

From Pride to Humility: An Evaluation of Augustine's
Break with Neo-Platonism in light of his conception of
the Ideal Man before and after his Conversion

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Introduction

One of the most intriguing features of Augustine's life and theology that has prompted ongoing debate is the nature of the changes he experienced in his quest for wisdom, both before and after his conversion to Christianity.¹ Many scholars have traced developments in his thought from his upbringing in a culture that was based on Roman values, to his discovery of philosophy, to his adherence to Manichaeism, philosophical skepticism, and Neo-Platonism, and finally to his conversion to Christianity and life as a bishop. Some scholars, such as Peter Brown, Gerald Bray, and Henry Chadwick, have specifically emphasized the importance of Neo-Platonism for Augustine's conversion, calling his discovery of the Neo-Platonists his first conversion or the first step in his conversion, and calling him a preeminent Christian Neo-Platonist.² This emphasis on Augustine's Neo-Platonism encourages the belief that Augustine was one of the main theologians who contaminated Christianity with non-Christian philosophical concepts. However, this perspective ignores Augustine's own view of the extreme differences between a life before and after conversion to Christianity. In order to

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), ix.

² See Brown, *Augustine*, 86; Gerald Bray, *Augustine on the Christian Life: Transformed by the Power of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 109; Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.

respond to this misconception, this paper will evaluate the change in Augustine's understanding of the ideal man from before to after his conversion, wherein his view of the ideal man moved permanently from a powerful and independent man who is perfect in virtue to a humble man who loves Christ, the perfect and unique God-man.

Augustine's Life

Much is known about the changes that Augustine experienced before and after his conversion because of his spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions*, and the many commentaries written on it. Augustine was born in 354 AD in Roman occupied Thagaste, North Africa. Though his parents had conflicting ideals, they raised Augustine in the context of and in general adherence to Roman values. As a child, Augustine learned stories that idealized power, honor, and success. He comments on this stage of life in his *Confessions*, saying to God, "at that time I believed that living a good life consisted in winning the favor of those who commended me. I failed to recognize the whirlpool of disgraceful conduct into which I had been flung out of your sight."³ In his adolescence, Augustine continued in the Roman way as he became obsessed with sex, even telling lies about how sexually promiscuous he was "lest [he] be thought less courageous for being more innocent."⁴ He studied rhetoric and his parents placed much hope in his potential success. He excelled in this craft and his growing reputation continually fed his pride.⁵

Soon, Augustine developed an interest in philosophy, which led to the beginning of his long and intentional quest for wisdom. He read Cicero's *Hortensius*, which "advocated the pursuit of philosophy as the way to obtain a better life," and this made him fall "into the trap of pseudo-intellectual pride and . . . derid[e] the Bible as something far too simple for serious minds to engage with."⁶ The philosophical system that first appealed to him was Manichaeism, of which he became a hearer, or a follower who was receiving instruction before baptism. The Manichees were dualists who created a mystical narrative of the battle between good

³ Augustine, *The Confessions* (trans. Maria Boulding. Rev. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶ Bray, *Augustine*, 56. See Augustine, *The Confessions*, 74.

and evil. Augustine was drawn to this sect because their dualistic system answered his questions about the nature of evil and gave him a way to assuage the guilt he held in his heart for maintaining a relationship with a concubine. However, after meeting with Faustus, a prominent Manichaean teacher, and hearing Faustus's inadequate responses to questions about the intricacies of Manichaean doctrine, Augustine began to see the holes in this system of thought. After this disappointing event, Augustine turned to philosophical skepticism and believed that human beings were unable to have knowledge that was beyond doubt. At this time, his close friend died and Augustine was cast into a pit of sorrow. The pain that he experienced "makes the case very well that his need for self-sustenance ran deep."⁷ To escape this pain, he moved to Carthage and began to teach there but was disgusted by the undisciplined behavior of his students. Thus, when he was offered a position in Rome, he jumped at the opportunity to teach among the civilized and obedient. This, too, proved to be a disappointment, as his cultured students lacked a sense of morality as well. Augustine moved to Milan to teach, permanently leaving the Manichees behind for his new-found skepticism.

