

GETTING USED TO GOD: AUGUSTINIAN AND AVICENNIAN APPROACHES TO THE HABIT OF MYSTICISM

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*The thoughts that rain their steady glow, like stars on life's cold sea,
Which others know, or say they know --they never shone for me.
Thoughts light, like gleams, my spirit's sky, but they will not remain.
They light me once, they hurry by, and never come again.*

In *Despondency* Matthew Arnold despairs of overcoming precisely the same problem which medievals like Augustine, Avicenna, and Ibn Tufayl do. The first intimacy, union, light, knowledge-beyond-knowledge arrives only after great effort and teases with its quick departure. These discrete experiences must somehow become closer to perpetual. The methods by which this habituation to the divine presence might occur, as well as its practical results, are diverse and span great temporal, geographic, and sectarian divides. For some the methods will result in a new perspective, attitude, and interaction with something which resembles 'normal daily life,' as it were, and for others it will mean an absolute withdrawal from it. The former will be here exemplified by St. Augustine, who, after experiencing an ecstatic divine union, does not seek to continue this ecstasy,¹ but rather grounds the human as human and finds divine mediation in Christ; the latter by Ibn Tufayl and Avicenna, for whom the habit developed is more akin to a sustained ecstatic union. These distinctions are not to be taken as absolute, and none of these mystics will say that ecstatic union can be unending in this life. Nonetheless, there are certainly relevant distinctions and comparisons to be made between these two traditions and their conceptions of abiding in the presence of the divine, or in union. We shall begin by treating this question in relation to the founder of this tradition of mysticism. In Plotinus' work we find the ground for both of these traditions.

Ultimately, the great question here is of the nature of the fall from union and the mystic's reaction to it. In *The Life of Plotinus* Porphyry tells us that his teacher experienced mystical union with the One four times while he was with him.² There are many descriptions of such ascents to unity and ecstatic union with the One and the subsequent fall in the *Enneads*. At the ultimate point of the ascent, there is no self-reflexivity and the mystic is no longer himself. Yet these are short experiences, and each time Plotinus is "weighed down" (VI.9.9.60) as he returns to self-reflection or thoughts of something outside. In this same way, Augustine falls under the weight of his externalizing, passionate habits,³ as does Tufayl when he becomes "aware of his

¹ I use ecstasy throughout to describe a union in which one is not conscious of the self, or in which one sees oneself as another, so to speak.

² Porphyry, "The Life of Plotinus" in *Plotinus*, volume 1, ed. and tr. by A.H. Armstrong (Loeb Classical Library: Cambridge, 1966-1988) 23.15. All references to Porphyry and Plotinus are from these volumes. and will hereafter be in text.

³ See Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VII.xvii(23), p. 127 and X.xl (65), p. 218.

state.”⁴ There is however a sense that even in the early treatise VI.9[9], this union can become easier to actualize with practice, for although there is no self-consciousness in the union itself (indeed, overcoming self-consciousness *is* the union) one might “remember who he became when he was united with That” (VI.9.11.1-16). Thus one might know the way back: “he wakes again the virtue in himself and considering himself set in order and beautiful by these virtues he will again be lightened and come through virtue to Intellect and wisdom and through wisdom to that Good” (VI.9.11.45). On this subject the most illuminating passage is found at V.8.11.7-15, where Plotinus seems to become comfortable and in control, as it were, of ecstatic union, where the leap from *nous* to the One becomes almost tractable:

But if he returns again to being two, while he remains pure he stays close to the god, so as to be present to him again in that other way if he turns again to him. In this turning he has the advantage that to begin with he sees himself, while he is different from the god; then he hastens inward and has everything, and leaves perception behind in his fear of being different, and is one in that higher world; and if he wants to see by being different, he puts himself outside.

It is this side of Plotinus’ thought which is taken up and elaborated upon by Avicenna and Ibn Tufayl.⁵ In the introduction to *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, Ibn Tufayl refers us to Avicenna’s description of a kind of gradual mysticism. First, flickerings of the truth are “thrilling him like lightning, flashing and going out” and then the “spells grow more and more frequent, until they come unasked.”⁶ Matthew Arnold seems to have been stuck at the first of these steps. Avicenna then speaks of a state where “no matter what he sees, he will turn from it to the Sacred Presence.”⁷ After all of these preliminary states, “his moment of recognition turns to tranquil contemplation; his stolen glimpses, familiarity; his spark a limpid flame. He has gained an understanding as unshakable as an old friendship.”⁸ In Avicenna’s short mystical parable also entitled *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, the sage tells his student that

for the present, then, thou must rest content with a journey interrupted by halts and inactivity... each time thou goest alone... I walk with thee... each time that thou sighest

⁴ Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, translated by Muhammad Ali Khalidi in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Muhammad Ali Khalidi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p. 151. I will also reference a translation by L.E. Goodman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) because although Khalidi omits parts of Ibn Tufayl’s text.

⁵ However textually close this connection is to Plotinus is not a matter I am here interested in.

