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### *Neoplatonism and Christianity*

Greek thought had considerable influence on later Christian thought. Christian awareness of Greek thought, however, was mediated by a movement of later interpreters of Plato called *Neoplatonism*. In addition to its impact on Christianity, Neoplatonism also had significant influence on Islamic thought, as we shall see.

The most influential Neoplatonist thinker was Plotinus (204–270). Plotinus emphasized the religious currents in Plato's thought, facilitating a later conflation of Platonic metaphysics with Christian theology. For example, he interpreted the Platonic form of the Good as a kind of person, inviting later interpretation of the Good as the Christian God. The Good, according to Plotinus, was the Supreme Mind, an indivisible unity that created the world. As an intelligence, this Supreme Mind was engaged in contemplation of itself, and Creation emerged as a kind of overflow from its thinking. Creation, in other words, emanated, or issued from, God's thinking. Plotinus's theory, therefore, is often described as a theory of *emanations*.

In contrast to Plato, who denigrated the material world as a lesser reality (comparing it to the shadows in a cave), Plotinus saw the material world as itself spiritual, the thought of a fully spiritual mind. Plotinus did, however, believe that the emanations constituted a hierarchy and that one order of Being emerged out of another. Spirit, the highest form of Being, emerges directly from the Divine Mind. Spirit illuminates Plato's Forms, the objects of the Divine Mind's contemplation. Soul proceeds from Spirit and guides life in the world by reaching beyond itself, ensouling matter. Matter is merely the lowest of the emanations.

The appeal of the doctrine of emanations may be less than evident in the twentieth century. In the first centuries of Christianity, however, the theory had tremendous appeal because it served several important philosophical and religious functions. Plato had divided the divine realm from the material realm without providing much of an account of their relationship. (His claim was that ordinary objects "participated" in the Forms.) The theory of emanations tries to explain how the two realms are related. From a strictly materialist standpoint (that is, the position that matter is the fundamental basis of whatever is real), this emanation theory might not seem like much of an account of the nature of things. But if one adopts the spiritual outlook presumed by Plotinus, his explanation is not only appealing but even edifying, insofar as it does not try to remove the "mystery" from an account of the world.

The theory of emanations also resolved the problem that the Pythagoreans had raised: "If unity is prior to everything, how does multiplicity ever come into

being?" In the same way, one might ask, "How did the World of Becoming emerge from Being?" In the context of monotheistic doctrines about God as Creator, this question easily takes on religious significance: If God is conceived as the eternal and perfect unity, why does He create a temporal world that is distinct from Him?

Plotinus claims that Creation, the world coming into existence, is an essential aspect of the Divine Mind, the One (God) thinking Itself. Like an artist, the One is impelled to create, to express itself, by virtue of its own nature. Creator and creation, however, are not sharply distinguished in Plotinus's account. Furthermore, the levels of Being overlap and interpenetrate one another. The human soul already has its archetype on a higher level, and spiritual discipline enables a person to develop spiritual intuition. This is a harmonious merger of the mind with higher levels of being. The ultimate aim for the soul, accordingly, is mystical union with the One (God), who becomes fully present to the human soul. Plotinus envisioned this optimal relationship between human beings and the One (God) as involving the whole person, joined to the One not only through knowledge but through love.

Despite its extreme abstraction, Plotinus's philosophy conveys a simple and remarkably positive spiritual message. The human soul is already in some sense divine and even the material world of everyday life is spiritual. There is no evil in the world, and therefore there is no "problem" of evil either. At worst, we encounter an absence of good, a lack that can, through human devotion, be corrected.

### *St. Augustine and the Inner Life of Spirit*

St. Augustine (354–430 C.E.) eventually bequeathed Plotinus's message that evil was only the absence of good to generations of Christians; but for much of his life, he found the problem of evil a devastating quandary. Augustine was born about sixty miles from the city of Hippo in North Africa (on the coast of what is now Algeria). His mother was a Christian; his father was not. Augustine later credited both his conversion and that of his father to her example. In his autobiography, entitled the *Confessions*, Augustine described his youth as a period of wanton sensuality which resulted in his fathering an illegitimate son. Motivated at least in part by despair over his own behavior, Augustine began seeking a solution to the problem of evil. Like Zarathustra, the Buddha, and Job, among many others, Augustine found himself searching for an explanation of the evil in the world—in particular, for the evils perpetrated, quite consciously, by human beings.

