

Augustine's Modification of Liberal Education: Reflections on *De doctrina Christiana*

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Ἦθεν καὶ τὸ Ἰησοῦς σωτὴρ ἐρμηνεύεται. . . . Χρῖστος δὲ ἡ
θεότης τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος. — John of Damascus

Per speculum in aenigmate, dit saint Paul. Nous voyons
toutes choses à l'envers. Quand nous croyons donner,
nous recevons, etc. — Léon Bloy

To borrow a phrase from a member of the opposition, Christianity introduced “new modes and orders” to our understanding of reality. And no one was more alive to these changes than Augustine of Hippo. His works display an alert sensitivity to how our understanding of God, human nature, history, morality, and so on are expanded and deepened by the becoming-flesh of God’s Word. Indeed, communicating a new, “Christianized” understanding of reality is at the heart of Augustine’s project in *De doctrina Christiana*, and it leads, as one should expect, to a modification of liberal education, i.e., that education which develops us intellectually and morally so as to live in freedom, from sin and toward God, as much as we are able in this fallen world.

Now, I choose this word “modification” deliberately. For Augustine does not think that the coming of the Christ dissolved the very “substance” or “nature” of education as pagans before the Incarnation experienced it; instead, he thinks that a Christian should undertake liberal education in accordance with a new *modus*, a new “mode” or “measure,” that derives from intellectual assent to the reality of the Christ,



the Anointed One, and that orients it rightly toward the true completion of human nature. Outlining the essential facets of such Christianized liberal education inasmuch as they can be drawn from Augustine's *De doctrina*¹ is the primary goal of this paper.

There are a few steps toward achieving this goal. First, I show in what way *De doctrina* actually concerns liberal education, or at least includes it within its scope, which is the aim of section I. Although I don't consider this is a contentious point, it still requires an explanation, because at first glance *De doctrina* may appear to be concerned primarily and even solely with the interpretation of Scripture—which seems to be a narrower topic than liberal education. Second, I articulate the new *modus* of education, its new “mode” or “measure,” presented in *De doctrina*. How exactly is education “modified” by Augustine? I address this question in section II by honing in on Augustine's reflections on *res*, “realities,” in the early chapters of Book I. For in these reflections Augustine deftly shows how we are to rethink the realities we encounter in accordance with “new modes and orders” brought to light by the coming of the God-man, i.e., by the becoming-flesh of Wisdom itself. Recognition of these new modes and orders not only affects us “ontologically,” i.e., in the task of adjusting ourselves intellectually and volitionally to the realities we encounter; but it also aids us hermeneutically (i.e., in the task of interpreting Scripture) and pedagogically (i.e., in the task of educating human souls). And, indeed, all three of these concerns—ontological, hermeneutical, and pedagogical—are on Augustine's radar in *De doctrina*. After detailing Augustine's reflections early in Book I, therefore, I suggest way in which how the task of education may be modified in accordance with Augustine's Christianized ontology. Third, in section III, I attempt to exemplify the modification of education by briefly considering Augustine's treatment of rhetoric in Book IV. Augustine

¹ For the sake of brevity, I refer to *De doctrina Christiana* simply as “*De doctrina*” (even though the “*Christiana*” in the title is crucial!). In the notes, I cite *De doctrina Christiana* as “DDC” and provide the book, chapter, and paragraph numbers.



“Christianizes” the learning and exercise of the rhetorical art, and from this we are able to extrapolate a few of the principles at work in the “Christianization” of education as a whole. Fourth and finally, I conclude with a few very general remarks that attempt to situate the sort of education of which Augustine speaks in *De doctrina* among some current alternatives with which we are familiar. My hope throughout is that by reflecting on Augustine’s modification of liberal education in *De doctrina*, the reader may come to a deeper and more expansive understanding of how to exercise more effectively his or her own activity of *doctrina*, particularly at Christian institutions dedicated to liberal education.

I. What *De doctrina* Is About

Clearly the *De doctrina* is about interpreting Scripture. This is evident from its opening words. “There are certain precepts for treating the Scriptures,” Augustine begins, “that I see as able to be handed on not unfittingly to those who are eager for them, so that they may profit not only by reading others who have uncovered things that are covered over in the divine Letters, but also by uncovering such things themselves for others.”² Upon reading this opening sentence, we may expect a rulebook for interpreting the Bible, and in some sense *De doctrina* offers this. Yet its title bespeaks a larger concern; for, as many have noted, the phrase *doctrina Christiana* potentially refers to a wide array of topics.³ It could refer to the content of the Christian faith, or it could refer to the very activity undertaken by those who pass on that content to others.⁴

² “Sunt praecepta quaedam tractandarum Scripturarum, quae studiosis earum video non incommode posse tradi; ut non solum legendo alios qui divinarum Litterarum opera aperuerunt, sed et aliis ipsi aperiendo proficiant” (Augustine, DDC, Prol.1). All translations are mine.

³ See especially G. Press, “*Doctrina* in Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 17 (1984): 98-120.

⁴ Different translations of the title itself suggest these various referents. The title *On Christian Doctrine* (as J. Shaw [in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. II {Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993}] and D. Robertson [Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1997] render it) suggests a focus on the



It could even refer to an entire way of life, the “culture,” to which such teaching and learning give rise when they are ongoing and thus permeate a human community. Now, in a work in which Augustine calls attention to the multi-layered meaning of Scripture, there may be good reason to think that he himself is operating on several levels, and thus all these meanings of *doctrina Christiana* are in play. Personally, I think that this is the case and, moreover, that Augustine ties these meanings together by honing in on the seemingly narrow issue of how to read a book.⁵

Or should I say *the* book? For it is not just any book that Augustine prepares us to read, but the Book, the Bible, sacred Scripture. For Augustine, Scripture is a very special book indeed, and yet, as we know from his *Confessions*, he was not always enamored of it. Early in his life Scripture failed to meet his sophisticated taste; uncircumcised in heart, he did not yet have ears to hear. “For when I attended to the Scripture,” Augustine confesses, “I did not perceive it as I now speak of it; rather, it seemed to me unworthy when I compared it to the worthiness of Cicero. For my swollenness drew back from its *modus*, and my mind’s focus did not penetrate its inner things.”⁶ The *modus* of which Augustine speaks in this passage likely refers to Scripture’s “measuredness,” i.e., its understated but (as Augustine recognizes in *De doctrina*) its ultimately appealing and eminently appropriate eloquence. Swollen with

content of the Christian faith, whereas *On Christian Instruction* (as J. Gavigan [Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950] renders it) and even more so *Teaching Christianity* (as E. Hill [New York: New City Press, 2002] renders it) suggest a focus on the activity of teaching the Christian faith to others. *On Christian Teaching* (as R. Green [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997] renders it) perhaps bridges these two meanings best, and for this reason I consider it the best option in English.

⁵ Press captures Augustine’s use of *doctrina* well when he writes as follows: “. . . *doctrina* has a range of logically related meanings, of which the most general and inclusive is ‘learning’ as a cultural ideal, and . . . Augustine, an accomplished rhetorician, deliberately and artfully uses that variety of meanings in order, at once, to refute the pagan ideal and construct a Christian version of it” (“*Doctrina* in Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*,” 99).

⁶ “Non enim sicut modo loquor, ita sensi, cum attendi ad illam scripturam, sed visa est mihi indigna, quam Tullianae dignitati compararem. Tumor enim meus refugiebat modum eius, et acies mea non penetrabat interiora eius” (*Confessiones*, III.v.9).



arrogance, the young Augustine failed to heed the subtle eloquence with which Scripture whispers to us in its still small voice.

But after heeding the call in the garden to take up and read, Augustine's perception of Scripture manifestly changed. Indeed, in *De doctrina*, begun (like the *Confessions*) about ten years after his conversion and a couple of years after being ordained a bishop,⁷ Augustine trumpets the uniqueness and primacy of Scripture as a book. In Scripture, he tells us, one finds the means of curing the maladies of the human will;⁸ one finds the thoughts and will of the various authors of its many books, but also the very will of God who inspired them;⁹ one finds an overflow of meaningfulness that eludes any individual reader's comprehension and that can be imbibed ever more deeply—yet always in ways that the Spirit foresees.¹⁰ As mentioned above, moreover, Augustine avows Scripture's rhetorical worthiness; for, he claims, the authors of Scripture display a singular and unsurpassable eloquence whereby they articulate their thoughts in precisely the right manner. Hence one finds in Scripture an eloquence that

⁷ As is often noted by scholars, DDC was actually written in two very distinct phases that stood thirty years apart. The Prologue and Books I-II were published soon after his ordination to the episcopate, and thirty years later Augustine completed the work by publishing the remaining two books. Admittedly, one may notice different emphases in these two "parts" of the work (the latter two books seem more "pastoral" in character), and yet the work clearly stands as a single treatise. In other words, the second phase of writing carries through on the single plan laid out in Book I. In what follows, therefore, I will treat the Prologue and Books I-IV as a single piece of writing.

⁸ "Ex quo factum est ut etiam Scriptura divina, qua tantis morbis humanarum voluntatum subvenitur . . ." (DDC, II.5.6).

⁹ "Quam legentes nihil aliud appetunt quam cogitationes voluntatemque illorum a quibus conscripta est invenire et per illas voluntatem Dei, secundum quam tales homines locutos credimus" (DDC, II.5.6). Cf.: "In his omnibus libris timentes Deum et pietate mansueti quaerunt voluntatem Dei" (DDC, II.9.14).

¹⁰ "... et ipsam sententiam forsitan vidit et certe Dei Spiritus, qui per eum haec operatus est, etiam ipsam occurruram lectori vel auditori sine dubitatione praevideat, immo ut occurreret, quia et ipsa est veritate subnixa, providit. Nam quid in divinis eloquiis largius et uberius potuit divinitus provideri, quam ut eadem verba pluribus intellegantur modis, quos alia non minus divina contestantia faciant approbari?" (DDC, III.27.38).



befits the authority of divinely-inspired writers.¹¹ In light of such an impressive list of things one can find in Scripture, it is little wonder that Augustine undertakes an entire work to prepare us to read this book insightfully.

