

**DANTE'S *PARADISO* AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF MEDIATION IN AUGUSTINE'S  
*CONFESSIONS*: THE ROLE OF THE PARTICULAR IN THE SOUL'S ASCENT**

by

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*In that abyss I saw how love held bound  
Into one volume all the leaves whose flight  
Is scattered through the universe around;*

*How substance, accident, and mode unite  
Fused, so to speak, together, in such wise  
That this I tell of is one simple light.*

*Yea, of this complex I believe mine eyes  
Beheld the universal form — in me,  
Even as I speak, I feel such joy arise.*

— *Paradiso XXXIII: 85-93*

*“Who knew heaven is a place on earth” — Belinda Carlisle*

### Abstract

This thesis provides an interpretation of Augustine's *Confessions* as an expression of Christian Neoplatonic mediation. In studying Augustine's diverse inheritance central to his inspiration, I expose an ambiguity in his expression of the role of *the particular* in the soul's mediative ascent. Some modern critical interpretations (Hannah Arendt and David Meconi) present Augustine largely as a Plotinian figure who denies a value to the *particularity* of mediative objects in the soul's ascent. I reject these interpretations and suggest that Augustine's theology of *incarnation* (the unmediated union of the *ineffable* and the *sensible*) must be employed as a central hermeneutic that allows for each mediative object to be valued *qua itself* as a function of the soul's ascent into God. Dante's *Paradiso* draws heavily on the metaphysics and theology of the mediative ascent of the *Confessions* and, further, offers a clarifying illustration of Augustine's *mediation* and its dependence on *incarnation*. The Empyrean Heaven, the highest heaven and final vision of the entire *Commedia*, is illustrated as a brilliant diversity of distinct identities, most fully themselves, revolving around and illumined by the *incarnate* person of Christ: the unmediated union of the ineffable and sensible.

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## Introduction

Much of western philosophical and theological discourse considers the relation of the “ineffable” and the “sensible;” the two ends of a metaphysical spectrum with its roots in the tradition of Platonic philosophy that emerged in Classical Athens (roughly 400s BCE). The ‘sensible’ is the material substance — the “stuff of this world” — so to speak, and the “ineffable” is what is *beyond* this world; the ineffable is given various terms such as “The Good,” or “The One.” The “ineffable,” for the early Platonists, is the cause of all material reality.<sup>1</sup> Early *Neoplatonists* (various schools of thought that stemmed from Plato’s original teachings in the third to fifth century CE) toyed with possibilities for the relation between these two ends being *mediated*: they oftentimes considered the possibility of a *stratification* of mediative substance that leads the soul upwards towards the ineffable. This consideration of the relationship between the ineffable and the sensible became particularly pertinent when early Neoplatonic Greek philosophy met the newly-forming systems and the growing prestige of Christianity. This developing metaphysics, which could be referred to as largely *Christian Neoplatonic* in theme, announces that ineffability can be *existent within* the sensible and that this occurs in *incarnation*: that Christ, as both human and God, is the perfect mediator between both ineffable and sensible.<sup>2</sup> This development of the more distinctly Christian *incarnation* onto the Platonist systems requires a continued consideration of the relations between the individual, God, and the world. What we see “unleashed” in this

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Speusippus (ca. 407 - 339 BCE), Plato’s nephew who took over Plato’s academy upon his death, elaborated on Plato’s principles by generating a ten-staged cosmic “schema,” with ‘The One’, supreme *Beyond* Being, as the first grade of Being. He posits that this first grade of Being is the most “simplex and primordial of all realities” and that it is the “cause of being and goodness for all other beings” (J.M Dillon, 2) See, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1977, 2)

<sup>2</sup> Prior to the more distinctly Christian notion of incarnation, there are is much discussion in Early and Middle Platonism about a “mixed” relation of the ineffable and the sensible. For example, Aristotelean *hylomorphism* suggests that every physical object is a compound of matter and “form.”

system of thought is a way of thinking about the world as a series of graduated *mediations* of the “ineffable,” specifically, in this case, made possible by the existence of an *unmediated union* of the ineffable and sensible in *incarnation*.<sup>3</sup> The particularly *Christian* union is the union of God (ineffable) and the sensible (in human form) in the person of Christ. In this instance, God physically becomes *in-fleshed*; there is a concrete instance of the union of the ineffable and sensible in a particular human body. Ultimately, what we see made possible is for material reality not to be understood as an object of evil (or, at the very least, in a radical *distinction* from the ineffable); but in fact, material reality can be understood, through *incarnation*, as a location of the union of materiality and ineffability.

If the “ineffable” is the ultimate *telos* (or final end) of the human soul and metaphysically *beyond* the sensible and material, as much of the Platonic tradition suggests, then perhaps it is justifiable to “ignore” the world; *use it* as a means to our more ultimate end, or even further, treat it as “evil,” because it is resistant to our *telos*. *However*, if the ineffable *is present* (or *incarnate*) within the world, then this too will have repercussions of monumental proportions. It will demand a re-evaluation of the root status of the world and its metaphysical value relative to each soul’s ascent into God. Saint Augustine of Hippo (b. 354 AD), an early figure of Christian Neoplatonism, discusses, at length, this union of the ineffable and sensible, and its repercussions on the soul’s relation to the world. I will outline and evaluate the particular contribution that Augustine makes to this discussion in his autobiographical work the *Confessions*.

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<sup>3</sup> It is indisputable that some Platonisms already offer a metaphysical system in which the sensible and material can be understood as “graduated” mediations of the ineffable. The more distinctly Christian notion of *incarnation*, however, brings with it a new philosophical-theological justification of how this unmediated union is possible, and makes possible a more generalized union of the divine and the material. The significance of this development of an *incarnational* theology will be discussed at length.

Augustine emerges from within the tradition of Neoplatonism, and thus, many of the assumptions and questions that inspire (and indeed, *enable*) his philosophical-autobiographical work *Confessions* (397 AD) remain consistent with those of his Platonic predecessors.<sup>4</sup> Scholarship around Augustine and the extent to which he both continues and departs from this tradition of Neoplatonism has been a lively source of philosophical and theological debate. I will argue, following the medieval scholar Robert Crouse, that Augustine's Christian Neoplatonism remains, essentially, Neoplatonic insofar as Augustine offers a Christian "conversion" (as opposed to *contradiction*), to a more strictly Platonic metaphysical structure of *mediation*. I will suggest that Augustine's theology of mediation, as depicted in the *Confessions*, affects the human individual's relationship to the world insofar as it offers a consideration (based on the notion of *incarnation*) of how the world is a substance with a positive metaphysical value: that is, the world, rather than distracting the soul from its end in God, can be engaged as a positive means of *mediation towards its end* in God. In Platonism and Christianity alike, the soul exists in a state of desire. For the Platonist, the soul seeks satisfaction and rest in the forms (and ultimately, the Good, or the One); it finds its natural rest in perfection and goodness. Similarly, as Augustine suggests at the beginning of his *Confessions*, the human heart is "restless until it rests in you [God]."<sup>5</sup> Augustine's distinctly *Christian* Platonism offers us a way in which the world can be engaged, through mediation, in the soul's journey towards its end (and rest) in God.

How the human soul is related to the sensible is a question that Augustine wrestles with in his *Confessions*. Augustine will oppose the radical anti-materialism of Plotinus' (early Platon-

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<sup>4</sup> Neoplatonism is one of a large patchwork of influences that Augustine inherits (as will be discussed in Chapter 1), however, his Neoplatonic heritage is the scope of my research.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, ed. Henry Chadwick, 1991), 1.i.i.

ist of the 2nd century) metaphysics in his more value-laden understanding of the sensible.<sup>6</sup> Augustine, opposing his depiction of Plotinus, believes the sensible to have a crucial role in the soul's journey into God. We will see that this greater freight given to the sensible is grounded in Augustine's philosophical theology of *incarnation*, which will elevate the value of all sensible material goods through the *incarnation* of the ineffable into the sensible through the person of Christ.

Augustine speaks of this unmediated unity between the ineffable and the sensible within his discussion of *incarnation* in his *On the Trinity*. Augustine understands *incarnation* in terms of Christ: God takes on human form in Christ; who is the second person of the Trinity (the three persons of the Trinity being the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Christ is both God and human; he is the unmediated union of the ineffable and sensible. This immediacy of ineffable and sensible through incarnation will, theoretically, have implications for *all* sensible material, insofar as, if it is possible for one material and sensible person to be *also* ineffable, then the ineffable theoretically exists as "possibility" for all of humanity.<sup>7</sup>

A second (and somewhat parallel) question of monumental repercussions that Augustine will encourage us to explore, in the context of his Trinitarian theology, is a consideration of diverse *multiplicity*. In a continuation of a longstanding discussion on the relation between 'The

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<sup>6</sup> There is tension within Plotinus himself as to the extent of his anti-materialism. Despite his numerous statements regarding matter being negative ("Plotinus identifies matter with evil and privation of all form or intelligibility"), he also claims (rather more positively) that "matter is only evil in other than a purely metaphysical sense when it becomes an impediment to the return to the One. It is evil when considered as a goal of end that is polar opposite to the Good." Augustine, however, primarily engages with Plotinus' most negative statements regarding matter in his *Confessions*, and therefore these objections are the focus of my research. (*Plotinus*, The Stanford Encyclopaedia for Philosophy. (n.d.))

<sup>7</sup> In Platonism, the ineffable (the non-physical, non-sensible reality) is necessary to understand the sensible and material. In other words, the *natural* cannot be understood fully *naturally*.



One' and 'The Many,' which comprises much of the Platonic tradition, Augustine proposes that multiplicity exists within and has its origin in divine unity in the Trinity. This union of multiplicity and unity is a lynchpin to Augustine's understanding of mediation: if multiplicity can be divine insofar as its origin is in the Trinity (and therefore not 'evil' in its opposition to the 'Oneness' of God, as Plotinus will conclude), then the vast diversity and *particularity* of sensible existence can also be seen as originating (or having its *ground*) in God.

Hannah Arendt's study of Augustine in her book *Love and Saint Augustine* grapples with this very question: if the soul's ultimate end is in God (as Augustine says) what is the soul's relation to the sensible material as mediating principles of this end in God? Arendt will offer a critical response: for her, in Augustine, each particular mediating principle to God is ultimately *dissolved* of its particular meaning because each mediating object functions *exclusively* as a mode of entering into union with God, and once this union has been achieved the particularity of each 'mediating step' is rendered inconsequential.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Arendt reads Augustine as offering a notion of meditation based in *exploitation*: the individual *uses* her mediating object as a means to her final end in God. I will engage with J. Warren Smith to apply what I believe to be a necessary corrective to Arendt's reading of Augustine that renders him far closer to Plotinus than I believe him to be, and that I believe his philosophical theology of *incarnation*, allows. I will reveal, with Smith, how Augustine allows the soul to love its object — or mediating principle — *both* in its particularity *and* in such a way that recognizes its partiality relative to God (being the ultimate *telos* of all). This brings us to the crucial distinction between my understanding of Augustine as

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<sup>8</sup> This recognition of the 'dissolution' of particularity within mediation is not strictly modern, but rather, is also internal to the early Platonist tradition itself. Because of her robust discussion of mediation, however, I choose to engage with this critical reading of Augustine through Arendt.

presenting *the world as in God* and God as *incarnate* in the world, as opposed to Arendt's reading of Augustine in which the world exists only as a *means* to God, who is *beyond the world*. If, as Arendt suggests, Augustine offers us a metaphysics and theology that understands the *particularity* of each sensible and material object to be of no metaphysical import, then this world is simply a means to *pass through* and *exploit* toward our end in God.

This engagement with Arendt (and Meconi, who follows her on this point) will be an aid in understanding what is at stake in Augustine's discussion of *incarnation*. Without a robust consideration of incarnation on the sensible material, a more Plotinian reading of Augustine (that Arendt provides us) relinquishes a claim to the sensible being of value, and all sensible particularity ultimately "dissolves" relative to the *absolute* telos of the soul's union with the ineffable (as metaphysically distinct from the sensible). In other words, a more Plotinian Augustine will offer us no imperative to treat the world as something of significance *in and of it itself* — rather, one's particular existence in the world is ultimately of no matter to their ultimate end in God. I will argue, with Crouse, that Augustine "converts" Neoplatonic assumptions, in such a way that mediating principles can become loci of divine encounter *in and of themselves*, and not only modes *through* which one passes to encounter God "on the other side," so to speak. Indeed, we will see how the individual can treat each mediating object as a location of divine encounter *qua itself* by virtue of its participation in the full *multiplicity* of God. This is made possible through Augustine's theology of *incarnation*: because of the unmediated union of the sensible and the ineffable in a *particular* human form, all sensible and material existence can now be understood positively as mediating steps through which, in their *particularity*, one is given occasion to know and love God.

Dante's *Paradiso* (written in the early 14th century), which I will turn to in Chapter 3, offers us a beautifully expressive illustration of how each *particular* good as 'mediating principle' is loved *qua* itself throughout the soul's journey into God. Dante's journey throughout the *Paradiso* offers an illustration of the pilgrim's journey into God through a series of mediative steps. As such, it follows many of the classical tropes of medieval literature, grounded within the bedrock metaphysical tradition of the Neoplatonists. Through a series of mediating steps, the pilgrim comes to a greater knowledge and love of God and thus assumes, over the course of his journey, a greater capacity to enjoy *union* with God. Dante, in the *Paradiso*, demonstrates fidelity to both the infrastructure of the Neoplatonic Medieval ascent and to Augustine in his depiction of the pilgrim's journey as a vast diversity of mediative steps that bring him to the Empyrean Heaven, where the universe is revealed to be a vast diverse array of identity *in* God. The pilgrim's final vision of the entire *Commedia* is a revelation of the mystery of an unmediated union of God and human form. In making this his last image, and depicting it as the "infinitesimal point"<sup>9</sup> and centre upon which all else depends (and a point that contains all that has preceded it), Dante demonstrates his inheritance of Augustine's radical *incarnational* theology. Thus, he can depict a mediative ascent that assumes the *incarnation's* metaphysical impact on the world by illustrating the significance of the *particularity* to each mediative step.

Ultimately, Dante will counter a more-Plotinian understanding of Augustine through his illustrations in *Paradiso* by showing the *particularity* of each mediative step that the pilgrim takes to be of import regarding the pilgrim's ascent into God. This is most explicit in the pilgrim's vision, at the end of the canticle, of the Empyrean Heaven: there is no dissolution of par-

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<sup>9</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno - Purgatory - Paradise*, ed. Dorothy Sayers (New York: Penguin, 1986), Canto xxxiii.

ticularity at the end of the pilgrim's ascent; rather, the Empyrean Heaven is an array of diverse identities held in one Divine Light. Dante offers an illustrative expression of the function of mediation (that is both consistent with and enriching of Augustine) in a study of the soul's journey into God. We see explicitly in Dante how the love that a human has for an object of mediation (whether it be another person or material good) is not simply an "analogy" of a love for God (or simply a means to an end in God), but rather, is *already* love for God *itself*. We will see this most explicitly in studying the pilgrim's love for Beatrice: as Charles Williams notes in *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943), romantic love (as illustrated in the pilgrim's love for Beatrice) serves as a means of increasing in perfection and of loving God *directly*. In loving Beatrice in all her beauty and particular radiance, the pilgrim is in fact *also* loving God, as he sees in Beatrice one *manifestation* of the unity of Divine Light. As Beatrice draws nearer to her source, her *particular* beauty increases in radiance. God is always and must be that which sustains Beatrice, yet, Beatrice's growth in *particular* beauty as she ascends in perfection is indicative of how Beatrice's particularity is a participant in the full *diversity* of the one Divine Light.

In Chapter 1, I will highlight key Neoplatonic impulses found in Augustine to demonstrate how Augustine is fundamentally a Neoplatonic figure. This will serve as the basis of my later argument that his Neoplatonic presuppositions are central to understanding the full radical thrust of his *incarnational* theology, as well as laying the groundwork for introducing contemporary criticisms of Augustine that are best understood in light of his Plotinian inheritance. Ultimately, I will argue that Augustine's Christianity is not in contradiction to understanding him as an essentially Neoplatonic figure. Then, I will investigate how Augustine's understanding of the sensible material and its relationship to mediation is immersed in the Neoplatonic discussion of

this topic, and attempt to locate Augustine's situatedness within this discussion. In the third section of this chapter, I will examine Book 7 of *The Confessions* to study Augustine's direct engagement and criticism of the Platonists, and how, even in his criticism, he essentially retains core Neoplatonic assumptions and inspiration on the question of human and divine mediation.

In Chapter 2, I will make the focus Augustine's concept of mediation. Here, we will ask what the soul's relation to mediating principles ought to be in light of the soul's journey into God. Arendt will point us toward theoretical limitations in Augustine's concept of mediation insofar as she argues that all particularity is ultimately lost in Augustine's framework. I will then engage with Smith to offer a corrective to Arendt's reading of Augustine that necessitates a total dissolution of particularity to reveal that particularity can be retained in Augustine's notion of mediation. I will engage with Meconi to suggest that it is largely due to a retained resonance with Plotinus that there exists a discrepancy in Augustine over the value of mediating principles.

Chapter 3 will turn towards an understanding of Dante's *Paradiso* as an illustration of Augustine's Christian Neoplatonism outlined thus far. I will begin with a brief history of Dantean scholarship, as well as an account of the mechanisms of Neoplatonic ascent at work in *Paradiso*, to demonstrate the value of considering Dante's *Paradiso* alongside Augustine's mediation. I will use the *Paradiso* as an illustrative example of Augustine's radically incarnational Christian Neoplatonism. Lastly, I will study Dante's culminating illustration of Beatrice in the Empyrean Heaven as an imagined-picture of the full thrust of Augustine's *incarnational* mediation. We will see how Dante shows that the pilgrim's love for Beatrice *qua* Beatrice is *already* a mode of Dante loving God, and in this, how the *particularity* and *diversity* of mediating principles are not

*in opposition to* nor *inconsequential* to the soul's *telos* in God but is rather, constitutive of the nature of God itself.

## **Chapter 1: The Christian Neoplatonism of Augustine's *Confessions***

### **Section I: Augustine's Christian Neoplatonic Understanding of Mediation**

Augustine's situatedness within the tradition of Neoplatonism impacts his understanding of mediation and the human relationship to the material.<sup>10</sup> There is a *chorismos* or gap, between the human and the divine, common to both pagan Neoplatonists and Augustine's Christian Neoplatonism. This gap is a problem that must be overcome, because, for the Christian and pagan Neoplatonists alike, the human has an innate desire to achieve union with the divine, or God. The pagan Neoplatonists, as we will see, 'overcome' this gap through mediation and rituals. In this way, the human soul, for the pagan Neoplatonist, engages with the world insofar as the world offers mediative steps towards union with the One, which, because of the *chorismos* between human and divine, would be unable to occur without mediation. Augustine, by contrast, will 'solve' this *chorismos* between divine and human with his theology of the Trinity as well as *incarnation*: the unmediated union of the ineffable and the human in the person of Christ; the second person of the Trinity.

The Plotinian metaphysical paradigm asserts that the sensible world is that which must be turned away from for the soul to return to its origin in the One. In Plotinus (d. 270 AD), the soul is 'Caused,' and thus, is inferior to its cause as it is secondary to it. However, because the soul has a divine origin, it is also more valuable than the sensible world — the world of becoming.

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<sup>10</sup> Plato's philosophical successors formed various schools of thought and interpretation. While remaining rooted in and inspired by the philosophy of Plato, a school of often broadly referred to as *Neoplatonism* emerged that both extended and interpreted Platonic material, while generally maintaining core metaphysical presumptions and structures. Immersed within the Neoplatonic tradition, Saint Augustine (b. 354 AD) maintains a variety of Neoplatonic philosophical and theological assumptions. Augustine's Platonism, which appears to be both recognized and unrecognized by Augustine himself, contributes to the foundation of his Christian theology.

For Plotinus, matter is evil insofar as it is the privation of the fullness of Intelligibility. Plotinus states that “matter is what accounts for the diminished reality of the sensible world.”<sup>11</sup> Seamus O’Neill, however, writes of an ambiguity that is internal to this Plotinian framework:

It is important to note that even though the things of the world of becoming are less valuable than those things that are above them, nevertheless, they play a crucial pedagogical, and thus, anagogical role in the ascent towards the Good. Without these steps, the ascent cannot be accomplished. One must also remember too, that the One is present throughout the ascent, without which presence, the ascent would not be possible.

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Plotinus also refutes this view of the sensible world as a function of the soul’s journey into God and thus exhibits tension in mapping the extent of his anti-materiality. Plotinus’ assertions on the goodness of creation are in tension with his doctrine of matter. Nonetheless, each figure in this tradition maintains a metaphysical distinction between matter and the Divine, and each figure offers a different interpretation of their relation. There is a stratification, in and amongst the tradition of Neoplatonism (and even amongst the individual figures themselves), of the function of mediation and its relation to the sensible material.

Wayne Hankey suggests that there is a general shift within the Neoplatonic tradition in its consideration of mediation when it finds itself grappling with materiality. Iamblichus (d. 325 AD), a Syrian pagan theologian and early lynchpin of Neoplatonism, was largely concerned with self-knowledge as a way of knowing God. Simultaneously emerging from and diverging from Plotinus (d. 270 AD), Iamblichus offered a new focus in Neoplatonism on the sensible and mate-

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<sup>11</sup> *Plotinus*, Stanford Encyclopaedia for Philosophy.

<sup>12</sup> Seamus J. O’Neill, “Towards a Restoration of Plato’s Doctrine of Mediation: Platonizing Augustine’s Criticism of ‘The Platonists,’” (Dalhousie University, 2008), 236.



rial.<sup>13</sup> This shift in emphasis, offered through Iamblichus, towards the sensible, caused wide-ranging repercussions for discussions of mediation:

The Iamblichan shift to the historical human individual and its situation in the material world requires philosophy to become occupied with the question of mediation, and philosophy turns to religion. The religion it seeks must be (to put it in Christian terms) incarnational and sacramental. The return of the Iamblichean totally-descended soul toward the Principle, which he elevated into a transcendence requiring a division between the Ineffable and the One, both of them above being, demands that what is above operate graciously toward it.<sup>14</sup>

Rooted in Iamblicus, Neoplatonism developed a hierarchy based in mediation; where it was understood that access to the Divine must come “from without” because the human soul is wholly descended, with none “remaining above” and thus “self-knowledge and knowledge of the divine cannot be immediate.”<sup>15</sup> Iamblichus argued that the entire soul is descended into *genesis*, and thus, due to the radical separation of the divine and the individual soul, knowledge of and union with God cannot be immediate. Rather, in an investigation of the sensible and material world, the soul increases in self-knowledge and knowledge of God because the power and presence of the

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<sup>13</sup> “It is also important to note that the conflict between the Plotino-Porphyrion approach and Iamblichus’ one does not simply amount to a conflict between philosophy and religion; rather, it opposes two different modes of access to the divine, with Iamblichus’ predecessors laying emphasis on silent asceticism and the shedding of our external identity, and accordingly viewing corporeality and materiality as something inherently negative... According to Iamblichus, the gods help mankind overcome its inherent weakness by revealing symbols to them that will establish some sort of connection: one of the criticisms he lays on Porphyry is that his views will “leave earth deprived of the presence of the superior beings” (*Reply to Porphyry* I, 8 [SS-2013: 21.12–13]). These symbols may differ in nature: items, rituals, myths, theological revelations such as the *Chaldean Oracles*, etc.; and most of them are placed under the patronage of a particular deity, thus creating a “chain” (*seira*) of, say, sun-like entities.” (“Iamblichus,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

<sup>14</sup> Wayne Hankey, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus, and Isaiah VI.6”, *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, (1, 1997):14.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 14.

gods permeate all that is below them.<sup>16</sup> This reevaluation in mediation allows for the world to be something to engage with as a means towards union with God, and not something to be shunned.

