

Struggling with Flesh: Soul/Body Dualism in Porphyry and Augustine

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Introduction

Porphyry began his *Life of Plotinus* with the statement, “Plotinus, the philosopher of our times, seemed ashamed of being in the body.”¹ This telling testimonial illuminates the privileging of the mind or soul over the corporeal that is characteristic of the Neoplatonic as well as the early Christian traditions; the hierarchical dualistic scheme of soul and body that constitutes the backbone of both Neoplatonic and Christian metaphysics has inevitably led to a denial of the corporeal body, a rejection of flesh, in the Western world. In this paper, I draw from both Neoplatonic and Augustinian thought on the body – predominantly through consideration of Porphyry’s *Letter to Marcella*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, and his writings on continence, marriage, and virginity² – in order to identify one source of the negative theorization of the body which has been a problematic and dominating legacy handed down to Christianity through Western philosophy.

It is somewhat difficult to point to one singular source for the root of Augustine’s dualistic notion of flesh and spirit. Some of Augustine’s critics have pointed to Scripture for these origins, while others, including Augustine’s contemporaries (for example, Julian of Eclanum), have argued that it stems from his early days as a Manichaean. However, focusing on the similarities between Augustine’s advocacy of abstinence from the pleasures of the flesh and Manichaean asceticism is perhaps less fruitful than examining the same connections between Augustine and the Neoplatonists, since Augustine consistently denied the former connections, but kept referring – explicitly or implicitly – to the latter. One particularly interesting link between Augustine’s conception of the body and that of the Neoplatonists can be made on the basis of a careful comparison of Augustine’s *De Continentia* sermon and Porphyry’s *Letter*

to *Marcella*. This comparative analysis is especially intriguing when one reads these texts with the controversial understanding that the Neoplatonist Augustine most likely read was Porphyry (O'Meara 1959, 57; Smith 1974, 79-80; O'Connell 1968; O'Donnell 1992).³ In *De Continentia*, Augustine writes that "A material body is sowed, however, and a spiritual body rises up" (204). Though he cites 1 Corinthians 15:44 as the source of this passage, a very similar notion of the body's relationship to the soul is put forth by Porphyry in his *Letter to Marcella*:

The body is joined to you in the same way as the membrane is joined to embryos growing in the womb, and as the stalk is joined to the growing grain [...]. So then, just as the membrane and the stalk of the grain grow concurrently, and once they mature each is shucked off, likewise also the body, which has been joined to the sown soul, is not part of a man but exists in order for him to be born in the womb, just as the entwined membrane is yoked to the body in order for him to be born on earth. (74-75)

By examining this and other textual similarities, I argue in this paper that careful consideration of the Neoplatonic view of the body, as it is presented by Porphyry, will shed light on the origins and nature of this dualism in Augustine, and may even serve to further establish the import of the Neoplatonists on the early development of the Christian Church.⁴

I will restrict my focus chiefly to the nature of this dualism in both Porphyry and Augustine, and the way in which it has inevitably led to a struggle with flesh and an ascetic denial of the corporeal body for both of these thinkers.⁵ Yet, for a feminist, such considerations naturally lead one to broach the topic as to how this hierarchical soul/body dualism has shaped the Western view of women.⁶ Along these lines, I conclude this paper with the argument that, because women have throughout Western culture traditionally been associated with the bodily, this hierarchical dualism has served to institute and justify patriarchal attitudes towards women.

Soul/Body Dualism in the Platonic Tradition

Though it is difficult to point to one source as the ultimate root of Augustine's dualistic notion of flesh and spirit – some critics have argued it stems from his early days as a Manichaean, while others will point to

sources in Scripture – an examination of the possible Neoplatonic sources of Augustine’s dualism may prove even more rewarding.⁷ Augustine made continuous reference to the books of the Platonists throughout his *Confessions*, and so we know that he considered Neoplatonism to be an essential phase in his own philosophical development; this can also be observed from the fact that Augustine’s philosophy shares a similar metaphysical backbone with that of the Neoplatonists, so much so that he is commonly referred to as a Christian Neoplatonist. Further, Augustine and Neoplatonists such as Porphyry even employ parallel metaphor to describe the hierarchical dualistic relationship of body and soul. Thus, an examination of Platonic dualism may help us to unearth these origins in Augustine.

Throughout this paper, I will consistently employ the term “dualism” to describe the systematically hierarchical devaluation of the bodily and privileging of the intelligible or spiritual, though of course neither the Platonic nor Augustinian systems are systems of strict binaries – they are both hierarchical orderings of reality, and so are more complicated than a basic dualistic scheme. However, I maintain that it is fair to refer to both the Platonists and Augustine as soul/body dualists, so long as one continues to keep their more complex metaphysics in the background. Soul/body dualists believe that there is a distinction between the soul or mind and material bodies; this belief has often led to a theory of the soul’s atemporal constancy. This brand of dualism is partially responsible for the epistemological divide that developed between philosophy and science; within traditional philosophy the suspicion has developed that the temporal body and its senses cannot be trusted – we have no hope of ever having knowledge of the sensible world because it is constantly changing, and so truth cannot be found in the sensory world. Philosophers desire knowledge of that which is immutable and unchangeable; thus, from this epistemology arose the firm conviction that we must look to the transcendental intelligible world for truth, and turn away from the ephemeral world of physical bodies.

This hierarchical variety of soul/body dualism found a firm advocate in Plato. As Porphyry mentions briefly in his *Letter to Marcella*, Plato “recollected the intelligible from the perceptible” (Porphyry 1987, 55),⁸ systematically drawing the distinction between the world of physical bodies and the intelligible world of souls and Forms. Plato, particularly in middle dialogues such as his *Republic*⁹ and *Phaedo*, explicated a dualistic scheme in which the intelligible world of souls and Forms was privileged and the physical world of material bodies was

degraded.¹⁰ According to Plato, particular bodies are only deficient earthly copies of that which is universal, perfect, and real: the Forms.¹¹ Hence, he claims in the *Phaedo* that “the soul is most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same” (Plato 1997a, 80b). Plato describes the body as a prison for the soul; humans can attempt to free themselves from this prison in life through the practice of philosophy by focusing on that which is atemporal.

The lovers of learning know that when philosophy gets hold of their soul, it is imprisoned in and clinging to the body, and that it is forced to examine other things through it as through a cage and not by itself, and that it wallows in every kind of ignorance. Philosophy sees that the worst feature of this imprisonment is that it is due to desires, so that the prisoner himself is contributing to his own incarceration most of all. As I say, the lovers of learning know that philosophy gets hold of their soul when it is in that state, then gently encourages it and tries to free it by showing them that investigation through the eyes is full of deceit, as is that through the ears and the other senses. Philosophy then persuades the soul to withdraw from the senses in so far as it is not compelled to use them and bids the soul to gather itself together by itself, to trust only itself and whatever reality, existing by itself, the soul by itself understands, and not to consider as true whatever it examines by other means, for this is different in different circumstances and is sensible and visible, whereas what the soul itself sees is intelligible and invisible. (Plato 1997a, 82e-83b)

Plato argues that if a person is overly concerned with bodily things in life, weighed down by the polluting force that is physical desire, this will pass with them into death, and they will remain caught up in the prison of the physical.¹² In order to achieve freedom from the fetters of the body, Plato advocates that philosophers avoid both the pleasures and pains of the body so as to allow the soul freedom from its powerfully corrupting grip.¹³ Later, the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Porphyry would come to take up this notion of the soul’s struggle with the bodily in their versions of Platonism; for both, the body is an obstacle in the way of the soul’s ascent.

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For Plotinus, body depends on soul for its existence much like a parasite: it is a burden from which soul must attempt to free itself. In the first tractate of *Ennead* I, Plotinus describes body as soul's instrument; in describing the body as soul's instrument Plotinus is not implying that it is a helpful tool, but rather he argues that the body is an inferior appendage that the soul must learn, via philosophy, to live without.¹⁴ Later, in the ninth tractate of *Ennead* I, Plotinus likens the body to fetters that imprison the human soul;¹⁵ body depends on soul for its existence, and thus in that way is secondary to soul, manifesting itself as a burden to soul – a burden that must be overcome with the help of philosophy by means of a Platonic ascent.

