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9. Doxology and Loving Knowledge in Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana* Book 1

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Abstract

This paper will explore why Augustine persists in using the categories of signs and things and use and enjoyment, even though they give rise to so many difficulties and proved so inimical to what he actually wanted to say in Book 1 of *De doctrina christiana*. It argues that, in fact, these classical categories are subverted and transformed by Augustine’s treatment of the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor and his conviction that God can ultimately be known only by a “knowledge of the heart” – one which leads, not to an exercise of the intellect but to doxology or praise of the unknowable, ineffable God. It takes issue with recent trends in Augustine scholarship, which, in examining Augustine’s debt to Stoicism, appear to have undermined his doctrine of grace and loving knowledge.

Keywords: love, double commandment, doxology, grace, cognition

Introduction

Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* – *On Christian Doctrine*, or *On Christian Teaching* – is a very odd work; it defies neat categorization and presents many challenges for the reader. This is perhaps because it is a work which seems to want to do everything: to describe the nature of reality (human, angelic, and divine); to set out the main features of the Christian faith (working systematically through the doctrine of God, the Incarnation, salvation, the Church, resurrection); to evaluate every last aspect of pagan culture and to decide which aspects might legitimately be appropriated by the Christian. Above all – and this is Augustine's avowed aim – it is about Scripture: how to interpret Scripture and how to communicate and preach on what is discovered through interpretation.

*De doctrina christiana*¹ has also been enormously influential and was perhaps Augustine's best known, and certainly his most cited, work in the Middle Ages. It is now generally agreed that the work might best be understood as a sort of handbook for preachers and teachers. In other words, the *doctrina* of the title is primarily understood as what is discovered in Scripture and taught and learned in the context of Christian education. This certainly makes sense of Books 2 and 3, in which Augustine focuses on the principles for interpretation of Scripture (*modus inveniendi*), and of Book 4, in which he reflects on the priorities and practice of Christian rhetoric in communicating Scripture to a listening audience (*modus proferendi*).² But Book 1 remains something of a puzzle on a number of counts.

Stuff and Signs

At first glance Book 1 appears to be a highly systematic presentation of what Augustine calls *res* or “things.” *Res* basically means “stuff” – the stuff of which reality is constituted. Every *thing* is a *res* simply by virtue of the fact that it exists. Anyone who has visited the excavations of the ancient Roman town of Ostia – the port outside Rome where Augustine had a vision with his mother Monnica and from where he sailed back to Africa after his conversion – will have seen in the museum a fragment of a fourth century wall painting from Ostia itself. In it, slaves are off-loading a ship (probably a delivery of grain from North Africa): the bag which they are emptying out onto the deck is simply labelled “RES” – stuff.

It is an odd term for Augustine to use. Early Christian theologians would be more likely to use the language of “being” or “substance” – of *ousia* (Greek), or *substantia* or *essentia* (Latin) – to refer to human and divine being, and to distinguish between them. But in this work Augustine, for reasons we will explore, decides to use the language of *res*. He opens the work by contrasting *res*, things or stuff, with *signa*, signs. Signs are themselves *res* – they are things – but they are things which point to other things (like words, or gestures, or smoke which points to a fire): so, all signs are things but not all things are signs. So far so good, I hope. The problem is that Augustine, like all early Christian theologians, is insistent on the fact that

¹ The work was begun around 396 CE but left unfinished at 3.25.35. It was only completed in 426/7 when Augustine added the final sections of Book 3 and all of Book 4. All references are to the edition and translation of the work by Green.

² *Doctr. chr.* 1.1.1 (Green: 12): *Duae sunt res quibus nititur omnis tractatio scripturarum, modus inveniendi quae intellegenda sunt et modus proferendi quae intellecta sunt.*

res/things cannot just be lumped together. There are *Res* and *res*: in other words, there are divine *res* and human *res*; eternal, immutable, incorporeal *res*, and temporal, mutable, corporeal *res*. This is usually expressed in terms of the distinction between Creator and creation; between transcendent divine being and created human being. But in *De doctrina christiana* Augustine is determined to follow through his distinction between *res* and *signa*, things and signs. The first point to note is that neither the language of *substantia*/substance or the language of *res*/stuff makes it easy to represent the complete divide, or chasm, which lies between Creator and creation. The same word is used for both. A further distinction or qualifier needs to be introduced to talk of divine or human being, divine or human things. Augustine begins *De doctrina christiana*, then, with the distinction between things and signs; *res* and *signa*, and immediately follows it with a further distinction, this time, between use and enjoyment: “There are some things which are to be enjoyed, some which are to be used” (*Doct. chr.* 1.3.7; Green: 14; *Res ergo aliae sunt quibus fruendum est, aliae quibus utendum*). God the divine Trinity is the only *thing* that is taken as an end in itself and enjoyed; all other *things* are to be used toward enjoyment of God.

The language of signs and things is drawn primarily from the classical liberal arts of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric (where it more often appears in the context of discussing words [*verba*] and their meaning [*res*]);³ the language of use and enjoyment, on the other hand, is drawn from classical, philosophical reflection on the goal or end towards which all human action is directed in order to attain happiness or the ultimate good (in other words, it belongs to eudaemonistic or teleological reflection).⁴

In Book 1, then, Augustine wants to identify the ultimate good – the goal or end of human action and the source of human happiness – with the eternal, immutable, incorporeal Divine Trinity. In contrast, temporal, mutable and corporeal *things* (including signs), must not be taken as ends in themselves but used towards enjoyment of God. So rather than the theological language of substance, Augustine frames his argument both in terms of the classical distinction between things and signs (*Doct. chr.* 1.2.4),⁵ and in terms of the classical, philosophical distinction between use and enjoyment, or of what secures the happiness which he takes for granted all people seek (1.3.3).⁶ He therefore argues that the thing alone to be enjoyed is God, the Trinity; everything else must be “used” towards this end, for only in the eternal, immutable

³ On role of the liberal arts, including dialectic, grammar, and rhetoric, see Kaster; Marrou. On classical sign theory, see Pollmann: 159-96. On pagan literary culture, see Harrison: 46-78. On signs, see Moreau et al.: note complémentaire 8, 483-95; Markus: 71-104; Mayer; Rist: 23-40.

