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## Augustine at Cassiciacum

AUGUSTINE'S COMMITMENT TO THE Christian faith in AD 386 is a pivotal event not only in his own life, but also in the history of Christianity and the history of the world, for the writings and teachings of Augustine set the course of theological and cultural development in western Christendom. But to what exactly was Augustine converted?<sup>1</sup> Scholars have long debated several questions pertaining to Augustine's conversion: whether he really converted to Christianity in 386, whether he was a neo-Platonist, and, if he adhered to both neo-Platonism and Christianity, which of the two was dominant in his thought. These are important questions, and I hope that this book will help to answer them. But these are not the questions that Augustine himself was asking when he abandoned his worldly pursuits of money, fame, and physical pleasures in 386. At this time he retreated with a few friends and relations to Cassiciacum, to the country home of his friend Verecundus. Here he wrote his first post-conversion writings, the Cassiciacum dialogues: *Contra Academicos*, or *Against the Academics*; *De beata vita*, or *On the Happy Life*; *De ordine*, or *On Order*; and *Soliloquia*, or *Soliloquies*. Ernest L. Fortin remarks that scholars often approach these earliest writings with their own questions rather than Augustine's own questions.<sup>2</sup> Augustine himself was more interested in questions such as "What is

1. Some scholars object to the word "conversion" to describe Augustine's change of life in 386. I am sympathetic to their concerns, although I continue to use the word in the broad sense of a life transformation whereby one abandons a morally and spiritually inferior way of life and adopts a morally and spiritually superior one. See below, chapter 2, under the subheading "Christ: Towards a Christian Theology of Desire."

"2. Fortin, "Foreword," x. There are excellent studies that do allow Augustine to speak for himself. To name a few: Foley, "Cicero, Augustine"; Foley, "The Other Happy

the nature of the soul?"; "What is the nature of happiness?"; and "How does one become happy?" In this volume I investigate three questions important to Augustine during his retreat at Cassiciacum: "What ought we to desire?"; "What has gone wrong with our desires?"; and "How do we come to desire the right things?"

Yet if we are attentive to the questions that motivated Augustine, we are more likely to find the answers to the questions that have motivated so many scholars. In letting the dialogues speak for themselves—in allowing Augustine's own questions and answers to emerge from the dialogues—it will be easier to discover to what degree Augustine is a Christian, to what degree he is a neo-Platonist, and how the Christian and neo-Platonic elements of his thinking interact. In this book I shall defend the thesis that Augustine's philosophy of desire in the Cassiciacum dialogues is a distinctively Christian one. In order to show this I shall investigate Augustine's own questions and answers pertaining to desire; what emerges will prove to be a distinctively Christian philosophy of desire. Indeed, it would not be amiss to call it a *theology* of desire.

There are two components to my thesis. The first is that Augustine's theology of desire at Cassiciacum is a distinctively Christian one incorporating some neo-Platonic elements—not a merely neo-Platonic one. The second component is that the Christian elements help to determine the shape of the whole; they help to determine the significance and application of the neo-Platonic elements.

Now this theology of desire is not exactly an anti-Platonic one; it has neo-Platonic elements. Nor will I argue that it is *thoroughly* Christian—only that it is *distinctively* so. Non-Christian regions may remain in the thinking of this newly converted Christian, so honest about his theological questions, so committed to *seeking* truths he has not yet found—and to *understanding* truths he has found but not yet fully comprehended.

In short, Augustine at Cassiciacum is developing a theology of desire that borrows heavily from neo-Platonism; yet its Christian characteristics determine the shape of its overall structure: trinitarianism, Christology, sin, grace, and the quest to understand God and the soul.

Before explaining the major distinctives of Augustine's theology of desire, it would be helpful to review the major alternative interpretations of Augustine's conversion and early writings. To this I now turn, after which I shall explain why a look at the Cassiciacum dialogues' analysis of desire is so useful for understanding Augustine—and for some other reasons.

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Life"; Cary, "What Licentius Learned"; Silk, "Boethius's *Consolatio*"; Kevane, "Christian Philosophy"; Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*; and Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom*.

Following that, I shall review the major philosophical schools with which Augustine interacts at Cassiciacum; finally, I shall summarize what his own views on desire at Cassiciacum actually are.

## WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION AND EARLY WRITINGS

The nature of Augustine's conversion and the character of the early writings have been subjects of significant debate for about one and a quarter centuries. Perspectives on Augustine in 386 and the years following generally fall into one of four categories. After discussing the nature of this dispute, I shall outline these four major perspectives on young Augustine, and endorse one of them.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine's worldview at Cassiciacum has been the subject of a great dispute concerning the nature of his commitment to Christianity. Intertwined with this debate are questions concerning the notion of Christian neo-Platonism and the extent to which the two were reconcilable in Augustine's world. There is also the question concerning, to whatever extent they were not, which one figures more prominently in his thought at Cassiciacum. This debate more or less began in 1888 with two scholarly works on Augustine, which inspired the first of the four perspectives on young Augustine's thought.

The first of these was Gaston Boissier's comparably modest article on the alleged change of views between Augustine's early and later writings. The second was Adolph von Harnack's work, which explicitly reads the *Confessions* as a misrepresentation of his mind in 386 and the years after.<sup>4</sup> Later Prosper Alfaric championed this interpretation of Augustine.<sup>5</sup> One crucial aspect of this rather uncharitable reading is the idea that Augustine was insincere, a convert to neo-Platonism but not to Christianity, which he allegedly saw as an inferior substitute for Platonism, fit only for the less

3. Much of this material has appeared previously in Boone, "The Role of Platonism in Augustine's Conversion." My characterization of the four perspectives is the same here, but the text has been modified for clarity and expanded in places. The reader interested in a direct look at views on the early Augustine's relationship to neo-Platonism should consult that article, available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rec3.12149/abstract>.

4. Boissier, "La Conversion;" von Harnack, "Augustins Konfessionen." Among the English sources discussing Boissier and von Harnack is a succinct paragraph in O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriguena*, 146.

5. Alfaric, *L'évolution intellectuelle*. O'Meara provides a helpful summary of Alfaric's book in *Studies in Augustine and Eriguena*, 121–22.

intelligent masses. Only much later, so the story goes, did he finally commit to Christianity. This interpretation approaches Augustine as being at different times two very different thinkers, in the early dialogues a neo-Platonist and in later works such as the *Confessions* a genuine Christian. A genuine Christian, but deceptive about his past, for such a reading tends to suspect Augustine of dissembling and deception.

