Did Augustine Read Plato?

Revisiting an old question with a new Hermeneutic

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# 1 The common view of Augustine's relation to Plato

Augustine is most commonly believed to have received his understanding of Platonism through 1) the mediation of the writings of Plotinus and perhaps Porphyry; 2) the preaching of St. Ambrose; 3) reading Cicero; and 4) aspects of Platonism that had become commonly held in his time period.[[1]](#endnote-1) While the claim that Plato influenced Augustine only indirectly has garnered widespread support,[[2]](#endnote-2) 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,[[3]](#endnote-3) and also likely had contact with the circle of Porphyry;[[4]](#endnote-4) 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.

In this paper, I dispute the standard thesis on two accounts: first I call into question its most basic assumption—namely, that what stands in need of proof is that Augustine *did* read Plato, while the contrary thesis does *not* need to be proven, but ought to be assumed in the absence of evidence; second, I refute readings of texts that have been brought forth in support of the standard reading.

# 2 On the *status quo* from which the problem of Augustine's contact with Plato ought to be posed.

## 2.1 Critique of Courcelle's study of the question.

In what is still the most extensive study to date on the question of Augustine's knowledge of Plato—Pierre Courcelle writes:

There is also nothing to prove that Augustine read Apuleius' lost translation of the *Phaedo*, as has been stated several times. The rare references that he makes to this dialogue seem indirect. One of them derives from Porphyry; another, from some commentator on Vergil; still another is a literary allusion to the famous passage relating to Socrates' daemon, which is the subject of Apuleius' treatise *De deo Socratis*, so often quoted by Augustine. Lastly, it was from the *Tusculans* that Augustine relates the anecdote about Cleombrotes' committing suicide after reading the *Phaedo*. Similarly, two references to the *Symposium* in no sense prove that Augustine read this dialogue. One of these references is a textual quotation from Apuleius' *De deo Socratis*; the other, relating to the apologue of Πενία and Πόρος, is borrowed from some Neoplatonist, probably Porphyry. In conclusion, Augustine quotes from the *Tusculans* the anecdote in the *Meno* about the child who by himself discovered geometry and the anecdote about Alcibiades' tears. He knows only from Cicero's *De re publica* the notion expressed by Plato in his *Republic* that all the gods are beneficent and the episode of the resurrection of Er of Pamphylia. I think therefore that from Plato's *Timaeus* Augustine read only the section that Cicero had translated. But he is abundantly informed on his philosophy, partly through the Romans—Cicero, Varro, Apuleius, Cyprian, Ambrose—and partly through Greek Neoplatonists.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Courcelle's method here is essentially to take texts from Augustine that *would* imply a knowledge of Plato and then to undermine that implication by diverting our attention to another source, where Augustine's knowledge of this alternative source is either verified by Augustine himself or for some other reason assumed to be more probable than a direct knowledge of Plato's dialogues. Now this kind of reasoning can be taken to support both a) an evidence-conclusion relation, and b) a deontic-doxastic relation holding betweenscholars and the evidence. As the former, the relation states: if Augustine exclusively quotes Plato via Platonists, then he did not read Plato. As the latter, the relation asserted is: if scholarship can account for all citations of Plato by Augustine via alternative sources, then scholars either a) ought not to believe that Augustine read Plato directly; or b) ought to believe that Augustine did *not* read Plato directly.

Courcelle consents to each of these assumptions, but without clearly distinguishing them from each other. For instance, he begins the above quote with the words “there is nothing to prove that,” leading his reader to expect him to hold only the weaker doxastic thesis: he ought to doubt (i.e. withhold judgment) that Augustine read Plato. But later in the quote, when he writes, “I think *therefore* [emphasis mine] that from Plato's *Timaeus* Augustine read only the section that Cicero had translated,” Courcelle commits himself to the stronger doxastic thesis, i.e. that he ought to doubt (i.e. deny) that Augustine read more than the Plato he read via Cicero. Courcelle's commitment to the stronger doxastic thesis is itself only sensible given a belief that the evidence-conclusion relation actually holds. In short, Courcelle takes absence of evidence as evidence of absence: if Augustine read Platonists, he did not read Plato.

Now both the stronger deontic-doxastic thesis and the evidence-conclusion relationship that it likely presupposes, regardless of their utility in other areas of inquiry, are clearly out of place here. But if one leaves to one side the psychological ambivalence of our acts of doubting and the strange metaphysics implied by doubt in the strong sense, one is left with a fact all the stranger because it must be acknowledged as true: Augustine's knowledge of the Platonists is, for us, a stumbling block to our believing that he had knowledge of Plato. It is this basic attitude that must be explored, and its underpinnings that must be undermined if we are to move further.

