Chapter 8
Understanding Augustine’s *On the Trinity* as a Mystical Work
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Augustine’s *On the Trinity* (*De Trinitate*) is widely regarded as his greatest work. In the medieval period it was read mystically, as a text which invites the reader to a deep appropriation of the mystery of the Trinity. The text falls into two halves. In Books 1–7, Augustine explains questions of the relations and unity of the divine persons of the Trinity; while in Books 8–15 (there are 15 books in total) he develops an interior reading of the Trinity, in terms of what has been called his ‘psychological analogy’, which likens our memory, intellect and will to the divine persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For medieval mystical writers, such as William of St Thierry, Bonaventure, and John of the Cross, to name only the most famous – there were numerous others taking a similar approach – the book was regarded as a means to transform the mind of the reader mystically towards the goal of contemplation or union with God. The interior turn of Books 8–15 was taken to indicate that the true purpose of seeking to understand the doctrine of the Trinity – with its language of persons, relations, and so on – was for a personal appropriation of the life of the Trinity in human experience, by means of a deep participation in the relations of the divine persons. In brief, Augustine’s exploration of the Trinity was thought to point the reader towards joining in the life of the divine Son in relation to the Father and to have as its goal the beatific vision in heaven.

It is hard, however, for the modern interpreter to get inside this mode of personal appropriation which yields a mystical reading. The modern interpreter’s attention tends to be drawn to those aspects of the text which address the technical questions of how, logically speaking, the one and the three can be reconciled; how there can be relations between persons without separation into three; how the persons can be equal and not subordinate to one another, and so on. The turn to the interior of the second half of the work is then regarded as providing merely useful analogies for helping to sort out these technical concerns, rather than as an invitation to a deeper personal appropriation of the doctrine. For instance, Augustine’s reflections on how human consciousness is both complex and yet unified are taken as tools for thinking in sophisticated ways about the technical problem of the three and the one in the Trinity. This is to make a typically modern separation between what is ‘out there’ in the world and what is ‘in here’ in my conscious personal subjectivity. The Trinity is something ‘out there’, to be understood by applying technical methods...
of reasoning, as we would to a complex mathematical problem. Yet Augustine, as an ancient/medieval writer, does not make this separation. He thinks that there is a distinction between what is ‘in here’ and what is ‘out there’, but that in the end they are the same reality and inseparable, because everything that is is first known by God. Since human knowledge of reality is understood as a participation in the divine knowing, the mind is seen as ‘interior’ to the world, within it rather than outside it. The Trinity is inherent to our knowing rather than, finally, outside us.1

Recent moves in the scholarship have gone a long way towards reconciling the technical questions of Books 1–7 with the interior journey of Books 8–15. But there has been little attempt to take this in a mystical direction, towards an interpretation which recognises the vital concern of the text for the personal transformation of the reader, with the goal of face-to-face vision or contemplation.2 Lewis Ayres, for instance, in his recent Augustine and the Trinity (2010), argues that the psychological analogies of the second half require a contemplative appropriation of our creation in the image of God: it is by seeking the contemplative capacity of the mind that we find the internal trinities of self-knowledge, self-love and so on. For Augustine, this use of the mind is not a different task from understanding the facts of doctrine in the first half of the work, but simply a deeper appropriation of the same facts.3 Yet Ayres is loath to see Augustine’s explanations as moving in a contemplative direction: contemplative knowing is harnessed to help explain the Trinity, but not for the sake of a contemplative knowledge of God itself. For Ayres, Augustine uses a contemplative self-appropriation of the mind to illustrate and expand our understanding of the Trinity rather than to draw us further towards contemplation. The focus of Augustine’s explanation is on the ‘Trinity itself’, not on the transformation of selfhood towards the contemplative goal.4 Others display a similar reticence concerning the mystical character of the text. Basil Studer, writing in 1997, criticises the medieval mystical tradition for reading Augustine’s psychological analogy in terms of contemplation. The ‘more important contribution’ of the text, Studer says, is to tell us about ‘the relationship between economy and theology’, that is, to show how doctrinal questions about the sending of the Trinity in time are related to the eternal Trinity.5 In other words, the development of personal interiority or transformation is not the point. But this is to ignore large parts of Augustine’s text which suggest that this is precisely the point, and it is to dismiss the long and prolific tradition of medieval mystical readings of Augustine on the Trinity. Thus, my aim is to sketch what it would be like to read this text of Augustine’s again today in a medieval mystical manner. I am not going to concentrate on how he deals with the technical problems of Trinitarian doctrine, though he does, or with precisely what kind of psychology he holds, though that is also interesting.6 I want to make a reading of the text which puts the subjective, personal perspective of the reader and the reader’s appropriation of their own consciousness at the centre, while maintaining, as Augustine does, that this is a fully critical and (as we would say) ‘objective’ reading of the text. This is the way


