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## Augustine and Problems of Scriptural Interpretation

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## Augustine and Problems of Scriptural Interpretation

### Abstract

In this paper, I examine Augustine's attempts to standardize Scriptural readings in *On Christian Doctrine* and *The Trinity*, in which he painstakingly defines sign-theory and other technical aspects of literary production. Much of the paper is devoted to Augustine's explication and application of these principles in his conversion narrative *Confessions*. Ironically, Augustine's attempts to stabilize scriptural language only expose language's very instability.

### Keywords

hermeneutics, Augustine, scripture, English, Jessica, Morton, Jessica M. Morton

### Disciplines

English Language and Literature

## Augustine and Problems of Scriptural Interpretation

Augustine of Hippo, writing around 400 A.D., observed the nascent stages of widespread Christianity in the Roman Empire. In his time, divergent interpretations of difficult scriptural passages fragmented the Church into competing sects. Augustine responded to these divisions with *On Christian Doctrine* and *The Trinity*, in which he tried to implement a consensus vision of scriptural readings. He also applied various hermeneutical principles formulated in these early theological writings to his now-classic conversion narrative, *Confessions*. In these works, his attempts to standardize scriptural hermeneutics ironically illuminate the distortions and destabilizations inherent in language.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine posited an original theory of language that resonated throughout intellectual discourse thereafter. According to Augustinian sign theory, signs are simply “things used to signify something”(NATC 188). These signs impact recipients’ senses and impart relevant mental associations or concepts. For example, smoke functions as a sign: when perceived by the nose and eyes, it signifies the fire from which it issues (NATC 188). Augustine terms uncontrived facial expressions, animal tracks, and this smoke “natural signs” that signify without the intention of signifying. On the other hand, a conventional sign “[is that] which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying...the motion of their spirits”(NATC 188); these signs, as explicit signifiers of the issuer’s mental state, elucidate for the recipient the other’s thoughts and feelings. These principles also apply to spoken and written language. Augustine calls vocalized words “a multitude of innumerable signs by which men express their thoughts”(NATC 189); the ephemerality of spoken language incites man’s efforts to devise and record visual signs for these words. This linkage of sign theory to spoken and

written language is one of Augustine's chief innovations in "On Christian Doctrine"(NATC 186).

He regards Scripture as the most inscrutable yet pertinent source of written language. Recognizing Scripture's abstruse nature, Augustine seeks to standardize methods for reading and deciphering the figurative language that suffuses Biblical text. In *On Christian Doctrine* he does so by defining figurative signs. With his definition, the intuitive, one-to-one correspondence between the signifier (the sign) and the signified suffers destabilization: a figurative sign, couched in a specific context, functions to evoke unexpected, counterintuitive associations. The Bible is rife with these figurative signs. Augustine sites the illustrative example of the ox: this sign signifies "evangelist" when situated within a scriptural framework that recalls St. Paul's statement, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out of the corn (Dueteronomy 25.4) (NATC 190). These figurative signs are enacted through tropes, which include metaphor (as in St. Paul's statement), catachresis, and irony. One's adroitness with these literary devices promotes his understanding of otherwise opaque Scriptural language. Additionally, Augustine argues that one's facility in multiple Biblical languages – Hebrew, Greek, and Latin – enables him to decipher "unknown literal signs," thereby enriching his grasp of God's Word. Augustine clearly hopes to ease Scriptural ambiguities through these prescriptions for proper reading.

Augustine's sign theory, as presented in *On Christian Doctrine*, figures throughout *Confessions*. In this work, which is presented as a narrative confession to God, Augustine ruminates on memory and the processes that form memories. In Book X he says,

I could see [mountains and waves and rivers and stars} inwardly with dimensions just as great as if I were actually looking at them outside my mind. Yet when I was seeing them, I was not absorbing them in the act of seeing with my eyes. Nor are the actual objects present to me, but only their images. And I know by which bodily sense a thing becomes imprinted on my mind (*Confessions* 187).