⁴ Verheijen reflects on this aspect in relation to the further qualification Augustine makes, which we will consider below, that there are some things “whose function is both to enjoy and use” (*aliae quae fruuntur et utuntur*).

⁵ *Omnis doctrina uel rerum est uel signorum, sed res per signa discuntur*; Green: 12-13: “All teaching is of either things or signs, but things are learnt through signs.” In classical literature this usually appears as a distinction between *res* (subject matter/things) and *uerba* (words); e.g., Cicero, *De oratore* 3.149; Quintilian, *Instituto oratoria* 3.5.1; or as referring, respectively, to the objects of *inuentio* and *elocutio*, e.g., Quintilian, *Instituto oratoria* 8, Proemium 6.

⁶ *Res ergo aliae sunt quibus fruendum est, aliae quibus utendum*; Green: 14-15: “There are some things which are to be enjoyed, some which are to be used.” See *Civ.* 19.1-4 for Augustine’s consideration of the classical eudaemonistic tradition.

God can we find a secure enjoyment, or happiness, which never changes and will never end (1.5.5).

This sort of argument is not uncharacteristic of Augustine, but the style and terminology he uses in Book 1 *is* rather unusual; it is clear-cut, technical, and uncompromising. At one level, it works: it establishes an order of reality and of use which leaves the reader in no doubt that nothing created is to be idolized or taken as an end in itself; that every level of created reality must be used towards final enjoyment of its Creator, the divine Trinity. Augustine does not deviate from this fundamental conviction, but the terminology in which he chooses to express it does not make for plain sailing, and often seems to be so much more of a hindrance than a help that the reader is left to wonder why he uses it at all.

The main reason Augustine's argument seems to be frequently buffeted off course in Book 1 is, I think, largely due to the fact that he quickly, and seemingly unquestioningly, transposes the language of use and enjoyment into the Christian language of love.⁷ Having carefully defined in the first three chapters an order of signs and things, of use and enjoyment, Augustine promptly turns to expound these categories in terms of love. Chapter four begins, "To enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love – if indeed it is something that ought to be loved" (*Doctr. chr.* 1.4.4; Green: 14-15).⁸ The transition from a classical to a Christian way of thinking here is apparently seamless, smooth, and unremarked. Augustine simply introduces the language of love without comment, as if it is an obvious move. In fact, it signals a decisive and dramatic shift, and one that will prove to be far from straightforward. As has often been remarked, when he turns to consider what sort of attitude we should have towards ourselves and towards our neighbor – whether it should be a matter of use or enjoyment, for example – clearly, he is acutely aware of the tensions in his argument. Human beings are indeed things (*res*), great things, made in the image of God. But, he comments, "It is therefore an important question, whether humans should enjoy one another or use one another, or both. We have been commanded to love one another, but the question is whether one person should be loved by another on his own account or for some other reason. If on his own account, we enjoy him; if for another reason, we use him" (1.22.20; Green: 28-29).⁹ So love, here, is not synonymous with either use or enjoyment, but rather begs the question and complicates the neat distinctions.

Indeed, as we read on in Book 1, it quickly becomes clear that the categories of *signs* and *things*, of *use* and *enjoyment*, do not, ultimately, appear to help Augustine very much at all in a Christian context founded on love. Instead, we find him prompted to rethink and qualify these terms at almost every turn, so that he ends up, not so much with hard and fast distinctions, but rather with what he calls an "ordered love" (*Doctr. chr.* 1.27.28; *ipse est autem qui ordinatam*

⁷ See related entries "amor" and "caritas" by Dideberg in *Augustinus-Lexikon*.

⁸ *Frui est enim amore inhaerere alicui rei propter se ipsam; uti autem, quod in usum uenerit ad id quod amas obtinendum referre, si tamen amandum est.*

⁹ *Itaque magna quaestio est, utrum frui se homines debeant an uti an utrumque. Praeceptum est enim nobis ut diligamus inuicem, sed quaeritur utrum propter se homo ab homine diligendus sit an propter aliud. Si enim propter se, fruimur eo; si propter aliud, utimur eo.*

habet dilectionem). This order must allow for so many qualifications and revisions of what constitutes a sign or a thing, and so many different types and degrees of use and enjoyment, that these categories become almost worse than useless, and a positive hindrance and complication when considered alongside the lucid simplicity of the Christian commandment of love of God and love of neighbor.

The Subversive Language of Love

Despite the obvious difficulties, however, Augustine doggedly sticks with his original definitions throughout the course of Book 1, and amidst many shifts and turns, arrives at an order of love which, to all intents and purposes, subverts them. For example, it is an order in which we cannot be said to enjoy ourselves (or at least, only imperfectly), but in which we do love ourselves – though this love is not on account of ourselves but on account of God, our Creator, who alone is to be enjoyed (*Doct. chr.* 1.22.20). It is also an order which allows room for a good self-love that takes care of the body, which is created by God (1.22.20-25.26), and for a benevolent love of neighbor which similarly understands them to be created by God and loves them “on God’s account,” and as able to “enjoy God with us” (1.27.28-29.30). Indeed, Augustine reflects that we love our neighbor when we show mercy to him, and he loves us when he shows mercy to us, but neither love is for our own sake or their own sake, but for the sake of God’s goodness, who alone shows mercy for the sake of God’s own goodness: “he pities us so that we may enjoy him, and we in our turn pity one another so that we may enjoy him” (1.30.33; Green: 42-43).¹⁰ So the initial, sharp distinction between signs and things, use and enjoyment, is mitigated by the language of “for the sake of”; “on account of”; “to enjoy with”; “able to enjoy with”; “to have mercy”; “for the sake of . . . goodness.”

