

Augustine and Plato: Clarifying Misconceptions

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The connection between Augustine and Plato is well-documented yet challenging to explain. It is not fair to either thinker to say Plato + Christianity = Augustine. The relationship between the two is a much more nuanced affair. On the surface, similarities between Christianity and Platonism are very pronounced. Both systems focus on a fundamental dualism that can be overcome through transcendence. That is, both doctrines emphasize the transcending of this reality in search of a better one. However, just because both views are fundamentally dualist, it does not follow that they are synonymous, let alone identical. Indeed, there are fundamental differences between Platonism and Christianity. As Augustine's thought matures, it appears that even he recognizes these tensions and, in some ways, moves away from his Platonic roots. Hoenig describes Augustine's relationship with Plato as a "downward pointing vector" that descends steadily throughout his career (Hoenig 222). He reaches the bottom of his descent when, in his *Revisions*, he makes the blanket statement: "Likewise, the praise with which I so greatly extolled Plato and the Platonists (or the Academic philosophers) was most inappropriate for these impious persons and has rightly displeased me; it is especially in the face of their great errors that Christian teaching must

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be defended” (Augustine, *Revisions* 29).¹ In context, this quote is specifically referring to one of Augustine’s first works, *Against the Academicians*, so it’s not clear if this condemnation also applies to his later works such as *City of God* or the *Trinity*. But while Augustine recognizes some of the tensions between Plato and Christianity, he interprets or simplifies Plato’s views in such a manner as to make Platonism more palatable. By doing so, he ignores Plato’s original intent. It is easy to create a narrative in the history of philosophy in which Augustine fails to contribute very much original thought because his contributions to various fields are wrapped up in his theological texts. Which contrasts with Aquinas who made a very marked effort to distinguish science from theology. There are pros and cons to each approach but this is a fundamental principle in understanding Augustine—he is first and foremost concerned with theology; however, he regularly engages with secular philosophy and exhibits philosophical rigor and inquiry in his own projects (Teske 3–25).² Augustine does have high regards for Plato and his philosophical followers (i.e. the Neo-Platonists); in fact, he says that “none are closer to us [Christians] than the Platonists” (Augustine, *City of God* 304). Augustine admits his indebtedness to Plato as Platonic philosophy eventually led him to embrace Christianity (Augustine, *Basic Writings* Bk. VII). Plato provided a way for Augustine to escape materialism and grasp a metaphysical reality above his own (Kenny).

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the dialogue between these two great thinkers and question the idea that Augustine is just a Christianized version of Plato. Certain factors cloud the proper manner in which Plato’s influence on Augustine ought to be understood. First, the notion that *all* metaphysical dualist systems in the ancient world (and even now) are Platonic in construction diminishes the significant variations that these systems exhibit. This kind of understanding of the history of philosophy would be detrimental to scholarship and the appreciation of history’s great thinkers. Secondly, Augustine’s own interpretative mistakes can cause a reader to connect Plato and Augustine in a manner that would be inappropriate.

¹Augustine quotations and their page numbers come from various English translations. See “Works Cited” for more information.

²Teske provides a good defense for referring to Augustine as a philosopher.

Interpretation and Creation

Even though Augustine held Plato in high regards, he had very limited access to Plato's Greek dialogues. James O'Donnell, in his commentary on Augustine's writings, created an extensive list of Augustine's literary references to Platonic writings. From this list, he infers that the *Timaeus* was the only Platonic dialogue that Augustine ever read (O'Donnell). With that said, Augustine developed an extensive understanding of Platonic philosophy by reading and interacting with Neo-Platonists (Fleteren 651). By using this information (and perhaps resources we do not know about), he was able to reference other Platonic dialogues indirectly, albeit competently. On the other hand, Augustine's limited access to Plato's full corpus certainly distorts Augustine's understanding of Plato and therefore, at times, the connection between these two figures can be obscured by Augustine himself.

