A History of Philosophy
20 Augustine and Neo-Platonism
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We're turning our attention today to Saint Augustine. And at the end of the hour last Wednesday, which was the last time we met, recall, the end of the hour last Wednesday, I was making some comments in response to some questions about my way of looking at the history of philosophy. If you like, it's an attempt at a philosophy of the history of philosophy.

That is to say, what I see is a variety of worldview traditions developing along parallel paths throughout the history of Western thought. There are certain major junctures in the history of thought, in the transition from ancient and medieval to modern, that is to say, about the time of the Renaissance, and in the transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism and post-modern thought, which is around 1800 to 1900. In there, Romanticism, Renaissance, rather, 1400, 1500, in that period.

And I'm suggesting that the distinctives of these three main periods have to do with scientific models that change, or scientific paradigms, as they're sometimes called. Where you have the Greek science, with its emphasis on explanation in terms of form, essence, and matter, mechanistic science coming out of the scientific revolution in terms of matter and motion, and then more organic conceptions of nature in the 19th century. In biology, of course, there is developmental theory, and the whole notion of biosystems in the 20th century in physics, field theory, electromagnetic field theory, and relativity of space-time, but more relationally-oriented systems.

OK? So you have here the emphasis on essences, fixed essences or forms. Here it's on the mechanistic model, and here it's a more relational or organic unity kind of model. Now, the point is that whether you are dealing with naturalistic philosophies, idealistic philosophies, or theistic philosophies of Jewish or Christian origin, all of these are working with the same model during that period of time.

And then in the course of transition, you have to work with the mechanistic model, and so forth. Now it's not so much that everybody suddenly stops working with essences. No, it's rather works something like this: you get one philosophical view developing that starts back with the Greeks and continues less prominently thereafter, another that starts in the Renaissance and continues less prominently thereafter, another that starts in the 19th and 20th centuries and goes strong.

You see? So you have these three continuing in parallel, often within one worldview tradition. So in that sense, you get Christian philosophers working with Greek

theories of forms, Plutonic, Aristotelian, and so forth. You also get Christian philosophers working with mechanistic conceptions like Descartes and others.

Christian philosophers were working with more organic conceptions in the 19th century. Hegel sees himself that way, though that might lead to some quibbling about the definition of the term Christian. But that sort of thing.

So the complexity of the thing is there. But basically, I think it helps to think of a plurality of worldview traditions with an ongoing history in interaction with each other, but working with the conceptual apparatus provided by the current cultural understandings of nature. Now, the cultural understandings of nature which we have been tracing thus far have been Greek.

Plutonic, especially. Aristotelianism will come forward again as we move on to around the time of Thomas Aquinas. But by virtue of the ongoing presence and activity of Middle Platonism in the Alexandrian scene, and then of Neoplatonism, the thinking of Christians in the West was, at the outset of the Middle Ages, overwhelmingly Platonic.

And by platonic, you have to mean Neoplatonic. Overwhelmingly that way. And Augustine provides an example of this.

But as I indicated last time, there are problems in absorbing, assimilating, hook, line, and sinker, the totality of a pagan philosophy. And so the intent, the attitude from the beginnings in the Alexandrian school onwards through the Middle Ages is that significant philosophical changes have to be made to these Greek schemes in adapting them into some coherence with Jewish or Christian or Islamic theology, as the case may be. Significant changes.

But at the same time, tremendous help was gained from them. And the initial illustration we had of that was the way in which the Alexandrian school found Middle Platonism very helpful in responding to the dualism of the Gnostics and the problem of evil that was involved in the Gnostic view of matter as evil. Platonism enabled them to say that by virtue of the forms which give order to nature, the material world is not evil.

It's good. And after all, the Christian wants to say that it's not the fact that we have bodies that's the source of the evil in us. Something other than that, he'll say.

Well, the same is true as we get to Augustine. Augustine of Hippo, born in 354, died in 430. Tremendously influential figure, and I think it's fair to say the first systematic thinker whose thinking encompassed the range of philosophical issues, theological issues as well, whose influences persisted in the West.

It's not to say there weren't important thinkers in the Eastern Church. The Cappadocian Fathers, if you hear of them, Gregory of Nyssa and others in the Black Sea area, were influential in shaping the Eastern Church, also with Platonic influence, but along more mystical lines than in the West. But certainly it's Augustine who, by all measures, stands out.