## 2.2 Critique of a modern hermeneutics of authorship

The root of the above attitude is an assumption about the nature of authorship: that to be an author of importance is to be a source of something new, an originator, an independent thinker, even a kind of first cause. This evaluation moves scholarship in comparative studies in the history of thought in the following two mutually supporting directions.

First, the import of a particular thinker is often identified with what makes them different. As a result, the act of studying a particular thinker is first an act of studying what makes them unique against their own historical backdrop or against ours. For example, in early modern philosophy, Descartes is associated with the *cogito,* Pascal with the wager, Leibniz with the monadology, while Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau are associated with differing notions of the “state of nature” that can be readily contrasted with each other. This means that contrasts are the *status quo* from which questions of relation and similarity are developed.

Concomitantly, questions of similarity are forced into the background. I mean this in the most literal sense: similarity is not *forgotten*, but becomes a deeply important matter because it is precisely what, given the disposition towards the different, must be *exposed*; if the different is the *terminus a quo,* then similarity is the *terminus ad quem.* Hence, it is, for example, regarded as a great achievement to show Descartes' dependence on late scholastic thought in spite of all his apparent differences from it.

For prior studies on our question such as Courcelle's, the question at hand is the relation of Augustine to his Greek sources. Rephrased so that the wonder motivating the question becomes apparent, the question becomes thus: how is the originality of Augustine's thought related to the common patrimony of Greek culture inherited by the Latin west? The task at hand, then, becomes one of reducing the *totum* of Augustine's thought to the elements of Greek influence. In short, the conclusion to the question is predetermined by aspects of the organon that it takes remain fixed: specifically, Augustine's originality is the *explanandum*, the *explanans* is Greek culture, and the method of explanation is a reduction of the former to the latter.

This reduction can, in turn, be partial or total. A total reduction would deny Augustine's originality altogether by reducing him to the sum of his sources. In this case, certain Greek ideas or writings would be able to explain the *fact*, or actuality, of Augustine's thought. Though Courcelle does not take this approach, he identifies a writer who does: Willy Theiler, who in his *Porphyrios und Augustin*, Courcelle tells us, asserts that Augustine “owes everything to Porphyry,”[[6]](#endnote-6) and that “Augustine is not original and that his sole merit lies in having tried to save the ancient treasures in a decadent age.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

By contrast, Courcelle's reduction is only *partial—*that is, it explains at best the *possibility* of the Augustinian synthesis, but not its actuality. This leaves Courcelle committed to the claim that there are certain aspects of Augustine's thought that are either a) unexplained, or b) inexplicable—that is, irreducible: spontaneous. The problem for Courcelle, then, becomes how to (only) partially account for Augustine's thought in terms of his influences.

Such an inquiry can take on varying degrees of rigor depending on what it seeks to prove. If one is seeking only to prove an influence of one author (e.g. Porphyry) on the thinking of another author (e.g. Augustine), then such a proof requires a) proof of a similarity of thought and b) a reasonable hypothesis about how the thoughts of the one author came to influence the other. If, on the other hand, one is attempting to show that one author *read* another, then one is required to unveil parallel texts in the form of allusions, paraphrases, and direct quotes by the one author of the other.

The latter proof is more rigorous than the former, since the latter proves an actual medium of influence while the former only proves a possible or probable medium. For example, if one proves that Augustine's thought is similar to that of Plotinus and that Plotinus was translated into Latin, then it is possible that Augustine read Plotinus. But if one proves that Augustine actually read Plotinus, then one also proves that he possibly read him.

To be more rigorous, then, is to cut off alternative possibilities. An inquiry becomes more rigorous the closer it comes to being able to join the following words to its conclusion: *and there is no other way that it could have happened*. This remains the case even if the addition of this clause is thought of as a limit that is in fact unachievable.

This *desideratum*, all by itself, ensures a premium on simplicity in the sense of parsimony, since it sets as a teleological goal the limitation of alternatives, which itself takes two forms: 1) the elimination as improbable of competing global hermeneutics, and 2) the elimination of unnecessary elements within one's *actual* hermeneutic. One might regard the former as the decision procedure by which alternative possible worlds, in accordance with the criterion of incompossibility (which itself becomes stronger as more facts about the actual world are decided), are jettisoned as *merely* possible or non-actual; and the latter as the elimination of possibles (in the sense of epistemic undecidables) in the actual world via the “crowding out” of unnecessary elements by the actually accepted elements of an ontology.

Taken together, the above considerations in hermeneutics proffer the following practical consequences.

