

Two Readings of St Augustine

by Denis O'Brien

In the literature that survives from the ancient world Augustine is unrivalled, except perhaps by Cicero, for the range and intimacy of his writings. The lovely folio pages of the edition published in Paris by the Benedictines of St Maur from 1679-1700, still the most recent more or less complete edition of the extant works, contain by far the greater part of the titles catalogued after Augustine's death by his disciple Possidius. Certainly enough has survived for us to see the personality and ideas of Augustine unfold over more than forty years, from the first flush of conversion at Cassiciacum, expressed in the almost adolescent idealism of the *Soliloquia* and the *De beata vita*, until his death at Hippo in 430, with the last chapters of the *De civitate Dei* completed some years before, and the *Retractationes* cut short, as scrupulosities should be.

The *Confessions* were written in the earlier part of this period. In book seven Augustine tells us that he finally rid his mind of the leas of Manichaeism by his reading 'certain books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin' (vii 13: I have cited throughout the paragraph divisions of the Maurist edition, without the chapter divisions of the *editio princeps*). In book eight Augustine is converted to Christianity by reading St Paul. But the conversion has still a Platonic element, for Augustine describes his experience in the garden at Cassiciacum partly in language that Plotinus had used to describe the soul's ascent to the beautiful. The journey to God is not a spatial movement: 'we do not travel there by road or sea', but, for Plotinus, by opening the inner eye of the spirit (i 6 [1] 8), and for Augustine, by a turning of the will (viii 19).

This flight of the soul to God, its true home, recurs throughout Augustine's writings, but with significant differences of tone. In the *Soliloquia* (i 23-25), the influence is in part from Plato's *Republic*. The eye must acclimatize itself to lesser lights, the moon and stars, before it can turn its gaze to the sun of truth. In the *Confessions* (viii 19-24), the flight is made not by an act of intelligence, but by a healing of the will. In the commentary on the 149th psalm (cxlix 5), written later, we need 'two wings of charity, love of God and love of our neighbour'. In the *De civitate Dei* (ix 17) we need a redeeming mediator, Christ. This movement from intellect to will to grace contains in embryo the central thread of Augustine's intellectual and spiritual development.

The influence of Plotinus on Augustine's account of his conversion

in the eighth book of the *Confessions* was noted, and analysed, in 1934 by Père Paul Henry (*Plotin et l'Occident*, 107 ff.), now one of the two editors of a definitive text of Plotinus. Some years later Professor Courcelle proved the influence of Ambrose on Augustine's account of his conversion, and on a similar passage in the first book of the *Confessions* (i 28) (*Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*, 125 ff.). Professor Callahan has now added a third potential source: Gregory of Nyssa.¹ In his second sermon *On the Lord's prayer* (P.G. xlv 1144B-1145C), Gregory employs the same passage from Plotinus' tract *On the beautiful* to illustrate the return of the prodigal son: in the earlier passage of the *Confessions* Augustine also speaks of the prodigal son. In Gregory, and in the later passage of the *Confessions*, Plotinus' account of an intellectual ascent has been replaced by a turning of the will. The distinction of spatial and non-spatial existence is prominent in both Augustine and Gregory, as in effect it is in Plotinus.

Professor Callahan concludes from these similarities that Augustine is dependent on Gregory. If this thesis could be proved, it would add another shaft of sunlight to our understanding of the *Confessions*. I confess I am attracted, but not convinced. The prodigal son is an obvious Christian counterpart to Odysseus, whom Plotinus employs in this passage as a type of the traveller returning to the fatherland. The other similarities which Professor Callahan notes between Augustine and Gregory could also have arisen independently. The significance of the human will as source of evil and the distinction of spatial and non-spatial existence are both dominant preoccupations in Augustine's thinking at the time of writing the *Confessions*. Influence, direct or indirect, from Gregory will need to be established on a firmer, or at least a wider, basis.