The first solution that attracted him was that of the Manichees, the followers of Mani (216–276 or 277 C.E.). Mani's sect was one of many *Gnostic* (the Greek term for "knowledge") schools, so named because they preached that redemption could be achieved through esoteric knowledge. Such knowledge was restricted to a small group or directly revealed to a sect's leader. Mani combined elements of Christianity and Zoroastrianism and attempted to appeal to both groups at once. His primary and best-known doctrine is that the world is a manifestation

of a great battle between two equally powerful divine principles, one good and the other evil. During the course of their war, bits of the good god (the god of light) became mingled with bits of the evil god (the god of darkness).

It was incumbent on human beings to liberate the good bits from the material world. The secret knowledge (or *gnosis*) that had been revealed to Mani was how to liberate this goodness. Those who listened to Mani and thus learned to liberate the good were the elect, who would be redeemed. Those who considered themselves elect pursued a life of asceticism and strict dietary practices, attempting to remove themselves from temptation. Mani was considered the Messiah by his followers, but he was considerably less respected by his many critics. Although Manichaeism strategically adopted elements of whatever culture it entered (appearing as a variant of Zoroastrianism in Persia, for instance), it had the dubious distinction of being branded a heresy by three different religious orthodoxies—those of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity.

Augustine found the Manichaean doctrine appealing as an explanation for human evil. Evil existed, on this account, because bits of an evil deity had entered and come to dominate a human soul. The only way to protect oneself from this fate was to adopt the ascetic practices of the elect and to devote oneself to good behavior. Augustine soon became disillusioned with Manichaeism, however. He was less than impressed with the simplistic erudition of a Manichaean bishop to whom he put his searching religious questions. As a young man Augustine had a formidable, demanding intellect. He was not about to be satisfied with evasive answers regarding an already-obscure doctrine.

For several years, Augustine devoted his life to teaching and to pursuing his studies in Neoplatonism. He devoted considerable attention to the works of Plato and Plotinus. After he converted to Christianity at the age of thirty-three, he fully devoted himself to the task of philosophically integrating Christian doctrine with Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. From Plotinus Augustine accepted the view that true reality was spiritual and that all Being comes from God. Augustine read Plotinus's articulation of the levels of emanation in terms of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. From Plato, he came to accept the view that a life of contemplation was the only way to knowledge and happiness, although he rejected the pagan framework within which Plato had developed this view. And with Christianity he embraced the view that the proper guide to living well was Scripture.

Perhaps Augustine's greatest single contribution to Western philosophy (and not only Christian thinking) was his emphasis on one's personal, inner life. The "I think, therefore I am" famously attributed to Descartes in fact appears in Augustine, twelve centuries earlier. It was Augustine, more than any other philosopher, who introduced and described in exquisite detail the "inner" or "subjective" experience of time. (The soul may be eternal, but it is in time that the soul is saved or lost.) The *Confessions* remains one of the boldest and most frank investigations of the self in Western literature. Ample concern for human reason can be found there, but the real attention is paid to the passions of the soul. These include love and faith, first of all, but also all of the urges, impulses, and vices (such as lust, pride, and "curiosity") that we all find in ourselves.

Augustine came to see the relationship between God and the human soul as the central concern of religion. Because the soul was created "in the image of God," self-knowledge became a means of coming to know God. It is thus with Augustine that we follow one of the most dramatic turns in philosophy, the "inward" turn (though we might note that a comparable turn appeared in Buddhism, many centuries before). Knowledge of the world, and of God in particular, is no longer conceived of solely as a matter of observation and reason but also as a matter of feeling as well. The early Greek philosophers may have talked on occasion about emotions, but they did not think of these as "inner experiences." The Jews and many early Christians talked about faith, treating faith as an attitude (a major step toward inwardness), but they did not conceive of what we would call "a rich inner life." Socrates did talk about the soul, but as he conceived of it, it was only the source of virtue, not the subject of profound experience.