According to Augustine, then, learning to read Scripture is well worth whatever effort it takes. But what does Scripture's elevated status in Augustine's eyes have to do with liberal education? A lot, I think, and part of the evidence comes from a passage in *De doctrina* in which Augustine suggests something else that can be found in Scripture—something that an educated reader may find startling. For, Augustine writes, “although there [i.e., in Scripture] anyone would discover all the things he has learned usefully elsewhere, there also he will find much more abundantly those things that he will never find at all elsewhere, but that are taught only in the wondrous height and wondrous lowliness of these Scriptures.”¹² Could a bolder statement about Scripture be made? All that one has learned usefully apart from Scripture can be found in Scripture, and then some! From this claim it seems a small step to say that to learn to read Scripture is to become learned simply; for Scripture is somehow saturated with all that can be learned usefully elsewhere.

Taken on its own, however, this passage is insufficient; for we need to know the reasons behind this claim. I bring up this passage at this point, however, in order to

¹¹ “Nam ubi eos intellego, non solum nihil eis sapientius, verum etiam nihil eloquentius mihi videri potest. Et audeo dicere omnes qui recte intellegunt quod illi loquuntur, simul intellegere non eos aliter loqui debuisse. Sicut est enim quaedam eloquentia quae magis aetatem iuvenilem decet, est quae senilem, nec iam dicenda est eloquentia si personae non congruat eloquentis; ita est quaedam, quae viros summa auctoritate dignissimos planeque divinos decet. Haec illi locuti sunt, nec ipsos decet alia nec alios ipsa. Ipsis enim congruit; alios autem, quanto videtur humilior, tanto altius non ventositate, sed soliditate transcendit. Ubi vero non eos intellego, minus quidem mihi apparet eorum eloquentia, sed eam tamen non dubito esse talem, qualis est ubi intellego. Ipsa quoque obscuritas divinorum salubriumque dictorum tali eloquentiae miscenda fuerat, in qua proficere noster intellectus, non solum inventione, verum etiam exercitatione deberet” (DDC, IV.6.9).

¹² “Et cum ibi quisque invenerit omnia quae utiliter alibi didicit, multo abundantius ibi inveniet ea quae nusquam omnino alibi, sed in illarum tantummodo Scripturarum mirabili altitudine et mirabili humilitate discutuntur” (DDC, II.42.63).



alert us to just how much value Augustine places on learning to read Scripture. Scripture has much to teach; in fact, it may contain everything worth learning. Seeing why Augustine thinks this, however, requires some familiarity with the structure of *De doctrina* as a whole as well as a sense of what Augustine aims to accomplish by showing us how to read Scripture.¹³ In the remainder of this section, then, I provide a brief synopsis of *De doctrina* with a view both to understanding Augustine's claim about Scripture's inclusion of all useful learning and to providing a backdrop for the investigation of other parts of *De doctrina* that we undertake below.

As we have already seen, Augustine opens *De doctrina* by alluding to certain precepts for treating Scripture that he hopes to pass on to those eager to learn them. At the start of Book I, he specifies further what this treatment of Scripture involves:

There are two realities on which every treatment of the Scriptures depends: the *modus* of coming upon those things that are to be understood, and the *modus* of presenting those things that have been understood. First we will discuss the coming-upon, and after this, the presenting.¹⁴

The two instances of the untranslated *modus* now doubt stand out at this point; we will discuss below the notion of *modus* in section II. It is sufficient to notice at this point that Augustine divides *De doctrina* into two major parts: a first part that concerns coming upon things to be understood in Scripture, which Augustine undertakes in Books I–III; and a second part that concerns presenting the things that have been understood, which Augustine undertakes in Book IV. The second part of Augustine's discussion, which is concerned with presenting, requires little explanation. In Book IV Augustine outlines

¹³ A more in-depth articulation of the parts of *De doctrina Christiana* can be found in G. Press, "The Subject and Structure of Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*," *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 99-124.

¹⁴ "Duae sunt res quibus nititur omnis tractatio Scripturarum, *modus inveniendi* quae intellegenda sunt et *modus proferendi* quae intellecta sunt. De inveniendo prius, de proferendo postea disseremus" (DDC, I.1.1).



the rhetorical disposition needed in someone who wants to convey effectively the things that he has understood in Scripture. We will briefly consider his discussion of this in section III. The concern of the first part of *De doctrina* (i.e., Books I–III) does require explanation, both because the discussion is more complex and because it is more central to the overall project of *De doctrina*. Indeed, what Augustine does in Book IV is among the consequences of what he has done in Books I–III.

In Books I–III of *De doctrina* Augustine deals with coming upon “the things to be understood” in Scripture. The grammar of this phrase in Latin, *quae intellegenda sunt*—a future-oriented phrase that employs the passive paraphrastic—suggests that Scripture is pregnant with intelligibilities waiting to be sought out and unearthed. In relation to us intelligent creatures, then, Scripture stands as an intellectual task; buried within it are “things to be understood”—or, more imperatively, things that should or ought to be understood. We can clarify what Augustine means here by considering that in the Prologue he likens what he is doing in *De doctrina* to teaching someone how to read—not, that is, how to read this or that book, but how to read, period.¹⁵ The comparison is telling. For when a child learns to read, a new world of intelligibilities opens up for him. Those metal signs along the road that used to appear merely as arrangements of colored figures now bear information. Odd little shapes moving across the bottom of a TV news channel no longer stream by without notice; instead, they tell of seemingly newsworthy events—and lead to uncomfortable questions for Mom and Dad! Hence learning to read

¹⁵ “Qui legit audientibus litteras, utique quas agnoscit enuntiat; qui autem ipsas litteras tradit, hoc agit ut alii quoque legere noverint; uterque tamen id insinuat quod accepit. Sic etiam qui ea quae in Scripturis intellegit exponit audientibus, tamquam litteras quas agnoscit pronuntiat lectoris officio. Qui autem praecipit quomodo intellegendum sit, similis est tradenti litteras, hoc est praecipienti quomodo legendum sit; ut, quomodo ille qui legere novit alio lectore non indiget, cum codicem invenerit, a quo audiat quid ibi scriptum sit, sic iste qui praecepta quae conamur tradere acceperit, cum in libris aliquid obscuritatis invenerit, quasdam regulas velut litteras tenens intellectorem alium non requirat, per quem sibi quod opertum est retegatur, sed quibusdam vestigiis indagatis ad occultum sensum sine ullo errore ipse perveniat aut certe in absurditatem pravae sententiae non incidat” (DDC, Prol.9).



multiplies the “teaching moments” in a child’s life; for the child is made capable with respect to meanings hidden in certain shapes that hitherto were just shapes. The child’s new capacity allows these shapes to mean something, to convey intelligibilities that they seemed not to convey before. The letters can now teach, the child can learn. Likewise, Augustine is suggesting, Scripture is replete with “things to be understood.” If disposed correctly, we who “treat” (*tractare*) or deal with Scripture are able to learn from it in ways we were hitherto unable. Like a child who acquires literacy and is thus disposed to come upon the intelligibilities beneath conventional symbols, we who acquire the proper “mindset”—or, perhaps more accurately, the proper “soulset”—to read Scripture are enabled to grasp the intelligibilities that lie beneath its textual surface.

Subsequently in Book I, moreover, Augustine points out that “all teaching [*doctrina*] is of realities or of signs, but realities are learned through signs.” We can make sense of this, too, in light of a child who learns to read. For there are two facets to learning to read. On the one hand, the child must already be aware or must become simultaneously aware of the realities to which the written signs point, since otherwise the perceptible signs will fail to register or to signify anything. On the other hand, the child must be shown how to interpret those signs (i.e., the written letter-sets) that point to different realities, which is usually accomplished by relating those signs to vocal sounds. Learning to read, then, involves the learning both realities and signs, as does the complementary activity of the one who teaches the budding reader.

If we follow through on the analogy between learning to read simply and learning to read Scripture, we can see that the latter is twofold as well. On the one hand, we budding readers of Scripture must be disposed to grasp rightly the realities to which Scripture’s signs point, i.e., we must be “ontologically” disposed in the right manner. On the other hand, we must be disposed to interpret rightly those signs that point to



realities, i.e., we must be “semiotically” or “hermeneutically” disposed in the right manner. In the remainder of Book I, then, Augustine disposes us “ontologically” by articulating the manner in which we should apprehend the realities to which Scripture points—which include, ultimately, all realities, Uncreated and created; whereas in Books II–III, he disposes us “semiotically” or “hermeneutically” by showing us the manner in which we should deal with and interpret the signs that Scripture employs. Disposing us semiotically or hermeneutically is broken down further as follows: after disposing us toward the signs in Scripture in a general way at the beginning of Book II, Augustine then considers how to deal with signs that are especially difficult to understand, namely, unknown signs and ambiguous signs; he discusses how to deal with unknown signs in the remainder of Book II, while in Book III he discusses how to deal with the ambiguous signs.

It turns out, then, that Augustine’s endeavor in *De doctrina* to enable us to read Scripture so as to unveil its hidden intelligibilities is not so simple—just as enabling a child simply to read is not so simple. But both are worth the effort. Indeed, learning to read is a process whereby new intelligible dimensions of reality begin to open up, and undergoing this process can be the grounds for a lifelong pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. And if learning to read Scripture is analogous to this, then Augustine is on target when he says that what he is doing in *De doctrina* is “a great and arduous work.”¹⁶ For it involves disposing us who read Scripture toward new insight into the character of all realities—God, human beings, and all else. We must be “ontologically disposed” inasmuch as the becoming-flesh of God has brought to light the true and ultimate intelligibility of every reality, and our metaphysical vision must be adjusted in order to see this. In addition, we must be “semiotically disposed” by learning how to

¹⁶ “Duae sunt res quibus nititur omnis tractatio Scripturarum, modus inveniendi quae intellegenda sunt et modus proferendi quae intellecta sunt. De inveniendo prius, de proferendo postea disseremus. Magnum opus et arduum ...” (DDC, I.1.1).



deal with the signs of Scripture. This latter task potentially entails our learning all that we can usefully learn apart from Scripture, inasmuch as Scripture is replete with signs that can be interpreted only in light of our knowledge of languages, nature, number, music, human institutions, history, arts and crafts, or logic. Such useful knowledge, therefore, allows us to come upon “the things to be understood” in Scripture, including both the signs that Scripture employs as well as the realities to which these signs point—which in their turn may point to even greater realities.

