
Synchronizing Religion and Philosophy

One of the most important Christian writers, St. Augustine acts as a bridge between the Classical period and Late Antiquity. His autobiography about personal struggles, conversion, and contemplation about God sheds light on both how people of Late Antiquity observed Christian traditions and how Neo-Platonism influenced Christians' relationship with God. Augustine constantly probes the question of evil in his Confessions. To seek an answer to this dilemma, he draws upon Christian tradition and the Neoplatonist philosophy. Neither of them alone is sufficient to answer the problem of evil's existence. Combining the two traditions, Augustine can achieve spiritual wisdom by going through Christian initiation, studying biblical texts, and contemplating inwardly and upwardly to God.

In the early part of the Confessions, Augustine is struggling to give up the temptations of the material world and become a devout Christian. He relies heavily on Christian traditions to make a decision to convert. Monica, Augustine's mother, influences her son by her demonstration of faith and devotion. Her piety and visions inspired Augustine to convert. Like a good Christian, she obeys Bishop Ambrose's rules and concentrates on personal worship for the saints. Augustine, seeing these actions, naturally feels guilty for not converting. An important vision he receives at the Milan Garden shows an important Christian belief that happiness and comfort is in God. Lady Continence reveals to Augustine that only believing in God can lead to true continence. In addition, following the command to "pick up and read," Augustine finds the answer in the Bible. Afterwards, he is able to relinquish his attachment to lust and desires. These events exhibit the Christian traditions' impacts on Augustine's initiation process.

In addition, Augustine believes in salvation through narration and the importance of the present as a critical time for redemption. These beliefs are rooted in the Christian tradition that past sins are forgivable as long as one starts believing in Jesus and God in the present. In the Gospels, for example, Jesus reiterates that whoever believes in him will be saved and forgiven. The letter from Paul to the Romans shows that Christians should not be a slave to sin but a slave to God. After Augustine's conversion, he no longer enslaves himself to his flesh and bodily pleasures. Instead, he looks to God for help and guidance. His idea of salvation through narration offers Christians a way to redeem themselves from sinful pasts. The Gospel teaches that one needs to submit himself to God like a child with innocence and a pure mind. Augustine, on the other hand, believes that children are essentially sinful. As a result, he advocates that Christians can gain God's favor by reflecting on the past and by learning from past mistakes. Essentially, a person can go back to his or her childhood and repent for the committed crimes by narration and interrogation. Thus, Augustine's conversion and recollection of the past are impacted by Christian traditions.

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Augustine's profound analysis of the biblical stories and texts draws on and reshapes Christian tradition. Instead of taking the Bible literally, Christians should have a spiritual understanding of the written text. This figurative interpretation of the Bible is not novel. The Gospel of John, for example, starts with the Word and the Word made flesh. These lines reveal that God's words may not have a single literal meaning but represent something bigger. When Augustine discusses the line "increase and multiply," he concludes that procreation does not only apply to aquatic animals and humans but is relevant to all creatures. Along with the study of the biblical text, Augustine recognizes different interpretations for a biblical story. The creation of heaven and earth, for example, can have ten different axioms. This transition from the literal reading of the Bible to using the text for spiritual fulfillment shows Christian tradition's influence on the Confessions.

After he becomes a Christian, Augustine relies heavily on Neoplatonist philosophy to find a path to unite with God. In fact, the arrangement of the Confessions, represent Plotinus' upward struggle from the Sensible Realm, to the Soul, to the Intellect, and to the One. In books one through nine, Augustine is shedding mud and material from his body by narrating his past. After book nine, he takes a semi-philosophical approach to become spiritually closer to God. By reading the philosophers' books, he found inward contemplation as a means for transporting his mind to a higher realm. He says that he cannot understand God until he understands himself. In addition, Augustine agrees with Plotinus that the One is the source of all good. Unlike the One, however, God is a true being who can be described and sensed. Nevertheless, inspired by Neoplatonism, Augustine can look inwardly to move upwardly toward God.

Besides finding the way to God, Augustine draws on Neoplatonist tradition to find an explanation for the existence of evil and corruption. Rejecting the Manichean ideal that some evil matter opposes God in a cosmic struggle, Augustine seeks a different explanation for evil. He follows the Neoplatonist tradition that the One only emanates good. Evil cannot possibly exist because all of God's creation is good and beautiful. This conclusion is similar to Plotinus' doctrine that the One only produces Beauty, which may be polluted by interaction with matter. According to Augustine, God is omnipotent and only produces material that is good. The problem of evil lies in human freewill. Freewill leads to the possibility of people deviating from the true Good by their own will. This resembles Plotinus' idea that some souls become contaminated by mingling with the body. One's soul, once bounded by undesirable will, is stuck in the sensible and material world. For Augustine, our will has to command the soul to contemplate instead of dwelling on lust and greed. With the help of Neoplatonist philosophy, Augustine hopes to find an answer to the presence of evil. In conclusion, he manages to see evil as lacking substance and presents freewill and the conflict of interests as the two sources of evil.

Probing the past, present, and future, Augustine writes about human nature in general and

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humans' relationship to God. By synchronizing Christian traditions and Neoplatonism, he hopes to gain more followers for God. Reading the Confessions is an act of transformation for the readers because we see Augustine grow from a sinful youth with internal struggles to a Catholic with a new understanding of God's designs and creations. Both religion and philosophy shapes Augustine's transformation from a rhetorician to a Christian, his study of the Bible, and his interpretation of evil. He reflects on Christian traditions and reshapes them, especially in the analysis of the Bible. Although following Plotinus' argument closely, Augustine distinguishes himself from the philosopher by having a greater interest in the creator rather than the creation. Not just simply an autobiography, the Confessions exposes a man's vulnerability, his intellectual quest, and his real concerns about the world, which aroused the empathy of generations of readers.

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