With Augustine's *Confessions*, the personal, inner life of spirit starts to take center stage in Western thinking. The end, the goal of human existence, he tells us, is contemplation of God in awe and reverence. This and this alone, he insists, will make us happy. From this conception of the inner life will evolve a powerful new conception of Christianity. The Reformation would mark a further evolution of this emphasis on the inner life of spirit, and modern philosophy would also emphasize subjectivity and experience, culminating in Descartes and the philosophers who follow him. Indeed, the experiential or "inner" basis of knowledge would become something of a shared premise for generations of modern philosophers. One thousand five hundred years after Augustine, those German philosophers who called themselves "Romantic" would elevate such inner experiences to "the Absolute."<sup>2</sup>

In Augustine's vision of human knowledge, God is not only the Creator but also the active agent in the universe. God illuminates the human soul, sharing with it the ideas of the divine mind. Augustine embraces a Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato. The Forms (the ideas of the Divine Mind) are rendered intelligible to humans through God. "Participation" thus receives a more straightforward explanation than it had in Plato. God's illumination makes the immaterial Forms described by Plato directly evident to the soul. Because God is the source of both the faculty of reason and the truths known through it, Augustine argued, we can have confidence in human reason. He interpreted insights of the ancient Greeks as true products of reason, even though the Greeks did not have the further access to truth provided by Scripture.

Such revelation through Scripture is essential to a full understanding of the divine plan and our place within it, according to Augustine. Nevertheless, our experiences of the natural world can point us in the direction of religious truth. Augustine formulated a number of naturalistic grounds for acknowledging the existence of God. He appealed to the orderly design and beauty of creation, to the imperfection of created things (which implies a perfect creator) and to the movement of created things (which suggests an initiator of this movement). More persuasive than rational argument, however, was the hungry desire Augustine found in himself, a hunger for blessedness, which could only be satisfied by

Oneness with God. It is through such emotional experience, as well as by way of reason, that we recognize that our grasp of truth is partial. But from this sense of our own limitations we glean a sense of the permanent, eternal truth that is God.

Augustine thought of philosophy as an activity, involving the techniques of reason, and also as an approach to wisdom and the ultimate truths about life. With this dual conception of philosophy, he could allow himself the great luxury of pursuing abstract matters of logic and solving some of the paradoxes that Christian doctrine inevitably produced, but without believing that such activities were sufficient to satisfy his real quest, the discovery, articulation, defense, and practice of the ideal life of faith. At least one of these paradoxes was not at all academic or merely logical, however, and that was, once again, the problem of evil.

Augustine sought to show, first of all, that God did not cause evil to exist. Accepting Plotinus's doctrine that evil was only the absence of good, Augustine argued that God was therefore not the cause of evil. Evil was not a created thing, but the lack of something else. Evil was akin to disorder, which is the absence of order, but not an existing entity. A room can become disordered, but not because "disorder" enters the room. "Disorder" is merely a term for order disrupted. Similarly, evil was the disruption of the order God created, not one of God's creations itself.

In creating the world, God had constructed human beings and all other creatures perfectly, giving them natures that were designed for pursuing their natural and (in the case of human beings) supernatural ends. According to Augustine, his Greek philosophical predecessors had described the natural purposes of human beings quite aptly, but they had been deluded or unclear about their supernatural destinies. They had not realized that God had provided human beings with a nature that was geared to their supernatural aim—mystical union with Him in a state of blessedness.

While natural disasters that caused suffering might suggest otherwise, Augustine insisted that we simply could not see their ultimate significance in the entire plan that God had for His Creation. If we could conceive of that plan, we would see that God's Creation was entirely good. An essential part of the divine plan of the universe, however, was that God allowed human beings an intimate share in His own nature, by granting them the great blessing of *free will*. Unlike other aspects of Creation, which followed God's plan without fail, human beings were allowed to determine their own actions. The culminating perfection of God's creation was that He allowed human beings freely to choose to believe in Him and to join with Him in actualizing His plan. But because human beings have free choice, God cannot be said to have caused them to sin. The possibility of sin is a necessary feature of free will. Therefore, God *allows* humanly caused evil, but He was not and is not Himself the cause of it.