It follows, then, that the more we possess the kind of knowledge and insight that constitutes a liberally educated human being, the better enabled we are to understand Scripture. Such an education cultivates in us a search for ultimate wisdom (as did Augustine’s reading of Cicero’s *Hortensius*) and sensitizes us to the fullness of meaning behind Scripture’s manifold signs and the realities to which they point. In this sense at least, therefore, a person discovers in Scripture “all the things he has learned usefully elsewhere.” These things are there insofar as Scripture both addresses the true and ultimate intelligibility of all realities and employs signs whose meanings are fully discerned by those possessed of a well-rounded knowledge of humanly- and divinely-instituted things.

This overview of *De doctrina* suggests the comprehensive character of Augustine’s attempt to enable us to read Scripture. At issue in the work, then, is a new and deeper apprehension of the whole of reality as well as of its divine source. Learning to read Scripture, therefore, involves a re-education concerning reality, not only because Scripture reveals the keys for unlocking the full intelligibility of realities, but also because it stands as the Book of books, i.e., as the Book that in some manner contains all that is usefully learned from other books and other experiences of reality.¹⁷ *De doctrina*,

¹⁷ Admittedly, Augustine is not perfectly clear about the manner in which Scripture contains all useful learning. One might say, in fact, that the manner of containment is worked out over the course of



therefore, is not only about how to interpret Scripture; it is, in addition, about what Scripture itself is about, namely, every reality that is as well as the cause of every reality that is. In this work, then, Augustine is showing us how to go about navigating the waters or reality by showing us how to navigate the waters of Scripture.

It is appropriate, I believe, to include at the end of this section what is perhaps the best-known passage from *De doctrina*, in which Augustine suggests the attitude he hopes to foster in us toward knowledge we acquire apart from Scripture. How should we treat or deal with the manifold knowledge that was achieved to one degree or another by the most illuminated, the most liberally educated, among the pagans, especially the Platonic philosophers? Augustine answers this question by alluding, fittingly, to a paradigmatic event of appropriation narrated in Scripture. He writes:

the Middle Ages, as various thinkers appropriate and integrate what they learn from pagan works with what they learn from Scripture. In order to witness the climax of this appropriation and integration, one should turn to Bonaventure, especially his early work *De reductione artium ad theologiam* (*On Leading the Arts Back to Theology*) and his late work *Collationes in Hexaemeron* (*Conferences on the Six Days of Creation*).

Consider, e.g., the words with which Bonaventure concludes the former work, which clearly alludes to what he has seen in his reading of DDC: “Et sic patet, quomodo multiformis sapientia Dei, quae lucide traditur in sacra Scriptura, occultatur in omni cognitione et in omni natura. Patet etiam, quomodo omnes cognitiones famulantur theologiae; et ideo ipsa assumit exempla et utitur vocabulis pertinentibus ad omne genus cognitionis. Patet etiam, quam ampla sit via illuminativa, et quomodo in omni re, quae sentitur sive quae cognoscitur, interius lateat ipse Deus. — Et hic est fructus omnium scientiarum, ut in omnibus aedificetur fides, honorificetur Deus, componantur mores, hauriantur consolationes, quae sunt in unione sponsi et sponsae, quae quidem fit per caritatem, ad quam terminatur tota intentio sacrae Scripturae, et per consequens omnis illuminatio desursum descendens, et sine qua omnis cognitio vana est, quia nunquam pervenitur ad Filium nisi per Spiritum sanctum, qui docet nos omnem veritatem, qui est benedictus in saecula saeculorum. Amen” (*De reductione artium ad theologiam*, 26). [“And so it is clear in what manner God’s multiform wisdom, which is lightedly handed down in sacred Scripture, is concealed in every recognition and in every nature. Also, it is clear in what manner all recognitions serve theology, and thus theology takes to itself examples and uses terms that pertain to every kind of recognition. Also, it is clear how ample is the way that is able to enlighten and in what manner God himself lies hidden within in every reality that is sensed or that is recognized. — And here is the fruit of all sciences: that in all things faith may be built up, God may be honored, mores may be brought together, consolations may be drawn out—consolations that exist in the union of husband and wife, which come-to-be through charity. Sacred Scriptures whole intention—and, consequently, every enlightening coming down from above—is brought to an end at charity, without which every recognition is empty, because never is one brought through to the Son except through the Holy Spirit, who teaches us all truth, who is blessed into ages of ages. Amen.”]



Now those who are called philosophers—especially the Platonists—if perhaps they said things true and fitted to our faith, not only are these not to be feared, but from them even as from unjust possessors they are to be claimed for our use. For just as the Egyptians not only had idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel detested and fled, but also vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing, which this people going out of Egypt claimed secretly for themselves for a better use, not by their own authority, but by a precept of God, while the Egyptians themselves unknowingly bestowed these things that they were not using well; so also all the doctrines of the nations not only have counterfeit and superstitious figments and heavy bundles of pointless labor, which each of us, going out of the society of the nations with Christ as leader, ought to abominate and avoid, but also contain liberal disciplines more apt to truth's use and some very useful moral precepts, and among them are found several true things about the one God who is to be worshipped. Among these things, that which is gold and silver—which the nations did not establish, but rather uncovered from certain mines, as it were, of divine providence that are poured out everywhere, and which they abused perversely and injuriously toward the services of demons—the Christian, when he separates himself in his soul from the pitiable society of the gentiles, ought to carry away toward the just use of preaching the Gospel. And their clothing, that is, the things instituted by men that are yet suitable to human society, which in this life we cannot be without, he is allowed to take and have as things to be converted to Christian use.¹⁸

¹⁸ *“Philosophi autem qui vocantur, si qua forte vera et fidei nostrae accomodata dixerunt, maxime Platonici, non solum formidanda non sunt, sed ab eis etiam tamquam ab iniustis possessoribus in usum*



The Jews' despoliation of the Egyptians provides a concrete basis for our imagining how liberal education is caught up into the activity of evangelization, grounded in an understanding of Scripture, to which each Christian is called. In addition, this passage concretizes two other, more abstract assertions that Augustine makes earlier in *De doctrina*. The first is from the Prologue, when he responds as follows to those who glory in their understanding of what is obscure in Scripture:

[N]o one ought so to have something as if it were his own {*suum proprium*}, except perhaps a lie. For every true thing is from him who said, "I am the truth." For what do we have that we have not received? And if we have received it, why do we glory as if we did not receive it?¹⁹

Just as the one who glories in his ability to understand the obscurities of Scripture does not appropriately *have* that ability, so the Egyptians did not appropriately own their possessions, and neither did the nations appropriately possess their learning. It is incumbent on the Christian, then, not to deny the existence of such accomplishments among the nations, but to appropriate them in a way that involves recognition of and gratitude toward the God who has provided them. Indeed, in a second passage, which

nostrum vindicanda. Sicut enim Aegyptii non tantum idola habebant et onera gravia, quae populus Israel detestaretur et fugeret, sed etiam vasa atque ornamenta de auro et de argento et vestem, quae ille populus exiens de Aegypto sibi potius tamquam ad usum meliorem clanculo vindicavit, non auctoritate propria, sed praecepto Dei, ipsis Aegyptiis nescienter commodantibus ea quibus non bene utebantur; sic doctrinae omnes Gentilium non solum simulata et superstitiosa figmenta gravesque sarcinas supervacanei laboris habent, quae unusquisque nostrum, duce Christo, de societate Gentilium exiens, debet abominari atque devitare, sed etiam liberales disciplinas usui veritatis aptiores et quaedam morum praecepta utilissima continent, deque ipso uno Deo colendo nonnulla vera inveniuntur apud eos. Quod eorum tamquam aurum et argentum quod non ipsi instituerunt, sed de quibusdam quasi metallis divinae providentiae, quae ubique infusa est, eruerunt, et quo perverse atque iniuriose ad obsequia daemonum abutuntur, cum ab eorum misera societate sese animo separat, debet ab eis auferre Christianus ad usum iustum praedicandi Evangelii. Vestem quoque illorum, id est, hominum quidem instituta, sed tamen accomodata humanae societati qua in hac vita carere non possumus, accipere atque habere licuerit in usum convertenda Christianum" (DDC, II.40.60).

¹⁹ "... nemo debet aliquid sic habere quasi suum proprium, nisi forte mendacium. Nam omne verum ab illo est qui ait: Ego sum veritas. Quid enim habemus quod non accepimus? Quod si accepimus, quid gloriamur quasi non acceperimus?" (DDC, Prol.8).



is from Book II and comes just prior to long passage quoted above, Augustine expresses the same thought even more concisely. “Whoever is a good and true Christian understands,” he says, “that wherever he may find the truth, it is his Lord’s.”²⁰

At least two points should be taken away from these passages before moving to section II. The first is subtle but crucial, namely, Augustine’s assertion that true things not only come from God, but in fact are God’s; in other words, it is God’s mines that we are ultimately mining. God *owns* true things; hence we in turn ought to stand toward true things not as owners, but as stewards. Thus when we dig up gold from the mines of divine providence, we should not take possession of it as if it were ours; rather, we should care for it as God’s, with a view to purifying it as much as we can and bearing it back to its rightful owner. This fundamental orientation of all truths toward God as their rightful owner already begins to suggest how Augustine intends to modify liberal education.

A second point is less subtle but perhaps more relevant to this first section of the paper, namely, that God owns *all* true things. Consequently, it behooves those who wish to align themselves with God and to understand Scripture to take stewardship over *all* true things that they find, no matter where they may find them—whether in the writings of the *Platonici* or other philosophers, in history, in the arts, in human institutions, or anywhere else. This potential stewardship over all truths opens up the broadest of scopes for the inquiring Christian who desires to understand Scripture. For it is a scope that encompasses all created realities insofar as one can draw from them any truths that lend themselves to insight into the signs employed in Scripture as well as into the realities—God, human beings, and all others—to which these signs point. Hence, if liberal education consists in a pursuit of wisdom about reality in order to

²⁰ “... quisquis bonus verusque Christianus est, Domini sui esse intellegat, ubicumque invenerit veritatem ...” (DDC, II.18.28).



navigate it freely and excellently, and if such an education was also the aim of the great pagan thinkers and philosophers, then one will be a better reader of Scripture the more one progresses in such an education and learns from both Christians and non-Christians alike.

To be sure, unlike educated pagans, the Christian is admonished to appropriate liberal education “Christianly.” To employ a theme taken up later in the Middle Ages, Christians are urged to read the “book of nature” in light of what is revealed in the “book of Scripture,” as well as to read Scripture in light of what they read and understand in the book of nature.²¹ How does such an intertextual reading of reality modify liberal education? This question drives our inquiry in the next section of this paper.

