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[See table of contents](#)

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AUGUSTINE AND ASTROLOGY*

Leo Charles FERRARI

Augustine of Hippo's sustained and avid interest in astrology during his earlier years is an important aspect of his development which is all too easily ignored. Part of the reason for this is the obvious emphasis in the *Confessions* upon his prolonged involvement with the religion of Manicheism, extending from his nineteenth to his twenty-eighth year.¹ Yet, during approximately the same period of time, Augustine was also deeply immersed in studies of the occult influences of the stars—"I was an eager student of the books of those who make horoscopes."²

The object of the present study is therefore to examine the hitherto neglected rôle of astrology in Augustine's development prior to his conversion. Also of interest is his later, more mature attitude to that art which was so widely practised in the pagan world and with which Christianity had to come to terms. In this regard, as the principal architect of western Christianity, Augustine's final conclusions on astrology would be of no small moment for posterity.

Even after his rejection of astrology and his conversion to Christianity, Augustine's earliest surviving writings betray an enduring fascination with the grandeur of the heavens. Thus, in the *Soliloquies* he has Reason address him as follows: "You are not so much delighted by the earth and her beauty, as by the beauty and magnificence of heaven."³ These words were written in the winter of 386-7 when Augustine was thirty-two. If there remains any doubt about the preference claimed in the previous extract, it is settled by another impressive passage in the same work, when Augustine rhapsodises with rare eloquence upon the grandeur of the heavens as follows:

God . . . by whose laws the poles revolve, the stars fulfill their courses, the sun vivifies the day, the moon tempers the night; and all the framework of things, day after day by vicissitude of light and gloom, month after month by waxings and wanings of the moon, year after year by orderly successions of spring and summer and fall and winter, cycle after cycle by accomplished

* The reader's attention is drawn to two of my more specialised studies in the same domain: 'Astronomy and Augustine's Break with the Manichees,' *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 19 (1973) 263-276; and 'Halley's Comet of 374 AD- New Light upon Augustine's Conversion to Manicheism,' *Augustiniana* 27 (1977) 139-150.

1. *Conf.* 4.1.1. (Such a reference to the *Confessions* would appear hereafter merely as: 4.1.1).
2. 4.3.5.
3. *Soliloquies* 1.11.

concurrence of the solar course, and through the mighty orbs of time, folding and refolding upon themselves, as the stars still recur to their first conjunctions, maintains, so far as this merely visible matter allows, the mighty constancy of things.⁴

In view of this extract, it is hardly surprising to find an off-handed reference in one of Augustine's other early writings to his own daily contemplation of stars.⁵ One is reminded of course, of the same practice which the Pythagoreans enjoined upon their followers.⁶ Yet, it would appear that this daily meditation of the stars with Augustine was more than a romantic venture of his youth. As his later writings show, he even came to believe that man was uniquely fashioned as the only upright animal so that he would be anatomically adapted as it were, to continually contemplating the heavens and thereby be constantly reminded of his heavenly destiny.⁷

On the other hand, as Augustine is careful to point out, mere knowledge of the heavens does not of itself constitute supernatural wisdom. For him, the astronomers who can predict eclipses and count all the stars in the heavens are only the more lost in their learning if they have not thereby gone beyond the heavens and found God.⁸ The ultimate call of man is rather to the heaven of heavens, compared with which the visible heavens, notwithstanding their grandeur, are much closer to the things of earth.⁹

It is understandable therefore that Augustine's personal search for God, as described in the *Confessions* is most dramatically expressed in an inner "ascent" which transcends even the heavens themselves:

We raised ourselves higher and step by step passed over all material things, even the heaven itself from which sun and moon and stars shine down upon the earth. And still we went upward, meditating and speaking and looking with wonder at your works, and we came to our own souls, and we went beyond our souls.¹⁰

This, the much-discussed "Vision at Ostia" took place in the presence of his mother, Monica. Later too in the *Confessions*, after the death of his mother, Augustine tried unsuccessfully to relieve the grief in his heart by bathing. He then fell asleep upon his bed and found his grief somewhat relieved upon waking. Then, while lying on his bed, some verses came to his mind which Augustine considered significant enough to include in the account some ten years after the events described. Of all possible themes for such an occasion, that of the heavens dominates the first stanza:

Creator Thou of everything,
Director of the circling poles,

4. *Op. cit.*, 1.4.

5. *Answer to Skeptics* 1.22.