Given that Augustine was the most familiar with the *Timaeus*, his usage of the *Timaeus* in the *City of God* is particularly interesting. This would make sense given that the overall purpose of the *City of God* is apologetical (Augustine, *City of God* 5). Indeed, it appears that the *City of God*, at least in part, attempts to provide a proper understanding of Plato's deity figure "the Demiurge." If the Demiurge is comparable to the Christian God, then Augustine would have demonstrated that Christianity is connected with the Greco-Roman heritage of the ancient world. Additionally, future interpretations of the *Timaeus* will be affected by Augustine's importation of Theism to Plato. At this point, however, scholarly consensus divides. This division seems to stem from a lack of consensus on how to read the *Timaeus*. Some propose that Plato's work ought to be understood metaphorically, others, however, contend that it must be understood literally. Thus, there is a fundamental difference in interpretive framework. The literal reading is in accordance with the Augustinian interpretation of *Timaeus* and is an attractive method to Christianize Plato.

In the 1930's, this debate on the nature of the Demiurge and interpretive frameworks culminated between two prominent Plato scholars at Cambridge University. A.E. Taylor held that Plato's Demiurge was to be viewed as almost akin to a monotheistic creator god (Cornford, *The "Polytheism" Of Plato*). In contrast, F.M. Cornford rejected this idea primarily on the grounds that such concept was foreign to ancient Greek culture (Cornford, *The "Polytheism" Of Plato*). While these debates continued throughout the modern era, Augustine himself attempted to weigh in on the subject. There are theories, albeit tentative ones, that Plato traveled to Egypt or even Israel itself and was exposed to monotheism. Augustine himself even entertained this possibility (Augustine, *City of God* 313-314).

However, the relationship between the Demiurge and the Christian creator god remains unclear. Indeed, the most immediate difference between the two ancient thinkers' conceptions of God are that God, in Augustine's view, facilitated a creation *ex nihilo* while the Demiurge, according to Plato, used pre-existing materials to build the universe. Furthermore, on Plato's account of the creation, these pre-existing materials prevent the Demiurge from constructing a perfect world (Mohr, *The Platonic Cosmology* 15). The Demiurge's inability to handle pre-existing matter is a clear difference between it and the creator God.

However, there is some debate on this topic as A.E. Taylor believes that when comparing the creation stories of the *Timaeus* with *Genesis* the question of "pre-existing" material is an open one. Richard Mohr says that the problem that plagues Taylor's view of the *Timaeus* is that, for him, the Demiurge is the same as the deity discussed in *Laws X* which adds additional qualities to Plato's deity that are absent in his other works (Mohr, *God & Forms* 198). Cornford rejects the connection between *Genesis* and Plato. He provides a summary of his disagreements with Taylor:

In Plato's Myth, on the contrary, the Demiurge is associated with other gods who take part in ordering the world; he is not represented as almighty; he did not create either the materials or the ideal pattern; the order of the world credited to him had no beginning in time; it is nowhere suggested that he should be worshipped; and it is open to doubt to what extent and in what sense he can be distinguished from the world itself, an eternal and blessed god with a reasonable soul. Such a creator is mythical in a sense in which the Christian Creator is not (Cornford, *The "Polytheism" Of Plato*).

Cornford rightly highlights the differences between each deity's power and scope with the Demiurge lacking the magnitude of the Christian God. The best example of this ontological inequality is that the Demiurge is dependent on the Platonic forms in a way which runs counter to traditional Christian theism. If a deity is dependent on an extrinsic, eternal model for creation, then the world is the way it is not because God made it so, but because the model, or form determined its design. The Demiurge is merely the agent of the world's actualization. However, in *The Republic*, Plato does address the issue of creation of the forms, which is contrary to his general picture of independent, abstract entities. For example, in the dialogue the character Glaucon asks Socrates if a god created the "the natural" or first bed and Socrates says yes it must be so (Plato, *Republic* 595a-598a); however, in the *Timaeus*, the idea of a god creating the form for an object is absent. It is possible that Plato later brought the ideas into the control of God as the passage previously mentioned from the *Republic* seems to leave this possibility open. Yet in this passage of the *Timaeus*,