Charles Boyer was a formidable adversary of Alfaric.<sup>6</sup> Thanks largely to his efforts, this reading is now widely considered discredited. Yet its effects have not ceased to linger in Augustinian scholarship. Two more recent scholars associated with this reading of Augustine are Paula Fredrekson and Leo C. Ferrari.<sup>7</sup> Brian Dobell's reading<sup>8</sup> is also similar to Alfaric's, though Dobell is explicit that the *Confessions* is not deceptive.<sup>9</sup>

This interpretation has also influenced a rather common tendency to view Augustine's intellectual development as a dramatic shift from a philosophical optimism present in his early writings to a theological pessimism in the later writings. Supposedly in his early days, influenced by Stoicism and neo-Platonism, he trusted reason to gain knowledge of God and had ambitious plans for *thinking* his way into the happy life. In his later days, chastened by failure to do just this and more knowledgeable of the writings of the Apostle Paul, he abandoned this approach and began to rely on God's grace. Carol Harrison's *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology* is aimed primarily at combating this view of Augustine's intellectual development, which corresponds to the old "two Augustines" theory of Alfaric: "the young Augustine is seen as an optimistic devotee of a Christian philosophy which promises the attainment of perfection, moral purity and tranquility, and the contemplation of wisdom."<sup>10</sup> Harrison cites Peter Brown's influential biography *Augustine of Hippo*<sup>11</sup> as a leading purveyor of this perspective, noting, however, that Brown retracts it in the new edition of his book.<sup>12</sup>

Before going on to the next general strategy for interpreting the early Augustine, I must pause to note that one of the major disagreements in the scholarly literature is his alleged belief in the possibility of perfect happiness in this life. Harrison is against this reading.<sup>13</sup> Among those saying that

6. Boyer, *Christianisme et Néo-Platonisme*; discussed in O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriguena*, 148–49.

7. Fredrekson, "Paul and Augustine," 3–34; Ferrari, *The Conversions*; Ferrari, "Truth and Augustine's Conversion," 9–19.

8. Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion*.

9. *Ibid.*, 25–26.

10. Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology*, 16.

11. Brown, *Augustine*.

12. Harrison, *Rethinking*, 14–17.

13. *Ibid.*, 63–67.

Augustine did indeed hold to the possibility of perfect happiness pre-mortem are Brown in his biography, Frederick Van Fleteren,<sup>14</sup> Eugene TeSelle,<sup>15</sup> Phillip Cary,<sup>16</sup> Leo Ferrari,<sup>17</sup> Ryan Topping,<sup>18</sup> and Paul Kolbet.<sup>19</sup> I lean—cautiously—towards Harrison’s view. I think Augustine’s eventual considered view that happiness in this life is neither complete nor perpetual has roots in his early writings, even at Cassiciacum. At Cassiciacum he thinks that happiness, though it may be *complete* whenever one has a fleeting vision of God, cannot in this life *last*. I will present for this view evidence, such as I have it, from the Cassiciacum dialogues. I have no delusions that what I say here will be the final word on the subject. I only hope to present some evidence that young Augustine did not believe in a perfect and perpetual pre-mortem happiness—or at any rate that, if he did, his views on the subject were not entirely clear and consistent. The subject is interesting, and my understanding of it would lend a modicum of support to my overall thesis in this book, but my thesis can stand without it.

In *The Irrational Augustine*<sup>20</sup> Catherine Conybeare articulates a view which is more or less the opposite of Alfaric’s. Instead of reading the early Augustine as a neo-Platonist and *not* a Christian, Conybeare argues that he is a Christian and *not* a neo-Platonist. Instead of discovering *later in life* that the neo-Platonic, rationalistic quest for the happy life is doomed to failure and needs to be rethought, Conybeare thinks Augustine was developing this critique immediately after his conversion and wrote about it at Cassiciacum. He was indeed to reject the neo-Platonic understanding of the universe, of man’s place in it, and of salvation, but this rejection took place much earlier. Conybeare reads Augustine at Cassiciacum as an earthy fellow, resistant to neo-Platonism and the other-worldly.

Conybeare’s thesis is best understood in terms of Augustine’s developing response to pagan philosophy. The Cassiciacum dialogues interact a great deal with various pagan philosophers—especially the Stoics, Plotinus, and Cicero. These ancient philosophers promised that one could attain a stable happiness by means of reasoning and philosophical practices—reasoning

14. Van Fleteren says that *b. Vita* implies “that man has the ability to reach this knowledge or vision [of happiness] in this life.” See “The Cassiciacum Dialogues and Augustine’s Ascent” 61.

15. TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 61, 73.

16. Cary, “What Licentius Learned.”

17. Ferrari, *The Conversions*, 72–73.

18. Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom*, 157–66.

19. Although Kolbet’s reading of Augustine is more or less that of Harrison, he departs from Harrison in this particular, siding with Van Fleteren and others; see *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 104 and 189.

20. Conybeare, *The Irrational Augustine*.

that would identify the correct stable object of desire, and practices that would help us come to desire it and so attain the satisfaction in which happiness consists. It is easy to read these passages and conclude that Augustine is endorsing this philosophical project aimed at producing a rational and stable happy life. However, according to Conybeare, Augustine is *interacting* with this project not to endorse it so much as to *reconsider* it. And, in reconsidering, he ultimately *rejects* it. Thus Augustine abandons the rationalism of the Stoics and the neo-Platonists, along with the otherworldliness of the neo-Platonists. In its place he adopts a more nuanced understanding of the good life: as an embodied activity, not a quest for disembodied intellectualism; a communal and inclusive affair, rather than the privilege of a few learned men; and a moral, rather than an intellectual, process. This new conception of the good life is inspired by Christianity, not by philosophy.

Conybeare's view is the mirror image of Alfarić's. According to the one, young Augustine is a neo-Platonist, not yet a Christian; he has experienced a mental conversion to neo-Platonic immaterialism. According to the other, he is already a Christian, not a neo-Platonist; having experienced a *moral* conversion to the Christian faith, he has already left neo-Platonism behind.

A third way of understanding Augustine in the fall of 386 and the years following is to see him as committed to Christianity *and* to neo-Platonism. Championed by such scholars as Pierre Courcelle and Robert J. O'Connell, this particular reading has it that Augustine in 386 has converted to Christianity *and* to neo-Platonism, which he sees as essentially compatible, the former the completion of the latter. The dual influences of neo-Platonism and Christianity are easy enough to find in Augustine's early writings. From the Christian side there are strong emphases on God, immortality, sin, and Jesus Christ. From the neo-Platonist side there are emphases on the immaterial nature of God and the soul, the superiority of the immaterial over the physical, and intellectual ascent to knowledge of immaterial reality. It is easy to assume that Augustine considers himself fully a Christian and a neo-Platonist, integrating the two. In this integration sin would be understood as an attachment to carnal reality, salvation as liberation from this attachment.