First, given the *desideratum* mentioned above, the deck is antecedently stacked *against* the thesis that Augustine read Plato, since there are clearly many alternative means by which one can explain the Platonic element of St. Augustine's thought: St. Ambrose, Cicero, Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Porphyry, even certain books of scripture. Thus, the claim that Augustine read Plato is poised from the start to be dismissed as an unnecessary hypothesis.

Second, the premium on parsimony predetermines the scholar towards an acceptance of the fewest necessary sources to explain Augustine's thought. As an example of this, we may note two figures that Courcelle takes as the antipodes for his own study: Willie Theiler, mentioned above, and Father Paul Henry.[[8]](#endnote-8) The former attempts to explain Augustine's contact with Plotinian texts entirely through through Porphyrian mediation, while the latter seeks to definitively show that Augustine did *not* read Porphyry prior to 415, but depends for his Platonism entirely on Plotinus. Though Courcelle disagrees with their conclusions, he fails to recognize that the kind of reduction in which both of his opponents are engaged is the *telos* of the very kind of inquiry in which he himself is engaged. For instance, to refute the claim that Augustine was unacquainted with Porphyry, Courcelle begins by stating, “The fact that [Augustine] never quotes Porphyry in the writings contemporary with his conversion does not prove that he did not read him.”[[9]](#endnote-9) But this same sort of reasoning can be reflected back against Courcelle's own thesis that Augustine did not read Plato, even more so since Courcelle admits that Augustine *does* quote Plato.

Along with the drive to restrict the domain of possibles comes the need for a decision procedure by which to decide *which* possibles are to be eliminated. The following is a list of criteria by which such de-cisions are made.

1. *noetic atomism.* As stated above, a comparative study of different thinkers begins with a focus precisely on what makes them different. The conditions for this attitude are that a) each thinker is regarded at first glance as an *integral* unit, and b) each thinker is viewed as an *isolated* unit. The first accords with a hermeneutical principle of charity that is not predisposed to regard the thought of an important figure as laden with contradictions, while the second is predisposed by a variant of the same principle not to reduce what is regarded as important in that thinker to another source. In other words, each thinker is set up as a *noetic atom—*a figure whose thought is antecedently regarded as unified and independent.

Such an assumption makes much sense when approaching authors from roughly 1600 onward, where thinkers are, in their very act of thinking, individuals. But it makes less sense in the culture of late antiquity, where many thinkers regard themselves as belonging to a tradition much larger than themselves. It is this that leads to the historiographical fragmentation of the schools of late antiquity, and constitutes an implicit bias against the notion of tradition itself. For example, one cannot talk about the tradition of, Neoplatonism without first proving the substantial unity of the thinkers that are presumed to constitute that tradition. Furthermore, given the starting point from which Platonism itself is divided into early, middle, and late schools, which are themselves *all* separated from the category “the thought of Plato”, to prove that there is a connection between Augustine's “Platonism” and Plato himself would be a massive task—the task of eliminating as impossible alternative sources of Platonism, which, from another viewpoint, would not be competitors but complements.[[10]](#endnote-10) In short, the tendency to begin by regarding Platonists atomistically replaces their conception of themselves as authors with our own conception of authorship: it transforms them in their role from mediators to stopping points, from windows to walls.

1. *nearness axiom—*This can be formulated as follows: “if an influence can be sufficiently explained by either of two different sources, one proximate and one remote, the proximate author is the more probable source of influence.” This is the kind of thinking which motivates, for instance, Theiler's attempt to reduce Plotinian influence on Augustine to Porphyrian influence.

The problem with this approach is that it conflates proximity and authority. If the textual evidence were not against it, such reasoning could in principle be used to reduce the influence of scripture on St. Augustine to the writings of St. Ambrose. But in Augustine's time, late antiquity is already under the spell of the *idea* of antiquity. In other words, antiquity is itself viewed as a measure of truth. Hence the relation between proximity and authority is likely to be inverse rather than direct. And since the weight of the *auctor* is likely to be directly related to the number of the parchment and paper codices upon which his work is copied, probability ought to suggest that the relationship of Augustine to Plato via the Platonists is precisely the opposite of the standard assumption: evidence that Augustine read the Platonists should be counted as evidence not against, but *in favor of* the thesis that he also read the Plato of whom these Platonists were disciples.

If authorship were a static thing the essence of which could be identified for all eternity, then this modern imposition would not in principle be a problem: it could be that our own hermeneutic simply understands the Neoplatonists *better* than they understood themselves. But as it is, the self-understanding of the Platonists of late antiquity would have had a marked effect on the environment of books to which the authors of late antiquity would have had access. For instance, if these Platonists regarded themselves as disciples under the authority of Plato and not usurpers of that authority, then it would stand to reason that they copied Plato's dialogues more often then their own works, which would serve to accompany rather than replace the texts of the master.