3 It has been noted that Augustine uses the term ‘mystical’ in a more general sense than that developed in the later medieval mystical tradition, but that his approach was foundational for what was later called ‘mystical theology’ in the West; thus, I use the term ‘contemplation’ here, from Augustine, as continuous with the later tradition of medieval mystical theology, and as ‘mystical’ in this sense (McGinn, The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century, pp. 252–3).

4 Ayres, Augustine and the Trinity, p. 6.


that medieval mystical writers sought to appropriate Augustine’s thinking on the Trinity, and I suggest that it was mostly quite consistent with his own approach.1

To do this, it is necessary to make a few preliminary comments about Augustine’s understanding of the human mind as created in the image of God. The Trinity, for Augustine, is an inherently personal matter. That is to say, it concerns us first of all ‘in here’, rather than being separable from us merely as something ‘out there’. We know about the Trinity because of the sending of the Son to the world in the incarnation and the related sending of the Holy Spirit. Having seen God in the flesh historically, we know that humanity is made, as it was in Christ, to know and love the Father. Knowing God is, in this sense, already part of humanity, put there from the beginning, and humanity is personally related to God, as the Son is. The fact that we do not know God is a result of sin and the fall, rather than because of our humanity.2 This means that God is related to us as the Father to the Son in the Trinity; God is not to be regarded as an external reality, but is rather to be found by penetrating our ‘inward’ capacity as knowers with the Son. The external teaching of the Trinity is useful, but only to enlighten us to the Trinity’s primary reality that is already within us, before we hear the words of faith.3 The Trinity is already part of human existence, though it requires grace to restore and perfect it in each human person; it is the personal address of the Father with the Son, already present in the incarnate. This is what Augustine means by being made in the ‘image of God’. Christ images the Father as the divine Word. Our own transformation by faith allows us to join his manner of imaging the Father, so that we attain a genuine ‘likeness’ (similitudo) of the knowing that Christ has in relation to the Father in his humanity.4 To repeat this point again, because it is central to interpreting Augustine correctly: the Trinity is a personal matter, not one that can properly be dealt with — except in the most superficial manner — as something outside us.

In On the Trinity, Augustine is seeking to introduce us not just to the grammar of language about the Trinity, but more importantly, to the personal address of God within us. Further, at repeated points throughout the text, he says that we are ‘on a journey’ of faith, towards the goal of contemplation or face-to-face vision, to be completed in heaven.5 The reader of this text is in the process of being healed, which entails purifying our vision so that we can see reality and God

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2 Augustine, Trin. 11.5.8; 14.14.20–15.21.

3 Trin. 13.2.5.

4 Trin. 7.6.12.

5 Trin. 1.3.5; 1.8.17–10.21; 1.13.31; 2.1.1; 4.1.1–18.24; 12.7.12–15.25; 13 (all); 14.16.22–19.26.

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16 Trin. 8.5.7; 4.1.1–2.4; 4.10.13; 12.8.13–14.23.
living, for instance. Spiritual knowing is different, however. Spiritual knowing begins from a sharing or participation in the object. Spiritual realities such as goodness and truth can only be known by sharing; if one seeks domination over them or to manipulate them to one's own ends, they cease to be what they are. They have to be shared in order to be known. In this case, the subject is then intimately involved with the object, knowing the object as a partner, by a personal relation within its subjectivity, rather than over against it.

This difference between 'bodily' knowing, on the one hand, and participatory or spiritual knowing, on the other hand, shapes Augustine's entire discussion in On the Trinity. Books 1–7 have at their heart the claim that the relations of the Trinity are identical with God's substance, rather than accidental to it. In Books 8–15, Augustine links this kind of relationality to the mind, seeking to show how we must approach knowledge of God as Trinity by sharing in God's love, rather than by seeking to make God a bodily kind of object outside us. Thus, it helps us to be aware of the divine presence if we are aware of how we are knowing — we need self-knowledge. Augustine seeks to develop tools in these books that serve to raise our awareness of this kind of knowing within us, so that we can move more easily to knowing God face to face, as the goal of the journey of faith. By a personal engagement with the Trinity, we are learning the shape of 'face-to-face' vision now, in a transformation that moves away from understanding God as an object outside us and towards finding God as the inward presence of truth and love.