In Milan, Augustine became a catechumen in the Catholic church because it was the social norm. However, God began to soften his heart to faith in Christ as he sat under Ambrose's preaching. He realized that his life was empty and continued to search for the truth. He was drawn to Neo-Platonism, which finally enabled him to conceive of God as a spiritual being, answered his questions about the origin of evil, and led him to read Paul's letters. He sought Platonic ecstasy or oneness with the Good, but in his small glimpse of reality he realized that he was infinitely far from God and could not reach him.⁸ He was "disappointed by the extreme transience of an experience so profound, and by the fact that afterwards he found himself as consumed with pride and lust as before."⁹

Augustine began to seek ways to grow closer to God.¹⁰ Through the testimonies of several Christians he entered into an extreme struggle with his flesh as he considered repentance. He first asked Simplicianus

⁷ Sandra Lee Dixon, *Augustine: The Scattered and Gathered Self* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 94.

⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 125ff. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1978), 21–22.

⁹ Chadwick, *Augustine*, 23.

¹⁰ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 137.

for help. Simplicianus was happy that Augustine had read Platonist writings. He told Augustine about the conversion of Victorinus, a famous teacher who “was not ashamed to become a child of [God’s] Christ and be born as an infant from [God’s] font, bending his neck to the yoke of humility and accepting on his docile brow the sign of the ignominious cross.”¹¹ Augustine marvelled at this story and wanted to do what Victorinus did but felt bound to his sin. In his inner person, his two wills fought viciously against one another.¹²

Later, Ponticianus visited Augustine and told Augustine how he was converted after seeing two of his friends converted from reading the *Life of Anthony*. This story gave Augustine “an example of humility that had not been offered to him by the Platonists.”¹³ After hearing it, Augustine began to hate himself and how he had wasted so many years searching for wisdom but never repenting. He had told himself that he was putting off repentance because he was not completely convinced of Christianity, but in reality he was.¹⁴ This hate turned into anger. Later, Augustine would confess to God, “in my secret heart you stood by me, Lord, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame in the severity of your mercy, lest I give up the struggle.”¹⁵ While he was agonizing over his repentance, he had a vision of Contenance who called him to turn from his sin. He could still hear his sin calling to him as well, but Contenance showed him that those who had turned to her did not do so by their own strength, but by God’s. Augustine then heard a voice who told him to “pick up and read,” and so he picked up Paul’s letters and read Romans 13:13 and realized that was all he needed to know to repent from his sin. Augustine finally renounced his sin and threw himself upon God’s mercy.¹⁶

After his conversion, Augustine abandoned his career and was baptized. Though he merely wanted to be a monk, he soon became a priest and bishop. He rose to prominence in the Roman empire through his preaching, writing, and opposition of heresies such as Donatism and

¹¹ Ibid., 140.

¹² Ibid., 144.

¹³ Mark J. Edwards, “Neoplatonism,” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 589.

¹⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 149.

¹⁵ Ibid., 154.

¹⁶ Ibid., 155–157.

Pelagianism, both of which underemphasized and thus distorted God's grace. In his old age, Augustine defended his beliefs against Julian of Eclanum. Julian accused Augustine of asserting doctrines that made God the Creator of evil and made man's free will non-existent. In his defence, Augustine accused Julian of placing "too much emphasis on the idea that human beings were capable of reaching eternal happiness through their own efforts and could even have some rightful claim to it through good works."¹⁷ To Augustine, Julian's perspective was a form of pride, just like the perspectives of Pelagius and the Donatists. Augustine died trusting in Christ and left a legacy of emphasizing humble dependence upon God's grace, which would form part of the foundation of Western Christianity.

Augustine's Ideal Man

As seen above, Augustine's thought was steadily being developed and revised throughout his lifetime. However, it is undeniable that his conversion to Christianity represented a significant and permanent break with non-Christian beliefs. At the heart of this break was the concept of humility, which Augustine repeatedly identified as one of the most foundational aspects of Christianity.¹⁸ Before his conversion, Augustine sought wisdom and happiness in human philosophy and conceived of the ideal man as a powerful and independent man who is perfect in virtue. After his conversion, Augustine continued to seek wisdom and happiness, but in God's way, which led him to conceive of the ideal man as the exact opposite, namely, the humble man who loves Christ, the perfect God-man.

Before Conversion

Augustine was raised in the Roman world and influenced by parents, teachers, and colleagues who had Roman values. Thus, his concept of the ideal man before his conversion had deep roots in Roman culture. To the Romans, the ideal man was powerful, educated, and had the leisure time

¹⁷ Paul van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God: Augustine as Negative Theologian* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 206.