II. Christianizing Ontology *et omnia res*

As we saw above, Augustine begins Book I of *De doctrina* thus:

There are two realities on which all treatment of Scriptures depends: the *modus* of coming upon those things that are to be understood and the *modus* of presenting those things that have been understood. We will discuss the coming-upon first, and after this, the presenting. This is a great

²¹ Although Augustine does not thematize the idea of a “book of nature,” as do later Christian thinkers like Bonaventure, it seems to me that the seeds of this theme are present in DDC. (It is noteworthy that Augustine did think of nature as a book at least one time of which I am aware: “At si universam creaturam ita prius aspiceres, ut auctori Deo tribueres, quasi legens magnum quemdam librum naturae rerum; atque ita si quid ibi te offenderet, causam te tamquam hominem latere posse potius crederes, quam in operibus Dei quidquam reprehendere auderes; numquam incidisses in sacrilegas nugas et blasphema figmenta, quibus, non intellegens unde sit malum, Deum implere conaris omnibus malis” [*Contra Faustum*, XXXII.20].) Augustine, then, may have been comfortable with the image of nature or creation as a book to be understood just as Scripture is. If so, then a crucial ingredient in becoming an insightful reader of Scripture is to be an insightful reader of the book of nature or creation. And, indeed, the mutual illumination of these two books would likely reveal more and more “things to be understood” in both.



and arduous work, and if it is difficult to sustain, I fear lest I be rash in undertaking it.²²

The word *modus* in this passage has been rendered variously, such as “way,” “mode,” or “process,”²³ to name a few. And on the basis of this passage alone, it would be difficult to argue that any one of these renderings is inaccurate. None of them, however, captures the root meaning of *modus* as “measure.” Yet, owing to the influence of both Plotinus and Cicero, the notion of *modus* as measure makes its presence felt regularly in Augustine’s early thinking about both God and morality. From Plotinus Augustine appropriates an “ontological” sense of measure, since Plotinus identifies the One (the highest divine hypostasis) as “the measure and limit of all things.”²⁴ Indeed, at times Augustine even describes God the Father as *summus modus*, the “abovest measure.”²⁵

²² “Duae sunt res quibus nititur omnis tractatio Scripturarum, modus inveniendi quae intellegenda sunt et modus proferendi quae intellecta sunt. De inveniendo prius, de proferendo postea disseremus. Magnum opus et arduum, et si ad sustinendum difficile, vereor ne ad suscipiendum temerarium” (DDC, I.1.1).

²³ These renderings are by D. Robertson, R. Green, and J. Shaw, respectively. For bibliographic information, see note 4.

²⁴ *Enneads* I.1.2: . . . μέτρον πάντων καὶ πέρας. (In Latin, μέτρον is usually rendered *modus*.) See also *Enneads* V.5.4, where Plotinus describes the One as μέτρον . . . αὐτὸ καὶ οὐ μετρούμενον, “measure itself and not measured.” Such passages suggest that for Plotinus the One is the ultimate “real horizon” against which the being and intelligibility of other realities are assessed.

²⁵ Consider, e.g., the following passage from *De beata vita*, which was written prior to *De doctrina*: “Quae est autem dicenda sapientia, nisi quae Dei Sapientia est? Accepimus autem etiam auctoritate divina, Dei Filium nihil esse aliud quam Dei Sapientiam [cf. I Cor. 1:24]: et est Dei Filius profecto Deus. Deum habet igitur quisquis beatus est: quod omnibus nobis iam ante placuit, cum hoc convivium ingressi sumus. Sed quid putatis esse sapientiam, nisi veritatem? Etiam hoc enim dictum est: *Ego sum Veritas* [John 14:6]. Veritas autem ut sit, fit per aliquem summum modum, a quo procedit, et in quem se perfecta convertit. Ipsi autem summo modo nullus alius modus imponitur: si enim summus modus per summum modum modus est, per seipsum modus est. Sed etiam summus modus necesse est ut verus modus sit. Ut igitur veritas modo gignitur, ita modus veritate cognoscitur. Neque igitur veritas sine modo, neque modus sine veritate unquam fuit. Quis est Dei Filius? Dictum est: Veritas. Quis est qui non habet patrem, quis alius quam summus modus? Quisquis igitur ad summum modum per veritatem venerit, beatus est. Hoc est animo Deum habere, id est Deo perfrui. Caetera enim quamvis a Deo habeantur, non habent Deum” (4.34).

Also, in *De natura boni contra Manichaeos*, which was begun after *De doctrina*, Augustine utilizes this phrase *summus modus* to describe God, suggesting that it amounts to understanding God as the *summum bonum*, “the abovest good”: “Deus autem nec modum habere dicendus est, ne finis eius dici



From Cicero, moreover, Augustine appropriates a “moral” sense of measure, insofar as Cicero not only connects the idea of measure to both the virtue of moderation and the seemliness of a good moral life,²⁶ but also says that our ability to recognize and implement measure in words and deeds distinguishes us from other animals.²⁷ In light of these influences, I contend that the “*modus* of coming upon those things that are to be understood” in Scripture is central to Augustine’s modification of education, and that this new “measure of intelligibility” is understood only by reflecting on the coming of Wisdom itself in the flesh. In other words, understanding the measure that Jesus Christ himself *is* is the way to unlocking the ultimate intelligibility of Scripture and, by extension, all of reality. In what follows I outline how we should understand this new

putetur. Nec ideo tamen immoderatus est, a quo *modus* omnibus tribuitur rebus, ut aliquo modo esse possint. Nec rursus moderatum oportet dici Deum, tamquam ab aliquo *modum* acceperit. Si autem dicamus eum summum *modum*, forte aliquid dicimus; si tamen in eo quod dicimus summum *modum* intellegamus summum bonum. Omnis enim *modus*, in quantum *modus* est, bonus est. Unde omnia moderata, modesta, modificata, dici sine laude non possunt; quamquam sub alio intellectu *modum* pro fine ponamus, et nullum *modum* dicamus ubi nullus est finis. Quod aliquando cum laude dicitur, sicut dictum est: *Et regni eius non erit finis* [Luke 1:33]. Posset enim dici etiam: non erit *modus*, ut *modus* pro fine dictus intellegeretur. Nam qui nullo modo regnat, non utique regnat” (I.22).

Consider also this passage from *Contra Academicos*, one of the Cassiciacum dialogues written just prior to his conversion: “Postremo quidquid de otio meo modo gaudeo; quod a superfluarum cupiditatum vinculis evolavi, quod depositis oneribus mortuarum curarum, respiro, resipisco, redeo ad me; quod quaero intentissimus veritatem, quod invenire iam ingredior, quod me ad summum ipsum *modum* perventurum esse confido; tu animasti, tu impulisti, tu fecisti” (I.2.4).

²⁶ For these connections, see especially *De officiis* I.93 and I.141-42.

Augustine appears to connect this moral/aesthetic sense of *modus* to the divine in the following passage: “Nunc ad propositum veniamus. Iam enim sero coepi metuere, ne hoc principium *modum* excederet, et non est leve. Nam *modus* procul dubio divinus est: sed fefellerit cum dulciter ducit, ero cautior cum sapiens fuero” (*Contra Academicos*, II.3.9).

²⁷ “Nec vero illa parva vis naturae est rationisque, quod unum hoc animal sentit, quid sit ordo, quid sit quod deceat, in factis dictisque qui *modus*. Itaque eorum ipsorum, quae aspectu sentiuntur, nullum aliud animal pulchritudinem, venustatem, convenientiam partium sentit; quam similitudinem natura ratioque ab oculis ad animum transferens multo etiam magis pulchritudinem, constantiam, ordinem in consiliis factisque conservandam putat cavetque ne quid indecore effeminateve faciat, tum in omnibus et opinionibus et factis ne quid libidinese aut faciat aut cogitet. Quibus ex rebus conflatur et efficitur id, quod quaerimus, honestum, quod etiamsi nobilitatum non sit, tamen honestum sit, quodque vere dicimus, etiamsi a nullo laudetur, natura esse laudabile” (*De officiis*, I.14).



measure of intelligibility by considering Augustine's discussion of *res* or realities in Book I.

In Book I of *De doctrina*, Augustine shows us how to “take measure” of the realities we encounter in accordance with the God of Jesus Christ—or, perhaps better, in accordance with the God that *is* Jesus Christ. Christ, then, is the interpretive key to our “coming upon the things to be understood” in Scripture. Moreover, given the status of Scripture in relation to all learning, as articulated in the section I above, one can also say that Christ uncovers the ultimate intelligibility and value of every reality. But, one may ask, *Quomodo?* How? Or, more precisely: By what measure? Book I explains it by showing how the God of Jesus Christ operates “ontologically” or “really” as the measure of the intelligibility of realities and, in addition, how we conform ourselves “morally” to this real measure through charity.

Augustine begins his explanation by introducing the most fundamental distinctions among realities:

There are some realities, then, that are to be enjoyed, some that are to be used, some that enjoy and use. Those that are to be enjoyed make us blessed. By those that are to be used, we who are tending toward blessedness are helped and, as it were, propped up, so that we are able to arrive at those realities that make us blessed and adhere to them. Now we who enjoy and use, who are constituted between both, if we will to enjoy those things that are to be used, our course is impeded and at times even bent down, so that we, shackled by the love of lower things, are held back or called back from obtaining those things that are to be enjoyed.²⁸

²⁸ “Res ergo aliae sunt quibus fruendum est, aliae quibus utendum, aliae quae fruuntur et utuntur. Illae quibus fruendum est, beatos nos faciunt. Istis quibus utendum est, tendentes ad beatitudinem adjuvamus, et quasi adminiculamur, ut ad illas quae nos beatos faciunt, pervenire, atque his inhaerere possimus. Nos vero qui fruimur et utimur, inter utrasque constituti, si eis quibus utendum



For Augustine, then, realities are distinguished first and foremost in terms of their relation to us human beings as “tending toward blessedness.” In light of the human orientation toward blessedness, a reality can stand either as an end or a means, i.e., as to-be-enjoyed (*fruendum*) or to-be-used (*utendum*). We human beings “are constituted between both” types of reality. Now, it becomes clear later in Book I that human beings stand toward each other ultimately as to-be-used. Hence, the primary distinction among realities is between those-to-be-enjoyed and those-to-be-used, although this distinction makes sense only in light of the presence of human beings as realities who are capable of enjoying or using them.