This growing emphasis on the material rests in the possibility of a gracious act of God, in which divine light is revealed as what the soul ultimately desires, argues J.J O’Cleary. Because the human is fully descended, and cannot ascend or descend of their own power, the human needs to be connected through intermediary mediating channels. Referencing Proclus (d. 285 AD), O’Cleary writes, “Like the initiate of the mystery cults, one must wait in the outer darkness for the gods to illuminate the soul, so as to bring it into direct contact with the One. This is why prayer and theurgy are necessary supplements to the scientific way.”<sup>17</sup> What is at stake here in the development of this notion of mediation is enormous: ultimately, one’s view of knowledge of and union with God will impact how one engages with the world. If divine ineffability is beyond and outside of the world (as is the case with Plotinus), then one must shed relations with the world to draw towards union with this divine ineffable. It is due to this Iamblichian shift (as well as Proclus’ uptake of Iamblichus on this), where the material can now be understood as ‘containing’ the gods, and that the material can now be thought of as substance with metaphysical import.

Crouse argues that Augustine’s Platonism does not exist in contradiction to his emerging Christian theology, but rather, his Platonism in fact comes to its “full fruition” in Christianity; that is, the full thrust and *telos* of his metaphysics is fully *accomplished* in Christianity. What

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<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Proclus, following Iamblichus, suggests that knowledge of God cannot be attained immediately, but rather, must become conscious of itself through “projection,” in which the soul creates what it knows over a period of time. For Proclus, philosophy and the scientific and material study are mediating steps; they act as preparation and modes of purification, but are not immediate knowledge of the divine.

<sup>17</sup> O’Cleary, “The Role,” 88, qtd. in Wayne Hankey, “Selfhood in Hellenistic Antiquity: Background ambiguities, paradoxes, and problems.” *International Journal of Decision Ethics*, (2007):10.

Augustine's Neoplatonic Christianity brings to the table, according to Crouse, is the combination of theological metaphysics and religious practice to complement and enrich the richly Platonic metaphysical successes. Augustine offers, in his Christianity, a "profound conversion of Platonic theology" that remains inspired by, and made possible by, his entrenchment within the Platonic tradition.<sup>18</sup> We see Augustine respond to the 'gap' between human and divine (originally presented by the Platonists) in distinct theological ways through his theology of the *Trinity* and *incarnation*: firstly, Augustine's trinitarian theology offers a way in which the *divine* can be both 'One' and 'Many.' Augustine's trinitarian theology, according to Crouse, allows for "the antithesis between ontology and henology [to be] transcended, and God [to be] understood as a unity of co-equal and co-eternal moments of being, knowing and willing" that is, "an original and profoundly important revision of Platonic theology in Christian terms."<sup>19</sup> Ontology (the study of 'Being') and henology (the study of 'The One,') are brought together in such a way that God, through the Trinity, can now be understood not only as the one *Being*, but the multiplicitous combination of *Being, Knowing and Willing*.<sup>20</sup> This understanding of the Trinity shows the way Augustine both maintains the Platonic notion of God as 'Being,' yet also imbues it with a notion that God is not

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Crouse, "In Aenigmat Trinitas (Confessions, XIII, 5, 6). The Conversion of Philosophy in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," *Dionysius* 11 (1987): 39.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> The Trinity is composed of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Augustine's Christology suggests that the Trinity all has *one essence, composed of three persons*. Augustine, in his *On the Trinity*, likens the Trinity to the rational part of the human soul. The soul, composed of "the mind, and the knowledge by which it knows itself, and the love by which it knows itself", is compared to the three persons of the Trinity. The human soul is in the image of God (*imago Dei*) because of its capacity to contemplate eternal forms. The three parts of this Trinity are Memory (where the mind holds metaphysical knowledge), the Intellect (the 'mind's eye,' which conceives of the forms stored in the Memory, and the Will (which directs the intellect and bodily senses). Of particular note, "Memory" is akin to eternity, insofar as it holds past, present and future, and this is an image of God the Father. See Augustine, *On The Trinity*. trans. Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 464.

simply pure Being, but is also, simultaneously, Knowledge and Will. This introduces a notion of multiplicity into the Godhead and requires a pause for consideration as to the consequence of God being understood now as *beyond* simply an utterly ineffable and inaccessible singular *Being*.<sup>21</sup> Further, within Augustine's trinitarian theology, "the logical necessity (and the futility) of mediating hierarchies [as Augustine sees in Platonism] is done away with, and the way is open for an understanding of mediation in which divine and human natures are seen as personally united without confusion."<sup>22</sup> The *chorismos* that is originally presented in Platonist metaphysics (and taken up by Christianity), is ultimately 'solved' by the *incarnation*. Christ, being both God and human, is the unmediated union of the ineffable and the sensible.

Perhaps the largest distinction that Augustine himself draws between his theology and that of the Platonists as a whole is his notion that there is ultimately, a single "True Mediator," and that is, Christ, in the *incarnation*. This is metaphysically distinct from previous instances of mediation: here, we have an immediate union of ineffable and material, as opposed to strictly a

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<sup>21</sup> We also see the idea of 'Beyond Being' in the Plotinian 'One,' which is beyond even Being itself (and thus is not a Being).

<sup>22</sup> Crouse, "In Aenigmate Trinitas." 41.

spectrum of graduated mediative steps.<sup>23</sup> O'Neill draws this point out in his discussion of *Confessions* VII.9,

Augustine describes what he found in the books of the Platonists in the words of the gospel of John. What he does not find in there, however, is incarnation of the mediator: "But that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, did I not read there." Augustine argues that the Platonist cannot through his own power make God into something that he can continually enjoy and at the same time achieve a lasting union with Him while maintaining the distinction between the individual human soul and God. Rather, God must come down to 'man's level,' so to speak, and provide a way of mediation in space and time itself, the very things that the Platonist shuns in his ascent.<sup>24</sup>

For Augustine, the incarnation is the necessary first movement of the meeting of Divinity and flesh. Christian incarnation is the act of God taking onto Himself human form in a specific human body. Christian theology states that Christ, the 'Son of God, and the second person of the Trinity, was "made flesh" by being conceived by the Virgin Mary (Theotokos). Augustine claims that the Platonists do not offer an instance of incarnation: the Word (God) does not take on human form (flesh). For Augustine, this mediation through Christian incarnation *allows for* all mediation (merging of ineffable and sensible) below it. It is the act of the incarnation, so to speak, that allows for a radically enhanced consideration of creation, and gives Augustine his theologi-

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<sup>23</sup> The character of Neoplatonic mediation is described with detail by Augustine in *City of God*. While a notion of theurgy is present in both Neoplatonic and Christian Neoplatonic mediation, Augustine makes clear distinction between Christian mediation and earlier mediations, insofar as Christian mediation is aimed at union with the "One True" God. Augustine explains, "These miracles, and many others of the same nature, which it were tedious to mention, were wrought for the purpose of commending the worship of the one true God, and prohibiting the worship of a multitude of false gods. Moreover, they were wrought by simple faith and godly confidence, not by the incantations and charms composed under the influence of a criminal tampering with the unseen world, of an art which they call either magic, or by the more abominable title necromancy, or the more honorable designation theurgy; for they wish to discriminate between those whom the people call magicians, who practise necromancy, and are addicted to illicit arts and condemned, and those others who seem to them to be worthy of praise for their practice of theurgy — the truth, however, being that both classes are the slaves of the deceitful rites of the demons whom they invoke under the names of angels" (Augustine, *City of God*, 10.9).

<sup>24</sup> O'Neill, "Towards a Restoration of Plato's Doctrine of Mediation: Platonizing Augustine's Criticism of 'The Platonists.'" 263.

cal tethers to mark his departure from Plotinus' negative view of creation. For Augustine, this specifically Christian incarnational mediation is not simply an alternative to the Platonist structure of mediation, but rather, it is its perfection and final form. It warrants this achievement, for Augustine, because there is no instance in Platonism of a mediator that is a union of *fully* divine and *fully* human.<sup>25</sup> Crouse writes of this "fulfillment" that Augustine offers the Platonist tradition:

As Augustine sees it, the doctrine [of the incarnation] is implied - indeed demanded - by Platonic thought, as its own clarification and completion; and yet, it is unattainable without the externally revealed Word, grasped by faith, and only after demonstrated. The *intellectus fidei*, then, will not be an alternative to Platonism, but a fulfillment of the aims and tendencies of that philosopher. It is, in fact, a reversion, or conversion, of Platonic thought at its most central point.<sup>26</sup>

Crouse suggests that Augustine posits his incarnational understanding of mediation as the "fulfillment" of the Platonic structure of mediation, and thus pinpoints and actualizes what the Platonist structure can only point towards because it does not offer an instance of unmediated union between human and God.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> One might recall Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*, where she suggests "God does not deal directly with man; it is by means of spirits that all the intercourse and communication of gods with men, both in waking life and in sleep, is carried on." (Plato, *Symposium*, trans. W. Hamilton, *The Penguin Classics*, 81).

<sup>26</sup> Crouse, "In Aenigmate Trinitas." 60.

<sup>27</sup> O'Neill emphasizes, on this point, how Augustine's incarnational mediation is an addition and development that is consistent with the trajectory of Neoplatonism that leads up to it: "Augustine is completely immersed in the Neoplatonic tradition, and emends what he conceives as problems in Platonism in ways that are characteristic of the historical development of Neoplatonism itself. What becomes particularly Christian for Augustine which is not Neoplatonic, nevertheless becomes possible because of his Platonism. The Platonic philosophy sets the ground and framework within which Augustine is able to understand the Christian religion rationally (O'Neill, "Towards a Restoration of Plato's Doctrine of Mediation: Platonizing Augustine's Criticism of 'The Platonists.'" 315).

Augustine and his Neoplatonist predecessors offer different ways of overcoming the *chorismos* that separates the human and God that separates the human from union with God, despite his or her innate desire for such a union. The pagan Neoplatonic mediation responds with mediative theurgy, and demons, while Augustine suggests that Christ (the ultimate mediator); the unmediated union of God and human in incarnation, overcomes this gap.<sup>28</sup> Augustine's immersion in the Neoplatonic tradition encourages him to develop a rational and speculative account of his religious framework, that is, ultimately, provoked by the theological metaphysical distinction of material and ineffable that he received from the Neoplatonists.

The notion of the Divine 'making the first move' towards the sensible, so to speak (what will become referred to as "grace") and further, the dependence of the soul's journey into God on God, has its basis in the Neoplatonic distinction of material and ineffable; divine and human, (and the *chorismos* that separates them), and thus the full thrust of Augustine's theology of incarnation can only be understood in light of these metaphysical assumptions:

Although Augustine, as a Christian, argues that mediation takes a specific form in Christ, which the pagan Neoplatonists deny, nevertheless, the need for grace, the mediation of the divine with the human *in creation*, are essentially Neoplatonic, and in fact, only become *Christian* in great measure because Augustine himself is a Neoplatonist. In the end, it is the recognition that mediation is necessary, and necessary in a way that preserves the distinction between the divine and the human in a way that loses the essential character of neither, that is essentially Platonic.<sup>29</sup>

Augustine depends on the assumed metaphysical distinctions of ineffable and sensible, and divine and human, offered to him by Platonism, to achieve his radically Christian notion of the incarnation as a specific instance of the transcendent immediate *within* creation. While the pagan

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<sup>28</sup> See ft. 18

<sup>29</sup> O'Neill, "Towards a Restoration of Plato's Doctrine of Mediation: Platonizing Augustine's Criticism of 'The Platonists.'" 318.

Neoplatonists before Augustine solve the *chorismos* between God and human with mediation through demons, theurgy, etc., Augustine suggests that it is Christ, the “One True Mediator,” that allows for the possibility of mediation in the world and union with God.

## **Section II: Plotinian Resonance of Augustine’s Critique of the Platonists in the *Confessions* Book 7**

In Book 7 of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Augustine offers a critique of the ‘Platonists.’ The *Confessions* is Augustine’s prolific autobiographical work, marking his conversion to Christianity through a series of mediating steps and spiritual mediations along his journey. One such ‘mediating step’ is Augustine’s engagement with what he refers to as the ‘Platonists,’ which he engages with particularly when wrestling in his developing consideration of the origin of evil and of what it consists. His portrayal and synthesis of the Platonists is the subject of much historic and current scholarly criticism and analysis. How Augustine maintains a Platonic framework, even in his explicit criticism of the Platonists, will be the focus of my argument. This portion of argumentation will serve to further bolster my overarching argument that Augustine is indeed, a Christian *Neoplatonist*. Further, it will establish the relation between Augustine and Plotinus, which will be used in Chapter 2 to distinguish varying interpretations of Augustine.

In Book 7, Augustine makes frequent references to the ‘Platonists,’ stirring controversy in scholarship over the accuracy and quality of his criticism. In a close reading of Book 7, I will explicate Augustine’s criticism of the Platonists in such a way that helps us better understand Augustine’s perception of the Platonists (whom I, following Henry Chadwick and Seamus



O'Neill, is best fit to Plotinus)<sup>30</sup> and how it is that his criticism does not escape the fundamental structure that Neoplatonism gives him, but rather, he maintains many of its core questions and assumptions.

Augustine speaks, in Book 7, of his belief in a God that is “incorruptible, immune from injury and unchangeable.”<sup>31</sup> He then draws distinctions between mutability and immutability, to suggest that the latter is greater than the former:

Although I did not know why and how, it was clear to me and certain that what is corruptible is inferior to that which cannot be corrupted; what is immune from injury I unhesitatingly put above that which is not immune; what suffers no change is better than that which can change. My heart vehemently protested against all the physical images in my mind, and by this single blow I attempted to expel from my mind's eye the swarm of unpurified notions flying about there.”<sup>32</sup>

Augustine attempts, at the beginning of the book, to rid himself of all that is not immutable and unchanging, opting for a total “purity” of changelessness. Here, we see resonance with the sixth tractate of Plotinus' *Enneads*:

On the one hand there is the unstable, exposed to all sorts of change, distributed in place, not so much Being as Becoming: on the other, there is that which exists eternally, not divided, subject to no change of state, neither coming into being nor falling from it, set in

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<sup>30</sup> “While this section focuses on Plotinus, it is important to note, peripherally, the ambivalence of Augustine's accuracy with his representation of Plotinus: Although Augustine's own criticism of “the Platonists” might more accurately be applied to Plotinus than to any other Neoplatonist because of his negative view of matter, nevertheless, only a part of the Plotinian *itinerarium* of the soul is described (and criticized) in the ‘Platonic’ vision of *Confessions* 7.10. Even Plato himself realizes that a purely personal, interior, intellectual ascent cannot achieve union with the Good.” (O'Neill, “Towards a Restoration of Plato's Doctrine of Mediation: Platonizing Augustine's Criticism of ‘The Platonists.’” 233).

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. 111.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 111.

no region or place or support, emerging from nowhere, entering into nothing, fast within itself.<sup>33</sup>

Augustine wrestles with his corruptible bodily nature and seeks to rid himself of the changeability that he believes defines it. He longs for this state of eternal unchangeability that is subject to no change.<sup>34</sup> He, however, feels trapped within his bodily existence; he cannot rid himself of his corporeality and its associated desires, and thus laments that he feels compelled to imagine God in physical terms:

Although you were not in the shape of the human body, I nevertheless felt forced to imagine something physical occupying space diffused either in the world or even through infinite space outside the world...I conceived even you, life of my life, as a large being, permeating infinite space on every side, penetrating the entire mass of the world, and outside this extending in all directions for immense distances without end; so earth had you, heaven had you, everything had you, and in relation to you all was finite; but you not so.<sup>35</sup>

Augustine conceives of God, at this point on his spiritual journey, as penetrating the entire world and the infinity of what is beyond the world. Because God is in all and beyond all, the nature of God is of a spiritual substance without any distinction that would imply a limit.<sup>36</sup>

Once again here we can trace this “negative” understanding of God to a clear Plotinian origin:

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<sup>33</sup> Plotinus, “The Six Enneads.” ed. Stephen McKenna and B. S Page (Larson Publications, 1992), 6.5.2.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, in Book 7, wrestles with two main topics: the nature and origin of evil, and the existence of non-corporeal substance and its nature. Prior to reading the Platonists, Augustine believed all that exists to be material and corporeal, and thus he struggled to imagine something as incorporeal or immaterial. Following his encounter with the Platonists, and their metaphysical distinction between material and ineffable, he had new capacity to philosophically consider the immaterial and incorporeal.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. 111-112

<sup>36</sup> Augustine arrives at the notion of God as a “spiritual substance” by reading about the Platonists.

There are, we hold, things primarily apt to partition, tending by sheer nature towards separate existence: they are things in which no part is identical either with another part or with the whole, while, also their part is necessarily less than the total and whole: these are magnitudes of the realm of sense, masses, each of which has a station of its own so that none can be identically present in entirety at more than one point at one time. But to that order is opposed Essence [Real-Being]; this is in no degree susceptible of partition; it is unparted and impartible; interval is foreign to it, cannot enter into our idea of it: it has no need of place and is not, in diffusion or as an entirety, situated within any other being: it is poised over all beings at once, and this is not in the sense of using them as a base but in their being neither capable nor desirous of existing independently of it; it is an essence eternally unvaried: it is common to all that follows upon it.<sup>37</sup>

Plotinus describes “Essence” as a centre, an eternal changeless point upon which all else is attached and limited in relation to itself. This centre point is the “starting point” for the being of all else, and in which all else participates as a limited being within the unlimited. This grounding of unlimited eternity is the beginning point for all limited beings to emerge and exist as limited participants within the whole. This metaphysical framework is resonant with Augustine’s description of God as being the one exception to all else that is finite and limited. Thus, we see a deep fidelity between Augustine’s proclamations as to the identity of God and this Plotinian understanding.

Augustine, further in Book 7, wrestles with his own interiority. He longs to externalize the tumult of his interior state. In this labour, he finds in himself a distinction between his own interiority and the rest of the external world around him. He discovers himself to be lesser than God, and yet distinct from the flux and changing mutable world around him:

How little of it my tongue could put into words for the ears of my closest friends! Neither the time nor my powers of speech were sufficient to tell them of the full tumult of my soul. But all of it came to your hearing, how ‘I roared from the groaning of my heart, and my desire was before you, and the light of my eyes was not with me’ (Ps. 37:9-11).

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<sup>37</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*. 4.2.1

That was inward, while I was still in externals. It was not in a place; but I was finding my attention on things contained in space, and there I found no place to rest in, nor did those external things receive me so that I could say ‘It is enough and it is well’. Nor did they allow me to return where it was enough and well for me. I was superior to those external objects but inferior to you, and you are my true joy if I submit to you, and you have made subject to me what you created to be lower than me. <sup>38</sup>

Here we see the stark influences of Plotinus<sup>39</sup> and his suggestion that knowledge of and — further, *union with* God, is intimately related to knowledge of oneself when abstracted from physical determinacy. Plotinus speaks of this as entering into the ‘All’ of one’s Being:

In that you have entered into the All, no longer content with the part; you cease to think of yourself as under limit but, laying all such determination aside, you become an All. No doubt you were always that, but there has been an addition and by that addition you are diminished; for the addition was not from the realm of Being- you can add nothing to Being- but from non-Being. It is not by some admixture of non-Being that one becomes an entire, but by putting non-Being away. By the lessening of the alien in you, you increase. <sup>40</sup>

For Plotinus, each human is already an “All,” which contains the additional alien “non-Being” of determinacy. When one “puts non-Being away,” one *increases* because they *subtract* the “addition” that has the nature of determination and limit. This exposes an anti-materialist view: the human is a Being that ought to detach from the associations of non-Being and determination within the world. In doing so, in “lessening the alien” of determination and limit, the human *increases* toward union with God.

The tumult of the soul brings Augustine to no longer be content with his limited partial existence. In returning to himself, his interior state, Augustine longs to put determination and limitation aside, and “become an All”. In this interior state, by ridding oneself of the additions of

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<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Chadwick notes that, here, Augustine is also largely resonant with Porphyry.

<sup>40</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*. 6.5.12

“non-Being,” and “putting non-Being away,” one increases and realizes one’s always-existent state of being an “All.” It is on this metaphysical basis that Augustine understands himself to be greater than the external objects and yet inferior to God. Augustine narrates this Plotinian moment of returning to his “innermost citadel”:

By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself. With you as my guide I entered my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper (Ps. 29:11). I entered and with my soul’s eye, such as it was, saw above the same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind — not the light of every day, obvious to anyone, not a larger version of the same kind which would, as it were, have given our a high trigger light and filled everything with its magnitude. <sup>41</sup>

Plotinus’ fifth tractate offers us insight into the metaphysical workings of Augustine’s soul in this “return into himself.” Plotinus writes:

A double discipline must be applied if human beings in this pass are to be reclaimed, and brought back to their origins, lifted once more towards the Supreme and One and First. There is the method, which we amply exhibit elsewhere, declaring the dishonour of the objects which the Soul holds here in honour; the second teaches or recalls to the soul its race and worth. <sup>42</sup>

In this twofold practice of 1) declaring the external objects of desire to be dishonourable and 2) recalling the soul and its Being as “All” that Augustine begins to see through his “soul’s eye” what it is that makes his ascent possible. In this twofold method as set out by Plotinus, Augustine attempts to rid himself of the changing desires (and the changing, external objects of his desires) and ascends further into the “immutable light.” Here, Augustine resembles Plotinus’ anti-materialism. He seeks to ascend to God by detaching himself from non-Being which keeps him descended in the world and far from God.

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<sup>41</sup>Augustine, *Confessions*. 123

<sup>42</sup>Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*. 5.1.1

However, Augustine laments the transient nature of this ascension into and further union with God — “But I was not stable in the enjoyment of my God. I was caught up to you by your beauty and quickly torn away from you by my weight.”<sup>43</sup> This lament of desiring to stay in this closer union with God, and yet being pulled away by the desires and loves of the world is resonant with a question that Plotinus himself asks in his sixth tractate:

There are those that have not attained to see. The soul has not come to know the splendour There; it has not felt and clutched to itself that love-passion of vision known to lover come to rest where he loves. Or struck perhaps by that authentic light, all the soul lit by the nearness gained, we have gone weighted from beneath; the vision is frustrate; we should go without burden and we go carrying that which can but keep us back; we are not yet made over into unity. But how comes the soul not to keep that ground? Because it has not yet escaped wholly: but there will be the time of vision unbroken, the self hindered no longer by any hindrance of body.<sup>44</sup>

Augustine’s lament that the soul is not able to remain in this state of union with God is crisply resonant with Plotinus’ own question. At the very end of the *Enneads*, Plotinus asks why it is that the soul cannot remain in this ‘All’ and in union with the One. The body, he remarks, is still ‘embodied,’ and it returns to its consciousness of material needs and desires.<sup>45</sup> We can see here Augustine’s recognition (as well as Plotinus’) that the body is *in* the world. It has needs and desires that keep the body “descended” into relation with the world. Plotinus and Augustine are di-

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<sup>43</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. 127

<sup>44</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*. 6.9.10

<sup>45</sup> O’Neill addresses Augustine’s dissatisfaction: “Augustine claims that the Platonists can attain a union with the Good, which he takes to be Intellect, yet he is dissatisfied with the union he achieves. This is because he does what he takes to be a Platonic exercise or set of instructions for attaining the proper end, and fails to maintain the union or ecstasy he achieves. In presenting this Platonic union, Augustine only presents an ascent to *Nous*, and thus is dissatisfied. Even if Augustine were to understand this end as the Plotinian One-beyond-being, (to which he comes close in *Confessions* IX) he would nevertheless be just as dissatisfied insofar as this Plotinian One cannot be related to the physical world and embodied soul in any meaningful way (O’Neill, “Towards a Restoration of Plato’s Doctrine of Mediation: Platonizing Augustine’s Criticism of ‘The Platonists.’” 229).

agnosing the same relation between human and the world: a human that has an ultimate end beyond the world (and with God), but a body that continually pulls the body into relation with the world. In this way, Augustine does not abandon the Neoplatonic quest, but rather, in structure, remains largely consistent with it. While Augustine will ultimately provide a different “solution” to this insofar as he will propose a way of *going through* the world towards one’s end in God, rather than *escaping* it, it is important to note that Augustine and Plotinus, wrestling with the same issue, ultimately land on different “solutions.” Augustine is ultimately left dissatisfied with Plotinus’ solution of escaping the world toward one’s end in God. He suggests that the Platonists are unable to make God into a continual object of enjoyment and something with which the human could enjoy lasting union because there is no instance of God descending to the level of humans in a way that would mediate the *chorismos* between the human and God.