¹⁸ See page 11ff.; Jennifer Herdt, "Smoke, Wind and that Journey Upwards: Augustinian Reflections on the Role of Humility in Virtue Formation," *International Journal of Christianity and Education* 19 (Mar 2015): 15.

needed to engage in philosophical reflection.¹⁹ During his school years, Augustine was taught “to admire emphasized pride in one’s abilities, the importance of ambition, the glamour of glory and praise, concern with one’s feelings of inner perfection, and sensitivity to the ways that people reflected agreement with that self-perception.”²⁰ Pagan literature celebrated “economic success and notoriety,” and “pride in sexual prowess figured in the stories” that Augustine read and even had to memorize.²¹ Herdt sums up these values by saying that in Roman culture, “virtue was literally manliness, not simply accidentally linked with the word for man but tied up with ideals of warrior courage, of the pursuit of glory, and of Stoical responses to suffering.”²² Dunnington sums up the Roman ideal in terms of self-knowledge and self-control, saying “the moral pagan becomes a man of character, and he knows his character, and his knowledge of his character crowns his virtue . . . because he has made virtue part of his second nature, he is both self-sufficient and relatively secure against the ravages of time and luck.”²³ Cicero reflected this in that his “ideal was personal self-sufficiency.”²⁴

When Augustine became a follower of the Manichees, his conception of the ideal man centered on morality. The Manichees viewed matter as evil, and thus the Manichean elite or elect practised celibacy and severe asceticism to avoid contact with matter. The lower grade of hearers

¹⁹ Herdt, “Smoke, Wind, and that Journey Upwards,” 18.

²⁰ Dixon, *Augustine*, 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

²² Herdt, “Smoke, Wind, and that Journey Upwards,” 22.

²³ Kent Dunnington, “Humility: An Augustinian Perspective,” in *Pro Ecclesia* 25 (Wint 2016): 40. Overall, these characteristics were seen in various aspects of Roman culture such as architecture, stories, and philosophical writings. See Harold Mattingly, “The Roman ‘Virtues’” *Harvard Theological Review* 30 (April 1937): 104–105, 110–114. For example, Augustine quotes Virgil in *The City of God*, saying “thus the mind in which this resolution is well grounded suffers no perturbations to prevail with it in opposition to reason . . . and not only so, but it rules over them, and, while it refuses its consent and resists them, administers a reign of virtue. Such character is ascribed to Aeneas by Virgil when he says, ‘He stands immovable by tears. Nor tenderest words with pity hears.’” Augustine, *The City of God*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *St. Augustin: The City of God and Christian Doctrine* (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 9.4.

²⁴ Chadwick, *Augustine*, 10–11.

helped them do this by “prepar[ing] their food and attend[ing] to their needs.”²⁵ The Manichees opposed those aspects of Christianity that seemed to be base, such as “the emphasis on faith (which seemed like credulity) . . . the anthropomorphic conception of God so characteristic of African Christianity . . . [and] the deficiencies of Scripture.”²⁶

Later, as a Neo-Platonist, Augustine conceived of the ideal man as one who had power over himself through reason, as employed by the faculty of the mind. In Platonic thought,²⁷

the ideal person is a philosopher, since his wisdom means his soul is in complete harmony with itself. The philosopher’s rational faculty governs his passions and appetites, never allowing them free rein . . . He has knowledge of himself and society; he knows what it is to be virtuous; [and] he has a certain amount of equanimity.²⁸

Plato asserted that the way to become the ideal man was to ascend to the Good through a visionary experience called theurgy.²⁹ Later, Plotinus would turn “what was essentially an academic philosophy into a kind of religion that would enable those who pursued it not only to understand but also to experience the supreme being,” which set Platonism up as an opposing religion to Christianity in the “marketplace of ideas.”³⁰

²⁵ Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁷ Though Neo-Platonists were not identical to Plato himself, his “aspirational and religious teachings” were adopted by the Neo-Platonists. Dewey J. Hoytenga Jr., *Faith and Reason From Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 62.

²⁸ Christopher Wright, “Plato’s Just State,” *Philosophy Now*, 12 10 2016 https://philosophynow.org/issues/90/Platos_Just_State.

²⁹ Hoytenga Jr., *Faith and Reason*, 30–31. See John Peter Kenney, “‘None Come Closer to Us Than These’: Augustine and the Platonists.” *Religions* 7 (September 2016): 5.

³⁰ Bray, *Augustine on the Christian Life*, 24.