A couple of points are worth noting here. The first is that the primary distinction is not among “goods” or of “objects of choice,” but *realities*. In other words, it is first and foremost an *ontological* or *metaphysical* distinction. I emphasize this because the reader of *De doctrina* may be tempted to think that Augustine is making a moral distinction at this point, insofar as he relates realities primarily to human beings as agents able to choose which goods to pursue or love. To be sure, there is some truth in reading this distinction along “moral” lines, and yet such a reading fails to uncover the depth and novelty of what Augustine is doing here. For by means of these fundamental distinctions, Augustine lays the groundwork for an ontology or metaphysics in which the very intelligibility of realities *simply as realities* is rooted in their relation to human beings as able to enjoy them or to use them. In other words, the very meaning of any reality revolves around the human being as “tending toward blessedness,” and thus what each reality ultimately *is* is brought to light by seeing it in relation to the human being. The reason for this is that realities were created for the human being; such was the Creator’s intention behind their existing at all. Hence, the world makes no sense apart from the

est frui voluerimus, impeditur cursus noster, et aliquando etiam deflectitur, ut ab his rebus quibus fruendum est obtinendis vel retardemur, vel revocemur, inferiorum amore praepediti” (DDC, I.3.3).



human intentionality toward blessedness. The human being, therefore, becomes the focal point of the meaningfulness of every reality. I should add, moreover, that unless one recognizes this, one fails to grasp how Jesus Christ as the God-man who came to save human beings stands as the interpretive key that unlocks not only the intelligibility of all morality, but also—and primarily—the intelligibility of all reality.²⁹

A second, but connected point has to do with the grammar that Augustine employs in this passage. He uses a future-oriented grammatical device, the passive paraphrastic, to make his division of realities into those-to-be-enjoyed (*fruendum*) and those-to-be-used (*utendum*). Earlier in *De doctrina* Augustine speaks of “things to be understood” (*intellegenda*) in Scripture, thus suggesting that Scripture is full of intelligibilities waiting to be unearthed by attentive and well-disposed readers; the reader of Scripture, then, should be attracted to it in accordance with its latent intelligibility. Here we see that realities themselves stand in waiting, so to speak, to be used or to be enjoyed. Realities should be understood, then, in terms of their latent potentiality in relation to our wills and our choosing; for realities are usable or enjoyable in light of the deepest orientation of human beings toward blessedness. One might say, then, that Augustine both “magnetizes” and “historicizes” every reality in relation to the possible future condition of human blessedness. In the present, everything that we encounter is to be understood in relation to us human beings who are not-yet-there in terms of blessedness, i.e., who are *in via*, exiles from the fatherland who are nonetheless on their way back. Every reality, then, is good and attractive, and its attractiveness must be understood in light of its ability either to help us on the way toward blessedness or to be that in which we find our blessedness. Consequently, every reality is able to elicit a choice from us, namely, to deal with it in such a way that we

²⁹ Along these lines, see M. Jordan, ““Words and Word: Incarnation and Signification in Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*,” *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 177-96.



bear it back toward what we love as something to be obtained or to deal with it in such a way that we adhere to it with love on account of itself.³⁰

This foundational ontological distinction between realities to be enjoyed and those to be used articulates their ultimate intelligibility in relation to the human being's underlying intentionality toward blessedness. In other words, it reveals the intelligibility of realities from the perspective of self-aware, free creatures, i.e., we realities who "enjoy and use."³¹ The next logical question, then, is this: Which reality is to be enjoyed? Which reality stands as the ultimate attractor, the ultimate reality in

³⁰ These last two alternatives are based on the way Augustine defines *uti* ("using") and *frui* ("enjoying") at DDC, I.4.4: "Frui enim est amore alicui rei inhaerere propter seipsam. Uti autem, quod in usum venerit ad id quod amas obtinendum referre, si tamen amandum est."

³¹ The "flip-side" of this created perspective is the Creator's perspective. And, in fact, Augustine grants us a glimpse of this perspective later in Book I when he wonders about God's use of realities. Indeed, seeing the intelligibility of realities from the other (divine) end, so to speak, helps us understand better their intelligibility in relation to us. This is what Augustine says: "Sed neque sic utitur ut nos: nam nos res quibus utimur ad id referimus, ut Dei bonitate perfruamur; Deus vero ad suam bonitatem usum nostrum refert. Quia enim bonus est, sumus; et in quantum sumus, boni sumus. Porro autem quia etiam iustus est, non impune mali sumus; et in quantum mali sumus, in tantum etiam minus sumus. Ille enim summe ac primitus est, qui omnino incommutabilis est, et qui plenissime dicere potuit: *Ego sum qui sum*, et: *Dices eis: Qui est misit me ad vos*. Ut cetera quae sunt, et nisi ab illo esse non possint, et in tantum bona sint, in quantum acceperunt ut sint. Ille igitur usus qui dicitur Dei, quo nobis utitur, non ad ejus, sed ad nostram utilitatem refertur, ad ejus autem tantummodo bonitatem. Cujus autem nos miseremur, et cui consulimus, ad ejus quidem utilitatem id facimus, eamque intuemur; sed nescio quomodo etiam nostra fit consequens, cum eam misericordiam quam impendimus egenti, sine mercede non relinquit Deus. Haec autem merces summa est ut ipso perfruamur, et omnes qui eo fruimur, nobis etiam invicem in ipso perfruamur" (DDC, I.32.35). ["But God does not use as we use. For we bear back the realities we use toward him so that we may thoroughly enjoy the goodness of God, whereas God bears back our use toward his goodness. For because he is good, we exist, and inasmuch as we exist, we are good. But also, because he is just as well, we are not evil without consequence; and to the extent that we are evil, to that same extent we *are* in a less way. For he *is* in the abovementioned and primary way, he who is altogether unchangeable and who was able to say most fully, "I am who am," and, "Say to them: 'He who is sent me to you'" [Exodus 3:14]. And so the rest of the things that are, are not able to be except from him, and to the extent that they have received so that they may be, to that extent they are good. That use, therefore, which is said to be God's, whereby he uses us, is borne back not toward his, but toward our usefulness, but toward his goodness only. But regarding the one whom we pity and care for, we indeed do it and regard it as for his usefulness; but I know not in what manner our own usefulness also comes about as a consequence, when God does not leave without reward that pity-heartedness which we expend on one in need. Now this is the highest reward: that we thoroughly enjoy him and that all of us who enjoy him also thoroughly enjoy each other in him."]



whom human blessedness consists? Augustine answers this question, in fact, immediately after he articulates his foundational distinction among realities. He says:

The realities, therefore, that are to be enjoyed are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the same Threeness, a single abovement reality, and something common to all those who enjoy it—whether it be not a reality, but the cause of all realities, or both a reality and a cause. For a name that befits such excellency is not able to be come upon easily, unless it is better said that this Threeness is the one God from whom are all things, through whom are all things, in whom are all things.³²

At the furthest end of human striving toward blessedness stands the three-in-one God, who alone is to be enjoyed. The attractiveness of this common and communal Trinitarian reality stretches back to all other realities and catches them up into its attraction, thereby making all of them realities to be used.

Because God stands as that in light of which and toward which we choose what we choose, it is helpful to understand (as much as we are able) the “mode” or “measure” of this divine reality. In what manner does it exist? Is there a way for us to “measure up” this reality in our minds? A few aspects of divine existence are hinted at in this passage. First, this single abovement reality is an interpersonal “Threeness,” Father and Son and Holy Spirit, who can be enjoyed in common by realities like ourselves who enjoy and use. This single, triune reality, therefore, is the grounds for a possible future human community marked by blessedness. In addition, this passage indicates that this abovement reality is in some sense a reality, but is perhaps better understand as a reality beyond all realities as their cause. Augustine suggests, in other

³² “Res igitur quibus fruendum est, Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus, eademque Trinitas, una quaedam summa res, communisque omnibus fruentibus ea; si tamen res et non rerum omnium causa, si tamen et causa. Non enim facile nomen quod tantae excellentiae conveniat, inveniri potest, nisi quod melius ita dicitur Trinitas haec, unus Deus ex quo omnia, per quem omnia, in quo omnia” (DDC, I.5.5).



words, that God exists among realities while simultaneously transcending them as their source, i.e., as the one from, through, and in whom all things are. In light of these first two points, a third one suggested by Augustine is unsurprising, namely, that this divine reality has an “excelling” manner of existence that makes it difficult to speak fittingly about it.

This last aspect of the divine reality as “inexpressibly excelling,” moreover, becomes thematic in the ensuing chapters. “Do we say something or sound something worthy of God?” Augustine asks. He answers himself thus:

I perceive, rather, that I have done nothing other than to will to say something; but if I have said something, I did not say what I willed to say. Whence do I know this except because God is inexpressible? But that which has been said by me, if God is inexpressible, would not have been said. And by this fact God is not to be said to be inexpressible, because when this is said, something is said. And there comes about by I know not what conflict of words that if the inexpressible is that which is not able to be said, then what can be said to be inexpressible is not indeed inexpressible. This conflict of words is to be avoided by silence rather than smoothed over by vocal-sound. And yet God, although nothing can be said of him worthily, has permitted the service of human vocal-sound and has willed that by our words we rejoice in praise of him. For thus he is and is said to be *Deus*. For truly in the noise of these two syllables he is not known; rather, when this sound touches the ears of all those who know the Latin tongue, it moves them toward thinking some most excelling and immortal nature.³³

³³ “Diximusne aliquid et sonuimus aliquid dignum Deo? Imo vero nihil me aliud quam dicere voluisse sentio: si autem dixi, non hoc est quod dicere volui. Hoc unde scio, nisi quia Deus ineffabilis est?”



God as the threefold, single, ever-excelling reality who is the cause of all realities; God as the sole reality to be enjoyed, in relation to which all other realities are to be used; God as the ineffably ineffable reality who stands at the extremity of our willing to think: such is the “measure” whereby we strive to articulate the reality of that which lies below and stands beyond all realities as the source and end of their intelligibility and choosability.