Another possible link with Gregory is provided in the eleventh book of the *Confessions* by Augustine's analysis of time. Plotinus had explained time as a product of his third hypostasis, universal soul. Time is the life of soul, when soul has separated itself from the simple contemplation of eternity. To Augustine, this account of the production of time would have seemed to impair God's creative prerogative. Augustine therefore explains time as a distention of the human soul, without attributing to the soul any notion of creativity. There is a similar reorientation of Plotinus' conception of time in Basil and in Gregory of Nyssa. Both exclude any notion of the creation of time by soul. Time for both is a distention within the universe. But Gregory in particular speaks of this universal distention as raised to a conscious level in man. Gregory's remarks on the place of hope or expectation and memory as a conscious distention of time compare with Augustine's psychological explanation of time as a

¹*Augustine and the Greek Philosophers*, in the Saint Augustine lecture series, the Saint Augustine lecture 1964, by John F. Callahan. *Villanova University Press*, 1967, 117 pp. \$3.50.

distention of the human soul, under the three forms of hope or anticipation, attention and memory.

Professor Callahan has considered Plotinus' and Augustine's notions of time in his book *Four views of time in ancient philosophy*, and he has given his attention to Basil and Gregory in a number of papers published subsequently. His remarks on Augustine and Gregory in the present lecture in effect add little of substance to what he had said in these earlier essays; indeed on occasion whole sentences are repeated almost verbatim. It is significant however that even in this latest work, where he claims Augustine's dependence on Gregory in one place in the *Confessions*, Professor Callahan still goes no further than to repeat that 'the position of Gregory on time is a natural intermediary between those of Plotinus and Augustine' (p. 90). A similar caution, it seems to me, is required for the descriptions given by Augustine and Gregory of the flight of the soul. Any two Christian and philosophical reactions to Plotinus are likely to have had elements in common. Influence, direct or indirect, of Gregory on Augustine will need to be demonstrated by something much more specific than modes of thought that follow fairly naturally from the fitting of Plotinian structures to a Christian context.

The first part of Professor Callahan's lecture is concerned with influence flowing in a different direction, from Augustine to Anselm. In two passages, in book seven of the *Confessions* (vii 6) and in the *De doctrina Christiana* (i 15-16), Augustine offers what would appear to be in some sense a prototype of Anselm's ontological argument. Augustine argues to God's pre-eminence and his incorruptibility from our inability to think of God except as *aliquid quo nihil sit melius atque sublimius*. The similarity with Anselm is obvious. So too is the difference. I am not sure that Professor Callahan will succeed in persuading his readers that the similarity so outweighs the difference that he can conclude: '... we have seen, I think, how the argument for God's existence that we call ontological not only follows in a direct line from an argument of Augustine, but indeed may in a very real sense be considered his discovery' (p. 47). Indeed I hope it will not seem churlish if I say that at the end of the day, or rather at the end of forty-seven pages, I am not sure that Professor Callahan has added anything of real substance to the remarks that had already been made on the similarity between Augustine and Anselm at this point by Gilson and Bréhier and others. (Here and elsewhere I have not repeated references that may conveniently be found in the books under review.)

A great deal of Professor Callahan's discussion of this point is taken up by a survey of the earlier philosophical background to ideas used by Augustine in the passage from book seven of the *Confessions*. It is very difficult for a general survey of this kind, ranging over some eight centuries of fairly wide philosophical activity, to be at once accurate and illuminating. And yet if such a survey is not accurate,

it cannot be illuminating. As it is, in several places Professor Callahan seems to me to have knocked the corners off his evidence. For example, he writes of Parmenides that 'whatever is conceived as perfection in the order of intellect must be referred to that of being' (p. 8). This obscures the point that for Parmenides the *only* thing that can be thought of must be referred to the One. What we might call imperfection in the order of being cannot, according to Parmenides, strictly be thought of at all. Another example: in his account of Plato, Professor Callahan falls into the error endemic in generalizing and especially Christianizing interpretations when he betrays a conflation of the idea of the good of the *Republic* with the demiurge of the *Timaeus*. He writes of Plato in the *Timaeus*: 'In this highly metaphorical account it is essential to his purpose that the workings of nature be understood in terms of the goodness which underlies them and is indeed the very reason for them' (p. 9). He later speaks of 'the dialectical use of the good as a first principle by Plato, especially in the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*' (p. 26). The notion that goodness is a first principle which underlies the workings of nature and is the very reason for them is perhaps a proper paraphrase of the *Republic*, where the form of the good 'provides existence—or nature—to what exists and knowability to what is known' (509B). There is no equivalent statement in the *Timaeus*. The generosity of motive in the demiurge (29A–30B) is not a first principle nor the reason for the workings of nature in the same sense in which those two expressions could be applied to a Platonic form, or to the supreme form of the *Republic*.