⁶ Avicenna quoted by Ibn Tufayl in *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, translated by L.E. Goodman, p. 96.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

after them... thou art separated from me... until the moment comes when thou shalt break with them wholly.⁹

Alone, these are relatively ambiguous passages from Avicenna regarding the actual manifestation of a journey without halts and inactivity. But if we take this journey to be symbolizing the mystical union we have been discussing, perhaps we may take Ibn Tufayl's subsequent fictional biography of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan as its manifestation: the 'journey' becomes a near-perpetual, selfless and quiet union with God, which is possible in this life. After Hayy's initial moment of union and subsequent fall due to remnants of the sensible world,

he sought to return to that station... and managed to attain it more easily... his stays lengthened, to the point that he was able to attain it whenever he wished and did not leave until he wanted to... he would remain there at that station, quitting it only for the sake of his bodily needs... at this point he wished that God would relieve him of his body."¹⁰

This passage, recalling so much of what Plotinus said in V.8, also agrees with Plotinus' embrace of death reported by Eustochius to Porphyry: "I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the All."¹¹ The human life and embodiment is seen as a hindrance.

This archetypal mystic of Avicenna and Ibn Tufayl would not be for Plato a Philosopher King. They do not return to the cave to teach and free those still living in darkness even though they may "see vastly better than the people there."¹² Although Hayy Ibn Yaqzan does his meditating in a cave, this is more likely a reference to the location of the first revelation of the Prophet Muhammad, and the irony unintentional. The development of this kind of perpetual ecstasy is the antithesis of Augustine's reaction to his awe-inspiring and terrifying experience of union in the *Confessions*. Rather, we might say that he meets Plato's demand for the King by engaging the community and becoming bishop of Hippo and leader of its Christian community.

Grounds for Augustine's version of abiding can also be found in Plotinus, who proves to be more than a proto-Sufi recluse. While "he was present at once to himself and to others and he never relaxed his self-turned attention except in sleep"¹³ and "never, while awake, relaxed his intent concentration upon the intellect,"¹⁴ he simultaneously took care of many orphans and their

⁹ Avicenna, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, in Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, translated from the French by Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books Inc.: 1960), p.141. This parable is neither an inspiration for Tufayl's story in terms of narrative, nor the source for the above quotes from Avicenna.

¹⁰ Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, translated by Khalidi, p.152-153.

¹¹ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 2, 24. Armstrong translates this instead as a command to Eustochius: "Try to bring back the god in you to the Divine in the all" but admits it to be aporetic. I obviously prefer McKenna's interpretation from Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen McKenna (London: Penguin,1991) ciii.

¹² Plato, *Republic*, VII.520c.

¹³ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 8.20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.17, 31.

estates and even acted as a civil arbitrator.¹⁵ He was evidently a prolific teacher as well. Plotinus, unlike Augustine, remains firmly dedicated to the mystical ascent culminating in ecstatic union. Though Plotinus' books are crucial for Augustine's knowledge and conception of himself and God and ultimately even his conversion, the Bishop criticizes the Plotinian union for being too dependent on human effort and thereby polemicizes the Platonists as swollen up with pride.¹⁶ In Book VII of the *Confessions* then, Augustine experiences as a result of his own effort unions with or visions of God in language which Chadwick has identified as almost purely Plotinian.¹⁷ Yet he "does not possess the strength to keep it fixed"¹⁸ and becomes somewhat despondent with Matthew Arnold. Later, at Ostia, he and his mother 'touch it,' namely God "by a moment of total concentration of the heart" (a concept foreign to Plotinus, one should note) only to quickly return to "the noise of our human speech."¹⁹ Not descending to reclusive cave dwelling like Ibn Tufayl will some centuries later, Augustine instead turns to Jesus, the Mediator, who stabilizes the fleeting ecstasy. He, like Tufayl, desires more than an "end to be perceived [but] a realm to live in."²⁰ For Augustine however, this is a human realm, not a divine one. It is the human side of the mediating Christ which stabilizes the journey. He only briefly "meditated taking flight to live in solitude" but was forbade because in Christ he was already redeemed, he was already with God.²¹ Aristotle's classic exhortation not to "being men, think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, [but to], so far as we can, make ourselves immortal"²² is eclipsed, then, by the refuge taken in Jesus who took flesh. Similarly, Augustine's *De Trinitate* grounds the human in its proper place, the human mind. The perfection of the human is in the perfect equality of "the mind itself, its love, and its knowledge."²³ This perfection for Augustine is according to the human's own rank, crucially not beyond itself. If it were unbalanced, even if the human were to become Godlike, the result would be the unstable trembling Augustine felt in the Plotinian union of *Confessions*, which is ultimately neither proper nor possible to maintain.

¹⁵ Ibid. 9, 31-32.

¹⁶ Wayne Hankey, "Bultmann Redivivus Radicalised: Augustine and Jesus as Heideggerian Existentialists" for *The Influence of Augustine on Heidegger: The Emergence of an Augustinian Phenomenology*, ed. Craig J. N. de Paulo (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 260. Whether this is an accurate portrayal of Plotinus by Augustine is beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems not to me. The union, for Plotinus, comes to the mystic, at least in its final stage.

¹⁷ For Example, Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.x (16), p. 123 with notes.

¹⁸ Ibid., VII.xvii (23), p. 127.

¹⁹ Ibid., IX.x (23), p. 171.

²⁰ Ibid., VII.xx (26), p. 130.

²¹ Ibid., X.xliii (70), p. 220.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.7, III.34-35.

²³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, translated by Stephen McKenna (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963) IX.4, p. 274.