After Conversion

Overall, Augustine's conception of the ideal man before his conversion to Christianity went through various developments as he grew up in a Roman culture and adhered to Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism. However, the common characteristic of his conception of the ideal man throughout this time was pride. This is seen in Augustine's own reflections after his conversion.

According to Augustine, the sentiment "engrained in the Roman mind" was that "the true way . . . is virtue, along which [the ideal man] presses as to the goal of possession—namely, to glory, honor, and power."³¹ To Augustine, viewing the ideal man as the one who was independent and self-sufficient was the exact essence of pride.³² Augustine would also identify pride as a characteristic of Manichaeism. He said that Mani "in his insane, pretentious vanity, pass[ed] off his erroneous opinions as those of a divine person—himself, no less."³³ Furthermore, commenting on his friend's time as a Manichee, Augustine said he was "deceived by the superficial appearance of a virtue that was but feigned and faked."³⁴ Though the Manichees boasted of achieving an ideal existence by being morally pure, they lived according to the flesh.³⁵ Finally, pride was also a characteristic of the Neo-Platonist ideal. After his conversion to Christianity, Augustine would accuse the Neo-Platonists of filling him with pride.

Overall, pride was the one thing that held Augustine back from repentance.³⁶ It was only when he humbled himself before God that

³¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, 5.12.

³² Dunnington, "Humility," 40.

³³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁵ For example, see Augustine, *On the Morals of the Manicheans in A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 4 (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 20.74–75.

³⁶ This is seen in personal reflections in his *Confessions* as well as his teachings on pride as the main vice that prevents one from repenting and turning to God in faith. See Augustine, *The Confessions*, 73, 78, 88, 124; *On the Holy Trinity*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, and Moral Treatises* (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 199), 13.17; Robert J.

Augustine experienced God's converting power. From then on, Augustine would develop the idea of humility seen in and given through Christ, the perfect God-man, as a central tenet of Christianity. The centrality of humility to Christianity in Augustine's thought is seen, for example, in a letter he wrote to Dioscorus. Augustine said,

I wish you to prepare for yourself no other way of seizing and holding the truth than that which has been prepared by [God] . . . in that way the first part is humility; the second, humility; the third, humility: and this I would continue to repeat as often as you might ask direction, not that there are not other instructions which may be given, but because, unless humility precede, accompany, and follow every good action . . . pride wrests wholly from our hand any good work on which we are congratulating ourselves . . . so if you were to ask me . . . what are the instructions of the Christian religion, I would be disposed to answer always and only 'Humility.'³⁷

According to Augustine, humility: 1) is exhibited primarily in Christ's death on the cross, 2) is received for salvation through faith in Christ, and 3) leads to the happy life. Augustine saw humility as exhibited primarily in Christ's death on the cross. In *A Treatise on Faith and the Creed*, Augustine said, "but little [comparatively] was the humiliation (*humilitas*) of our Lord on our behalf in His being born: it was also added that He deemed it meet to die in behalf of mortal men. For 'He humbled Himself, being made subject even unto death, yea, the death of the cross.'"³⁸ Christ provided the supreme example of humility. Augustine reminded his readers that Christ himself said (as recorded in Matthew

O'Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine's Imaginations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 270.

³⁷ Augustine, *The Letters of Saint Augustine*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, *St. Augustin: Confessions and Letters* (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), CXVIII.

³⁸ Augustine, *A Treatise on Faith and the Creed*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, *On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, and Moral Treatises* (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 5.11.

11:28-29) that people should learn from Him because of His meekness and humility, not because of the miracles He performed.³⁹

However, Christ is not just a pre-eminent example of humility, but also provides salvation to man through His humility.⁴⁰ Augustine repeatedly accuses humanity of being full of sinful pride and in need of receiving salvation through Christ's humility. This is seen, for example, in Augustine's use of the metaphor of human pride as a physical infirmity that can only be healed through Christ's remedy or medicine of humility.⁴¹ In *On the Holy Trinity* he says, "the humility by which God was born of a woman, and was led to death through contumelies so great by mortal men, is the chiefest remedy by which the swelling of our pride may be cured."⁴² In *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*, Augustine asserted, "inasmuch as there is nothing more adverse to love than envy, and as pride is the mother of envy, the same Lord Jesus Christ, God-man, is both a manifestation of divine love towards us, and an example of human humility with us, to the end that our great swelling might be cured by a greater counteracting remedy."⁴³ In a sermon on John 2, Augustine preached,

Ye know, Brethren, for ye have learnt it as believing in Christ, and continually too do we by our ministry impress it upon you, that the humility of Christ is the medicine of man's swollen pride. For man would not have perished, had he not been swollen up through pride. For "pride," as saith the Scripture, "is the beginning of all sin." Against the beginning of sin, the beginning of righteousness was necessary. If then pride be the beginning of

³⁹ Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, 13.14. See van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God*, 173.