As if this was not complicated or convoluted enough, Augustine plows on – fully aware that he is moving from one ambiguity to the next – to tackle the question of how the categories of use and enjoyment can be employed in describing God’s relation to us. Once again, the clearly defined categories falter as soon the language of love is introduced: if, as he has established, “we should enjoy only a thing by which we are made happy, but use everything else,” how does this relate to God’s love for us? For the Scriptures testify that God does indeed have a great love for us: how then does he love us, Augustine wonders, for “if he enjoys us, he stands in need of our goodness.” Obviously, this cannot be the case, and Augustine is therefore forced rather unsatisfactorily to conclude that God “does not enjoy us but uses us” (*Doct. chr.* 1.31.34) – albeit in a way different from how “we relate the things which we use to the aim of enjoying God’s goodness”; God, rather “refers his use of us to his own goodness” (1.32.35)!

And so it seems that the language of love, and especially the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor, leads Augustine to obfuscate the distinctions between use and enjoyment, so that he ends up talking about different types, or degrees of love – some of which are more like “use” and some more like “enjoyment”! I don’t propose to engage with these modifications in this paper (see O’Donovan and the critique by Verheijen); rather, I would simply like to ask why love, despite being so problematic for his argument, is nevertheless the crux of his teaching in Book 1. This might at first seem like an obvious

¹⁰ *ille nostri miseretur ut se perfruamur, nos vero invicem nostri miseremur ut illo perfruamur.*

question which has as an equally obvious answer. As Augustine makes clear, God *is* love, creates us in love, becomes incarnate in order to redeem us through love; his love is shed abroad graciously in our hearts by the Holy Spirit in order to inspire in us a right love of himself. And as Augustine constantly reminds us in Book 1, we are commanded to love God with our whole heart and mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. Perhaps our question should be turned on its head, then. What we need to ask is: given that love is undeniably the foundation of the Christian faith for Augustine, its unquestionable, central, and defining feature, why does Book 1 of *De doctrina christiana* use the seemingly inimical and unhelpful categories of signs and things if they simply serve to problematize love?

I would like, first of all, to suggest that it is precisely *because* these terms are so problematic, *because* they cannot be ignored but need to be rethought, that Augustine persists in using them; and, second, that in this respect Book 1 is no different from the rest of *De doctrina christiana*. He exhaustively reconsiders and re-evaluates every aspect of classical culture according to the paradigm of its usefulness for interpreting the scriptures in a long section of Book 2 (*Doct. chr.* 2.19.29-42.63); he reconsiders and re-evaluates classical, literary techniques of interpretation in relation to exegesis of Scripture in Book 3; and he undertakes a reconsideration and re-evaluation of classical, rhetorical theory and practice in relation to Christian communication of the scriptures in preaching in Book 4. Just so, I would suggest, in Book 1 he demonstrates how the Christian faith's fundamental tenet of the love of God and love of neighbor necessitates a fundamental reappraisal of the classical teaching on signs and meaning, and of the classical philosophical theory of the happy life and the ultimate good. In this context, as in the other books, Augustine should be understood to be working very much as all other early Christian apologists did: demonstrating the relation between Christianity and classical culture; considering the extent to which the latter can be helpfully used and exploited in a Christian context, and the extent to which it falls short and should be rejected, or has been superseded, by Christianity. In Book 1 Augustine takes terms from classical grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy which were intended to address the question of how we attain truth and how we attain happiness, and, by considering them alongside what he identifies as the defining feature of Christianity – the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor – he demonstrates that, in comparison to the commandment of love, these categories are really no more than crude caricatures of truth that do not and cannot do justice to the nature of our human created-ness, on the one hand, or to God, the transcendent Creator and redeemer of humankind, on the other. In short, he demonstrates that the classical distinctions so ingrained and established by tradition in his own mind, and no doubt in those of his educated contemporaries – pagan and Christian – are not so hard and fast as might be supposed; that in fact, signs and things, use and enjoyment, are, in a Christian context, subverted and transformed – by love.¹¹

¹¹ This is, of course, exactly what he also does in the opening chapters of Book 19 of *De civitate dei*, where he undertakes a long and detailed survey of classical eudaemonism in order to demonstrate how it relates to, and informs, but is ultimately superseded in a Christian context, where the ultimate good/happiness is found only in love of God and neighbor.

Teaching and Learning in Love

The prologue to *De doctrina christiana*, which is overlooked more often than not, gives us an important clue as to how and why this is the case. Reflecting on his purpose in writing the work, Augustine is aware of those Christians who hold that the practice of teaching and learning – or *doctrina* – which he is setting out to describe, is not in fact necessary; rather, they “congratulate themselves on a knowledge of the holy scriptures gained without any human guidance” (*Doct. chr.*, Prologue 1.5). In other words, there are those who hold that the truth can be apprehended directly, without the need for doctrine, i.e., for human teaching and learning. His answer to these people is twofold: at the most obvious level, he responds that we all learn by listening; we learn to speak a language by hearing it spoken and imitating others (Prologue 1.5). At a deeper level, however, he argues that there is a need for a human teacher or intermediary in the transmission of the sacraments and in the process of learning what cannot be grasped and understood directly – in other words, in teaching “what should be the objects of his faith, hope, and love” (Prologue 1.6). So Paul, he observes, “though prostrated and then enlightened by a divine voice from heaven, was sent to a human being to receive the sacrament of baptism and be joined to the church” (Prologue 1.6). Moreover, Cornelius, “although an angel announced to him that his prayers had been heard and his acts of charity remembered, was nevertheless put under the tuition of Peter” (Prologue 1.6). Augustine concedes that God could, indeed, have given the sacraments and teaching through an angel; but interestingly he observes that “the human condition would be really forlorn if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency” (Prologue 1.6; Green 6-7).¹² What does he mean by this enigmatic statement? The answer, I think, is found in the comments which immediately follow his reference to Paul and Cornelius: he points to that aspect of the Christian faith which is to be the central feature of the rest of the work, that is, love: “Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were inter-mingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans” (Prologue 1.7; Green 6-8).¹³ So the communication of the sacraments, of what is to be believed, hoped for, and loved, is most effectively done by human intermediaries whose offices and teaching result not so much in a shared *knowledge* of them as a shared *participation* in them. This should not surprise us: “the sacraments” and what “should be the objects of . . . faith, hope, and love” are not things that can be intellectually grasped or explained, but they can be communicated and shared in love.