Plato answers his own Euthyphro dilemma thus neutralizing the idea that a deity could create the Forms: “Now surely it’s clear to all that this was the eternal model he looked at, for, of all the things that have come to be, our universe is the most beautiful, and of causes the craftsman is the most excellent. This, then, is how it has come to be: it is a work of craft, modeled after that which is changeless and is grasped by a rational account, that is, by wisdom” (Plato, *Timeaus* 29a). For Plato, the world is beautiful because it is beautiful, not because a deity made it. This contrasts heavily with Augustine’s creator God who fashions the very content of the model in his mind in order to create reality. For Augustine the divine plan completely belongs to God alone and is not outside of him because it originates from within him. While Augustine is fully committed to God’s sovereignty and immutability, he fails to note the difference between himself and Plato on this issue.

In fact, Augustine seems to believe that he and Plato have similar if not identical cosmologies (Augustine, *City of God* 314–315). He even starts making questionable connections between the *Timaeus* and the creation account in *Genesis* (314–315). Augustine makes the mistake of A.E. Taylor by importing outside information that Plato could not have known (or at least had not expounded yet until *Laws X*).³ A peculiarity that exists in Plato’s cosmology is the mysterious “straying cause” or necessity—a force that undermines the Demiurge’s creation by bringing things closer to disorder. This force must be conquered or accommodated by the intellect of the Demiurge (Plato, *Timaeus* 47e–48b). Perhaps the “straying cause” is responsible for the deficiencies inherent within physical materials, else how could a truly good craftsmen fail to make the best possible cosmos? Unless the materials are to blame for the inadequacies of the world and not the craftsman per se. So, for Plato we have at least four components involved in creation: the Demiurge, the realm of forms, the “straying cause” and the materials themselves (comprised of the four elements). On the contrary, Augustine says of his creator: “From him derives every mode of being, every species, every order, all measure, number and weight. He is the source of all that exists in nature, whatever its kind, whatsoever its value, and of the seeds of forms and the forms of seeds, and the motions of first seeds and forms” (Augustine, *City of God* 196). Clearly a single entity

³ The concept of a personal, all powerful deity is foreign in Platonic thought with the possible exception being the divine being discussed by Plato in the *Laws X*.

is responsible for all things including the world of the immutable, eternal forms.⁴

Deities and Forms

In the document known as *Miscellany of the Eighty-three Questions*, Augustine provides crucial information on his understanding of Platonic forms. When asked about the Theory of Forms, Augustine provides this explanation: “For ideas are the principal forms or the fixed and unchangeable reasons of things that have themselves not been formed and consequently are eternal, always constituted in the same way and *contained in the divine intelligence*” (Augustine, *Responses* 60). The understanding that forms are in the divine intelligence betrays Augustine’s interpretation of Plato. This idea that Forms exist in the mind of one divine being originated in the Neo-Platonist thought of Plotinus (Gerson). Augustine himself identifies the metaphysical problem that the *Timaeus* poses to a Christian, “For it is sacrilegious to imagine that there was something located outside of himself that he looked at, so that in accordance with it he could create what he created” (Augustine, *Responses* 60). However as we have already seen, it is clear that Plato’s deity looked to something outside of himself in order to create the universe. It is difficult to understand how Augustine admits that Forms outside of a deity is unacceptable to Christianity yet seemingly ignores the text of the *Timaeus* which says otherwise.

Plato does, however, present a different picture of an ultimate deity. In the *Republic*, the form of the Good is a single entity from which all forms derive their being. This idea is identical to the ontological supremacy of the Christian God but ontological rank is not the only quality a thing has. For example, each Form is of an equal ontological status yet are distinct from one another because likeness does not equal sameness. However, even if the form of the Good can be considered analogous to God, Plato does not mention an entity higher than the Forms that gives them being in the *Timaeus*. As a result, it is questionable to compare the source of all being in the *Republic* with the creator of the physical universe because as previously established, the Demiurge is dependent on the Forms for the act of creation. If the forms have being and are independent of the Demiurge, then it is impossible for the Demiurge to be the “form of forms” the way the Good is in the *Republic*. Furthermore, discussing the exact nature and relationship of Plato’s ultimate ontological entities (i.e. Good,

⁴ How a deity can be responsible for “creating” a form is another question deserving its own paper.