And what we want to do, then, is to look at Augustine. How many of you have ever read Augustine's Confessions? Confess. Half a dozen or so.

The rest of you, sometimes, do it. You know, I said you're not educated until you've read the Republic. Well, add to that list the Confessions, Augustine's Confessions.

In a way, it's an inspirational classic. In another way, it's an intellectual autobiography. In another way, it's a profound treatise on the nature of the human soul.

It's all of that and more. But one of the things that you get from simply reading the storyline, and I suppose that's what we do at the first reading. I remember when I read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.

You remember that book? I found I was reading it simply for the travelogue involved, rather than the philosophy involved. Well, read Augustine for the travelogue involved. And you'll find that in his life journey in his early years, while raised by a mother who was Christian, his father apparently pagan, he drifted in his early years into Manichaean dualism.

Now, Manichaeism was a fourth-century version of that Gnosticism, more explicitly dualistic than many other versions, in the sense that they saw two eternal realms of being, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. The light is good, the darkness evil. The light is the light of reason.

The darkness, the confused world of material existence. And it was a form of dualism that had some roots in Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsees now, but had a Christian veneer to it, so that they conceived that this eternal conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, was such that when the kingdom of light sent his son into the world of darkness, the light was captured and imprisoned in a body. Get the platonic note? And imprisoned in a body.

However, when hounded to his death, the body turned out to be phenomenal, illusory, not real. And so the victim rose, quote, from the dead, triumphing over evil, the body. Well, the implication of all of this was that if the body is evil, the way of salvation lies in a life of self-denial and asceticism in order to escape the body.

And Augustine, thinking of the relative wildness of his youth, was attracted to this explanation of evil. Oh, until he met some of the traveling lecturers in the Manichean lecture circuit and started quizzing them and became disillusioned with their capacity to answer the questions. The problem that he saw with Manichean dualism was that it provided no hope for the triumph of good over evil if the two are locked in an everlasting conflict.

No hope. And that it reduced humans to simply pawns in an everlasting conflict that ultimately they had nothing to do with Static. And he wasn't happy with either of those implications.

But the thing which finally helped him to get beyond Manicheanism was being introduced to Neoplatonism. Oh, not directly. In between, he had a time when he was attracted to the skepticism of the academic skeptics, people like Carneades and his fallibilism, and so forth.

But then, eventually, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, introduced him to Neoplatonism. And that provided the vehicle for his thinking his way beyond dualism towards a consistent Christian theism. In fact, in many ways, it was a vehicle by virtue of which he was able to become a Christian.

Now, what was it then in Neoplatonism that helped him? What were his debts to Neoplatonism? And that material on reserve from Augustine's City of God, Book Eight, tells why he thought so highly of Plato and Platonism. He gives you the whole bag in that context. Read it.

It's very worthwhile. But in summary, the things which he gains from Platonism are, first, the idea that God is not a material being, as the Stoics had held and the Manicheans had held, but that God is an incorporeal spirit, that God is the source of all being, not just half of it, but all of it, that God is the good. And you'll notice on the very first page of his confessions that much-quoted line of his, thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.

You see, Augustine sees an inner teleology such that all creation seeks to turn to God, the source, purpose of being, the good. You see? So God is the source of being. God is the good.

As a result, in the Neoplatonic tradition, evil is a privation, a perversion, a corruption of something that's good. It doesn't have a separate existence, as it does for the Manicheans. Evil is parasitical on the good.

It's not something quite independent in itself. And the human soul is immaterial as well. If God can be an incorporeal spirit, so can the human soul be an incorporeal spirit.

And he argues, interestingly, about that, that the soul is able to distribute, to take it back, to distinguish. The soul is able to distinguish between true and false without use of sense experience by dialectic. Oh, so the soul seems to be in its functioning, capable of independence from bodily input.

And the soul in its thinking can embrace vast reaches of space and time, time in memory, space in imagination. Yeah, the soul is not limited by space and time like the body is. Why? The explanation, it's an immaterial spirit.

Yes, sir. Well, his debt to Platonism then runs through all of this. And as a result, he echoes the Platonic emphasis on two loves.

You remember that in Plato. And it was there in the Neoplatonists. There is a love, taking the divided line, a love for things below and a love for things above.

