

BOOK VII

A Neoplatonic Quest

i (1) By now my evil and wicked youth was dead. I was becoming a grown man. But the older I became, the more shameful it was that I retained so much vanity as to be unable to think any substance possible other than that which the eyes normally perceive. From the time that I began to learn something of your wisdom, I did not conceive of you, God, in the shape of the human body. I always shunned this, and was glad when I found the same concept in the faith of our spiritual mother, your Catholic Church. But how otherwise to conceive of you I could not see. I a mere man, and a man with profound defects, was trying to think of you the supreme, sole and true God. With all my heart I believed you to be incorruptible, immune from injury, and unchangeable. Although I did not know why and how, it was clear to me and certain that what is corruptible is inferior to that which cannot be corrupted; what is immune from injury I unhesitatingly put above that which is not immune; what suffers no change is better than that which can change. My heart vehemently protested against all the physical images in my mind, and by this single blow I attempted to expel from my mind's eye the swarm of unpurified notions flying about there.¹ Hardly had they been dispersed when in the flash of an eye (1 Cor. 15: 52) they had regrouped and were back again. They attacked my power of vision and clouded it. Although you were not in the shape of the human body, I nevertheless felt forced to imagine something physical occupying space diffused either in the world or even through infinite space outside the world.² Admittedly I thought of this as incorruptible and inviolable and unchangeable, which I set above what is corruptible, violable, and changeable. But I thought that anything from which space was abstracted was non-existent, indeed absolutely nothing, not even a vacuum, as when a body is removed from a place, and the space remains evacuated of anything physical, whether earthly, watery, airy or heavenly, but is an empty space—like a mathematical concept of space without content.

¹ Echo of Virgil, *Aeneid* 3. 233.

² Similarly Plotinus 6. 5. 2.

(2) So my heart had become gross (Matt. 13: 15), and I had no clear vision even of my own self. I thought simply non-existent anything not extended in space or diffused or concentrated or expanding, which does not possess, or is incapable of possessing, such qualities. My eyes are accustomed to such images. My heart accepted the same structure. I did not see that the mental power by which I formed these images does not occupy any space, though it could not form them unless it were some great thing.³ I conceived even you, life of my life, as a large being, permeating infinite space on every side, penetrating the entire mass of the world, and outside this extending in all directions for immense distances without end; so earth had you, heaven had you, everything had you, and in relation to you all was finite; but you not so. Just as the sunlight meets no obstacle in the body of the air (this air which is above the earth) to stop it from passing through and penetrating it without breaking it up or splitting it, but fills it entirely: so I thought that you permeate not only the body of heaven and air and sea but even earth, and that in everything, both the greatest and the smallest things, this physical frame is open to receive your presence, so that by a secret breath of life you govern all things which you created, both inwardly and outwardly. This was my conjecture, for I was incapable of thinking otherwise; but it was false. For on that hypothesis a larger part of the earth would possess more of you and a smaller part less, and all things would be full of you in the sense that more of you would be contained by an elephant's body than a sparrow's to the degree that it is larger and occupies more space; so, piece by piece, you would be making different parts of yourself present to parts of the world, much of you in large parts, little of you in small parts. And that is not the case. But you had not yet 'lightened my darkness' (Ps. 17: 29).

ii (3) For me, Lord, there was a sufficient refutation of those deceived deceivers and those word-spinners with nothing to say (for it was not your word which sounded out from them). It was enough to state the argument which used to be put forward by Nebridius long before at Carthage, an argument which struck us dumb when we heard it: The Manichees postulate a race of darkness in opposition to you. What could that have done to you, if you had

³ Similarly Plotinus 4. 2. 1.

refused to fight against it? If they were to reply that you would have suffered injury, that would make you open to violation and destruction. But if nothing could harm you, that removes any ground for combat, and indeed for combat under such conditions that some portion of you, one of your members, or an offspring of your very substance, is mingled with hostile powers and with natures not created by you, and is corrupted by them and so changed for the worse that it is altered from beatitude to misery and needs help to deliver and purify it. They say this is the soul, enslaved, contaminated and corrupt, to which aid is brought by your word, free, pure, and intact; and yet your word is itself corruptible, because it is of one and the same substance as the soul. Thus if they say that you, whatever you are (that is your substance in virtue of which you have your being), are incorruptible, the entire story becomes false and execrable. But if corruptible, then without further discussion the very proposition is false and to be abominated.

This argument would have been enough to oppose those people whom I should have vomited forth from my overloaded stomach. For they had no escape from this dilemma without thinking and speaking about you with a horrible sacrilege of heart and tongue.

iii (4) But a problem remained to trouble me. Although I affirmed and firmly held divine immunity from pollution and change and the complete immutability of our God, the true God who made not only our souls but also our bodies, and not only our souls and bodies, but all rational beings and everything, yet I had no clear and explicit grasp of the cause of evil. Whatever it might be, I saw it had to be investigated, if I were to avoid being forced by this problem to believe the immutable God to be mutable. Otherwise I might myself become the evil I was investigating. Accordingly, I made my investigation without anxiety, certain that what the Manichees said was untrue. With all my mind I fled from them, because in my inquiry into the origin of evil I saw them to be full of malice, in that they thought it more acceptable to say your substance suffers evil than that their own substance actively does evil.