Pierre Courcelle exemplifies this way of reading Augustine. Courcelle has shown that there was a Christian neo-Platonic community at Milan at the time of Augustine's conversion.<sup>21</sup> For Courcelle, this is evidence supporting Augustine's own neo-Platonism. Courcelle is the father of the modern

21. Courcelle's major works are *Recherches sur les Confessions* and *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin*. One of the many English sources discussing Courcelle is a brief but rewarding discussion in O'Donnell's commentary on the conversion scene in *The Confessions of Augustine: An Electronic Edition*, commentary on 8.12.28–29. O'Donnell mentions as "The sternest rejoinder to Courcelle" Bolgiani, *La conversion*; referenced in O'Donnell, commentary on 8.12.29.

view that young Augustine was both neo-Platonic and Christian, but in one important respect his reading resembles Alfarcic's. Recall that Alfarcic treats Augustine's autobiographical account of his state of mind in 386 as a misrepresentation. Courcelle, while he views Augustine as being a Christian neo-Platonist in his early and his later writings, views the famous conversion scene in book VIII, chapter 12, of *Confessions* as a fictional narrative.<sup>22</sup>

The legacy of Courcelle continues in more recent scholars including Van Fleteren, Jon Beane, and Roland Teske.<sup>23</sup> John O'Meara, a keen commenter on Augustine's "synthesis" of neo-Platonism and Christianity, also falls into this camp.<sup>24</sup> There is also Phillip Cary, who argues that Augustine is influenced by the neo-Platonic idea of the soul's divinity, an idea he accepts in the early writings.<sup>25</sup> Henry Chadwick offers a nice summary of this interpretive tradition, saying of post-conversion Augustine that "Ambrose has convinced him of the incorporeality of God, and preached so profound a fusion of Christianity with Platonic mysticism that Augustine thinks of Christ and Plato as different teachers converging in the same truths, complementary to each other."<sup>26</sup>

In recent decades O'Connell has been particularly influential in promoting this understanding of Augustine's conversion.<sup>27</sup> In addition to his studies of the relationship of Augustine's early writings to Plotinus,<sup>28</sup> O'Connell has distinguished himself by his idea that Augustine had adopted Plotinus's view of the fall of the soul.<sup>29</sup> Plato had suggested in *Meno* that the soul existed before it came to be in the body. Plotinus elaborates in the *En-*

22. O'Donnell disagrees with Courcelle: "There is no convincing reason to doubt the facts of the narrative of this garden scene as A. presents them, and so we should depart from Courcelle;" commentary on 8.12.29.

23. Van Fleteren, "The Cassiciacum Dialogues and Augustine's Ascent." Beane, "Augustine's Silence." Teske, *To Know God and the Soul*.

24. O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Erigena*, 130–31, 136–38, 155–56.

25. Cary, *Augustine's Invention, Inner Grace, and Outward Signs*. For example, in *Augustine's Invention*, Cary explains that Augustine was in 386 converted to Platonist philosophy and to Catholic Christianity, and "to the latter by means of the former;" afterwards, his "Platonism grew in tandem with his Christian orthodoxy" (35). In an earlier article Cary argues that Augustine's idea of the soul's divinity is, at Cassiciacum, transforming from a Manichean idea to a Platonic; Cary, "God in the Soul," 69–79.

26. Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo*, 29–30.

27. Rombs provides a valuable summary of O'Connell's work and its place in Augustine scholarship in the Introduction to his *Saint Augustine and the Fall*.

28. O'Connell, "Enneads VI."

29. O'Connell, *Saint Augustine's Early Theory*. Elsewhere O'Connell says that the "Incarnation, about which Plotinus himself may never have dreamt, Augustine fits neatly into the scheme of the Plotinian universe;" O'Connell, "The Enneads," 160. O'Connell also provides a very helpful refutation of the Alfarcic reading of young Augustine in O'Connell, "The Visage of Philosophy?"

*needs*: The human soul “fell” into an embodied state as the result of sin committed in a former, disembodied state. If indeed this is young Augustine’s view, he has adopted a view on the origins of the soul although the Christian church had not decided the question. Moreover, he views embodiment as a bad state; the body is not the soul’s true home, and embodiment is a punishment. The soul’s purpose is to return to its original, disembodied state. Salvation is an escape from the body, not just an escape from sin; indeed, the two escapes are one.

Courcelle, O’Connell, and others in this tradition differ from Conybeare in taking Augustine to be a committed neo-Platonist; they differ from Alfarcic in taking Augustine to be a committed Christian from the time of his conversion. This strategy for interpreting Augustine leaves room for development in his thought, a development which is, perhaps, necessary for a maturing Christian neo-Platonist. Yet this view eschews the notion of a radical division between an early and a late Augustine; the division is avoided largely by making both the early and the late Augustine into a Christian neo-Platonist—the late perhaps somewhat less Platonic than the early.

O’Connell’s reading of Augustine is somewhat problematic. The early writings display a Christian metaphysics which is not entirely consistent with neo-Platonism. Rombs rightly remarks that part of O’Connell’s legacy has been a “neglect of the context of Augustine’s assimilation of that Plotinian thought. Such Plotinian elements are found in Augustine’s early texts alongside competing or incompatible metaphysical principles.”<sup>30</sup> As a theist Augustine knows that the Principle governing the universe is a personal God who hears our prayers. Moreover, Augustine emphasizes the Son’s equality with the Father in *De ordine* 1.10.29; this Nicene orthodoxy excludes any “Platonizing notions of a hierarchy of divine beings.”<sup>31</sup> Scholars also point to the metaphysical distinction between creator and creation.<sup>32</sup> Etienne Gilson summarizes: “The single fact that Augustine held from the very beginning of his conversion the doctrines of creation and of the equality of the divine Persons would suffice by itself to establish that he was Catholic *and not Plotinian* from the outset.”<sup>33</sup>

30. Rombs, *Saint Augustine*, xxiv.

31. Rist, “Plotinus and Christian Philosophy,” 394–96. Clark emphasizes the significance of this distinction between Christianity and Platonism, which she says even O’Connell acknowledges. See Clark, Review of *St. Augustine’s Early Theory*, 435.

32. An article by Kevane and a recent book by Harrison are particularly helpful in elaborating this metaphysical difference. Kevane, “Christian Philosophy” and Harrison, *Rethinking*. Writing in the Courcelle-O’Connell tradition, Cary, in an earlier book, also mentions this; Cary, *Augustine’s Invention*, 59.

33. Gilson, *Revue Philosophique*, 503; quoted in Kevane, “Christian Philosophy,” 80,



Moreover, in the early writings even the elements in common with neo-Platonism are set in a Christian context and oriented towards Christian purposes. Could Augustine at Cassiciacum really have believed in such dynamic ideas as the Trinity and the Incarnation—yet maintained certain large regions of his worldview that were identical to regions of a neo-Platonic worldview?<sup>34</sup> I think not. On the contrary, he hopes to use neo-Platonic insights to understand the doctrines he received by faith from the church (*Contra Academicos* 3.20.43). Above all, he directs neo-Platonic insights to the goal of understanding two realities with which Christian theology is closely concerned, which Ambrose taught him not to conceive in carnal terms (*De beata vita* 1.4). He summarizes his intent thus: *Deum et animam scire cupio*: “I yearn to know God and the soul” (*Soliloquia* 1.2.7).