6. Cf. Marcus AURELIUS, *Meditations* 11.27.

7. *City of God* 14.4, 11 & 27; 22.24. The image is apparently derived (with some play upon the word 'rectus') from *Ecclesiastes* 7.29.

8. 5.3.3.

9. 12.2.2. See also *City of God*, book 22.

10. 9.10.24.

Clothing the day in lovely light
And giving night the peace of sleep.¹¹

Finally, references to the heavens under various aspects abound in the last three books (11-13) of the *Confessions*, as Augustine expounds at length upon the opening words of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In the concluding book, Augustine pays the supreme compliment to the Scriptures (which he revered above all writings) when he compared them to the firmament of the heavens:

Who except you, our God, made for us a firmament of authority over us in your divine Scripture? For . . . you have 'like a skin stretched out the firmament' of your book, that is, your words which so well agree together and which, through the agency of mortal men, you placed above us.¹²

Such then, are a few of the many occasions in the *Confessions* when Augustine's descriptions are permeated with celestial imagery. They show Augustine to be extremely heaven-orientated, even in the physical sense. This is further confirmed by the fact that he was for some nine years a member of the Manichean sect which worshipped the Sun and Moon as divine beings.¹³ This aspect of that religion would seem to have held a particular fascination for Augustine, as is evident by the very description which he gives of his conversion to Manicheism in the *Confessions*:

There was set before me, in my hunger for you, the sun and moon, beautiful creations of yours, but nevertheless creations of yours and not you yourself, nor indeed the first of your creations. For your spiritual creations are before these physical creations, heavenly and shining as they are.¹⁴

Consistently with Augustine's heaven-orientated character, his disillusionment with Manicheism was eventually also precipitated by celestial phenomena, as I have argued elsewhere.¹⁵ It would seem that the solar eclipses of 378 and 381 (the first such phenomena which Augustine would have witnessed since the age of five) helped undermine his faith as a Manichee that the Sun and Moon were divine beings. This helps explain the preoccupation with celestial phenomena and their prediction, which pervade the earlier chapters of the fifth book of the *Confessions*. Without the explanation which I have proposed, this lengthy preoccupation appears as a curious intrusion upon the explanations which Augustine there gives for his growing disenchantment with Manicheism.

From these events, it would appear that while teaching at Carthage, Augustine had acquired quite a knowledge of the astronomy of his times. Quite distinct

11. 9.12.23.

12. 13.15.16.

13. For a short account of Manicheism see pp. 9-18 in 'Introductory Essay' in volume IV of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (New York, 1901) which volume is devoted to Augustine's writings against the Manichees and the Donatists. See also *Conf.* 3.6.10, as well as *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean* 20.1-4.

14. 3.6.10.

15. Leo FERRARI, 'Astronomy and Augustine's Break with the Manichees', *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 19 (1973), 263-276.

from this, yet at the same time dependent upon it, was the art of astrology which concerned the supposed influence of the heavenly bodies upon human affairs. Later in life, at least, Augustine set forth the distinction in clear terms. Thus, in a letter of the year 400 (about the same time that he was writing his *Confessions*) he observes:

But who can fail to perceive how great is the difference between useful observations of the heavenly bodies in connection with the weather, such as farmers or sailors make . . . and the vain hallucinations of men who observe the heavens not to know the weather, or their course . . . but merely to pry into the future and learn now what fate has decreed.¹⁶

The elementary form of astronomy practised by the farmer and the sailor of Augustine's time was but the layman's version of a sophisticated science whose foremost champion had been the famous Ptolemy of Alexandria. From this, across the succeeding centuries, there developed the modern science of astronomy. However, along with this growth of astronomy, the ages have also been witness to another interest in stars which sees them as means of predicting future events. This too survives in modern horoscope columns.

In the world of Augustine, astrology was but one of the many popular forms of divination whereby attempts were made to predict future events, or even to control their outcome. Thus, in regard to this latter aspect, Augustine describes how, when he was about to enter a poetry-reading contest, a magician (*aruspex*) offered to procure him the victory through his magical ceremonies, in exchange for a fee.¹⁷ Even earlier in the Roman Empire, Cicero, in his book *On Divination*, gives an indication of how widespread was attempted foretelling of the future:

Now I am aware of no people, however refined and learned or however savage and ignorant, which does not think that signs are given of future events, and that certain persons can recognize these signs and foretell events before they occur.¹⁸

Too, among the Romans, besides astrology, common methods of divination included dreams, frenzies, unusual events (including lightning and earthquakes), the behaviour of animals (the flights of birds were popular omens) and the inspection of entrails.