In *Ennead* IV.7, Plotinus argues that “soul is prior by nature to body,” “independent of body,” and is “constitutive of body while being separate from body, a different and superior nature” (O'Meara 1996, 74).¹⁶ In *Ennead* VI, Plotinus asks that we think of the “body as being ‘in’ soul, in the sense that it depends entirely for its organization and life on soul” (O'Meara 1993, 27).¹⁷ It is crucial to keep in mind that since the body is “in” soul and depends on soul for its existence, Plotinus' dualism is not at all like a Manichaean dualism – the two principles are not equal and competing, but rather his is a dualism in which a higher principle must struggle to free itself as much as possible from the influence of the lower physical principle.¹⁸

Plotinus' discussion of the soul/body hierarchy is frequent, and can be found dispersed throughout his *Enneads*;¹⁹ thus, though Plotinus' dualism is complicated by his metaphysics, this does not negate the fact that for Plotinus there are indeed two dueling principles, body and soul, and one – soul – is highly privileged over the other. Yet the Platonic notion of the body as lower than soul is taken up and expounded upon to a greater extent by Plotinus' student, Porphyry. It is in the work of Porphyry, I will argue, that we can most clearly see the Neoplatonic roots of Augustine's soul/body dualism and its ascetic tendencies.

Porphyry's Soul/Body Dualism: the *Letter to Marcella*

Though Platonism from the outset, as we have seen, was a dualistic philosophy that privileged the world of the Forms over the ephemeral physical world – a perfect recipe for asceticism – Porphyry's interpretation of Platonic doctrine may have leaned more in the direction of a harshly ascetic disparagement of the physical world than even that of

his teacher, Plotinus. Porphyry was born around 232-3 C.E., approximately twenty-eight years after Plotinus.²⁰ Porphyry's temperament may have disposed him towards the dualistic worldview of Neoplatonism; Porphyry was prone to depression,²¹ and had even seriously contemplated suicide, which may indicate that he was generally unhappy with life in the temporal world.²² As we shall observe from his *Letter to Marcella (Ad Marcellam)*, which was written around 300 C.E., Porphyry practiced a trained abstinence from the pleasures of the physical world. The negatively abstemious elements of Neoplatonism may have been taken farther by Porphyry than even Plotinus would have preached; when Porphyry contemplated suicide – presumably as a result of Neoplatonic teachings – Plotinus “convinced him that what was really wrong with him was an imbalance in his humors caused by black bile,” and so he encouraged Porphyry to recuperate for a while in a warmer climate; it seems Plotinus did not want his teachings to be interpreted as encouragements of hatred towards this world: “Moderate asceticism is a legitimate inference, dualistic self-mutilation or suicide are not” (Praet 1999).²³

I introduced this paper with a quote from the beginning of Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*: “Plotinus, the philosopher of our times, seemed ashamed of being in the body” (Porphyry 1966, 3). This statement is quite telling of the general tendency to privilege the mind or soul over the corporeal that is characteristic of the Neoplatonic tradition; however, there is some controversy as to whether or not Plotinus actually decried the body to such a negative extent, or whether Porphyry, in his own taking up of Neoplatonism and its emphasis on the soul, exaggerated this element of Plotinian philosophy in his biography of his teacher (Miles 1999, 5; 49; 90-91).²⁴ It is certain that both Plotinus and Porphyry held a hierarchical notion of soul and body, in which the bodily is held to be lower than the soul; as we have seen, this was inherited from Plato. Yet in important respects Porphyry fundamentally disagreed with Plotinus regarding the relationship of the soul to the body; “Indeed, Porphyry's own philosophical stance was much more pessimistic about body than that of Plotinus” (Miles 1999, 91). As John O'Meara explains in *Porphyry's Philosophy from Oracles in Augustine*, Porphyry

disagreed with both Plato and Plotinus that souls that had been joined to human bodies should return subsequently to join a bestial body, and he furthermore contended that perfectly purified souls never returned to body, human or

bestial, at all. [...] The important thing to remember is that Porphyry, as represented by Augustine, thinks of this principally in terms of fleeing re-union with body. It is not merely that he counsels us to shun the body in this life, but he places still greater emphasis on fleeing from re-union with a body, once one has got to the next life. (O'Meara 1959, 24-25)

Such exegeses of Porphyry's work may give us some indication that Porphyry had taken the Neoplatonic soul/body hierarchy farther than Plotinus, which led him down the path of rather extreme asceticism.²⁵

This greater tendency of Porphyry's to deplore the bodily can be observed in his *Letter to Marcella*. In this work, Porphyry entreats his new wife, Marcella, to take up the ascetic life of Neoplatonism.²⁶ In the letter, Porphyry attempts to explain to Marcella why theirs must be a celibate marriage; through a careful evaluation of his effort, we can gain a glimpse at Porphyry's own more radically dualistic and ascetic interpretation of Neoplatonism. Porphyry here describes the dualistic relationship between soul and body in the language of a fall – a “descent into the flesh” (Porphyry 1987, 55) – and of imprisonment; the soul is trapped in the body temporarily, and the goal is to free it as much as possible from the domination of the body such that the soul controls the body, thus escaping its corrupting grip.

For Porphyry, the body is analogous to a prison from which we must attempt to flee via abstinence. He writes,

we have been enchained by nature's chains with which she has surrounded us: the belly, the genitals, the throat, the other bodily members, both in respect to our use and passionate pleasure in them and our fears about them. So then, if we should rise above their witchcraft and guard against their seductive snare, we have enchained what has enchained us. (Porphyry 1987, 75)

Porphyry counsels Marcella, “The absence [of the pleasures of the flesh] is painful to you as you train yourself to flee from the body” (Porphyry 1987, 55), but the reward is great, though controlling the body is difficult. This control is a refraining – avoiding the passions of the bodily appetites. Porphyry cautions Marcella to “never use bodily members simply for pleasure, for it is much better to die than to dull the soul through lack of self-control” (Porphyry 1987, 77). We must ascend from

the body by avoiding the pleasures of the flesh: “It would be impossible either to ascend the mountain peaks without danger and hard work, or to ascend from the inmost parts of the body through what drags it down into the body, namely, pleasure and indolence” (Porphyry 1987, 51).

Porphyry clearly explicates his dualistic, ascetic philosophy throughout the text – his philosophically written letter to his wife is really a treatise on Neoplatonic abstinence, a call for the reader to make the body subservient to the soul. This, as we will see, is very similar to Augustine’s own purpose in both his *Confessions* and his essay on continence, *De Continentia*. These texts all argue that the lover of the bodily is unjust and ignorant of God:²⁷ Porphyry writes, “To the extent anyone longs for the body and the things related to the body, to that extent is he ignorant of God and darkens God’s vision of him, even if in the eyes of all men he may be honored as a god [...]. Let the soul obey the intellect; then, of course, let the body be subservient to the soul” (Porphyry 1987, 57-58). Porphyry states, “even the gods have prescribed remaining pure by abstinence from food and sex” (Porphyry 1987, 71).²⁸ So, he says that we must “become totally in control of ourselves” (Porphyry 1987, 71); this control is only achieved via detachment from the body. The body, Porphyry writes,

is joined to you in the same way as the membrane is joined to embryos growing in the womb, and as the stalk is joined to the growing grain [...] So then, just as the membrane and the stalk of the grain grow concurrently, and once they mature each is shucked off, likewise also the body, which has been joined to the sown soul, is not part of a man but exists in order for him to be born in the womb, just as the entwined membrane is yoked to the body in order for him to be born on earth. The more an individual has turned toward the mortal element, the more he makes his heart unsuitable for the sublimity of immortality. But the more he holds aloof from passionate attachment to the body, the more he draws near the divine. (Porphyry 1987, 74-75)

Control over the body, through the practice of abstinence, is the primary goal of Porphyry’s Neoplatonism.²⁹

This control over the body should not be read as simply a form of balanced moderation, but rather as a practiced turning away from all that is bodily towards that which is atemporal; a most interesting line in Porphyry’s *Ad Marcellam* comes towards the end of the letter: “Often

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people amputate some limb to save their lives; you should be prepared to amputate the whole body to save your soul” (Porphyry 1987, 75). This call to “amputate the whole body to save [the] soul” further indicates Porphyry’s more radical Platonism. Here, Porphyry is addressing Neoplatonic ascent, which is a philosophical separation or purification,³⁰ “the call to escape from the body” and live the “life of the inner man” (Smith 1974, 20; 23),³¹ something Plotinus had claimed to achieve on numerous occasions. Though both Plotinus and Porphyry believed that “soul may separate itself from body before body has separated itself from soul – [...] the ascent of the soul during life” (Smith 1974, 22),³² Porphyry’s language in the *Letter* and his disposition indicate that he was advocating something even more radical than the Plotinian version of philosophical separation in his *Letter*:³³ it seems that for Porphyry the “amputation” of body from soul is a more extreme version of this separation, one that would possibly even consider suicide as a desperate effort to flee from the body. As Smith writes, for Porphyry, “there is sufficient reason for desiring ultimate release [the release of death] even for the philosopher since the restrictions imposed by the body are considered by him to be a serious impediment, even at times an insurmountable obstacle, in attaining the goal” (Smith 1974, 80).