But it is not only what Professor Callahan has said about Plato which leaves me uneasy. It is what he has left unsaid. The biggest fish has, I think, slipped through Professor Callahan's net. Augustine's concern with incorruptibility in the passage in the *Confessions* might have led a searcher for the origins of the ontological argument to look not in a highly metaphorical passage in the *Timaeus*, where Plato is attempting to use a benevolent generosity in the motive of the demiurge as a teleological principle in the workings of the cosmos, but in a quite different context, a highly sophisticated argument in the *Phaedo*, where Plato attempts to exempt the soul from the instability of sensible phenomena. For it is here, I think, that the ontological argument finds some kind of footing in Plato's thought. In the *Phaedo*, in the last argument which Socrates puts forward for the immortality of the soul, Plato comes close to offering a conception of soul as something necessarily or essentially characterized by existence. Formally, the argument concludes that the soul is essentially characterized by life, and so excludes the opposite of life which is death, so that the soul is in that sense deathless, *athanatos*. Verbally, the argument continues with a claim that the soul is also indestructible, *anolothros*. If Plato had elaborated this conception in terms of the analysis he has already offered, then the soul would

have been said to exclude non-existence, and to be in that sense indestructible, because it was necessarily or essentially characterized by existence. And to that extent Plato could be said to have argued to the existence of a being *cuius essentia est esse*.

But Plato has not taken this further step; and the reason, or part of the reason, why he has not done so is, I think, clear. On the immediate level, Plato's preoccupation with immortality in terms of reincarnation has given the structure of his argument a peculiar twist which allows the notion of deathlessness to absorb the wider notion of indestructibility. On a broader scale, the influence of Parmenides, and the whole course of Plato's philosophical development, would have made it difficult for him, within the confines of the *Phaedo*, to broach effectively the distinction of existence and non-existence. (For an elaboration of these rather elliptical remarks I may perhaps refer the reader to a pair of recent articles in the *Classical Quarterly*.)

I have spent some time on Professor Callahan's lecture because, despite my reservations about the cogency of his conclusions, he has dealt with important topics and in some detail. Professor Armstrong's contribution to the same series¹ deals with topics that are no less important; but the style of treatment is much more general. Professor Armstrong touches on three main topics: Augustine's abandonment of the Plotinian theory that the highest part of the human soul is perfect and immutable; Augustine's rejection of cosmic religion, in the Platonist sense, and his attitude to the world and the body; and finally the apparent conflict in Augustine between freedom and grace and predestination. These themes repeat to a certain extent material that Professor Armstrong has recently published in his chapter on Plotinus in *The Cambridge history of later Greek and early medieval philosophy*, and in lectures published in the first half of *Christian faith and Greek philosophy. Dis kai tris tò kalón*: but I confess I find it tantalizing to have these crucial and fascinating topics treated once more in a form that is so clearly intended for the spoken word and a popular audience.

It is not only the popular character of Professor Armstrong's lecture which I find frustrating: even taken on the level of *haute vulgarisation*, this lecture is curiously unsatisfying, at least for my taste. I think this is partly because of Professor Armstrong's characteristic reiteration that distinctions between Christian and pagan Platonism must not be made 'too sharp or too absolute' (p. 6), 'too unqualified and sharp' (p. 8). Antecedently of course I have not the slightest desire to make these distinctions a whit more sharp or less sharp than is indicated by a critical study of the evidence. But in order to see similarities clearly (if that is what Professor Armstrong wishes), I find it essential to have any differences sharply delineated.

¹*St Augustine and Christian Platonism*, in the Saint Augustine lecture series, the Saint Augustine lecture 1966, by A. Hilary Armstrong. Villanova University Press, 1967, 67 pp. s2.25.

And indeed the smaller or more obscure the distinction, the clearer and more precise is the analysis that I would wish to aim for. Exactly because there is a certain fluidity between Christian Platonist and pagan Platonist philosophies in the fourth and fifth centuries, a modern critical analysis of the two must be uncompromisingly rigorous and clear, if both the phenomenon and our understanding of the phenomenon are not to be dissolved into a single milky opaqueness.