Augustine’s investigation of the relationship between his bodily state and the God he desires is motivated by the metaphysical terms set by the Platonists, and largely Plotinus. Augustine’s offering to the Neoplatonic tradition of Christian trinitarian theology must first *pass through* the totality of Augustine’s wrestling with the Platonic tradition,<sup>46</sup> which thus assumes that Augustine’s theological discussion of the ascent into God remains essentially Neoplatonic in metaphysical structure and inspiration. If one does not first begin with an understanding of the basic terms of Platonic metaphysics, the radical development of incarnation that Augustine makes, as a “conversion” to these terms, will be overlooked or understated. The end goal, union

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<sup>46</sup> “Augustine, therefore, is in fact closer to those whom he criticizes than he realizes himself to be, which is evident not only by the character of his correction of what he takes to be the complete Platonic view, but more fundamentally, by his complete immersion within the Neoplatonic tradition itself” (O’Neill, “Towards a Restoration of Plato’s Doctrine of Mediation: Platonizing Augustine’s Criticism of ‘The Platonists.’” 233).

with God, and the need for meditation to achieve union remain the same for Augustine and the earlier Platonists alike. The form that the ascent and mediation take, however, differs.

Augustine is emphatic in his dissatisfaction with the Plotinian “answer” to the issue of separation between the human and God:

It is one thing from a wooded summit to catch a glimpse of the homeland of peace and not to find the way to it but vainly to attempt the journey along an impracticable route surrounded by the ambushes and assaults of fugitive deserters with their chief, ‘the lion and the dragon’ (Ps. 90:13). It is another thing to hold on to the way that leads there, defended by the protection of the heavenly emperor.<sup>47</sup>

For Augustine, it is emphatically Christ alone that is capable of acting as mediation between the human and God, insofar as in the form of Christ, God descends onto the “human level” and thus makes mediation initially possible. He writes explicitly, in Book X, that it is Christ alone who can serve as a mediator between the human and God, because Christ is not a ‘midway’ point between the human and God (as Neoplatonic mediations are), but rather, Christ is *fully equal* to God:

[Christ] is ‘the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim. 2:5). He appeared among mortal sinners as the immortal righteous one, mortal like humanity, righteous like God...He is not midway as Word; for the Word is equal to God and ‘God with God’ (John 1:1), and at the same time there is but one God.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.xxvii

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, X.xliii.



It is this that allows the human to *move through* the world in their ascent to God, as opposed to *shunning it* in an attempt at escape.<sup>49</sup> Christ, as fully human and fully divine, is the only instance of mediation that is not “partially” or “half” God. The human, for Augustine, can ascend into God because God has first descended into human form in Christ (and yet remains *fully* divine). It is this union of the human form and divinity that the Platonists, according to Augustine, do not provide and thus do not provide a viable account of mediation that allows for the human to ascend into God.

There is Plotinian resonance in Augustine’s conception of God as we see in his engagement with “The Platonists” in Book 7. Augustine is both an inheritor of the Platonic metaphysical infrastructure and yet also offers a development from Plotinian metaphysics that introduces the radical notion of incarnation. Because of incarnation, the sensible, at large, can now be understood positively in light of the soul’s journey into God because of God’s original descent into “human form.” No longer (as was the case with Plotinus) is material reality a negative substance that one must release oneself from to ascend to God — the material reality is now a part of the ascent. We see material reality as a component of the soul’s ascent towards the end of Book VII of the *Confessions*:

At that point it had no hesitation in declaring that the unchangeable is preferable to the changeable, and that on this round it can know the unchangeable, since, unless it could somehow know tis, there would be no certainty in preferring it to the mutable. So in the

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<sup>49</sup> Augustine’s *City of God*, Book 10, also addresses the incarnation as the true form of mediation that allows for human ascent. He writes, “The grace of God could not have been more graciously commended to us than thus, that the only Son of God, remaining unchangeable in Himself, should assume humanity, and should give us the hope of His love, by means of the mediation of a human nature, through which we, from the condition of men, might come to Him who was so far off — the immortal from the mortal; the unchangeable from the changeable; the just from the unjust; the blessed from the wretched.” (Augustine, *City of God*. Book X, xxix)

flat of a trembling glance it attained to that which is. At that moment I saw your ‘invisible nature understood through the things which are made’ (Rom I:20).<sup>50</sup>

Because of incarnation, the human can engage in a material ascent into God. Now, the human can engage with the world as a mode of ascent because God has first descended into the world, bringing divine nature into the material in the incarnation:

Your Word, eternal truth, higher than the superior parts of your creation, raises those submissive to him to himself. In the inferior parts he built for himself a humble house of our clay. But this he detaches from themselves those who are willing to be made his subjects and carries them across to himself, healing their suffering and nourishing their love. They are no longer to place confidence in themselves, but rather to become weak. They see at their feet divinity becoming weak by his sharing in our ‘court of skin’ (Gen 3:21). In their weariness they fall prostrate before this divine weakness which rises and lifts them up.<sup>51</sup>

God, superior to creation, has nonetheless descended into creation, bringing the divine nature into the material. The human engages with the “humble house” of divinity that God creates within the material as a means of ascent into God through the material. The human flesh that God takes on, referred to as his “court of skin” of human weakness, allows the human to engage with the material as a means of ascent into God because the material has become divinized with God’s having descended into it. Augustine remains, in some part, Plotinian, in his conception of God and the relation of the human to the world. We see the influence of Plotinian *detachment* in much of Augustine’s work on interiority and the soul’s relation to God.

The danger that is present for scholars of Augustine, due to his pervasive Plotinian resonance, is that if his theology of *incarnation* is overlooked, we are not able to extract from Augustine a metaphysics nor theology that takes into account the value of the material, or that under-

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<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. VII, xvii.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. VII, xvii

stands the material as a mediating step in relation to the soul's journey into God. We will turn now to two critical readings of Augustine to determine what is at stake if one overlooks the grandiosity and all-encompassing repercussions of Augustine's theology of incarnation that allows for an elevation of the metaphysical value of the sensible. If Augustine's theology of incarnation is overlooked, and his Plotinian resonance given dominance (as Hannah Arendt will do), then one can mine from Augustine an "exploitative" vision of the material with regards to the human ascent into God, where the material world is not enjoyed or gone through to enter into union with God, but is rather exploited and disavowed to "escape" into God.

## **Chapter 2: Critical Readings of Mediation in *Confessions***

I will now turn to contemporary criticisms of Augustine on mediation to highlight what is at stake if one overlooks the radical and central nature of Augustine's theology of incarnation that emerges and yet diverges from the traditional terms of Platonic metaphysics. I will engage with scholarly interpretations of Augustine that draw primarily on his considerable Plotinian resonance to examine the way in which Augustine has commonly been read as a figure that offers no metaphysical import to the material in his oftentimes apparent preference for the transcendental ineffable. While these critical insights will certainly allow us to strengthen our understanding of Augustine's metaphysics of ascent, I will critically engage with this current of contemporary Augustine interpretation to argue that the more explicit anti-materialist passages of Augustine must be read in a "broader light" that takes into account the centrality his understanding of *trinity* and *incarnation* (as discussed in Chapter 1) to avoid error. Augustine allows for a positive theology of material reality insofar as "all" material reality is redeemed through an instance of the

unmediated union of the ineffable and sensible through the incarnation. Indeed, what a strictly Plotinian Augustine denies us is any justification for engagement with the world in a meaningful way because the logic of ascent necessitates detaching from the world. I will begin by engaging with Hannah Arendt, whose largely Plotinian-reading of Augustine in *Love and Saint Augustine* (1929) will highlight for us what happens if one does not fully incorporate the full thrust of his radically incarnational metaphysics into all aspects of his thought. If one overlooks the metaphysical implications of Augustine's theology of incarnation, a more Plotinian emphasis in Augustine will prescribe the dissolution of the material in a consideration of the soul's ascent into God. I will critically engage with Arendt, alongside J.W Smith, to highlight how Augustine's Neoplatonic notion of incarnation ultimately disallows this more exploitative reading of mediation due to its radical embrace of the *particularity* of the sensible. Rather than depicting an exploitative mediation in which the mediative object is a dissoluble particularity (what Arendt accuses Augustine of), Augustine in fact offers us a mediative structure in which each particular object is maintained *in its distinctiveness* throughout the soul's ascent.

### **Section I: A First Reading of Augustine on Mediation: Hannah Arendt**

Notwithstanding Augustine's numerous explicitly Christian developments onto a Neoplatonic ontology, in Arendt's reading (on this point consistent with my own), Augustine nonetheless assumes an ontological hierarchy in which the form of the Good is in the most privileged position (as it is ethically, ontologically and epistemologically prior to all). Arendt's reading of Augustine, however, *also* suggests that Augustine is concerned with the soul's journey *into God* to such an extent that a positive value of each mediating step is overlooked. In other words,

Arendt suggests that Augustine privileges the ultimate ‘Good’, (posited, ostensibly, as the last ‘rung’ on a vertical ladder upwards) to the extent that he overlooks and offers little metaphysical import to the material existence into which Augustine is “descended.” She argues that a ‘leveling’ of the particularity of each mediating step occurs such that the particular distinctions of each mediating role are lost. Arendt might suggest, for example, that ultimately, your spouse (with whom you share an intimate relationship) is as equally capable as your mortgage broker to act as a mediator in your ascent into God. Both characters in this hypothetical scenario are “neighbours” (as Arendt uses the term) with the capacity to be used in one’s ascent into God.

As studied in Chapter 1, Augustine offers another opportunity to think about a positive relationship to the material in mediation through his discussion of the Trinity. It is this discussion that Arendt explicitly engages with in her book *Love and Saint Augustine*. In Augustine’s discussion of the Trinity, we see how he maintains the traditional Platonic ontological assumption of the soul’s relation to God, and yet introduces a notion of the Trinitarian God, in which unity and multiplicity are ontologically in union. In a radical step away from the (largely Plotinian) notion of divine unity, Augustine introduces a Trinity that is *at once* united and multiplicitous.<sup>52</sup> He introduces the concept of personal alterity *within* the Godhead in the form of the Trinity, and in so doing, makes simultaneous a (quasi-)Plotinian divine unity and a notion of multiplicity or “oth-

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<sup>52</sup> “the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality; and therefore that they are not three Gods, but one God: although the Father has begotten the Son, and so He who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and so He who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, Himself also co-equal with the Father and the Son, and pertaining to the unity of the Trinity” (Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chapter 4)

erness" consistent within it.<sup>53</sup> This existence of alterity within the Godhead will, necessarily, impact Augustine's theology of creation. While for Plotinus, the world is, ultimately, what one must *pass through* (or disengage from) to realize the soul's ultimate union with God, Augustine, on the other hand, understands the second-order goods of creation to be a valuable step on the return into God, due to the fundamental theological union of "the One" and "the Many" that is in the *ground* of existence. The divine essence itself is constituted by relationship: the Father who begets the Son; the Holy Spirit who unites and distinguishes Father and Son. With alterity and relationship embedded into the Godhead itself, Augustine offers a Christianized understanding of Divinity that allows for differentiation and multiplicity in such a way that requires a reconsideration of "diversity" and second-order goods; and their mediating capacity on the soul's journey into God.<sup>54</sup> It is worth pausing to notice the radical step away Augustine takes (along with several other Christian Neoplatonists of his time, such as Porphyry) from the more pagan "One."

Arendt, conceding and discussing these points in Part II of *Love and Saint Augustine*, will suggest, however, that while Augustine's Christianized mediation *allows* and *requires* a loving of these second-order goods, he is clear that these ought not to be loved eternally, but loved *in relation to* the eternal divine.<sup>55</sup> In Arendt's reading of Augustine (and on this point, she is drawing

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<sup>53</sup> For discussion of divine unity and multiplicity in Proclus to Aquinas, and alterity within the Godhead, see "Divine Henads and Persons: Multiplicity's birth in the Principle in Proclus and Aquinas," Wayne J. Hankey, (Dalhousie: Dionysus, Vol. XXXVII, 2019), 164-181.

<sup>54</sup> We see this combination of Divine multiplicity and unity in other Neoplatonic figures post-Plotinus, such as Porphyry.

<sup>55</sup> "Often times the love of God is inhibited by the love of an earthly friend, as Augustine recounts on the passing of his friend at Thagaste. There Augustine learned early on not to love a mortal eternally! Such reluctance to embrace a creature without end became the basis of the classic Augustinian notion between *uti* and *frui*. God alone is to be enjoyed (*frui*) and therefore loved in and of himself, all other "loves" must be qualified as ways of "using" (*uti*) creatures so as to attain to the divine" (David Meconi, "Travelling without Moving: Love as Ecstatic Union in Plotinus, Augustine and Dante," *Manchester University Press*. n.d):10

almost exclusively on Augustine's commentaries on the New Testament), all loves in the created world, while they are good and ought to be loved (which is, admittedly, already a radical departure from Plotinus), these created things are *only* to be loved as a "use" of attaining the Divine (the only object of love that ought to be loved *in and of itself*). David V. Meconi, following Arendt on this point, suggests that the role of mediating objects, for Augustine, is to play "the part of a heavenly ladder lifting the soul upwards, clearly evidenced in Augustine's search for the divine early on in his intellectual and spiritual sojourn."<sup>56</sup> The purpose of all created objects is ultimately understood in their relation to their capacity to point the soul toward God. The human soul ought to treat the created object rightly and understand it at all times as a mediating function towards God, so as to not end up "worshipping the creature" over the creator.<sup>57</sup> In learning to love through these objects, one is trained in love such that it might ultimately be directed towards God *without mediation*. Thus, in Arendt and Meconi's reading of Augustine, the human soul first learns to love through mediating objects, but must properly continue its ascension towards that which sustains each mediating object, the Divine itself.<sup>58</sup>

Of particular note, however, (and contrary to what one might expect following this reading) is that, for Meconi (who is largely consistent with Arendt on this matter), in Augustine, the

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<sup>56</sup> Meconi, "Travelling without Moving: Love as Ecstatic Union in Plotinus, Augustine and Dante." 10

<sup>57</sup> Augustine, on numerous occasions throughout the later books of the *Confessions*, notes that God (as distinct) from the sensible material world is what makes it possible for Godself to be present through the material: "Late have I love you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made" (Augustine, *Confessions*. 201).

<sup>58</sup> The ladder into God (or the movement of ascent) is an especially prominent theme in Book X of the *Confessions*: "What then do I love when I love my God? Who is he who is higher than the highest element of my soul? Through my soul I will ascend to him. I will rise above the force by which I am bonded to the body and fill its frame with vitality" and "I will therefore rise above that natural capacity in a step by step ascent to him who made me" (Augustine, *Confessions*. 185).

‘ladder,’ by which one learns to love God, does not entirely ‘drop out’ once the human soul loves God. Rather, as Meconi points to, “Augustine will maintain that one cannot even claim to love God if one does not love his or her neighbour.”<sup>59</sup> Meconi explains that the proper love of neighbour has a temporal primacy over the love of God: “We must love first our brothers and sisters who are immediately present to our senses if we are ever going to learn to love the invisible God.”<sup>60</sup> The human soul must learn how to love properly in loving what is most immediate to its sensible existence; by loving the neighbour, the soul learns to love properly and rightly, and thus is, in loving the neighbour, learning to love God. The human soul, and its situatedness in the world, do not dissolve once the soul loves God. Rather, the human soul continues to love these mediating objects as a part of the totality of God’s essence. However, ultimately, the human soul *will not be satisfied* with principles of mediation because the soul’s final end is in God.<sup>61</sup> In Arendt’s and Meconi’s reading, all loves must be relocated in God and understood in relation to God: “Augustine must accordingly delocalize the human heart so as to ensure its relocalization in God alone.”<sup>62</sup> The task of the human soul is to work to love each mediating object *rightly*, ultimately, by ensuring that each mediating principle is understood as a derivative of God and as *one step* in the soul’s growing capacity to love God. Any other treatment of these mediating princi-

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<sup>59</sup> Speaking of the commandment to love God and to also love one’s neighbour, Augustine writes, “for those two commandments, being carefully considered, are found to be so connected to one with another, that neither can the love of God exist in a man if he love not his neighbour, not the love of his neighbour if he love not God” (Augustine, *On Faith and Works*. ed. Gregory J. Lombardo. (Newman Press, 1988), 16

<sup>60</sup> Meconi, “Travelling without Moving: Love as Ecstatic Union in Plotinus, Augustine and Dante,” 11

<sup>61</sup> “given the self-deception inherent in human eros coupled with the power of a creature to entice, all loves must be relocated in God” (Meconi, “Travelling without Moving: Love as Ecstatic Union in Plotinus, Augustine and Dante,” 11)

<sup>62</sup> Meconi, “Travelling without Moving: Love as Ecstatic Union in Plotinus, Augustine and Dante,” 12



ples is idolatry and non-redemptive, for Arendt's Augustine. It is only God who deserves love on the level of eternal order value, and thus, strictly, no second-order goods (such as a friend or neighbour) deserve this final and ultimate love.

Arendt goes so far as to suggest that a 'levelling' takes place in Augustine's concept of mediation such that the particularity of each mediating good is lost. She writes on the concept of the love of neighbour:

The lover meets a man defined by God's love simply as God's creation. All meet in this love, denying themselves and their mutual ties. In this meeting all people have an equal, though very minor, relevance to their own being. Because man is tied to his own source, he loves his neighbour neither for his neighbour's sake nor for his own sake.<sup>63</sup>

There is a 'levelling' that occurs in the transaction of human love, for Arendt, because the "transaction" of love will only be experienced as an instance of loving God; to which all people have an equal capacity to offer. For instance, the "transaction" of love that I have for my brother (whom I see every day), for Arendt, is ultimately equal to the "transaction" of love of I have for my bank manager, whom I speak to once a year. All "neighbours" are yet one instance of numerous other equally-capable instances of loving God. Arendt concludes that an 'isolation' of the human soul emerges out of this command to love one's neighbour, yet simultaneously exists the phenomenon of the dissolution of the neighbour's particularity:

Love of neighbour leaves the lover himself in absolute isolation and the world remains a desert for man's isolated existence. It is in compliance with the commandment to love

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<sup>63</sup> Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 94. An example of this may be in the *Confessions*, where Augustine writes, "As a boy he had grown up with me, and we had gone to school together and played with one another. He was then not yet my friend, and when he did become so, it was less than a true friendship which is not possible unless you bond together those who cleave to one another by the love which is 'poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us'" (Augustine, *Confessions*, 56). Arendt suggests that, for Augustine, what one truly loves is the "eternal" in their neighbour; and that the lover "reaches beyond" their beloved to God.

one's neighbour that this isolation is realized and not destroyed, in regard to the world in which the creature also lives in isolation.<sup>64</sup>

The love that the soul has for its neighbour cannot rest in any particularities of their neighbour because, truly, what one loves in the love of their neighbour is its "uncreated" and "unrecognizable" part. For Arendt, the "uncreated" and "unrecognizable" is the impersonal aspect of the neighbour: the part of them that is free of distinction and particularity, and is shared equally amongst all. In loving what is impersonal and equal amongst all, one *overcomes* the neighbour's distinction to love, for Arendt, what is most worthy of loving.

Arendt suggests that one must have the "right comprehension" of oneself to have the "right comprehension" of the neighbour:

It is only where I have made sure of the truth of my own being that I can love my neighbour in his true being, which is in his createdness. And just as I do not love the self I made in belonging to the world, I also do not love my neighbour in the concrete and worldly encounter with him.<sup>65</sup>

When one loves his neighbour as one ought, one loves one's neighbour as "created," and understands the neighbour in his "createdness." "Createdness," for Arendt, is the "infallible continu-

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<sup>64</sup> Arendt, "Love and Saint Augustine," 95. Arendt points to this moment in the *Confessions* as an example of the "isolation": "'Grief darkened my heart' (Lam. 5:17). Everything on which I set my gaze was death. My home town became a torture to me; my father's house a strange world of unhappiness; all that I had shared with him without him transformed in a cruel moment. My eyes looked for him everywhere, and he was no there. I hated everything because they did not have him, nor could they now tell me 'look, he is on the way', as used to be the case when he was alive and absent from me. I had become to myself a vast problem, and I questioned my soul 'Why are you sad, and why are you distressed?' But my soul did not know what reply to give. If I had said to my soul 'Put your trust in God' (Ps. 41:6,12), it would have had good reason not to obey. For the dear friend I had lost was a better and more real person than the [Manichee] phantom in which I out have been telling my soul to trust. Only tears were sweet to me, and in my 'soul's delights' (Ps. 138:11) weeping had replaced my friend" (Augustine, *Confessions*, 58). For Arendt, this suggests that his friend's death is irrelevant to Augustine's love, because the friend is used as an occasion to love God and thus there is a "levelling" of all possible loves insofar as they ultimately serve as an equal passage to God. The lover, Augustine, is left isolated because the significance of the particularity of his neighbour has been overcome.

<sup>65</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 95.

ity” located in the human’s soul; it is not touched nor identified in any way by worldly contingents or identities. In loving the neighbour “as created,” “I love something in him, that is, the very thing which, of himself, he is not.”<sup>66</sup> It is in this sense, for Arendt, that the lover is isolated such that they have no love or contact with the ‘particularity’ of their beloved.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the lover, in some sense, overcomes the particularity of the beloved to love their impersonal part; which is equally weighted amongst all human beings. Arendt’s understanding of the commandment to “Love thy neighbour as oneself,” she interprets in terms of loving the neighbour in the same way that one loves oneself *by denying oneself*. In loving oneself, for Arendt, one ought to love what is uncreated in oneself (in addition to love what is uncreated in the neighbour), and thus to deny oneself of all particularities such that one only loves what is most Divine in the soul. Then, the soul must treat the neighbour in the same way, in a denial of all of their particularities such that one loves only their “uncreated” part.<sup>68</sup>

Arendt draws a connection between the love one must have for their neighbour within a broader understanding of the soul’s relation to God. For Arendt, the soul’s *reditus* into God involves the active disavowal of distinction; to grasp one’s being most purely and truly is to rid oneself of one’s worldly distinction and to “gain one's being” in God:

Self-denying love means loving by renouncing oneself; and this in turn means to love all people so completely without distinctions that the world becomes a desert to the lover. Moreover, it means to love them “as oneself.” By the fact of referring back, man as creature gains his own being. Since man is both “from God” and “to God,” he grasps his

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, 95.

<sup>67</sup> “it also means that for the neighbour as well love is merely a call to isolation, a summons into God’s presence” (*ibid*, 94).

<sup>68</sup> “This denial corresponds to “willing that you may be” and “carrying off to God.” I deny the other person so as to break through to his real being, just as in searching for myself I deny myself” (*ibid*, 96).

own being in God's presence. This return through recapturing his own being, and the isolation achieved in it, is the sole source of neighbourly love.<sup>69</sup>

Augustine ultimately knows himself through his identity in God as he "grasps his being in God's presence", according to Arendt, which involves attempting to rid oneself of distinctions that indicate distance or separation from God. In the command to love one's neighbour as oneself, both of these relations are ultimately only known in the *reditus*<sup>70</sup> of human existence. The particular identity of the soul's neighbour dissolves in the soul's loving of them, as the soul must renounce itself in its loving, and then the loving of the other must follow suit in this renunciation. Once again, returning to the hypothetical brother and bank manager, for Arendt, neither of these concrete identities nor distinctions remain in the soul's loving of them. Rather, the soul ought to love each neighbour in spite of their particular identities and drastically different relations to oneself, because they are both human beings with an equal capacity to act as a soul's conduit to love God in each person's "uncreated" and non-distinct aspect. It is only, for Arendt, through God, that all of these neighbours and loves can ultimately be redeemed and understood.