(5) I directed my mind to understand what I was being told, namely that the free choice of the will is the reason why we do wrong and suffer your just judgement;⁴ but I could not get a clear

⁴ Augustine could hear this theme (from Plato) in Ambrose's sermons, or read it in Plotinus 5. 1. 1.

grasp of it. I made an effort to lift my mind's eye out of the abyss, but again plunged back. I tried several times, but again and again sank back. I was brought up into your light by the fact that I knew myself both to have a will and to be alive. Therefore when I willed or did not will something, I was utterly certain that none other than myself was willing or not willing. That there lay the cause of my sin I was now coming to recognize. I saw that when I acted against my wishes, I was passive rather than active; and this condition I judged to be not guilt but a punishment.⁵ It was an effortless step to grant that, since I conceived you to be just, it was not unjust that I was chastised. But again I said: 'Who made me? Is not my God not only good but the supreme Good? Why then have I the power to will evil and to reject good? Is it to provide a reason why it is just for me to undergo punishments? Who put this power in me and implanted in me this seed of bitterness (Heb. 12: 15), when all of me was created by my very kind God? If the devil was responsible, where did the devil himself come from? And if even he began as a good angel and became devil by a perversion of the will, how does the evil will by which he became devil originate in him, when an angel is wholly made by a Creator who is pure goodness?' These reflections depressed me once more and suffocated me. But I was not brought down to that hell of error where no one confesses to you (Ps. 6: 6), because people suppose that evil is something that you suffer rather than an act by humanity.

iv (6) In this way I made an effort to discover other principles. I had already established that the incorruptible is better than the corruptible, and so I confessed that whatever you are, you are incorruptible. Nor could there have been or be any soul capable of conceiving that which is better than you, who are the supreme and highest good. Since it is most true and certain that the incorruptible is superior to the corruptible, as I had already concluded, had it been the case that you are not incorruptible I could in thought have attained something better than my God. Therefore, when I saw that the incorruptible is superior to the corruptible, I ought to have looked for you there and to have deduced from that principle the locus of evil, that is, the source of the corruption by which it is impossible for your being to be injured. There is absolutely no way

⁵ On sin and suffering as divine justice see Plotinus 4. 3. 16.

corruption can injure our God—no act of will, no necessity, no unforeseen chance—since he is God and what he wills for himself is good, and he is that same good. Whereas to be corrupted is not good.

Moreover, you cannot be unwillingly compelled to anything; for your will is not greater than your power. It would be greater only if you were greater than yourself. For the will and power of God is God's very self.⁶ And what can be unforeseen by you who know all things? No nature exists but you know it. Indeed, why need we say repeatedly 'Why is the being of God not a corruptible substance?' If it were so, that would not be God.

v (7) I searched for the origin of evil, but I searched in a flawed way and did not see the flaw in my very search. I placed before my spirit a conspectus of the entire creation—all that we can perceive in it, earth, sea, air, stars, trees and mortal animals, and all that we cannot perceive, the firmament of heaven above, all the angels, and all the spiritual beings.⁷ But I imagined these beings to be like bodies which are allocated to particular places. I conceived your creation as a single vast mass differentiated by various types of bodies, whether they were real bodies or whether the bodies with which my imagination invested the spirits. I did not make its size precisely what it is, for that I could not know, but I made it as great as seemed appropriate, but on every side finite. I visualized you, Lord, surrounding it on all sides and permeating it, but infinite in all directions, as if there were a sea everywhere and stretching through immense distances, a single sea which had within it a large but finite sponge;⁸ and the sponge was in every part filled from the immense sea. This is the kind of way in which I supposed your finite creation to be full of you, infinite as you are, and said: 'Here is God and see what God has created. God is good and is most mightily and incomparably superior to these things. But being God, God created good creatures. See how God surrounds and fills them. Then where and whence is evil? How did it creep in? What is its root and what is its seed? Or does it not have any being? Why should we fear and avoid what has no being? If our fear is vain, it is certain that fear itself is evil, and that the heart is groundlessly

⁶ Plotinus 6. 8. 13 is close.

⁷ Verbal echo of Plotinus 5. 1. 4. 2 f.

⁸ Plotinus (4. 3. 9. 38) uses the illustration of a net.

disturbed and tortured. And this evil is the worse for the fact that it has no being to be afraid of. Yet we still fear. Thus either it is evil which we fear or our fear which is evil. Where then does it come from since the good God made everything good? Certainly the greatest and supreme Good made lesser goods; yet the Creator and all that he created are good. What then is the origin of evil? Is it that the matter from which he made things was somehow evil? He gave it form and order, but did he leave in it an element which he could not transform into good?⁹ If so, why? Was he powerless to turn and transform all matter so that no evil remained, even though God is omnipotent? Finally, why did God want to make anything out of such stuff and not rather use his omnipotence to ensure that there was no matter at all? Could it exist contrary to God's will? Or indeed, if matter was eternal, why did God allow it to exist for an infinite period of past time in its unordered state and only much later decided to do something with it? Or if now God willed suddenly to do something, would not the Almighty have preferred to cause it not to exist and to be himself alone the totality of the true, supreme, and infinite good? Or if, because he is good, it would not be well that he should not be making and creating something good, could he not abolish evil matter and reduce it to nothing, and himself make good matter out of which he would create everything? He would be less than omnipotent if he could not create something good unless assisted by a matter which he had not himself created.'