It may be helpful to think of this account of God as Augustine’s articulating the abovest reality in a way that tallies with the restless, all-too-human heart in both its intellectual and volitional dimensions. The divine reality stands as the ultimate object of the *eros* that permeates all things, and especially the *eros* of the human heart that is always capable of extending its thinking and willing beyond the finitude of any given reality. Hence, in one of his “Anselmian” moments, Augustine asserts:

For when that one God of gods is thought by those even who suppose and call on and worship other gods either in heaven or on earth, he is thought in such a way that that thought endeavors to touch upon something than which there is nothing better and more sublime. . . . Those, however, who proceed to see what that God is through intelligence prefer him to all changeable things, to all visible and bodily natures and even to intelligible and spiritual natures. But all struggle earnestly for the excellency of God, nor can there be found anyone who believes that God is that than which something is better. And thus all perceive together that God is that

Quod autem a me dictum est, si ineffabile esset, dictum non esset. Ac per hoc ne ineffabilis quidem dicendus est Deus, quia et hoc cum dicitur, aliquid dicitur. Et fit nescio qua pugna verborum, quoniam si illud est ineffabile quod dici non potest, non est ineffabile quod vel ineffabile dici potest. Quae pugna verborum silentio cavenda potius quam voce pacanda est. Et tamen Deus, cum de illo nihil digne dici possit, admisit humanae vocis obsequium, et verbis nostris in laude sua gaudere nos voluit. Nam inde est et dicitur Deus. Non enim revera in strepitu istarum duarum syllabarum ipse cognoscitur; sed tamen omnes latinae linguae scios, cum aures eorum sonus iste tetigerit, movet ad cogitandum excellentissimam quamdam immortalemque naturam” (DDC, I.6.6).



which they put before all other things.³⁴

This description of God appears to correspond with a Neoplatonic account of the highest divinity as the One beyond Being who is likewise the Good from whom all the realities of our experience emanate. Having come forth from the Good, emanated realities are “eroticized” or desiderative in their relation to it, which is particularly apparent in realities like ourselves who participate in intelligence and freedom and who are able self-consciously to get out of ourselves and strive for that which is higher and transcendent. It appears, then, that Augustine, like Plotinus, is articulating a measure of realities that is itself unmeasured.³⁵ Indeed, God is the One that renders all realities intelligible, the Good that renders all realities attractive—and perhaps even ensnaring in their very attractiveness.

In the ensuing chapters, moreover, Augustine depicts a “hierarchy of being” that also appears to fill out a Neoplatonic conception of the whole of reality. This hierarchy spans the bodily, the living, the sentient, the intelligent, the wise, and Wisdom itself, which by its very unchangeability is capable of bringing changeable, wisdom-seeking human intelligence to rest. Human striving for that abovest reality which alone is to be enjoyed turns out, therefore, to be *philosophia*, the pursuit and love of Wisdom itself. And to reach it, Augustine indicates, requires both a cleansing and serious effort on our part:

On account of this, since that truth which lives unchangeably is to be thoroughly enjoyed, and in that truth God the Trinity, the author and

³⁴ “Nam cum ille unus cogitatur deorum Deus, ab his etiam qui alios et suspicantur et vocant et colunt deos sive in coelo sive in terra, ita cogitatur, ut aliquid quo nihil melius sit atque sublimius illa cogitatio conetur attingere. . . . Illa autem qui per intelligentiam pergunt videre quod Deus est, omnibus eum naturis visibilibus et corporalibus, intelligibilibus etiam et spiritalibus, omnibus mutabilibus praeferunt. Omnes tamen certatim pro excellentia Dei dimicant; nec quisquam inveniri potest qui hoc Deum credat esse quo melius aliquid est. Itaque hoc omnes Deum consentiunt esse, quod caeteris rebus omnibus anteponunt” (DDC, I.7.7).

³⁵ See note 24 above.



establisher of the universe, establishes for realities the things he has decided on, the soul is to be cleansed so that it may avail to see thoroughly that light and adhere to what it has seen thoroughly. We deem this cleansing to be, as it were, a certain walking and, as it were, a voyaging to our fatherland. For we do not move through places toward one who is present everywhere; we move toward him, rather, by good effort and good mores.³⁶

No one is more aware than Augustine that this cleansing voyage, which requires good effort and good living on our part, is difficult—indeed, impossible—to achieve by our own strength. And yet we must undergo this deep cleansing if we ever hope to be well-adjusted intellectually and volitionally to the realities that surround us *in via* so as to evaluate them rightly as we make our way toward Wisdom itself. This is a dilemma, an *aporia*, an impasse in our journey: the restless human heart on its own cannot arrive at that for which it strives.

If Augustine's account of God as the abovement reality and the human striving for that reality mirrors the account of the *Platonici*, then we should be grateful for how far these "Egyptians" have led us. Yet if Augustine's restless heart reflects in some way the experience of Everyman, then the *Platonici* bring us to an impasse, through which they know not the way. At this point in Book I, therefore, we can stand back and witness Augustine himself as he purifies that gold ore which he has dug up from the mines of divine providence. And he purifies it, surprisingly, by "sully"ing it with human flesh. "We are not capable of [good effort and good mores]," Augustine says,

except that Wisdom itself deemed it worthy to come together with our

³⁶ "Quapropter, cum illa veritate perfruendum sit quae incommutabiliter vivit, et in ea trinitas Deus, auctor et conditor universitatis, rebus quas condidit consulat, purgandus est animus, ut et perspicere illam lucem valeat et inherere perspectae. Quam purgationem quasi ambulationem quamdam et quasi navigationem ad patriam esse arbitremur. Non enim ad eum qui ubique praesens est locis movemur, sed bono studio bonisque moribus" (DDC, I.10.10).



weakness and to provide an example of living for us, not otherwise than in a man, because we too are men. But because we act wisely when we come toward that Wisdom, Wisdom itself was reputed by arrogant men to have acted foolishly when it came to us. And because we gain strength when we come toward that Wisdom, Wisdom itself is deemed weak, as it were, when it comes to us. But “that which is foolish for God is wiser to men, and that which is weak for God is stronger to men” [*I Corinthians* 1:25]. Since, therefore, Wisdom itself is the fatherland, it has also made itself the way to the fatherland for us.³⁷

Human ascension to the divine requires divine condescension to the human. Thus Wisdom itself, that ultimate theoretical end of the philosophers, foolishly insinuates itself into the physical world as the very practical Wisdom necessary for human beings to attain their end. Here, then, by asserting that the end has become also the means—or, in Augustine’s terms, the sole reality to be enjoyed has also become a reality to be used—Augustine initiates a modification of our understanding of the abovementioned reality that measures all things. And, as this passage suggests, to the eyes of us all-too-human beings, such a modification appears foolish.

Speaking for myself, I know that I am not as true a lover of Wisdom itself as I ought to be. Hence my restless heart’s intellectual and volitional encounters with realities demand modification and correction in order to live up to even the seemingly Neoplatonic conception of the whole of reality that Augustine had laid out up to this point. In other words, despite the fact that I am a professor of philosophy—or perhaps

³⁷ “Quod non possumus, nisi ipsa Sapientia tantae etiam nostrae infirmitati congruere dignaretur et vivendi nobis praeberet exemplum, non aliter quam in homine, quoniam et nos homines sumus. Sed quia nos cum ad illam venimus, sapienter facimus; ipsa cum ad nos venit, ab hominibus superbis quasi stulte fecisse putata est. Et quoniam nos cum ad illam venimus, convalescimus; ipsa cum ad nos venit, quasi infirma existimata est. Sed *quod stultum est Dei, sapientius est hominibus, et quod infirmum est Dei, fortius est hominibus* [*I Cor.* 1:25]. Cum ergo ipsa sit patria, viam se quoque nobis fecit ad patriam” (DDC, I.11.11).



precisely *because* I am a professor of philosophy!—I fail to be as philosophic as I ought to be; in other words, I fail to love wisdom as I ought. Hence I fail to take measure of other realities in light of that Wisdom itself which is to be enjoyed and which makes realities intelligible and choices meaningful. What Augustine is doing at this point in Book I both hurts and helps me. It hurts me inasmuch as it adds a new, deeper dimension to that Wisdom itself which I struggle to “put before all other things.” Yet it helps me inasmuch as it certifies my struggle and provides a way out for me, namely, if I assent to the fact that Wisdom itself joined itself to my weakness in order to exemplify a path toward itself. My restless heart, it seems, shouldn’t be anything but exhilarated by such a gracious proposal; why, then, does it in its thinking and willing tend to dismiss it as foolish? This mystery of divine charity that baffles me is, I don’t doubt, repelled by the mystery of iniquity that dwells in me.

Augustine, though, continues, seeking to make the proposal of divine condescension intelligible to us and hoping, it appears, to facilitate our assent to it. *Quomodo venit?* he asks. In what manner did Wisdom itself come? By what measure can we render such divine foolishness understandable? Augustine’s subtle answer provides a model so ready-to-hand that we may feel foolish indeed for overlooking its meaningfulness:

In what manner did [Wisdom] come except that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” [*John* 1:14]? It is just as when we speak: in order that what we bear in our soul flows into the soul of the one hearing through fleshly ears, that word which we bear in our heart becomes a sound, and it is called speaking. Our thought, however, is not turned into that same sound; rather, remaining integral with respect to itself, it takes on the form of a vocal-sound whereby it works itself into ears without a defect from its being changed. So also the Word of God, not changed, was



nonetheless made flesh so that he might dwell among us.³⁸

Wisdom itself—or the Word, the *Logos*, its Scriptural name—became flesh after the manner of thought’s becoming sound. Now, we know that a “descent” of intelligible content into the realm of sensible sound takes place; it happens all the time. For when the voice of my fellow human being hits my ears, its intelligibility registers immediately in my mind. Yet such “descent” in no way compromises the integrity of the intelligible content. Rather, the speaker retains it in his own mind even as it is being diffused into the minds of others.

Allow me to go further with this comparison. In the act of speaking, sound is “anointed,” I daresay, by intelligibility, and this “anointing” is able to bring the mind of the hearer to a completion, at least with respect to what is being communicated in that act of speaking. It fills us something that is lacking in the hearer. The act of speaking is, as it were, “anointed sound that saves.” In other words, speech manifests a “Jesu-Christo-logical” configuration,³⁹ and such a configuration addresses the *Quomodo?* question; in other word, this Jesu-Christo-logical configuration is the *modus* according to which we should understand the existence of the abovmost reality in its relation to us human beings who are both ill and yet striving for blessedness. The abovmost reality, in other words, is the Wisdom itself, the Word, that stands at the extremity of our heart’s thinking and longing as the sole reality to be enjoyed; simultaneously, this same abovmost reality anoints humanity by its divinity in order to assist us exiles as we journey *in via* toward the enjoyment of Wisdom itself in our *patria*. The *patria*, while remaining integrally the *patria*, becomes also the *via* to the *patria*.