The starkest moment of Arendt's criticism of Augustine is her suggestion that ultimately, no particularity matters to him — so much to the extent that the death of a neighbour becomes irrelevant:

The lover reaches beyond the beloved to God in whom alone both his existence and his love have meaning. Death is meaningless to love of neighbour, because in removing my neighbour from the world death only does what love has already accomplished; that is, I love in him the being that lives in him as his source. Death is irrelevant to this love, because every beloved is only an occasion to love God. The same source is loved in each

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, 97.

<sup>70</sup> Generally, the 'return-to-God' of human existence.

individual human being. No individual means anything in comparison with this identical source.<sup>71</sup>

Arendt, herself, is disquieted at this seeming irrelevance of particularity in Augustine. She points to this moment in the *Confessions* as an example of this “isolation”:

Grief darkened my heart’ (Lam. 5:17). Everything on which I set my gaze was death. My home town became a torture to me; my father’s house a strange world of unhappiness; all that I had shared with him without him transformed in a cruel moment. My eyes looked for him everywhere, and he was no there. I hated everything because they did not have him, nor could they now tell me ‘look, he is on the way’, as used to be the case when he was alive and absent from me. I had become to myself a vast problem, and I questioned my soul ‘Why are you sad, and why are you distressed?’ But my soul did not know what reply to give. If I had said to my soul ‘Put your trust in God’ (Ps. 41:6,12), it would have had good reason not to obey. For the dear friend I had lost was a better and more real person than the [Manichee] phantom in which I out have been telling my soul to trust. Only tears were sweet to me, and in my ‘soul’s delights’ (Ps. 138:11) weeping had replaced my friend.<sup>72</sup>

For Arendt, this suggests that his friend’s death is irrelevant to Augustine’s love because the friend is used as an occasion to love God and thus there is a “levelling” of all possible loves insofar as they ultimately serve as an equal passage to God. The lover, Augustine, is left isolated because the significance of the particularity of his neighbour has been overcome. She suggests that if we follow his presuppositions, even the death of a neighbour ought not to matter, as what one ought to love is the neighbour’s “uncreated” part, and thus this part remains of the perished individual. Ultimately, what is loved in the other is the same in each person, as it is the part of the individual whose source is God, and thus uncreated and unchanged. Therefore, there is no matter

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<sup>71</sup> Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 97.

<sup>72</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 58.

to whom the person loves, as ultimately, each other person is an occasion to love God.<sup>73</sup> The neighbour's relevance is only valuable insofar as they serve as a conduit of a love of God. Here we see Arendt explain this limitation in her sharpest terms:

I never love my neighbour for his own sake, only for the sake of divine grace. This indirectness, which is unique to love of neighbour, puts an even more radical stop to the self-evident living together in the earthly city. This indirectness turns my relation to my neighbour into a mere passage for the direct relation to God himself.<sup>74</sup>

In Arendt's reading of Augustine, all social relations are provisional of a more ultimate love of God, and the particular identity of the loved object or person is *always* dissolved. There is an undeniable selfishness in this metaphysical system because for Arendt, all love of the other is exploitative in being ultimately for one's own metaphysical purposes of ascent.

Arendt's reading of Augustine does not allow for the particularity of each mediating object to be understood as valuable. Rather, for my purposes, she exposes the danger of a certain interpretation of Augustine (in which Augustine comes across as far more Plotinian than I believe his incarnational metaphysics allows for), insofar as he could be understood to suggest that the world ought simply to be *used* as a method of the soul's journey into God. Ultimately, this reading renders a situation in which the human soul exploits the world as a means toward its end in God. This implies that the "use-value" of each mediating object has no value *qua* itself, but rather, is only valuable insofar as it is *one of many* opportunities through which a person may *pass* on their journey into God. This Plotinian emphasis in Augustine (which cannot fully be de-

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<sup>73</sup> In an effort to highlight points of agreement with Arendt's work, it is notable that there is still mediation occurring in her metaphysical construct: because of every individual's capacity to act as a conduit of ascent towards the love of God, there are always available concrete instances of drawing closer to God. Arendt goes so far as to say that "It is not really the neighbour who is loved in this love of neighbour—it is love itself" (Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 97.)

<sup>74</sup> Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 111.

nied as present, particularly in his *Confessions* Book 7), must be appropriately engaged with to *i)* not deny the influence of Plotinus on Augustine yet *ii)* however, ensure that Augustine is also read more holistically as a complex patchwork of many influences, and as offering a deeply-penetrating *incarnational theology* through which his body of work must be read as a crucial hermeneutic. Firstly, however, I will turn to a study of the Plotinian infrastructure and philosophical theology present in Augustine to account for how Augustine does, in large part, resonate with Plotinus on some crucial metaphysical points.

## **Section II: Arendt's Criticism of Augustine's Mediation read with Plotinus**

To consider the reasons for and impact of Augustine's notion of mediation that allows for a lesser understanding of the particular, we must look towards his philosophical heritage, and mainly, his relation to Plotinus. Meconi suggests that it is because of Augustine's Plotinian assumptions that he is ultimately unable to consider the particular and other "second-order" goods to have any *ultimate* value. I will argue that, ultimately, Augustine is able to understand relationality in the world in a positive sense because of the Trinitarian model that he integrates into an otherwise largely Plotinian metaphysical structure of soul and divine union. By embedding a notion of multiplicity *into* the concept of (and not distinct from) divine unity, we have occasion to reconsider the value of goods that are descended and lesser than the ultimate Divine One. In other words, we can think the multiplicity and diversity of creation anew. However, for Arendt and Meconi, Augustine does not take this upscaling of value to mediating principals far enough — their reading suggests that Augustine does not allow the mediating principle to be an *actual presence* of the divine embrace and thus is unable to elevate more significantly the theological significance of the second-order goods.

A significant break that Augustine has from Plotinus is, as made clear by now, in his elevation of the value of second-order goods, by introducing an understanding of these goods as not evil or contrary to divine unity, but rather, can be used as an *experience of* divine unity. This fundamental shift is crucial and worth a moment of pause to consider its significance. Plotinus is strict with his division of material goods from the nature of the Divine One in his insistence that the love for the lesser goods is ultimately false and harmful. Meconi writes of this, “Because the deepest propulsion of the soul is not to love visible individuals but to attain the divine, its only true lover (*ἀληθινὸν ἐρώμενον*), discarding all else as ersatz images, so as to become one with the One, not in external carnality but in disembodied unity.”<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, the soul, for Plotinus (as explained in depth in Chapter 1), must be shed of all embodiment, as all that is not, ultimately, the One, is a distraction from it. True freedom is only a result of transcending all things that are not God: eros does not allow for accentuation of particularity, but rather, must be rid of in order for the soul’s ultimate union. In light of this, and to better understand Arendt’s (and Meconi’s, who follows her on this interpretation) critical engagement with Augustine, it is worth considering the extent to which Augustine assumes this Plotinian insight (despite his obvious divergences from Plotinus.) Augustine, in some part, retains a Plotinian understanding of ‘the One’ (which Augustine will, of course, call ‘God’) as being the ultimate and final place of the soul’s reunion with God, insofar as he brings the Plotinian understanding that “the soul’s only way out of such obstinate separation and dissipation is to reunite itself with the divine.”<sup>76</sup> Further, Augustine maintains the notion that the soul’s final freedom is in the soul’s union with God,

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<sup>75</sup> Meconi, “Travelling without Moving: Love as Ecstatic Union in Plotinus, Augustine and Dante,” 6.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, 5.



as opposed to something such as a “creedal profession or overcoming sin.”<sup>77</sup> By retaining a weighted importance on this final resting place there is still an emphasis on the soul’s union as the most important: “The soul accordingly must collect itself, become again present to itself, by transcending the world of disparate existents and be filled with eros for the One alone.”<sup>78</sup> The aim, for Augustine, is in large part, remains the same as that of Plotinus: for the soul to be united with the One, God.

We see this in Augustine’s understanding of eros as the means of the soul’s return to God. In doing so, Augustine maintains the basic Plotinian distinction between earthy and heavenly. For Plotinus, “The ultimate goal of wing-bearing ἔρωϛ is reunification with the divine One. The human soul carries about an innate and unshakeable love for the divine but oftentimes confuses this heavenly eros for human when enamoured by the diverse allures of the material order.”<sup>79</sup> For Plotinus, the material order is simply a distraction from the ultimate love that the soul has for the Divine One. Thus, the material order is something to shed as excess in the soul’s ascension into the One. While Augustine suggests that the material order is in fact a necessary step in the soul’s ascension (in such a way that the eros the soul has for a material good will ultimately allow for the soul’s ascension towards the love of higher goods), he maintains the common assumption that it is still the case that the soul’s ascension into the One is ultimately what the soul longs for, and thus necessarily relativizes the weight given to the material world in light of that. Meconi refers to a passage from Book XIII of the *Confessions* to demonstrate this point:

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, 6

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*, 6

I put my question to the earth, and it replied, “I am not he”...And to tall things which stood around the portals of my flesh I said, “Tell me of my God. You are not he, but tell me something of him.” Then they lifted up their mighty voices and cried, “He made us.” My questioning was my attentive spirit, and their reply, their beauty — *Interrogatio mea intent mea et responsio eorum, species eorum.*<sup>80</sup>

In this reading of Augustine, by retaining the Plotinian hierarchy, Augustine is unable to collapse earthly and heavenly love in such a way that would allow for anything other than the soul’s union with God to be the place of Divine encounter — principles of the earth entirely point beyond themselves towards their Creator. The purpose of each creature is to point the soul towards the divine; to not let the soul rest in itself as *telos*. Mediating steps draw the soul up towards the one, but it is only ultimately at the “highest level” of the ladder, so to speak, that the soul meets God.

### **Section III: A Second Reading of Augustine on Mediation: J. Warren Smith**

Following the work of J.W Smith, among others, I will argue that Arendt (and Meconi) go too far in their suggestion that particularly is necessarily dissolved in Augustine’s understanding of meditation and its *telos* in God. Further, I will suggest ways in which, and consider the extent to which, Augustine does privilege second-order goods *in their particularity*; and that this value stems from and *requires* Augustine’s *incarnational* Neoplatonism.

Smith argues that modern criticisms of Augustine’s mediation (as we see in Arendt) often lean too heavily on a reading that privileges the Platonic hierarchy so much such that it overlooks the crucial concessions Augustine does make relative to second-order goods. Smith goes so far as to argue, in vast contrast to Arendt, that “Augustine’s hierarchical ontology ultimately allows him

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<sup>80</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. 10.6.9

to reconcile the love of God and neighbour in a way that allows for a true love of neighbour in her particularity.”<sup>81</sup> Without disregarding the acknowledgement that Augustine is deeply situated within the Platonic tradition that assumes ontological and epistemological privilege (as covered at length in Chapter 1), Smith suggests that it is *because* Augustine retains a strict hierarchical ontology that the one can fully and correctly love her neighbour in *all of her particularity*.

Augustine’s understanding of the love of neighbour is situated within his broader ontological hierarchy: the love of neighbour is not a love for the neighbour in herself (*in se*), but is ultimately an enjoyment in God. While acknowledging this, Smith points out also how Augustine “envisions redemption as a restoration of the unity and peace inherent in a creation that derives its life from the one true God.”<sup>82</sup> Each created thing is given form by the creator, and its “shapeliness” is necessary of it having been created. For Smith, in Augustine, when the creature comes to know their form and their shape (in other words, their *particularity*), they come to an understanding of their “createdness” in God.

Smith suggests that the imposition of the Divine Unity onto the human soul impacts the soul in both a cognitive and affective way: “Not only do we see that God alone is to be enjoyed, but we also see how to love the many creatures rightly.”<sup>83</sup> Smith explains the soul’s two-pronged reception of the divine light:

Because Christ himself is the inner light that abides in and illuminates the mind, our intellect is illuminated by the very Principle of unity that orders the many goods in creation. Loving the many creatures not as ends in themselves to be enjoyed but as means

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<sup>81</sup> Warren J. Smith, “Loving the Many in the One: Augustine and the Love of Finite Goods,” *MDPI*, (2016): 6.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*, 8.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*, 13.

of serving God and as parts of the whole that reflects God's beauty, we are freed from the distention of desire that takes the form of greed or covetousness (*cupiditas*).<sup>84</sup>

Having been illuminated by God's light (which, as explained in Chapter 1, is ontologically both unified and multiplicitous in the Trinity), according to Smith, the human soul gains the affective power of viewing the goods of creation in their proper function as parts of God's whole. Having *also* been illuminated by the full completeness of the One, one is not tempted to treat the second-order goods as final ends: "In discovering the One thing that is necessary we are freed from the fear inherent to the cycle of gain and loss—no longer continually grasping for new goods that we hope in vain will sustain our lives and give us security."<sup>85</sup> The soul can be content living in a multiplicity of material goods because of the sustained delight in the One which sustains it all. When one's soul and intellect is illuminated by the comprehensiveness and completeness of God, one will not be tempted, for example, to mistake their mother for God, because she will see her mother as one Good that participates in the full completeness of God, but not God herself. Thus, the soul will see in these second-order goods both a participation in and a part of the way in which each good is related to God. To flesh out this argument, Smith, who comments on Arendt on this point, examines the metaphysical similarity between Augustine and Plotinus. By looking to Plotinus, we can see how Augustine's metaphysical structure can seem, at times, largely resonant with this pagan predecessor. Plotinus' First Principle, "the One," is the unconditioned condition of all else. The One becomes a multiplicity only from being contemplated by the Intellect, the Second Principle, whilst the One remains a Union of Divine Simplicity. Here, Augustine makes a significant departure:

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<sup>84</sup> *ibid*, 13.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, 9.

Plotinus, therefore, would never say that God is *formosissima*. Augustine, however, does. His point is not that God is one thing among other things, one form of being among other forms. Rather, *formosissima* is Augustine's way of expressing conceptually the meaning of Psalm 36:9: "for with you is the fountain of life." God is one and immaterial and so not composed of parts. Yet in God's oneness, there is an abundance and fecundity to his creative imagination and will that gives form to all things. The One is the source of the many and so holds the many in unity, harmony, and peace.<sup>86</sup>

Augustine allows for an understanding of God that entails both the Divine Unity, as well as an understanding of the Divine Unity as being the ground of the fountain of multiplicity and generation. Thus, in the *imago Dei*, the human's perfect form, Smith suggests, we have an image of both the unity and multiplicity of the Divine. And thus, the root of the understanding of particularity or variance is a Divine root in itself, as opposed to being derivative and lesser than God.

Further, Smith remarks of how a shared telos in God inspires a love of mutuality amongst neighbours as a rebuttal to the assertion that Augustine's ontological hierarchy requires that the love of mediating objects must be exploitative:

For the shared *telos* of sisters and brothers in Christ gives their instrumental relationship a gravity that is infinitely greater than the instrumentality of an automobile. No mutuality exists between car and driver; the destination to which the car transports the driver is a good only for the driver. By contrast, the mutual longing for their shared destination and the recognition of the mutual dependence of the spiritual traveling companions creates a bond of love between them—a bond entirely conditioned by their mutual love of God and at the same time carrying a profound appreciation and gratitude for each other.<sup>87</sup>

A mutual love can be generated between neighbours when viewed in light of the mutual way in which the neighbours are both in a process of ascent into God. In this way, Smith attempts to offer a scenario in which the ontological primacy of God is maintained while allowing for a love

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<sup>86</sup> *ibid*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*, 13.

that is not strictly exploitative nor hierarchical. In a recognition of a mutual dependency, one neighbour does not exploit the other for their own progress, but rather, the two neighbours see in each other a mutual recognition of dependency on one another, thus inspiring a love and gratitude towards one another that is particular to them.

Seeing the neighbour as a participant in the whole of God's creation is only possible eschatologically, as no finite perception can conceive of the whole of God's "creative artistry."

Smith writes,

Since, as Augustine concedes, "there is no human being who can grasp the whole range of time and its successive ages," (*vera rel.* 22.43) how can rational creatures located in the middle of history gain a vision of the big picture that allows them to use and love their neighbours appropriately? Only if the Christian's intellect apprehends God's creative artistry by surveying salvation history as a *whole* is she able to grasp the true beauty of individuals as parts of the whole, i.e., in the particular role they play in the plan of Providence. Such a vision is at most an eschatological possibility.<sup>88</sup>

Only eschatologically, in Smith's view, will this whole vision take place in which the neighbour can be loved fully and rightly as a fellow participant in the whole of God's creation. Thus, it seems, according to Smith's account, that any loving before this eschatological vision will necessarily remain partial and distorted prior to its eschatological completion. While the soul can come close to this vision through "memory and the discipline of Christian confession,"<sup>89</sup> there is no capacity for a full and perfect love in this 'middle time.' For Smith, it is through habitual memory and recitation that the individual can best remember herself in her relation to her neighbour and thus love her neighbour most fully and rightly. There is, however, in Smith's account, an acknowledgment that this love for the neighbour ought to be continually recalled, and thus there is

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, 15.

always a partiality and incompleteness before the eschatological restoration of the perfect neighbourly love.

Smith points us towards what I believe to be a necessary corrective of Arendt's criticism of Augustine. He does this by bringing to light how multiplicity as the ground of all being (as given in the Trinity) allows for a person's conception of multiplicity as diverse, and yet, as part of the united wholeness of the Divine nature. While what Smith highlights does indeed offer a way in which a particular and intimate love can be generated between neighbours in recognition of a common *telos*, his corrective does not give a viable illustration of a non-exploitative love. While Smith's formulation creates a mutuality of neighbourly love (as in, it is not just that A loves B, but rather, there is a reciprocal engagement), the formulation does not in fact save the situation from criticisms of exploitation. In an attempt to offer a way in which Augustine's love is non-exploitative, Smith in fact just offers an image of mutual exploitation (A loves B and B loves A), in that each neighbour recognizes that they need the other in order to ascend, and in so doing, 'uses' the neighbour for this purpose. Just because their neighbour is also doing this to them at the same time does not mean that the exploitative nature of love is eradicated, but rather, just that the exploitation is now mutual.

Smith's account provides a necessary corrective to Arendt's account of the complete dissolution of particularity in Augustine's notion of mediation. With Smith, I believe that Augustine does offer a way in which the individual has the capacity to enjoy the particularity of their mediating object, whilst simultaneously recognizing its function in the soul's journey. However, Smith's limitation is that he fails to illustrate a way in which this is possible: his vision of mutual love of neighbours towards a common *telos* (as an attempt to show how this multiplicity and uni-

ty can be simultaneous) is flawed insofar as, in actuality, it is rather a vision of mutual-exploitation. In sum, Augustine *does* allow for an understanding of value given to the particular on the soul's journey into God given his rigid Trinitarian and incarnational theology emergent from his Neoplatonism. We have yet, however, to see an illustration of *what this looks like*, because, as I have argued, Smith's illustration of an attempt to depict a non-exploitative love does not do Augustine's mediation justice. If one employs Augustine's theology of incarnation and Trinity as key hermeneutics to understanding his structure of meditation, a non-exploitative understanding of mediation can be both deciphered in and illustrated through Augustine.

#### **Section IV: The Importance of Augustine's Incarnational Neoplatonism**

I share the concerns that arise from Arendt's reading of Augustine as a primarily Plotinian figure. A strictly Plotinian reading of Augustine demands a dissolution of the particular nature of each mediating object as all particularity becomes relativized according to one's more ultimate journey into God. In this view, to treat one's neighbour and second-order goods 'rightly,' one must *already* have an eschatological view of the mediating object's relation to God. In other words, Arendt seemingly proposes that one must keep in mind (at all times) that one's love for a particular object or person is indeed in reality a love of God. In practice, it is simply not the case that I am capable of such cognizance when I think of my love for my mother. Even though I may, in theory, admit that my love for my mother is indeed a love for God, it would be an egregious lie to suggest that this is on my mind at all times in my love for her, as Arendt seems to require. *However*, following Smith, I believe that Augustine allows for a way in which the soul can delight in the multiplicity and diversity of creation. In studying the form and shape of each particular object, *qua* object, and in its particularity, one can see the vast diversity of creation as united



within one whole, which is made possible by the simultaneous unity and multiplicity in the Godhead; the ground of existence. Because of Augustine's concept of *incarnation*, made possible by Augustine's understanding of the Trinity (and the multiplicity that dwells therein), second-ordered goods have to have the capacity to be the source of divine *encounter* in and of themselves due to God's descent and absorption into all of creation, and thus *no longer* (as *is* the case with Plotinus) must be understood as only partial and relativized steps on the soul's ascent into God. The dissolution of the particular (as we see in Plotinus) cannot take place when one is able to view the soul's loving of the particular *in its particularity* (*qua* itself) as in fact the mode of the soul's ascent into God. In studying and loving the distinctions and contours of each particular mediating step, the soul sees how the light of the Divine unity is manifested *particularly* through that object; thus the soul draws nearer to Divine unity by dwelling in this particular and distinct object. As Smith eloquently describes, this affirmation of "createdness" is what allows the individual to refrain from the deletion of one's own and other's particularity to come to know God. Rather, the soul can come to knowledge of God by leaning into the particular distinctiveness of each mediating object it comes to know, such that it can understand its form and shape *as made particular* by God.

The contemporary theologian Rowan Williams, in his essay 'Augustinian Love,' shares many of these same concerns with Arendt's interpretation of Augustine. Williams is concerned at what is lost when the neighbour becomes simply a reminder to love God in such a way as to stress the need for each neighbour's retention of particularity:

[Augustine's grief] is not an attitude indifferent to the specificity of the object of love, seeing such an object as simply a 'reminder' to love God. There is indeed a sense of

solidarity in the moral condition; and we have to keep a watchful eye on our friendships and loves if we are to avoid using relationships to assure ourselves that we are not really mortal...Loving humanly, it seems, must be a love that refuses to ignore the morality and limitedness of what or whom we love. Forget this, and we are left with an intensity of felt intimacy that ultimately and subtly refuses to 'release' the person loved from the bonds of that intimacy.<sup>90</sup>

Williams stresses that to love the neighbour (in his particular, limited form) is already to love him *in God*. Indeed, it is impossible not to do so, because, as Williams points out, "any attempt to love or indeed to know anything except as related to God is illusory."<sup>91</sup> Williams makes the crucial point that for Augustine, what it is to be human is to already have an inner life "whose constitutive object is God," whether one knows it or not. Thus, it is impossible to love something in such a way that does not love God, as this would simply be illusory — God is present throughout all: "The image of God in human beings is the human being turned towards God, having God as object," writes Williams, "This implies that if we seek either to know or love another human subject as if they subsisted independently of this directness or drawnness, we are pursuing a phantom."<sup>92</sup> My love for my mother, according to Williams, is already my love for God insofar as the "constitutive object" of my mother (or anyone, for that matter) is God. If I try to imagine that my mother subsists independently from God in my love for her, I am deluding myself. I would also not love her *as she truly is*, since she is not, in fact, independent from God.

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<sup>90</sup> Rowan Williams, "Augustinian Love," In *On Augustine*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 194.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid*, 194

<sup>92</sup> *ibid*, 194

Each particular neighbour has, as his or her constitutive elements, God as object.<sup>93</sup> Thus, when one loves the particularity of her neighbour, she loves God, *and* her neighbour in particularity. There is no sense, for Augustine, that this particularity must dissolve or be *gone through*, to ‘get to God,’ per se, because the presence of God is not ‘behind’ the neighbour, so to speak, but rather, God is always present insofar as God is *always already* the constitutive object of all human life for Augustine.