Augustine’s Soul/Body Dualism

At the risk of setting up a strawman Augustine, the following section will highlight Augustine’s negative articulation of the body. In fairness to the philosopher it must be noted from the outset that he attempts to discuss the body in less disparaging terms elsewhere, particularly in *City of God*. Evident tensions within Augustine’s philosophy emerge as he struggles to reconcile his lingering dualism with the more nuanced understanding of flesh that is philosophically necessary for his project to work.³⁴ However, his efforts to discuss the body positively are highly problematic; that he is not altogether beyond a hierarchical form of soul/body dualism is exposed by statements made throughout his corpus, and even in *City of God*. For example, in Book 19, Chapter 17 of that text he writes: “When we shall have reached that peace, this mortal life shall give place to one that is eternal, and our body shall be no more this animal body which by its corruption weighs down the soul, but a spiritual body feeling no want, and in all its members subjected to the will.” It is the “animal body” that must be reclaimed for

philosophy – the present paper merely aims to clear the air so that a positive articulation of the *material* body might be taken seriously. To this end, Augustine’s notion of a spiritual body cannot assist us.

Augustine harbored a notion similar to that of Porphyry that we humans must struggle to overcome the body in order to nurture the soul. Though this is in line with Neoplatonic doctrine generally, there is evidence that Augustine read Porphyry in particular (O’Meara 1959, 57; Smith 1974, 79-80; O’Connell 1968; O’Donnell 1992).³⁵ We can look to Augustine’s works on sexuality, continence, marriage, and virginity in light of the above reading of Porphyry’s *Letter to Marcella* as further evidence to support this claim; such a reading will show that the similarities between the two philosophers are strikingly textual and thematic.

Augustine had an exceedingly difficult time throughout his life struggling against what he considered to be the evil desires of his body. At a young age, Manichaeism allowed him some relief from his guilt – it held that the individual is not really responsible for the evil he or she commits, because this power of evil is constantly at work in the universe, competing against the good; the Manicheans believed that evil is a substance which is coeternal and competing with good. The relief provided by Manichaeism was short-lived for Augustine, however, as he found Manichean explanations insufficient. He would find a much more suitable account of evil in the books of the Platonists.

In *Confessions* Book VII, Augustine describes how the books of the Platonists helped to solve the problem of evil for him.³⁶ Rather than thinking of evil as a substance as the Manicheans do, the Platonists helped Augustine see that evil is a perversion of the will such that the will turns away from God. Evil, therefore, does not really exist – it is nothing but a lack of focus on God. It is a turn away from the source of illumination (God), from atemporal things like truth (which is God), and thus a turn towards the body and temporal things.³⁷ Particularly, this element of truth in the books of the Platonists was the Neoplatonic understanding that everything is an emanation from the One (God) in a hierarchical ordering: that which is closest to the One has more reality than that which is farthest away; the material world is distant from the One, and humans must focus inwardly away from this material multiplicity in order to ascend back towards the One. In the Neoplatonic system, everything comes from the One and is good insofar as it exists, but that which is lower – i.e., farther from the One – has less being than that which is higher. (Accordingly, evil is not a substance, but rather a

lack of being in the full sense, a nothingness, or at least that which is closer to a lack of existence).³⁸

Augustine takes up this Neoplatonic system and synthesizes it with his Christian framework. According to Augustine, in order to avoid “evil” humans must focus inwardly on their soul or mind, which is closest to God, and not on their bodies, which carry the burden of original sin in the flesh and are farthest from God; in order to do this we must ask for God’s grace to help us control the body,³⁹ though even with God’s help this struggle with flesh is never easy. Following in the Platonic tradition, Augustine privileges that which is unchanging: we see this explicitly in Book VII of the *Confessions*, where Augustine attempts to comprehend a God that is non-corporeal. God cannot be corporeal, Augustine reasons, because God is perfect and thus absolute, whereas the body, in a constant process of change and decay, can never be described as perfect. Thus, the soul must struggle against the corrupting influence of the body.

Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine describes his constant struggle with the world of physical pleasures.⁴⁰ In Book VI, Augustine expresses his battle with “carnal lusts” (Augustine 1998, 118); in Book VII, the body is described as a weight: “I was drawn toward you by your beauty but swiftly dragged away from you by my own weight, swept back headlong and groaning onto these things below myself; and this weight was carnal habit” (Augustine 1998, 138). Augustine depicts the temporal body as an oppressive hindrance to the soul’s ascent: “the perishable body weighs down the soul, and its earthly habitation oppresses a mind teeming with thoughts” (Augustine 1998, 138). Book VII contains Augustine’s account of his failed attempt at ascent towards God, which was foiled by the weight of *consuetudo carnalis*.

Augustine’s introspective ascent to God – which he describes famously in Book 7 of the *Confessions* – ends on a note of anticlimax. As quickly as he was taken up by divine beauty, he was snatched back by a competing source of attraction. He blames his unwanted descent on *consuetudo carnalis*, a repository of old desire that hung on him like a dead weight. The Latin term has admitted of various translations: ‘sexual habit’ (Chadwick), ‘carnal habit’ (Warner, Sheed), ‘habit of the flesh’ (Pine-Coffin), ‘carnal custom’ (Pusey), and even ‘the habit of thinking intrinsically associated with the senses’ (Quinn). It is clearly a body-

fixated habit that is at issue here, as all the translations indicate. (Wetzel 2000, 165)

Augustine continues his discussion of the way in which the physical world and its devious pleasures, particularly sexual pleasure, fetter him down in *Confessions* Book VIII: he praises God for helping to set him “free from a craving for sexual gratification which fettered me like a tight-drawn chain, and from my enslavement to worldly affairs” (Augustine 1998, 155). In Book X, this battle with the corruptible flesh becomes fleshed out to a greater extent.⁴¹ Augustine introduces Book X with an examination of his love for God, which he finds has nothing to do with his bodily senses,⁴² and Augustine spends the latter part of Book X confessing the ways in which he is still separated from a truly Godly life due to the concupiscence of the flesh. He examines the ways in which physical touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing can lure one to ignore the spiritual and to focus on the bodily (Augustine 1998, 223-235).⁴³

Augustine takes up this issue of the troublesome struggle with the concupiscence of the flesh to a greater extent in his attempts to establish proper Christian doctrine regarding sexuality. His writings on marriage and virginity – for example, *De Continentia*, *De Bono Coniugali*,⁴⁴ *De Sancta Virginitate*,⁴⁵ and *De Bono Viduitatis*⁴⁶ – are meant to guide Christians towards a more Godly life. As with Porphyry’s *Letter to Marcella*, inherent in Augustine’s sermons is the advocacy of abstinence from sexual conduct for the purposes of nurturing one’s spiritual side. The underlying thesis of these works is that a life of control of one’s sexual impulses is best; to this end, Augustine – like Porphyry before him – praises celibacy above even marriage, and within marriage he strongly advocates sexual relations only for procreative purposes.

Also like the *Letter to Marcella*, Augustine’s *De Continentia* sermon expresses a hierarchical soul/body dualism, a dualism in which the two parts are engaged in constant struggle in this material realm: Augustine writes that “*The flesh has desires opposed to those of the spirit, and the spirit has desires opposed to those of the flesh. These two work against each other with the result that you do not do what you want to do*” (Augustine 1990, 197-198). Continnence, Augustine writes, is “of special importance” in this “war where the spirit has desires opposed to the flesh”; it puts to death “the deeds of the flesh” with which we so greatly struggle.⁴⁷ In this manner, *De Continentia* is strikingly similar to Porphyry’s *Letter to Marcella*.

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The similarities are not merely thematic; the two texts also share a parallel grounding metaphor. Recall that in the *Letter*, Porphyry wrote that the body

is joined to you in the same way as the membrane is joined to embryos growing in the womb, and as the stalk is joined to the growing grain [...] So then, just as the membrane and the stalk of the grain grow concurrently, and once they mature each is shucked off, likewise also the body, which has been joined to the sown soul, is not part of a man but exists in order for him to be born in the womb. (Porphyry 1987, 74-75)⁴⁸

Likewise, Augustine also employs the metaphor of a material body being sowed so that the spiritual body can rise:

The flesh can desire nothing except by means of the soul; but the flesh is said to have desires opposed to the spirit, when the soul struggles against the spirit because of carnal desires. All of this is ourselves, and even the flesh, which dies when the soul leaves it, is the lowly part of ourselves. It is not cast off to be abandoned, but it is put aside to be received back, and once received back it will never again be relinquished. *A material body is sowed, however, and a spiritual body rises up* (1 Cor 15:44). (Augustine 1990, 204)

This textual similarity lends validity to the argument that Augustine in fact had studied Porphyry's writing carefully, perhaps even the *Letter to Marcella*, and had appropriated Porphyry's version of Neoplatonism.