The Prologue is rather unusual. In other contexts, Augustine tends to answer the question of why we need human teachers and temporal signs in terms of the Fall: having lost the direct grasp of Wisdom/Divine *res*, which Adam and Eve intuitively enjoyed before the Fall, we, like them, he frequently maintains, now need temporal, mutable, corporeal signs – the Incarnation, Scripture, the sacraments, and grace – in order to begin to apprehend the eternal, immutable, incorporeal Wisdom that we have turned away from and are now blind to. But this is not, I

¹² *sed abiecta esset humana condicio si per homines hominibus deus verbum suum ministrare nolle videretur.* Cf. *F. et symb.* 3.4; *Cat. rud.* 12.17.

¹³ *Deinde ipsa caritas, quae sibi homines inuicem nodo unitatis astringit, non haberet aditum refundendorum et quasi miscendorum sibimet animorum, si homines per homines nihil discerent.*

think, what primarily lies behind Augustine's emphasis on the need for human teaching and learning in *De doctrina christiana*. It is striking that, although the Fall is alluded to in Book 1, it is never specifically discussed or described. Rather, as we have seen, Augustine's main concern is with the need for teaching, for human communication, and for words or signs which unite those who teach and those who learn in a shared participation in what is being communicated. This is the case because, as Augustine will make clear as Book 1 progresses, the source of teaching, the content of teaching, the motivation of teaching and the effect of teaching, is love – love of God and love of neighbor. In this context, signs and things, use and enjoyment, are necessarily inseparable: they are from God, of God, and lead to God, and when we love them we love him in them. It is this insight which I think guides Augustine's complicated and convoluted treatment of use and enjoyment and keeps it on course: there is but one stream of love whose source is God, he observes, and all our loves – whether of what is below us, of ourselves, of our neighbor, or of God – must flow from and return to that source if they are to be rightly directed: whatever we love must be loved, as he puts it, “on account of God” (*Doct. chr.* 1.22.20). “So if you ought to love yourself not on your own account but on account of the one who is the most proper object of your love, another person should not be angry if you love him too on account of God. . . . loving him as he would himself, he relates his love of himself and his neighbor entirely to the love of God, which allows not the slightest trickle to flow away from it and thereby diminish it” (1.22.21; Green: 30-31).¹⁴ Similarly, as we have seen above, Augustine urges that we should love whatever we love “for the sake of God” (*propter deum*) (1.27.28), so that “all may enjoy God with us” (1.29.30; *ut omnes nobiscum diligant deum*). It is the same, he insightfully observes, as when someone loves an actor in the theater, “and enjoys his art as the greatest good . . . he loves all those who share his love for the actor, not on their own account, but on account of him whom they love together” (1.29.30; Green: 38-39).¹⁵ In the same way, we too love our neighbor on account of the love we both share for God.

We should note that for Augustine the observation that the source of love is God, and that all love must flow from and return to that source, is primarily an ontological insight, as well as an ethical one: God is the source of our existence, and we exist only insofar as he grants us existence. Love complicates the clear-cut categories of signs and things, use and enjoyment, because in a Christian context God, the Creator of all, is also love, the source and end of all love. When we love our neighbor on account of God, and show compassion by offering mercy and assistance, we are therefore not only helping the neighbor, but also, in a curious way, helping ourselves, since God does not leave us unrewarded: for in loving our neighbor we are also loving God, who is their Creator, and are granted to enjoy him with them (*Doct. chr.* 1.32.35). But more than this, Augustine suggests that we enjoy God not only *with* them, but in a certain way, *in* and *through* them. Eliding the distinction between use and enjoyment, and commenting on Paul's words to Philemon, “So, brother, I shall enjoy you in the Lord”

¹⁴ *Si ergo te ipsum non propter te debes diligere, sed propter illum ubi dilectionis tuae rectissimus finis est, non susciteat alius homo, si etiam ipsum propter deum diligis. . . . Sic enim eum diligens tamquam se ipsum totam dilectionem sui et illius refert in illam dilectionem dei quae nullum a se rivulum duci extra patitur cuius derivatione minuat.*

¹⁵ *et tamquam magno vel etiam summo bono eius arte perfruitur, omnes diligit qui secum eum diligunt, non propter illos, sed propter eum quem pariter diligunt.*

(Philemon 20; *Doct. chr.* 1.33.37; Green: 46-47), he allows for the fact that we can, in a real sense, enjoy God in our neighbor. He explains this in characteristic terms of delight: when we enjoy someone in the Lord, we both take delight in him and in a certain sense “use” him, since our delight is in fact not so much in him as an individual, but in God, his Creator, whom we delight in, in and through the neighbor: “When you enjoy a human being in God, you are enjoying God rather than that human being. For you enjoy the one by whom you are made happy” (*Doct. chr.* 1.33.37; Green: 46-47).¹⁶ This, of course, is a key insight in Augustine’s theology that he applies to every aspect of God’s creation: we can rightly take delight in, and can be said to love and even enjoy, created, temporal, mutable things, if we delight in, love, and enjoy God, their eternal, immutable and incorporeal Creator, in and through them. As we know, delight, for Augustine, is the way in which the grace of God, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, enables us to encounter God in and through his creation and revelation: we can only “know” him, recognize him, and relate to him in the love inspired by delight (*Simpl.* 1.2.21-22).¹⁷

Love and Ineffability

But I would like to argue that the Christian commandment of love is fundamental in an even more basic and profound sense. It is necessary not only because of the Fall; not only because the sacraments and “what should be the objects of . . . faith, hope, and love” are more readily participated in than understood; and not only because God is the source and end of all rightly directed love – though these are all important – but even more fundamentally, for Augustine, because God the Trinity, the ultimate reality (*res*) to which all signs point and who alone is to be enjoyed, is Himself unknowable and ineffable: He can only ever be “known” by love.