A further danger in Arendt’s reading of Augustine is the language she uses when suggesting that Augustinian love is “loving for the sake of God.” What seems to be implied here is that if it were not for the more ultimate purpose, one would have no desire nor need to love the primary object — (eg. I love my ugly cat “for the sake of” my mother, who gifted me the cat). This is not an entirely egregious interpretation, because Augustine himself writes, in *De Doctrina Christina*, that “It seems to me, then, that [the neighbour] is to be loved for the sake of something else. For if it is for his own sake, we enjoy him; if it is for the sake of something else, we use him.”<sup>94</sup> In this way, independently of the more ultimate love of my mother, I would have no reason to love the cat that she has gifted me. Williams helpfully points out that this formulation does not reflect at all what Augustine speaks of when he suggests some level of “indirectness” to one’s love for the other; rather, Augustine actually means quite the opposite of Arendt’s interpretation.

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<sup>93</sup> Here, we might think of Augustine’s outline of the relationship between human on God in *De Doctrina Christiana*: “Desiring to exercise the reader in the things that are made, in order that he many know Him by whom they are made, we have now advanced so far as to His image, which is man, in that wherein he excels the other animals, *i.e* in reason or intelligence, and whatever else can be said of the rational or intellectual soul that pertains to what is called the mind. For by this name some Latin writers, after their own peculiar mode of speech, distinguish that which excels in man, and is no tin the beast, from the soul, which is in the beast as well. If, then, we seek anything that is above this nature, and seek truly, it is God — namely, a nature not created, but creating” (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christina*. New Advent Translation, XXV, I.i.)

<sup>94</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina Christina*. I.xxii.20.

Williams writes, “The question which prompts his formulation is whether a human being is appropriately loved in the mode of ‘enjoyment,’ that is, as an end in itself; and his answer, with appropriate qualification, is that this would be to read another human individual as independently promising final bliss to me, signalling nothing beyond itself.”<sup>95</sup> For Augustine, the neighbour is both a *res* (truly subsistent reality) and *signum* (a sign) of God. Williams cites an extract from Augustine’s *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, to show Augustine’s attention to the particularity of the neighbour in one’s love for him, and to show that “the love between believers is very much a matter of what is both imperative and possible here and now, in attention to the specific reality of the other.”<sup>96</sup> Williams cites Augustine’s fifth homily on this point: “If any man shall have so great charity that he is prepared even to die for his brethren, in that man is perfect charity. But as soon as it is born, is it already quite perfect? That it may be made perfect, it is born; when born, it is nourished; when nourished, it is strengthened; when strengthened, it is perfected.”<sup>97</sup> To love the neighbour in one’s subsistent reality, is already to love God. To stress, one is not simply loving the neighbour begrudgingly “because one has to,” but rather, one *cannot* love one’s neighbour (with full retention of particularity) apart from God.<sup>98</sup>

In Williams’ essay ‘The Nature of Christian Formation,’ he clarifies Arendt’s concern of Augustine’s seeming prescription of the use and exploitation of mediating principles. Funda-

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid*, 196

<sup>96</sup> *ibid*, 198

<sup>97</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, ed. H. Browne (n.d): 5.4

<sup>98</sup> Williams wards off criticism of an Augustinian paradigm in which the neighbour and God “compete” for love by reiterating that “God *cannot* simply be a rival of our love. It is impossible to love the human other, just as it is impossible for me to love myself, without God being involved as the animating presence to which my subjectivity and the other’s subjectivity are always present” (Williams, *Augustinian Love*, 197.)

mentally, this criticism lies in a misunderstanding of Augustine's key principles of *signum* and *res*, Williams suggests, and to take these words at 'face value' (as Arendt appears to) is a mistake. To take these words as they appear is to assume that God is '*res*' and all else then, is '*signum*' in respect of God. Williams notes the difficulty and ambiguity in these parts of Augustine:

As Augustine himself was well aware, such language is misleading if taken at its face value; there is something odd in saying that the proper love of neighbour is a 'using' of the neighbour to draw closer to God, and there are very considerable problems in applying the scheme to God. These difficulties have been often noted. But we must be careful to avoid a superficial reading... Our last end is the contemplation of that which in no way depends on us or is defined in terms of us (we, rather, are defined in terms of it); and so we cannot for this end use other objects of love in a self-interested way. To 'use' the love of neighbour or the love we have of our own bodies (a favourite example of Augustine's) is simply to allow the capacity for gratuitous or self-forgetful *dilectio* opened up in these and other such loves to be opened still further. The language of *uti* is designed to warn against an attitude towards any finite person or object that terminates their meaning in their capacity to satisfy my desire, that treats them as the end of desire, conceding my meaning in terms of them and theirs in terms of me.<sup>99</sup>

*Uti* is the act of terminating the meaning, distinction and value of the mediating principle. In this sense, *uti* is instrumental in one's own desired ends; where the object is known strictly in reference to the knower. Rather, what Augustine prescribes is *frui*: "If you settle down in that delight and remain in it, making it the end and sum of your joy, then you can be said to be enjoying it in a true and strict sense"; and no such cessation of desire is legitimate in relation to objects of finite love."<sup>100</sup> When one enjoys its object as its object, and not in view of one's own desires or exploits, then one is truly enjoying the object in the fullest and truest sense. Arendt's criticism of Augustine lies in an overly simplified understanding of *uti* and *frui*, insofar as she understands only God to be capable and worthy of true enjoyment and thus all else must be 'used,' and in her

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<sup>99</sup> Williams, "The Nature of Christian Formation," 45.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*, 45.

understanding, exploited for this purpose. Williams issues the strong corrective that this is *not* the case for Augustine, but rather, that he prescribes a delight and ‘remaining in’ the objects of our enjoyment; as this is truly the enjoyment of them.<sup>101</sup>

This misunderstanding of Arendt’s, in my estimation, is centred in her more Plotinian reading of Augustine’s metaphysics. There is an anti-materialist edge to Arendt’s assumption that the world ought to be ‘used’ in order to get to God, to the point of the dissolution of the meaning of the object once the individual ‘passes through it.’ As Williams helpfully points out, it is rather, to “stay and remain” in the object is truly the fullest enjoyment of it, and thus, also, our enjoyment of God. This more world-embracing (and anti-Plotinian) understanding of *uti* and *frui* rest in Augustine’s radically incarnational Neoplatonism, and cannot be understood outside of it: “The coming of the Word in flesh establishes, we might say, the nature of fleshly being as word, as sign, the all-pervasiveness of ‘use’.”<sup>102</sup> When God becomes incarnate in the world, this opens

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<sup>101</sup> Paul Kolbet makes a similar claim to Williams regarding the way in which desire for what is other than God is not impeded in loving God directly: “Augustine was not telling us that once we come to desire God we cease desiring anything that is not God. We continue to desire ourselves and other things, but we do so in a manner that does not come at the expense of our other desires or set them in conflict. This is possible because things are loved for what they are within the ordered whole, rather than isolating them and clinging to them as means of resolving our unhappiness. To love objects and especially human flesh in any other way is to love without knowledge. In the particularly Augustinian version of the Delphic command, this disordered, nearsighted love of self or others is a species of ignorance. It is a love that is incompatible with self-knowledge. According to Augustine’s account, the scarcity that is experienced by the will’s competing with one another is superseded by an experience of abundance. All proximate desires flow into the ultimate desire of God, and this makes it possible that ‘all of us who enjoy him should also enjoy one another in him’.” (Paul Kolbet, “Augustine Among the Ancient Therapists.” *Augustine and Psychology*. ed. Sandra Lee Dixon, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth (UK, Lexington Books, 2013), 105.

<sup>102</sup> Williams, “The Nature of Christian Formation,” 46.

an entirely new possibility of objects being “signs,” and in this sense, all becomes “use.”<sup>103</sup>

Williams concludes: ‘In the light of Christ, no *res* is left alone. It can be used, and so become a sign; it can mean what it is not.’<sup>104</sup> In sum, in ‘use’ of the world, the pilgrim is not *exploiting* the world to get at ‘what is behind it,’ but rather, all becomes ‘use’ insofar as the world itself has become a *sign* of God through the incarnation.

I will now turn to Dante’s *Paradiso*, which I believe offers an illustration of an interpretation of Augustine that affirms, and in fact, *celebrates*, the distinction of the particular in a consideration of the soul’s journey into God. As we will see illustrated in Dante’s masterful poetics of his *Paradiso*, the specifically Neoplatonic incarnation that Augustine offers allows the human to see divine occurrence on the level of the material, and not simply see the material as that which ought to be used nor transcended to “elevate” to the heavenly.

### **Chapter 3: Dante’s *Paradiso* as an Illustration of Augustine’s Mediation**

#### **Section I : Philosophical Heritage of the *Divine Comedy***

It is impossible to trace Dante’s philosophical and theological heritage to one person or tradition. While much of 20th-century scholarship attributes the philosophical and theological

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<sup>103</sup> Williams explains this at greater length later on in this same essay. He writes: “In the *Confessions*, Platonism serves first to liberate desire, to stop us enjoying limited objects, so that our longing can turn towards what is not in the realm of things; but desire must undergo a second purification. It is not to seek for timeless vision, for the true and the eternal, as a kind of place to escape into from the vicissitudes of the material world; it must enact its yearning through the corporate life of the persons in this world (through the Church, ultimately, for Augustine). And it is directed or instructed and enabled in this by the fact that the crucial liberation from pride is effected by encountering the utter difference, the transcendence, of unchanging truth in the life, death, and resurrection of a mortal man.” (*ibid*, 50)

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*, 46

aspects of his *Commedia* largely to the influence of Aquinas and Aristotle, to suggest that either of these figures is *the most* prominent is a matter of scholarly debate. Certainly, Dante's work emerges from a patchwork of influences, including, but not limited to, Aristotle, Plato, Neoplatonism, Averroes and Avicenna. These figures all comprise the school of thought in which Dante was trained and thus arguably determined his imaginative scope and theological presuppositions.

O'Neill suggests that to attempt to ally Dante with a specific precursor would be a post-Enlightenment and anachronistic attempt to parse what was, at the time of Dante, largely philosophically synchronous:

Dante could not have distinguished the "schools" of his time as rigorously as modern scholars do. [...] To reduce philosophy to "isms" is to reduce it to dogmas, ideologies, bodies of propositions: this is largely a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, and foreign to Dante [...].<sup>105</sup>

O'Neill adds that "Dante's world was perhaps more faithful to the pedigree of philosophical doctrines than is our present one, with its academic custom to append to various tenets and arguments often artificial or overly-general designations such as "peripatetic," "pagan," and "(Neo)platonistic."<sup>106</sup> In studying Dante, one cannot study the influence of one such figure without taking into account the philosophical synchronicity and holism of the wider philosophical currents at the time. Thus, to focus on only one influence would be to shed light on one aspect of Dante's work that would necessarily contain nuance, or even contradiction, given his wide variety of resources.

Nonetheless, one warrants a richer understanding of Dante in studying the formidable figures of Dante's philosophical and theological mentorship — indubitably Aristotle and August-

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<sup>105</sup> Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005): 109.

<sup>106</sup> O'Neill, "How does the Body Depart?: A Neoplatonic Reading of Dante's *Suicides*," 4.



tine.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Dante worked within a tradition that was thoroughly seeped in Aristotle and the uptake of Aristotelian thought. Dante claims of Aristotle in the *Convivio* that he is the “magister sapientium (“master of those who know,” DVE 2.10.1), and is “degnissimo di fede e d’obbedienza (“most worthy of faith and obedience,” Conv. 4.6.7).”<sup>108</sup> Tracing this linkage between Aristotle and Dante defined a large current of twentieth-century Dante scholarship; rendering a public reception of a very ‘Thomistic’ Dante.<sup>109</sup> However, later, a countercurrent emerged following this Thomistic heyday, when figures such as Bruno Nardi “tried to situate Dante within a much more dynamic world of thought than is suggested by the simple catch-phrases ‘Thomist’ or ‘Aristotelian,’ and he sought to unravel the complex series of philosophical thought patterns at work in Dante’s output.”<sup>110</sup> From this scholarly debate emerged a Dante more primarily understood as the offspring of a vast array of influences and schools of thought.

The influence of Augustine on Dante is also a matter of scholarly debate. Strangely, Augustine is only mentioned briefly in the *Commedia*.<sup>111</sup> Scholars have hypothesized this omission to be a result of various causes: firstly; Dante does not make a habit of affording influential fig-

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<sup>107</sup> “Philosophically, Dante was influenced by Aristotle more than by any other philosopher. On the one hand, this is hardly surprising, given that Dante lived during and immediately after the period in which much of the wisdom of ancient Greece, especially that of Aristotle, reappeared through the intermediary influence of Arabic translation and confronted Western Latin philosophy” (“Philosophy,” *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000))

<sup>108</sup> *ibid*, “Philosophy”

<sup>109</sup> It is widely acknowledged that Aquinas draws on and is consistent with Aristotle in much of his works and questions. Thus, it is natural that scholarship not only tended towards tracing the linkages between Aquinas and Dante, but also Aristotle and Dante. Further, ‘Thomistic’ in this case, refers not only to the influence of Aquinas on Dante, but also “Thomism” as the surfacing of the Thomistic revival.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid*, “Philosophy”

<sup>111</sup> “It is surprising that in the *Commedia*, where one might expect [Augustine] to have a featured role in the *Paradiso* on the scale of those afforded Aquinas or Bonaventure, he should be mentioned only twice and then almost in passing” (“Augustine,” *The Dante Encyclopaedia*).

ures with rewarding roles in his *Commedia*; secondly, Dante was perhaps attempting to exhibit a preference for Aristotelian thought over Augustine and his association with Platonism; and, lastly, that Dante was perhaps expressing “radical dissent from the anti-Roman historical-political vision developed in the *De civitate Dei*.”<sup>112</sup> Gardner, nonetheless, suggests that it is clear that “Dante was profoundly influenced by Augustine, whom, in the *Monarchia*, he classes among the inspired doctors.”<sup>113</sup> For my purposes, I will argue that Dante borrows *broadly* from Augustine’s *Confessions* in his illustrative depiction of the pilgrim’s journey into God.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, I will argue that the *entire landscape* of the *Paradiso*, and its eros-driven journey towards God in the form of the pilgrim’s journey can be understood through and pinned to Augustine and his largely Neoplatonic theological understanding of the soul’s *reditus*. Through the *Paradiso*, Dante offers his reader an opportunity to meditate on each image, illustration, and mystical rapture such that the reader might use the text as a pedagogical tool for their own increase in perfection and ascent into God. Through each mediation, one’s knowledge and “whole soul” is oriented towards desiring to see the Good, and to see things “rightly”. As Augustine, in his *Confessions*, meditates on various images, illustrations, relations and experiences in his growth in knowledge and orientation toward truth, so too Dante’s reader is offered opportunities for such meditation throughout the *Paradiso*. We will see, as especially pronounced through Dante’s beautifully articulated illustrations and detail-ridden concepts, the indissoluble role that Dante gives to the *particularity* of

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<sup>112</sup> “Philosophy,” *The Dante Encyclopaedia*

<sup>113</sup> “Augustine,” *The Dante Encyclopedia*

<sup>114</sup> “While it is Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* that influences Dante’s political thought, it is the former’s *Confessions* (and the *Consolation of Boethius*) that holds sway over Dante’s conception of the pilgrim’s journey and the return of the soul to God in the *Commedia*” (O’Neill, “How does the Body Depart?: A Neoplatonic Reading of Dante’s *Suicides*,” 21)

each mediative step throughout the soul's ascent.<sup>115</sup> I will now shift to a close reading of three Cantos to offer a reading of how Dante, having remained largely consistent with Augustine, can emphasize the vast diversity of particularity of each mediative step maintained and sustained by the one unifying light of God. Indeed, the pilgrim's perfection increases and increased union of God is achieved such that the pilgrim sees the one "comprehensive light" in such a way that does not dissolve the particularity nor significance of each mediative step for the pilgrim, but rather, reveals how all diverse forms manifested up until this point are sustained and remain within the one unifying and comprehensive light of God.

## **Section II: A Close Reading of Three Cantos of *Paradiso***

We can see, in *Paradiso*, ample evidence of Dante's entrenchment in a Neoplatonic framework. This, in short, allows us to see the richness of his illustrations in light of the tropes and implications of the mediative ascent into God. I will provide a close reading of three significant moments in the *Paradiso* that show evidence of Dante's resonance with two key figures of Christian Neoplatonism: Boethius and Dionysus. This analysis will draw the foundation for my upcoming argument of how it is that Dante, being thoroughly Christian and Neoplatonic (and of course, largely Augustinian) is able to provide an illustrative account of the pilgrim's ascent into God in such a way that radiantly depicts the indissoluble role of the *particular* throughout and at the end of the soul's *reditus*. Following the close reading of these cantos of *Paradiso* in such a

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<sup>115</sup> Dante certainly emphasizes the role of the particularity each mediative object throughout the soul's ascent (which is indeed the subject of my argument), but the root inspiration of the emphasis can be traced to Plato. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, in a discussion of both lovers and rhetoric as modes of the growth of the soul's self-knowledge and ascent, the distinctive character of the lover and interlocutor is particularly emphasized. Socrates suggests that one must have an intimate knowledge of their lover's memories, imagination, and character in order to best engage in a relationship oriented towards the good and mutual ascent.

way that highlights the thoroughly Neoplatonic elements (and thus also demonstrates how Dante remains largely consistent with Augustine's philosophical theology of mediation), I will be able to more pointedly argue that Dante illustrates Augustine's priority that he gives to the *particular* within mediation (which stems, namely, as we have seen in Chapter 1, from his philosophical theology of *Trinity* and *incarnation*). In doing so, due to the intimacy to Augustine with which Dante illustrates these concepts, I will show that Dante only elucidates and poetically illustrates *what is already within* Augustine, which will serve to contest directly Meconi (among others in this strand of modern scholarship) in his claim that Dante exceeds Augustine in his devotion to the *particular*.

#### i. Canto I

We see, in the first canto of *Paradiso*, the pilgrim describing the glory of God as reflected in creation. He speaks,

The glory of Him who moves all things she'er/ Impenetrates the universe, and bright/ The splendour burns, more here and lesser there./ Within that heav'n which receives His light/ Was I, and saw such things as man nor knows/ Nor skills to tell, returning from that height;/ For when our intellect is drawing close/ To its desire, its paths are so profound/ That memory cannot follow where it goes. <sup>116</sup>

Dante speaks of God's light "impenetrating" all of creation, such that God is the unmoved origin point of the entire universe, and yet also is present, in stratified proportions, across its entirety.

Notably, Dante speaks of this stratification of the "burning of God's splendour" by saying that it is "more here and lesser there." Dorothy Sayers comments here that "the glory of God, reflected in creation, is manifested variously according to the nature of that which receives it."<sup>117</sup> We see

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<sup>116</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, 1.1-9

<sup>117</sup> *ibid*, 57

again this notion of stratification of God's "splendour" in Canto XXXI, "For God's rays penetrate with shafts so keen/ Through all the universe, in due degree."<sup>118</sup> We know, from Dante's philosophical inheritance, that this stratification is *not* because God is limited, but because the "mode of reception" of God is varied, and thus, some will receive more "divine light," and others less. We can trace this understanding of the knowledge of God being limited by the receiver (as opposed to any limitation in God Himself) to the Christian Neoplatonic figure of Boethius (d.524 AD), among many others of these early figures who 'Christianized' Neoplatonism. A Platonic current of thought is that things are known according to the "object," as opposed to according to the mode of the knower. This would imply that within the "object" of knowledge itself there are limitations that prevent a universal impenetration of that knowledge. Further, in this way, knowledge is conditioned by the object, and the kind of knowing that the individual will receive is the kind of thing the known-object *is*. One cannot have knowledge of particular things, because they change.<sup>119</sup> What this will ultimately mean is that a *stable* knowledge needs a *stable* and unchanging object — the quality of thought depends on the quality of object. Because perception is changing, one needs a stable formal object of knowing in order for anything to be known. Boethius, among others, suggests that this is incorrect, and that rather, things are known according to the *mode of the knower*; and as such, limitation in knowledge occurs due to a limitation in the knower, as opposed to limitation on the part of the object: this ensures that God contains no

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<sup>118</sup> *ibid*, 31.22-23

<sup>119</sup> One might think of Heraclitus' river.

limitations.<sup>120</sup> Thus, Boethius would suggest that ultimate Goodness, God, *cannot* have any limitation in his nature. Rather, His divine light is dispersed in unequal degrees because of the stratification of a capacity to receive His light. God, whose nature is “knowing in its highest mode,” *contains* all modes and degrees of knowledge and being that are beneath God.<sup>121</sup> This is a claim fundamental and worthy of pause: God is so totalizing and full that God contains *all lesser forms* of God. God, who *is* and *knows* in the highest mode, will contain within that highest mode the derivative and lesser degrees of that being and knowing. God does not contain limitation in Himself, and thus, his being and knowing must also contain all derivative degrees of his being and knowing: God is the fullest and most total being and knowledge (and also, *beyond* that being and knowledge). This is what makes it possible for what is less than God to know God in a partial way. While humans are unable to “know” in the way that God knows, humans have a capacity for “knowing” that is *not equal* to God’s knowing, and yet also true human Knowledge.<sup>122</sup> What is lesser than God has the capacity to, in a limited sense, have Knowledge of God to lesser and greater degrees.

Aquinas speaks to this relation between the individual and his or her capacity to know God. Aquinas suggests, as Dante will illustrate, that the “mode of perfection” that the pilgrim

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<sup>120</sup> O’Neill makes this succinct: “Boethius, following Ammonius, who probably received the doctrine from Iamblichus, asserts that this Platonic position is wrong, and thus proposes something rather different: knowledge is not an assimilation of the knower to the object of thought, but rather, the quality of knowledge is dependant on the quality of the knower (Seamus J. O’Neill, “Augustine and Boethius, Memory and Eternity,” (*Analecta Hermeneutica*. Volume 6, 2014): 12).

<sup>121</sup> O’Neill explains, “Thus God, in knowing in a higher mode, does not exclude the lower human mode; higher modes include the lower, but the lower do not include the higher” (*ibid*, 14)

<sup>122</sup> “Boethius suggests that while the human cannot comprehend God’s eternity in the same way that God understands, nevertheless, there is a proper human mode of knowing that can be true, or at least truer than some other human attempts to conceive it. Even though the human conception is somewhat alien to God’s knowing, this does not affect the status of our knowledge as knowledge” (*ibid*, 13)

achieves is the determining factor for his or her capacity to know God. As the limited pilgrim increases in perfection through a series of mediating steps, the pilgrim increases in capacity to know more of God and increases in perfection to *become* more like God.<sup>123</sup> In other terms, the “synchronicity” of the pilgrim’s knowing and the object known is determined by the pilgrim’s level of perfection: that is, it is determined by the pilgrim’s similarity to God in his or her knowledge of Him. When divine truth is revealed, it is revealed in a proportion relative to the pilgrim’s capacity to receive knowledge of God. Aquinas suggests, in his commentary on Dionysus’ angelic mediation, that only God is fully knowable to Himself, and that the pilgrim’s knowledge of God will be through what God chooses to reveal of Himself to what is lesser than Himself.<sup>124</sup> O’Rourke stakes out Aquinas’ particular contribution (and in particular, how he departs from Dionysus) to the discussion of relation of “knower” and “known”:

Dionysus had suggested that it is through his benevolence that God reveals his supernatural splendour to creatures — to each in due proportion. Aquinas is even more emphatic in explaining why a knowledge of the hidden God is bestowed: ‘It would indeed be against the nature of divine goodness that God should retain for itself all his knowledge and not communicate it to anyone else in an way whatsoever, since it belongs to the nature of the good that is should communicate itself to others.’<sup>125</sup>

The reason that God would allow Himself to be known by what is lesser than Him is because

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<sup>123</sup> “There is for St Thomas a close relation between the internal perfection of an individual being, its cognitive capacity, and its degree of cognoscibility or intelligibility. There is, in other words, a correspondence on the ontological level between beings and (a) the objects which they may know and (b) the knowing subjects by which they may in turn be known” (O’Rourke, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas,” 23).