Such questions revolved in my unhappy breast, weighed down by nagging anxieties about the fear of dying before I had found the truth. But there was a firm place in my heart for the faith, within the Catholic Church, in your Christ, 'our Lord and Saviour' (2 Pet. 2: 20). In many respects this faith was still unformed and hesitant about the norm of doctrine. Yet my mind did not abandon it, but daily drank in more and more.

vi (8) I had already rejected the fraudulent divinations and impious fantasies of the astrologers. May your mercies, my God, make grateful confession of that to you from the innermost parts of my soul! (Ps. 106: 8).

It was you, entirely you, who brought this about. For no other

⁹ Plotinus 3. 2. 5. 23 'The supreme power can use evil for a noble end, and is capable of transforming formless things to give them a new form.'

could recall us from all deadly error than the life that knows no death, and the wisdom which itself needs no light, illuminating needy minds, the wisdom which governs the world down to the leaves that tremble on the trees. You healed the obstinacy with which I withstood the acute old man Vindicianus and Nebridius the young man with a mind of marvellous quality. The one vehemently, the other with some hesitancy but great frequency, declared that the art of forecasting the future is non-existent, but that human conjectures often have the power of chance. The fortune-tellers say so much that some of their predictions are fulfilled, not because the forecasters know but because merely by not keeping silent they hit on the truth.

Your providence brought me a friend. He was not a very frequent consulter of astrologers, and he was not well up in the literature of the subject, but, as I have said, consulted them out of curiosity. Yet he had some knowledge which he said he had learnt from his father. He did not know how much validity that might have for overthrowing confidence in the art.

He was a man named Firminus, liberally educated and well trained in rhetoric.¹⁰ He consulted me as a close friend about some of his affairs, where his secular hope had been rising. He wanted to know what I thought about his 'constellations' as they call them. I, however, had already begun to be influenced by Nebridius' opinion of astrology. I did not refuse to offer a guess and to say what occurred to my hesitant mind. Nevertheless, I added that I was almost persuaded it was a ridiculous and vain practice. He then told me how his father had been extremely curious about astrological books, and had had a friend who was given to such studies as much as he and at the same time. An equal enthusiasm and close collaboration kindled the fire of their passion for these trivialities, to such a point that if dumb animals gave birth at their house, they recorded the moments of birth and made a note of the position of the heaven, as a basis for a collection of experiments in this pseudo-science.

Firminus said he had learnt from his father that at the time when his mother was expectant with him, a slave-girl of this friend of his father was likewise big with child. This could not pass unobserved

¹⁰ For Firminus and his ambitions at Milan nothing is known beyond the information here. A letter to him, known to Augustine's ancient biographer Possidius, has not survived.

by the slave-girl's owner, who took pains to know the most precise details when his bitches were producing puppies. The two men made exact observations, the one of his wife, the other of his maidservant, for the days and hours and minutes, and it so came about that the women both had their infants at the identical time. So they had to make the same horoscopes for each newborn child identical to the minute, one for his son, the other for the little slave. For when the women began to be in labour, the two men informed each other what was going on in his own house, and they prepared messengers to send to one another, so that the news of the birth was given to each as soon as it had taken place. Each on his own estate easily arranged for the news to be carried instantly. The messengers sent by each man, he said, met at the halfway point between their houses, thereby excluding the possibility that either of them could make a different observation of the stars' position and of the precise time. Nevertheless, Firminus who was born into a well-to-do family had a career along the world's main roads.¹¹ His wealth increased; he was elevated to high honours. But that slave served his owners and experienced no relaxation of the yoke of his condition, as Firminus, who had known him, informed me.

(9) After I had heard this story, which I believed because of the character of the narrator, all my reluctance to abandon astrology dissolved and collapsed. First I tried to dissuade Firminus himself from this curious occultism. I told him that after inspecting his constellation had I been able to make a true forecast, I should have been able to see that his parents were distinguished citizens at their home-town, a noble family in their own city, born free, given a gentleman's education and liberal culture. And if the slave had consulted me, then on the basis of his stars which were identical with those of Firminus, were I able to offer him also a true forecast, I ought again to have seen there a family of the most abject status, with servile condition and other disadvantages utterly different and remote from Firminus' destiny.

Therefore it followed that after inspecting identical horoscopes I should give different forecasts in order to get it right, and that to offer identical forecasts would be to get it wrong. From this I drew

¹¹ Literally: the whitened roads. On main roads the Romans used chalk on the top layer. Even today a Roman road in Tunisia or Algeria looks white against the surrounding land.

the certain inference that true predictions on the basis of horoscopes are given not by skill but by chance, while false forecasts are due not to lack of skill in the art but to chance error.