1. *Deductivist axiom—*“A hierarchical treatment of influence sources is to be preferred to a conjunctive treatment.” The hierarchical organization of sources of influence itself gives the condition for the division of influences into proximate and remote, and therefore, in tandem with the nearness axiom, the possibility of the transformation of mediators into originators and the concordant discarding of remote causes. With this division in place as a *desideratum*, one is antecedently more likely to prefer a model like this:

Plato → Aristotle → Plotinus → Porphyry → Augustine

to one like this:

Plato → (Aristotle & Plotinus & Porphyry & Augustine).

1. *Dogmatist definition of “thought”*—“Thought: 1. the explicit and implicit propositional commitments of a thinker. 2. The additional propositional commitments toward which this body of thought tends or to which it is open.” The question of influence is by its nature a question of identity: one is attempting to explain the thought of person A by recourse to the thought of person B. The thoughts of an individual are often regarded as constitutive, in part or in whole, of that individual him/herself; this is even more so where the identity of the person is constituted as “thinker”. St. Augustine is a thinker. This means that one seeks to understand him by understanding his thought. Here, “thought” is thought of in terms of the positions to which a thinker is committed at a given time. This definition must be regarded as a restriction. For instance, one can say “the doctrine of original sin is an important part of Augustine's thought,” but one cannot say “Augustine's childhood is an important part of Augustine's thought”, even though Augustine clearly thought about his own childhood. To regard thought in terms of the propositional commitments of a thinker as constitutive of that thinker *qua* thinker is to put the final nail in the coffin to the idea that Plato influenced or was read by Augustine. Why? A precondition for being an influence is being self-identical in the double sense of a) having thoughts in the sense of determinate commitments and b) having those commitments be in some manner discernible. But if the propositional commitments (i.e. thoughts) of Plato, as is commonly held, are opaque to his readers by virtue of the dialogue form that he uses; or if Plato is, as is also commonly held, a non-dogmatic thinker, then there simply is no discernible, integral, propositional body of doctrine in terms of which the doctrinal tendencies of Augustine's thought is able to be analyzed: the *explanans* is in the wrong genus. And given the identification of thought with commitment as the self-identical constitution of the self, then one must even say that there is no self-identical “Plato the thinker” to begin with.

What is problematic about the above assumptions is not their modernity. Rather, it is that the hermeneutic decides the question before any evidence has actually come before the enquirer. Specifically, by insisting on an atomistic interpretation of authorship, the hermeneutic conceals the relations that are taken for granted within any school that regards itself as handing on a tradition. Platonism in antiquity is just such a school. The following remarks are meant to amplify this claim.

# 3 Considerations in support of an alternative hermeneutic.

First, we note the religious character of Platonism in late antiquity. As Hadot has argued, ancient philosophical schools in general ought to be construed firstly as advocating a way of life, secondarily as advocating a set of doctrines.[[11]](#endnote-11) On such a picture, individual Platonists would be such by virtue of their commitment, both in theory and practice, to the teachings of a master, i.e. Plato. The propositional expression of those doctrines in their own writings would, then, have taken second place.

We can further characterize Platonism not merely as religious in character, but as having the specific characteristics of a “religion of the book.” In support of this characterization, we make several points.

First, we note the prominence of the commentary genre. While Christians and Jews were writing commentaries on the prophets, and psalms, Neoplatonists had taken to writing commentaries on the books of Plato and Aristotle. For instance, Porphyry is known to have written commentaries on Plato's *Cratylus, Sophist, Parmenides, Timaeus, Philebus, Phaedo,* and *Symposium,* as well as on Aristotle's *Categories, De Interpretatione,* and *Physics.*[[12]](#endnote-12) Iamblichus (CA. 245-325 AD) is known to have written commentaries on Plato's *Alcibiades I, Phaedo, Sophist, Phaedrus, Philebus, Parmenides, and Timaeus.*[[13]](#endnote-13) Neoplatonists also wrote commentaries on other important works of antiquity, such as Porphyry's commentary on the *Cave of the Nymphs* in Homer.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Even works by Neoplatonists that are not ostensibly commentaries often tend towards commentary. For instance, the first chapter of Plotinus' first Ennead is thought to address a passage in Aristotle's *De anima*;[[15]](#endnote-15) the theoretical question at Ennead V.2 discusses questions arising out of a long tradition of interpreting Plato's Parmenides;and Iamblichus' *Protrepticus* provides us with sizeable fragments of a lost dialogue of Aristotle by the same name.