When it came to divination, the young Augustine's taste seems as exotic as his preference for the Persian religion of Manicheism. Judging from his writings, the traditional Roman means of divination apparently held little appeal for him. Thus, in his later writing, during his massive attack upon Roman paganism in the first ten books of the *City of God*, magic and augury in their most popular forms are barely mentioned.¹⁹ However, it is significant that during that same attack, he does devote some attention to disproving the claim that the prosperity of Rome derived from any kind of fate (*fatum*) as decreed by the stars.²⁰

16. Letter 55 15.

17. 4.2.3. See also *Answer to Skeptics* 1.17-18.

18. CICERO, *On Divination* 1.1 (Falconer translation).

19. *City of God* 4.29; 7.35. The same can be said of the *De divinatione daemonum*.

20. *City of God* 5.1-7.

Astrology was exotic in Augustine's milieu because it was a relatively late importation and also because of its obviously foreign sources. From both aspects its extending influence was opposed by the more traditional techniques of Roman augury; an opposition which was ultimately to be overcome, as astrology increasingly won acceptance in the Empire.

The origins of astrology presumably lie in the Mesopotamia of the third millennium before Christ.²¹ From there it followed the path typical of so many religions and spread westwards. By the time of Plato, its infiltration of Greece was so extensive that he himself advocated the joint worship of Apollo and the sun,²² thus linking the most Greek of all the gods with the most resplendent of all the heavenly bodies. Identification of the various stars with the traditional figures of Greek mythology was carried further by Plato's contemporary, the astronomer Eudoxus. Further absorption of astrology by the Greeks was promoted by Alexander's expansion of the Empire to the east. From the Greeks, the art of astrology was destined inevitably to be absorbed along with so many other "Greek" influences, into the Roman Empire.

In ancient Mesopotamia, astrology had been a royal science. What was written in the majestic heavens could not be addressed to any personage of lower rank than the supreme ruler. The democratising influence of Greece deprived astrology of its exalted status by bringing it within the reach of all those who could pay for its services, whence its later name of *genethliology*,²³ or the art of drawing up individual horoscopes based on time of birth. The degradation of the once-royal science was carried further by the Romans in a manner described by Augustine regarding its practice in his own times:

People prefer those astrologers (*mathematici*) to all others, who say from the inspection of the constellations that they indicate the birth of a beast and not of a man. They also dare tell what kind of beast it is, whether it is a wool-bearing beast, or a beast suited for carrying burdens, or one fit for the plough, or for watching a house; for the astrologers are also tried with respect to the fates of dogs, and their answers concerning these are followed by shouts of admiration on the part of those who consult them.²⁴

Previously, with the Greeks, astrology had become a vast, complex body of knowledge whose authority extended down into even the most trivial actions of daily life.²⁵ Too, the supposed influence of the stars upon human life was a belief possessing particular appeal to the stoic philosophers, with their doctrine of the universal "sympathy" of all things. Granted then, Augustine's early fascination

21. For this and succeeding information on astrology: *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertum-wissenschaft*, Georg Wissowa (Stuttgart 1896), under 'Astrologie'.

22. *Laws* 12.945e. Cf., *City of God* 7.15.

23. *Genethliacus*: nativity-caster (γενεθλιακος, having to do with birth). Cf. *Conf.* 4.3.5 and *On Christian Doctrine* 2.21.32. See also: Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 1.9 & 14.11. Augustine also calls them *mathematici*.

24. *City of God* 5.7. Also for the influence of astrology in Augustine's North Africa: J. CARCOPINO, *Aspects mystiques de la Rome païenne* (Paris 1942) 214 & 224.