(10) Starting from the approach to the subject which this story gave me, I ruminated further on these phenomena. For one of those charlatans who make money out of astrology, and whom I now wished to attack and with ridicule to refute, might resist me by arguing that false information was given either by Firminus to me or by his father to him. I therefore gave attention to those who are born twins. Most of them emerge from the womb in succession at a brief interval of time. They may contend that in the realm of nature this interval has considerable consequences. But it cannot be recorded by human observation and noted in the tables that the astrologer will inspect to give a true forecast. Moreover, the forecasts will not be true. Someone inspecting the identical tables ought to have been able to say that Esau and Jacob would have the same destiny. Yet things turned out differently in each case. Therefore he would be giving an incorrect prediction. If his forecast were correct, he would not predict the same destiny; yet the stars he studied were identical. Therefore a true forecast is based not on art but on chance.

You Lord, most just controller of the universe by your hidden discernment, act on those who consult fortune-tellers and those who are consulted, though they are unaware of it. So when someone consults a futurologist and he hears what he should hear, that is dependent on the hidden merits of souls and the profundity of your just judgement. Let not man say 'What is this? Why is that?' Let him not say it, let him not say it; for he is man.

vii (11) You, my helper, delivered me in this way from those chains. I was seeking the origin of evil and here was no solution. But you did not allow fluctuations in my thinking to carry me away from the faith which I held, that you exist and are immutable substance and care for humanity and judge us; moreover, that in Christ your Son our Lord, and by your scriptures commended by the authority of your Catholic Church, you have provided a way of salvation whereby humanity can come to the future life after death. These matters, therefore, were secure and firmly fortified in my mind while I was seeking feverishly for the origin of evil. What

torments my heart suffered in mental pregnancy, what groans, my God! And though I did not know it, your ears were there.

As in silence I vigorously pursued my quest, inarticulate sufferings of my heart were loudly pleading for your mercy. You knew what I endured; no human being knew. How little of it my tongue could put into words for the ears of my closest friends! Neither the time nor my powers of speech were sufficient to tell them of the full tumult of my soul. But all of it came to your hearing, how 'I roared from the groaning of my heart, and my desire was before you, and the light of my eyes was not with me' (Ps. 37: 9–11). That was inward, while I was still in externals.¹² It was not in a place; but I was fixing my attention on things contained in space, and there I found no place to rest in, nor did those external things receive me so that I could say 'It is enough and it is well'. Nor did they allow me to return where it was enough and well for me. I was superior to these external objects but inferior to you, and you are my true joy if I submit to you, and you have made subject to me what you created to be lower than me. This was the correct mean, the middle ground in which I would find health, that I should remain 'in your image', and in serving you be master of my body.

But when in my arrogance I rose against you and ran up against the Lord 'under the thick boss of my shield' (Job 15: 26), even those inferior things came on top of me and pressed me down, and there was never any relaxation or breathing space. As I gazed at them, they attacked me on all sides in massive heaps. As I thought about them, the very images of physical objects formed an obstacle to my return, as if saying 'Where are you going to, unworthy, soiled man?' This grew out of my wound, for 'you have humbled the proud like a wounded man' (Ps. 88: 11). My swelling conceit separated me from you, and the gross swelling on my face closed my eyes.

viii (12) But you, Lord 'abide for eternity and you will not be angry with us for ever' (Ecclus. 18: 1; Ps. 84: 6). You have mercy on dust and ashes, and it has pleased you to restore my deformities in your sight (Ps. 18: 15). By inward goads you stirred me to make me find it unendurable until, through my inward perception, you were

¹² The language here is full of reminiscences of Porphyry, with his Neoplatonic thesis that the knowledge of God is knowledge of nothing other than oneself, all physical and external things being abstracted. Cf. Plotinus 6. 5. 12.

a certainty to me. My swelling was reduced by your hidden healing hand, and my mind's troubled and darkened eye, under the hot dressing of salutary sorrows, was from 'day to day' (Ps. 60: 9) brought back to health.

ix (13) First you wanted to show me how you 'resist the proud and give grace to the humble' (1 Pet. 5: 5), and with what mercy you have shown humanity the way of humility in that your 'Word was made flesh and dwelt among' men (John 1: 14). Through a man puffed up with monstrous pride,¹³ you brought under my eye some books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin.¹⁴ There I read, not of course in these words, but with entirely the same sense and supported by numerous and varied reasons, 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him nothing was made. What was made is life in him; and the life was the light of men. And the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.' Moreover, the soul of man, although it bears witness of the light, is 'not that light', but God the Word is himself 'the true light which illuminates every man coming into the world'. Further, 'he was in this world, and the world was made by him, and the world did not know him'. But that 'he came to his own and his own did not receive him; but as many as received him, to them he gave the power to become sons of God by believing in his name', that I did not read there (John 1: 1-12).

(14) Again, I read there that the Word, God, is 'born not of the flesh, nor of blood, nor of the will of man nor of the will of the flesh, but of God'. But that 'the word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1: 13-14), I did not read there.

In reading the Platonic books I found expressed in different words, and in a variety of ways, that the Son, 'being in the form of the Father did not think it theft to be equal with God', because by nature he is that very thing. But that 'he took on himself the form of

¹³ The man was evidently a pagan Neoplatonist, perhaps Manlius Theodorus, a powerful figure at Milan whose patronage was important to Augustine at the time of his conversion in 386 and who was a known enthusiast for Neoplatonic ideas. Theodorus' sympathy for Christianity, however, cooled, which would explain the icy reference in the *Confessions* here. He became consul in 399, and the poet Claudian celebrated this in verse. (If pagan 'pride' marked the man in 385, he was not Theodorus.)