In the Neoplatonic scheme, it's getting immersed in desire for things below, which causes the fall of the soul into a body and its enslavement in a body. And the escape is by virtue of this third level of the soul in between, which is where the intellect dwells, so the intellect can save us by focusing attention on things above. Well, that's the way it was in Neoplatonists.

Augustine likes the story of two loves, but he doesn't like to think that it's the intellect that saves us. That's not where the source of hope is. And so you see where he's going to have to make some modifications.

But the result of this emphasis on two loves is that Augustine develops his Christian ethic as an ethic of love. You see, translating not just in terms of eros, but in the New Testament, agape, what in his Latin becomes caritas, our English word charity, caritas, an ethic of love. And the central theme of his ethic is that it is love which is the underlying significance of the whole moral law.

He talks of not just the Ten Commandments, the way the New Testament does, love is the fulfilling of the law, but he talks of the Greek virtues, temperance, courage, wisdom, justice, and argues that love is the fulfilling of those, so that courage is loving God most and therefore braving all else well. Justice is honoring God and, therefore, ruling all else well. You see, love finds expression in the various virtues.

Well, those are the kinds of debts that he finds in Neoplatonism. And doubtless the kinds of things which we've all appreciated as we've been thinking of Plato over these last several weeks. But the problems that he has with Neoplatonism focus on these two areas, two problems with regard to, if you like, how to convert Plato to Christianity.

How? Well, with regards to the problem of evil, he's pretty explicit that at least the evil in us, the evil in the human soul, is not due to the way in which a body drags us down in some deterministic fashion. No. But rather, he argues, the evil that we do is because of the free choice of will.

And Augustine moves to a voluntaristic account of human behavior. A voluntaristic account of free will. And because our sin is a result of free choice of the will, deliverance does not come through contemplating the higher good, but from freely choosing and loving the higher good.

In other words, Augustine saw clearly that his disagreement with Platonism was because of the gospel. Where the Christian gospel makes it plain that it is in a willing and full love for God that one finds deliverance. Now, inasmuch as the evil we do is not because the body drags us down, it follows that Augustine is going to develop a higher view of the body than was prevalent in a lot of Platonic thought.

Plotinus, while not actually speaking of the body as evil, after all, the Neoplatonists couldn't do that if material things are ordered by forms. At least he thought that bodily involvements were things to avoid. So while he advised Roman statesmen who came to visit him, he refused to get involved in politics.

He wanted nothing to do with affairs of this life. He tended to neglect his bodily well-being and so forth. Wasn't particular about what he ate, so forth.

But Augustine disagrees. In his earlier writings, he's closer to the Neoplatonists. And you may notice that in the Confessions, he chides himself because he enjoys eating.

And he plays with the distinction between living to eat and eating to live. Comes to the conclusion that he had tended to live to eat, rather than to eat to live. And he doesn't seem to have a particularly high view of the marital relationship.

He seems to think that sexual desire is in itself evil. And that's because of the body's captivating, dragging us. But as time went on, and later he wrote retractions on some of his earlier writings, he gave more and more attention to the positive value of bodily things.

And wrote extensively on the importance of an education that gets one into an appreciation of music and mathematics, not only for the cultivation of the mind, but because of good gifts of God's ordered creation, which enable us to appreciate the earthly creation more. Well, in the final analysis, then for Augustine, the middle level, which is the decisive level between the higher and the lower in our lives, is not going to be intellect, but is going to be the will, a free choice of will. And that feeds into his discussion of evil and good.

Reason cannot overcome the passions, because in the final analysis, we are not ruled by what we know. We are ruled by what we love. And that's the crucial difference for Augustine.

We're not ruled by what we know. We're ruled by what we love. Now, that's not to separate knowing and loving.

He doesn't separate them. But he does make a distinction that the empowerment is in the loving, not in the knowing. Now, it's this, I think, which marks one of the major breaks between Greek thought and Christian thought.

Because you've noticed it, and I've noticed it in your papers as you've written about the Greeks, that in various ways they seem to say that we're ruled by reason, the rule of reason in the moral life. There are some readings of Plato, I think, lopsided and mistaken. Some readings of Plato say that if you know what's good, you'll do what's good, as if it's automatic.

Well, I don't think it's automatic in Plato. But for Plato, it's not, however, a matter of free choice of the will, as it is for Augustine. This is the major difference, I think, in those regards.