⁴⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 393.

⁴¹ See van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God*, 150, 170.

⁴² Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, 5.13.17.

⁴³ Augustine, *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, *St. Augustin: Confessions and Letters* (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 4.

all sin, whereby should the swelling of pride be cured, had not God vouchsafed to humble Himself?⁴⁴

Finally, Augustine stated that humility leads to the happy life. Perhaps the most obvious proof of this is the thrust of Augustine's *Confessions*, wherein he moves from one unhappy situation to the next until he finds the true meaning of joy in Christ. Augustine's moments of greatest joy are when he praises God for humbling him and thus giving him grace. On the other hand, his moments of greatest pain and sorrow are when he relies on himself or others for happiness. For example, he said

the temptation to want veneration and affection from others, and to want them not for the sake of some quality that merits them . . . in order to make such admiration itself the cause of my joy . . . is not true joy at all, but leads only to a miserable life and shameful ostentation. This tendency is one of the chief impediments to loving [God] and revering [Him] with chaste fear, and therefore [God] thwart[s] the proud but give[s] grace to the humble.⁴⁵

According to Augustine, happiness is not found not in self-sufficiency but humility, which enables one to love God and live righteously.⁴⁶ In other words, one leads a happy life to the extent that one practices "humility as the most exalted form of self-development,"⁴⁷ loves God,⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Sermon LXXIII*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 6, *St. Augustin: Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, and Homilies on the Gospels* (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 215.

⁴⁶ Cavidini comments on Augustine's manual of the Christian life, saying that being "aware of the great gift of God's humility in Christ, and placing hope in that and not in oneself" leads to "one's lusts progressively giv[ing] way to love even to readiness to lay down ones life for ones friends." John Cavidini, "Enchiridion," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan Fitzgerald and John Cavidini; Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 296–267.

⁴⁷ van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God*, 144.

⁴⁸ Matthew Drever, *Image, Identity, and the Forming of the Augustinian Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 141.

and lives righteously by receiving Christ's righteousness.⁴⁹ Thus, Augustine's view of humility is not one of self-hatred or low self-esteem, but recognizing the truth about one's sinfulness and finitude, and depending on God for everything in life.⁵⁰ Peter Holmes explains that Augustine's emphasis on the human need for the healing of pride does not demean humanity, but leads humanity from humility to exaltation:

I know nothing in the whole range of practical or theoretical divinity more beautiful than Augustin[e]'s analysis of the procedures of grace, in raising man from the depths of his sinful prostration to the heights of his last and eternal elevation in the presence and fellowship of God.⁵¹

This emphasis on humility is also seen in Augustine's opposition to Pelagianism and Donatism. Pelagius claimed that man was able to turn from sin by the power of his own will and the Donatists claimed that only those who are perfectly righteous are able to be a part of the church. To Augustine, Pelagianism and Donatism overemphasized man's supposed self-control and righteousness to the point that God's grace was distorted. In response to Pelagius, Augustine asserted that man was corrupted by sin and could not choose good, but had to depend on God's grace. Again and again in his writings against Pelagius, Augustine proclaims that humility is the truth about humanity, even when they are at their best.⁵² For example, Augustine cited 1 Corinthians 15:10,

⁴⁹ Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine: An Introductory Guide to His Most Important Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 56.

⁵⁰ Herdt, "Smoke, Wind, and that Journey Upwards," 24. Dunnington, "Humility," 25, 27. See Dunnington, "Humility," 27.

⁵¹ Peter Holmes, "Preface to Volume I of the Edinburgh Edition" in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 5, *St. Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (ed. Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 11.