25. The tyranny of astrology extended to such mundane things as taking a bath, or having one's hair beautified. See Franz CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (Paris 1906), chapter 7: 'L'astrologie et la magie'.

with astrology, this would be very compatible with an interest in the philosophy of the Stoics. It is significant that such an interest has been claimed for reasons quite different from the present suggested one.²⁶

From the order of recounting in the *Confessions*, it appears that Augustine's first encounter with the astrologers would seem to belong to that period of his life when he had finished his studies and had begun teaching rhetoric.²⁷ However a closer examination of the description reveals that the meeting with the astrologers is actually an interpolation and really belongs to Augustine's earlier student-days in Carthage, as described in the third book.²⁸ This being so, the question can well be asked as to whether Augustine really did become involved with the Manichees before the astrologers. That such would seem to be the correct sequence is implied by a significant detail in Augustine's first mention of the astrologers:

I was ready enough to consult those impostors called astrologers, my reason being that they made no sacrifices and addressed no prayers to any spirit to assist them in their divinations.²⁹

As Madec has well observed, following Gibb and Montgomery,³⁰ the Manichean religion prohibited the slaying of animals. Since the astrologers did not indulge in this practice, Augustine as a Manichee was not reluctant to consult them. Again in the cited text, the act of praying to a spirit would have been in contravention to the materialism of the Manichees who worshipped physical light. Indeed, as Augustine himself informs us, it was only after leaving the Manichees and through his discovery of the writings of the "Platonists" that he came to an understanding of "immaterial."³¹ Both the above considerations in regard to the cited text would imply that Augustine was already a practising Manichee by the time that he began consulting the astrologers.

Also while a student at Carthage, Augustine was befriended by the Proconsul and court-doctor, Vindicianus, who vainly attempted to rid the young Augustine of his obsession for astrology. Neither the paternal advice of Vindicianus nor the scoffings of Nebridius (a friend of Augustine's own age) could dislodge him from his fervent dedication:

Neither he [Vindicianus] nor my dear friend Nebridius (a really pure young man, who used to laugh at the whole business of divination) could persuade

26. Sr. Rita Marie BUSHMAN, 'St. Augustine's Metaphysics and Stoic Doctrine', *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952) 283-304.

27. The first mention of the astrologers occurs in the *Confessions* at 4.3.4. Previously (4.2.2), he mentioned that he had begun teaching rhetoric.

28. Thus, the Vindicianus who had befriended him (4.3.5 and 7.6.8) was Proconsul at Carthage and court-doctor (Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969) p. 67).

29. 4.3.4.

30. Goulven Madec, 'Ex tua castitate (*Conf.* 4.2.3). Adulescens . . . valde castus (*ibid.* 4.3.6)' *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 7 (1961) 245-7. Cf. *Conf.* 3.7.12. See also note 5 on p. 81 of *The Confessions of Augustine* edited by John Gibb and William Montgomery (Cambridge) 1908.

31. 7.20.26: "But then, after reading those books of the Platonists which taught me to seek for a truth which was incorporeal, I came to see your 'invisible things understood by those things which are made' [Romans 1.20]".

me to give up those studies. I was still too much impressed by the authority of the astrological writers.³²

Both Vindicianus and (to a lesser extent) Nebridius argued that in cases where the prophesies of the astrologers later proved correct, this was due to mere chance.³³ If enough predictions were made about the future, some of them were bound to be fulfilled. This did not prove that the predictions were the product of a genuine science, but rather that such predictions just happened to be correct. Therefore these fulfillments were merely the products of the force of chance which operated in nature.³⁴ While these arguments did not lessen Augustine's dedication to astrology, he does admit that they provided him with lines of inquiry which he later followed up and which eventually led to his abandoning the practice.³⁵

It is noteworthy that Augustine in other places besides in the *Confessions* admits of the astrologers making valid predictions in some cases because of the assistance of demons.³⁶ These, because of their superior cognitive powers could see signs of future events which would not be knowable to man. For this reason, later in life as a bishop he warned his flock against frequenting astrologers, even when they made true predictions.³⁷ In the *Confessions* however, the omission of demons' assistance when accounting for valid predictions, would seem to be due to the fact that the explanation from chance originated with Vindicianus who presumably was a pagan. He would therefore have hardly been constrained to condemn astrology for the suspected rôle of demons in it. Again, it would seem that Augustine is being consistent in omitting the intervention of demons for the good reason that they became explanative entities *after* his conversion.

As was seen, Augustine was probably already a Manichee before becoming involved with astrology. Thereafter, both persuasions seem to have claimed the young Augustine's allegiance almost simultaneously over similar periods of time. In itself, this is not surprising, considering that both Manicheism and astrology encouraged essentially mystical attitudes to the denizens of the heavens. As has been remarked, this attitude was to be shattered with the young Augustine by seeing the predictions of the astronomers come to pass in the cases of the eclipses of 378 and 381.