As we have already noted, in setting out at the beginning of Book 1 the order of what should be used and what should be enjoyed, Augustine underlines the radical, ontological divide between God, the Creator, and his creation. As so often, he expresses this in terms of Romans 1.20: “If we wish to return to the homeland where we can be happy we must use this world, not enjoy it, in order to discern ‘the invisible attributes of God, which are understood through what has been made’; in other words, to ascertain what is eternal and spiritual from corporeal and temporal things” (*Doct. chr.* 1.4.4; Green: 16-17)¹⁸ He thus makes it absolutely clear that it is only God, the Creator, the one, consubstantial, eternal, and immutable Trinity, that should be enjoyed and loved for his own sake. Every other thing must be used towards enjoyment of God and must never be taken as an end in itself. But in attempting to give an account of God the Trinity, however, I think Augustine not only identifies the one, supreme *res* that is to be enjoyed; he also makes it clear why love is fundamental to learning about him,

¹⁶ *Cum autem homine in deo fruieris, deo potius quam homine fruieris. Illo enim fruieris quo efficeris beatus.*

¹⁷ For an excellent presentation of this key aspect of Augustine’s thought, see Bochet. Cavadini rightly describes it as sacramental: “We never leave the temporal because in Christ the temporal becomes sacramentalized; it becomes our enjoyment of God” (172).

¹⁸ *si redire in patriam volumus ubi beati esse possimus, utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum, ut invisibilia dei per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciantur, hoc est ut de corporalibus temporalibusque rebus aeterna et spiritalia capiamus.*

to communicating him to others, and to participating in him. It is because he is otherwise unknowable and ineffable; we can only have a “loving knowledge” of God, not a rational understanding of him.

Even more than Augustine’s emphasis in the Prologue on the need for human teaching and learning as an exercise in love, what he has to say in Book 1 about the ultimate unknowability of God, the Trinity, is often overlooked. But I think that these two insights are the twin keys to unlock the notorious difficulties of this first book and to help us to understand the rest of the work: love and ineffability.¹⁹

Having attempted to give a brief account of the consubstantial co-equality of the three unique persons of the one divine Trinity (*Doct. chr.* 1.5.5), Augustine proceeds to exclaim: “Have I spoken something, have I uttered something, worthy of God? No, I feel that all I have done is to wish to speak; if I did say something, it is not what I wanted to say” (1.6.6; Green: 16-17).²⁰ The reason, of course, is an almost inexpressible contradiction in terms: God is ineffable, and yet in saying that God is ineffable we are expressing something about him: “if what cannot be spoken is unspeakable, then it is not unspeakable, because it can actually be said to be unspeakable” (1.6.6; Green: 16-17).²¹ Although we can say nothing worthy of God, however, Augustine suggests that God “has sanctioned the homage of the human voice, and chosen that we should derive pleasure from our words in praise of him” (1.6.6; Green: 16-17).²²

This last phrase is telling: God “has sanctioned the homage of the human voice, and chosen that we should derive pleasure from our words in praise of him.” If God is ineffable, “a being than which there is nothing better or more exalted” above “all visible and corporeal beings . . . above all intelligible and spiritual beings” (*Doct. chr.* 1.7.7; Green: 18-19) then of course we can never grasp or comprehend him; we can never hope to say anything at all that is worthy of him, but only render homage with our voices and take “pleasure from our words in praise of him.”²³ What is this taking “pleasure from our words in praise of him”?

I would like to suggest that to take the pleasure or joy (*gaudere*) in praising God is very like the taking enjoyment of God which we have in our neighbor. We noted Augustine’s comments on Paul’s words to Philemon, “So, brother, I shall enjoy you in the Lord.” Augustine writes, “When you enjoy a human being in God, you are enjoying (*frueris*) God rather than that human being. For you enjoy the one by whom you are made happy” (*Doct. chr.* 1.33.37; Green: 46-

¹⁹ The literature on unknowability and ineffability in Augustine’s thought is scarce, though van Geest is a notable and very helpful exception. See also Moreau et al.: note complémentaire 5.3, “L’ineffabilité divine,” for references to related passages in Augustine’s work, a consideration of the Neoplatonic background, and bibliography on negative theology in Augustine.

²⁰ *Diximusne aliquid et sonuimus aliquid dignum deo? Immo uero nihil me aliud quam dicere uoluisse sentio; si autem dixi, non hoc est quod dicere uolui.*

²¹ *quoniam si illud est ineffabile quod dici non potest, non est ineffabile quod uel ineffabile dici potest.*

²² *admisit humanae uocis obsequium et uerbis nostris in laude sua gaudere nos uoluit.*

²³ Cf. the translation of this passage by Robertson; he translates *et uerbis nostris in laude sua gaudere nos uoluit*, “and wished us to take joy in praising him with our words” (11).

