

The *Superbia* of the Platonists in St. Augustine's *Confessions*

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St. Augustine says that “a man puffed up with monstrous pride” introduced him to the *libri Platoniorum*, and that this encounter initiated the second of his three “bookish” conversions of the *Confessions*.¹ In Book III, after his conversion to philosophy, Augustine attempts to understand the Scriptures, but they repel him because he is too proud for their humble style.² Augustine represents his conversion to Platonism in Book VII as a necessary condition of his third conversion, to Christianity, in Book VIII. As such, he spends much of Book VII comparing and contrasting the Platonic books and the Christian Scriptures. He insists that God wanted him to encounter the Platonic books before he understood Bible,³ even though he spends much of Book VII detailing what is lacking in the Platonic books. Augustine’s central criticism of the Platonists is that they are filled with *superbia*. This creates a problem: how is one to understand the alleged pride of the Platonists, if the proud Platonic books gave Augustine access to the humble Scriptures?

Augustine identifies at least three essential forms of Platonic *superbia*. First, the Platonists fail to approach God “laborantes et onerati” as they should, and as the humble do.⁴ Similarly, in their “presumption,” the Platonists miss that the “confession” of sins is essential for reconciliation to God.⁵ Third, Augustine says that the Platonist boasts “quasi non acceperit non solum quod videt, sed etiam ut videat.”⁶ The Platonists imagine that their ability to understand God is not a gift, even if the content of their understanding is. They therefore fall under St. Paul’s condemnation: “professing themselves to be wise, they have become fools.”⁷

1. *Conf.* 7.9.13.

2. *Conf.* 3.5.9.

3. *Conf.* 7.20.26.

4. *Conf.* 7.9.14.

5. *Conf.* 7.20.26.

6. *Conf.* 7.21.27.

7. *Conf.* 7.9.14.

On this last point in particular, one might easily say that Augustine's criticism is polemical and does not reflect fairly on Platonism. The Platonists affirm that God grants the power to understand intelligible things as well as the understanding itself. The Platonists insist that the intellect is the gift of God, in that it only exists by participation in the self-giving divine *νοῦς*. Further, the Socratic interpretation of the Delphic oracle, which is at the foundation of Platonism, is that one must examine one's own claims to wisdom, and thereby reach the conclusions that only God is wise and that one can only understand human wisdom in relation to the prior wisdom of God. This is far from "professing oneself to be wise." This apparent misrepresentation of Platonism deepens the problem of understanding Platonic *superbia*: does Augustine have a philosophical basis for this accusation, or is he simply attacking a straw man?

I argue that he does have such a basis. The central analogy for his philosophical criticism of Platonism is the *via* and *patria*, which comes up most fully at the end of Book VII, where he summarizes his relation to the Platonic books and how they led him to Scripture.⁸ The Platonists are like travellers who, seeing their homeland afar off from a mountaintop, abandon the road whose safety is guaranteed by the emperor of that country. Instead, they set off blazing a trail through the woods, in an attempt to arrive by what they perceive to be the most direct route. Along the way, they meet robbers and many dangers, and never arrive at the hoped-for *patria*. The Christian, on the other hand, is the one who faithfully follows the *via*, even when he is not granted at all times to see where it leads in the way that the philosopher "sees" when he ascends to contact with the divine. That is, God has provided a way for the human soul to return to him, and Platonic pride consists in thinking that this way is unnecessary, when in fact it is. The Platonists do not have the humility to accept that there is only one way to the *patria*, and it is not the way they would have made for themselves. In scriptural language, the Platonists refuse to acknowledge that the Word was made flesh to be the one mediator between God and man, which is the true and only *via in patriam*. This is Augustine's central criticism of Platonism.

The pride of the Platonists therefore has an intellectual sense as well as the moral one.⁹ On the moral side, the Platonists reject

8. *Conf.* 7.20.26-21.27.

