

History of Philosophy

20 Augustine and Neo-Platonism

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes examines **Saint Augustine's** integration of **Neoplatonism** into Christian theology, illustrating how shifting **scientific paradigms** influence philosophical traditions. While Augustine adopted the Neoplatonic view of God as an **incorporeal spirit** and the source of all being, he modified these Greek concepts to align with the **Gospel**. Specifically, he replaced the idea of **emanation** with the doctrine of **creation ex nihilo** and shifted the focus of human deliverance from the intellect to the **will**. By defining evil as a **privation of good** rather than a material substance, Augustine provided a framework to oppose **Manichaean dualism**. Ultimately, the text highlights Augustine's belief that humans are governed by their **loves** rather than their reason, marking a significant departure from classical Greek thought.

Briefing Document:

Briefing: Augustine and the Synthesis of Neo-Platonic Philosophy

Executive Summary

This briefing examines the philosophical contributions of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes. Augustine is identified as the first systematic thinker to bridge Greek philosophy—specifically Neo-Platonism—with Western theological frameworks. While Augustine utilized Neo-Platonic structures to move beyond the dualism of Manichaeism, he ultimately modified these Greek schemes to align with Christian theism.

Critical takeaways include:

- **The Model Shift:** Augustine's work represents a major juncture where Greek scientific models (focused on form, essence, and matter) were adapted to a Christian worldview.
- **Voluntarism over Intellectualism:** A primary divergence from Greek thought is Augustine's emphasis on the **will** over the **intellect**; he argues that humans are ruled by what they love, not merely by what they know.
- **Evil as Privation:** Augustine rejects the idea that matter is inherently evil, defining evil instead as a "privation" or corruption of order, measure, and form.
- **Creation vs. Emanation:** Augustine replaced the Neo-Platonic theory of emanation (which implies a pantheistic hierarchy) with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), preserving the distinction between the Creator and the creation.

Historical Context and Scientific Models

Dr. Holmes frames the history of Western philosophy through three primary scientific paradigms that shape worldview traditions (naturalistic, idealistic, and theistic):

Period	Scientific Model	Primary Emphasis
Ancient/Medieval	Greek Science	Form, Essence, and Matter
Renaissance (1400–1500)	Mechanistic Science	Matter and Motion
19th–20th Century	Organic/Relational	Bio-systems, Field Theory, Relativity

At the outset of the Middle Ages, Western Christian thought was "overwhelmingly Platonic," specifically influenced by Neo-Platonism. Augustine serves as the foundational example of this tradition, though he found it necessary to make "significant philosophical changes" to pagan schemes to ensure coherence with Christian theology.

Augustine's Intellectual Evolution

Augustine's journey toward Christian theism involved several distinct philosophical phases:

1. **Manichaeism:** In his youth, Augustine was attracted to this fourth-century version of Gnosticism. Manichaeism proposed two eternal kingdoms: Light (reason/good) and Darkness (matter/evil). He eventually became disillusioned with this view because it offered no hope for the triumph of good and reduced humans to "pawns" in an everlasting conflict.
2. **Academic Skepticism:** Following his departure from Manichaeism, Augustine was briefly attracted to the fallibilism of thinkers like Carneades.
3. **Neo-Platonism:** Introduced to this by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Augustine found in Neo-Platonism the vehicle to move beyond dualism. It provided the conceptual tools to view God as an incorporeal spirit rather than a material being.

Neo-Platonic Foundations (Debts to Plato)

Augustine adopted several core tenets from the Neo-Platonic tradition to build his systematic theology:

- **God as Incorporeal Spirit:** Contrary to Stoicism and Manichaeism, Augustine held that God is not material but an immaterial spirit and the source of all being.
- **The Human Soul:** He argued for the immateriality of the soul, noting its ability to distinguish truth from falsehood without sense experience (dialectic) and its capacity to transcend space and time through imagination and memory.
- **Teleology of the Good:** Following the Platonic "Divided Line," Augustine viewed God as "The Good" toward which all creation seeks to turn. This is famously summarized in his *Confessions*: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee."
- **The Ethics of Love:** Augustine adapted the Platonic "Two Loves" (higher and lower) into a Christian ethic of *caritas* (charity). He argued that love is the fulfillment of all moral laws and Greek virtues (temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice).

Critical Divergences and Modifications

Despite his debts to Neo-Platonism, Augustine made fundamental changes to adapt the philosophy to the "Gospel."

Voluntarism: The Primacy of the Will

While Greeks generally emphasized the "rule of reason," Augustine moved to a voluntaristic account of human behavior.

- **Source of Evil:** Evil in the human soul is not caused by the body "dragging us down" deterministically, but by the **free choice of the will**.
- **Empowerment:** Augustine argued that "we are not ruled by what we know; we are ruled by what we love." Deliverance comes not through contemplating the higher good (intellectualism) but through freely choosing and loving God.

