine, 1977, p. 79-81). The level below God consists of all created spirits, including angels and human souls. Angels and souls are immutable in regards to place. That is, they are not “strictly locatable in spatial terms, and hence cannot be said to move about, change, from one place to another” (O'Connell, 1986,

p. 1). However, because angels and human souls are created beings, they do undergo some change: they grow older in time and they experience moral and cognitive changes. At the lowest level of the hierarchy are physical bodies, both living and non-living, which, according to Augustine are all mutable and in no way immutable. As such, they are susceptible to change with respect to both place and time (Augustine, 1979, p. 236).

Addressing the question of why God ordered the universe according to a hierarchy and did not create everything equal, Augustine tells us: "Because there would not be everything if everything were equal. For there would not be the many kinds of things which make up the universe in its hierarchy of created things from the first and second levels of created things right down to the last" (Augustine, 1998, p. 470). Thus, a world in which everything is not equal, according to Augustine, is more complete than one in which everything is equal. Even lesser goods, which human beings may find distasteful, such as mice or fleas, add to the perfection of the whole and the beauty of the universe.

Finally, one additional difference between Plotinus and Augustine should be mentioned regarding the creation of existing beings other than God. For Plotinus everything that exists was created out of an involuntary process of emanation from the One. For Augustine, however, everything that exists was created by God by a free, generous act of the Divine will (Augustine, 1953, p. 264- 265). Hence, God created, "not from any necessity, not because He had need of any benefit, but simply from His own goodness: that is, so that it might be good." Augustine's departure from Plotinus on this point is clearly influenced by Christian Scripture, especially the book of Genesis, which demands such a deviation from the Plotinian cosmology.

### **Conclusion**

Neo-Platonism heavily influenced Augustine thoughts but his Christian theology led him to diverge from Neo-Platonist ideas. The remarkable differences Augustine had with Neo-Platonism were on their different views about God, nature of reality, human nature, salvation, freewill, evil and eschatology. On the view of God the Neo-Platonists hold that the one which is the source of ultimate reality is impersonal, eternal and unknowable in variance with Augustine's position that God is personal, loving and knowable through revelation which is explainable in the idea of the Christian Trinity. Also, on the nature of reality Augustine disagreed with the Neo-Platonic view the reality is hierarchical, with lower levels (material world) emanating from higher levels (spiritual realm) and asserted that Reality is created by God, with no necessary hierarchy (all creation is good). He could not agree with the Neo-Platonic understanding of human nature where Humans are sparks of the divine, capable of achieving unity with the One through asceticism and contemplation. His opinion was that Humans are created in God's image, fallen due to original sin, and redeemed through faith in Christ. This position was necessitated principally because of his Christian background. On salvation Augustine held that Salvation is through faith in Christ, divine grace, and participation in the Church in contrast to the Neoplatonic idea that salvation comes through individual effort, asceticism, and spiritual contemplation. Augustine was also not in agreement with the Neo-Platonist on the

idea of Freedom of the Will. For Augustine human will is fallen, requiring divine grace to achieve true freedom which varies with the Neo-Platonic claim that human will is free, but influenced by cosmic forces. On evil the Neo-Platonist were of the opinion that evil is an illusion, a lack of being or goodness. Augustine disagreed with this position and held that evil is real, a privation of good, resulting from human sin. Augustine's theory of eschatology was also different from that of the Neo-Platonist for he held the Linear view of time, with a final judgment and eternal heaven or hell while cyclical view of time, with souls reincarnating until achieving unity with the One characterized the Neo-Platonist eschatological theory.

Despite all these notable differences, Neo-Platonism significantly influenced Augustine's Metaphysics by providing a philosophical frame work for understanding Christian doctrine. Augustine adopted Neo-Platonic concept of *the one* to describe God as the ultimate transcendent source of all reality. He modified the Neo-Platonic idea of emanation, aligning it with Christian creation ex nihilo, where God creates the world intentionally not as a necessary overflow of His essence.

Neo-Platonism also has shape Augustine's view of evil, which he saw as privation of good rather than an independent substance, countering dualistic views. Additionally, the Neo-Platonic idea of the soul's ascent toward the divine influenced Augustine's belief in the soul's journey, Augustine's Metaphysical views on God, creation evil and the soul reflect a synthesis of Neo-Platonism with Christian theology. Augustine integrated Neo-Platonist ideas into his Christian theology, transforming them to align with biblical teachings.

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