<sup>124</sup> This is commensurate with Dionysus’ understanding of grace. It is only due to grace that the human, in their limited state, is able to have any knowledge of God: because God chooses to allow Himself to be known in diminished form.

<sup>125</sup> O’Rourke, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas,” 25.

God, as entirely Good, must diffuse knowledge of Himself (as well as His Goodness and Being) amongst what is other than Himself because it is in the nature of Goodness that it must be communicable. Thus, to Aquinas, “the nature of his goodness signifies that, while reserving a certain mode of knowledge as unique to himself, he communicates as a favour (*ex sua gratia*) to inferior beings some mode of knowledge, illuminating them according to the proportion of each.”<sup>126</sup> As each inferior being increases in knowledge of God and increasingly actualizes their potential of Being and Goodness, they gradually assimilate into God. Aquinas suggests that the created being ought to aspire to the fullest knowledge of God and union with God that can be apportioned to Him given his limited intellect in earthly existence.

Aquinas also distinguishes between God’s *essence* and God’s *likeness*. God’s essence is outside of and unrelated to the created world. However, “through creation, God ‘transfuses’ into beings a likeness to himself.”<sup>127</sup> In the created world exists a manifestation of God’s similitude, a created likeness or ‘theophany’ of God’s mystery and identity. Similitude to God is not an added portion to each being’s existence, but rather, divine similitude is the essence of the being of each created thing. O’Rourke explains Aquinas’ position:

Diffusion, similitude, participation — these notions integral to a proper understanding of creation and the relation of creatures to God: their total presence within God, God’s infinite intimacy within them; their utter separation and his infinite transcendence. Diffusion leaves God untouched in his nature; it safeguards the divine presence within beings without entering into relation with creatures.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> *ibid*, 25.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*, 262.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid*, 258.



The created world is ontologically distinct from the Divine Essence, which is untouched and unrelated. Yet, for Aquinas, the created world exists essentially *in the likeness* of God and through this likeness exists in total intimacy with God. The essence of created beings is to exist as participating in the likeness of God, but the essence of God remains distinct and untouched by this participation.

Aquinas suggests that the reason mediation is the most adequate mode of knowledge assimilation is because it reflects the outpouring of God's goodness:

Since causality is a reflection of God's own outpouring of goodness, a creature resembles God all the more perfectly if it is not only good but also causes goodness in others for there to be a more perfect imitation of God in creatures, it is necessary, therefore, that there be different degrees in things.<sup>129</sup>

Mediation allows for each member of the created world to not only assimilate knowledge and ascend towards God through perfection but also, means that that same member can also operate as a mediating principle for what is "lower" than them.<sup>130</sup> In this way, the structure of mediation allows for the pilgrim to not only actualize their potential for Goodness and increase in their union with God as a singular soul but also, through mediation, they can imitate God's own out-

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<sup>129</sup> *ibid*, 262.

<sup>130</sup> For Proclus, what is produced by the "productive principle" is both like and unlike that which produces it: "*All procession is accomplished through a likeness of the secondary to the primary*. For if the producing cause brings into existence like things before unlike (prop. 28), it is likeness which generates the product out of the producer: for like things are made like by likeness, and not by unlikeness. The procession, accordingly, since in declension it preserves an identity betwixt engenderer and engendered, and manifests by derivation in the consequent that character which the other has primitively (prop. 18), owes to likeness its substantive existence" (Proclus. *The Elements of Theology*. Translation: E.R. Dodds. Oxford at the Clarendon Press. (1933): 35)

pouring of himself (and in doing this, *become* more like God) by acting as a point of mediation for what is lesser than themselves. For the pilgrim to both, through mediation, ascend to what is higher than them, and also, to aid what is lower than them in growth in perfection by being a mediating principle for those who are lower on their ascent, there must be a stratification of God's likeness to lesser and higher degrees. It is in this double role of both being a mediator and ascending through mediation that the pilgrim participates most fully in God's similitude.

The reference to a stratification of Goodness in the first Canto references, as demonstrated, and large body of scholarship regarding the theological-philosophical understanding of God's stratification; and God as present to varying and lesser degrees. As I have attempted to demonstrate, a stratification of God's Being and Goodness is what makes mediation possible. It is through God being present through greater and lesser degrees that the soul can ascend and grow in perfection toward union with God. It is also how one can imitate God, by, as Aquinas suggests, serving as a conduit for someone lower in degrees of perfection. This is only a first instance of how Dante proves himself to cling tightly to his Neoplatonic and Augustinian philosophical-theological heritage in his depiction of the mediative structure that implies a stratification of Goodness and Being.

## ii. Canto XXXI

In Canto XXXI, Beatrice, who has served as the pilgrim's guide until this point, removes herself so that St Bernard can continue to lead the pilgrim to the final portion of his ascent into God. The pilgrim cries out in a meditative prayer to Beatrice, upon her departure:

Thou hast led me, a slave, to liberty,/ By every path, and using every means/ Which to fulfil this task were granted thee./ Keep turned towards me thy munificence/ So that my soul which thou has remedied/ May please thee when it quits the bonds of sense."/ Such was my prayer and she, so distant fled,/ It seemed, did smile and look on me once more,/ Then to the eternal fountain turned her head."<sup>131</sup>

We can look to Boethius' fellow Christian Neoplatonist, Pseudo-Dionysus (5th century) to better understand why Dante might have given the pilgrim a new contemplative "guide" at this stage of his ascent. With Boethius, Dionysus suggests that God uses a hierarchy of likeness to Himself such that each thing in the world reflects His Divine Light, to varying degrees.<sup>132</sup> One only needs to think of Plato's Divided Line to understand the rich Platonic influence at work behind these theological concepts.<sup>133</sup> It is part of the divine plan that there will be mirrors to God, reflecting God's light back to Himself, to varying degrees of divine illumination and communication, such that each created thing can ultimately be like God and united with God at the culmination of their mystical ascent. To better understand the way in which each mediative step relates to the other, we can look to Dionysus' discussion of the angelic hierarchies: Dionysus divides the functions of the angelic hierarchies into three categories: purification, illumination and perfection. It is

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<sup>131</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, XXXI.85-93

<sup>132</sup> Gardner points out that Dionysus combines Neoplatonism and Biblical scripture in his understanding of angels as Divine emanations that reflect the Divine Light of the One; understanding the angels as hierarchies of heavenly intelligence: "The purpose or meaning of a hierarchy is the utmost possible likeness to God and union with Him, in proportion to the divine illuminations conceded to it; each Angel is a mirror that receives the beams of the primal and sovereign light, and reflects them upon all, in accordance with the divine plan for the government of the world, thus working to make each created thing, in its degree, like to God and united with Him (Gardner, "Dante and the mystics a study of the mystical aspect of the Divina commedia and its relations with some of its mediaeval sources." ed. J.M. Dent (E.P. Dutton.): 87-88)

<sup>133</sup> For background reading on Plato's Divided Line, see Plato's *Republic*, Book 6.

through these stages that the pilgrim ascends and ultimately can reach union with God.<sup>134</sup> The soul moves through these stages in anticipation of, ultimately, the Beatific vision of God.

Wayne Hankey examines more closely the way in which these mediating steps are necessary to the *reditus* that is the mystical ascent. The first, God, only draws souls, lower than Him, back into Himself through mediating steps, and never directly.<sup>135</sup> The highest cannot touch the lowest without a mediating principle.<sup>136</sup> This principle too is taken up directly from Plato. In the *Symposium*, Plato writes, “God does not deal directly with man; it is by means of spirits that all the intercourse and communication of gods with men, both in waking life and in sleep, is carried on.”<sup>137</sup> The existence of the Dionysian angels, therefore, allows a means by which God does not need to diminish Himself yet allows for what is lesser than him to ascend into Him. The distinction of ranks within the hierarchy of angels allows for a mediated ascension into God that takes into account human limitation:

Alan explains the Dionysian hierarchical system with its distinction between the highest ranks, who immediately receive the divine illumination, and the lower ones, who receive their illumination mediately through the higher orders. He distinguishes sharply between

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<sup>134</sup> Gardner, speaking of Dionysus, writes, ““Threefold,” says the author of the *Mystical Theologia*, “is this way to God; to wit, first, the purgative way, whereby the mind is disposed to learn true wisdom. The second way is called the illuminative, whereby the mind by pondering is enkindled to the burning of love. The third is unitive, whereby the mind, above all understanding, reason, and intellect, is directed upwards by God alone” (Gardner, “Dante and the mystics a study of the mystical aspect of the Divina commedia and its relations with some of its mediaeval sources,” 90).

<sup>135</sup> “Therefore, only the lowest in the mediating hierarchy comes into contact with what is to be raised, or led back” (Hankey, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus, and Isaiah VI.6,” 81).

<sup>136</sup> “There must be a diminution of spiritual feature to a lower level within a hierarchical rank before a higher order of being can come into contact with a lower. Even then the higher touches only the top grade of the lower order” (Hankey, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus, and Isaiah VI.6,” 80).

<sup>137</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 81.

humans who are *facti* and angels who are *creati*. They see face to face, we see mediately <<per speculum in enigmat>>.”<sup>138</sup>

The Dionysian angels illuminate and offer a mirror of God back to Himself in such a way that allows the human soul, in its imperfect and limited state, to see God in a limited way and thus increase in their capacity to see God through each mediation. This angelic hierarchy serves humanity and its ascent of return into God.<sup>139</sup> Hankey explains that angels as mediating objects are given to humanity such that each soul might return to its origin:

Through [angelic hierarchy], the simple, utterly incomprehensible knowledge of everything, at once universally and particularly, in God is diminished by a gradual particularization so that finally it can, in the lowest angels, illuminate and direct us. The gracious moment of God toward us through this order would be destroyed if the first hierarchy, which always states in the immediate presence, where there is the first influx of the divine light and all is contemplation in its universal simplicity, were to leave of these intuitions for the sake of the particularized knowledge and particular actions of the lower ranks.<sup>140</sup>

The incomprehensible universality of God is completely inaccessible to the temporally determinate and particular, limited human pilgrim. Through the hierarchy of angels, the total Knowledge and Being of God is gradually particularized such that it can act as a mediating portal for the human soul’s journey into God. The total system of mediation is depended on the existence of

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<sup>138</sup> Hankey, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus, and Isaiah VI.6,” 81.

<sup>139</sup> Interestingly, Proclus suggests that the more that the object participates in the Good, the more the object will be able to be the cause of what is below it: The more complete is the cause of more, in proportion to the degree of its completeness: for the more complete participates the Good more fully; that is, is nearer to the Good; that is, is more nearly akin to the cause of all; that is, it is the cause of more. And the less complete is the cause of less, in proportion to its incompleteness (Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 30).

<sup>140</sup> Hankey, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus, and Isaiah VI.6,” 86.

the higher angels as the primary and mediating presence of God; the created beings that see God face-to-face and reflect the Divine Light back to Himself. There is a synchronicity to the mode in which the human soul interacts with the mediating angels, and vice versa, and this synchronicity is Divinely designed.<sup>141</sup> The lowest of the high touches the highest of the low and guides the soul towards more universal contemplations, and in so doing, the lower increases in perfection and knowledge.<sup>142</sup>

Once again, in Canto XXXI, we see Dante's close fidelity to several figures of Christian Neoplatonism in his depiction of the mechanism of mediation through Beatrice. Dante illustrations of Beatrice leaving the pilgrim, and having St. Bernard step in as the pilgrim's next mediative object can only be understood in a fuller sense when one sees the deep ties to Neoplatonic mediation that Dante remains close to throughout his illustrations. God ("what is highest") cannot touch what is lesser than Him without mediation. Thus, Pseudo-Dionysius offers us a robust understanding of Neoplatonic mediation in his discussion of angelic hierarchies. In short, objects of mediation are given to humans such that they might return to their Divine origin and actualize their potential for perfection and union with God. Once again, we see how this philosophical-theological principle of mediation is at the core of Dante's illustration of the pilgrim's ascent.

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<sup>141</sup> "There could be nothing more graciously and providentially designed than that the higher should direct the lower through their more universal contemplations, and that that lower, moved by the power and intelligence of the higher, should do what is given them to see as God's will for us" (Hankey, "Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus, and Isaiah VI.6," 86).

<sup>142</sup> The 'productive principle,' what Proclus refers to as that which causes what is beneath it to participate in the Good, remains untouched and undiminished by being something in which other beings participate: "Every productive principle will imitate the One, the productive cause of the sum of things: for the non-primal is everywhere derived from the primal, so that a principle productive of certain things must derive from the principle which produces all things. Therefore every productive principle produces is consequents while itself remaining steadfast. It follows that the productive principles remain undiminished by the production from them of secondary existences: for what is in any way diminished cannot remain as it is (Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 31).

## ii. Canto XXXIII

The final canto of the *Paradiso* offers us the vision to which the entire *Commedia* thus far has been gesturing: the final vision of the highest heaven. Dante speaks in ecstasy,

In that abyss I saw how love held bound/  
Into one volume all the leaves whose flight/  
Is scattered through the universe around;/  
How substance, accident, and mode unite/  
Fused, so to speak, together, in such wise/  
That this I tell of is one simple light./  
Yea, of this complex I believe mine eyes/  
Beheld the universal form — in me,/ Even as I speak, I feel  
such joy arise. <sup>143</sup>

Dante here sees the Divine light as the exemplar and “form” of all creation. Sayers explains, “All things that exist in themselves (“substance”), all aspects or properties of being (“accident”), all mutual relations (“mode”) are seen bound together in one single concept. The Universe is *in* God.” <sup>144</sup> As the pilgrim arrives finally at a union with God following the mystical ascent, he experiences the ‘eternal instant,’ which is, distinct from a linear and temporally-sequential eternity, is rather, all time at once (past, present, and future). Once again, we might look to Boethius to better understand this ‘eternal instant.’ Gardner writes, “And, by eternity, the mystic does not mean endless time, nor, primarily, everlasting life; but Eternity as defined by Boethius, as the complete and perfect possession of unlimited life at a single moment; a coming to that eternal now.” <sup>145</sup> As the pilgrim arrives into union with God, the relationship to temporally linear time

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<sup>143</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, 33.85-93.

<sup>144</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, 347-8.

<sup>145</sup> Gardner, “Dante and the mystics a study of the mystical aspect of the Divina commedia and its relations with some of its mediaeval sources,” 28-29.

ceases to exist for the pilgrim as he experiences time as God does: in one eternal instant in which past, present and future all exist simultaneously.

Dante's final action is to try to understand how human nature is united with the Word, which he does following his final vision of the Empyrean Heaven:

The sphering thus begot, perceptible/ In Thee like mirrored light, now to my view —/  
When I had looked on it a while —/ Seemed in itself, and in its own self-hue/ Limned  
with out image; for which cause mine eyes/ Were altogether drawn and held thereto/ As  
the geometer his mind applies/ To square the circle, nor for all his wit/ Finds the right  
formula, howe'er he tries,/ So strove I with that wonder - how to fit/ The image to the  
sphere; so sough to see/ How it maintained the point of rest in it. <sup>146</sup>

Sayers writes of these last moments,

Next, having glimpsed the whole of creation, Dante beholds the Creator. He sees three circles, of three colours, yet of one dimension. One seems to be reflected from the other, and the third, like a flame, proceeds equally from both (the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). Then, as he gazes, the reflected circle shows within itself the human form, coloured with the circle's own hue. As Dante strives to comprehend how human nature is united with the Word, a ray of divine light so floods his mind that his desire is at rest. At this point the vision ceases, and the *story* ends with the poet's will and desire moving in perfect coordination with the love of God.<sup>147</sup>

The pilgrim's last insight and vision reveals to him how human and the Divine are joined in God.

In some way, the souls that are able to see God as he is, or "in His essence," the union between humans God as a self-evident and axiomatic truth. The Trinity, the theological crux of the whole vision, is presented as being the centre from which all else proceeds. The vision of the trinity gives way to the idea of incarnation: the unmediated union of God and man in human form. The pilgrim strives to understand the grandiosity of the human being united with God; it's central positioning as the culminating vision of the canticle illustrates its centrality to all that has preceded

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<sup>146</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, XXXIII. 127-138.

<sup>147</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, 348.



it. Particular to this final vision is the human form, united with God, all held together through the Divine light. Here, Dante's fidelity to the crux of Augustine's incarnational theology is demonstrated most explicitly: Dante poetically illustrates how it is that all mediation, and all lesser forms of this union with God is made possible by the unmediated union of divinity and humanity in human form. This unmediated union of God and human must be the central vision of the *Paradiso*, because it is the perfect union to which all stratified and degreed lesser images until now have been pointing. Because the human is united with God in the final vision of God, the pilgrim can understand all lesser and mediating steps that he has ascended through until this point as also containing divinity. Further, it is because the human is united with God that the pilgrim is able to have divinity in potentiality, and thus is able to gradually actualize it to become more perfect and to see a vision of God himself. The pilgrim is able to gaze on God and see this perfected unmediated union of God and man because he has ascended through a series of mediating steps whereby he has gradually actualized his potential for perfection, and thus is able to catch a glimpse of God as He is.

A thoroughly-penetrating resonance with these particular Christian Neoplatonic figures reveals Dante's obvious fidelity towards the Christian Neoplatonic infrastructure of ascent, of which Augustine was a lynchpin figure. In a study of mediation, the angelic hierarchies, and the eternal instant, we can see evidence of Dante's conscious integration into and progression of the Neoplatonic understanding of mediation, which better allows us to understand the significance of Dante's further appropriation of Augustine's incarnational theology into his illustrations. Most poignantly, we see Dante's recognition of Augustine's incarnational theology as the fundamental lynchpin to the overall structure of the Neoplatonic mediative ascent that he illustrates. By de-

picting an unmediated union between God and human as the central and final vision of his entire *Commedia*, Dante demonstrates that he recognizes the way in which Augustine's philosophical theology hangs on this union as the precursor for all lesser forms of divine and material union. In short, the unmediated union of the human form and God allows for a positive view of materiality and diversity; because it can now be understood as mediating functions for the soul's ascent into God; just as it has served for the pilgrim throughout the *Commedia's* entirety. Dante has indeed shown himself to exhibit the utmost fidelity to Christian Neoplatonism, at large, and specifically to Augustine's incarnational theology in this final vision of Canto XXXIII. Thus, Dante is not exceeding Augustine (in contradiction to this current of contemporary scholarship that I have discussed through Arendt and Meconi), but rather, bringing to the fore in image form the crux and implications of Augustine's understanding of incarnation. I will now turn to an examination of the way in which Dante's illustration is both, essentially, Neoplatonic *and* Christian in its fidelity to Augustine's theology of the trinity and incarnation.

### **Section III: The *Paradiso* as Neoplatonic Mediative Ascent**

Dante depicts, in his *Commedia*, an illustration of the pilgrim's journey into God. This journey into God is punctuated by objects of mediation along the way. The pilgrim's ascent into God takes place within the context of the *exitus reditus* common to Christian Platonism: all things come from God and are of God, and thus all things must return into God. The pilgrim, having originated in God, must return to his origin point in God through an ascent to the God who is both the origin and the end of all things. This ascent occurs through a dialectic of human and divine interaction insofar as it is through a series of meditations and mystical steps that the pilgrim increases in philosophical and theological knowledge. This increase in knowledge, how-

ever, is *beyond* simply knowledge. Rather, Dante is becoming purified such that, his entire being, holistically (beyond only the intellect), is drawing nearer to union with God through a gradual increase in perfection. Through these steps of stratified increases, the pilgrim can finally arrive at a vision of God.<sup>148</sup>

Distinctive to the medieval ascent is that it is both an interior journey and an exterior journey *at once*. As the pilgrim intakes new knowledge and increases his philosophical and theological knowledge through externalities, his interior intellect and will are shaped and increased in perfection; thus the pilgrim is prepared for his ultimate vision of God. Throughout the *Paradiso*, we see the pilgrim's knowledge of central Christian dogmatic concepts (eg. the theological virtues and the Holy Trinity) increase.<sup>149</sup> *Through* this increase in knowledge, the pilgrim's intellect and will are shaped as one mode of the way in which his whole being increases in perfection. The idea that the intellect needs to be purified such that it might be in a more fitting state to gaze upon God can be traced to Augustine. Gardner cites Augustine, and then offers commentary on this resonance:

*'Since that Truth is to be enjoyed, which liveth changelessly, and in it God the Trinity, the author and creator of the universe, proves for the things that He hath made; the mind must be purified, in order that it may be able to gaze into that light, and to cleave to it when it has been beheld. Which purification we deem to be, as it were, a kind of ambulation, or navigation toward our native-land.' "...*" A clearer echo of this passage is heard in the last canto of the *Paradiso*, where the poet's purified vision not only enters he

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<sup>148</sup> Gardner notes that God, through mystical rapture and otherwise, can quicken the teleology of the pilgrim's ascent, if He wills. Further, God can abbreviate or manipulate the pilgrim's journey at His will.

<sup>149</sup> I emphasize knowledge and intellect here, following Augustine on this point, however, it is, of course, a *holistic* perfection of the entire human person that occurs in the ascent — not exclusively an intellectual transformation.

Light the its the very truth, but is united with it, all powers of spiritual vision being actualized therein.<sup>150</sup>

Augustine's words resonate with the *exitus-reditus* notion of the soul's return journey into God. Through a purification of the mind and intellect, the pilgrim is made ready for the *reditus* into God; the Origin point from which they came and to which they return through their ascent. Although there is an undeniable emphasis that McMahon (and arguably Augustine) puts on the intellect as a mode of perfection; it is indeed a more "holistic" ascent that the pilgrim makes in perfection and thus the ability to see God. The union that occurs is beyond the intellect alone but is a broader union of the entire human soul into God.

Robert McMahon points out that, throughout the *Commedia*, we not simply offered an illustration of the pilgrim's ascent, but rather, the reader is encouraged to use the text as a pedagogical tool of their own ascent: the reader ought to meditate on each encounter such that they too might partake in the pilgrim's journey.<sup>151</sup> The reader must work to draw connections between

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<sup>150</sup> Gardner "Dante and the mystics a study of the mystical aspect of the Divina comedia and its relations with some of its mediaeval sources," 60 -61.

<sup>151</sup> "As Dante the pilgrim traveled through these realms, he was educated about evil, vice and virtue, love, God's ordering of the universe, the Trinity, and so on. In this way, his exterior journey proved also to be an interior one, as his intellect and will were prepared for the vision of God. Similarly, the poem records this education in its "original" sequence, so that readers may receive, as far as possible, the same education as Dante the pilgrim" (Robert McMahon. *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent : Augustine, Anselm, Boethius, & Dante* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 2.)

each stage of the pilgrim's journey and its relation to the whole.<sup>152</sup> In doing so, the reader both imitates and participates in the pilgrim's discursive seeking of God. McMahon situates this pedagogical motive within the broader genre of Medieval literature:

The transforming work of the poem is effected to the extent that readers meditate upon it. In this instance, as we attempt to understand what the *Commedia* is saying about "love," we dwell upon its transformations of meaning, and this dwelling allows them to work more deeply upon us. We are involved more deeply in the transformations effected in the poem, and they may thereby effect a transformation in us.<sup>153</sup>

The reader must mediate on each mediating step in order to read the text in the way that Dante, in keeping with the meditative medieval tradition, intended. Like the pilgrim, as the reader meditates on each image, illustration and mystical rapture, the reader too can work to transform their life in conformity with that of Christ's, and thus, increase in their own ascent into God. We see resonance of this mediative-step journey of the soul in Augustine's *Confessions*. The soul's desires lead the pilgrim towards mediative goods that, gradually, through a series of mediative steps, eventually can find rest in God; as God is the final and proper union for the soul. Each mediative step serves to orient the soul's gaze towards what is Good, and thus the soul is gradually "trained" to desire what is most good through these labours and wrestling.