⁵² See Augustine, *On Nature and Grace, Against Pelagius*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *St. Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 38.34, 42.36, 73; Augustine, *On the Proceedings of Pelagius*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 5, *St.*

wherein Paul acknowledges his success but attributes the source of it to God. Commenting on this verse, Augustine said, “O mighty teacher, confessor, and preacher of grace! What meaneth this: ‘I laboured more, yet not I?’ Where the will exalted itself ever so little, there piety was instantly on the watch, and humility trembled, because weakness recognised itself.”⁵³ In response to the Donatists, Augustine asserted that it was prideful to assume that one could distinguish between true and false believers in the church. Augustine supported his argument by quoting Cyprian who said,

What swelling of arrogance it is, what forgetfulness of humility and gentleness, that any one should dare or believe that he can do what the Lord did not grant even to the apostles, — to think that he can distinguish the tares from the wheat, or, as if it were granted to him to carry the fan and purge the floor, to endeavor to separate the chaff from the grain!⁵⁴

Augustine’s Break with Neo-Platonism

As shown above, the centrality of humility in Augustine’s conversion and view of the Christianity is seen clearly in primary and secondary sources. This shows that though Augustine’s conversion was influenced by his adherence to Neo-Platonic thought (a fact that he himself recognized in his *Confessions* and earlier works), this does not mean that his turning to Neo-Platonism was the same kind of conversion as his true conversion to Christianity (a fact that he himself recognized in his *Confessions* and later works). Though some of his Christian doctrines may parallel non-Christian doctrines he held to before his conversion, this does not mean that they find their origin in non-Christian doctrines

Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 27.12.

⁵³ Augustine, *On the Proceedings of Pelagius*, 36.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 4, *St. Augustin: The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists* (ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 4.11.

or that Augustine thus contaminated biblical Christianity with non-Christian philosophical concepts.

Unfortunately, this misconception is still widely held on a popular level. Some scholars exacerbate this misconception by overemphasizing Augustine's Neo-Platonism, marking it as one step along the way in his ever-deepening quest for wisdom and spiritual development, just as his conversion to Christianity was. In other words, they identify his 'conversion' to Neo-Platonism and his conversion to Christianity as a change of the same kind. Such scholars make parallels between Augustine's Christian doctrines and Neo-Platonic doctrines at every turn.⁵⁵ The most oft-cited proofs for this perspective are 1) Augustine's recounting of learning Christian doctrine from Neo-Platonic writers, and 2) his claim that the Platonists were the closest philosophers to Christianity.⁵⁶ First, in his *Confessions* Augustine said that in Platonists books he read, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; he was God" though those exact words were not used.⁵⁷ Second, in *Of True Religion* Augustine said, "with the change of a few words and sentiments, [the Platonists] would become Christians, as many Platonists of recent times have done."⁵⁸ Furthermore, O'Connell explains that the reason some refer to Augustine's turning to philosophy as his first conversion is because Augustine used similar language regarding his experience of reading Cicero's *Hortensius* and his experience in the garden before his conversion to Christianity.⁵⁹

Based on passages such as these in primary sources, scholars make statements that lessen Augustine's break with Neo-Platonism. For example, Bray says that Augustine "rejected Platonism more because it was inadequate than because it was false."⁶⁰ Bray explains that in Augustine's thought, "the difference between Platonism and Christianity was that the former was an idea of ultimate reality whereas the latter was

⁵⁵ See Brown, *Augustine*, 498.

⁵⁶ See Chadwick, *Augustine*, 55; O'Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine's Imaginations*, 197.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 125.

⁵⁸ Augustine, *Of True Religion* in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. John H. S. Burleigh; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 7.

⁵⁹ O'Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine's Imagination*, 197.

⁶⁰ Bray, *Augustine on the Christian Life*, 109.

an experience of it.”⁶¹ Moreover, Chadwick explains that Augustine’s conversion to Christianity was “no sudden flash, but the culminating point of many months of painful gestation” and “marked a shift more ethical than intellectual in content.”⁶² Chadwick notes in passing that Augustine maintained his Neo-Platonism until his death.⁶³ He also describes Augustine’s view of “the content of salvation” as “happiness . . . [and] inner security.”⁶⁴ In his lengthy biography on Augustine, Brown claims that Augustine’s conversion from a “Manichean version of Christianity” to “Christian Platonism” allowed Augustine to “regain . . . a sense of purpose” and make sure progress in his life of philosophy.⁶⁵ Finally, John Kenney refers to the “conversionary power of Platonism” in Augustine’s life and claims that Augustine was “never free from Platonism.”⁶⁶