Finally, on the subject of Manicheism and astrology, it is significant that Augustine abandoned astrology *only after* he had withdrawn from the Manichees. Thus, he describes his decision to quit the Manichees at the end of the fifth book of the *Confessions*.³⁸ On the other hand, his rejection of astrology is not recounted

32. 4.3.6.

33. 4.3.5 and 7.6.8.

34. This was the strong opinion of Vindicianus and (to a lesser extent) of Nebridius (*Conf.* 7.6.8).

35. 4.3.6.

36. *City of God* 5.7: "When astrologers give very many wonderful answers, it is to be attributed to the occult inspiration of spirits not of the best kind." Cf., *ibid.* 9.22, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.36 and *De divinatione daemonum* 4-6.

37. *De Genesi ad litteram* 2.37-8, *Sermon* 9 3.

38. 5.14.25.

until well into the seventh book.³⁹ On the basis of remarks in the text, it would seem that the former decision occurred in his twenty-ninth year, while the latter rejection took place after the age of thirty, but before the age of thirty-two.⁴⁰ From this it could be argued that astrology had a much stronger hold over his mind than the religion of Manicheism; a possibility which has hitherto generally escaped attention.⁴¹

Though certain allusions in the *Confessions* would seem to indicate that Augustine's disenchantment with astrology had been growing apace over the years,⁴² it appears that a "test case" was required in order to crystallize his nebulous doubts into concise rejection. The decisive evidence for such a case was provided by a friend, Firminus. On the evidence of this friend's father (who had had a consuming interest in astrology⁴³), Firminus was himself born at the very same time as the infant of a slave belonging to a friend of his father.⁴⁴ According to the casters of horoscopes, both babes should have had identical futures, yet their respective lives proved to be as different as the families into which they had been born.

Judging by the recount in the *Confessions*, this particular case seems to have come as a dramatic revelation to Augustine, leading him on to consider the disparity in the lives of particular cases of twins, where the implications would have been still more irrefutable.⁴⁵ Indeed, the "twins argument" commended itself so

39. 7.6.8-10.

40. His final abandonment of Manicheism is stated in *Conf.* 6.1.1.: "It was certainly no longer a Manichaeism." However, the decision comes at the end of the fifth book: "I did at least decide that I must leave the Manichaeism." (5.14.25), which would place it in the events of his twenty-ninth year (5.3.3). The rejection of astrology is not described until well into the seventh book (chapter 6). This would seem to locate the time as well past his thirtieth birthday (6.11.18), yet before his thirty-second (8.7.17). However, in making such estimates, one must bear in mind Courcelle's reservations about the chronology of the *Confessions* (Pierre COURCELLE, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris 1950), pp. 43-6).

41. The emphasis on Manicheism is not only much more evident in the *Confessions*, but also is underscored elsewhere by Augustine's many writings and debates against the Manichees. On the other hand, he engaged in no public debates with astrologers, nor are they patently portrayed in the *Confessions* as having been anywhere nearly as important to him as the Manichees.

42. Thus, by the time that Firminus came to seek his advice, Augustine's disillusionment with astrology was all but complete: "I was now practically certain that all these inquiries were a ridiculous waste of time". (7.6.8).

43. 7.6.8.

44. *Ibid.* and 7.6.9.

45. 7.6.10, where for reasons which are doubly strange, he mentions only one case, that of Esau and Jacob. In the first place, since Augustine had just previously remarked upon the need for certainty in the cases considered, it is puzzling that he would in the next breath, as it were, consider one set of twins as sufficing for such certitude. Again, the choice of Esau and Jacob would seem unfortunate because apparently the episode would have belonged to that stage in his evolution *before* he turned to a study of the bible: "Most eagerly then, did I seize that venerable writing of Thy Spirit". (7.12.27). Though the case of Esau and Jacob could have been stuck in his memory from an earlier venture into the Old Testament (3.5.9). Again, the example of Romulus and Remus would have been more apt for the stage of evolution which he had attained, and also would have been familiar to him from his earliest years. On the other hand, perhaps the choice of Esau and Jacob was dictated by the faith of the christian readers for whom the *Confessions* was written.

strongly to Augustine that he used it on more than one occasion to refute the claims of the astrologers.⁴⁶