Beauty, Demiurge, the Deity in *Laws X*) to one another is a complex and thorny issue (Copleston 177, 189–91).⁵ Regardless of Plato's actual doctrine on these ultimate entities, Augustine only had access to the *Timaeus*. As such, Augustine would have only been aware of the Demiurge and the passages from the *City of God* that intentionally reference the main points of connection between Christianity and Plato.

The most condemning aspect of Augustine's interpretation of the *Timaeus* is that he adds the idea of worship to the Demiurge. Plato is not looking to start a religion in this dialogue, rather he is looking for a "likely story" to explain the apparent order in the universe (Plato, *Timaeus* 29b–d). In a passage of *The City of God* Augustine describes the "connection" between God and Plato's deity by referring to the passage in the Old Testament where God reveals himself to Moses as "I AM HE WHO IS" and the grounds for this connection is that immutability is the hallmark property of the Platonic realm of reality (Augustine, *City of God* 315). Despite the metaphysical grandeur of God revealing himself to Moses, Plato never had a deity behave in that manner—revealing its existence to a human which thus inspires worship and a relationship. As Cornford said previously, worship is never connected to the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* and our obligation to worship God is clearly discussed in the *Genesis* account of creation. Augustine himself says of the first humans (Adam and Eve): "The pair lived in unalloyed felicity; their love for God and for each other was undisturbed" (Augustine, *City of God* 567). The question arises: why would Augustine emphasize his connection to Plato over the differences that exist between their cosmological accounts? Perhaps he wanted to accentuate the respectability of the Christian faith and provide a philosophical pathway towards conversion in a manner similar to his experience. That overall goal in mind, coupled with an abundance of Neo-platonic materials and a lack of Plato's literature, lead to the misrepresentation of Plato. However, Augustine is very critical of Plato in an area commonly assumed to be essentially Platonic.

The Soul and the World

Metaphysical psychology was of much importance to both Plato and Augustine. This is because to them, the soul was the most obvious mechanism that could provide a pathway between the visible and invisible worlds. The Platonic model of the soul is often appropriated onto

⁵ Copleston gives a good account of how these entities could relate together.

Augustine by professional philosophers, and, on a basic level, this appears correct. However, several key differences are ignored in order to create a tidy, common narrative like this: since both Plato and Augustine believed in an immaterial soul and established a hierarchy of difference between the material world and the immaterial world, commentators conclude that their views are synonymous with one another. Again, this is a broad description that does not allow nuance between the positions to be explored. For example, because Spinoza is a monist and so is Democritus should we conclude Spinoza is a fancier, more complex version of Democritus? (Granted, Democritus and Spinoza are not as closely related as Augustine and Plato, but my point remains the same) Despite his dualism Augustine himself seeks to differentiate between the Platonic psychology and Christian metaphysics.

First and foremost, Augustine openly rejects the most obvious tension between Platonic psychology and the Christian soul—reincarnation. Plato is committed to some form of reincarnation which may slightly change depending on the dialogue (*Phaedo* is a famous example) (Plato, *Phaedo* 80b–82e). Augustine knew this because it is in the *Timaeus* (Plato, *Timaeus* 42b–c) and was a doctrine held by Neo-Platonists such as Plotinus. The root of this divide goes back to Christian cosmology, souls were created out of nothing because they are not co-eternal with God. Thus, Augustine does not have to provide a mechanism by which an eternal soul becomes “temporalized” in the visible world, they are simply created in time. Additionally, there would be no need for reincarnation in order to punish or reward someone for earthly deeds as heaven and hell fulfilled that role for Augustine. In the Platonic world, souls are eternal and since bodies are mortal then the souls must be recycled into the fallible bodies. Augustine presents a rather strong argument against Plato:

If they maintain that the soul is co-eternal with God, how can it experience a change to unhappiness, to a condition from which it has been exempt for all eternity? This is something they will never be able to explain. For if they say there has been a perpetual alternation of the soul between misery and felicity, then they are forced to say that this alternation will continue forever. And this leads them to this absurdity, that the soul is said to be happy, which is obviously impossible if it foresees its coming misery and degradation, while if it does not foresee this, but thinks it will always enjoy happiness, its felicity is based on a mistake (Augustine, *City of God* 433).