While we need not decide what, if any, view of the soul’s origin Augustine held at Cassiciacum,<sup>35</sup> my concerns with O’Connell’s reading have implications for my understanding of Augustine’s diagnosis of desire and prescription for its healing. For example, the soul’s desperate need for grace to convert its desires will emerge as an effect of Augustine’s Christianity on his theology of desire—not (or not only) of neo-Platonic influences.<sup>36</sup>

In later chapters I shall from time to time revisit these first three interpretations and their major proponents.

A fourth interpretation is exemplified by Carol Harrison in her book *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology*. Harrison argues that there is only one Augustine and that he takes neo-Platonist insights very seriously while always giving preeminence to Christianity over Platonism. Platonism provides conceptual resources for answering objections to Christianity, especially the problem of evil (*Confessions* VII), and for explaining Christian doctrines.

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n. 99; emphasis added. Kevane’s article is a helpful source on the significance of the distinction Augustine recognizes between creation and creator; Kevane also recommends Anderson, *St. Augustine and Being*, 61; quoted in Kevane, “Christian Philosophy,” 80–81 n. 101.

34. Fortin is helpful on this theme; see “Reflections,” 99.

35. And I confess that I lean against O’Connell on this point. I agree with O’Daly’s analysis of Augustine’s use of language suggesting the soul’s return to God: It is a metaphorical way of expressing a truth about the divine origin of *knowledge*, not about the soul’s preexistence; O’Daly, *Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind*, 199–201.

36. While suggesting that Augustine realized slowly that Christianity and Plotinus depart on the distinction between creation and creator and the treatment of human beings as both body and soul, Rist notes that Augustine knew “at the outset” that we need God’s gracious help to return to him. See “Plotinus and Christian Philosophy,” 407–8. Cary, in the Courcelle-O’Connell tradition, recognizes this also, treating the idea of grace as a Platonic idea rooted in the divinity of the Good, from which all goodness derives, and which draws us to it by its own goodness; see his *Inner Grace*. I will not argue against this particular view of Cary, but I do argue that Augustine at Cassiciacum has a noticeably Christian notion of grace.

But Platonism is not itself Christianity, and it does not on its own authority establish the truth of Christian doctrine.<sup>37</sup> According to Harrison, the later Augustine's emphases on sin and grace and on Christian faith and practice rather than philosophy as the way to the happy life are already present in the early writings. His thought as it develops undergoes "less a revolution" than a "natural evolution."<sup>38</sup> Even in the early days, he is a *distinctively* Christian thinker—if a less *thoroughly* Christian thinker than he would be after a few decades of writing, thinking, serving, and maturing.

How then, on this reading, is Augustine's relationship to neo-Platonism to be understood? Very simply: He is a Christian, but he appreciates the insights of the neo-Platonists. He finds them insightful and helpful, yet he subordinates them to the revealed truths of the Christian faith, which they are helpful for understanding. He is a "Platonist" in a very broad sense, for he believes in the existence of immaterial reality and in its superiority over physical reality. But he does not accept all the trappings of ancient neo-Platonism. His thought is controlled by Christianity, and not by Plotinus or Porphyry.

Other scholars have a similar interpretation to Harrison. Harrison herself acknowledges her indebtedness to Goulven Madec.<sup>39</sup> John Mourant's article in the inaugural issue of *Augustinian Studies* helpfully collects myriad details from the *Cassiciacum* and other early dialogues, presenting them as evidence for "the extensive presence in virtually all of the dialogues of the Christian spirit and the Christian faith."<sup>40</sup> Eugene Kevane remarks that in the early dialogues "Something immensely illuminating was emerging, a new kind of philosophy, linked somehow with the new religion which had emerged powerfully out of Palestine into the Graeco-Roman world," a kind of philosophy that would "reorient all the arts and disciplines" and see them "placed at the service of God Incarnate."<sup>41</sup> Or, as Curley quotes Maurice Testard: "One must not forget, the Augustine of *Cassiciacum* is a Christian!"<sup>42</sup> Carl J. Vaught aptly summarizes this way of understanding Augustine in 386: "Augustine is a Christian who subordinates Neoplatonism to his own purposes rather than a Neoplatonist who disguises himself as a Christian theologian."<sup>43</sup> Paul Kolbet's recent book on Augustine's ethics and use of rhetoric supports the

37. Harrison, *Rethinking*, chapters 3 and 4.

38. *Ibid.*, 151.

39. Most of Madec's studies are in French. To my knowledge only one of Madec's writings is in English: "The Notion."

40. Mourant, "The Emergence," 70.

41. Kevane, "Christian Philosophy," 52.

42. Testard, *Saint Augustin et Cicéron*, 174; quoted in Curley, *Augustine's Critique of Skepticism*, 73.

43. Vaught, *Encounters with God*, 9–10.

idea that his early thought has some neo-Platonic elements but is controlled by Christianity.<sup>44</sup> Ryan Topping's recent book on Augustine's early pedagogy also seems to lend some (admittedly ambiguous) support to the idea that his early thought has neo-Platonic elements, but is controlled by Christianity.<sup>45</sup> Other scholars who understand Augustine's early thought in much the same way include Etienne Gilson,<sup>46</sup> Mary Clark,<sup>47</sup> John Rist,<sup>48</sup> G. R. Evans,<sup>49</sup> Joanne McWilliam,<sup>50</sup> Laura Holt,<sup>51</sup> Brian Harding,<sup>52</sup> Ernest Fortin,<sup>53</sup> Michael Foley,<sup>54</sup> and William Mallard.<sup>55</sup>

When we are considering the relationship of Augustine's thought to neo-Platonism we are dealing with a complex set of issues, and it is easy to get confused about them. One issue in particular deserves special note: Both Harrison's reading and that of O'Connell and others emphasize the continuity of Augustine's thought. The disagreement concerns the nature of that continuity. Is Augustine's thought—both early and late—simply a Platonically informed Christianity (Harrison et al), or is it a more thoroughgoing

44. Kolbet explicitly links himself to the Madec-Harrison interpretive tradition; Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 14–16, 220 n. 68.

45. Topping explains how Augustine's goal in the early years was to understand immaterial reality (3), but also had "a distinctive Christian moral theory" (17). However, he endorses the same perspective on Augustine's early views as the O'Connell tradition: that Augustine considers Christianity and Platonism to be fully consistent (66). Yet he does not explicitly stake out a position on Augustine's early relation to neo-Platonism, a question he seems (understandably) to prefer to bracket in a study focused on other matters (66–7). Addressing Harrison in detail, Topping agrees with her on some points but objects on one, saying Augustine did at first hold to the possibility of moral perfection and happiness pre-mortem, with the help of grace (157–166). Topping sounds quite a bit like Harrison when he explains how reason in Augustine's thought follows on faith; its job is to explore that "which Christ through his Church" teaches it (169–70). His final word is that Harrison was wrong on pre-mortem happiness and right on grace, and "that past discussions have often failed to acknowledge how Catholic the young Augustine was" (230).

46. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy*.