One possible objection to this reading may be that Augustine held, in accordance with Christian dogma, that a "spiritual body" rising up means that the Christian body will become purified after death, and will live eternally; this, it might be argued, runs contrary to Porphyry's metaphor in which the body itself is "shucked off." Augustine had to attempt to reconcile Christian Scripture with his own more Neoplatonic understanding of the body-soul relationship. Scripture often uses corporeal metaphor and symbolism to describe that which is spiritual in nature: the body of Christ in the Eucharist, for example. Augustine's struggle to understand God as an incorporeal being in his *Confessions* will perhaps help us to better understand what he means by a spiritual body as opposed to a material body; Augustine uses the term body, but he

does not seem to imply that any sort of purified corporeal body will actually rise up. Augustine continued the above passage with the statement: “Then the flesh will no longer have any desires opposed to the spirit. It will itself be called spiritual, as it will be subject to the spirit without any resistance, and without any need of bodily food to sustain its eternal life” (Augustine 1990, 204). Thus, this term “spiritual body” in Augustine need not be read differently than Porphyry’s use of the term “soul” in the above passage from the *Letter to Marcella*, despite its more corporeal overtones.

Further, it is important to note that Augustine was also struggling to distance his own theology from that of the Manicheans when he wrote *De Continentia*. In *De Continentia* Augustine makes great effort to assert that his discussion of the battle between the flesh and the spirit does not stem from a Manichaean dualistic understanding of flesh as evil. Contrary to the Manichaeans (and actually in line with Neoplatonic doctrine), Augustine affirms that there is nothing inherently wrong with flesh: “What error, then – or, better, what utter madness – has possessed the Manichees, for them to class our flesh as belonging to some kind of mythical nation of darkness?” (Augustine 1990, 206). God, being a good god, made both flesh and spirit, and so naturally these both are good products.⁴⁹ Still, the flesh does harbor certain desires which, when we give into them, are sinful; the flesh, the corruptible body, does weigh down the soul.⁵⁰ Augustine refers to this tendency as a “defect of the flesh” (Augustine 1990, 204).⁵¹ Augustine indicates that these sinful thoughts, our inheritance from Original Sin, are beyond our control – what is not beyond our control is how we react to them. If we dwell on these thoughts, or act upon them, we are giving in to sin; however, if the mind is “obedient to God’s law” these can be “kept in check” (Augustine 1990, 205).⁵²

Thus, this distinction Augustine insists upon between his own soul/body dualism and that of the Manicheans is important to keep in mind, and yet we must also question whether this distinction is somewhat trivial; though the dualism Augustine describes is not a radical dualism of two opposing natures, but rather is a dualism within one nature, the binary of opposition between flesh and its “defective,” lustful tendencies and spirit is nonetheless present, and for all practical purposes the effects of this dualistic understanding of the self are very similar for Augustine as they were for the Manichaeans – a doctrine of abstinence, an advocacy of an ascetic life. However, as I have thus far argued, the same advocacy of abstinence can be found in Porphyry’s writings, and it is couched in

similar metaphor. This lends support to the claim that Augustine may have no longer been a Manichean when he wrote *De Continentia*, but was rather merely a good Porphyrian Neoplatonist.

Is Augustine's Soul/Body Dualism Manichaeic or Neoplatonic?

When considering the question as to whether or not Augustine's dualistic view of the body and soul might stem from his early days as a Manichaeic or his later Neoplatonism, it may be useful to regard the opinion of Augustine's own contemporaries on the subject. In "A Critical Evaluation of Critiques of Augustine's View of Sexuality,"⁵³ Mathijs Lamberigts examines Augustine's view of sexuality in light of the criticism of one of Augustine's contemporaries, Julian of Eclanum. Julian had expressed an unease regarding Augustine's view of sexuality and desire, and had even accused Augustine of continuing to harbor a Manichean notion of sexuality.

Like many of his contemporaries, Julian also praised a life of sexual abstinence.⁵⁴ Yet he could not accept fully negative views of sexuality; according to Julian, "As a gift of God, sexuality belongs by its very nature to the physical dimension of the human person" (Lamberigts 2000, 177). Julian wrote about sexuality and desire "in a positive manner" (Lamberigts 2000, 178), unlike Augustine who "regularly labeled 'desire' as a *vitium*, a weakness characteristic of fallen humanity, a deficiency with respect to the fullness of being for which the devil was responsible" (Lamberigts 2000, 178). Julian found this aspect of Augustine's view of sexuality suspect, and in order to prove that the shadow of the Manicheans lingers in the background of Augustine's view of sexuality he compared Augustine's *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* with the Manichaean text *Epistula ad Menoch*. "In this work, Augustine proposed that 'lust' was something evil" (Lamberigts 2000, 178), since Adam and Eve had clothed themselves upon committing that first sin.

The fact that people felt shame with respect to lust was simply proof of its truly evil nature [...]. Augustine also pointed out that, where the *libido* was concerned, the human mind did not enjoy the same supremacy as it did with respect to other parts of the body [...]. Moreover, sexual desire, for Augustine, did not constitute one of the 'goods' of marriage [...] He believed, on the contrary, that all human

beings were under the power of the devil, because they had all been born as a result of sexual desire. (Lamberigts 2000, 178-179)

Julian found very similar passages in *Epistula ad Menoch*. In both texts, the “struggle between spirit and flesh was presented as a struggle between good and evil” (Lamberigts 2000, 179).

However, Lamberigts points out that Julian may have been unfair to claim that the anti-sexuality tendencies in Augustine are remnants of his days as a Manichean; “With respect to his negative interpretation of *concupiscentia (carnis)*, Augustine was indebted to the Bible, where both Old and New Testaments spoke repeatedly of sinful desire [...]. In response to the accusation that he follows the Manichaeans in calling desire ‘bad,’ Augustine would certainly have reacted by appealing to the Scriptures” (Lamberigts 2000, 180). Lamberigts argues that if one wants to label Augustine a Manichaean, one would need to prove Augustine was conforming to the “radical dualism propagated by the Manichaeans” (Lamberigts 2000, 181). This is unlikely, but a less radical dualism is most certainly present in Augustine. It is perhaps more plausible that the cause of this dualism is the influence of the Platonists on Augustine in combination with his reading of the Scriptures, and less the remaining influence of the Manichaeans on his philosophy. Additionally, Augustine’s own struggle on the path of conversion likely played a large role in the formation of his dualism:

Augustine’s own process of conversion, in which his personal struggle with the phenomenon of *concupiscentia (carnis)* had a significant role to play, also deserves to be taken into account. As he himself describes it, his conversion can and should also be seen as a renunciation of the active sexual life he had lived for almost thirteen years. With exceptional negativity, his *Confessions* portray his own past, with respect to the desires of the flesh in general, and sexual desire, in particular, as ‘mud’ [...]. He refers to sexual desire as a sickness. (Lamberigts 2000, 182)

Lamberigts adds that, for Augustine, the sexual impulse (*concupiscentia carnis*) need not lead to sin; it is not sinful necessarily, because one can resist it. Grace can help people to resist this desire. Augustine also maintained that before the original Fall, *concupiscentia (carnis)* was present harmoniously in Eden, and was only made sinful after the Fall.

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However, after the Fall, sexual desire “was a disturbing force running counter to reason, a sign of the fact that all people are born with original sin, an experience which elicited shame and characterized the time after the Fall as marked by sin, suffering and death. Sexual desire was something to be avoided at all costs” (Lamberigts 2000, 186). Because sexual desire is itself not necessarily evil for Augustine, we see that his view differs from that of the Manichaeans.

Augustine focuses more on the fact that the passions of the flesh detract one’s attentions from God, and for this reason he must value abstinence and asceticism in general.⁵⁵ This Augustinian view of evil and flesh is far more Neoplatonic than it is Manichaean, fitting in with the overall Platonic hierarchy of being. Further, it is more Porphyrian than it is Plotinian as Augustine tends to take the disparagement of bodily things to extremes, which is evident in both Book X of his *Confessions* and his sermons on sexuality.

Feminist Concerns with Dualism: Porphyry and Augustine’s Unintentional Contribution to the Subjection of Women

Throughout this paper, I have focused primarily on the nature of dualism in both Porphyry and Augustine, and the way in which this dualism has inevitably led to a struggle with flesh and an ascetic denial of the corporeal body for both of these thinkers. This dualistic understanding of the mind and the body has penetrated deeply into the core of the Western paradigm,⁵⁶ and so we must now turn to the subject of the ramifications of this dualism, specifically, how this Platonic and early Christian hierarchical dualism has helped to negatively shape the Western view of women. Thus, I conclude this paper with the argument that – because women have throughout Western culture traditionally been associated with the bodily – this sort of hierarchical dualism put forth by Porphyry and Augustine has lent a hand to patriarchy in that it justifies subjugating women as we all must struggle to control the body.