This dilemma would probably be difficult to overcome, and Augustine also commends the Neo-Platonist Porphyry for criticizing this doctrine as well (417–418).⁶

A common conception against dualist metaphysics of the Platonic strain is that it depreciates the body and promotes asceticism. Since the world is only opinionable as the famous analogies of the Sun, Line, and Cave maintain, then the troubles of this world really are not important (Plato, *Republic* Bk. VI–VII). The soul longs to escape the imprisonment of the mortal body and be satisfied in the next world. Granted, one must be careful here because Augustine does talk like this and believes the basic notions to be true. However, he does not think that the human body, *per se*, is evil, only the *corrupted* body (Augustine, *City of God* 528–529). This is an important distinction as it prevents Augustine from saying that God created something deficient, i.e. the body, as a prison for souls. It appears Plato does endorse some version of the “trapped soul” thesis because of his remarks in the *Phaedo* (Plato, *Phaedo* 66a–67b).⁷ The status of a soul in body is obviously reflected by each thinker’s view of matter itself. As already mentioned, Plato holds matter to be deficient in some important ways by its very nature. While by no means a champion of carnality and even subscribing to some form of ontological hierarchy, Augustine rejects the depreciation of matter in itself for two reasons. First, God would not create the world out of a deficient substance when it is in his power to alter such a substance. Secondly, Augustine provides a proof from the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation. He says: (1) God became man in order to save sinners (2) In order to become man, God must take on a body (3) If Christ’s sacrifice is to mean anything then the body could not have corrupted the divine nature (4) therefore matter and the body itself cannot be necessarily deficient (Augustine, *City of God* 364). Of course this argument would not be convincing to a non-Christian. Instead Augustine is differentiating the proper doctrine of Christianity from the ideas of Plato and the Neo-Platonists.

Conclusion

This process of differentiation between thinkers allows us to understand each of them more clearly. The understanding of the relationship between Augustine and Plato fundamentally affects how one will read their

⁶ Also, Augustine gives a slightly different formation of the argument just mentioned.

⁷ The body prevents the soul from gaining knowledge.

works. Hopefully, one will not be so quick to follow Augustine and equate Platonic deities with God. Or the even more common error of grafting Plato's ascetic dualism to Augustine's more nuanced view of matter. As much as the differences between Augustine and Plato have been ignored, there is a celebrated connection between the two philosophers. In his introduction for *The Basic Works of Saint Augustine*, Whitney Oates discusses this interesting dichotomy between a "closed" and "open" philosophical system (Augustine, *Basic Writings*). He says that a "closed" system is a complete systematic contribution to the field of philosophy and two examples of this would be Aristotle and Aquinas. Next, he describes an "open" system as "one which comprehends within it all aspects of reality, one which recognizes the principle that 'life runs beyond logic,' and above all, admits the fact that human speculation on ultimate questions is always a process, and cannot in any final sense ever be completed" (Augustine, *Basic Writings* X). This definition applies to Augustine and Plato, the thinkers who often write works with a singular end goal but journey through a myriad of topics before reaching their conclusion (e.g. *The Republic* and *The City of God*). Besides their stylistic similarities, Augustine and Plato ask us to look inwards to ourselves in order to find something greater above ourselves. In *The Confessions* Augustine describes the beginning of his transcendence (or walking out of The Cave as it were) "And I entered, and with the eye of my soul (such as it was) saw above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Unchangeable Light" (101).

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