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<sup>152</sup> Gardner draws a distinction in Medieval literature between mysticism as an *experience* and mysticism as a *science*: He writes that there is a difference between "the experiential and subjective mysticism, which claims personal union (visionary or otherwise) with the suprasensible; and the doctrinal or objective mysticism, which studies the revelations and experiences received or claimed by others, and deals with them from the standpoint of theology, psychology, or poetry" (Gardner, "Dante and the mystics a study of the mystical aspect of the Divina commedia and its relations with some of its mediaeval sources," 29). Dante appears to merge these two forms, as Gardner presents them, of mysticism together. Dante the pilgrim's journey is both an experience, which occurs to him as it is present to him by God through grace, and yet also presents, pedagogically, almost a *science* of mysticism, in which reader can follow the sequence of mediative theological and philosophical steps such that they too might engage in this mystical ascent.

<sup>153</sup> McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Mediative Ascent*, 22.

As the pilgrim ascends, he increases in more ‘comprehensive’ visions. In a sense, his visions become more all-encompassing and general, as he draws near to a vision of God as *all-encompassing*. McMahon explains:

Dante’s ascent to what is “prior” and “higher” proves of image of his growth in knowledge. Because the heavenly spheres of the *Paradiso* are arranged concentrically around the Earth as their centre, as the pilgrim moves higher he encompasses more of the universe beneath him. Concomitantly, as he ascends to higher, more comprehensive spheres, he is given higher, more comprehensive visions about the divine order of things. Most of these visions are discursive, but they lead towards and culminate in Dante’s vision of God in *Paradiso* 33. Thomas Aquinas’ discourse on the Creation (13.52-87), for example, is surpassed by Beatrice’s discourse sixteen cantos later (29.13-36)” she treats the same issues in briefer compass by using more general categories, and her primary subject, the creation of the angels, is earlier and higher than his, the creation of Adam. Beatrice’s discourse is further surpassed, in brevity and comprehensiveness, by the pilgrim’s vision of God, when he sees all the possibilities of being existing in a “simple light” (33.90), “bound with love in a single volume” (33.86).<sup>154</sup>

As the pilgrim draws near to his final vision of God, the vision increases in *simplicity*, insofar as he becomes increasingly capable of seeing the *unifying light* that encompasses all diversity seen thus far.<sup>155</sup> To offer a corrective, I would like to shift the emphasis in McMahon’s reading on this point: while the vision that the pilgrim achieves at the end of the *Paradiso* is indubitably one of the “simple light” that encompasses all, it is *also* a vision in which the particularity of each diverse form is maintained and sustained. Indeed, the pilgrim’s vision does not broaden in some

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<sup>154</sup> McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent*, 6.

<sup>155</sup> McMahon explains, “The conception of God’s eternity, *dove s’appunta ogni obi ed ogni quando*, “in which every *where* and every *when* is brought to a point” seems to condense St. Augustine’s doctrine on the subject into a single line. And the philosophical account of the creation that follows, though drawing elements from Plato as well as from Dionysus and Aquinas, is in accordance with the explanation of the beginning of the book of *Genesis* in the *Confessions*. At the height of the mystical vision, all time and space that was revealed teleologically and spatially collapses into one infinitesimal point which is God. There is no spatial nor discrete nature of time in God; rather, all is collapsed in one point, an ‘eternal instant,’ which contains in one moment, all that is temporally discretely revealed. (McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent*, 65).

sense of generalized *dissolution*, as McMahon's reading might be interpreted, but rather, the pilgrim's vision *broadens*, such that all is seen under the singular light that retains and sustains all diversity *at once*. Indeed, Dante the pilgrim increases in perfection on his journey of ascent, and as such he is able to begin seeing the union of the vast diversity and its union in the one unifying light that sustains all such diversity. I will speak to this in the following close reading of three Cantos that depicts the way Dante illustrates the maintenance of such diversity and particularity within this one divine and sustaining light, as will be epitomized in Dante's illustration of the Empyrean Heaven.

We see depicted through Dante's pilgrim a holistic increase in perfection and gradual movement towards union with God through a series of particular mediative steps. For Dante to depict the journey of the soul towards this union, as well as to intend his work to serve as a pedagogical tool and a 'mediative step' in itself is consistent broadly with the medieval understanding of the soul and God and, for my purposes, wholly consistent with the philosophical-theological structure of the *Confessions*.

#### **Section IV: Dante's Illustrative Commentary on Augustine's Mediation in light of Charles Williams' *The Figure of Beatrice***

Charles Williams (1886-1945), the Anglican poet-theologian, has written extensively on the *Divine Comedy*. Williams is particularly noted for his 'Theology of Romantic Love,' largely explicated in his study of the figure of Beatrice and her relation to Dante (the pilgrim) throughout the *Divine Comedy*. Williams' theology suggests, primarily, that romantic love can act as a movement towards the 'inGodding' of the person; in other words, romantic love is a mediating

step through which the person comes to know and enters into union with God. Beatrice, for Williams, is the embodiment of Dante's experience of romantic love, and thus, by studying the figure of Beatrice, we will further understand her role as a participant of Dante's journey into God. Consistent with the Christian Neoplatonic infrastructure outlined previously in this chapter, all upwards movement toward God, in Dante's cosmos, is dependent on the primary movement of God allowing Himself to be present in derivative and imagistic forms. Central to Williams' theology is the belief that one person is able to carry the glory and image of God to another person. This is made possible, according to Williams, because of the first moment of the incarnation of God into man, which consequently allows for all lesser imaging of this initial incarnational movement. I aim to critically engage with Williams' work such that I highlight the way in which Dante offers a means by which the particularity of Beatrice is maintained following the pilgrim's union with God. Williams offers both illustration and philosophical framework by which we can see and understand the retention of Beatrice's particularity throughout the pilgrim's journey. I aim to engage with Williams such that I highlight the way in which Williams' analysis of Beatrice might also shed light on the way in which Dante shows that the pilgrim's love for Beatrice is love for Beatrice *qua* Beatrice, and not only for God *through* Beatrice. This will serve as an example of the way in which Dante consciously sheds light on the character of the *particular* in the mediative ascent, which is the crucial insight of the previous Chapter.

I will examine Williams' theology of romantic love, as understood through the figures of Dante and Beatrice, through three central theological themes found in Williams' work: 1) *the overlap of 'knowing' and 'loving' as seen through Beatrice*; 2) *Beatrice as an image of God for*



*Dante; and 3) Dante's necessary movement beyond Beatrice and yet her remaining particularity.*

A close textual analysis of particular cantos that pertain to and substantiate each theological theme will follow the explication of that theme. Through examining these three central theological themes, we will better understand Williams' claim that Dante and Beatrice, in the *Paradiso*, offer us not only an image of a redeemed universe but also an image of a 'redeemed love affair.' We will see how, as seen in the romantic love that Dante experiences for Beatrice, a lover sees a vision of their beloved more akin to how God sees them, and in doing so, the lover increases in perfection by increasingly sharing in the vision of God. Dante, in his loving of Beatrice, ascends such that, through her mediating presence, he ultimately becomes fit to gaze upon God directly: the ultimate aim of his desire. By reading Williams we will see how the pilgrim's love for Beatrice *in her particularity is in itself* a divine encounter. While this is indubitably made possible by God, there is also a legitimate encounter with the divine prior to the divine union which occurs in the Empyrean Heaven.

#### i. Beatrice as Knowing and Loving

Dante, in desiring Beatrice on a sensitive plane, will ultimately be spurred to desire to *know* what is *beyond* Beatrice; to understand the more-perfect Being that sustains her. A scholar of Williams, Nancy Enright, suggests, "This sense of all-enveloping charity merely provides a glimpse of what the lover might become. It is up to him (or her) to explore the meaning of this experience by looking beyond it to the theological turrets to which it is pointing, as Dante does in the *Commedia*. By doing so the lover can move from a taste of salvation to the full experience of

it.”<sup>156</sup> In the experience of love, a demand is made for the lover to know *beyond* the love itself.

We see this as Dante’s love for Beatrice gradually ascends from being a sensory taste of glory to the full experience of glory in the perfection of the Empyrean Heaven. A sensory experience of love is properly associated with a desire for knowledge of that person; and ultimately, for Williams, knowledge of that person will eventually lead to a desire to know what is *beyond* that person; to know that which creates and sustains the love that the lover experiences through their beloved.<sup>157</sup>

Williams outlines the necessary movement from the sensitive to the intellectual that ought to occur through romantic love. Speaking of Beatrice, Williams writes: “She recalls him, but not to herself, to the intellectual splendours which are now about him. The Image quickens the soul to seek the Good, and as it is itself forgotten yet at that moment quickens the mind to ardours of intellect.”<sup>158</sup> Dante’s sensitive experience of Beatrice is simultaneous to the ‘quickening’ and excitement of his intellect in his vision of Beatrice. One might think of the moment in Canto XXXVII, where Beatrice’s beauty intensifies simultaneous to her lengthy exposition on the principles of creation:

Such gladness was reflected in her smiles,/ Meseemed the joy of God therein did play./  
The nature of the universe which stills/ The centre and revolves all else, from here,/ As  
from its starting-point, all movement wills./ This heaven it is which has not other

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<sup>156</sup> Nancy Enright. “Charles Williams and his Theology of Romantic Love: A Dantean Interpretation of the Christian Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity,” *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R Tolkien, C.S Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 16, 2 (2008): 17.

<sup>157</sup> Williams highlights *knowledge* in his analysis of Dante’s desire for Beatrice, but it is important to note that, for Augustine, (as outlined in the previous chapters) this desire cannot be reduced to strictly knowledge. Rather, the senses (both physical and psychological) are also involved in this desire and pursuit of the Good through Beatrice.

<sup>158</sup> Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*. (Cambridge: Faber & Faber, 1994), 218.

‘where’/ Than the Divine Mind; ‘this but in that Mind/ That love, its spur, and the power  
it rains inhere...’<sup>159</sup>

Beatrice’s beauty intensifies as she becomes impassioned by the knowledge and love of the Light of which she speaks. At this moment, we see the simultaneity of the quickening of the intellect spurred by the pilgrim’s being transfixed on her particularizing and enhancing beauty.

Williams points out that Beatrice’s exposition on the principles of Creation, at this point, are not only expositions “in general, but they are also particular,” and that Beatrice is “declaring the principles of creation and also of her created self.”<sup>160</sup> The pilgrim becomes interested in Creation, in general, because he first wants to know the origin of Beatrice; from where she came, and the nature of her Being. It is through his interest in Beatrice’s particularity that his mind is quickened to share in her Knowledge, *in general*.

Beatrice, however, is cognizant of her participatory role in the pilgrim’s journey into God. She does not posit herself as his *telos* at any point, but rather, on many occasions, points beyond herself: “But it is a girl who has precisely excited her lover to his proper function; in this case, to know the doctrines it is his business to know.”<sup>161</sup> Beatrice desires that she might spark Dante’s desire (which includes his intellect); she knows that her proper function is not simply to be a sensory pleasure for Dante, but rather, acknowledges her participatory role in Dante’s journey, ultimately, into God. Beatrice’s holiness prevents her from desiring beyond the function that

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<sup>159</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, XXVII, 104-111.

<sup>160</sup> Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, 218.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid*, 218.

she serves in Dante's journey into God. We see this, for the first time among many instances, in Canto X, when the pilgrim 'forgets' Beatrice for a brief moment, and she responds with laughter:

Than at those words was I; I grew God's lover/  
So wholly, needs must Beatrix' self admit/  
Eclipse, and I became oblivious of her./ But this displeased her not; she smiled at it./ So  
the splendour of her laughing eyes/ From one to many thing recalled my wit. <sup>162</sup>

The simultaneity of Dante's sensory loving of Beatrice and the concurrent stimulation of his intellect is rooted in the theological notion that "all things now are known in God" and that "the eye of the Image continue to light the Way which in its turn confirms and deepens the beauty of the eyes of the Image — that is, of the Image."<sup>163</sup> God allows himself to be made manifest in derivative and imagistic ways that are only partial to the totality of His full glory. In the case of romantic love, for Williams, God can initially manifest Himself through sensory pleasure. In this way, the pilgrim originally experiences divine love through the figure of Beatrice. Only once the lover is able to gaze upon God directly does he or she then see the partiality and significance of the mediative sensory steps, and recognize them as partial of the full knowledge and understanding of the glory of God.

Williams claims that, essentially, the role of Beatrice for Dante is to be "his very act of knowing."<sup>164</sup> Through romantic love, Dante's intellect is enkindled, first for knowledge of Beatrice, and then curiosity about what is *beyond* Beatrice. Beatrice, for Dante, is the vehicle by

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<sup>162</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, X, 58-63.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*, 205.

<sup>164</sup> *ibid*, 231.

which he comes into knowledge; she is central to all his knowledge. Williams draws a quasi-trinitarian structure to this relationship of knowing: “Indeed the entire work of Dante, so inter-relevant as it is, of the great act of knowledge, in which Dante himself is the Knower, and God is the Known, and Beatrice is the Knowing.”<sup>165</sup> Dante, as Knower, comes to know himself as Knowing through Beatrice, and ultimately, knows that what his Knowing points ultimately towards, is God. Williams draws the explicit connection between Dante’s knowing of God and his knowing of Beatrice: “[Dante’s] actual knowing, even so, is a reflection; the Twy-Natured<sup>166</sup> is reflected in it, and the final Point Itself. Those eyes yield, in the end, to the eyes of the God-bearer. Then the Knower begins to know after a quite other manner, about which nothing else can be said.”<sup>167</sup> Dante sees in Beatrice a reflection of the ‘final point’ of knowledge which is God. Dante’s increasing perfection and Beatrice’s intentional withdrawal work together such that Dante comes ultimately to love, through his love of Beatrice, God Himself. Beatrice is the first place in which we see Dante’s intellect spurred; his desire to know Beatrice enkindles his desire to know her beauty; her particularity. The pilgrim’s heart is the first location of the emergence of knowledge, in his love for the *particular* Beatrice. In this explanation of Williams’, we see that the pilgrim’s knowing of Beatrice *is* his knowing of God; and thus his knowing of Beatrice in her particularity, in knowing Beatrice *qua* Beatrice, he is indeed knowing God in this very act.

## ii. Beatrice’s Particular Beauty

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<sup>165</sup> *ibid*, 231.

<sup>166</sup> Unclear reference, likely referring to the Trinity, as ‘Tri-Natured’.

<sup>167</sup> *ibid*, 231.

From the very start of the *Paradiso*, we see Beatrice depicted as a contemplative. Dante's interest in her gradually moves beyond physical descriptions of her beauty as he becomes increasingly aware of her disposition of contemplation. In the first canto, Beatrice's gazing at the Sun allows Dante to join her in that gaze:

When Beatrice, intent upon the Sun, / Turned leftward, and so stood and gazed before;/  
 No eagles e'er so fixed his eyes thereon./ And, as the second ray doth evermore/ Strike  
 from the first and dart back up again,/ Just as the peregrine will stoop and soar,/ So  
 though my eyes her gesture, pouring in/ On my mind's eye, shaped mine; I stared wide-  
 eyed/ On the sun's face, beyond the wont of men. <sup>168</sup>

Beatrice gazes at the sun, which increases Dante's interest in that at which she is gazing. Following numerous descriptions of the beauty of her eyes, Dante's focus extends now toward the object of her eyes. He makes explicit that it is in Beatrice's gazing that his 'mind's eye' begins to widen; his physical vision of Beatrice makes possible an expansion of his intellectual comprehension of her, and thus his desire leads him to want to know upon *what* she is contemplating. In canto three, we see a further movement from the awakening of the heart in Dante to the awakening of intellect:

I strained my sight to follow her as long/ As might be, till I lost her; wherefore, yearning/  
 To an attraction that was still more strong,/ Toward Beatrice's self I moved me, turning;  
 But on mine eyes her light at first so blazed,/ They could not bear the beauty and the  
 burning;/ And I was slow to question, being amazed.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, 1.46-54.

<sup>169</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 3.124-130.

For a brief moment in this canto, Beatrice is shining in the full radiance of her glory in the Empyrean heaven, which is her proper and final place. Dante becomes incapable of questioning Beatrice; rather, at this moment we see Dante overcome by her beauty and intellectual radiance. Dante, in Beatrice, sees the glory of her simultaneous beauty and intellect and is rendered momentarily mute at its presence. As Beatrice increasingly reveals more of her particular and glorified beauty to Dante, he becomes increasingly capable of seeing and knowing the vision that she offers. Williams gestures towards but does not explicitly acknowledge, that Beatrice's beauty becomes enhanced by her contemplation of God. In a sense, her particularity is increasing as her beauty becomes more refined, causing the pilgrim to be all the more attracted to her radiance. Of note, she is not becoming more abstract as she becomes increasingly contemplative of God, but rather, her contemplation of God increases her particular and unique radiance. The pilgrim becomes increasingly attracted to her divine particularity that is emerging through her increase in radiance. Her contemplation of God is causing her to increase in perfection, which causes an increase in the radiant diversity of her particular beauty.

### iii. Beatrice as an Image of God

Beatrice is capable of being an image of God to Dante only because God made the original movement of allowing himself to be known through Beatrice. For Williams, God's primary incarnational movement into man allows all subsequent movements of God into person. God is the primary beginning and is all-encompassing love, and thus all subsequent loves derive from Him as the origin. Because of God's initiating movement, the love that Dante has for Beatrice acts as

an imitation, as a rung of a ladder, of Dante's upwards progression towards knowing and loving God. Nonetheless, this love that the pilgrim experiences for Beatrice isn't exclusively derivative, rather, his love for Beatrice *qua* Beatrice is all-encompassing and divine in and of itself: it is the pilgrim's first mode of divine love. What follows from this principle, for Williams, is the belief that every person has the capacity to be an image of God to another person, particularly in the experience of romantic love. Enright writes of Williams on this theological point:

The Incarnation of Christ is the root of [Williams'] belief that all people, if they allow themselves to be transformed by grace, can be images of God, lesser ones no doubt but images all the same, an imaging for which men and women were intended from their reaction. According to the Theology of Romantic Love, the lover sees the beloved precisely as this image of God, and as a vehicle of grace, she (or he) leads the lover into the co-inherence of God's love. Like Dante, Williams saw all life as capable of being significant of the Glory of eternity.<sup>170</sup>

Because God, as the complete totality of love, chooses to allow Himself to be manifest in the world through grace, every person is capable of being this image of God's love to another person. This is seen in Dante's love for Beatrice but extends to each lover and their beloved. It is Beatrice's fixated contemplation of the higher heavens and the Sun that allows the pair to rise throughout the heavens. In this sense, it is never Beatrice alone that allows for Dante's journey into God, but rather, it is Beatrice's contemplation of that which is higher than her that sustains Dante's ascension. This is made clear in the second canto of the *Paradiso*:

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<sup>170</sup> Enright, Nancy, "Charles Williams and his Theology of Romantic Love: A Dantean Interpretation of the Christian Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity," 17.



Beatrice gazed on heav'n and I on her;/ Then, while a quarrel might thud home, and wing,/ And from the nocking-point unloosed, as 'twere/ I found I'd come where a most wondrous thing/ Enthralled my sight; whence she, being privy thus/ To my whole thought and secret questioning,/ Turning to me, as blithe and beauteous: "Lift up to God", and she, "thy grateful sense, Who with he first star now uniteth us. <sup>171</sup>

Beatrice, in this moment, makes clear to Dante that what unites and sustains their pairing, and their ascension, is the 'first star,' a star that is most glorious and allows for their union and ascension. Dante is discouraged from treating Beatrice as God due to Beatrice's consistent pointing beyond herself by revealing to Dante the way in which she is sustained in her gaze upon that which is other than and beyond her. Beatrice appears to be cognizant of her role as mediatory, and a singular step on the pilgrim's ascent into God. In this way, Dante depicts a relation between the pilgrim and Beatrice that avoids a pitfall that Augustine warns us against: the pilgrim does not make an 'idol' of Beatrice, but rather, Beatrice operates as one step on the pilgrim's ladder of ascent.

A nuance that I would like to add to Williams' reading, at this point, is the nature of the 'pointing beyond' that Beatrice does for the pilgrim. The reader must grapple with the fact that it is true that Beatrice is always gesturing beyond herself, towards God, and that which sustains her; yet also, *at the same time*, Beatrice is experiencing an increase in the radiance of her *particular beauty*. This simultaneity of growth in radiant particularity and gesturing towards what is beyond grasps the crucial contribution of Dante, which betrays and illustrates so beautifully the *radically incarnational* Neoplatonism that Augustine offers. In this simultaneity of particularity

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<sup>171</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 2.22-30.

and perfection, we see Dante offering a means by which the perfection of the Divine *is* the increase in perfected diversity. There is no dissolution of particularity as one draws near to God, rather, the particularity becomes more distinct in its growing perfection; and it is revealed to be one component of a patchwork of diverse identities that comprise the Divine life. Indeed, Beatrice's enhanced particular beauty makes her an even more powerful mediator for the pilgrim; so long as her beauty is used "rightly" and does not become an idol for the pilgrim. Thus, Beatrice is the pilgrim's mode of loving, *strictly in her particularity*, and it is in this loving of her particular beauty and radiance *qua* herself, that Dante begins and learns to love God. Of utmost importance, even when Dante eventually sees God as the most immanent sense at the end of *Paradiso*, the particularity of Beatrice in her radiant beauty *eternally stays* within the Divine Circle and does not dissolve into indiscriminate light.

#### iv. The Pilgrim's Movement Beyond Beatrice

Dante, for Williams, must move beyond Beatrice in order for Beatrice's proper function to be fulfilled, just as, in a romantic relationship, the lover and beloved must move beyond their romantic love and towards God to allow for the right ordering and function of romantic love. Enright writes, "No matter which path or option the lover chooses, the Theology of Romantic Love describes the movement from the circumference to the centre of the circle, where love indeed casts out all fear, even 'in the days when Beatrice does not smile.'<sup>172</sup> Where romantic love leads, when fulfilling its proper function, is to the love of God, and as a consequence, the lovers will lose their dependency on romantic love as the means by which they know God. Romantic love

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<sup>172</sup> Enright, Nancy. "Charles Williams and his Theology of Romantic Love: A Dantean Interpretation of the Christian Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity," 17.

leads to a place where romantic love is no longer necessary to know God but becomes only part of their knowledge of God. However, because God is what makes possible and sustains romantic love, the love experienced in romantic love is *already* a site of divine encounter.<sup>173</sup> Beatrice knows that Dante must move beyond her to a direct vision of God, and thus, towards the end of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice withdraws herself such that Dante can press on towards a more immediate vision of God. Williams writes of the moment immediately before Beatrice withdraws from Dante's side:

Dante, in this single moment, will have nothing else distract his or our eyes. The perfect Image reaches its perfect height. She stands, alert and intelligential, beautiful and passionate, pointed in the heaven from which her Maker has withdrawn for her sake his visibility; the Substance which is her spiritual off-spring has withdrawn; the divine God-bearer has withdrawn. This is Beatrice, said to have been called Portinari, a girl born in Florence, in 1266. Her lover behind his last praise of her <sup>174</sup> — his last praise but for his last prayer. <sup>175</sup>

Dante sees Beatrice in this moment not as God but as her personalized self in her highest form of intelligence and beauty. Following Beatrice's withdrawal, Dante can move more fully towards contemplation of that which sustains her. Yet, in Beatrice's pointing towards what is beyond her, she grows in her personalized self. In other words, the pilgrim's moving beyond Beatrice does

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<sup>173</sup> Reciprocally, it is because romantic love can be used "rightly," this is also why romantic love can continue once the lover has 'ascended' beyond it. Romantic love can continue to be a site of divine encounter (in circular fashion as opposed to linear) even once the love has ascended towards higher and more perfect goods.