47).²⁴ So to take pleasure or joy in praise is to take pleasure in and to enjoy God in and through it. This is precisely what praise of the ineffable God makes possible. Although God's transcendent ineffability effectively makes all signs inadequate, at the same time it also makes all signs indispensably necessary, for without them God cannot be apprehended or expressed at all. In the face of God's ineffable transcendence, Augustine often turns to praise as our best means available to respond to the unknowable God: as he urges in his early work, *Ad Simplicianum*, "Inscrutable are his judgments and unfathomable his ways' (Romans 11:33). Let us say 'Alleluia' and join in the canticle and let us not say 'why this?' or 'why that?'" (1.2.22).²⁵ This is like the approach in the Prologue of *De doctrina christiana*, where human teaching and learning enables teacher and learner to minister and receive the sacraments, and in faith, hope, and love, allows them not so much to understand them as to participate in them; it is like enjoyment of our neighbor in God, and like following the way set out for us by the incarnate Word, in and through whom we arrive at the incorporeal Father (1.34.38); so praise responds to the unknowable and ineffable God in a way that allows human beings, not to comprehend him, but to use temporal, mutable signs and things to take pleasure or joy in him. Praise, then, like teaching and learning, demonstrates the necessary inseparability of signs and things, of use and enjoyment: it is not a matter of moving *from* signs to things and of asking "why this?" or "why that?"; nor is it matter of moving *beyond* use, in this life, in order to enjoy God, but rather of using words and signs in order to take pleasure in, or to enjoy, him.²⁶

So what are we left with? Not specific doctrines or teachings; not intellectual understanding or knowledge; and only the tatters of a theory of signs and things, use and enjoyment. Rather, we are left with a sense of the necessary inextricability of signs and things, use and enjoyment, which characterizes not just our fallen-ness, but first and foremost, our created-ness, our relationship with each other and with the incarnate Word; above all, it characterizes our relationship with our eternal, unknowable, and ineffable Creator. Unlike classical thought, there are no neat distinctions and no obvious progressions; we will never, in this life (and arguably, in the life to come), be able to leave signs or the discipline of use behind, for these are our only way of participating in the unknowable and ineffable truth of God the Trinity.²⁷

²⁴ *Cum autem homine in deo frueris, deo potius quam homine frueris. Illo enim frueris quo efficeris beatus.*

²⁵ *Sed inscrutabilia sunt iudicia ejus, et inuestigabiles vias ejus (Rom. 11: 33). Dicamus Alleluia, et collaudemus canticum, et non dicamus, Quid hoc? uel, quid hoc?*

²⁶ Sutherland makes a similar point in reference to Book 4: "Words become for him a means instead of an end, the end unattainable without the means, the means empty without the end. And this unity of ends and means is part of that greater unity which is love" (152). Markus similarly observes of Augustine's use of signs and things, use and enjoyment: "This is Augustine's way of affirming the necessity of keeping our horizons perpetually open. We thwart this drive of our nature only at the cost of blocking off the process of learning and growth that living in the midst of this realm of limited and unstable things ought always to remain. A tendency to discover things to be signs is central to Augustine's understanding of what it is to be human, and doubly so to his idea of being Christian" (101).

²⁷ As Williams comments, "All that is present to us in and as language is potentially *signum* in respect of the unrepresentable God" (145).

By using the traditional categories which his readers would no doubt recognize and be familiar with, Augustine is, then, effectively subverting them in *De doctrina christiana* in order to demonstrate a Christian worldview in which the transcendent Creator is apprehended, not through doctrinal definitions or intellectual understanding, not through moving beyond signs in order to grasp the reality to which they refer or through ordered use in order to attain enjoyment of eternal things, but in and through faith, hope, and love in the very temporal, mutable, and corporeal things and signs by which he has graciously revealed himself to us: creation, the Incarnation, Scripture, the Church, and the sacraments. As Augustine puts it, towards the end of Book 1, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation. We should use it, not with an abiding but with a transitory love and delight . . . so that we love those things by which are carried along for the sake of that toward which we are carried” (*Doct. chr.* 1.35.39). In this life, signs are always necessary in order to believe in, hope for, and love divine truth (*res*). Likewise, “use,” now understood as an “order of love” or, perhaps more accurately, an “order of delight” (1.27.28; Green: 36-37),²⁸ is always the only way to participate in or enjoy that truth.

Love as the Beginning and End of Scripture

I think that these insights might help us to explain Augustine’s striking and at first rather disconcerting observations at the end of Book 1 concerning the need for Scripture. He suggests that the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor is itself sufficient to interpret Scripture and to establish the sense of a passage: “So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar” (*Doct. chr.* 1.36.40; Green: 48-49).²⁹ Indeed, he goes further and adds that “a person strengthened by faith, hope, and love, and who steadfastly holds on to them, has no need of the scriptures except to instruct others” (1.39.43; Green 52-53).³⁰

In a sense this takes us back to the beginning and to the Prologue of *De doctrina christiana*. There, in response to those who claimed that they knew the truth of Scripture without human instruction, Augustine insisted on the need for human teaching and learning in order to impart the sacraments and to convey “what is to be believed, what is to be hoped and what is to be loved.” We noted that his insistence was founded, not so much on the need to impart knowledge or understanding as to unify those who teach and those who learn in a bond of love. From examining Book 1 more closely we can now appreciate that this refers to a shared

²⁸ *Ille autem iuste et sancte vivit qui rerum integer aestimator est. Ipse est autem qui ordinatam habet dilectionem*; “The person who lives a just and holy life is one who is a sound judge of these things. He is also a person who has ordered his love.”

²⁹ *Quisquis igitur scripturas divinas vel quamlibet earum partem intellexisse sibi videtur, ita ut eo intellectu non aedificet istam geminam caritatem dei et proximi, nondum intellexit. Quisquis vero talem inde sententiam duxerit, ut huic aedificandae caritati sit utilis, nec tamen hoc dixerit quod ille quem legit eo loco sensisse probabitur, non perniciose fallitur nec omnino mentitur.*

³⁰ *Homo itaque fide et spe et caritate subnixus eaque inconcusse retinens non indiget scripturis nisi ad alios instruendos.*

love of the unknowable and ineffable God, the source and end of the sacraments, and of all that is believed, hoped, and loved. What Augustine concludes in the closing chapters of Book 1 reiterates this: “The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that the fulfilment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing” (*Doctr. chr.* 1.35.39; Green: 48-49).³¹