¹⁴ Translated by Marius Victorinus, the texts were of Plotinus and his disciple Porphyry.

a servant and emptied himself, was made in the likeness of men and found to behave as a man, and humbled himself being made obedient to death, even the death of the Cross so that God exalted him' from the dead 'and gave him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of celestial, terrestrial, and infernal beings, and every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord in the glory of God the Father' (Phil. 2: 6–11)—that these books do not have.

The books say that before all times and above all times your only-begotten Son immutably abides eternal with you, and that souls 'receive his fullness' (John 1: 16) to be blessed, and that they are renewed to be wise by participation in wisdom abiding in them. But they do not contain that 'at the right time he died for the impious' (Rom. 5: 6), and that you 'did not spare your only Son but gave him up for us all' (Rom. 8: 32). For you have hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to babes, that toiling and burdened they should come to him to be restored. For he is meek and humble of heart (Matt. 11: 25–9), and he directs the meek in judgement and teaches the docile his ways (Ps. 24: 9), seeing our humble condition and toil, and forgiving all our sins (Ps. 24: 18). But those who, like actors, wear the high boots of a supposedly more sublime teaching do not hear him who says 'Learn of me, that I am meek and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls' (Matt. 11: 29). Even if they know 'God, they do not glorify him as God or give thanks, but are lost in their own thoughts and their foolish heart is obscured; professing themselves wise, they have become fools' (Rom. 1: 21–3).

(15) So also I read of 'the glory of your incorruption' changed into idols and various images 'in the likeness of corruptible man and birds and beasts and serpents', that is the Egyptian food (lentils) for which Esau lost his birthright (Gen. 25: 33 f.). Your firstborn people honoured an animal's head instead of you, 'being turned in heart towards Egypt' (Acts 7: 39) and making your image, their own soul, bow down before a calf that eats hay (Ps. 105: 20). I found this in those books and did not feed on it.¹⁵ It pleased you, Lord, to 'remove from Jacob the opprobrium of being junior' (Ps. 118: 22), and that the 'elder should serve the younger' (Rom. 9: 13); and you

¹⁵ The Platonist books offered good philosophy, marred by bad polytheism.

called the Gentiles into your inheritance. And I had come to you from the Gentiles and fixed my attention on the gold which you willed your people to take from Egypt, since the gold was yours, wherever it was.¹⁶ And through your apostle you said to the Athenians, 'In you we live and move and are' (Acts 17: 28), as also some of the pagans have said. And Athens is where these books [of the Platonists] came from.¹⁷ I did not give attention to the idols of the Egyptians which they served with your gold and 'changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator' (Rom. 1: 25).

x (16) By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself.¹⁸ With you as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper (Ps. 29: 11). I entered and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind—not the light of every day, obvious to anyone, nor a larger version of the same kind which would, as it were, have given out a much brighter light and filled everything with its magnitude.¹⁹ It was not that light, but a different thing, utterly different from all our kinds of light. It transcended my mind, not in the way that oil floats on water, nor as heaven is above earth. It was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it. The person who knows the truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it.²⁰ Eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity: you are my God. To you I sigh 'day and night' (Ps. 42: 2). When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is Being, and that I who saw am not yet Being. And you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe.²¹ And I found myself far from you 'in the region of dissimilarity',²²

¹⁶ The spoiling of the Egyptians by the Hebrews (Exod. 3: 22; 11:2) was for Irenaeus and Augustine (here and elsewhere) an allegory of the Christian right to select truth from pagan texts without accepting polytheism. The Exodus passage was ridiculed by the Manichees.

¹⁷ In fact Plotinus taught in Rome, Porphyry lived in Sicily; but Athens was the symbolic home of classical Greek philosophy (e.g. *City of God* 18. 9).

¹⁸ Plotinus 5. 1. 1.

¹⁹ Ibid. 5. 3. 9. 10 f; 5. 3. 12. 40 f.

²⁰ Ibid. 1. 6. 7. 2 'one who has seen the good, the desire of every soul, knows what I mean when I say it is beautiful'; Plotinus continues that it is known with the passion of love. Similarly 6. 9. 9. 46.

²¹ Ibid. 1. 6. 7. 12–19.

²² Ibid. 1. 8. 13. 15 f. (from Plato, *Statesman* 273d).

and heard as it were your voice from on high: 'I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me.'