The Status of the Body

Neo-Platonists like Plotinus often neglected bodily well-being, viewing the body as an entanglement to be avoided. Augustine developed a higher view:

- **Natural Goodness:** He argued that every spirit and every body is "naturally good" because it is a gift from God.
- **Education:** He advocated for the appreciation of music, mathematics, and the earthly creation as reflections of God's ordered creation.

Creation vs. Emanation

Augustine rejected the Neo-Platonic idea of "emanation"—the notion that all things flow out of God's own being.

- **The Problem of Pantheism:** He argued that if emanation were true, then any suffering or wickedness in the world would be a part of God being "slaughtered" or "whipped."
- **Ex Nihilo:** He insisted on creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). This maintains that while things are created by God, they are not *of* the substance of God.

The Trinity vs. Hierarchy

Neo-Platonism proposed a hierarchy of "intermediary beings" (the Noose, the World Soul), each inferior to the one above it.

- **Coequality:** Augustine rejected this hierarchy to defend the Christian Trinity. In his 15 books on the Trinity, he insisted that the Son is "coequal with the Father and coeternal," of the same substance (*homoousios*) rather than a different or inferior substance (*heteroseous*).

The Nature of Evil and "Soul-Making"

Augustine defined evil not as a substance, but as a "corruption of measure, form, and order."

- **Privation:** Evil is a "privation of essential being." Just as an apple rots when it loses its form, evil occurs when a thing fails to participate fully in its intended form.
- **Temporal Beauty:** Augustine noted that even the "corruption and destruction of inferior things" contributes to the "beauty of the universe." He used the example of falling autumn leaves: their dying is part of a magnificent, ordered picture of natural beauty.
- **Moral vs. Natural Evil:** He distinguished between natural evil (the tendency of things created out of nothing to return to nothing) and moral evil (the failure of the will).

Epistemology: Reason and Authority

Augustine examined the relationship between faith and logic, establishing a chronological and ontological sequence:

1. **Chronological Priority (Authority):** In human experience, authority comes first. We learn from parents and sources before we can reason for ourselves. "Faith is the understanding's step."
2. **Ontological Priority (Reason):** In the nature of reality, reason is first because the universe was created by a rational deity. Authority exists *because* of the rationality of God.

3. **Synthesis:** Augustine famously concluded that "understanding is faith's reward." Belief opens the door to deeper intellectual comprehension.
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Key Quotes

"Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee." — *Augustine, Confessions*

"We are not ruled by what we know. We are ruled by what we love." — *Dr. Arthur Holmes, summarizing Augustine*

"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." — *Augustine, excerpted from lecture notes*

"If Plato were alive today [400 AD], he would become a Christian. Simply because his philosophy was leaning so much in that direction." — *Augustine, as cited by Dr. Holmes*

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to Augustine and Neo-Platonism

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical transitions between ancient Greek thought and early Christian theology, specifically focusing on the influence of Neo-Platonism on Saint Augustine. It examines the synthesis of these traditions, the areas of significant departure, and the resulting developments in metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided historical context.

1. **What are the three major scientific paradigms described as shaping Western worldview traditions?**
 2. **How did Neo-Platonism assist early Christian thinkers in responding to Gnostic dualism regarding the material world?**
 3. **Why did Augustine eventually become disillusioned with Manichaeism dualism?**
 4. **In what way does Augustine define God as an "incorporeal spirit"?**
 5. **What evidence does Augustine provide to argue for the immaterial nature of the human soul?**
 6. **How does Augustine redefine the Greek virtues (temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice)?**
 7. **What is the "voluntaristic" account of human behavior, and how does it differ from Greek thought?**
 8. **Why did Augustine reject the Neo-Platonic theory of emanation in favor of creation *ex nihilo*?**
 9. **What was the central issue in the "battle over an iota" regarding the nature of the Trinity?**
 10. **How does Augustine describe the chronological and ontological relationship between faith and understanding?**
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Part II: Quiz Answer Key

1. **What are the three major scientific paradigms described as shaping Western worldview traditions?** The three paradigms include the Greek model focused on fixed essences, forms, and matter; the mechanistic model emerging from the scientific revolution focused on matter and motion; and the 19th-century organic/relational model focused on biosystems and field theory. These models provide the conceptual apparatus for naturalistic, idealistic, and theistic philosophies during their respective periods.