Feminist scholarship has been greatly concerned with the topic of dualism and how the dualistic conception of a separation between soul and body, as well as binary categories in general (such as male and female, white and black, rich and poor), can be obstacles that impede the goals of feminism. As Eve Browning Cole points out, the dualistic relationship of the mind or soul to the body is “one of dominance; the

body is to be subordinated and ruled”; this relationship of mind to body necessarily involves “a fundamental power dialectic in which mind must triumph over the body” (Cole 1993, 56-57). Thus, a primary feminist critique of dualism has to do with the place women hold in many dualistic hierarchies and with the tendency of dualism to privilege one side over another, resulting in oppression. Many contemporary feminists have argued that a deconstruction of the harsh man/woman, masculine/feminine dichotomy is necessary: only an evaluation and a deconstruction of this polarity will truly help the feminist movement move forward.

Now, if man is to mind as woman is to body, as appears from much of the literature and iconography of Western culture throughout historical time, and if we adhere to a generally Cartesian view of the self as a purely mental entity, then the self of the woman becomes deeply problematic. Can women have Cartesian egos? Genuine selves? It would appear to be impossible if woman’s essence is located in the domain of the bodily. Clearly some other and less dichotomously dualistic conception of the self must be sought. (Cole 1993, 65)

Women have long carried the burden of a predefined nature; women have traditionally been associated with the body,⁵⁷ irrationality, emotion, chaos,⁵⁸ maternity, and nature.⁵⁹ Humanity is dichotomized as a result of this concept of woman’s essence: bodily woman as opposed to mental man; emotional woman as opposed to calmly rational man; natural woman as opposed to cultural man.⁶⁰ This binary view of male and female essences has crossed cultures and the span of time, and has put chains on women in the Western world. These chains, though not clearly visible, are nonetheless binding woman from the political realm and are causing her harm within her social world.⁶¹

Of course, Augustine and the Platonists are by no means solely to blame for dualistic hierarchies or woman’s lower position within these hierarchies, and I have no intention of resting all the blame on their shoulders. Women have been oppressed by dualistic associations with irrationality, the emotions, and the body since as far back in the history of philosophy as Pythagoras,⁶² and so naturally we cannot scapegoat either the Neoplatonists or Augustine. In fact, the argument may even be properly made that these men were attempting to help women achieve equal treatment in that they did not focus on bodily differences, but rather

on the similarities of souls – that bodies are ignored by these philosophers may actually have allowed them to see past the differences in women’s bodies so as to observe the real strengths of women. An examination of Augustine’s discussion of women such as Monica and his mistress throughout the *Confessions* may lend weight to this argument, as Augustine repeatedly praised Monica throughout the *Confessions* for her steadfast Christianity, and even praised his mistress for her ability to control her bodily passions upon their parting⁶³ (though his dismissive treatment of his mistress was rather misogynistic). Porphyry, too, may be commended for fairly feminist leanings; after all, he directed a substantial philosophical text, his *Letter to Marcella*, to a woman. However, all of this apparently positive discussion of women may be belied by the underlying problem posed for women of each man’s inherently dualistic philosophy, and their significant roles in the development of philosophy and of the Christian church causes their contributions to this problem to have been especially influential, and therefore considerably effective at shaping the negative view of women in the West.

We need not look simply to modernity or postmodernity to view the nature of this problem for women; this becomes apparent even in Porphyry’s *Letter to Marcella*. For example, when Porphyry entreats Marcella to take on the Neoplatonic lifestyle of turning away from the bodily towards the atemporal, he writes: “Therefore, do not be overly concerned about whether your body is male or female; do not regard yourself as a woman, Marcella, for I did not devote myself to you as such. Flee from every effeminate element of the soul as if you are clothed in a male body” (Porphyry 1987, 75). Needless to say, that the female person should regard her body as a male body so as to better free herself from the imprisonment of the flesh is highly problematic, and indicates that soul/body dualism should indeed be viewed as an obstacle to feminist goals.

Thus, though we cannot fairly blame either Porphyry or Augustine for these traditional associations of woman with the body and man with the soul or mind – since of course these associations had been in existence long before either of them – it is not unjust to point out the role they each played in further instituting this dualism; such efforts must be made so that we can examine the nature of this dualism and show how it came to be so commonly accepted as truth, as such a fundamental and formative aspect of the Western paradigm.⁶⁴ Such efforts will enable us

then to engage in the more productive endeavor of deconstructing this dualistic worldview.

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Endnotes

¹ “Plotinus, the philosopher of our times, seemed ashamed of being in the body. As a result of this state of mind he could never bear to talk about his race or his parents or his native country. And he objected so strongly to sitting to a painter or sculptor that he said to Amelius, who was urging him to allow a portrait of himself to be made, ‘Why really, is it not enough to have to carry the image in which nature has encased us, without your requesting me to agree to leave behind me a longer-lasting image of the image, as if it was something genuinely worth looking at?’” (Porphyry 1966, 3).

² Particularly *De Continentia*, *De Bono Coniugali*, *De Sancta Virginitate*, and *De Bono Viduitatis* (On Continence, *The Excellence of Marriage*, *Holy Virginity*, and *The Excellence of Widowhood*).

³ O'Meara argues in *Porphyry's Philosophy from Oracles in Augustine* that “the double controversy as to the sincerity of Augustine's conversion in A.D. 386 and the Platonist whose books most vitally affect him is solved: Augustine was sincerely converted and Porphyry played the major role” (O'Meara 1959, 2); he backs this controversial claim up with textual evidence from *City of God*. O'Meara further claims that Porphyry's lost *Philosophy from Oracles* was “probably the Platonic text which most directly affect Augustine's conversion” (O'Meara 1959, 1).

⁴ There is considerable debate within Augustinian scholarship surrounding whether or not Augustine remains a Manichaean throughout his life. The purpose of

this paper is, in part, to show that Neoplatonism actually carries the same dualistic tendencies, and so Augustine may not rightly be called a Manichaean but may have inherited some of these problems from the Neoplatonists, particularly Porphyry, instead. This project attempts to reveal how both of these traditions (Augustinian and Neoplatonic) are problematic for anyone attempting a positive theorization of the body.

⁵ “Asceticism, grounded in the principle of ontological dualism, dichotomized the spiritual and material facets of human existence. It was an intrinsic aspect of Platonism from its inception and also characterized the Neoplatonic tradition [...]. Porphyry described vividly the ascetic life of his teacher [Plotinus], emphasizing his sparse vegetarian diet, limited sleep and sexual continence” (Wicker 1987, 7).

⁶ “This drastic dualism is vulnerable to criticism from many different directions; feminist critics begin with the observation that in Western culture and throughout its history, we can observe a tendency to identify women with the nature, the physical, the bodily. Nature is personified as a female, a ‘mother’; women are portrayed as more closely linked to nature, less completely integrated into civilization and the cultural order, than men. Men are rational agents, makers of order and measure, controllers of history; women are emotional vessels, subjects or orders and measures, passive observers of history” (Cole 1993, 64-65).

⁷ Of course, it is undeniable that Scripture indeed had an influence on Augustine’s notion of flesh and spirit, but we need not think of the influence as an either/or – either Scripture or Neoplatonism – but rather it would probably be most correct to see the synthesis of both in Augustine’s philosophy. In that vein, it is interesting to observe that Augustine’s conversion to Christianity involved a denial of the pleasures of the flesh. “Hearing an unseen child say, ‘Take up and read. Take up and read,’ Augustine opened the book of St. Paul, which he had been studying, to Romans 13, where he read: ‘Let us live honorably as in daylight; not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the flesh’” (Hampl 1998, xxxi). Though this paper is limited to uncovering the Neoplatonic sources of his denial of the flesh, it would be remiss not to note that both Neoplatonism and Scripture synthesize to influence Augustine’s negative theorization of the body.

⁸ “Even the divine Plato started from these thoughts and recollected the intelligible from the perceptible” (Porphyry 1987, 55).

⁹ Consider the allegory of the cave in Book VI of the *Republic* (514a-517c). “The whole image [of the cave and its prisoners], Glaucon, must be fitted together

with what we said before. The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey" (Plato 1997b, 517b).

¹⁰ See also the *Theaetetus*: "The type of purification of the soul that Plato himself has in mind may be illustrated by the passage from the *Theaetetus* (176A-B) [...]: Since evils cannot exist among the gods, but hover always around mortal nature and this earth, we should try to flee from here to there as quickly as possible; this flight consists in becoming like God as far as we can, and to become like Him is to become just and holy and wise" (Callahan 1964, 50).

