Preliminary Notes on St. Augustine

1. In *Confessions* Augustine credits his reading of works of the Platonists (seemingly of Plotinus and Porphyry in Latin translations) with removing intellectual obstacles to his fully embracing Christianity. This leads to the question how fully and in what sense he was a Platonist or a Neoplatonist. (In part the ensuing answers are indebted to my reading the article “Saint Augustine,” by Michael Mendelson, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*)
   a. It must be kept in mind that for much of the period in which he wrote his now extant works, he was a Catholic bishop concerned with maintaining a standard of belief against what he perceived as doctrinal errors. Thus, his first concerns are religious, not philosophical. Further, he did not distinguish religion from philosophy in the way we do.
      i. Two doctrinal errors that he was particularly concerned to combat were
         1. Donatism, the view that sacraments administered by apostate priests are invalid
         2. Pelagianism, the view the man in his natural will, unaided by divine grace, is able to be righteous or just.
   ii. Between Augustine and us there is an interval of over 1500 years. During those years
      1. The Thomistic tradition developed a principled distinction between truths of natural reason and truths of revelation that, if not foreign to Augustine, was a least sharper than the line he drew
      2. The U. S. Constitution establishes the rule of governmental non-interference in religion
      3. (In part) because of these two developments in our institutions, we (customarily) use the term “theology” for sectarian or denominational teachings, and philosophy for speculations that are independent of the doctrines of any particular religion
      4. This was not how the original distinction between these terms was drawn, in antiquity, by Aristotle.
         a. For him, as a result of the discussions in *Metaphysics*, “theology” is another name for the first part of philosophy, the part that treats of the first cause of the process of nature.
      5. Augustine probably saw the word “philosophy” as having a broader meaning than for Aristotle, denoting any path that offered a solution to “the human condition.” If that philosophy derived from a certain supposed tradition of revelation, as in the case of
Manicheism or Christianity, it would not have made it any less a “philosophy.”

2. Global comparisons between Plotinus and Augustine
   a. Augustine, unlike Plotinus, is, as is characteristic of medieval thinkers, engaged in a process of harmonization of two disparate cultural traditions, Greek philosophy and the Jewish and Christian scriptures
   b. According to A. H. Armstrong, all Plotinus’ writings belong to the period of his mature thought, in which his views were relatively fixed and complete. Augustine, however, was indefinite and minimalist in some of his views, was uncertain about some points of great importance, and changed some of his views significantly over time.
   c. Keeping in mind the Plotinian order of causality, One, Mind-Being, Soul, Body, Matter, one can note these points of similarity:
      i. God is immaterial (incorporeal) and is the origin of all. (Plotinus sometimes calls the One “God.”)
      ii. The human soul is incorporeal and immortal.
      iii. There are two realms, that of sensation and that of thought (really, this is more akin to Plato and Aristotle than to that of Plotinus, but it is incorporated into Plotinus’ thought)
      iv. The sense world, the world of body, is the world of moral hazard or temptation
      v. Salvation lies (in part) in attending to the intelligible as opposed to the sensible
   d. Points of divergence between the thought of Plotinus and that of Augustine:
      i. The principle of evil is not matter, but rather a wrong focus of the human will (desire) on temporal rather than on eternal things
      ii. (A corollary of this:) The path of salvation is to focus one’s will on the eternal, rather than to attain disembodiment.
      iii. Whereas Plotinus accepted the Socratic or Platonic theory of reincarnation or transmigration of souls, Augustine was long in doubt about the origin of the soul and about how the soul and the body have come to be combined. Mendelson lists five theories that Augustine entertained at various times:
         1. The soul pre-exists the body and is sent by God to administer it.
         2. The soul pre-exists the body and chooses to enter the body (thus committing sin)
         3. The soul is derived genetically from one’s parents
         4. God directly creates a soul for each newly conceived person
         5. The soul of Adam remains throughout time, stained with original sin, and is progressively differentiated into individual souls and newly humans are conceived
iv. (As far as I know), Augustine does not posit the universe as a living being as a whole or a world soul, as does Plotinus (following Plato in the *Timaeus*)

v. (I am hesitant on this point:) Augustine seems to put the Ideas in the mind of God, and thus to conflate, to a certain degree, the Neoplatonic One and Mind-Being. He seems to see eternity as being the life of God, rather than as being the life of something derivative, Mind-Being, as in Plotinus

vi. I am uncertain about angels and demons.

e. A distinctive point of Augustinian philosophy: divine illumination (derived ultimately from Plato’s Divided Line)

i. The objects of knowledge, as opposed to opinion (as in Plato) are eternal, and therefore sensation does not yield knowledge

ii. All humans are endowed with the knowledge of certain *a priori* truths (examples provided by Mendelson, citing *De Libero Arbitrio)*:

   1. Mathematical and logical truths
   2. We all seek a happiness beyond what can be attained in this life
   3. Good is to be sought and evil avoided
   4. There is something above and more reliable than the human mind