Next, we note the mystical ascent tendency of the Platonic curriculum. According to Gerson, Platonists were introduced to Plato's writings in a particular order. One began one's study by discussing a series of questions such as “why did Plato write in dialogue form?” that were meant to orient the reader. This discussion “was followed by introductions to the twelve dialogues contained in the syllabus of Plato’s works: *Alcibiades I, Gorgias, Phaedo, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Phaedrus, Symposium, Philebus, Timaeus, Parmenides*.”[[16]](#endnote-16) These dialogues were read in this order under two presumptions: first, that there were distinct teachings that one could extract from Plato's writings, and that the dialogues were not *merely* meant to provide their reader with an occasion for thinking about some particular issue; second, that though the dialogues did provide the reader with definite teachings, these teachings themselves had to be received in a particular order. Plato's doctrine is not *systematic* in the sense that to know any part is to be lead to the knowledge of the whole; his doctrine is *scandalous* in two senses: first, that it was possible, or perhaps even likely, that one could be mislead in one's understanding of Plato by going about that study in the wrong order; second, that Plato's doctrine was *gradual,* like the rungs of a ladder (*scandala*). For instance, Gerson tells us that the last two dialogues in the curriculum, the *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*, were read as Plato's definitive statements on the material and ideal world, respectively.[[17]](#endnote-17) Therefore, the view of the “system” and the propositional commitments held within it would not necessarily be identical at the top and at the bottom, at beginner and at expert levels.

This consideration is important because our own hermeneutics often implicitly accepts the inference from the dogmatic character of a body of writing to its systematicity. If one accepts this conditional, then a simple *modus tollens* explains why we are inclined to read Plato as either a non-dogmatic thinker or a developing thinker—that is, a thinker whose body of work taken as a whole is inconsistent. A Platonist in late antiquity would have accepted neither of these alternatives, and Augustine's own Platonism shows no signs of a commitment to either of these. This means that if Augustine read Plato, this does not entail that he was a Platonist in the sense of adhering to a Platonic system, or even in the sense of incorporating Platonism, in whole or in part, into a Christian system. If Augustine's reading of Plato shows signs of this “scandalous” reading of his corpus, then this would in fact be an argument *against* his Platonism having been mediated entirely by the more systematic Platonism of Plotinus or Porphyry. As Miner writes:

Clearly, the late Augustine rejects any literalized interpretation of the Platonic doctrine. He certainly wants to reject the notion of transmigration of souls that a hardening of Platonic myths and images into a “doctrine” seems to imply. But this very reserve, this manifest caution against literalization, may serve to make Augustine *more* Platonic.[[18]](#endnote-18)

That Augustine himself interpreted his Platonism “scandalously” can be proven by several quotations.

First, Augustine refers to the teachings of Plato as preserved by the Academy as “mysteries”. Accordingly, he writes:

Non enim aut facile ista [mysteria] percipiuntur nisi ab eis, qui se ab omnibus uitiis mundantes in aliam quandam plus quam humanam consuetudinem uindicarint; aut non grauiter peccat, quisquis ea sciens quoslibet homines docere uoluerit.[[19]](#endnote-19)

In other words, those who had learned the teachings of Platonism actually had a responsibility to preserve the order of initiation, and thus to *not* disclose the teachings to those who had not yet attained a certain purity of life. That this mandate did not preclude positive deception is gathered from specific examples that Augustine gives: Augustine writes that when Zeno's views began to gain popularity, then-head of the academy Arcesilaus “prudently and with great advantage completely concealed the view of the Academy”[[20]](#endnote-20); similarly, Carneades, by ascribing the term “truthlike” to the doctrines of his opponents, “prudently concealed” the truth itself of which these doctrines were imperfect images.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Furthermore, when Augustine does make use of Platonic doctrines, he himself recounts as part of an ascending narrative. Let us recall Augustine's autobiographical own autobiographical encounter with the books of the Platonists in the confessions. He writes:

Item legi ibi quia uerbum deus *non ex carne, non ex sanguine, non ex uoluntate uiri, sed ex deo natus est*;[[22]](#endnote-22) sed quia *uerbum caro factum est et habitauit in nobis*,[[23]](#endnote-23) non ibi legi. Indagaui quippe in illis litteris *uarie dictum et multis modis[[24]](#endnote-24)* quod sit filius *in forma patris[[25]](#endnote-25)*...sed quia *semet ipsum exinaniuit formam serui accipiens[[26]](#endnote-26)*...non habent illi libri. Quod enim ante omnia tempora et supra omnia tempora incommutabiliter manet unigenitus tuus coaeternus tibi...est ibi; quod autem *secundum tempus pro impiis mortuus est*,[[27]](#endnote-27) non est ibi.[[28]](#endnote-28)

