Did Augustine Read Plato?

Revisiting an Old Question with a New Hermeneutic

# Abstract

While the claim that Plato only indirectly influenced Augustine has garnered widespread support,[[1]](#footnote-1) the argument in favor of it remains largely an argument from absence: Augustine speaks of having read the *libri platonicorum* in Confessions Bk. VII, but never forthrightly claims to have read Plato; we know that Augustine read the Latin translations of Plotinus by Marius Victorinus,[[2]](#footnote-2) and also likely had contact with the circle of Porphyry;[[3]](#footnote-3) there is no evidence that there were Latin translations of Plato available at Augustine's time, and Augustine never mastered Greek. Given the difficulties with the thesis that Augustine *did* read Plato, combined with the clear presence of alternative avenues from which Augustine was able to draw his Platonism, one defaults to the contrary thesis that Augustine likely did not read Plato. Call this the *standard thesis*.

This paper divides in two parts. In the first, I show that that the concepts of authorship and influence behind the standard thesis sufficiently determine a negative answer to the question *prior to* any evidence being given. Against this, I explicate an alternative way of thinking about authorship and transmission more in accord with the self-conception of late antiquity more generally, focusing on the hermeutic of ascent applied both in Augustine’s readings of scripture and in Neoplatonic readings of Plato in late antiquity.

In the second part, I directly confront the texts brought forth in support of the standard thesis by Pierre Courcelle and others, focusing specifically on structural parallels between Augustine’s *De Magistro* and Plato’s *Meno*. Because these prior studies have been almost entirely focused on *content* –specifically, quotations – glaring structural parallels between these texts have been largely overlooked. By putting the proof texts for the thesis that Augustine did *not* read Plato back into their context, I show not only that are they insufficient for proving their point, but that they even provide support for the contrary thesis.

KEYWORDS: AUGUSTINE; PLATO; PLATONISM; READING, AUTHORITY, AND AUTHORSHIP IN LATE ANTIQUITY; PLATONIC ASCENT

**References**

All references to the works of Augustine are by book (upper case Roman numeral), chapter (lower case Roman numeral), and paragraph (Arabic numeral).

Augustine, St (1981). *Confessionum libri XIII.* In CCEL vol. 27. Cited as *Conf*.

(1970). *Contra Academicos*. In CCEL vol. 27. Cited as *ConAcad.*

(1970). *De Beata Vita*. ed. W. M. Green. In CCEL vol. 29. Cited as *BV*.

(1970). *De Magistro*, ed. K. D. Daur. In CCEL vol. 29. Cited as *DeMag.*

*(*1968). *De Trinitate*. ed. W. J. Mountain. In CCEL vol. 50. Cited as *DeTrin*

(1995). *Against the Academicians and the Teacher*. Trans. Peter King. Hackett: Indianapolis. Cited as King followed by page number.

Bochet, Isabelle (2010). “The Role of Scripture in Augustine’s Controversy with Porphyry” *Augustinian Studies* 41:1, 7-52.

Bourke, Vernon J (1992). *Augustine's Love of Wisdom*. Purdue University Press.

Bowery, Anne-Marie (2008). “You are What you Read: Reading the Books of Augustine’s *Confessions*” *Augustinian Studies* 39:1, 101-112.

Courcelle, Pierre (1969). *Late Latin Writers and Their Greek Sources.* Trans. Harry E. Wedeck. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

De Lubac, Henri (2000). *Medieval Exegesis Volume 2: The Four Senses of Scripture*. Trans. E.M. Macierowski. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Gersh, Stephen (1986). *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism*: *The Latin Tradition*, vol. 1. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Gerson, Lloyd (2005). *Aristotle and Other Platonists*. Cornell University Press.

Hadot, Pierre (1971). *Marius Victorinus*. *Recherches sur sa vie et ses oeuvres*. Paris.

(1995). *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. New York: Blackwell.

(2002). *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Miner, Robert (2007). “Augustinian Recollection” *Augustinian Studies* 38:2, 435-450.

Plato (1981). *Meno*, trans. G.M.A. Grube*.* Indianapolis: Hackett. Cited by page and letter of the critical edition.

Smalley, Beryl (1964). *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Stock, Brian (1996). *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, self-knowledge, and the ethics of interpretation*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Various Editors (1970-1984). *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina.* Vols. 27, 29, and 57. Turnhout: Brepols.

1. cf. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Conf.* VIII. ii. 3. Stock p. 54; Hadot 1971, 203-204. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. cf. Bochet, 8-11, *passim* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)