On the other hand, and by the strangest of coincidences, it is noteworthy that the "twins argument" is to be found in one of the works of Cicero who was so much admired by Augustine. Among other things, Cicero's *On Divination* contains a telling rebuttal of astrology⁴⁷ where the "twins argument" is one of the means employed to this end.⁴⁸ Considering Augustine's consuming interest in the astrological form of divination, as well as his enduring admiration of Cicero, it is surprising that he had not read this work on the subject of divination during his student days. On the other hand, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the *On Divination* is not quoted in any of the works prior to the *Confessions*, nor in this work itself. However, several references to the *On Divination* in Augustine's *City of God* show that he was at least familiar with it in later life.⁴⁹

Besides the "twins argument", yet another possible source of Augustine's disenchantment with astrology is suggested by certain details in the seventh book of the *Confessions*. In that place, following closely upon Augustine's rejection of astrology is his discovery of "some books written by the Platonists, which had been translated from Greek into Latin."⁵⁰ As Augustine himself recalls, the reading of these books caused a momentous change to take place in him.⁵¹

Connolly has argued cogently that these books of the Platonists consisted principally (if not exclusively) of certain of the *Enneads* of Plotinus.⁵² While Connolly's demonstration does not bear explicitly upon the second *Ennead*, it is to be observed that the third tractate in this *Ennead* is devoted to refuting the claims of the astrologers that the stars are causes of human fortunes and misfortunes. Considering that Augustine's rejection of astrology in the *Confessions* is followed so closely by his description of the discovery of the books by the Platonists,⁵³ the

46. The "twins argument", again hinging on the case of Esau and Jacob, is found in *On Christian Doctrine* 2.33 [22]; *De Genesi ad litteram* 2.36 [17]; *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* 1.2.3 and in the *City of God* 5.4. In the last-mentioned location however, the "twins argument" receives a much more extensive treatment (chapters 2 to 6). Again, since this last argument is in that section of the *City of God* devoted to Augustine's lengthy attack on Rome's paganism, one feels that the case of Romulus and Remus would have been a most telling example among the pagan readers of the polemic. Yet Augustine did not avail himself of the opportunity, even though the case of Romulus and Remus had already come under consideration in the third book (chapter 6) where Augustine impugns the gods for having let the fratricidal act of Romulus go unpunished.

47. *On Divination* 2.42-7.

48. *Ibid.*, 2.43.

49. *City of God* 3.17; 4.26; 4.30.

50. 7.9.13. The translator is subsequently identified as the eminent orator, Victorinus (8.2.3).

51. *Conf.* 7.8-20.

52. Rev. S. CONNOLLY, 'The Platonism of Augustine's 'Ascent' to God', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 78 (1952) 44-53. The 'ascent' itself is analysed in three succeeding articles in the same periodical, showing how much it owes to Plotinus' *Enneads*: 80 (1953) 28-36; 81 (1954) 120-133 & 260-269.

53. His concluding remark on the astrologers is at the beginning of 7.7.11, while the books of the Platonists make their entrance at the beginning of 7.9.13. The connecting text is meditative in character.

question can well be asked as to whether the arguments in the third tractate of the second *Ennead* did not also help wean Augustine from astrology.

This possibility is fortified by evidence forthcoming from another source. In this regard, it is to be observed that right at the very opening of the third tractate of the second *Ennead*, Plotinus makes the distinction between the stars *as signifying* future events, and the stars *as causing* such events. Some fifteen years after writing the *Confessions*, when working on the fifth book of the *City of God*, Augustine makes just such a distinction and with a mysterious allusion which could well refer to Plotinus:

But if the stars are said rather to signify these things [*i.e.* human acts] than to effect them, so that that *position of the stars* is, as it were, a kind of speech predicting, not causing future things,—for this has been the opinion of men of no ordinary learning [Plotinus?],—certainly the mathematicians [*i.e.* astrologers] are not wont so to speak, saying, for example, Mars in such or such a position *signifies* a homicide, but rather that it *makes* a homicide.⁵⁴

In any case, it is clear from the many occasions on which Augustine attacks astrology that he is principally concerned about the second aspect in the cited passage—namely about some mysterious influence whereby stars could *cause* human actions. He sees such causative influence as supplanting free will and thereby eliminating the whole domain of morality, since all human actions would then be the inevitable consequences of astrological determinism.⁵⁵

Interestingly enough, it seems to have been this notion of the causative influence of the stars which first aroused the young Augustine's interest in astrology. Thus, soon after his first mention of the astrologers in the *Confessions*, he observes: "the astrologers . . . say: 'The cause of your sin is inevitably determined by the stars' and 'Venus was responsible here, or Saturn or Mars.'" ⁵⁶ From this brief extract, it would seem that the youthful Augustine saw astrology primarily as a means of attempting to disclaim any responsibility for his sins. Further, the mention of Venus would seem to imply that such sins were principally sexual in nature. Too, just a little earlier in the text Augustine had admitted to living with a woman to whom he was not married.⁵⁷