9. Cf. Crouse, R.D., "In aenigmate trinitate, (*Conf.* XIII, 5,6): The Conversion

the Incarnation of the Word because they are “puffed up with monstrous pride”¹⁰ and unwilling to learn “what [Christ’s] weakness was meant to teach.”¹¹ As a philosophy, Platonism fails to achieve the final end of ethics: it cannot give its practitioners the power to enjoy the good that they perceive. Philosophical perception alone as the goal of ethics cannot be about the moral perfection of the individual; Augustine criticizes Platonism as ultimately being morally inert. The Platonists correctly perceive the divinity of the Word, creation by the Word, the distinction between the Word and the soul, and the alienation of the soul from the Word.¹² They also understand the generation of the Word from God, and the equality of the Word with God.¹³ Though the Platonists understand these things, they cannot enjoy them, lacking the power to truly and stably contemplate the divine νοῦς.

To make this point, Augustine relates how he made at least two mystical ascents towards contact with the divine νοῦς, and was disappointed in each case.¹⁴ Both times, the experience “gave a shock to the weakness of [his] sight,”¹⁵ so that Augustine realizes that he “was not stable in the enjoyment of God.”¹⁶ In each case he was left with “only a loving memory and a desire for that of which I had the aroma but which I had not yet the capacity to eat.”¹⁷ God is “the food of the fully grown”¹⁸ which Augustine must grow stronger to enjoy. Augustine’s mystical experiences are also a form of spiritual touch with the divine, but they do not “make it possible for him to hold onto” God.¹⁹ He cannot maintain his contact with the divine by the methods taught to him in the *libri Platonicorum*. This cannot happen until he embraces Christ as

of Philosophy in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Dionysius* 11 (1987): 53–62. P. 55: “In Augustine’s view, the deficiency which mars that pagan aspiration is as much intellectual as moral.”

10. *Conf.* 7.9.13.

11. *Conf.* 7.18.24.

12. *Conf.* 7.9.13.

13. *Conf.* 7.9.14. All of these doctrines, perhaps with the exception of the equality of the Intellectual-Principle (the Word) and the One, can be found in Plotinus, *Ennead* 5.1.

14. *Conf.* 7.10.16, 7.17.23.

15. *Conf.* 7.10.16.

16. *Conf.* 7.17.23.

17. *Conf.* 7.17.23.

18. *Conf.* 7.10.16.

19. *Conf.* 7.21.27.

his mediator to God,²⁰ for he Platonic mystical disciplines fail to actually teach the soul to enjoy God.

One might argue that Augustine misunderstands his mystical disappointments. Even for pagan Platonists, contact with the divine $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ is transient and cannot be maintained. Augustine is not judging Platonic ascents on the basis of an atypical mystical experience. Rather, he exposes as a problem that which the pagan Platonists accept as a fact, namely that contact with the divine cannot be maintained. For Augustine, if one can “touch” God, one ought to be able to “hold on” to God, and his failure to do this, before he understands the Word made flesh, is what leads him to Christianity as the solution to his problem. But what *intellectual* difference is the basis for Augustine’s criticism that pagan Platonism is an ethical failure?

Platonism is simply incorrect when it says that reconciliation with God is possible apart from the particular and total integration of the human and the divine in the Incarnation. The *superbia* of the Platonists is their over-confidence in their own disciplines for achieving reconciliation to God. After discussing his second mystical disappointment, Augustine says that “the immutability of the Word” which he learned from the Platonists left him two non-Catholic options for understanding the Incarnation.²¹ The first is the Arian position, “that Christ excelled others not as the personal embodiment of the Truth, but because of the great excellence of his human character and more perfect participation in wisdom.” The second is the Apollinarian position, that Christ is “God clothed in flesh only in the sense that in Christ there was only God and flesh,” but not a human soul and mind. Augustine does not criticize these positions in Book VII. Augustine’s accusation of Platonic *superbia* is therefore not complete in the *Confessions* until he argues at the end of Book X against the efficacy of any form of mediation other than the Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation. In Book VII, one must be satisfied with the imagery of *via* and *patria* as the difference between orthodox Christianity and pagan Platonism.