In this passage, Augustine illustrates the internal mechanics of memory. He demonstrates the power of memory by claiming that his inward vision of such vast natural objects as “mountains and waves and rivers and stars” accurately replicates their immense scale. His language also situates memory’s processes in a sensory realm; verbs such as “to look,” “to see,” “to absorb” and “to imprint” highlights vision’s fundamental role in memory-formation. This passage nicely echoes Augustine’s presentation of sign-theory in *On Christian Doctrine*. Here, as in his essay, objects are perceived through “bodily sense[s]; the attendant sight (or sound, taste, sensation, smell) signifies a mental concept or image, which is then imprinted on the brain. Augustine’s conceptualization of memory-formation as “imprinting” both reiterates the visual qualities of the above passage and highlights *Confessions*’ underlying preoccupation with language.

Augustine, devoted to explicating memory in its entirety, also meditates on the process of memory-retrieval. He thus describes the act of recollection:

When I am in this storehouse [of memory], I ask that it produce what I want to recall, and immediately certain things come out; some things require a longer search..until what I want is freed of mist and emerges from its hiding places (*Confessions* 185).

Here, Augustine characterizes memory-retrieval as a potentially difficult extraction of buried memories. In noting that this process of extraction attends his articulation of past and present sins, he expresses the laboriousness of his confession (*Confessions* 186). Additionally, his description of memories as obscured “by mist” and enclosed within “hiding places” acknowledges the inaccessibility of portions of his mind. He more explicitly ruminates on the mind’s ineffability in the following statement:

Great then is the power of memory, an awe-inspiring mystery, my God, a power of profound and infinite multiplicity. And this is mind, this is I myself. What then am I, my God? What is my nature?...See the broad plains and caves and caverns of memory...( *Confessions* 194).

Augustine’s ecstatic self-acknowledgment, as signified by the profusion of “I” and “my,” is typical of his narrative; his arduous self-examination before God yields a degree of self-

knowledge. His characterization of his mind as populated by “broad plains and caves and caverns” evokes associations with topographical landscapes; throughout his narrative he navigates this interior space so as to understand his, and more generally humanity’s, defining attributes. His understanding is necessarily constrained, however, by these obscuring, enigmatic “caves and caverns.” Augustine more explicitly articulates an incomplete, unstable identity when he later writes, “I have great fear of my subconscious impulses which [God’s] eyes know but mine do not” (*Confessions* 215). For him, these ungovernable “subconscious impulses” are symptomatic of an inherent tendency toward sin (*Confessions* 203); he posits man’s nature as the wellspring of sin when he laments that “...occurrences of sin..., to our regret, have somehow been done in us” (*Confessions* 203). The former quotation’s emphasis that “God’s eyes know but [his do not]” separates Augustine, representing the human condition, and divinity on the basis of this fundamentally tainted nature, and implies destabilizing consequences for his efforts to live a holy life.

In the above passage, Augustine uses such hyperbolic descriptors as “awe-inspiring” and “profound and infinite multiplicity” to marvel at the scope of memory. He calls this and related faculties “mind,” omitting a preceding article (“the” or “a”) so as to imbue the term with additional significance. That Augustine defines himself by this “mind” is evidenced by his pronouncement that “...this is mind, this is I myself.” Here he subtly reflects a Neoplatonic orientation, a position invoked (often more explicitly) throughout his text (*Confessions* xxi). His pre-conversion studies of Neoplatonism surface as he narrates his struggle to apprehend God through his rational faculties in book 10 of *Confessions*. By laboriously charting his mind’s landscape and locating the source of his faith within a mysterious, “higher” interior space, he

reflects the Neoplatonic belief that man exercises his rational faculties so as to transcend his purely earthbound state and aspire toward God (Boethius xxv-xxvii).

Augustine's preoccupation with interiority is explained, in part, by his efforts to locate the origins of speech. In *The Trinity*, he clarifies the source:

We...come to that word of man, to the word of a living being endowed with reason, to the word of the image of God...this word cannot be uttered in sound nor thought in the likeness of sound...(NATC 195).