In this passage, Augustine draws on a variety of scriptural contrasts to paint a picture of Platonism itself as an incomplete likeness to the truth of Christianity—that is, as a step on the ladder to the higher truth that is the revealed gospel. While it is possible that the content of what he read came from (or was accompanied by) the writings of Plotinus or another Platonist, the form of appropriation itself has more in common with Plato than with Neoplatonism, the treatises of which tend to be decidedly systematic interpretations of Plato's writings. In Augustine's *Confessions*, the books of the Platonists are praised as attaining a certain level of truth, but not the fullness of truth, and are themselves incorporated within a narrative of ascent grounded in Augustine's autobiography, moving past Platonism to Christian conversion, and achieving completion with a meditation on God's creation of the universe.

The fact that Augustine ends the *Confessions* with a meditation on creation itself mirrors the high place that Plato's *Timaeus* held in the Platonists' curriculum. But it incarnationally reverses that curriculum in exactly the same way that Augustine's contrast of Platonism with Christianity redirects the immaterialism of Platonic ascent to the materialism of the incarnation: there is no Augustinian *Parmenides* serving as the final rung of the ladder. We know that Augustine read the *Timaeus* in the translation of Cicero.[[29]](#endnote-29) If Augustine was familiar with the ordering of the books of the Platonic curriculum, then perhaps this reversal is deliberate.

A similar structure can be found in Augustine’s *de libero arbitrio*. Augustine begins book I with a discussion of Manichaeanism, ascends in book II to a one oriented by Platonic thought, and then writes Book III, from the perspective of the mature Christian has come to understand Christian truth.

Augustine's interpretation of Platonism, then, is in respect of content similar to the writings of neoplatonists; but his *use* of that doctrine is far more in accord with the manner of presentation of Plato himself. While it is possible that Augustine's ingenuity was itself a source for this manner of appropriation, this seems to me less plausible than that Augustine had learned this kind of pedagogy through Plato's dialogues, which a) were ordered in this way collectively in the Platonic curriculum, and b) frequently follow this ascent structure internally.[[30]](#endnote-30)

# 4 Objections and Replies

In this section, I shall address interpretations of specific texts from Augustine that would incline one away from the thesis that Augustine read Plato.

Our first passage is from the *Contra Academicos*:

Adeo post illa tempora non longo interuallo omni peruicacia pertinaciaque demortua os illud Platonis, quod in philosophia purgatissimum est et lucidissimum, dimotis nubibus erroris emicuit maxime in Plotino, qui Platonicus philosophus ita eius similis iudicatus est, ut simul eos uixisse, tantum autem interest temporis, ut in hoc ille reuixisse putandus sit.[[31]](#endnote-31)

In his panegyric of the Platonic philosophers, Plotinus is the last mentioned by name, and also the one given the highest praise: he is so close to Plato in doctrine as to be his contemporary, but so far in time as to be his reincarnation. Courcelle notes that this expression is likely borrowed from a disciple of Plotinus', perhaps Porphyry. Thus, that even Augustine's praise of Plato is secondhand betrays a basic ignorance of the teachings of the master himself.

This seems improbable for several reasons. First, given that the culture of late antiquity has nothing like the notion of intellectual property that one finds in the modern period, it may simply be that Augustine's repetition of a familiar piece of praise represents his agreement with it, not his *dependence* on the original source from which it came. Second, if Augustine has *not* read Plato, then the panegyric is hypocritical: Throughout the *Contra Academicos*, Augustine has been engaged in refuting the notion that the wise man can be guided merely by the plausible or truthlike. One of Augustine's main arguments against the academics is that it is implausible to speak of something as truthlike unless one knows that of which it is a likeness, i.e. truth. Similarly, Augustine's praise of Plotinus can be summed up as follows: he is Plato-like. By Augustine's own reasoning, then, Augustine's act of praising Plotinus as an imitation of Plato implies a knowledge of that of which Plotinus is an imitation, i.e. Plato.

Our second quote is from the *de beata vita*.

Lectis autem Plotini paucissimis libris, cuius te esse studiosissimum accepi, conlataque cum eis, quantum potui, etiam illlorum auctoritate, qui diuina mysteria tradiderunt, sic exarsi, ut omnes illas uellem ancoras rumpere, nisi me nonnullorum hominum existimatio commoueret.[[32]](#endnote-32)

This passage is often interpreted as describing the same event that Augustine later recounts in *Confessions* book VII, i.e. the encounter with the books of the Platonists.[[33]](#endnote-33) If this identification is correct, then the earlier reading serves to specify which books of which Platonists Augustine had read: those of Plotinus.