2. **How did Neo-Platonism assist early Christian thinkers in responding to Gnostic dualism regarding the material world?** Neo-Platonism allowed thinkers to argue that the material world is not inherently evil because it is given order and beauty by the forms. This shift enabled Christians to maintain that human bodies are part of a good creation rather than the primary source of evil.
3. **Why did Augustine eventually become disillusioned with Manichaeism?** Augustine found that Manichaeism provided no hope for the ultimate triumph of good since it posited an everlasting, static conflict between light and darkness. Furthermore, he realized the system reduced human beings to mere pawns with no agency in this cosmic struggle.
4. **In what way does Augustine define God as an "incorporeal spirit"?** Augustine views God as a non-material being who serves as the source of all being and the ultimate "Good." Unlike the Stoics or Manichaeans who held materialist views of deity, Augustine followed the Neo-Platonic debt of seeing God as an immaterial source to which all creation seeks to return.
5. **What evidence does Augustine provide to argue for the immaterial nature of the human soul?** He argues that the soul functions independently of bodily input by using dialectic to distinguish between true and false. Additionally, the soul's ability to embrace vast reaches of time through memory and space through imagination demonstrates that it is not limited by physical constraints like the body.
6. **How does Augustine redefine the Greek virtues (temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice)?** Augustine views love (*caritas*) as the underlying significance and fulfillment of all moral laws and virtues. For instance, he defines courage as loving God most and braving all else well, while justice is seen as honoring God and ruling all else well.
7. **What is the "voluntaristic" account of human behavior, and how does it differ from Greek thought?** Augustine's voluntarism posits that human behavior and moral failure are driven by the free choice of the will rather than being dragged down by the body or dictated solely by reason. This differs from the Greek view that we are ruled by reason, suggesting instead that humans are ruled by what they love, not merely what they know.

8. **Why did Augustine reject the Neo-Platonic theory of emanation in favor of creation *ex nihilo*?** He argued that if things emanated from God's own being, then any evil or suffering in the world (such as a boy being punished) would imply that a part of God is being punished or is wicked. Creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) maintains God's purity and establishes a clear distinction between the Creator and the creature.
9. **What was the central issue in the "battle over an iota" regarding the nature of the Trinity?** The conflict centered on whether the Son was *homoiousios* (of a similar substance/nature) or *homoousios* (of the same substance) as the Father. Augustine insisted on the latter, arguing against the Neo-Platonic hierarchy of inferior intermediary beings to assert that the Son is coequal and coeternal with the Father.
10. **How does Augustine describe the chronological and ontological relationship between faith and understanding?** Chronologically, faith and authority come first in human experience as we learn from others before we can reason for ourselves; hence, "understanding is faith's reward." Ontologically, however, reason is first because the universe is a rational, intelligible creation of a rational deity.

Part III: Essay Questions

1. **The Synthesis of Philosophy and Theology:** Discuss how Augustine utilized Neo-Platonic concepts to build a Christian worldview. To what extent did he "convert" Plato, and where did he find the Greek schemes incompatible with the Gospel?
2. **The Problem of Evil:** Compare and contrast the Manichaean view of evil as a physical realm of darkness with Augustine's Neo-Platonic view of evil as a "privation of form." How does the concept of free will alter this definition?
3. **Intellect vs. Will:** Analyze the shift from the Greek "rule of reason" to Augustine's "rule of love." How does this change the understanding of moral failure and the process of spiritual deliverance?

4. **Creation vs. Emanation:** Examine the theological and philosophical implications of choosing creation *ex nihilo* over the theory of emanation. How does this choice affect the distinction between God and nature, and the concept of the Trinity?
5. **The Nature of Beauty and Change:** Using Augustine's reflections on the "temporal beauty" of falling leaves and cockfighting, explain his argument that even corruption and the "falling away" of inferior things contribute to the ordered beauty of the universe.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Agape / Caritas	The New Testament concept of love (translated as <i>caritas</i> in Latin and "charity" in English) which Augustine identifies as the fulfillment of the moral law.
Arian Controversy	A theological dispute regarding whether the Son was of a different nature (<i>heteroseous</i>) or similar nature (<i>homoiousios</i>) to the Father, rather than the same nature.
Creation ex nihilo	The doctrine that God created the universe "out of nothing," rather than out of his own substance or pre-existing matter.
Dialectic	The process of reasoning or dialogue used by the soul to distinguish between true and false independent of sense experience.
Emanation	The Neo-Platonic theory that all things flow out of the "One" in a hierarchy of increasingly inferior beings; rejected by Augustine to preserve God's goodness.
Gnosticism	An early dualistic movement that viewed matter as evil and the body as a prison for the soul; often emphasizing salvation through secret knowledge.

Homoousios	A Greek term meaning "of the same substance," used to define the coequal relationship between the members of the Trinity.
Incorporeal Spirit	A non-physical, immaterial being; Augustine applied this definition to both God and the human soul.
Manichaeism	A 4th-century dualistic religion positing an eternal conflict between the Kingdom of Light (good/reason) and the Kingdom of Darkness (evil/matter).
Neo-Platonism	A philosophical school, stemming from Plato, emphasizing the movement of the soul toward the "One" (the Good) and viewing evil as a privation of being.
Privation	The concept that evil is not a positive substance but a corruption, perversion, or loss of the "measure, form, and order" that constitute goodness.
Soul-Making Theodicy	The idea that natural evil and human proclivities are built into nature to create a necessity for discipline that builds faith, trust, and love.
Voluntarism	A philosophical emphasis on the will (free choice) rather than the intellect as the decisive factor in human behavior and morality.