And I recognized that 'because of iniquity you discipline man' and 'cause my soul to waste away like a spider's web' (Ps. 38: 14), and I said: 'Surely truth cannot be nothing, when it is not diffused through space, either finite or infinite?' And you cried from far away: 'Now, I am who I am' (Exod. 3: 14). I heard in the way one hears within the heart, and all doubt left me.²³ I would have found it easier to doubt whether I was myself alive than that there is no truth 'understood from the things that are made' (Rom. 1: 20).

xi (17) And I considered the other things below you, and I saw that neither can they be said absolutely to be or absolutely not to be. They are because they come from you. But they are not because they are not what you are. That which truly is is that which unchangeably abides. But 'it is good for me to stick fast to God' (Ps. 72: 28); for if I do not abide in him, I can do nothing (John 15: 5). But he 'abiding in himself makes all things new' (Wisd. 7: 27). 'You are my Lord because you have no need of my goodness' (Ps. 15: 2).

xii (18) It was obvious to me that things which are liable to corruption are good. If they were the supreme goods, or if they were not good at all, they could not be corrupted. For if they were supreme goods, they would be incorruptible. If there were no good in them, there would be nothing capable of being corrupted. Corruption does harm and unless it diminishes the good, no harm would be done. Therefore either corruption does not harm, which cannot be the case, or (which is wholly certain) all things that are corrupted suffer privation of some good. If they were to be deprived of all good, they would not exist at all. If they were to exist and to be immune from corruption, they would be superior because they would be permanently incorruptible. What could be more absurd than to say that by losing all good, things are made better? So then, if they are deprived of all good, they will be nothing at all. Therefore as long as they exist, they are good.²⁴ Accordingly, whatever things

²³ On the total assurance given by the vision of the Good, see Plotinus 5. 5. 2.

²⁴ Augustine frequently states the Platonic axiom that existence is a good: cf. below, XIII. xxxi (46); Plotinus 1. 7. 2.

exist are good, and the evil into whose origins I was inquiring is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would be good. Either it would be an incorruptible substance, a great good indeed, or a corruptible substance, which could be corrupted only if it were good. Hence I saw and it was made clear to me that you made all things good, and there are absolutely no substances which you did not make. As you did not make all things equal, all things are good in the sense that taken individually they are good, and all things taken together are very good. For our God has made 'all things very good' (Gen. 1: 31).

xiii (19) For you evil does not exist at all, and not only for you but for your created universe, because there is nothing outside it which could break in and destroy the order which you have imposed upon it. But in the parts of the universe, there are certain elements which are thought evil because of a conflict of interest. These elements are congruous with other elements and as such are good, and are also good in themselves. All these elements which have some mutual conflict of interest are congruous with the inferior part of the universe which we call earth. Its heaven is cloudy and windy, which is fitting for it.

It is far from my mind now to say, 'Would that those things did not exist!' If I were to regard them in isolation, I would indeed wish for something better; but now even when they are taken alone, my duty is to praise you for them. That you are to be praised is shown by dragons on earth, and all deeps, fire, hail, snow, ice, the hurricane and tempest, which perform your word—mountains and all hills, fruitful trees and all cedars, beasts and all cattle, reptiles and winged birds; kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all judges of the earth, young men and maidens, old men with younger: let them praise your name (Ps. 148: 7–12). Moreover, let these from the heavens praise you: let all your angels praise you in the height, our God all your powers, sun and moon, all stars and light, the heaven of heavens and the waters that are above the heavens: let them praise your name (Ps. 148: 1–5).

I no longer wished individual things to be better, because I considered the totality. Superior things are self-evidently better than inferior. Yet with a sounder judgement I held that all things taken together are better than superior things by themselves.

xiv (20) 'There is no health' (Ps. 37: 4, 8) in those who are displeased by an element in your creation, just as there was none in me when I was displeased by many things you had made. Because my soul did not dare to say that my God displeased me, it refused to attribute to you whatever was displeasing. Hence it came to adopt the opinion that there are two substances. But it found no rest and spoke a strange language. Returning from this deviation, it created for itself a god pervading all places in infinite space. It imagined this god to be you and installed him at its heart. It again became the temple of its own idol, an abomination to you. But afterwards you calmed my head without my realizing it, and 'shut my eyes that they should not see vanity' (Ps. 118: 37). I relaxed a little and my mad folly was put to sleep. I woke up in you and saw you to be infinite in another sense, and this way of seeing you did not come from the flesh.

xv (21) I turned my gaze on other things. I saw that to you they owe their existence, and that in you all things are finite, not in the sense that the space they occupy is bounded but in the sense that you hold all things in your hand by your truth. So all things are real insofar as they have being, and the term 'falsehood' applies only when something is thought to have being which does not. And I saw that each thing is harmonious not only with its place but with its time, and that you alone are eternal and did not first begin to work after innumerable periods of time. For all periods of time both past and future neither pass away nor come except because you bring that about, and you yourself permanently abide.

xvi (22) I learnt by experience that it is no cause for surprise when bread which is pleasant to a healthy palate is misery to an unhealthy one; and to sick eyes light which is desirable to the healthy is hateful. The wicked are displeased by your justice, even more by vipers and the worm which you created good, being well fitted for the lower parts of your creation. To these lower parts the wicked themselves are well fitted, to the extent that they are dissimilar to you, but they can become fitted for the higher parts insofar as they become more like you. I inquired what wickedness is; and I did not find a substance but a perversity of will twisted away from the highest substance, you O God, towards inferior things, rejecting its own inner life (Ecclus. 10: 10) and swelling with external matter.

xvii (23) I was astonished to find that already I loved you, not a phantom surrogate for you. But I was not stable in the enjoyment of my God. I was caught up to you by your beauty and quickly torn away from you by my weight.²⁵ With a groan I crashed into inferior things. This weight was my sexual habit. But with me there remained a memory of you. I was in no kind of doubt to whom I should attach myself, but was not yet in a state to be able to do that. 'The body, which is corruptible, weighs down the soul, and our earthly habitation drags down the mind to think many things' (Wisd. 9: 15). Moreover, I was wholly certain that your invisible nature 'since the foundation of the world is understood from the things which are made, that is your eternal power and divinity' (Rom. 1: 20).