Though these statements may convey some truth, they do not convey the whole truth because they do not take into account other relevant passages in Augustine’s works. Stated simply, Neo-Platonism was the opposite of Christianity when it came to Augustine’s beloved doctrine of humility, and this caused Augustine to reject it as a false belief system. This is attested to by Augustine himself and various scholars. Augustine’s evaluation of Neo-Platonism is seen most clearly in *The City of God*. Here he said, “the Platonists, though knowing something of the Creator of the universe, have misunderstood the true worship of God.”⁶⁷ Addressing Porphyry, Augustine said,

You drive men, therefore, *into the most palpable error*. And yet you are not ashamed of doing so much harm, though you call yourself a lover of virtue and wisdom. Had you been true and faithful in this profession, you would have recognized *Christ*, the virtue of God and the wisdom of God, and would not, *in the pride*

⁶¹ Ibid., 96.

⁶² Chadwick, *Augustine*, 27. Dunnington notes that some scholars call Augustine’s adherence to Neo-Platonism his “intellectual conversion to Christianity.” Dunnington, “Humility,” 55.

⁶³ Chadwick, *Augustine*, 26.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁵ Brown, *Augustine*, 104.

⁶⁶ Kenney, “None Come Closer to Us Than These,” 1.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, 10.3. Italics mine.

*of vain science, have revolted from His wholesome humility . . . [preaching Christ crucified] is despised as a weak and foolish thing by those who are wise and strong in themselves; yet this is the grace which heals the weak, who do not proudly boast a blessedness of their own, but rather humbly acknowledge their real misery.*⁶⁸

Furthermore, reflecting on his conversion to Christianity after his adherence to Neo-Platonism, Augustine said, “had I not been seeking [God’s] way in Christ our Savior I would more probably have been killed than skilled. For I had already begun to covet a reputation for wisdom.”⁶⁹ Schlabach explains that though Augustine said that Neo-Platonic thought helped him accept certain Christian doctrines, it was only a potential “source of saving knowledge . . . in a very backhanded way” in that it was one of the “inner goads” driving him to such saving knowledge, which was “precisely the humility of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰ Hoitenga uses the same argument, saying, “for all their success in bringing Augustine to the truth about God’s nature, [the Platonists] not only failed to make him humble, but actually fed his pride” and therefore may have even “drawn him away from faith, had he come upon them after his conversion.”⁷¹

Van Geest provides a thorough explanation of the reasons that Augustine’s Neo-Platonism would have come into direct opposition to Augustine’s Christianity, all of which revolve around the concept of humility. For example, the Platonists could not accept the idea that God took on flesh, lived an unimpressive life, and suffered and died on a cross.⁷² Furthermore, it was simply not Platonic to conceive of humility as a way to know God, but that is exactly what Augustine did.⁷³ van Geest highlights the fact that after years of preaching, Augustine’s sermons

⁶⁸ Ibid., 10.28. Italics mine.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 134.

⁷⁰ Gerald W. Schlabach, “Augustine’s Hermeneutic of Humility: An Alternative to Moral Imperialism and Moral Relativism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 22 (Fall 1994): 315, 316. See Augustine, *The Confessions*, 123–125.

⁷¹ Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 92, 93. See Augustine, *The Confessions*, 134.

⁷² van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God*, 86, 169. See Augustine, *The City of God*, 10.28; Augustine, *The Confessions*, 125–126.

⁷³ van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God*, 244–245. See footnote 75 below.

“increasingly exude a familiarity with the person of Christ as he is presented in Scripture, rather than an indebtedness to neo-Platonism.”⁷⁴ O’Connell also attests to the significant differences between Augustine’s evaluation of Neo-Platonism in his first book written as a cleric, *Of True Religion*, compared to his later writings, such as *The City of God*, between which Augustine had probably discovered Porphyry’s *Against the Christians*.⁷⁵

Therefore, Augustine’s earlier statements about Neo-Platonism should be seen in light of his later statements. Early on, Augustine said that the Neo-Platonists were the philosophers who were closest to the Christian faith. However, in light of his later statements, one must conclude that according to Augustine, this does not mean that the Neo-Platonists could bridge the gap between their doctrine and Christian doctrine by their own reasoning.⁷⁶ Early on, Augustine commended the Neo-Platonists for teaching him that God is immaterial. However, this is only one of many other important doctrines, of which Neo-Platonism knew perhaps none.⁷⁷ Moreover, much of the knowledge they claimed to have was not knowledge of the truth.⁷⁸ Though some may want to label Augustine’s adherence to Neo-Platonism his first conversion or the first step in his conversion to Christianity,⁷⁹ it is clear that much of the knowledge that he learned from the Neo-Platonists had to be renounced. Therefore, it is inaccurate to say that because Augustine conceived in his mind that God was a transcendent, spiritual being who was good, and that he willed to be close to God, that he was, in a sense, converted.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 86.