I would like now to turn to two examples of how Augustine seeks to engage the reader in this transformation, from Books 8–15. I cannot hope to cover the entirety of these books, but only to indicate the kind of process that Augustine seeks to draw us into. In Book 8, he introduces his psychological treatment: by asking us to attend to our own experience of interpersonal love. God is love, he says, citing 1 John 4:8, so if we want to understand the Trinity, all we have to do is to understand love. We need to see what love is within us, and that, quite simply, is God's presence. Augustine says:

Let no one say, 'I don't know what to love.' Let him love his brother, and love that love; after all, he knows the love he loves with better than the brother he loves. There now, he can already have God better known to him than his brother. Certainly better known because more present, better known because more inward to him, better known because more sure.

To talk of love from the example of our awareness of loving others serves several purposes, for Augustine. First, it is personal, drawing our attention to what we are aware of when we ourselves are engaged in the act of loving. What kind of knowing is this, in our experience? Second, it draws out precisely the kind of shared knowing that Augustine regards as truly spiritual. To be aware of love is to be aware of something necessarily shared with the other. Even if they do not reciprocate it, love makes a bond with the other. Third, by asking what we are aware of when we love, we are being pointed to our ability to distinguish something within this act of sharing. What is it that we know? We know subjectively that we are involved, that we are loving. We do not know an object that can be separated from the knowing; yet within the relationship with the object, something is really known: that we are loving. Finally, by linking love to God via the scriptural quotation, 'God is love', Augustine is suggesting that God can be known in the same manner as love, by an awareness of being in an intimate relation to one who is distinguishable only within the relationship and not apart from it, that is, by participation. Augustine is raising our awareness to the possibility that we can distinguish God's presence within us. We do this not by making God into a bodily kind of object, but by the kind of awareness we have of love, when we love.

Augustine then goes on to relate this kind of knowing to the Trinity. When we see love within us, the pattern of unity and distinction in relation to what we know, which is made clear by love, is the pattern of the Trinity. This is the Trinity in human awareness, where the other is present by sheer relationship without separation from the knower. As an inward or subjective kind of knowing, it is 'more present' and 'more sure' than even the neighbour that we love, because the neighbour remains separable from us, whereas the awareness of the love is inseparably within us. From this point, Augustine goes on in the following books to develop a series of reflections on the nature of this kind of loving-knowing, which enlarge his approach to the Trinity from within the subject's appropriation of consciousness.

The second example that I have chosen illustrates another important part of Augustine's argument, which is his emphasis on the immediate character of the divine presence. In a further reflection on human awareness in Book 10, using the old philosophical adage of the Delphic Oracle, 'Know thyself', he says this:

The mind you see is not told know thyself (cognoscere te ipsum) in the same way as it might be told 'know the cherubim and seraphim'; of them, as absent beings, we believe what they are declared to be, that they are certain heavenly powers. Nor is it like being told 'know the will of that man,' which is not available in any way to our sense perceptions, nor even to our intelligence unless certain bodily signs of it are given, and this in such a way that we must rather believe than be intellectually aware (intellegamus) of what it is. Nor is it like a man being told

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13 Trin. 8.3.5.
14 Trin. 5.5.6.
15 Trin. 5.7.10.
16 Trin. 8.8.12.
'look at your face', which he can only do in a mirror, even our own face is absent from our sight, because it is not in a place our sight can be directed at. But when the mind is told know thyself, it knows itself the very moment it understands what 'thyself' is, and for no other reason than that it is present to itself (sibi præsens est).\footnote{Trin. 10.9.12; The Trinity, p. 295.}

Here Augustine helpfully gives examples of three kinds of knowing that he is not talking about. He is not talking about knowing something that is absent – such as knowing what the cherubim and seraphim are, from scripture. He is not talking about knowing something by report or from someone's body language, such as when we know another person's will. Nor, thirdly, is he talking about knowing ourselves in the manner of looking in a mirror, when we see a 'third party' reflection of our face, as if looking at someone else. In each of these cases, we are separated from the thing that we know. The third case is an interesting one, because mostly what people mean by self-knowledge today is of this kind – for instance, knowing your strengths and weaknesses – where one adopts the perspective of another person in order to assess oneself. Augustine is drawing our attention to a different capacity for awareness, which requires no such separation of the thing known from the knower. It is of the kind that we have when, fleetingly, we catch a glimpse of our own presence to ourselves, the 'me' within our knowing of other things – whatever it is that makes all my knowing mine rather than someone else's. This is the character of immediacy that he is seeking. To know here is to know oneself not as separate from oneself, but as 'interior' to one's knowing, the immediate source that is 'me' in all my knowing.