<sup>174</sup> Here Williams references Canto XXX, where the pilgrim speaks of Beatrice for the last time: "Were everything I've ever said of her/ Rolled up into a single jubilee./ Too slight a hymn for this new task were there./ Beauty past knowledge was displayed to me —/ Not only ours: the joy of it complete/ Her Maker knows, I think, and only He./ From this point on I must admit defeat/ Sounder than poet wrestling with his theme./ Comic or tragic, e'er was doomed to meet;" (Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*, 16-24.)

<sup>175</sup> *ibid*, 218.

not mean that the particularity of Beatrice's significance dissolves: rather, her personality is retained and is seen by the pilgrim more fiercely. Because of Beatrice's mediating role in Dante's journey, what Dante ascends towards is already partially known and understood by him because of the revelations received through Beatrice. Dante only continues to deepen his knowledge of what Beatrice has already partially revealed to him. Williams explains,

The eyes of Beatrice are seen no more; the eyes of Mary are seen instead, But, deeper and more piercing though these are, they are not alien. They are the eyes of the God-bearer, the last of the Images. But Beatrice, for Dante the first of the Images, had also been a God-bearer; only there the God had not, as here, fulfilled himself in the glorious and holy flesh.<sup>176</sup>

Dante is able to recognize in Mary the eyes of the God-bearer because he has first seen and come to first know Beatrice as a God-bearer. It is only in Dante's final vision, however, that Dante is able to see God with no mediation — ("Eternal light, than in Thyself alone/ Dwelling, alone dost Know Thyself, and smile/ On Thy self-love, so knowing and so known!")<sup>177</sup> It is in the presence of the fullness of God that Dante is then able to see Beatrice in her full glory and understand her participatory function of his journey into God. Our last glimpse of Beatrice is in Canto XXXIII, where the pilgrim speaks:

And further do I pray thee, heavenly Queen,/ Who canst all that thou wilt, keep his heart pure/ And meet, when such great vision he has seen./ With thy protection render him secure/ From human impulse; for this boon the saints, ' With Beatrice, thronging fold hands and implore. <sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> *ibid*, 222.

<sup>177</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 124-126.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid*, 34-39.

The last glimpse of Beatrice is of her, seated amongst the Saints, in a posture of prayer. Beatrice is, at this moment, participating in the full glory of Heaven, at her most particular and fullest state of Beauty. Williams writes further on the pilgrim's last glimpse of Beatrice.

It will be remembered that Dante could not bear the full heavenly smile of Beatrice until after he had seen Christ glorious in his saints — a figure of profound significance, for it was the earlier subdued smile of Beatrice which had brought him to Christ and his saints; and here again is a continual exchange of power between one image and all the other images. This certainly is the principle — discovered or undiscovered — of every love-affair, by which (now) is meant every affair of love.<sup>179</sup>

Dante receives through revelation what his capacity allows him relative to his place on his journey into God. The early subdued smile of Beatrice, as Williams notes, allows Dante to begin and motivates his journey through romantic love into God. It is only after seeing God that Dante can then see Beatrice both as lesser than the fullness of God, yet also in the full weight of her glory as a member of the Empyrean Heaven. Williams broadens this particular love of Dante and Beatrice to the experience of love, in general, to suggest that experiences of romantic love allow the soul to journey into God Himself, and after having reached this vision of God Himself, the lovers will then be able to look back and see their love (in all of its distinction and particularity) for their beloved as participatory in the full glory of God. Lovers must arrive at an understanding of the distinction between the love that they experience and the ultimate Love that sustains all experiences of love. If the lovers do not arrive at this distinction through their love, romantic love is not recognized in its proper function. Williams writes of this distinction: “Once the voice of Beatrice had been the salutation of love; now her voice is but a sign of the salutation of love. The

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<sup>179</sup> *ibid*, 230.

whole of Dante's life and work had been to achieve that distinction and to understand it. It seems but a very slight distinction, but it is the whole purpose of the Way."<sup>180</sup> At the beginning of Dante's journey, Beatrice was Dante's complete understanding of love. By the end of the *Paradiso*, Dante comes to see through Beatrice towards "the point from which 'heaven and all nature hangs.'"<sup>181</sup> As Dante moves through his path of purification and upwards through the Heavens towards the Empyrean, Dante, upon seeing God, will be able to make the distinction between what is God from what is only a sign or image of God.

Beatrice consistently tells Dante that his final vision; his ultimate desire, ought not to be of her, but to be of God. Beauty and Knowledge, which have primarily been present to Dante through Beatrice until this point, will untimely come to be known fully in God. Sayers writes in her commentary of the *Paradiso* that until the highest heavens, Beatrice has been the "perfection and fulfillment" of all of Dante's desire."<sup>182</sup> Beatrice cautions Dante against treating her as his final object of desire: "She, with a smile that left my faculties/ Quite vanquished, said to me: 'Turn and give heed;/ Not in my eyes alone is Paradise.'"<sup>183</sup> Sayers writes that here we see "a gentle reminder that the light of God is likewise to be seen reflected in all that has yet to be manifested."<sup>184</sup> Beatrice is always pointing beyond herself; her fitting position is to refer Dante to what is greater than even her. Dante has seen the glory of God as manifest through Beatrice, yet

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<sup>180</sup> *ibid*, 219.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid*, 227.

<sup>182</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*: 219.

<sup>183</sup> Dante, *Paradiso* 18.19-21.

<sup>184</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*: 219.

Beatrice informs him that she is but one of the infinite and diverse manifestations of the unifying glory of God.

In Canto 23, we see a glimpse of Dante's growing capacity to endure the beauty of Beatrice. This marks a crucial shift for Dante insofar as he is no longer rendered mute and overwhelmed by Beatrice's glory:

Even so my Lady stood, intent to feast/  
Her gaze upon that region where the sun,  
Climbing at noon, appears to hasten least./ I, seeing her poised in longing, was as one/  
Who in his heart doth something more desire/  
And by his hopes is to quiescence won;/  
But swiftly did the space of time transpire/  
Between my waiting and beholding how/  
The heaven was lit with ever brighter fire.<sup>185</sup>

Beatrice fixes her gaze upon the zenith, causing Dante to grow in expectancy. Dante is growing in his capacity and in his interest in what is beyond Beatrice. As he grows in his capacity to see a more full glory even beyond Beatrice, i.e., God, Dante no longer suffers from the overwhelmedness of his incomprehension. Beatrice marks this development in Dante in Canto 28: "Lift up thine eyes and look on me awhile;/ See what I am; thou has beheld such things/  
As make thee mighty to endure my smile."<sup>186</sup> Beatrice is aware that her smile is no longer having the same overwhelming effect on Dante and she rejoices in the increasing perfection of his vision and desire. Notable also to this moment is that Dante offers an explanation of the cause of the 'radiant light' in Beatrice's eyes, which has been the consistent focus of his loving attention. Dante speaks,

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<sup>185</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 23.10-16.

<sup>186</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 28.46-48.

So, I remember, did it prove to be,/ While I was gazing in the lovely eyes/ Wherewith  
 Love made a noose to capture me;/ For, as I turned, there greeted mine likewise/ What all  
 behold who contemplate aright/ That heaven's revolution through the skies. / One Point I  
 saw, so radiantly bright,/ So searing to the eyes it strikes upon,/ They needs must close  
 before such piercing light. <sup>187</sup>

Dante recognizes that he was first 'captured' by the radiant beauty of Beatrice's eyes. He now sees that his attraction to her eyes is *only* by virtue of the fact that Beatrice's vision is set upon the full glory of the 'One Point' upon which all else rests. Dante sees reflected in Beatrice's eyes "the light of God and of the angelic circles, shining through the transparent Primum Mobile from the Empyrean beyond."<sup>188</sup> Dante sees his first glimpse of the unity of God in Beatrice, as demonstrated in the 'infinitesimally singular point' which is God.<sup>189</sup>

In seeing this through Beatrice's eyes, which have until now been the object of his love, Dante sees how his romantic love for Beatrice derives most originally from the singular infinitesimally singular light of God. Here we have a stark and beautiful image of the simultaneity of the pilgrim's loving of Beatrice and God: we see in the image of Beatrice's eyes and its reflection of the divine light that the pilgrim's love for Beatrice *qua* Beatrice *is* his love for God. Dante's vision of this point is piercing and all-encompassing: "So long from converse Beatrice withdrew,/ To gaze, with rapturous and smiling mean,/ Full on the Point which pierced my vision

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<sup>187</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 28.10-18.

<sup>188</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 305.

<sup>189</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 305.



through.”<sup>190</sup> Simultaneous to Dante’s vision of this singular point, Dante also becomes capable of seeing Beatrice in her full glory, which comes to its full fruition in Canto 30. Dante speaks,

Little by little our of sight withdrew,/ Whence I to Beatrice must needs transfer/ My gaze,  
for love, and lack of aught to view./ Were everything I’ve ever said of her/ Rolled up into  
a single jubilee,/ Too slight a hymn fro this new task were there./ Beauty past knowledge  
was displayed to me —/ Not only outs: the job of it complete/ Her Maker knows, I think,  
and only He.<sup>191</sup>

This moment marks Dante’s last gaze upon Beatrice, and at this moment, he finds her beauty to be so transfigured into her full glory that he cannot describe it. Beatrice’s beauty has become maximally particularized and radiant as her place amongst the vast array of Divine Life is revealed. Never has Beatrice been more beautiful, and this is because the closer she arrives to perfection, the more *herself* she is. The pilgrim is, however, able to gaze upon her and see her in her full glory, because he has been offered a glimpse of God Himself, as that which sustains Beatrice.

At the heart of Williams’ theology of romantic love is the fundamental assertion, as he explicates through the journey of Dante, that what each lover ultimately desires, in the love that they have for their beloved, is God himself, and that their desire for their beloved will only ultimately be satisfied by God alone. Yet, and *this* is the crucial nuance that I seek to add to Williams’ work, the pilgrim’s love for Beatrice in and of herself *is already* the pilgrim’s love of God. In loving Beatrice in all her beauty and particular radiance, the pilgrim is in fact also loving

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<sup>190</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 29.7-9.

<sup>191</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*. 30.13-21.

God as he sees in Beatrice one manifestation of Divine Light. God is always and must be that which sustains Beatrice, yet, Beatrice's growth in particular beauty as she ascends in perfection is indicative of the way in which Beatrice's particularity is a participant in the full diversity of the Divine Light, and thus how the pilgrim's loving of Beatrice is *already* also his loving of God.

### **Section V: The Particularity of Beatrice and Augustine**

Charles Williams' 'Theology of Romantic Love' offers a theological interpretive lens to understand the dynamic and animating love that Dante experiences for Beatrice throughout the *Paradiso*. It is Dante's experience of romantic love for Beatrice that allows him to journey upwards in perfection to ultimately allow him his capacity to gaze upon God directly. Further, and more crucially, it is in loving Beatrice *qua* Beatrice that serves as the pilgrim's first mode of loving God. It is through Williams' theological tenants of 1) *the 'oneness' of knowing and loving as seen through Beatrice*, 2) *the way in which Beatrice is an image of God to Dante*, and 3) *Dante's necessary movement beyond Beatrice and yet the retention of her particularity*, that we can come to understand how it is that, for Williams, romantic love can serve as a means of increasing in perfection when it is properly ordered and understood as knowing and loving God. These three theological underpinnings can be neatly tied back to Augustine and his theological presuppositions, as examined in Chapters 1 and 2. Thus, I argue that these theological arguments (and their underlying assumption) are largely consistent with Augustine's influence on the *Paradiso*.

Beatrice, Williams argues, serves to be the pilgrim's mode of knowing and loving. The pilgrim is transfixed (and remains, in large part, transfixed) on her particularizing and enhancing beauty as the canticle progresses. We see illustrated the simultaneity in knowing and loving as

Beatrice's beauty becomes enhanced as she increases in perfection. Meanwhile, she offers several orations on the principles of creation. The pilgrim, transfixed by her beauty, remains interested in her sharing of Knowledge, beginning as a love for her beauty, and then progressing into a love for the knowledge that she shares (in some moments, to the point of 'forgetting' her beauty).

Here, we must recall Rowan Williams' claims of Augustine that each individual has God as their "constitutive object," as discussed in Chapter 2 section IV. We see this most clearly illustrated in Beatrice's direct contemplation of the Divine light. Her gaze both physically and intellectually is directly upon God, and it is this orientation towards God as the object that both enhances her physical beauty and inspires her cosmological orations. It is by virtue of having God as one's "constitutive object" that allows for one to love both God and their neighbour simultaneously. As Williams stresses in his reading of Augustine, to love God is to love one's neighbour in their neighbour's *particularity*; as their neighbour is always already oriented towards God. Thus, as the pilgrim loves Beatrice, Beatrice is always already gazing upon God as her constitutive object, and thus we have a crystallized illustration of the pilgrim loving God as he loves Beatrice, whose object is God.

Beatrice reveals more of her particularized and glorified beauty to the pilgrim, as he becomes increasingly capable of seeing and knowing the vision that she offers. Williams implies that Beatrice's beauty becomes enhanced by her contemplation of God. Her contemplation of God causes an increase in perfection, and as she draws closer to her final place in the Empyrean heaven, she becomes all the more radiant in her beauty. As Beatrice (and the pilgrim) approach the Empyrean Heaven, her particularity, and the particularity of the pilgrim's attraction to Beat-

rice, does not dissolve, but rather, the particularity becomes more distinct in its growing perfection; rather than dissolving, it becomes more clear how it is that Beatrice's beauty (and the pilgrim's love for her) is but one of a patchwork of identities and relations that comprise the Divine life. In Beatrice's radiance, *qua* herself, Dante first learns to love God. There is even room for the retention of the pilgrim's particularized love for her as it is revealed to be one of many in a web of relations and loves that is the Divine life. Even when the pilgrim gazes upon God, directly, the radiance of Beatrice's particular identity remains within the Divine Circle, and does not dissolve into indiscriminate light.

As discussed in Chapter 2 Sections III and IV, in Augustine, each created thing is given form by the Creator, and the "shapeliness" (or, distinctiveness) of that created Being is necessary for its being created. As the creature comes to know their shape (or, their particular distinction relative to all other created beings), they come to understand their "createdness" or identity in God. From this graduated standpoint, the pilgrim is able to see the multiplicity of goods, all encompassed by the singular Divine light that sustains all. One ought also to recall the distinction made between *uti* and *frui* in Chapter 2 Section IV. According to Williams, Augustine prescribes *frui* when it comes to one's love for his or her neighbour. In making the neighbour the sum of one's joy, one is loving and enjoying their neighbour in its full and strict sense. When the pilgrim enjoys Beatrice's beauty and intellect as object, and makes it the object of his enjoyment, and not used in an exploitative sense, he is loving Beatrice rightly, and in doing so, loving God. It is for this reason that, even once the pilgrim gazes on God, he is still able to "remain in" his delight of Beatrice.

Dante is able to recognize Mary as a mediator to God because he had first seen and loved Beatrice. The pilgrim arrives, as Williams' theology prescribes that one must, at a distinction between the love he experiences for Beatrice and that love that sustains all experiences of love. It is arriving at this distinction that romantic love becomes recognized as its proper function as a mediator. In the final canto of the *Canticle*, never before has Beatrice been more beautiful, and this is because the closer she arrives to perfection, the more *herself* she is. The pilgrim gazes upon her and sees her in her full glory, because he has been offered a glimpse of God Himself, as that which sustains Beatrice.

Dante's final vision of the entire *Commedia*, in which he sees human nature united with the Word, indicates the most explicitly Dante's taking up of Augustine's *incarnational* theology, such that it becomes clear that Dante has taken up the centrality of Augustine's incarnational theology to justify his depiction of the Empyrean heaven as a vast diversity of particular identities, all radiant in their eternal formation in the Divine Light. The pilgrim speaks, in the final canto of the last canticle, of the Trinity: "The first mirrored the next, as though it were/ Rainbow from rainbow, and the third seemed flame/ Breathed equally from each of the first pair."<sup>192</sup> Here, Dante refers to the Son, begotten of the Father (as a second rainbow is considered to be "begotten" of the first; and the Holy Ghost, the third person of the Trinity, proceeds directly from both.<sup>193</sup> The pilgrim's final consideration, while gazing on the Trinity, is how it is that the Divine Deity is reconciled with the particular human countenance of Christ. Using trying to reconcile a square in a circle as a metaphor for straining to see how it is that humanity can be reconciled

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<sup>192</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 118-120.

<sup>193</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, 349.

with ‘the circle’ of Divinity, the pilgrim speaks, “So strove I with wonder — how to fit/ The image to the sphere; so sought to see/ How it maintained the point of rest in it.”<sup>194</sup> The entire *Commedia* ends with the pilgrim’s mystical insight that halts his desire: “Thither my own wings could not carry me/ But that a flash my understanding clove, Whence its desire came to it suddenly.”<sup>195</sup> A flash of divine insight reveals to the pilgrim how it is that the human and divine are joined in God. Dante gives the Trinity, and the mystery of incarnation, the final stage in the entire *Commedia*. Notably, the pilgrim is positionally at the *centre* of the universe (we see how the whole Universe is “in God”). Thus, Dante is illustrating explicitly that the mystery of the incarnation (the Divine united with human form) is the centrepiece for a justification for the weight which he lends to particularity throughout the *Paradiso*’s entirety. As we know from our discussion in Chapter 1 on Augustine, it is the unmediated union between the Divine and one, particular human form that allows for a larger elevation of the particular across all of sensible existence - because of the singular unmediated unity at the “centre” of the universe, all of creation can become, in a certain way, *incarnation*; and thus serve to be steps of mediation towards the final vision of God in the Beatific vision. It is the union of divinity and particular humanity that allows for all distinctions to remain distinctive and diverse in the vast display of Divine Light. This final vision of the incarnation as the final and most central stage of the entire *Commedia* reveals to the reader that Dante’s choice to emphasize the retention of particularity (as we have studied in the most detail through Beatrice) is not a coincidence, but rather, because Dante has taken up Augustine’s

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<sup>194</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, 136-138.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.* 139-141.

radical incarnational theology, he depicts the Empyrean Heaven as a vast diverse display of identity all encompassed within a singular Divine light.

## Conclusion

Augustine, as later illustrated by Dante, offers us a radically incarnational metaphysical infrastructure for understanding the soul's journey into God. Entrenched within the Neoplatonic school of philosophy, this notion of *incarnation* — the union of the ineffable and the sensible — causes a resounding reconsideration of many assumptions of past Platonisms, particularly in terms of the Divine's relation to the sensible. Perhaps most significantly, the *incarnational* Neoplatonism that Augustine introduces resists the dualisms that early Platonisms (such as Plotinus) require. Augustine offers us, through this, a way that warrants, within the ultimate context of the soul's journey into God, a richer understanding of the role of each mediating principle. Within Augustine's infrastructure, the world does not dissolve into a general 'mode of mediation,' that could equally be fulfilled by any object. Rather, the particularity of each mediating object is maintained, and in fact, *necessary* to, the pilgrim's ascent.

Augustine, as I have attempted to prove, is a rich philosophical-theological figure through which to consider the longstanding Platonic relation between the ineffable and the sensible. His discussion of *incarnation* and *trinity*, all while, in large part, assuming a traditional Neoplatonic infrastructure, both offer ways into thinking about the sensible and material as "positive" relative to the soul's ascent into God. This more "positive" reading serves to counter Augustine's reading of Plotinus' materialism, which posits a world that one must escape, or *pass through* in a manner of exploitation, in order to arrive at their ultimate *telos*. Augustine's *incarnation* posits an unmediated union of the sensible and the ineffable in Christ (God in human form). This union of sensible and ineffable in a singular unmediated form causes radical repercussions for Augustine's



stance on materialism. If it is possible for the ineffable to be present (or *incarnate*) in the material, then for Augustine, the sensible and material, metaphysically, are of positive value in the possibility they offer to serve as mediating principles for the soul's ascent into God. Further, Augustine's discussion of the *trinity* posits a diversity that is also united, at the heart of the Godhead. Multiplicity is not, therefore, a derivation from a strict 'Oneness' of God, but rather, multiplicity is native to the Godhead, the ground of existence, itself. Thus, Augustine is able to posit the vast diversity and multiplicity of creation as having their *ground* in God, further substantiating his positive materialism.

Reading Hannah Arendt's *Love and Saint Augustine*, for my purposes, signals the imperative of a holistic reading of Augustine's *incarnational* theology as a hermeneutic key across his entire corpus. Arendt sees in Augustine a largely Plotinian figure, that presents a negative understanding of the material when it comes to mediation. Arendt argues that Augustine presents us with an exploitative prescription to the material world, insofar as one must use the world in order to reach their final end in God. To this end, the particularity of each mediating object is of no matter, because all things are equally capable of serving as this principle through which one must pass— (remember, Arendt's reading of Augustine says that we should not, theoretically, care about the death of a friend, because their particular person is ultimately of no final value to us). I attempted to counter this reading of Augustine with my own reading (following Crouse and Williams) that focuses on the radical nature of Augustine's incarnation and its repercussions on generating a more positive materialism. Specifically, Augustine's incarnation creates a metaphysics of mediation in which the *particularity* of each mediating principle (be it one's neighbour, spouse, or tax collector), is of metaphysical value. I read Augustine as presenting us with a

metaphysics that “converts” Neoplatonic assumptions and infrastructure in such a way that mediating principles are able to become loci of divine encounter *in and of themselves* and in their *particularity*. Each particular mediating principle (my spouse, my neighbour) is able to be a location of divine encounter by virtue of her participation in the vast *multiplicity* and *diversity* in God. As Williams helpfully clarifies, our loving of our neighbour, is *always already* our loving of God, by virtue of our neighbour’s “constitutive object” being God. There is no neighbour whose “constitutive object” is not God, by virtue of the universe being *of* and *in* God, and thus, to love one’s neighbour, in her particularity, *is already* to love God. This saves us from a situation in which one loves her neighbour to a point of eventually “passing through” her to get to God, and in such a way that assumes the dissolution of her particularity.

Dante’s *Paradiso* illustrates the full thrust of the impact of Augustine’s incarnational theology on mediation. Throughout the canticle, Dante offers us a beautiful expressive illustration of the way in which the *particularity* of the goods that the pilgrim loves throughout his mediative journey is sustained and maintained in the vast diversity of the Empyrean Heaven; where we see a diversity of particular identities all bound in one singular light. Dante makes his last illustration of the entire *Commedia* a vision of the mystery of the unmediated union of God and human form. This is the most explicit way in which Dante proves his fidelity to and comprehension of the full thrust of Augustine’s *incarnational* theology. Dante makes this union of divine and sensible the “singular point” around which the universe circulates. Dante illustrates the centrality and implications of Augustine’s *incarnational* theology insofar as it is a theology that allows for a treatment of each particular as a location of divine encounter *qua* itself. I have attempted to expose the way in which Dante illustrates this Augustinian implication of each mediative principle being

a location of divine encounter *qua* itself through the study of the pilgrim's relationship to Beatrice throughout the course of the canticle. As the pilgrim loves Beatrice, and all of her *particular* radiance, the pilgrim is in fact *already also loving God*, as Beatrice is but one manifestation of the diversity of identity that is held together in the unity of divine light. As Beatrice draws nearer to her source in the Empyrean Heaven, her growth in her *particular* beauty intensifies. The final vision of the entire *Commedia* shows Beatrice, in her full glorified and particular radiance, as participating in the full diversity of the One Divine Light, with the mystery of the unmediated union of God and human form at its centre and around which all else circulates.

With Augustine, the Platonist is required to reconsider the world. Although certain later Neoplatonists will also move in this direction, with Augustine, no longer must the Platonist shun the world or simply attempt to dissolve the world in the journey into God, but rather, the Platonist is offered a new understanding of the world as *in God* — all centred around and sustained by the “One Infinitesimal Point” — that *is* God. Each diverse piece of the world can now be seen as one part of a vast diversity, all held together by the singular unifying light of God. Just as Beatrice becomes more and more beautiful as she draws nearer to her Divine Light, so too, all pilgrims will increase in their particular distinction in their journey of ascent into God.

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