This passage cannot be interpreted in an exclusive manner; first, because it goes against the assumption, commonly held, that Augustine had at least *some* knowledge of Porphyry's work as well. Second, it offends the grammar of the *Confessions* passage: Augustine read the books of Platonists, not *a* Platonist. Third, Augustine's impressive account of the History of the Academy in the *Contra Academicos* implies a wider knowledge of Platonists than would be the case if he had only read Plotinus. What is clear is that Augustine, at the time of writing the *de beata uita* and *contra academicos*, held Plotinus in particularly high regard among Plato's disciples.

Our third passage is the passage from the *Confessions*

Et primo uolens ostendere mihi, quam resistas superbis, humilibus autem des gratiam et quanta misericordia tua demonstrata sit hominibus uia humilitatis, quod uerbum tuum caro factum est et habitauit inter homines, procurasti mihi per quendam hominem immanissimo typho turgidum quosdam Platonicorum libros ex graeca lingua in latinam uersos*.*[[34]](#endnote-34)

What is interesting about this passage is that Augustine interprets his encounter with the books of the Platonists as serving the purpose of showing that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. How is this so?

One interpretation of this passage is provided by Stock:

God wished to show [Augustine] how “to resist the proud and show grace to the humble.”...in order to demonstrate how his mercy could serve as “a pathway to humility” for mortals, since his word “was made flesh and dwelt among men”... To that end, it was by means of “someone inflated with tremendous pride” that the deity procured for him the *libri Platonicorum* which had been translated from Greek into Latin. The unknown person who brought him these works thus reactivated the topos of his pagan pride, which first surfaced when he read Cicero's *Hortensius*.[[35]](#endnote-35)

According to Stock, then, God shows Augustine that he resists the proud by virtue of the medium through which the books of the Platonists were procured for him. This interpretation, however, is tendentious. First, because the clear focus of the contrast that immediately follows Augustine's passage is not the messenger, but the books themselves. As a whole, Book VII of the Confessions is best interpreted as depicting Augustine's encounter with and struggle with the books themselves. To suggest the opposite is to make the fact that the books were *Platonic* superfluous: the proud messenger could just have easily brought other books—or none at all.

One might then, read Augustine as stating that he found the Platonists who he read to be proud: God shows Augustine specimens of proud people, who in their pride deny the grace of God by denying the incarnation. But this interpretation also cannot stand. First, because though Augustine is on his way to Christianity, he is not there yet, and so the opposition of the Platonists to Christian doctrine would not be sufficient grounds for Augustine, prior to his conversion, to regard them as proud. Furthermore, such an interpretation would not accord with the context: in the contrasts that follow the above passage, Augustine never suggests that the Platonists are sinners, but only that their doctrine is incomplete. Third, in respect of their pride, the Platonists do not seem worse than Cicero, with whom Augustine was well acquainted. Therefore, there does not seem to be a reason for why the books that served to teach Augustine this lesson had to be books of the *Platonists*. In accord with the above point, it seems that if God were to teach the lesson that He “resists the proud” by laying bare the thought of proud people, then Augustine would have learned this lesson by now: Augustine has, up to this point, both read and made acquaintance with many proud people. But an elementary consideration of the nature of pride itself should teach us that such a method is insufficient to achieve its end: if Augustine does not *know* that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, it is in part because his own pride gets in the way. Prior to learning this lesson, Augustine is likely to either a) fail to recognize the pride of those whom he admires, or b) recognize pride, but fail to make the connection between their pride and his own. In fact, if we are to believe his account in the *de beata uita*, Augustine was held back from joining the ranks of those Platonists by “the regard of not a few men”--that is, Augustine was held back by the flattery and reciprocal pride of bad company. If this is the case, then no matter what the books of the Platonists were, from the standpoint of Augustine's pride at the time of his reading them, they would have been an improvement, even if they were proud by standards of Christian humility.

What is necessary, then, for God to teach Augustine that he resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, is precisely an indirect communication. The most natural interpretation of this passage is that Augustine was lead to believe that God resists the proud not by *who* he read, or *by whom* it was procured for him, but by *what* he read. And precisely this lesson is taught quite well by both the form and content of Plato's dialogues: the form, because they allow the reader the distance necessary to recognize the truths that they illustrate; the content, because Socrates' signature trait in many of the dialogues is that of making a fool out of a proud interlocutor. God teaches Augustine the path of humility through the medium of Socratic irony.

If this is correct, then the phrase “Platonicorum libros” should not be interpreted as a genitive of *authorship*, but one of *membership* or *ownership*. In other words, the interpretation is not books *written by* the Platonists, but books *adhered to* by the Platonists, i.e. books of the canon.