This sexual element in the youthful Augustine's interest in astrology is also implied in at least one other place in the *Confessions*. In the seventh book, when describing his final rejection of the art of astrology, he says: "and so my helper,

54. *City of God* 5.1 (italics added). While Origen apparently subscribed to this distinction (*De praeparatione evangelica* 6.11), considering Augustine's critical attitude towards him in general, he could hardly have been included in the compliment.

55. *City of God* 5.1 & 6; *Letter 55* 13; *In Psalmum* 72 22. See also F. van der MEER's *Augustine the Bishop* &c., (Sheed & Ward 1961) 60-7. It is not unlikely that earlier in life the young Augustine's eager interest in astrology combined with his background of learning would have well qualified him to practise as an astrologer. Thus, the case of the Firminus who called on him for advice about the future, which also included Augustine's appraisal of his "constellations" (*Conf.* 7.6.8). Again, considering Augustine's early addiction to astrology and therefore to astrological determinism, it is surprising that this topic does not come under consideration in his *On the Free Choice of the Will*, which was written after his conversion (388: 394-5).

56. 4.3.4.

57. 4.2.2.

you had set me free from those chains (*me . . . illis vinculis solveras*). But I still asked: 'What is the origin of evil?'.⁵⁸ This last sentence of the extract reaffirms Augustine's earlier interest in astrological determinism, mentioned above. Presumably, in his youth, it would have enabled him to impute his sins to the influence of the stars. Again on the cited extract, the mention of having been set free from the chains is a clear anticipation of this same theme which is so important to the eighth book: "Thou hast broken my bonds (*vincula mea*) in sunder . . . I will tell how it was that you broke my bonds."⁵⁹ Buchheit's fine study on the conversion-scene in the eighth book has demonstrated conclusively how Augustine by the references to the breaking of chains (*vincula*) is referring to his final liberation from servitude to sexual lust.⁶⁰

Sometime after 412 Augustine came to writing his treatise *On Contenance* in which restraint from sexual intercourse is seen as the way of perfection. It is in this work (fittingly enough) that he writes of the supposed influence of the stars upon (sexual) sinners. One allusive extract could well be seen as describing the secret source of his own early and ardent interest in astrology:

And some indeed, who are used to excuse their own sins, complain that they are driven to sin by fate, as though the stars had decreed this, and heaven had first sinned by decreeing such, in order that man should afterwards sin by committing such, and thus had rather impute their sins to fortune.⁶¹

It would seem therefore, that one of the reasons for Augustine's earlier interest in astrology was a desire to disclaim any personal responsibility for his own sins. However, over and above this, there would seem to be a second and more important reason of enduring relevance to his entire life. This second reason would seem to have been an intense interest in the physical heavens. Indeed, as was seen, this seems to have been an important ingredient in his initial attraction to Manicheism, and (as I have argued elsewhere) also one of the important sources of his final disillusionment with that sect. Again, much later on in life, Augustine was so impressed by the grandeur of the heavens that he came to believe that man's unique, erect stature was no accident, but a tangible expression of man's divine vocation to the life beyond the visible heavens, in the heaven of heavens itself.

In conclusion therefore, an initial investigation of the hitherto neglected topic of Augustine's interest in astrology has been seen to lead to some interesting implications and to some novel insights into his complex personality.

58. 7.7.11.

59. 8.1.1. At the beginning of the sixth chapter (8.6.13), the rôle of the chains as symbolizing sexual concupiscence is even more explicit: "I shall tell and confess to your name how it was that you freed me from the bondage of my desire for sex, in which I was so closely fettered (*de vinculo quidem desiderii concubitus quo arctissimo tenebar*)". The symbolism is also explicit in the ninth book (9.3.5). Finally, the idea of the chains is repeated several times in the course of the eighth book with some variation of circumstances, but implying the same basic symbolism of sexual concupiscence (8.5.10 and 8.11.25).

60. Vinzenz BUCHHEIT, 'Augustinus unter dem Feigenbaum (zu Conf. VIII)', *Vigiliae Christianae* 22 (1968) 257-271.

61. *On Contenance* 14.