Firstly, Augustine's likening of the "word of man" to "the word of a living being endowed with reason," underlines man's rational capacity; he regards this singular characteristic as necessary for the word's formulation. This "prevocalic word," arising within the seat of pure knowledge and thought, precedes all signifiers by which it may be translated and audibly expressed; it is thus fundamentally untranslatable and inexpressible. Indeed, Augustine writes, "...this word cannot be uttered in sound nor thought in the likeness of sound." He equates this "word of man" with "the word of the image of God," thereby highlighting man's semi-divine status and implying an analogous relationship between his word and God's Word. This comparison with the Word – whose difficult presentation in scriptural language Augustine constantly acknowledges – reinforces his conception of the inexpressibility of man's word. That God's Word is rendered in written form also raises questions regarding the viability of written manifestations of man's word.

Augustine tries to allay issues of translation and expression through his examination of reason. In *Confessions*, he discusses man's capacity for reason:

Then I turned toward myself and said to myself: 'Who are you?' I replied: 'A man.' I see in myself a body and a soul, one external, the other internal. Which of these should I have questioned about my God, for whom I had already searched through the physical order...What is inward is superior. All physical evidence is reported to the mind, which presides and judges...The inner man knows this – I, I the mind through the sense-perception of my body (184).

Here, Augustine construes humans as encompassing dichotomous characteristics; he portrays a dualism by constructing man as “a body and a soul, one external, one internal.” He explicitly promotes the latter aspect of this dualism, as signified by his self-definition – “I, I the mind” – and pronouncement that “what is inward is superior.” Augustine prizes this interior existence because it provides the basis for cogitation: the mind “presides [upon] and judges” all sensory input. This ability to deduce logical judgments both separates humanity from animals, for whom “reason does not sit in judgment upon the deliverance of the senses”(NATC 184), and provides a means of apprehending divine, immutable truths. Augustine reflects these beliefs when he claims that he “will...rise above this power [of sense-perception]...for this is also possessed by the horse and the mule...in a step-by-step ascent to him who made [man]”(NATC 185). Notably, he fails to address the issue of imperfect man’s naturally imperfect cognitive abilities.

Man’s reason guides his issuing and interpretation of written and oral communications.

Augustine writes in *The Trinity*,

When, therefore, that which is in [man’s] knowledge is in [man’s] word, then it is a true word...and what is not in the knowledge is not in the word...In this way, the likeness of the image that was made approaches, insofar, as it can be, to the likeness of the image that was born, whereby God the Son is proclaimed as substantially like the Father in all things (NATC 195).

In this passage, Augustine argues that man’s rational nature delimits valid signs of his word. Tangible signs of internal thoughts are ideally consistent with the knowledge maintained by both the issuer and his recipient. Their minds judge these expressions according to man’s inherent rationalism: “When...that which is [man’s] knowledge is in [man’s] word, then it is a true word.” Man’s reason thus guides translations of prevocalic words (“the image that was born”) into corresponding external expressions (“the likeness of the image that was made”); it also regulates interpretations of such expressions. Augustine, in the above passage, parallels this relationship between the prevocalic word and its sign to that between the Father and the Son.

Just as man attempts to channel his thoughts into representative oral or written expressions, so God's Word becomes flesh through the Son. Significantly, both cases require acts of accommodation. As Augustine says in *The Trinity*:

For just as our word in some way becomes a bodily sound...[so that] it may be manifested to the senses of men, so the Word of God was made flesh by assuming that in which He might also be manifested to the senses of men (NATC 194).

In this passage, both man and God translate their original "words" into forms that "may be manifested to the senses of man"; in so doing, they accommodate man's limited sensory-perception mechanisms. Augustine, continuing his previous intimations at the potential for distorted translations, acknowledges that "when [man's word] is spoken through a sound or through some bodily sign, it is not spoken just as it is, but as it can be seen or heard by the body"(NATC 195). This statement presents an explicit disjuncture between what is and what "can be seen or heard by the body." In other words, this process of accommodation destabilizes the expected one-to-one correspondence between the sign and the mental processes it signifies. As previously explained, however, Augustine tries to allay such implications by promoting the role of reason in regulating the sign-signified relationship.