More particularly, the lack of definition in Professor Armstrong's lecture seems to me to result from his presenting the audience with symptoms of the distinction between Plotinus and Augustine, and not with their causes. I will take as one example Professor Armstrong's opening topic: the difference between Plotinus and Augustine on the nature of the human soul. Professor Armstrong first sets out the difference that for Plotinus there is a lower passible self, and a true self which is impassible and does not 'come down' and is immortal by nature and in a sense divine, while for Augustine the whole soul is passible and peccable and, because it is fallen, is in need of redemption. Against this difference Professor Armstrong sets two mitigating factors: the divinity which Plotinus attributes to soul is something less than the transcendence of his first principle, the One, while for Augustine, as for other Christians, the human soul is offered 'a created divinity by participation' (pp. 8-9).

It is not my purpose to disagree with all or any part of this from a simply factual point of view. My point is that the sketch which Professor Armstrong has offered in these opening pages of the difference between Plotinus and Augustine lacks any philosophical stuffing. We have been given the verdict, but none of the evidence or the judge's summing up. We have been given the answer, but none of the workings out. And in this case the philosophical mechanics are particularly significant. For Plotinus' theory of the unfallen higher soul was rejected not only by Augustine; it was abandoned by Plotinus' pagan pupil, Proclus. We may hope to find therefore an explanation which will apply both to pagan and to Christian Platonism: and that is likely to be an explanation in philosophical terms.

The root of the matter lies, I think, in Plotinus' conception of evil. For Plato, evil had arisen either from an 'errant cause' within the sensible world, which is more or less the view built into the *Timaeus*, or from an evil soul or from an evil element within the soul, which is the view that some ancient commentators at least extracted from the *Laws*. Plotinus combines both views. For Plotinus, human evil arises from a weakness within the soul and from matter. These two are part-causes of human evil. They are never singly but only jointly a sufficient cause. (This interpretation of Plotinus' conception of human evil I have sought to demonstrate in an article in the first issue of the *Downside Review* for 1969.)

For Plotinus, this interpretation of human evil has the advantage that evil as such is given no place among the higher realities, of which soul is one. However, there is a complication. For the system of part-causes to work, one of the two part-causes probably needs to be evil in itself. (The reason for the slight qualification is explained on p. 104, n. 2 of my article.) For if neither cause were evil in itself, then Plotinus may well have supposed that there would be no evil; just as two people would never commit adultery, if each potential partner made his decision dependent on the antecedent determination of the other. Plotinus in fact makes matter evil in itself, as well as being part-cause of evil in the soul. Now for Plato, the errant cause exists independently of the higher realities, the forms and the demiurge. There is therefore no immediate difficulty in its being evil. But for Plotinus, everything, even the quasi non-existence of matter, is dependent ultimately on the One. How can what is intrinsically evil spring from what is purely good?

Augustine and Proclus close this rift in Plotinus' metaphysics by ridding themselves of the notion that matter is intrinsically evil. The source of evil is placed within the will. And in this way the whole soul is peccable. For Plotinus' distinction between a lower self and a true self is tolerable, I suggest, if at all, only so long as the lower self is not made entirely responsible for sin. Once the root of sin is placed within the soul, and not within the soul's relationship to matter, then the distinction between a lower, sinful soul and a higher, impeccable soul would, I suggest, have been strained too far. On this interpretation, the Plotinian distinction can be retained only so long as the lower self is not entirely responsible for sin, but is seduced into sin by a principle of utter evil.

I do not offer this as an exhaustive or as a definitive account of the reason why Augustine and other later Platonists abandoned Plotinus' doctrine of the undescended soul. There is much more to it than that: Augustine's whole notion of causality is radically different from Plotinus' notion of successive dependency or, one might say, of 'staggered' creation. These reflections on evil are intended merely as an example of the kind of explanation one might hope for in the kind of exercise that Professor Armstrong has undertaken. My point is quite simply that even in a popular lecture I think one might hope to be shown the workings of the play, and not simply be presented with the cast lining up to receive their bouquets and curtain calls.