³⁸ “Quomodo venit, nisi quod *Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis* [John 1:14]? Sicut cum loquimur, ut id quod animo gerimus, in audientis animum per aureas carneas illabatur, fit sonus verbum quod corde gestamus, et locutio vocatur; nec tamen in eundem sonum cogitatio nostra convertitur, sed apud se manens integra, formam vocis qua se insinuet auribus, sine aliqua labe suae mutationis assumit: ita Verbum Dei non commutatum, caro tamen factum est, ut habitaret in nobis” (DDC, I.13.12).

³⁹ “Jesus,” of course, means “savior” or “one who saves,” while “Christ” means “anointed.”



What follows in the next few chapters of Book I is a narrative that evidences just how practically wise Wisdom-itself-made-flesh is in carrying out its salvific task on our behalf. Wisdom itself comes down in order to heal us, so that we may be strong enough to enjoy that Wisdom. In so doing, moreover, Wisdom exercises a deft touch that is “accommodated to our wounds.”⁴⁰ Within this medical motif we again find a Jesu-Christo-logical configuration; for, Augustine says, “the wisdom of God that cures man manifests itself in order to heal, being himself the physician, himself the medicine.”⁴¹ The *medicus*, while remaining integrally the *medicus*, becomes also the *medicina* utilized by the *medicus*. The presence of the physician within the medicine infuses that medicine with an efficacious abundance that truly belongs to it and yet simultaneously transcends it. Such is the Jesu-Christo-logical mode of divine healing.

Thus far in this section I have presented a step-by-step reading of the first 14 chapters or so of Book I of *De doctrina*. I have done so with a view to bringing out the nuanced flavor of Augustine’s thinking in this work. Augustine knows that Wisdom itself is nuanced, touching from end to end strongly and disposing all things sweetly. And the connected tasks of interpreting Scripture, understanding and evaluating realities, and engaging in the activity of *doctrina* demand the same sense of subtlety—a subtlety whose mode is, I contend, Jesu-Christo-logical. But what does this mean in actuality? In other words, how do we, practically speaking, act in accord with this mode? How does it modify the way we read this book called the Book? How does it modify the way we understand and evaluate the realities we encounter? And how does it modify the way we educate? Indeed, when such questions are raised, I balk, and I

⁴⁰ “Et quemadmodum medici cum alligant vulnera, non incomposite, sed apte id faciunt, ut vinculi utilitatem quaedam pulchritudo etiam consequatur; sic medicina Sapientiae per hominis susceptionem nostris est accomodata vulneribus; de quibusdam contrariis curans, et de quibusdam similibus” (DDC, I.14.13).

⁴¹ “... sapientia Dei hominem curans, seipsum exhibuit ad sanandum, ipsa medicus, ipsa medicina” (DDC, I.14.13).



begin to see more clearly Augustine's claim that what he is doing in *De doctrina* is indeed a *magnum opus et arduum*, "a great and arduous work."

Now, from what I have presented thus far, there appears to be a simple, straightforward answer to these questions, namely, measuring all that we do in light of the abovement Measure, who had become manifest to us in Christ. This measure in us in accordance with the abovement Measure is charity. For by charity we orient our heart and mind toward the Triune God as the sole reality to be enjoyed, a drive toward the ever-excelling Divinity that becomes the deepest impetus of our being, while "anything else to be loved that comes into the soul is seized there where the whole impetus of love runs." Augustine continues:

Whoever, then, rightly loves his neighbor should so act with him so that he may also love God with his whole heart, whole soul, and whole mind. For thus loving him as himself, he bears back his whole love of himself and his neighbor toward that love of God which allows no stream to be led outside away from itself, by the diversion of which it might be diminished.⁴²

Charity, then, enables the right ordering of our attachments to different realities, namely, God, ourselves, our neighbors, our bodies, and everything else that is. Our soul's attachments are thus measured in accordance with the standing that each reality has as a reality, and this internal measure of the soul is justice and holiness. Hence Augustine says:

⁴² ". . . quidquid aliud diligendum venerit in animum, illuc rapiatur, quo totus dilectionis impetus currit. Quisquis ergo recte proximum diligit, hoc cum eo debet agere, ut etiam ipse toto corde, tota anima, tota mente diligit Deum. Sic enim eum diligens tanquam seipsum, totam dilectionem sui et illius refert in illam dilectionem Dei, quae nullum a se rivulum duci extra patitur, cujus derivatione minuatur" (DDC, I.22.21).

Later in Book III Augustine defines "charity" thus: "Caritatem voco motum animi ad fruendum Deo propter ipsum, et se atque proximo propter Deum" (III.10.16). ["I call charity the motion of the soul toward enjoying God on account of himself and oneself and one's neighbor on account of God."]



Now, he lives justly and in a holy way who is an integrated evaluator of things. Such is the one who has an ordered love: neither does he love what is not to be loved, nor does he not love what is to be loved, nor does he love more what is to be loved less, nor does he love equally what is to be loved either more or less, nor does he love more or less what is to be loved equally.⁴³

Justice and holiness, then, consists in the right ordering of our heart's attachments to the realities it encounters.

By means of charity, therefore, the human heart is attuned to realities as they are: natural ones are to be used, the Uncreated—i.e., the divine Persons—are to be enjoyed. This attunement does not diminish or denigrate our love of natural realities; rather, in the integrity of charity, we attach ourselves to natural realities precisely as created, and thus we simultaneously bear them back toward the triune Creator who wills them into being, who is the reality from whom they came forth and toward whom they are to return. By orienting our natural attachments toward the abovementioned God, charity salvifically anoints them by a deeper, more fundamental attachment to the one reality to be enjoyed, who is able to make us blessed.

This Jesu-Christo-logical structure of charity should be present in all that we do—not only in the choices we make, but also in the ways we think about realities. Intellectually speaking, then, we inculcate charity by adequating our thinking to Jesus Christ, the Anointed Who Saves, who stands front and center as the single reality who makes sense of all other realities. In *De doctrina*, therefore, the paradigm of Jesus Christ is the key to engaging in the three major tasks with which the work is concerned,

⁴³ "Ille autem iuste et sancte vivit, qui rerum integer aestimator est: ipse est autem qui ordinatam dilectionem habet, ne aut diligat quod non est diligendum, aut non diligat quod est diligendum, aut amplius diligat quod minus est diligendum, aut aequè diligat quod vel minus vel amplius diligendum est, aut minus vel amplius quod aequè diligendum est" (DDC, I.27.28).



namely, interpreting Scripture, dealing “ontologically” (i.e., intellectually and volitionally) with any reality whatsoever, and educating others. To be sure, positing Christ as the key to these tasks may seem a simple answer, and yet in positing it we must simultaneously acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the most non-simple—i.e., the most complex—reality there can be; for Christ recapitulates in himself all realities arranged hierarchically as well as the transcendent divine cause of those very hierarchically-arranged realities—and he manages to do so in a way that keeps intact all relevant ontological distinctions between them.⁴⁴

Accordingly, then, the manner in which we are to engage in these tasks is likewise both simple and complex. The manner is simple inasmuch as we should engage in these tasks in the mode of charity. For charity as a disposition of the heart helps us to unlock the Scriptures, to bring to light the truth and value of every reality, and to bring others to recognize these same things. Yet this charity must, like Wisdom, touch from end to end strongly and dispose sweetly, and it can do so only if it is the deepest and most forceful impetus present in us as we carry out these tasks while at the same time enabling us to exercise the same deft touch that Christ the physician does in healing us. His is a deft touch that is wisely and discerningly accommodated to our wounds; in turn, therefore, ours must be a deft touch that respects and acknowledges the multiplicity, diversity, and distinctions innate to the objects of our tasks (namely, Scripture, all realities, and other human souls), and that also deals with these objects so as to bring them gently to their completion.

Consider, for example, the task of dealing with Scripture, which is *prima facie* the principal concern of *De doctrina*. If one were to sum up Augustine’s teaching about the manner in which we should treat Scripture so as “come upon the things to be

⁴⁴ Ultimately, then, DDC is touching upon the very “mystery of God’s will,” namely, the recapitulation of all things in Christ. See *Ephesians* 1:9-10.



understood” in it, one could put it thus: charity must salvifically anoint our interpretation of Scripture. In other words, our encounter with Scripture must be human-and-divine (i.e., “anointed”), and it must be oriented ultimately toward the enjoyment of God by both ourselves and our neighbor (i.e., “salvific”). What does this mean exactly? It means our encounter with Scripture must be human; that is, we should read it intelligently, alertly, and perceptively (and, if possible, in its original language), just as we would endeavor to read any other book that we take seriously. (In this regard, then, much of *De doctrina* is not specifically about how to read Scripture well, but more generally about how to read any book well.) In addition, it means our encounter with Scripture must be divine; for we should read it with a divine-like expansiveness and generosity that allows its superabundant meaningfulness to manifest itself to us. Such generous freedom in reading Scripture is especially helpful when we are alert to the meaningfulness present in the “spirit” of transferred and figurative signs that permeates the “letter” of the text. The literal meaning of Scripture, in other words, is anointed with figurative meaningfulness, and it is charity that prods us gently from slavery to the letter toward the freedom of apprehending that same letter’s spiritual intelligibility.⁴⁵ Finally, our encounter with Scripture must be oriented

⁴⁵ Consider, e.g., the following passage: “Sed verborum translatorum ambiguitates . . . non mediocrem curam industriamque desiderant. Nam in principio cavendum est ne figuratam locutionem ad litteram accipias. Et ad hoc enim pertinet quod ait Apostolus: *Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat* [II Cor. 3:6]. Cum enim figurate dictum sic accipitur, tanquam proprie dictum sit, carnaliter sapitur. Neque ulla mors animae congruentius appellatur, quam cum id etiam quod in ea bestiis antecellit, hoc est, intelligentia carni subjicitur sequendo litteram. Qui enim sequitur litteram, translata verba sicut propria tenet, neque illud quod proprio verbo significatur, refert ad aliam significationem” (DDC, III.5.9). [“But the ambiguities of transferred words, which are to be spoken about next, require no mediocre care and diligence. For you are to be warned in the beginning lest you take a figurative expression literally. And what the Apostle says pertains to this: ‘The letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive’ [II Cor. 3:6]. For when something said figuratively is taken as if it were said properly, it is understood in a fleshly manner. Nor is anything more fittingly called the death of the soul than when even that which in the soul surpasses the beasts—i.e., the intelligence—is subject to the flesh by following the letter. For he who follows the letter takes transferred words as proper, nor does he bear back that which is signified by the proper word toward another signification.”] On this point, see also DDC, III.9.13.