In Book X, then, Augustine completes the argument by presenting a theory of the Atonement that excludes the possibility of any mediation other than by the Word made flesh.²² He begins by saying that he is aware that some seek to be reconciled to God

20. *Conf.* 7.18.24.

21. *Conf.* 7.19.25.

22. *Conf.* 10.42.67-43.69.

by “angels” and “sacred rites,” by whom he means the Platonists,²³ and says that “They sought a mediator to purify them, and it was not the true one.”²⁴ He says that “a mediator between God and the human race ought to have something in common with God and something in common with humanity.”²⁵ Christ as a mediator has righteousness in common with God, since he has the very divine nature, and mortality in common with human beings, since he is truly human. The human cannot be united to him in his natural righteousness, which is the goal, so we are united with him in his death. Having been joined to him in his death, we are therefore exalted with him when he returns to Father, joining him in the righteousness of the divine nature and enjoying God wholly and purely.

This theory of the Atonement excludes both of the Platonic interpretations of the Incarnation which Augustine entertains in Book VII. The Arian position is incorrect, because it means that Christ does not have divine righteousness by nature, since he is only a man who participates fully in wisdom. The Apollinarian position denies that Christ had a complete human nature, so man cannot be joined to God in God’s true mortality. In Augustine’s theory of the Atonement, mere participation in the divine life in an ordered hierarchy, on which the Platonic system of mediation is grounded, is not enough to reconcile the human to God. God himself has to take on the human essence and go “all the way down” to the human level. For Augustine, there can be no mediation unless there is one mediator, the man Christ Jesus.²⁶ Not to see this is the central error of Platonism.

Moreover, it is an error that explains the alleged *superbia* of the Platonists. Christ as a mediator goes “all the way down” into death in order to enable reconciliation between human beings and God. Christ as the *via humilitatis* requires that the Christian join him in his total humility in order to be lifted up to the Father. The Platonists do not recognize that one must go “all the way down” in order to be exalted; they do not understand “what Christ’s weakness was meant to teach,”²⁷ namely that reconciliation with God was possible by death to sin in the specifically Christian

23. Cf. *Confessions*, trans. Chadwick, note 44, p. 218.

24. *Conf.* 10.42.67.

25. *Conf.* 10.42.67.

26. *Conf.* 7.18.24, 10.42.67.

27. *Conf.* 7.18.24.

sacraments of confession²⁸, baptism, and Eucharist, all of which are made possible by Christ's sacrificial death. The *superbia* of the Platonists is fundamentally their belief that salvation is possible without a personal humility which participates in the humility of Christ which made salvation possible.

In this respect, the "double-discipline" of Plotinus,²⁹ which Augustine alludes to in Book VII, is not enough to reconcile him to God, even though it is "the middle ground in which [he] would find health."³⁰ Augustine describes himself before encountering the Platonists as "swelling"³¹ and "still in externals."³² The first part of the double-discipline, recognizing the superiority of the soul to the external objects of perception, was precisely what Augustine needed to move him from outward things toward his own soul, just as he says that "inde [i.e. by the Platonic books] admonitus redire ad memet ipsum."³³ The second step of the double-discipline, to recognize the superiority of God over the soul, is not enough for Augustine all by itself. In order to be reconciled to human beings, God must condescend to make himself equal to them in his Incarnation. Otherwise, divine life simply remains an unattainable goal.

The Platonic books can provide Augustine an entry-way into Scripture because the *superbia* of Platonic philosophy is a different pride than that which prevents Augustine to read the Scriptures in Book III. By reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, Augustine begins to long for "the immortality of wisdom."³⁴ But, being disappointed that Cicero does not mention Christ, he turns to the Scriptures, but finds that his "inflated conceit shunned the Bible's restraint, and [his] gaze never penetrated its inwardness."³⁵ Augustine's problem is that his soul had "thrust itself to outward things."³⁶ By reading

28. Contrasted to presumption: *Conf.* 7.20.26. Cf. 10.42.67: They were "inflating their chest rather than beating their breast" in trying to be reconciled to God.