⁷⁵ O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s Imaginations*, 79, 123.

⁷⁶ Edwards states that according to Augustine, “there is nothing in the sensible creation that will lead us to God so readily as the voluntary abasement of his Word in Jesus Christ: “The God within whom man forsook in pride he found outside him in humility’ (*lib. arb.* 3.10.30).” Edwards, “Neoplatonism,” 589.

⁷⁷ See O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s Imaginations*, 123.

⁷⁸ Augustine claimed that knowledge of God stemming from a prideful attitude is not really knowledge of God at all. van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God*, 106.

⁷⁹ This is sometimes referred to as the theory of a two-step conversion: the first ‘intellectual’ step achieved in Neo-Platonism and the second ‘moral’ step achieved in Christianity. See Dunnington, “Humility,” 25, 37; O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s Imaginations*, 197.

Rather, his description of his life as a Neo-Platonist aligns with the description of a spiritually dead person.⁸⁰ Perhaps his experiences as a Neo-Platonist before his conversion marked the beginning of his conversion. However, he had not reached the point of regeneration. Furthermore, he did not reach such regeneration by his own Neo-Platonic thought, but was regenerated by God after throwing himself upon God's grace. Overall, Augustine saw conversion as an act of God.⁸¹

Because of these statements from various scholars and Augustine himself, studies on Augustine should reflect the significance of his conversion to Christianity. This may be worked out in several ways. For example, though one should not ignorantly disregard the philosophical systems that influenced Augustine, one need not feel compelled to explain Augustine's Christianity as it hinged on these philosophical systems, especially Neo-Platonism. Instead of constantly referring to these systems and making explicit parallels between their doctrines and Christian doctrines as if they had fundamental similarities, it would make more sense to allow his Christians beliefs to stand as fundamentally separate from such systems. This is not to say that such parallels should never be made, but rather that Neo-Platonic beliefs should not be portrayed as the foundation upon which Augustine built his Christianity. Augustine himself would look upon this interpretation with disdain.

More specifically, the statements quoted above from Bray, Chadwick, and Brown may be improved by removing their implicit de-emphasis on Augustine's break with Neo-Platonism. Augustine did not reject Platonism merely because it was inadequate, as Bray claims, but also because it was false in many ways, though true regarding the transcendence of God. Christianity was not only different from Platonism because it was an experience of God rather than just an idea, as Bray states, but also because Christianity was an entirely separate

⁸⁰ See Augustine's description of the dead soul. Augustine, *The Confessions*, 292–293.

⁸¹ See Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*. Dixon states that "Augustine made his small but drastic shift in his view of human nature in *To Simplicianus*, written in 396. He gave up the notion that human beings chose to respond to God's calling or not to answer it and conceded that the power to initiate faith comes from God alone." Dixon, *Augustine*, 197. See Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 127; Augustine, *The Confessions*, 285.

theological system that believed in a different God, namely, Jesus Christ. According to Augustine, his conversion was not just a shift in his ethics or another step on his way to happiness and wisdom brought about by Platonic thought, as Chadwick and Brown propose, but a change from death to life; an act of God that saved him from damnation. Finally, because of this significant break with his past, Augustine did not hold to Platonism for the rest of his life, as Chadwick asserts. Rather, though Augustine continued to believe in God's transcendence, he fundamentally changed other beliefs to conform with orthodox Christianity, which set him at odds with Platonism. On the other hand, Schlabach, Hoitenga, and van Geest exemplify a proper understanding of the interplay between Augustine's positive comments and negative critiques of Platonism, as well as Augustine's own understanding of conversion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Augustine believed that one reached an ideal existence not by ascending to the Good and thereby being able master oneself, but by falling before Christ, the perfect God-man, and surrendering one's life to his lordship. The true ideal man is Christ, who humbled himself in death on a cross and, though he will ultimately make his co-heirs perfect through his righteousness, is always the center and source of that perfection. Thus, there was not only a functional difference between Augustine's life and thought before and after his conversion to Christianity, but a fundamental difference. Christ was that difference.