47. Clark, Review of *Augustine's Early Theory of Man and Odyssey of Soul*.

48. Rist, "Plotinus and Christian Philosophy."

49. Evans, *Augustine on Evil*. Evans takes Augustine's reference in *c. Acad.* to true philosophy to refer to Christianity (30) and says that "he wove" neo-Platonic ideas "into his Christian philosophy" (29). Evans also explains how Augustine's ethics in *b. Vita* are Christian and not merely Stoical (151–53).

50. McWilliam, "The Cassiciacum Autobiography."

51. Holt, "Wisdom's Teacher."

52. Harding, "Skepticism, Illumination."

53. Fortin, Review of *St. Augustine's Early Theory*, 309–11.

54. Foley, "Cicero, Augustine" and "The Other Happy Life."

55. Mallard argues that Augustine's early Christology is orthodox, though pre-Chalcedonian; "The Incarnation in Augustine's Conversion."

Christian neo-Platonism (Courcelle, O’Connell, et al)? Cary, for example, representing the latter tradition, points out that he sides with Madec as well as O’Connell on the question of continuity, although he departs from Madec on “the sources and character of Augustine’s Platonism.”<sup>56</sup>

One other, and particularly important, lesson we can learn from studying Harrison’s approach is that how we interpret Augustine’s early writings is not merely a matter of examining his theology vis-à-vis Neo-Platonism’s. There is a methodological difference between Harrison and other scholars arising from the approach they take to Augustine’s biography. If we interpret the early Augustine in one manner commonly employed by scholars, then we will assume that he is a neo-Platonist except where we can demonstrate a difference between him and the relevant neo-Platonic philosopher—usually taken to be Plotinus. If we read Augustine in Harrison’s way, then we will assume that he was always as much of a Christian as he could be given his developing understanding of Christian doctrine, and we accept no commonality with neo-Platonic thought save where we can demonstrate one.

This particular interpretation of the Christian character of Augustine’s early writings is also my own. The book you are reading could aptly be said to be an application of this interpretation to an important but underappreciated region of young Augustine’s thought, his early theology of desire. It is also a limited defense of this way of reading young Augustine, a defense based on the Christian characteristics of his analysis of desire and on the relationship they bear to the neo-Platonic elements—facts which fit Harrison’s interpretation somewhat better than the others. (To be fair, although my way of reading Augustine comes from a different interpretive tradition, my findings may in fact be consistent with the analyses of some writers in the Courcelle-O’Connell tradition.)

The facts, if my view is correct, are these: At Cassiciacum there are, first, truths Augustine has gleaned from neo-Platonism and to which he will cling for the rest of his life, finding them always to be salutary and consistent with Christianity. Second, there may be some ideas which Augustine has gleaned from neo-Platonism which he will give up as he grows and reflects more deeply on the mysteries of his own faith. These are both coupled with a third category, truths received from the Christian Scriptures and the testimony of the church. The joining of neo-Platonist insights to Christian calls for a rethinking and correction of the former. This rethinking is far from complete, but the point is that it has already begun.

Determining with precision into which categories various ideas fit is no easy task, but we can say with confidence that into the first category fall

56. Cary, *Inner Grace*, 149 n. 110.

the immateriality of God and the soul and the need for intellectual training to contemplate them. Into the second category may well fall the allegedly disembodied state of the afterlife (on which see chapter 3, below), or the Plotinian view of the fall of the soul. The third category includes the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the existence of a personal God (as distinct from the impersonal Principle or One of neo-Platonism), and the radical distinction between creator and creation. These truths impart a new significance to the insights in the first category, placing them within a new worldview.<sup>57</sup> O'Connell and his ilk fail to understand, or at least to properly emphasize, this fact. Meanwhile, Alfarić and his ilk miss the third category altogether, and undermine the significance of the first category.

The three interpretations I reject lend themselves to mutual correction and themselves suggest the contours of my own reading of Augustine. The Courcelle-O'Connell interpretation, itself the closest to my own, corrects the Alfarić reading by calling attention to the Christian aspects of the dialogues.<sup>58</sup> In return the Alfarić reading correctly emphasizes the differences between neo-Platonism and Christianity. Each of these is right in seeing that the dialogues have neo-Platonic aspects, yet either reduces their theology to neo-Platonism or at least fails to appreciate the differences. Conybeare prevents the identification of Augustine's thought with neo-Platonism, but loses sight of Augustine's commitment to neo-Platonic insights.

In short, the perspective on Augustine which I am developing in this book is nothing original; it contains elements from Alfarić, Courcelle, O'Connell, Cary, Conybeare, and others. In understanding these elements the way I do, I stand on the shoulders of other Augustine scholars, including Etienne Gilson, Ernest L. Fortin, Eugene Kevane, Augustine J. Curley, Michael Foley, Goulven Madec, and Carol Harrison. But it must be admitted that so much ink has been spilt in the disagreements over how to read Augustine rightly that rarely have we done the actual reading.

I shall now explain why this particular exercise in reading is so important.

57. If O'Connell is right about the preexistence and pre-natal fall of the soul, this would not detract from the significance of the third category and its effects on the things in the second. I do not endorse O'Connell's reading, and the literature provides ample cause for suspicion. See criticisms of O'Connell's view in Clark and in O'Daly, "Did St. Augustine Ever?"

58. A particularly helpful refutation of the Alfarić reading from O'Connell's perspective appears in O'Connell, "The Visage of Philosophy."

## WHY EXAMINE THE DIALOGUES' THEOLOGY OF DESIRE?

The analysis of desire is an important part of the work of ancient and medieval philosophers and is vitally important for understanding the figure who looms largest in the transition from the ancient to the medieval world. But there are other reasons we might benefit from understanding Augustine's early theology of desire.

One reason is simply that the theme of desire's maladies and their healing is central to the *Cassiciacum* dialogues. Unfortunately, it has generally been neglected. Many studies on Augustine's early writings focus on uncovering his sources or on the nature of his conversion. Some opportunities to exegete the early writings, to let him speak for himself, have been lost. The excellent studies that do let Augustine speak for himself<sup>59</sup> rarely if ever focus directly on desire, making it a lacuna even in the best scholarship. Yet desire is an important theme in the dialogues, replete as they are with the language of desire, words such as: *amare*, *appetere*, *quaerere*, *velle*, *cupere*, *sitire*, *diligere*, *libido*, *cupiditas*, and *voluntas*. The disordered state of our affections and their need for renewal is a ubiquitous theme, intertwined with the other central themes of the *Cassiciacum* dialogues.

The literature itself points to the need to fill this lacuna. Various scholars<sup>60</sup> have observed that the arguments and claims advanced in the dialogues have an ethical purpose, the restoration of happiness in men. For example, Topping: "From *Cassiciacum* onward Augustine considered the end of philosophy (or what we might term his 'moral theology') to be beatitude, the satisfaction of human aspiration for union with God."<sup>61</sup> Since happiness requires the satisfaction of desire, an understanding of desire in the dialogues is necessary if we are to understand how the dialogues are meant to help us reach happiness.

Several books focusing on Augustine's classical education and his turning it towards more pious ends go some way towards filling this gap.