¹¹ In the *Phaedo*, Plato makes clear this distinction between the physical (visible) world and the real, intelligible (invisible) world. Plato asks Cebes, "can the Equal itself, the Beautiful itself, each thing in itself, the real, ever be affected by any change whatever? Or does each of them that really is, being uniform by itself, remain the same and never in any way tolerate any change whatsoever? > It must remain the same, said Cebes, and in the same state, Socrates. > What of the many beautiful particulars, be they men, horses, clothes, or other such things, or the many equal particulars, and all those which bear the same name as those others? Do they remain the same or, in total contrast to those other realities, one might say, never in any way remain the same as themselves or in relation to each other? > The latter is the case, they are never in the same state. > These latter you could touch and see and perceive with the other senses, but those that always remain the same can only be grasped by the reasoning power of the mind? They are not seen but are invisible? > That is altogether true, he said. > Do you then want us to assume two kinds of existences, the visible and the invisible? > Let us assume this. > And the invisible always remains the same, whereas the visible never does? > Let us assume that too. > Now one part of ourselves is the body, another part is the soul? > Quite so. > To which class of existence do we say the body is more alike and akin? > To the visible, as anyone can see" (Plato 1997a, 78d-79b).

¹² "I think that if the soul is polluted and impure when it leaves the body, having always been associated with it and served it, bewitched by physical desires and pleasures to the point at which nothing seems to exist for it but the physical, which one can touch and see or eat and drink or make use of for sexual enjoyment, and if that soul is accustomed to hate and fear and avoid that which is dim and invisible to the eyes but intelligible and to be grasped by philosophy – do you think such a soul will escape pure and by itself? > Impossible, he said. > It is no doubt permeated by the physical, which constant intercourse and association with the body, as well as considerable practice, has caused to become ingrained in it? > Quite so. >

We must believe, my friend, that this bodily element is heavy, ponderous, earthy and visible. Through it, such a soul has become heavy and is dragged back to the visible region in fear of the unseen and of Hades [...] They wander until their longing for that which accompanies them, the physical, again imprisons them in a body” (Plato 1997a, 81b-e).

¹³ “Every pleasure and every pain provides, as it were, another nail to rivet the soul to the body and to weld them together. It makes the soul corporeal, so that it believes that truth is what the body says it is. As it shares the beliefs and delights of the body, I think it inevitably comes to share its ways and manner of life and is unable to ever reach Hades in a pure state; it is always full of body when it departs, so that it soon falls back into another body and grows with it as if it had been sewn into it. Because of this, it can have no part in the company of the divine, the pure and uniform” (Plato 1997a, 83d-e).

¹⁴ “From the Soul using the body as an instrument, it does not follow that the Soul must share the body's experiences: a man does not himself feel all the experiences of the tools with which he is working. [...] As long as we have agent and instrument, there are two distinct entities; if the Soul uses the body it is separate from it. But apart from the philosophical separation how does Soul stand to body? Clearly there is a combination. [...] It will be the double task of philosophy to direct this lower Soul towards the higher, the agent, and except in so far as the conjunction is absolutely necessary, to sever the agent from the instrument, the body, so that it need not forever have its Act upon or through this inferior” (Plotinus 1956, I.1.3).

¹⁵ “We must recognize how different is the governance exercised by the All-Soul; the relation is not the same: it is not in fetters. Among the very great number of differences it should not have been overlooked that the We [the human Soul] lies under fetter; and this in a second limitation, for the Body-Kind, already fettered within the All-Soul, imprisons all that it grasps. But the Soul of the Universe cannot be in bond to what itself has bound: it is sovereign and therefore immune of the lower things, over which we on the contrary are not masters. That in it which is directed to the Divine and Transcendent is ever unmingled, knows no encumbering; that in it which imparts life to the body admits nothing bodily to itself. It is the general fact that an inset [as the Body], necessarily shares the conditions of its containing principle [as the Soul], and does not communicate its own conditions where that principle has an independent life: thus a graft will die if the stock dies, but the stock will live on by its proper life though the graft wither” (Plotinus I.9.7).

¹⁶ “Plotinus extends this relation of priority by nature between soul and body to cover the general relation between intelligible being and body” (O’Meara 1996,

74). “But the other nature, which has being of itself, is all that really exists, which does not come into being or perish: or everything else will pass away, and could not come into being afterwards if this real existence had perished which preserves all other things and especially this All, which is preserved and given its universal order and beauty by soul” (Plotinus IV.7.9.1-5).

¹⁷ For Plotinus, “Soul, as the source of life in bodies, is not a body and does not depend on body for its existence. This in turn points to the immortality of soul. Plotinus is quick also to convert the distinction he has established between soul and body into a broad distinction between intelligible and sensible reality [...] between what is truly and eternally and what is subject to perpetual change. (O’Meara 1993, 18)

¹⁸ Plotinus made this point very clear in his argument against the Gnostics in *Ennead 2.9*. Plotinus was upset that the Gnostics “ignored the full context of Plato’s teaching, emphasizing his most dualist and body-hating statements at the expense of his comprehensive and integrative worldview” (Miles 1999, 98); Miles argues in *Plotinus on Body and Beauty* that this argument against the Gnostics proves that Plotinus was not as anti-body as his student Porphyry. “Plotinus objected to the Gnostics’ claim that the sensible world is the evil creation of an evil demiurge. [...] Plotinus will find this construction of reality deeply repugnant. For him, the universe and everything in it is the good creation of a single and simple source called, for purposes of reference only, the One or the Good. The universe informed and sustained by the One exhibits goodness and beauty throughout; some entities have more, some less according to their spiritual proximity to the One” (Miles 1999, 99). This, we shall see, is remarkably similar to Augustine’s brand of soul/body dualism.

¹⁹ In *Ennead IV.8* and *Ennead V* particularly, Plotinus describes the descent of souls into bodies from a “higher world” (Plotinus 1984, 11).

²⁰ (Smith 1974, xi).

²¹ It is known that in the year “268 [Porphyry] fell sick with a melancholy and Plotinus urged him south to Sicily for his health’s sake” (Barnes 2003, x).

²² “The fit of depression which almost led Porphyry to suicide betrays a temperament which was dissatisfied with the things of this world” (Smith 1974, 21).

²³ “When he was still living in Rome and attending Plotinus’ courses, Porphyry became depressed and for some time, he entertained the idea of taking his own life. This state of mind had not escaped Plotinus’ godlike attention, so he paid

Porphyry an unexpected visit and convinced him that what was really wrong with him was an imbalance in his humors caused by black bile. He sent Porphyry to Sicily to get some rest and to benefit from the better climate. [...] Eunapius tells us that Porphyry wanted to kill himself because of Plotinus' teachings [...]. One could say that Plotinus is here presented as if he were defending his teachings against a Gnostic interpretation: his theories should not be interpreted as incitements of hate towards the material world, life in this world or life in the material body. Moderate asceticism is a legitimate inference, dualistic self-mutilation or suicide are not" (Praet 1999).

²⁴ Miles has argued in *Plotinus on Body and Beauty* that "Porphyry overstates and distorts Plotinus's careful teaching on body. Why did Porphyry misrepresent his teacher?" (Miles 1999, 5). Perhaps Porphyry overstated Plotinus' position on the body due to his own view of the body; trained abstinence, the need of nothing, seems to be Porphyry's reading of philosophy's goal in general. "Therefore, the philosophers say that nothing is as necessary as perceiving clearly what is not necessary, and that the greatest wealth of all is self-sufficiency, and they take the need of nothing as worthy of respect" (Porphyry 1987, 71). Praet discusses this controversy as well in his essay "Hagiography and Biography as Prescriptive Sources for Late Antique Sexual Morals"; it is possible that Porphyry interpreted Plotinian philosophy too strongly in the direction of dualistic asceticism, as though it were an outright rejection of life in the here and now. Plotinus may actually have been wary of this misinterpretation.

²⁵ Certainly, Plotinus also participated in a mildly ascetic lifestyle, but it seems that Porphyry focused more on the withdrawal aspect of Neoplatonism than did Plotinus. Porphyry's emphasis was on control over the body, including controlling one's sexual appetites, diet, and even sleep. This philosophy of control over, (or of controlled disregard of), the physical body is especially explicated in Porphyry's *Letter to Marcella*.

²⁶ "Porphyry summoned Marcella, first of all, to an ascetic way of life" (Wicker 1987, 7).

²⁷ "'The lover of the body is always a lover of wealth; the lover of wealth is necessarily unjust; the unjust person is both irreverent toward God and parents and immoral toward everyone else. [...] Therefore one must totally avoid the lover of the body as ungodly and defiled'" (Porphyry 1987, 59).

²⁸ "Consequently, even the gods have prescribed remaining pure by abstinence from food and sex. This leads those who are pursuing piety toward Nature's intent,

which the gods themselves constituted, as though any excess, by being contrary to Nature's intent, is defiled and deadly" (Porphyry 1987, 71).