In moral philosophy, the major difference is the role of the will. And he's pushed in that direction because of the implications of the gospel. Now, the second area of major difference, oh, incidentally, on this first one, it becomes apparent that Augustine shares Plato's concern about the improvement of the soul.

That Plato shares, Augustine shares Plato's concern about the improvement of the soul. Very much so. The same kind of thing.

In fact, he argues in one place that Jesus Christ brings to fulfillment all of Plato's philosophical hopes, and says in another place that if Plato were a Christian today, no, take it back, if Plato were alive today, 400 AD, he would become a Christian. Simply because his philosophy was leaning so much in that direction. OK, now the other area of problem that he sees is in the Neoplatonic notion of emanation.

You know that outflowing from the one that is the good of all other things. Such that there is an inner determinism within the being of the one to, as it were, emit from within its own being not only the noose and the world's soul and other intermediary beings, but also finite souls coming out from the world's soul and everything emanating from the one. Now that bothers Augustine, and in our language, he begins to see quite clearly the difference between pantheism and theism.

Between pantheism, which sees things as a result of emanation, and theism, which sees things as a result of being created out of nothing. Not out of God, but out of nothing. Ex nihilo.

His objection to emanation is several-fold. Some of his remarks seem to be more satirical, rhetorical, but they seem to have a point in them. He says, for instance, that if the theory of emanation is right, then when an animal is butchered, part of God is being slaughtered.

And when a naughty boy is punished, a part of God is being whipped. It would mean that parts of God are lewd, wicked, dirty, and so forth. Well, if that's the case, then God is not altogether the good.

Well, I don't think it takes much imagination to see how Plotinus would respond to that. That you're not talking of parts of God, you're talking of emanations out of the divine being, suffering from privation of being. Therefore, privation of form, privation of ordered unity.

And you account for the evils in that way. But, on the other hand, Augustine objects to the notion of intermediary beings. And you remember in the Middle Platonism, certainly in the earlier Neopythagoreanism, also in Philo of Alexandria, with the Middle Platonism that he adopted, there were, in addition to God, the One, and the Logos, a whole hierarchy of intermediary beings.

Angelic beings or whatever. Angelic beings in Philo's thinking. Other deities in the thinking of pagan Middle Platonists.

And some of this carries over into Neoplatonic thinking, according to Augustine. And he is troubled by this. In order to influence us, his creatures, God has to work through all these intermediary beings.

Isn't the Christian story that God acts directly? What about the Incarnation? Isn't that a direct presence of God in his creation? Now, part of what else is involved in those intermediary beings and the theory of emanation is the fact that all of the intermediate beings are inferior to those above them in the hierarchy. So the noose is inferior to the One, God. The world soul is inferior to the noose, the Logos.

So you have a hierarchy of increasingly inferior beings. But that doesn't fit the Christian understanding of the Trinity. The Trinity, which is trying to say, and you remember the Nicene Creed? Not that Jesus is of a similar substance, though inferior, but of the same substance as the Father.

Do you remember the Arian controversy? We mentioned it as growing out of the Alexandrian Christianity. The tendency was to say that the Son is heteroseous with

respect to the Father. Heteroseous meaning of a different nature, of a different being, of a different essence, of a different substance.

And that would have made the Son of a similar nature, a similar substance, homoiousios. And the debate of homoious, similar, heterose, means different. This is sometimes called the battle over an iota.

But the iota makes it a totally different thing. Now, they were trying to say that Jesus is fully God, as well as fully man, of the same substance with the Father, homoiousios. Now, that was Nicaea, 325.

325. Augustine, writing three-quarters of a century later, and by the time he got to writing on the Trinity, he had written 15 books on the Trinity. Not 15 volumes, but 15 whatever, scrolls, I presume, on the Trinity.

And he insists on trying to spell this out in response to Neoplatonism with its intermediary inferior beings, he insists that what this means is that the Son is coequal with the Father and coeternal. The Chalcedonian formula, the Chalcedonian Creed, in what year was that, 451? Or was it 453? I can never get that. Whatever a thing.

What happens to free will? But on the other hand, if God creates ex nihilo out of nothing, then the inner dynamics of God's inner being, finally, that reason is sufficient to rule life. Because if we're of the very being of God, then human reason is part of the divine reason. Human reason is a finite manifestation of divine reason if we're part of the being of God by emanation.