59. See above, footnote 2.

60. As Kevane says, Augustine's philosophy "was a way of life" based in Christian doctrine and practice; "Christian Philosophy," 48. Gilson commends this aspect of Augustine to our study in chapter 1 of *The Christian Philosophy*. Foley, Silk, and Curley also read the dialogues with close attention to their ethical dimension. Others studies are Heil, "Augustine's Attack on Skepticism;" Harding, "Epistemology and Eudaimonism;" Harding, "Skepticism, Illumination;" Neiman, "Augustine's Philosophizing Person;" and Cary, "What Licentius Learned."

61. Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom*, 8. Another memorable remark on ethics at *Cassiciacum*: "while Augustine adopted the eudaimonism he found in Cicero's *Hortensius*, already by 386 he had learned how to adapt this to Christian ends" (*ibid.*, 227).

Joseph Pucci's *Augustine's Virgilian Retreat* examines Augustine's reuse of pagan authors in service of Christian truth.<sup>62</sup> Topping's *Happiness and Wisdom* is an admirable study in Augustine's early pedagogy. It is, however, limited in this regard in that it focuses on pedagogy rather than on desire and in that it looks at various other early writings and does not thoroughly cover Cassiciacum. Much the same can be said of Eugene Kevane's magisterial *Augustine the Educator*, which covers, from Cassiciacum onward, Augustine's pedagogy—a topic intersecting with desire. Kevane's is a fine book which, in my view, deserves much more attention from Augustine scholars. But it does not cover in sufficient depth Augustine's teaching on desire at Cassiciacum. In addition, Kolbet's *Augustine and the Cure of Souls* is a fine study of Augustine's psychagogy—his use of rhetoric and philosophy to heal the soul—but it is not sufficiently attentive to the formative period at Cassiciacum. Of the literature I have mentioned, only Conybeare presents a systematic reading of the Cassiciacum dialogues, a reading problematic in some respects and in any case not focused directly on the crucial topic of desire. The lacuna remains.

There are at least three other reasons for such an investigation.

One is that an understanding of Augustine's early thinking on the status of desire and the means of its renovation will inform his later thought on the same subjects. A typical entry point into the *Confessions*, for example, is the notion that sin involves disordered loves—and redemption rightly ordered loves. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a quality study of the *Confessions* that does *not* discuss this theme at some length. Why, then, would we neglect the same topic in the early writings of the same author? Augustine's views on the disorder of desire in sinful man and the reordering of desire in redeemed man did not emerge fully developed as he was writing the *Confessions*. The doctrine grew with him into maturity. If we are to appreciate fully this topic in the later works, therefore, we must examine it in the earlier ones.

Also, the theology of desire in the early writings of Augustine has the potential to inform contemporary debates on the nature of desire. The current philosophical discussion is thoroughly analytical. It seeks to determine what desire is, typically characterizing it as a requirement for action; coupled with beliefs about the way the world is and the way it could be, a desire that it be a certain way results in action.<sup>63</sup> Although I do not object

62. Pucci, *Augustine's Virgilian Retreat*.

63. A good summary of this view appears in Pettit, "Desire." In trying to determine what desire is Schroeder takes a different approach, analyzing the biological substrata of desire. Although his approach presupposes materialism and treats *all* desires as rooted in or identical to bodily states, I find his theory a plausible account of as many

to the accuracy of this analysis of what desire is,<sup>64</sup> I do not believe it can be a complete analysis of desire. Desire is more than that which together with belief equals action. It is as much a condition for satisfaction as a condition for action. The ancient-medieval perspective on desire suggests an ethical definition: Desire is that which together with an attainment of the object of desire equals satisfaction.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, as a component of the happy life desire calls for more than an analytic treatment; it calls for an active, even a spiritual, treatment that brings us to happiness by renovating our desires. We must understand the value of desire and the nature of healthy desire. From the ancient-medieval perspective, the recent books of David Naugle and James Smith<sup>66</sup> on reaching happiness by reordering our loves are just as important, if not more so, than the analytical approach which is currently the standard in philosophy.

Scholars of the ancient philosophers know well how they treated desire. This ethical and spiritual treatment of desire by the ancients has been called “therapy,” and rightly so, for this is therapy as it was practiced millennia before the emergence of modern psychology. These ancient philosophers write with a view toward bringing people to happiness, which they understand as the satisfaction of desire. They diagnose the absence of happiness as a malfunction of desire, and prescribe for its restoration the healing of desire. The nature of the diagnosis and the cure prescribed vary according to the worldview of the philosopher—be it Epicurean, Stoic, Skeptical, or neo-Platonic.

And this is a final reason to understand Augustine’s theology of desire in the early dialogues: It is a fitting extension to our understanding of ancient philosophical therapies of desire.

Since this philosophical approach is also the background to Augustine’s own analysis, it would behoove us to review some of the views of the philosophical schools of the ancient world, particularly their understanding of desire. After this I shall turn to a summary of Augustine’s early theology of desire.

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of our desires as are rooted in the body; not being a materialist, I doubt it is true of *all* desires. See Schroeder, “Desire.” Milliken critiques the standard analysis of desire in “In a Fitter Direction.”

64. Indeed, Burt says something similar when he remarks that acts of love require knowledge of an object as well as delight in the same object. “*Let Me Know You*,” 69–70. Moreover, this definition of “desire” is close to the Stoic notion of *horme* as well as to Augustine’s use of *voluntas*; see Byers, “The Meaning of *Voluntas*.”

65. “. . . happiness depends on the fulfillment of our basic desires . . .” Burt, “*Let Me Know You*,” 10.

66. Naugle, *Reordered Loves*. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*.



## ANCIENT PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR THERAPIES FOR DESIRE

The philosophical schools of late antiquity were intensely interested in the problem of desire—in the ubiquity of dissatisfaction and the strategies or therapies one can apply to desire to make satisfaction possible. One can tell the story of late antique philosophy in terms of the philosophies of desire of its various schools. After describing some common elements of ancient philosophical therapy, I shall trace these elements through some of the chapters in this story which are particularly relevant at Cassiciacum: the Epicurean, Stoic, and neo-Platonist schools of thought.<sup>67</sup>

Ancient philosophical therapy is commonly developed according to a medical analogy. Philosophy is, so to speak, spiritual medicine. It observes the evidence of pathology in a person's life, as a doctor would observe *symptoms*; it provides an explanation of the underlying pathology, as a doctor would make a *diagnosis*; it provides a *therapy* for a person's life; finally, it describes the ideal of spiritual *health* to which therapy should bring one. Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire* and Pierre Hadot's *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* are very helpful studies of these themes in the ancients.<sup>68</sup> Kolbet and Topping review the same material, focusing on the therapeutic uses of, respectively, rhetoric and education, in their books before going on to explore Augustine's use of the same types of therapy throughout his career.<sup>69</sup>

### Epicureanism

Epicureanism sees symptoms of spiritual pathology in the obsessions, fears, and disappointments with which our lives are rife. Nussbaum describes the Epicurean criticism of many people's lives: "We see people rushing frenetically about after money, after fame, after gastronomic luxuries, after passionate love . . ." <sup>70</sup> Lucretius, the Roman Epicurean, also describes sexual

67. This is not a complete survey, for there are other chapters in the story; for example, Kolbet reviews the therapeutic use of rhetoric in Cicero, Manicheanism, Ambrose, and neo-Platonism in chapter 3 of *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*.

68. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*; Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*. Topping summarizes Hadot nicely: "the ancient school primarily offered an education in virtue" (41).

69. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*; Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom*. Referring to the work of Diognon, Topping says that "the Cassiciacum dialogues present a pedagogy in action" (71).

70. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 103.

obsession.<sup>71</sup> The Epicurean philosopher, above all, sees as symptomatic of spiritual pathology the fact that nearly everyone is “poisoned by the fear of death,” desperately trying to secure for themselves a happy position in the afterlife.<sup>72</sup>

Epicureanism analyzes these disorders as rooted in desires that exceed what can naturally be achieved: “The flesh took the limits of pleasure to be unlimited.”<sup>73</sup> These desires are rooted in false beliefs about what is good for us, beliefs strengthened by a society that has lost sight of the natural human good.<sup>74</sup> The fear of death is especially significant. We have been trained to believe in an afterlife in which we may be rewarded or punished; we have been trained to believe in gods who punish us when we vex them. Accordingly we live our lives fearing death and the wrath of the gods. We have been led to believe by “conversations all around us glorifying wealth and power” that these are good things.<sup>75</sup> Lucretius goes deeper still, analyzing the accumulation of wealth and power as frantic attempts to achieve invulnerability and rooted in the fear of death.<sup>76</sup>

As therapy, Epicureanism prescribes that we rid ourselves of these false beliefs and learn the truth of the universe and of our existence in it. The Epicurean therapy is rooted in a materialist conception of reality. The universe is composed of atoms in a void; human beings are material creatures, composed of atoms. In a telling piece, Epicurus describes to Herodotus the physical makeup of the universe and explains how the truths of materialism remove anxiety.<sup>77</sup> When we die our atoms simply dissipate, so there is no afterlife to fear. By ceasing to believe in the afterlife we can accept the fact of death and live contentedly in its expectation. The gods are happy, invulnerable creatures who do not need anything from us; accordingly, they do nothing to harm us and we need not fear them. Epicurus explains in a letter to Pythocles that meteorological events are the result of the movements of atoms, not the portents of the gods; by ceasing to believe in gods looming wrathfully over us we cease to fear them.<sup>78</sup> Epicureanism recommends constant meditation on these truths in order to “become intensely aware of,

71. Nussbaum has an excellent discussion of this theme in Lucretius; *ibid.*, chapter 5.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Epicurus, *Epicurus Reader*, xx.

74. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 105, 113.

75. *Ibid.*, 107.

76. *Ibid.*, 198.

77. Epicurus, “Letter to Herodotus,” in *Epicurus Reader*.

78. Epicurus, “Letter to Pythocles,” in *Epicurus Reader*. The exact Epicurean account of the gods is not entirely clear; for an account Augustine almost certainly read, see Cicero in Book I of *The Nature of the Gods*.

and assimilate within ourselves,” the truth about the universe.<sup>79</sup> Epicureans also learned to be content with simple and natural pleasures and cultivated friendships to help one another live by these truths.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, happiness is achieved when we live within our natural limits. The Epicurean ideal is a life free from the psychological torment of unachievable expectations and content with bodily existence. Not seeking to live forever or to placate the gods, the happy person is content to live as a body for a time and then die. Not seeking to accumulate wealth or rise precipitously to political power, the happy person is satisfied with being relatively free from pain and experiencing a modicum of physical pleasure. This achieves the happy life, a state of *ataraxia*, or tranquility.<sup>81</sup> In short, Epicureanism counsels that we limit our desires to the very modest goal we are able to achieve; desire for what we cannot attain and retain results in disappointment, so we should understand what is attainable and trim our desires to accept it.

## Stoicism

Like the Epicurean, the Stoic school of thought addresses spiritual pathology, seeing as evidence of pathology the emotions that disturb our lives: the likes of fear, anxiety, grief, disappointment, envy, anger, hatred, and regret. For example, Seneca opens his *On Anger* with an account of the misery associated with anger: bloodlust, a loss of self-control, outbursts of violent speech, wars, etc.<sup>82</sup> In *On the Tranquility of the Soul* he describes the boredom and laziness of some lives, a condition which digresses into envy: “they desire the ruin of everyone, as they have not been able to succeed themselves; then . . . the mind of these men becomes angry at Fortune and complains about the times, withdrawing into corners and brooding over its sorry fate until it becomes irritated with itself.”<sup>83</sup> The great sadness we often experience at the death of a loved one is also taken as an example of spiritual ill health.

The Stoic diagnoses these disorderly emotions in terms of mistaken judgments; according to Stoic psychology, emotions are a kind of false judgment.<sup>84</sup> The devastating emotions which disturb our lives are judgments that the universe does not measure up to how it should be; for example,

79. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 122.

80. *Ibid.*, 123.

81. See Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 109.

82. Seneca, *On Anger*, 1.1–2.3.

83. Seneca, *Tranquility of the Mind*, 116–17.

84. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 366–69.

grief is the judgment that I have lost something of great value.<sup>85</sup> As the Stoic sees it, these judgments show that we are failing to see the universe for what it is and failing to see our place in it.

To cure us of these emotions, Stoic therapy aims to help us learn the truth about the universe. Philosophy of desire is again linked to metaphysics: Nothing happens without divine permission; our fate is acceptable to God and is indeed God's very decree.<sup>86</sup> The universe is determined, and the way things are is the way they ought to be. Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* reflects on the order of the universe: a systematic whole which is law-like, beautiful, and good. We must learn to accept the universe as it is and to consider it from the perspective of the whole.<sup>87</sup> We experience disturbing emotions because our desires are based on our own perspective: a selfish, individual view which does not take into account the good of the whole. What seems a misfortune is actually good; by reflecting on the universe as a whole we will come to see this and accept our place in the universe.<sup>88</sup> By changing our perception of things, we change our desires; by changing our desires, we are no longer hurt by shifting fortune. Since emotions are a false judgment, removing the judgment removes the emotion. The key to happiness is to cut desire down to size, or even to extirpate it completely—to proportion desire to the way things are. Arguments help to cultivate the soul's understanding of the truth and thus are central in its therapy.<sup>89</sup> Stoic therapy also includes constantly paying attention to oneself and reminding oneself of one's place in the universe.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, the Stoic explains spiritual health. The person who lives properly understands that the soul's true good is its own virtue: "virtue all by itself suffices for a completely good human life . . ." <sup>91</sup> Thus the Stoic ideal is the state of *apatheia*, the utterly stable contentment of one whose desires line up with the way things are. The heart of this prescription for happiness is the principle that we should desire only that which is under our direct control, namely our own virtue; nothing else is consistently attainable.

85. *Ibid.*, 375–86.

86. Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.40.

87. *Ibid.*, 4.7.

88. On this theme see Seneca's *On Providence*.

89. For example, see chapter 11 of Nussbaum's *Therapy of Desire* on how Seneca's *On Anger* uses arguments as therapy to heal the reader's soul.

90. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 138.

91. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 359; also see Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 127: "The good person believes that the only evil is moral evil and that there is no good but moral good—namely, what we call duty or virtue."

Everything else can go by the wayside; we do not need it, and should not want it, to be happy.

## Neo-Platonism

In a revealing passage Plotinus explains what things do *not* affect the happy man, thus showing the sort of things the neo-Platonist sees as evidence of poor spiritual health.<sup>92</sup> These are the fears and disappointments common to men, such as: distress at the death of a child or the loss of possessions; despair when political winds bring change; and the fear of an ignoble death, of not being buried, or of not having an imposing tombstone to stand as monument. By fearing the possibility of such things and despairing at their realization men show that they are not spiritually healthy.

Neo-Platonism diagnoses not the *strength* but the *direction* of desire as what has gone wrong. Desire for physical things is the root of spiritual pathology. Although Epicurus and the Stoics are correct that our desires exceed anything attainable in this world, we should not be desiring *this* world in the first place.<sup>93</sup> Lust for sensory things pulls us off the pursuit of what would make us happy; the right object of desire is immaterial and accessible only to the intellect.<sup>94</sup> Plotinus says, “the mortal . . . is not the authentic object of our love nor the good we really seek. Only in the world beyond does the real object of our love exist . . .”<sup>95</sup>

The soul’s therapy consists in being trained to know immaterial reality. At the heart of neo-Platonism are the insights that there is such a thing as an immaterial world; that it is better than the physical world; that it lends to the physical world such continuity, organization, and rationality as it admits of; that our souls are immaterial realities themselves; that it is the soul and not the body that knows immateriality; and that we must be trained in order to know it. Neo-Platonic therapy helps us know the immaterial world by living “in accordance with the highest part of ourselves, namely the intellect,” in order to be healed.<sup>96</sup> We must also contemplate immateriality and practice

92. From the treatise on *Happiness* in Plotinus, *The Essential Plotinus*, 1.4.7.

93. Stoics such as Marcus, who desire the good of the universe, bear a resemblance to the Platonists in that they recommend *redirecting* our desire towards something higher than money, power, fame, and physical pleasure. From the Platonic perspective, the problem is that they still fail to redirect desire towards an immaterial world.

94. Plato’s *Symposium* is the paradigmatic meditation on love for the divine.

95. From Plotinus, the treatise on *The Good or the One* in *Enneads*, 6.9.9.

96. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 158.

asceticism in order to learn to live for the immaterial world.<sup>97</sup> Finally, in Plato's Academy it was taught that the fear of death was to be avoided.<sup>98</sup>

The happy life is the life lived in accordance with reason and in contemplation of immateriality, and it culminates in union with the divine.<sup>99</sup> Happiness depends on the soul's becoming acquainted with immateriality; when our minds contemplate the divine we are content: "the soul rests. It seeks no further. It is sated. Its vision remains all within; it is sure of its object."<sup>100</sup> No carnal thing holds the interest of a soul thus contented.<sup>101</sup>

Where Epicurus makes the contentedness of the body primary, the neo-Platonic intellectual ascent makes it irrelevant; where contentedness with the physical universe satisfies both Stoic and Epicurean, the mind trained to contemplate the divine readily gives it up. All agree that happiness is contingent on the attainability of desire and that unhappiness is due to inordinate desire for unattainable things. But where others advise us to cut desire down to size, the neo-Platonist encourages us to love something more lasting and more worth loving. The right object of desire perennially satisfies; if anything, our desire may actually be too weak!

## Augustine and the Philosophers

Although many aspects of these ancient philosophers are still the subject of scholarly debate, clearly they are concerned with the disorders that afflict human desire and with the means of restoring desire to right order. This sort of therapy as it appears in the ancient philosophers is well known to scholars of the ancients, and similar analyses of desire are familiar to those who study the later writings of Augustine and the writings of other medieval thinkers. It is here at this pivotal moment, when the mind of Augustine the new Christian thinker is setting in motion the transition from the ancient to the medieval era, that we have so far been largely negligent in studying this crucial topic. The *Cassiciacum* dialogues are the first fruits of the philosopher-theologian who did more than any other to effect the transition from the pagan ancient culture to the Christian medieval. In these dialogues Augustine interacts with late antique eudaimonism; his Christian advice for the restoration of desire is in part a response to ancient advice on desire. He

97. *Ibid.*, 158–59.

98. *Ibid.*, 67.

99. *Ibid.*, 160.

100. From Plotinus, the treatise on *Contemplation*, 3.8.6.

101. From Plotinus, the treatise on *Beauty*, 1.6.7. (1.4.7 in the treatise on *Happiness* is also helpful.)

has a valuable perspective on late antiquity, one helpful for understanding ancient philosophy and Christian theology alike.

I now turn to a summary of the dialogues' analysis of desire.

## DESIRE IN THE CASSICIACUM DIALOGUES

Augustine's response to ancient philosophy emphasizes the superiority of the neo-Platonists to other philosophical schools, and *their* inferiority to Christianity. He specifically focuses on what we have come to know as the "neo-Platonic" tradition represented by Porphyry and Plotinus, whom Augustine recognizes as authentic representatives of Plato's doctrine.<sup>102</sup>

Let us look briefly at an illustrative example from a later work. In the 410 Letter to Dioscorus Augustine gives an overview of ancient philosophy, presenting the ethics of three ancient schools of thought in order to contrast them with one another and with Christianity, privileging the Platonist school as getting closest to the truth.<sup>103</sup> Each school espouses a view on the supreme good: for the Epicurean, the body; for the Stoic, the mind; and, for the Platonist, God. Stoicism has an advantage over the Epicureans; it locates the supreme good in the mind, thus promoting an *inward* turn away from carnal lusts and towards the good of the soul. Platonism locates the supreme good in a divine reality above the soul, thus promoting an *upward* turn toward God. Even so, Platonism lacks the truths of Christianity; it fails to depict God as personal and trinitarian. It also lacks the humble way that leads to God, the way of following Christ.

This response to ancient philosophy is incipient at Cassiciacum, where Augustine responds to the problems of ancient philosophy with Christian reflections on loving God and the soul. Like the ancient philosophers his treatment of desire provides all the elements of a rich medical analogy. In the next five chapters of this book I pursue the theme of desire and its renewal through each of the dialogues, devoting one chapter to each dialogue. Here I shall describe the major roles desire plays in each of the dialogues. Then I shall summarize the major insights on desire that emerge from the dialogues. Then I shall discuss the concluding chapter of this book.

102. Harrison, *Augustine*, 13. Accordingly, while there may be differences between Plato and Plotinus, these are not Augustine's concern at Cassiciacum.

103. Augustine, "Letter 118," 3.14–17.