Although Augustine holds out the possibility that someone with an unshaken hold on faith, hope, and charity might be said to need the scriptures no longer, the fact that he then proceeds to spend the rest of the work discussing the interpretation of Scripture in Books 2 and 3, and preaching on Scripture in Book 4, rather belies this observation. Although an unshaken hold on faith, hope, and love might well make the scriptures redundant, he is convinced that for most human beings, the scriptures are the indispensable *source* of their faith, hope, and love. We have seen that the truth of Scripture, the *res* of Scripture, cannot be known in this life, but that this is not why we undertake to study or to teach them. Scripture is not concerned with *knowledge* of God or *knowledge* of neighbor; it is not concerned with “why this” and “why that.” Rather its “fulfillment and end” is love – a love that unites us with our neighbor and with God because its source *is* God; a love that enables us to comprehend with our hearts what we cannot comprehend with our intellects, which is God the Trinity. The fact that Augustine spends the rest of *De doctrina christiana* discussing interpretation of Scripture in Books 2 and 3 (not so much in terms of doctrine but of the providential and delightful obscurity of its figurative signs), and then how to communicate it to others in Book 4 (again, not so much in terms of teaching but of rhetorical persuasion and delight), then, is really an extended demonstration of what we have hopefully established as the key to Book 1: that the words of Scripture (*signa*) are ultimately inseparable from the things (*res*) they communicate; that signs are the means by which we encounter things (*res*), participate in them, and comprehend them – not in understanding, but in delight and love.³²

Love, then, as Robert Wilken has felicitously pointed out (quoting the poet Geoffrey Hill) is a form of “sensuous intelligence” (291); it is a “form of knowledge” (312; quoting Gregory the Great’s *Homily* 27.4 on John 15:12-16). Together with faith and hope, it is the only sort of knowing that we creatures can have of our unknowable, transcendent Creator. It is a knowledge of the heart.

But I am aware that this idea of a “loving knowledge” sits rather uneasily with the work of some recent scholars, who, in elucidating Augustine’s debt to Stoic and Platonic moral psychology, have suggested that he retained a role for human cognitive judgement and assent, as well as for the inspiration of grace, in human motivation and action. Our reading of Book

³¹ *Omnium igitur quae dicta sunt ex quo de rebus tractamus haec summa est, ut intellegatur legis et omnium diuinarum scripturarum plenitudo et finis esse dilectio rei qua fruendum est et rei quae nobiscum ea re frui potest.*

³² Augustine rehearses a similar argument concerning the relation of the double commandment and Scripture in a number of works, notably *Conf.* 12.

1 of *De doctrina christiana* would suggest that just the opposite is the case.³³ In conclusion, therefore, I would like to examine this issue a little further.

What have You That You did not Receive?

What is at stake here, I think, is nothing less than Augustine's understanding of grace: does it comprehend human assent or is it wholly a matter of God's unmerited gift of love? Once again, this no doubt sounds like an obvious question which has an obvious answer – an answer which can be readily rehearsed in the well-worn terminology of the Pelagian controversy. But in revisiting Augustine's use of Stoic philosophy, and in particular, Stoic moral psychology, Sarah Byers has recently revived the ghost of this controversy. There is indeed much that is fascinating in her careful and insightful treatment of an aspect of Augustine's thought that has tended to be overlooked, precisely because the scholarly consensus has long been that Augustine's understanding of the Fall, the divided will, and the operation of grace leaves no room for Stoic theories of, for example, good and bad preliminary feelings (pre-passions), which must then be either accepted or rejected by rational evaluation and judgment before they become emotions.³⁴ In contrast, Byers interprets the famous passage in *Confessions* 8.11.26-27, where Augustine describes his divided will in terms of Romans 7, as describing a will at the stage of encountering conflicting, preliminary emotions or impressions, which it must then rationally evaluate and respond to, choosing either to reject or to embrace them, after which it can move to full consent. So she maintains that in *Confessions* 8 God graciously grants Augustine a vision of Lady Continence in opposition to his carnal temptations; Augustine hesitates, deliberates, is divided, but then yields in confession and repentance, calling upon God for assistance. God then responds by graciously assisting his will to come to full consent and conversion to celibacy (Byers: 172-214, esp. 185-86). Byers's Stoic interpretation of *Confessions* 8 thus closely resembles some of Augustine's earliest reflections on Romans, written in 394 CE, wherein he attempts to uphold the justice of God's election of some sinners but not others, and briefly entertains the possibility of a human response to God's call (what Byers calls a "graced motivating impression"³⁵), which God then subsequently rewarded by the grace of faith (*Exp. prop. Rom.* 60; written in 394).³⁶ We should note, however, that he definitively renounced these ideas two years later in his *Ad Simplicianum*, written in 396.

This two-stage operation of grace (Byers' "two grace" model: 197), which allows an intermediate role for human response to an (albeit) graced motivating impression, is, however, fundamentally alien to Augustine's thought and seriously undermines his theology of grace,

³³ William Harmless's work on the heart in Augustine, which is included in this volume, very much bears this out.

³⁴ As Byers puts it: "emotions are caused by judgements, passions are caused by assent to false propositions (Stoic *pathos*), and affections by assent to true propositions (Stoic *eupatheia*)" (57).

³⁵ Byers describes grace as "God's action on the mind, whereby the intellect apprehends the beauty and goodness of virtue, and as a result formulates sayables [interior mental speech] including an imperative, in the discursive reason" (182).