Augustine introduces the notion of memory at this stage, to amplify the reader's grasp on this kind of self-presence.\footnote{Trin. 10.11.18.} By memory he means the sense that one can have, when knowing, of being the personal source of the knowing, in an immediate relation. One can know oneself as present, as a kind of memory, without departing from what one knows in the manner of an outsider observer. One can simply inhabit one's knowing and know it within the knowing. Memory becomes a powerful way of referring to this source of knowing that is immediately present within knowing.\footnote{Trin. 14.11.14.} Augustine then links this to the presence of God, who similarly is known in the manner of an immediate source.\footnote{Trin. 14.14.18.} This in turn reflects the character of the Father in the Trinity, who is the ungenerated source, yet not separate from the other persons. To grasp the immediacy of memory within knowing is to begin to see how God can be distinguished as the God of immediate, face-to-face vision.

\footnote{c.e., John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle 39-3.}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Augustine understands the Trinity as a teaching about personal relations which begin in God and extend to creation through Christ's humanity: Christ was humanly conscious of the Father, so the Trinity is already within the structures of human consciousness, from creation, ready to be taken up on the journey of faith. The words of faith shine a light on the hidden presence of the Trinity, which is universally present in human awareness. This Trinity is found in the mode of interiority and personal appropriation, offering the possibility of spiritual transformation and mystical vision. For mystical theology, this personal engagement over time, in the life of faith, is vital to understanding the text fully. The interior journey furnishes the contemplative capacity with which to reach a deeper understanding of the simultaneous unity and relationality of the Trinity; and more than this, it serves to draw the reader mystically towards the goal of the life of faith, which, as Augustine repeatedly says, is contemplation or face-to-face vision. Medieval mystical writers such as John of the Cross who spoke of 'transformation in the Trinity' may have extended Augustine's inward appropriation of Trinitarian doctrine but they did not misread it. And for students today, such a reading need not be excluded as belonging only in a devotional or religious context but can be appreciated in the academic setting. It is not necessary to be in a church or to be religiously committed to make such a reading; all that is demanded is that the appropriation of my own structures of consciousness is engaged as a central part of the work of interpretation. If Augustine is right, these are universal structures, and whether he is right that the Trinity is the divinely revealed presence of God can be put to one side, allowing him at least that to approach an understanding of the Trinity is to engage with an interior, not merely an exterior, reality. Until this point is grasped in the interpretation of numerous mystical texts, a central part of their meaning will be missed.

\textbf{Bibliography}


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Chapter 9

The Apophatic Potential of Augustine’s De doctrina christiana: Creatures as Signs of God

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This chapter consists in three interrelated claims, each of which will need to be qualified in important ways. The claims and their qualifications are generated by a reading of Augustine’s De doctrina christiana (specifically Book I and the beginning of Book II). The first and overarching claim, which is the burden of the chapter, is that words contribute to the signification of God only insofar as they contribute to the redemptive transformation of human creatures, making those creatures themselves better, or more transparent, signs of God. This needs unpacking. First, there is an implicit negative side to the claim: words do not signify God directly, for instance by referring to or describing God. Their only purchase on God is in the way they contribute to the transformation of the human beings who use them. This is the chapter’s apophatic proposal. While it is not made in these terms by De doctrina itself, it is a proposal that De doctrina makes possible.

Second, the claim contains within it a subclaim: that it is the transformed lives of human beings which are rightly said to signify God. This will form the second of the chapter’s three claims, and unlike the first it is one which, as I will argue below, is directly derived from De doctrina. We can state it more generally as follows: creatures (including human ones) signify God; or in other words, creatures are signs of God. Our interest more specifically in human beings as signs of God follows from our interest in the role of human words in relation to God, and specifically their role in the redemptive transformation of human beings. The second claim is thus an answer to the following question: If

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1 While human words have an impact beyond the lives of human beings (for better or ill), the particular responsibility of human beings, in their use of words, is to address their own sin and need for redemption (one result of which may be to bring human beings into better relation with non-human creation). For this reason, while it is not denied that non-human creatures can be signs of God, our focus will be on the potential of human beings to become better signs of God, and thereby enter into more fully redeemed relationship with God. This way of putting the matter will gain qualification over the course of the chapter. See n. 27.