Genesis recounts the failure of human beings to choose the good consistently. Adam and Eve's original sin brought about the Fall of all humanity into an inferior state of being. One aspect of this inferior state was the tendency, bequeathed to Adam and Eve's descendants, to succumb to temptation and "cor-

ruption," parting from the body. This exacerbated the tendency of human beings to cause evil in the world. But Augustine insists, nevertheless, that "the corruption of the body, which weighs down the soul, is not the cause but the penalty of the first sin. . . . It was the sinful soul which made the flesh corruptible." Temptation is a consequence of human sin, human choice, not its original cause.

Augustine considered the counterargument that God's foreknowledge nevertheless makes God responsible for sin. It might be argued, for example, that since God is all-powerful and He foresees human sins, He is responsible for them, for He could prevent them. If God did not foresee sin, He would not be all-knowing—but then He would not be God, at least on the Christian conception. Augustine concluded that God does foresee human sin. Indeed, since God is not bound by time, He sees all of time in a timeless glance. Therefore, He can see all of the wrong choices that human beings have ever made or will ever make (and are making right now). Nevertheless, God's knowledge of these free choices does not imply that God engineered these choices. God *knows* the whole story of human history, but He is not a puppeteer who forces it to unfold as it does.

Far from causing human beings to sin, God gave human beings the ability to overcome sin, even in humanity's fallen state. In this condition, human beings cannot rely on their own nature to direct them to God. One of the effects of sin is to warp the tendencies that are basic to our nature, much as careless driving warps a car's alignment. God, however, freely gave *grace* to those who would accept it, where grace is divine guidance. Augustine did not think that everyone would accept grace, and the fact that some people do and others do not leads him to the conclusion that many people would fail to receive grace and the salvation that comes with it. Later on, this view would be formulated as the harsh Calvinist doctrine that some people are *predestined* for salvation and some are predestined for damnation, regardless of what they do or believe.

Augustine, however, also emphasized the protective power of God's grace, which directed believers away from temptation to the path that would lead them to their supernatural destiny. The greatest danger and temptation, Augustine insisted, was our very human insistence on self-determination, and, despite his emphasis on human free will, Augustine argues that the only antidote is a passionate but passive acceptance of God. It is human beings who choose evil, but as often through ignorance and arrogance as through malice. Against his contemporaries who urged active effort to secure salvation, Augustine insisted that the optimal human attitude is faith, which is available to everyone. Far from being the source of evil, God provided the means for human beings to overcome it.

Thomas Aquinas (Thomas of Aquino, 1225–1274) is the culminating figure of Scholasticism. A Dominican priest, he is considered by the Catholic Church to be one of its most important Doctors of the Church. His most significant and influential philosophical works are the multivolume *Summa Contra Gentiles* (A Summary Against the Gentiles) and his (incomplete) *Summa Theologica* (A Summary of Theology). The *Summa Theologica* is a systematic presentation of theology, written for novices in the clergy, but it is also the definitive summation of Catholic philosophy. The target of *Summa Contra Gentiles* was the naturalistic tendency he discerned in certain Arabic philosophers. However, in a sense, his work conceded several premises to the naturalists. Thomas aimed to show that Christian faith was grounded in reason and that the law inherent in nature is rational.

Thomas was the student of Albert the Great, who had attempted to make the thought of the Greeks, Arabs, and Jews available to his contemporaries. Thomas extended this effort. He was a great synthesizer and drew from the works of many thinkers, including Maimonides and Ibn Sina. He was concerned to show that reason and philosophical investigation were compatible with Christian faith. He contended that reason and revelation each had its own realm. Reason was an appropriate instrument for learning the truth about the natural world. Revelation, however, concerned the supernatural world, and the natural world was not the whole of reality. The true place of the natural world could only be known by reference to the supernatural.

Thomas was particularly influenced by Aristotle, whose significance he so took for granted (along with so many of his contemporaries) that he referred to him simply as "the Philosopher." Aristotle's works on logic had been available in Latin translation for some time, but some theologians and papal authorities were opposed to his more recently translated metaphysical and natural philosophical works. In particular, they objected to Aristotle's views that the world was eternal and that its continuing existence was independent of God. More generally, they considered his perspective inappropriately naturalistic, for Aristotle's "God" had been conceived as an abstract natural phenomenon (the Prime Mover) instead of a personal, spiritual being. Aristotle's differences with Plato were also seen as theologically suspect, since medieval Christians had long considered Plato as having "looked forward" in a number of ways to Christian ideas.