This thesis accords well with the ascent patterns found in many of Augustine's works. But it also accords well with another hitherto unnoticed fact: the sharp shift in Augustine's writing style in the wake of reading these books. If much of pagan rhetoric, for the later Augustine, is identified as “inflated”, it is because he learns this lesson through his reading of Plato.

Augustine's earliest dialogue, the *contra academicos*, is still, both in its structure and its style, Ciceronian, not Platonic. It involves several interlocutors who are attempting to answer a question, and by the end of the dialogue, Augustine provides an answer. Throughout the dialogue, Augustine makes abundant use of rhetorical devices to make his point: for instance, the dedicatory epistle begins with an analogy of a ship attempting to get to harbor, personifies virtue, and in general makes use of long, fairly complicated sentences, a tendency which is present all through the dialogue.[[36]](#endnote-36) Augustine makes use of myth,[[37]](#endnote-37) the vocative sense,[[38]](#endnote-38) and in short makes much use of his rhetorical skill. The same can be said for the *de beata vita*. But by the time that Augustine writes the *de magistro*, the first dialogue within which the ascent tendency is marked and the Platonic parallels striking, Augustine's style has changed considerably: instead of beginning the dialogue with a sentence several lines long, he begins with question that is short and to the point: “Quid tibi uidemur efficere uelle, cum loquimur?”[[39]](#endnote-39) This is even more the case with the *de libero arbitrio*, which begins with a two word question.[[40]](#endnote-40) Here, Augustine has clearly learned to restrain his use of rhetoric. One can almost hear him taking this advice directly from Socrates: a theatrical presentation is not a more persuasive one.[[41]](#endnote-41)

# 5 Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has not been to show convincingly that Augustine *has* read Plato. Instead, I have attempted to make three points: first, that the conclusion that he did not is not a consequence of any evidence, but rather a result of the hermeneutic adopted in the treatment of the question; second, that this hermeneutic is itself unable to satisfactorily account for certain aspects of Augustine's writing style, mode of presentation, and doctrinal development; third, that these aspects *are* accounted for by a hermeneutic that treats Augustine's contact with Platonists not as barriers to contact with Plato, but as they regarded themselves—as mediators and commentators. Thus, this study should suffice to reorient, resurrect, and reopen a question once thought to be decided; and it should also reawaken in us a questioning about how we ought to pose a question.

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1. cf. Bowery 2008, p. 109; Gersh 1986, p. 413; Stock, p. 147; Bourke, p. 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. cf. ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Conf.* VIII. ii. 3. Stock p. 54; Hadot 1971, 203-204. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. cf. Bochet, 8-11, *passim* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Courcelle 1969, 170-171. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Courcelle 1969, p. 172 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. cf. Courcelle 1969, 172-177 *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Courcelle 1969, p. 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Courcelle himself recognizes this when he writes concerning a manner of conducting his study that he considered: “One plan, following Father Henry, would have been to study successively the influence that each Greek writer exerted on the West.” Courcelle's reason for deciding against such a path implicitly shows the practical impossibility of such a de-fragmentation process: “But this series of monographs would scarcely have fitted into a synthesis.” (Courcelle 1969, p. 7) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. cf. Hadot 1995, esp. ch. 3 and 2002, *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. cf. Gerson, p. 291. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For an overview of commentary methods among Christian and Pagan authors in late antiquity, cf. Smalley ch. 1and De Lubac ch. 6 and ch. 9, esp. part 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Plotinus, p. 94, n.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Gerson 2005, p. 28 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Gerson 2005, 28-29 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Miner 2007, p. 450 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *ConAcad* III. xvii. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. ibid, quoted from King, p. 88 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *ConAcad* III. xviii. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. John 1:13 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. John 1:14 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Heb. 1:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Phil 2:6 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Phil 2:7 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Rom 5:6 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Conf.* VII. ix. 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Courcelle 1969, p. 169 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Unfortunately, I cannot go into detail regarding this latter claim. But we may take as an example Plato's *Meno*, which begins with an attempt at defining virtue in the manner that a sophist would approach the question, moves from there to a naturalistic account of how virtue is possible in the theory of recollection, and ends by abandoning this naturalistic account in favor of the thesis that virtue is a gift of the gods. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *ConAcad* III. xviii. 41 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *BV* i. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. cf. Stock 1996, p. 69 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Conf.* VII. ix. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Stock 1996, ch. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. *ConAcad* I. i. 1 Augustine makes use of a similar maritime analogy at *BV* i. 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *ConAcad* II. iii. 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. *ConAcad* III. xvi. 35 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. *DeMag* I. i. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. *DLA* I. i. 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *cf Meno* 75c-76e [↑](#endnote-ref-41)