29. *Enn.* 5.1.1.: "There is the method, which we amply exhibit elsewhere, declaring the dishonour of the objects which the Soul holds here in honour; the second teaches or recalls to the soul its race and worth; . . ." (that is, to recognize the superiority of that which is above the soul) ". . . this latter is the leading truth, and, clearly brought out, is the evidence of the other."

30. *Conf.* 7.7.11.

31. *Conf.* 7.8.12.

32. *Conf.* 7.7.11.

33. *Conf.* 7.10.16.

34. *Conf.* 3.4.7.

35. *Conf.* 3.5.9.

36. *Conf.* 3.1.1.

the Platonists Augustine was taught to appreciate first his own inwardness, then the inwardness of the Scriptures, whose true meaning is hidden underneath the literal sense which repulsed Augustine when he first read them. The pride of the Platonists was never the same pride which prevented the young Augustine from reading the Bible. Augustine therefore says, "I believe you wanted me to encounter [the Platonic books] before I came to study your Scriptures."³⁷ Having encountered them first, they can serve as an entryway to the Scriptures, whereas, had he learned to read scripture first, the Platonic books might have deceived him with their different form of pride, leading him away from the truth of Christ.³⁸

However, St. Augustine's conclusion is not a rejection of philosophy, of human reason, or even of Platonism in its Christianized sense. Boethius, a century later, would so wholly adopt the Platonic philosophical system that it was for some time a matter of controversy whether or not he was a "Christian" writer, yet he claims that, in his own works, the "seeds of reasons" in the writings of St. Augustine bear fruit.³⁹ Boethius' fundamental allegiance is to the Truth, and so, in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, he uses the method of pure reason to represent the journey of the soul to God without making any references to the scriptures or dogmatic formulae. "The truth." for Boethius, happened to be Platonic and philosophical. It also happened to be Christian and biblical. This unification of Platonism and Christianity, of reason and revelation, is essentially an Augustinian position. St. Augustine's criticism of Platonism is that it does not accomplish its own tendencies: if Platonism is truly about mediating between the human and the divine, it must for *philosophical reasons* embrace the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Platonism is more perfectly rational having been Christianized. This Augustinian project of Christianizing Platonism – considered together with Aristotle as representing the tradition of "universal reason" – was carried out in the following centuries notably by Boethius and St. Anselm. The result of this project is Christian philosophy in the Latin West.

St. Augustine consistently says that the central problem of Platonism is its *superbia*, which, on a philosophical level, is its

37. *Conf.* 7.20.26.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Crouse, R.D., "Semina Rationum: St. Augustine and Boethius," *Dionysius* IV (1980), p. 75-86.

rejection of the Incarnation. Augustine, in his central analogy for Platonism, contrasts the *via* and the *patria*: the Platonists know the *patria*, the destination of their spiritual pilgrimage, but not the *via*, the way to get there. The *patria* is the eternal enjoyment of God. Though the Platonists, through their mystical disciplines, can “touch” the mind of God, they cannot “hold” it; though they can “taste” God, they cannot “enjoy” him. This is because they do not believe that Christ, the Word made flesh, is the only *via* by which they may reach the enjoyment of God. They are proud in that they suppose that they can make their own way to the *patria*. Augustine argues that only the full descent of God into human mortality can provide a way for human beings to return to God; they must meet God in his death. Nonetheless, Platonism is a necessary step for Augustine towards the humility of Christ. He was occupied with externals, and the Platonists taught him the inwardness which opened the Scriptures to him. In the Scriptures, Augustine met the *via* into the *patriam* which the Platonists had related to him. This encounter is a necessary but penultimate step in St. Augustine’s conversion, which takes him from outwardness and pride to the inner contemplation of the Word.

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Plotinus. *Enneads*.