The distinction between the realms of reason and of revelation allowed Thomas to specify a distinct place for Aristotle's philosophy in a Christian worldview. Aristotle's philosophy was concerned only with reason and the natural world. Thomas believed that within that sphere, Aristotle's philosophy articulated the

truth adequately. One impact of Thomas's endorsement of Aristotelian philosophy was that he made room within Christian thought for a relatively high regard for the natural world and human knowledge about it. This contrasted with the more Platonic cast of earlier Christian thought, which emphasized the unreality of the natural world in comparison with the real and heavenly world of the Forms.

Thomas not only presented the natural world as real and knowable; he also considered it to be a reflection of the Law of God. God had given the creatures of his Creation particular natures, and Creation involved the interrelation of the various natures of things in a particular order. God ordained the laws of nature by virtue of his own divine law. In recognizing the intelligible structure of the world of everyday experience through reason, therefore, human beings gain insight into the mind of God as well. Thomas's account was a major boost for the study of science when science was still wholly on the defensive.

Seeing the work of God's law throughout the natural world, Thomas claimed that the whole of metaphysics (concerned with all that exists) is directed toward knowledge of God. Thomas believed that reason would be led in this direction simply by contemplating the natural world. Thomas famously provided his own proofs for the existence of God based on reason's analysis of contingent beings (beings, in other words, that depend on something other than themselves to exist or behave as they do). In general, his arguments take the form of a *cosmological proof*, an inference from factual existence to ultimate explanation. For example, the motion of contingent things is causally dependent on other things that moved them. Believing, with Aristotle, that an infinite regress is unintelligible, Thomas was convinced that this realization would lead the mind to seek a first mover.

This Prime Mover that the mind concludes must exist is God, according to Thomas. In each of his five proofs of God's existence (also called his "five ways"), Thomas makes a similar move, concluding that the contingent being of things in the natural world depends on something that transcends them, namely, God.

In that reason directs the human mind toward the supernatural, the spheres of reason and revelation are not absolutely distinct in Thomas's system. Indeed, he believed that we come to know spiritual reality through its manifestation in the material world. Nevertheless, he emphasized the limitations of reason as a mode of insight into the divine realm. Thinking is imagistic, and the images the mind produces are derived from sense experience of the world. Thus, when we try to imagine God, we do so falsely, in terms of temporal and spatial images that are utterly inappropriate. Philosophy can help theology, but, again, mainly by helping us to understand what God is not, rather than what He is. Revelation is necessary for human beings to have an adequate sense of the supernatural, a vision of God in heaven. Grace helps to direct the individual's will toward this goal, of which the intellect has only a dim awareness.

Regarding science and everyday reason, Thomas was an *empiricist* in the sense that he thought the natural world was known to human beings primarily through sense perception.<sup>51</sup> Thomas denied the position that ideas were innate, but, at the same time, he denied that sense perception involved mental passivity. One of his chief differences with Augustine and with Ibn Sina concerned their view

that the mind was a passive recipient of ideas and forms that are provided externally by divine illumination.<sup>52</sup> Thomas contended that the human mind itself was active. God did not offer the mind external illumination. Instead, God had given the mind an internal principle of activity, a *nature*. In this respect, the mind was like the rest of Creation. God had given a nature to every kind of thing He had made, its own kind of natural agency. Thus, the mind was not passive, but active, according to God-given principles.

The notion of active natures facilitated many of the moves in Thomas's philosophy. Human knowledge, for example, is possible by means of the nature of the human mind, which actively analyzes the images presented by the senses and seeks to determine their natures, or essences. So, too, human morality is neither a simple matter of freedom nor a natural determinism. Instead, it depends on the particular God-given nature of human beings. Morality depends primarily not on the vicissitudes of human calculation, feeling, and desire but on the *natural law*, the moral principles instilled in us and discoverable through reason.