I asked myself why I approved of the beauty of bodies, whether celestial or terrestrial, and what justification I had for giving an unqualified judgement on mutable things, saying 'This ought to be thus, and that ought not to be thus'. In the course of this inquiry why I made such value judgements as I was making, I found the unchangeable and authentic eternity of truth to transcend my mutable mind. And so step by step I ascended from bodies to the soul which perceives through the body, and from there to its inward force, to which bodily senses report external sensations, this being as high as the beasts go. From there again I ascended to the power of reasoning to which is to be attributed the power of judging the deliverances of the bodily senses. This power, which in myself I found to be mutable, raised itself to the level of its own intelligence, and led my thinking out of the ruts of habit. It withdrew itself from the contradictory swarms of imaginative fantasies, so as to discover the light by which it was flooded. At that point it had no hesitation in declaring that the unchangeable is preferable to the changeable, and that on this ground it can know the unchangeable, since, unless it could somehow know this, there would be no certainty in preferring it to the mutable. So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to that which is. At that moment I saw your 'invisible nature understood through the things which are made' (Rom. 1: 20). But I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. My weakness reasserted itself, and I returned to my customary condition. I carried with me

²⁵ Closely similar language in Plotinus 6. 9. 4. 16-23. Plotinus also asks why the experience of mystical union with God is so transient (6. 9. 10). See also below x. xl (65).

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.

xviii (24) I sought a way to obtain strength enough to enjoy you; but I did not find it until I embraced ‘the mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim. 2: 5), ‘who is above all things, God blessed for ever’ (Rom. 9: 5). He called and said ‘I am the way and the truth and the life’ (John 14: 6). The food which I was too weak to accept he mingled with flesh, in that ‘The Word was made flesh’ (John 1: 14), so that our infant condition might come to suck milk from your wisdom by which you created all things. To possess my God, the humble Jesus, I was not yet humble enough. I did not know what his weakness was meant to teach.

Your Word, eternal truth, higher than the superior parts of your creation, raises those submissive to him to himself. In the inferior parts he built for himself a humble house of our clay. By this he detaches from themselves those who are willing to be made his subjects and carries them across to himself, healing their swelling and nourishing their love. They are no longer to place confidence in themselves, but rather to become weak. They see at their feet divinity become weak by his sharing in our ‘coat of skin’ (Gen. 3: 21).²⁶ In their weariness they fall prostrate before this divine weakness which rises and lifts them up.

xix (25) I had a different notion, since I thought of Christ my Lord only as a man of excellent wisdom which none could equal.²⁷ I thought his wonderful birth from a virgin was an example of despising temporal things to gain immortality for us, and such divine care for us gave him great authority as teacher. But the mystery of the Word made flesh I had not begun to guess. I had only realized from the writings handed down concerning him that he ate and drank, slept, walked, was filled with joy, was sad, conversed. I knew that his flesh was not united to your Word without a soul and

²⁶ Augustine often allegorizes the ‘coats of skin’ of Adam and Eve to mean the mortality of the human condition.

²⁷ This was Porphyry’s opinion, coupled with the rejection of the Church as mistakenly believing him to be divine: see *City of God* 10. 27–9. Porphyry, however, is not known to have accepted the Virgin Birth and to regard that as the ground of Jesus’ special distinction as a wise man. Augustine associates this last opinion with Photinus who denied Christ’s pre-existence before the incarnation, affirmed the Virgin Birth, and believed Christ wise through God’s inspiration rather than to be the personal presence of God’s wisdom. Condemned for heresy in 351, Photinus retained admirers.

a human mind. Everyone knows this if he knows the immutability of your Word. I knew it to the best of my understanding, nor had I the least doubt on the subject. To move the body's limbs at will at one moment, not another, to be affected by an emotion at one time, not another, to utter wise judgement by signs at one moment, at another to keep silence: these are characteristic marks of the soul and mind with their capacity to change. If the writings about him were wrong in so describing him, everything else would be suspected of being a lie, and there would remain no salvation for the human race based on faith in these books. So because the scriptures are true, I acknowledged the whole man to be in Christ, not only the body of a man or soul and body without a mind, but a fully human person. I thought that he 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.

Alypius, on the other hand, thought Catholics believed him to be God clothed in flesh in the sense that in Christ there was only God and flesh. He did not think they held him to possess a human soul and mind. Because he was quite convinced that the actions recorded in the memorials of Christ could not have been done except by a created being endowed with life and reason, his move towards the Christian faith was slower. But later when he knew that this was the error of the Apollinarian heretics,²⁸ he was glad to conform to the Catholic faith. For my part I admit it was some time later that I learnt, in relation to the words 'The Word was made flesh', how Catholic truth is to be distinguished from the false opinion of Photinus.