Augustine demonstrates this potential instability of language throughout *Confessions*. In Book XI he applies these issues to biblical text:

...grant us space from our meditations on the secret recesses of your law, and do not close the gate to us as we knock. It is not for nothing that by your will so many pages of scripture are opaque and obscure. These forests are not without deer which recover their strength in them and restore themselves by walking and feeding, by resting and ruminating (*Confessions* 222).

In *Confessions*, Augustine metaphorically casts scripture as "forests" or "dark thickets"(*Confessions* 267) so as to signify its bewildering complexity. This use of metaphor, itself, reproduces the literary tropes that simultaneously obscure and enrich scriptural text.

While Augustine's rational faculties aid his interpretation of secular communications, his successful deciphering of scripture relies on his possession of grace via faith; man's "knock" on

God's "gate" warrants his privileged ability to uncover meaning from the purposely "opaque and obscure" language. In this passage, Augustine depicts men engaged in the laborious exercise of deciphering scripture as "deer" in "forests." That these adherents' derive intellectual and spiritual stimulation from their encounters with scripture is signified by the deer's "recover[y]," "restor[ation]," "resting," and "ruminating." Significantly, these intellectual meditations spawn a multitude of scriptural readings as "words are variously interpreted" (*Confessions* 203). Here, Augustine's suggestion of an unstable relationship between sign and signified complicates his parallel efforts to standardize hermeneutics.

Augustine ignores the more disquieting implications of his work, thereby leaving various issues unresolved and lingering. He again espouses the necessity of faith as he examines Moses' role as a human intermediary between God's Word and man's perception. While Moses' mutable status logically implies his imperfect apprehension and translation of God's Word into human language, Augustine ostensibly resolves such difficulties through faith. He writes,

Who is our teacher except the reliable truth? Even when we are instructed through some mutable creature, we are led to reliable truth when we are learning truly by standing still and listening to him (*Confessions* 227).

Here, divine, "reliable truth," functioning as the ultimate teacher for the faithful, circumvents humans' tendency toward distortion. Moses' imperfect nature proves irrelevant in the face of divine doctrine and fails to inhibit access to the truths contained within his teachings.

Throughout Books XI and XII, Augustine repeatedly invokes the above motif of "standing still and listening." For example, Augustine relies on God's truth in his "inner mind" (*Confessions* 257) to resolve his inquiries into the truth of Moses' account of creation:

Within the lodging of my thinking...there speaks a truth which is neither Greek nor Latin nor any barbarian tongue and which uses neither mouth nor tongue as instruments and utters no audible syllables. It would say 'What he is saying is true' (*Confessions* 223-4).

In this passage, the faithful Augustine is privy to God's divine Word. His faith, like his reason, originates in "the lodging of his thinking." His characterization of this divine truth consequently echoes his formulation of the prevocalic word ("word of man") in *The Trinity*: both precede all signifiers and, significantly, cannot be rendered in earthly "barbarian tongues." The unsatisfactory character of Augustine's argument that faith stabilizes these scriptural signified correlations also extends to his view on reason's role in regulating general linguistic relationships. These passages on Moses merely reinforce man's mutable status and implicitly question his capacity for reason. Constrained by limiting sensory-perception mechanisms and imperfect human cognition, man encounters within himself irremediable blocks to full apprehension and communication of all oral and written expressions. Augustine's exacting efforts to resolve inconsistencies in both scriptural and secular hermeneutics ironically expose the irreconcilable issues that motivate his writings.

In the above three works, Augustine unintentionally elucidates the instability of language, thereby exposing potential problems of exegesis for future theologians and secular intellectuals. His failure to adequately resolve the tensions underpinning his writings anticipates the later work of figures like Dante, who, through works like *Il Convivio*, transforms Augustine's overall disregard for linguistic instability into an explicit celebration of the polysemous nature of texts. For Dante and many others, Augustine's discoveries simply enrich and enliven one's interface with texts.

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