³⁶ Byers refers to a similar passage in *Div. qu.* 83, 68 (395/6 CE) as the first time Augustine uses this "dialogue model" (205).

which I would argue is one in which grace is always understood as the ever-present, internal, irresistible inspiration of God, who alone enkindles our delight in the good and the ability to act on it, leaving no room for human rational deliberation or choice. It is this theology of grace which Byers does indeed acknowledge is present in the *Ad Simplicianum* of 396 CE (see Byers: 180-81), and also allows is sometimes glimpsed in those rare, spontaneous conversions, such as Paul's (Byers' "one grace" model: 89-90); but she maintains that it really begins to reappear only after 418 (Augustine having somehow forgotten it), and is fully formulated only after 425.³⁷ In the intervening years, Byers suggests, Augustine's understanding of grace was characterized more by the sort of process he describes in *Confessions* 8 in relation to his own conversion – that is, one which is closely based on the Stoic, epistemological framework of a motivating impression, followed by human rational deliberation, followed by assent. It is this model of conversion which, she believes, "set the terms for what became the accepted doctrine of grace in the West" (that is, the "two grace" model; Byers: 191). It is a model in which, in a Christian context, grace grants the motivating impression and brings the will to consent; but the interim stage of rational evaluation, judgment and choice remains an act of the will. As she puts it: "So, it looks as though *Conf.* 8.11.27-8.12.29 represents a 'dialogue' model of conversion. The giving and receiving of grace is apparently a conversation: God initiates contact, and subsequently grants consent or does not, depending on the recipient's reaction to the impression" (202). However, not only does this undermine Augustine's theology of grace, but, in the context of this paper, we can also appreciate that it entirely subverts his theology of loving knowledge. Augustine in fact opposes it at every turn, as he will later oppose Pelagius: by setting against it the unmerited and irresistible gift of God's grace, "the love of God, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which he has given to us" (Romans 5:5); by asking, "what have you that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7); and by constantly reiterating that "it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who has mercy" (Romans 9:16). Love is not the result of human, rational deliberation and judgement; it cannot be intellectually cognized, evaluated, or chosen; it is rather the result of God's inward, mysterious, ineffable, and irresistible inspiration within us.³⁸

Augustine's use of the terminology of signs and things, use and enjoyment, in *De doctrina christiana* Book 1, is, as I hope this paper has demonstrated, one of the ways in which he counters and subverts the classical tradition of philosophical reflection in which Pelagianism stands, that is, one based on human ability to apprehend the true and the good and to act upon it. Book 1 is an uncompromising statement of the love whose source is God; the love to which every movement of our heart is a return, in and through his grace; the love by which God

³⁷ Why Augustine forgot it is not explained. He does not comment on this memory lapse in the *Retractationes*, which prompts Byers to suggest that "maybe he forgot that he had ever forgotten" (211)!

³⁸ Lust and joy suffer the same fate as love in Byers's presentation: they become passions or emotions which are the result of rational cognition and judgment. She maintains that "Augustine typically talks as if all affects are effects of cognitive processes" (78). So, "In exaltation or joy . . . one believes one has attained something that contributes to happiness" (67). "Even lust, which he conceives of as essentially involving changes in the generative organs, he will say is caused by thoughts (*putare*) . . . 'lust' is essentially 'thinking' that sexual pleasure is more important than it actually is, in the *Contra Julianum*" (78-79, 124).

loves himself through us.³⁹ In short, Augustine is describing a journey not for the feet, but for the affections.

As we have seen, it is in this context that Augustine often reverts to doxology, to love and praise as the only adequate response we can make in the face of God's ineffability and in response to the work of his grace. The only way we can find to express our sense of God's unknowable and ineffable reality is to take "pleasure in our words in praise of him" (*Doct. chr.* 1.6.6). Byers, revealingly, can find no room for prayer in relation to the healing of the passions because, as she puts it, the latter "are voluntary." "They are not things that can just be 'taken away' by God, but have to be fought through, via one's thoughts" (153, and n. 13). But for Augustine, the sort of praise we have just described is precisely the sort of prayer which heals the one who prays – not through their own battles or rational reflections, but through their submission to the love of God which is shed abroad in their hearts and prays and praises through them.⁴⁰

One further example, in conclusion: Augustine's own attempts at attaining the supreme *res*, who alone is to be enjoyed – God the Trinity – are evidence of the way in which reason must give way to doxology and a loving knowledge of the unknowable and ineffable. God the Trinity can only ever be known by the heart, and however much we long to know and to enjoy God, that heartfelt knowing is never more than a momentary, fleeting, touching glance which can never be fixed, pinned down, or made permanent in this life. This is, of course, what Augustine describes as the final outcome of all the ascents towards God which he nevertheless essays throughout his work (Harmless 2008). Once again, classical terminology and a classical framework – this time a pattern of ascent from body, to soul, to mind, to the One, derived from the Neo-Platonists – is at once used, and simultaneously subverted and transformed, in a Christian context, in order to demonstrate the newness and radical difference of Christian faith: that God, the ultimate truth, cannot be attained by human effort or be known by the human mind; that he can never be permanently enjoyed in this life; that we must continuously stretch out towards him, who we can never rationally cognize, in the love which he inspires within us, before we can finally attain him in the life to come.⁴¹

Conclusion

We suggested in relation to *De doctrina christiana* that love and ineffability were the twin keys needed to unlock the complexities created by Augustine's use of the categories of signs and things, of use and enjoyment. In briefly examining some aspects of recent scholarship which would appear to undermine this suggestion, we once again encountered love and ineffability as the twin ideas which lie at the heart of Augustine's thought and which allow us to appreciate the distinctive and radical effect which Christian faith and, above all, a Christian

³⁹ In *De trinitate* 9.1.1, Augustine quotes Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 8:2-3: "If anybody thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But anyone who loves God, this man is known by him."

⁴⁰ This is very much what Harmless (2012) demonstrates so cogently.

⁴¹ As van Geest puts it: "However tangible God becomes through love, and however close to humankind, for Augustine love was as incomprehensible as God himself, and therefore God was as indefinable as the love that could be experienced" (105).

understanding of divine grace, had on his presentation of classical approaches to truth, the ultimate good and human motivation. We then suggested that these twin ideas of love and divine ineffability are the key features of how we know God: it is through the voice of the heart and the longing of the heart, through doxology and loving knowledge, that God the Trinity can be “known” in this life.

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