The rejection of heretics brings into relief what your Church holds and what sound doctrine maintains. 'It was necessary for heresies to occur so that the approved may be made manifest' (1 Cor. 11: 19) among the weak.

xx (26) At that time, after reading the books of the Platonists and learning from them to seek for immaterial truth, I turned my attention to your 'invisible nature understood through the things

²⁸ Alypius was held back by his beliefs (a) that the gospels describe a real human being, (b) that the Church holds the incarnate Lord to be God veiled in flesh only, without a human mind. He was liberated when he found that the latter opinion had been censured as heresy when taught by Apollinaris of Laodicea in Syria during the 360s and 370s. Ambrose of Milan emphatically rejected Apollinaris' opinion.

which are made' (Rom. 1: 20). But from the disappointment I suffered I perceived that the darkneses of my soul would not allow me to contemplate these sublimities. Yet I was certain that you are infinite without being infinitely diffused through finite space. I was sure that you truly are, and are always the same; that you never become other or different in any part or by any movement of position, whereas all other things derive from you, as is proved by the fact that they exist. Of these conceptions I was certain; but to enjoy you I was too weak. I prattled on as if I were expert, but unless I had sought your way in Christ our Saviour (Titus 1: 4), I would have been not expert but expunged. I began to want to give myself airs as a wise person. I was full of my punishment, but I shed no tears of penitence. Worse still, I was puffed up with knowledge (1 Cor. 8: 1). Where was the charity which builds on the foundation of humility which is Christ Jesus? When would the Platonist books have taught me that? I believe that you wanted me to encounter them before I came to study your scriptures. Your intention was that the manner in which I was affected by them should be imprinted in my memory, so that when later I had been made docile by your books and my wounds were healed by your gentle fingers, I would learn to discern and distinguish the difference between presumption and confession, between those who see what the goal is but not how to get there and those who see the way which leads to the home of bliss, not merely as an end to be perceived but as a realm to live in. For if I had first been formed in mind by your holy books, and if you had made me know your sweetness by familiarity with them, and then I had thereafter met those volumes, perhaps they would have snatched me away from the solid foundation of piety. Or if I had remained firm in the conviction which I had imbibed to my soul's health, I might have supposed that the same ideas could be gained from those books by someone who had read only them.

xxi (27) With avid intensity I seized the sacred writings of your Spirit and especially the apostle Paul. Where at one time I used to think he contradicted himself and the text of his words disagreed with the testimonies of the law and the prophets, the problems simply vanished. The holy oracles now presented to me a simple face, and I learnt to 'rejoice with trembling' (Ps. 111: 7). I began reading and found that all the truth I had read in the Platonists was

stated here together with the commendation of your grace, so that he who sees should 'not boast as if he had not received' both what he sees and also the power to see. 'For what has he which he has not received?' (1 Cor. 4: 7). Moreover, he is not only admonished to see you, who remain ever the same, but also healed to make it possible for him to hold on to you. So also the person who from a distance cannot yet see, nevertheless walks along the path by which he may come and see and hold you.

Even if a man 'delights in God's law in the inner man', what will he do with 'the other law in his members fighting against the law of his mind and bringing him into captivity under the law of sin, which is in his members?' (Rom. 7: 22-3). For you, Lord, are just. But 'we have sinned, we have done wickedly' (Dan. 3: 27, 29), we have behaved impiously (1 Kgs. 8: 47), and 'your hand has been heavy upon us' (Ps. 31: 4). We have been justly handed over to the ancient sinner, the president of death, who has persuaded us to conform our will to his will which 'did not remain in your truth' (John 8: 44).

What will wretched man do? 'Who will deliver him from this body of death' except your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 7: 24), who is your coeternal Son, whom you 'created in the beginning of your ways' (Prov. 8: 22). In him 'the prince of this world' (John 14: 30) found nothing worthy of death and killed him, and 'the decree which was against us was cancelled' (Col. 2: 14).

None of this is in the Platonist books. Those pages do not contain the face of this devotion, tears of confession, your sacrifice, a troubled spirit, a contrite and humble spirit (Ps. 50: 19), the salvation of your people, the espoused city (Rev. 21: 5), the guarantee of your Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5: 5), the cup of our redemption. In the Platonic books no one sings: 'Surely my soul will be submissive to God? From him is my salvation; he is also my God and my saviour who upholds me; I shall not be moved any more' (Ps. 61: 2-3).

No one there hears him who calls 'Come to me, you who labour' (Matt. 11: 28). They disdain to learn from him, for 'he is meek and humble of heart'. 'For you have concealed these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes' (Matt. 11: 25).

It is one thing from a wooded summit to catch a glimpse of the homeland of peace and not to find the way to it, but vainly to attempt the journey along an impracticable route surrounded by the

ambushes and assaults of fugitive deserters with their chief, ‘the lion and the dragon’ (Ps. 90: 13). It is another thing to hold on to the way that leads there, defended by the protection of the heavenly emperor. There no deserters from the heavenly army lie waiting to attack. For this way they hate like a torture.

In surprising ways these thoughts had a visceral effect on me as I read ‘the least’ of your apostles (1 Cor. 15: 9). I meditated upon your works and trembled (Hab. 3: 2).