And it's in the self-understanding of human reason, therefore, that we would gain the truth. ...is to start asking himself about the relationship between reason and revelation. Authority.

And the essential, or if you like, the ontological ordering in the very nature of being itself. Now, chronologically in our experience, chronologically in our own experience and thinking, it's always authority that comes first. After all, the things that our knowledge starts with and builds on are things we learn from others who tell us.

Parents, whatever sources. And in... knowledge and reasoning take off from there. Faith... That is to say, in the very nature of reality, this is an ordered, rational, intelligible universe created by a rational, intelligent deity.

And in that sense, reason is first. And it's because of the rationality of God, the rational universe, that there is authority at all. And that the authority can precede reason in us creatures.

So, an interplay of reason and authority that's going to affect his epistemology. And understanding is faith's reward. It's faith.

Faith is the understanding's step. That's the chronological sequence. And as a result, understanding is faith's reward.

With that belief, then all sorts of understanding begin to open up. Further implications follow. Well, that's my initial picture of Augustine.

Let me pause there and measure, as it's called, that evil is a loss of order. Of ordered unity. Harmony.

And inasmuch as ordered unity is a product of form, evil is a failure to participate as fully as we could in form. It's a loss of form. A privation of form.

Inasmuch as a thing's essential being is measured by the form, evil is, in measure, privation of essential being. Now, in all those regards, things are created out of nothing. And since they're created out of nothing, they have a tendency to return to nothing.

Why does an apple rot? Created XD, hello? If it loses its form, what's going to happen? Back to nothing. So, for natural evil, he's thinking of the effect that all natural evil and human proclivity are built into our nature. So as to create the necessity for that kind of discipline.

Which will build not just Greek courage, but faith, trust, and love, and hope into the backbone of the human soul. Soul-making theodicy. I suspect there's some combination of the two, but he makes a clear distinction between natural and moral evil.

Irenaeus does. Yeah. Do you... So, probably, next time we can talk somewhat more systematically about how he develops the theory of forms.

How that shapes his epistemology. How does it affect his thinking about the nature of the soul? Okay.

Why does he claim that God is timeless? Topics of that sort, that are part of his philosophical contribution. Okay, on the nature of the good, look at chapter one.

The highest good than which there is no higher is God. Consequently, he's unchangeably good, hence truly eternal, truly immortal. What is of him is himself.

If he alone is unchangeable, all things he's made. Because... Then, chapter two, the beginning. For the sake of those not being able to understand that all nature, every spirit, and every body is naturally good.

Every body is naturally good. That's an interesting emphasis that we wouldn't think of making today. But he finds it necessary to make for obvious reasons.

Every spirit and every body is naturally good. But all nature, every spirit, and every body is moved by the iniquity of spirit and the mortality of body. Let's see.

That's where the changes occur. The failure of will, every spirit, and the mortality of body. Good, measure, form, order.

Four synonyms. Synonyms. Yeah, they mean the same thing.

Syn-ordered are assuredly good to a higher degree. So degrees of good are degrees of form, order, unity. Chapter four.

When it's inquired, whence is evil? It must first be inquired into what evil is. And nothing else than corruption of measure, form, order. Evil is a corruption of good. Okay.

Or of measure. He talks about watching cockfighting and talks of the beautiful movements of those bodies, even when engaged in it. Chapter eight.

From the corruption and destruction of inferior things is the beauty of the universe. The rest of things that are made of nothing, physical things, assuredly inferior to the rational soul, can be neither blessed nor miserable, but in proportion to their fashion and appearance, they're good, nor could there be good things in a lesser degree. To things falling away and succeeding, halfway to the end of the paragraph, a certain temporal beauty belongs.

Temporal beauty. Yeah, this morning I was looking out of my study window at home at our maple tree towards the back of the yard. The maple tree from which the leaves were literally falling.

There was a thin carpet of leaves of various shades of yellow, orange, and gold. And the leaves on the tree, a magnificent picture. Utterly beautiful.

But they're dying. It's in their dying that the order of nature reveals such beauty. You get the point? So even that which is a privation of form is part of the form and overall order of beauty.

Oh, we would make such a change impossible. We'd make such beauty impossible. Only God is immutable.

Only God is immutable. Yeah, we're all of us biodegradable, every one of us.