²⁹ "Let us become totally in control of ourselves" {Porphyry 1987, 71}.

³⁰ "Plato suggested that the soul can be separated from the body by a process of gathering all the elements of soul which are dispersed through the body into a single whole which presumably was the state of the soul before its embodiment. This process is called purification. [...] Plato argues that the unified soul can live both here and hereafter as an entity separate from the body. Porphyry does not make this argument here, but it is implicit in his thought" (Wicker 1987, 95): "And does purification not run out to be what we mentioned in our argument some time ago, namely, to separate the soul as far as possible from the body and accustom it to gather itself and collect itself out of every part of the body and to dwell by itself as far as it can both now and in the future, freed, as it were, from the bonds of the body?" (Plato 1997a, 67c-d).

³¹ "Separation means living the life of the inner man. This life is vested in the higher or intellectual part of soul and eventually in Nous. Only the rational powers can rightly be said to lead us to this life as they alone are capable of introversion whereby we come to see the ground of our own being, the inner self. This is not to deny that the lower powers are important. They must remain 'quiet' and controlled by the higher. The real life goes on at the higher level. The lower activities of man are a mere by-product of the higher self and express its life at a lower level just as the lower soul itself is a lesser manifestation of the higher soul. Thus so far we gather that the soul can and ought to release itself from the body even before natural death and that this release is called philosophical separation or death" (Smith 1974, 23-24).

³² As Smith explains, the separation of soul from body "does not necessarily refer to the moment of death but to a full separation of body and soul even during earthly life. This is termed 'philosophical' separation, a term which equally must involve the concept of a 'philosophical' union of body and soul or rather 'fall' of soul into body" (Smith 1974, 20).

³³ Perhaps Porphyry's desire to commit suicide was a misled attempt at a philosophical separation from the body. As Smith questions, is Porphyry's "a purely negative approach to life – an escape from the realities of this world?" (Smith 1974, 20).

³⁴ Augustine needs to avoid a fully negative articulation of flesh for his theodicy; this is why I titled the essay "Augustine's Struggle with Flesh" – I do not

mean to indicate that he was a strict mind/body dualist, but rather I want to show that he continues to struggle with an understanding of flesh as both positive and negative. His turn to Neoplatonism allows him to move away from a strict mind/body dualism, yet Neoplatonism continues to harbor a negative view of the material body.

³⁵ “Augustine could have found in this passage from Porphyry [a passage from the lost *Philosophy from Oracles* as accounted in *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 23] – which moreover is merely an excerpt from the full text, or at any rate from a larger excerpt of the *Philosophy from Oracles* – the basic notions of a way to the Father, a life of purgation, virtue, imitation of the Father, seeking for Him, worshipping Him spiritually, and aiming at ultimate divinization” (O’Meara 1959, 57).

³⁶ As well as the other problem he had inherited from the Manicheans: he had troubles in that he had been conceiving of God as corporeal, when he knew that God could not be so – God must be incorporeal. These two problems are really tied together for Augustine.

³⁷ Evil was such a problem for Augustine because it challenged the notion that God is omnipotent and unchanging perfection. Why would such a being have created a substance such as evil? If he were perfect, it seems he would never do such a thing, so he must not be perfect. Or, if he did not create it, but rather is at war with it as the Manicheans believed, he must not be omnipotent. The books of the Platonists, in which Augustine found some great bits of wisdom (as described in Book VII of his *Confessions*), solved this problem for him.

³⁸ Everything in creation is good in that it came from the One, and everything in creation longs to return to the One from which it came.

³⁹ Grace is undeserved divine favor, whereby God helps us overcome the problems of ignorance and difficulty that accompany the human condition after the fall of Adam and Eve. Often, when humans ask for it, and sometimes even when they don’t, Grace intervenes to help humans break out of patterns that they cannot escape by will, when the hold of the body is too strong for us to handle it on our own. We require God’s help; to assume otherwise is pure arrogance.

⁴⁰ He writes in Book VIII: “To find my delight in your law as far as my inmost self was concerned was of no profit to me when a different law in my bodily members was warring against the law of my mind, imprisoning me under the law of sin which held sway in my lower self. For the law of sin is that brute force of habit whereby the mind is dragged along and held fast against its will, and deservedly so because it slipped into the habit willingly. In my wretched state, who was there to

free me from this death-doomed body, save your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Augustine 1998, 154-155).

⁴¹ In Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine clearly explicates his dualistic understanding of the world. Within this dualism, the non-corporeal soul is superior to the body; it is that which gives the body its life, but is not limited to the body. In Book X, 7.10, Augustine writes: “Even you, my soul, are better than that, for you impart energy to the mass of your body and endow it with life, and no corporeal thing can do that for any other corporeal thing” (Augustine 1998, 204). Compare this with *Ennead VI*, in which Plotinus asks that we think of the “body as being ‘in’ soul, in the sense that it depends entirely for its organization and life on soul” (O’Meara 1993, 27), and not the other way around.

⁴² In Book X, 6,8, Augustine writes: “What am I loving when I love you? Not beauty of body nor transient grace, not this fair light which is now so friendly to my eyes, not melodious song in all its lovely harmonies, not the sweet fragrance of flowers or ointments or spices, not manna or honey, not limbs that draw me to carnal embrace: none of these do I love when I love my God” (Augustine 1998, 202).

⁴³ “Quite certainly you command me to refrain from concupiscence of the flesh and concupiscence of the eyes and worldly pride. You commanded me to abstain from fornication, and recommended a course even better than the marital union you have sanctioned” (Augustine 1998, 223). Augustine confesses in Book X that, in spite of this knowledge of God’s command, he is still plagued by disturbing erotic dreams, though during his waking hours he is celibate. Taste, smell, sound, and vision are also treacherous pleasures of the flesh that he finds difficult to deal with.

⁴⁴ Augustine wrote *The Excellence of Marriage* in response to the fourth century monk Jovinian. Jovinian “expressed reservations about the tide of asceticism which was then sweeping through the Roman world. Although Jovinian himself was a monk committed to the celibate life, he regarded the notion that celibacy was superior to marriage as implying an unduly negative (even ‘Manichean’) view of sexuality” (Hunter 1990, 29). Augustine defends celibacy within marriage in a way that is careful not to sound Manichaean by pointing out the various goods of marriage, including procreation, fidelity, and the sacramental bond (Hunter 1990, 30). However, “the married person who seeks sexual relations out of excessive desire (‘the concupiscence of the flesh’) commits a sin that is unforgivable” (Hunter 1990, 30).

⁴⁵ In *Holy Virginit*y, “Augustine argues that the celibate life is genuinely superior to the married life” (Hunter 1990, 65). He argues that virginity is superior to marriage (Augustine 1990, 71) and to physical motherhood (Augustine 1990, 72).

⁴⁶ In *The Excellence of Widowhood*, Augustine praises the virtues of chastity once again, and instructs the reader (the letter was written to Anicia Juliana, a widow) to “let spiritual pleasures take the place of carnal ones: reading, prayer, the psalms, good thoughts, being occupied with good works, looking forward to the next life, having one’s heart on high, and giving thanks for all these things to the Father of lights” (Augustine 1990, 131).

⁴⁷ “I say to you, however, walk with the spirit and do not carry out the desires of the flesh. The flesh has desires opposed to those of the spirit, and the spirit has desires opposed to those of the flesh. These two work against each other with the result that you do not do what you want to do. [...] He therefore wants those living under grace to enter that struggle against the deeds of the flesh. [...] last among the good things he listed he put continence, which is the object of the discussion we have now undertaken and the reason for much that we have already said, because he particularly wanted that to be fixed in our minds. Without doubt in this war where the spirit has desires opposed to the flesh, it is of special importance, since in a way it crucifies the actual desires of the flesh. That is why, after saying this, the apostle immediately went on: Those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. This is what continence does, this is how the deeds of the flesh are put to death. On the other hand, those deeds in their turn bring death to those who are lured by carnal desire to abandon continence and consent to committing them” (Augustine 1990, 197-198).

⁴⁸ The body, Porphyry writes, “is joined to you in the same way as the membrane is joined to embryos growing in the womb, and as the stalk is joined to the growing grain [...] So then, just as the membrane and the stalk of the grain grow concurrently, and once they mature each is shucked off, likewise also the body, which has been joined to the sown soul, is not part of a man but exists in order for him to be born in the womb, just as the entwined membrane is yoked to the body in order for him to be born on earth. The more an individual has turned toward the mortal element, the more he makes his heart unsuitable for the sublimity of immortality. But the more he holds aloof from passionate attachment to the body, the more he draws near the divine” (Porphyry 1987, 74-75).

⁴⁹ “So the flesh is not evil, if it is devoid of the evil, that is, the defect, with which human nature is impaired, not because it was made badly but because it has

acted badly. In both respects, namely soul and body, it was created good by a good God, but it has itself done wrong and thereby become bad” (Augustine 1990, 205).

⁵⁰ “When, therefore, all the evil, which came from us, has been destroyed in us, and the goodness in us has been increased and perfected to the peak of the supreme happiness of incorruptibility and immortality, what will our two substances be like then? Even now in this state of corruption and mortality, when the *corruptible body still weighs down the soul* (Wis 9:15) and, as the apostle says, *The body is dead because of sin* (Rom 8:10), he gives that testimony in support of our flesh, that is, the inferior and material part of us, with the words I quoted just above: *No one ever hates his own flesh; and he immediately adds, but nourishes and nurtures it, just as Christ does the Church* (Eph 5:29)” (Augustine 1990, 206).

⁵¹ “Because we are made up of both these two things, that at present oppose each other within us, we pray and work to bring them into harmony. We must not think that one of them is the enemy. The enemy is the defect whereby the flesh has desires opposed to the spirit” (Augustine 1990, 204).

⁵² This is the constant state of things in the mortal realm, and so we must be forever vigilant. Augustine emphasizes that “the fact that the flesh has desires opposed to the spirit, and good does not dwell in our flesh, and the law in our bodies rebels against the law of our mind, does not mean that there is an amalgamation of two natures, created from opposing elements, but that one nature is divided against itself as a consequence of sin. We were not like that in Adam, before nature disdained and offended its maker by listening to and following its seducer” (Augustine 1990, 206).

⁵³ See also Lamberigts, 1998: “Was Augustine a Manichaean? The Assessment of Julian of Aeclanum.”

⁵⁴ “What Julian could not accept, however, was that *concupiscentia* has been characterized as having the power to elude the rational and moral autonomy of the human person. As a component of the human body, *concupiscentia* was subject to reason” (Lamberigts 2000, 177).

⁵⁵ “Since desire as such distracts the human person from his or her true purpose and, in a certain sense, commands the entire person, it cannot be from God but must belong to the world of the flesh, which is at war with the spirit. The world of the flesh incorporates everything that encourages the human person to place his or her own will above the will of God. [...] Where the purpose of humanity – life in and for God – hindered by *concupiscentia*’s ungodly aspirations, such *concupiscentia*

certainly cannot be good and, as such, it would be better neither to make use of it nor to 'know; it than to use it properly for the sake of procreation. It is for this reason that Augustine had the highest regard, at least on this question, for a life of *Christian* abstinence, within or without marriage [...]. It must also be evident, therefore, that every form of sexuality outside marriage was formally rejected by Augustine" (Lamberigts 2000, 187).

⁵⁶ "Two features of this way of discussing the relation of mind to body, common to Plato and Descartes, should be noted. First, it is striking how easily both drop into the mode of thought in which a human being becomes not one but two, and two *different*, kinds of entity. There quickly emerges a kind of logical and metaphysical distance between mind and body, an alienation that provokes disagreement about what to believe, what to seek, how to behave. But secondly, this is not a disagreement among equals. The mind or soul is in Descartes' view the locus of certainty and value, in Plato's view the part of the human composite akin to the 'pure' and 'divine.' Its relationship to the body is to be one of dominance; the body is to be subordinated and ruled. An individual human being contains within the self, therefore, a fundamental power dialectic in which mind must triumph over the body and must trumpet its victory in flourishes of 'pure' rationality by means of which its soundness is demonstrated and ratified. Far from being an isolated peculiarity of a small handful of philosophers, moreover, this general dialectic is seen being set up and played out in many theaters of Western culture, from religion to popular morality, from Neoplatonism to existentialism" (Cole 1993, 56-57).

⁵⁷ Woman represents for man all that ties him to the bodily world, to nature; she is the representation of the natural that must be dominated, ignored, or overcome – she represents an impediment for man: "Men's oppression of women is, in Beauvoir's existential analysis, an inauthentic attempt to evade the demands of authentic human relationships and the ambiguous realities of human existence. For men who would define themselves as pure spirit, women represent an odious link to the absurd contingency of a man's own life: his birth, embodiment, and death. 'In all civilizations and in our own day, [woman] inspires horror in man: it is horror of his own carnal contingency which he projects onto her'" (Simons 1995, 256).

⁵⁸ Ellen Driscoll writes of the essentialistic notion of woman; Driscoll writes, "The message of female hunger as a potent metaphor for out-of-control desire, sexuality, and power is frequently internalized, in gendered terms, as the battle between their male (e.g., disciplined and spiritual) and their female (e.g., dangerous and insatiable) selves" (Driscoll 1997). Along the same lines, Bordo states, "throughout dominant Western religious and philosophical traditions, the 'virile' capacity for self-management is decisively coded as male. By contrast, all these

bodily spontaneities – hunger, sexuality, the emotions – seen as needful of containment and control, have been culturally constructed and coded as female” (Driscoll 1997). Control over the physical and the emotional has been associated with the masculine, and a chaotic lack of control has been associated with the feminine.

⁵⁹ “Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will; Nature is a vein of gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and she is the supreme reality; she is contingency and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself. Now ally, now, enemy, she appears as the dark chaos from whence life wells up, as this life itself, and as the over-yonder toward which life tends. Woman sums up nature as Mother, Wife, and Idea; these forms now mingle and now conflict, and each of them wears a double visage” (Beauvoir 1989, 144).

⁶⁰ For a more thorough discussion of the misogynistic views of woman’s nature in Western thought, see Nancy Tuana’s book *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman’s Nature* (Tuana 1993).

⁶¹ These assumptions regarding woman’s nature have resulted in terrible forms of oppression. This is especially evident in the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; because the body supposedly rules women, we are less capable of resisting evil and temptation than men are. “To achieve a life of reason, one must be able to transcend the desires and needs of the body. Furthermore, one must focus only on universal issues, completely ignoring anything that is particular and personal. The needs of the body must be suppressed by the mind. The emotions must be dominated by the will. But this definition of the rational person is in tension with the traditional view of woman as being more influenced by the body and the emotions than man. In fact woman is frequently defined by qualities which directly contradict Descartes’ requirements for rationality. To take one such example, Philo characterizes the female as ‘material, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought’. Woman is perceived as lacking the strength of will Descartes posited as necessary for dominating the emotions, a position accepted by Aquinas who tells us that ‘since woman, as regards the body, has a weak temperament, the result is that for the most part, whatever she holds to, she holds to it weakly.’ And given that the needs of her body are viewed as far stronger than those of man, woman will be seen as less capable of suppressing them, a tenet that fed the belief in the sixteenth and seventeenth century that women are prone to witchcraft” (Tuana 1992, 39)

⁶² Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans believed that the world is comprised of oppositions: they set various aspects of the world against one another and divided these opposites into two lists, believing that “order, beauty, and harmony are achieved when members of the first list establish dominance over their counterparts on the second list” (Ring 1999, 57). The first list, the contents of which should establish dominance over the contents of the second list, includes male, light, and good. The second list, the contents of which should be dominated if harmony is to be attained, includes female, darkness, and bad. It is important to note that the traits traditionally associated with women caused the Pythagoreans to believe that men should dominate women. This is an early case of male philosophers defining women into subjugation, but it is by no means an isolated case; unfortunately, the canon of Western philosophy is fraught with this notion that women are irrational, chaotic, emotional, bodily, and natural. “This association of women with the emotions and the appetites [has] remained a consistent tenet of Western philosophical, religious, and scientific views of women” (Tuana 1994, 35).

⁶³ Augustine writes of the strengths of his mistress in Book VI: “She had returned to Africa, vowing to [God] that that she would never give herself to another man, and the son I had fathered by her was left with me. But I was too unhappy to follow a woman’s example: I faced two years of waiting before I could marry the girl to whom I was betrothed, and I chafed at the delay, for I was no lover of marriage but the slave of lust” (Augustine 1998, 118). Along these lines, see also Børresen’s (1994) essay, “Patristic ‘Feminism’: The Case of Augustine.”

⁶⁴ Due to the fact that male philosophers have not made the subject of woman an issue worthy of serious discussion and inquiry, many of the faulty assumptions regarding women’s nature have been harbored and sustained for thousands of years. Unfortunately, these false associations dominate all philosophical discussion on the topic of women throughout the history of philosophy. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall discuss this in their anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*: “Traditionally, philosophers have valued mind over body, culture over nature, reason over irrationality, truth over illusion, and good over evil. Women, femininity, and maternity have been associated with body, nature, irrationality, illusion, and even evil. Because of the associations among women, femininity, maternity, and nature or irrationality, discussions of women and femininity have been topics traditionally excluded from serious consideration by philosophers” (Oliver and Pearsall 1998, 1-2)

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