salvifically; for our interpretation of Scripture should not become an impediment or snare that holds us or others back from progress toward the enjoyment of the Triune God through Christ. We should avoid, therefore, taking pride in our own interpretations, and we should hold back from excluding interpretations that, even if they seem wrongheaded to us, are nonetheless moving in the same direction of that underlying motion toward God that charity itself is.⁴⁶

A similar consideration could be carried out with regard to the task of education; for it, too, should be undertaken Jesu-Christo-logically. That is to say, education should be salvifically anointed, and this takes place especially—or, perhaps, only—when educators exercise the activity of *doctrina* in the mode of charity.⁴⁷ Hence, education should be human-and-divine, and it should be oriented toward both the student's and the teacher's beatitude. Before making any general comments on this mode of

⁴⁶ Consider, e.g., the following passage: “Quando autem ex eisdem Scripturae verbis, non unum aliquid, sed duo vel plura sentiuntur, etiam si latet quid senserit ille qui scripsit, nihil periculi est, si quodlibet eorum congruere veritati ex aliis locis sanctarum Scripturarum doceri potest: id tamen eo conante qui divina scrutatur eloquia, ut ad voluntatem perveniatur auctoris, per quem Scripturam illam sanctus operatus est Spiritus; sive hoc assequatur, sive aliam sententiam de illis verbis, quae fidei rectae non refragatur, exsculpat, testimonium habens a quocumque alio loco divinorum eloquiorum. Ille quippe auctor in eisdem verbis quae intelligere volumus, et ipsam sententiam forsitan vidit; et certe Dei Spiritus, qui per eum haec operatus est, etiam ipsam occurruram lectori vel auditori, sine dubitatione praevidit; imo ut occurreret, quia et ipsa est veritate subnixta, providit. Nam quid in divinis eloquiis largius et uberius potuit divinitus provideri, quam ut eadem verba pluribus intelligantur modis, quos alia non minus divina contestantia faciant approbari?” (DDC, III.27.38). [“When, however, not one thing, but two or several are judged from the same words of Scripture, even if what the writer judged is hidden, there is no danger if each of these can be taught to fit with truth from other places in the holy Scriptures. Now the one who carefully searches the divine sayings—who is striving to be led to the will of the author through whom the Holy Spirit worked that Scripture, whether he attains this or some other judgment about these words that does not run counter to right faith—is without blame when he has testimony from any other part of the divine sayings. For the author perhaps saw in the same words what we want to understand and that very judgment; and certainly the Spirit of God, who worked these things through him, without doubt foresaw the very thing that was to occur to the reader or hearer—indeed, he provided so that it would occur to him, since it is supported by truth itself. For what could be provided more generously and more abundantly in the divine sayings than that the same words be understood in several ways that other testimonies that are no less divine cause to be approved?”]

⁴⁷ Augustine himself exemplifies this mode of teaching in *De magistro*, where we see him at work in the task of educating his son Adeodatus.



education, however, it may be best to consider briefly Book IV of *De doctrina*, in which Augustine articulates a Jesu-Christo-logical manner of learning and exercising rhetoric. With such an example in place, we will be in a better position to treat the implications of Book I's Christianized ontology for the task of education.

III. Learning and Exercising Rhetoric Jesu-Christo-logically

This section's brief consideration of Book IV's discussion of rhetoric both is limited in scope and comes with an important presupposition. The limitation is this: I touch upon only a few aspect of Augustine's discussion of rhetoric with but a single goal in mind, namely, to illustrate how it assumes a Jesu-Christo-logical mode in Augustine's presentation of it. The presupposition is this: I take for granted that Augustine's articulation of the rhetorical categories that he gathers from Cicero is sufficiently accurate—at least insofar as it outlines rhetorical categories that were likely operative in Rome's pagan political context.

Perhaps the first thing to note about Augustine's discussion of rhetoric is the value he sees in a Christian's possession of this art, which he points out early on in Book IV thus:

For since through the rhetorical art both true and false things may be urged, who would dare to say that truth in its defenders ought to stand unarmed against lying, so that those who strive to urge things that are false would know from the start how to make a hearer either good-willed or eager or teachable, whereas [defenders of truth] would not know? . . . Since, then, the faculty of eloquence, which avails in many ways toward urging either depraved or upright things, is placed in the middle, why is it not put together with the zeal of good men so that they may fight for truth, if evil men usurp it to maintain perverse and empty causes for uses



of iniquity and error?⁴⁸

Rhetoric or eloquence, then, is a capacity *in medio posita*, “placed in the middle,” capable of being used for good or ill. It is, in other words, like the Egyptian gold that the Egyptians misused but that the Jews were able to purify and reshape into vessels and ornaments utilized for true worship. Augustine was aware, no doubt, of his own usurpation of rhetoric earlier in life, whereby he likely maintained perverse and empty causes, and yet he is sensible enough to recognize that the corruption lay more deeply in his own heart than in the principles and techniques of the art that he had acquired.

Augustine seems wary, however, of passing this skill on to others by way of direct training in it. He intends neither in Book IV nor outside of it to engage in training rhetoricians as such. He suggests, rather, that Christians learn by an “ecclesiastical osmosis,” being permeated by the eloquence present in good literature written by Christians. If a capable Christian dives into such literature, he “imbues this eloquence by being near to it and especially by the exercise of writing out or dictating and, later, of speaking those things that he perceives in accordance with the rule of piety and faith.”⁴⁹ This mode of learning eloquence is Jesu-Christo-logical; for the rhetorical art, embodied in ecclesiastical works of human origin, is acquired by the reader of these works in a context permeated by piety toward and faith in God, which orient the art so acquired toward saving both others and himself by the effective preaching of the Gospel. In

⁴⁸ “Nam cum per artem rhetoricam et vera suadeantur et falsa, quis audeat dicere, adversus mendacium in defensoribus suis in armem debere consistere veritatem, ut videlicet illi qui res falsas persuadere conantur, noverint auditorem vel benevolum, vel intentum, vel docilem proemio facere, isti autem non noverint? ... Cum ergo sit in medio posita facultas eloquii, quae ad persuadenda seu prava seu recta valet plurimum: cur non bonorum studio comparatur, ut militet veritati, si eam mali ad obtinendas perversas vanasque causas in usus iniquitatis et erroris usurpant?” (DDC, IV.2.2).

⁴⁹ “Quoniam si acutum et fervens adsit in genium, facilius adhaeret eloquentia legentibus et audientibus eloquentes, quam eloquentiae praecepta sectantibus. Nec desunt ecclesiasticae litterae, etiam praeter canonem in auctoritatis arce salubriter collocatum, quas legendo homo capax, etsi id non agat, sed tantummodo rebus quae ibi dicuntur intentus sit, etiam eloquio quo dicuntur, dum in his versatur, imbuitur, accedente vel maxime exercitatione sive scribendi sive dictandi, postremo etiam dicendi, quae secundum pietatis ac fidei regulam sentit” (DDC, IV.3.4).



contrast, the Christian's acquisition of rhetoric in a pagan manner, i.e., by focused training in the skill itself, would separate this human skill from the divine context in which its true utility is revealed. At best the skill so acquired would stand *in medio*, neither hot nor cold. Now a Christian, Augustine spits out such lukewarm, unanointed, non-salvifically-oriented rhetoric, and he shows no interest in training others in this "secularized" mode.

It appears, moreover, that the acquisition of rhetoric by ecclesiastical osmosis tallies better with the manner in which eloquence is present in Scripture itself, or at least in those passages that even the experts would recognize as rhetorically excellent. As Augustine puts it:

In those places [in Scripture] in which [eloquence] is perhaps recognized by the learned, such realities are spoken that the words by which they are spoken seem not to be employed by the one saying them, but seem as if they are freely subject to the realities themselves—as though you were to understand that wisdom goes forth from her house, i.e., from the breast of the wise man, and eloquence follows as an inseparable servant who has not even been called.⁵⁰

Just as the reader of ecclesiastical literature concerns himself primarily with what can be learned from it about divine matters and yet concomitantly assimilates the rhetoric contained therein, so Scripture primarily communicates wisdom and yet does so in speech that is unaffectedly eloquent. Scripture, then, is the embodiment of divine wisdom in human speech—human speech that is at times ordinary, at times eloquent. Augustine expresses this point concisely. "These [Scriptures]," he says, "were not put

⁵⁰ "Et in quibus forte locis agnoscitur a doctis, tales res dicuntur, ut verba quibus dicuntur, non a dicente adhibita, sed ipsis rebus velut sponte subjuncta videantur: quasi sapientiam de domo sua, id est, pectore sapientis procedere intelligas, et tanquam inseparabilem famulam etiam non vocatam sequi eloquentiam" (DDC, IV.6.10).



together by human industry, but were poured out by the divine mind both wisely and eloquently—not with wisdom intent upon eloquence, but with eloquence not receding from wisdom.”⁵¹ In Scripture, wisdom assumes human speech to itself, which speech can be quite eloquent; in Scripture, in other words, human speech is anointed by divine wisdom, and this anointing is eminently useful for our reaching beatitude. Such is the Jesu-Christo-logical mode of Scripture’s speech itself.

Let us turn briefly now to the Christian rhetorician. How might a Christian possess and exercise rhetoric in a Jesu-Christo-logical manner? It may be best to begin answering this question by considering aspects of the unpurified gold that Augustine appropriates from Cicero. According to Augustine in Book IV, the great Roman orator distinguished three rhetorical styles, namely, the understated, the balanced, and the grand. In addition, Cicero matches each style with a distinct activity in which an orator may be engaged, namely, teaching his hearers, delighting them, or bending them, respectively. And finally, these styles and activities correspond with the different “magnitudes” of the subjects of which an orator may speak, namely, small things, moderate things, and great things, respectively. Gathering these distinctions together, Augustine expresses his understanding of Cicero’s teaching thus: “He will be eloquent, therefore, who will be able to say small things in an understated way so that he may teach, moderate things in a balanced way so that he may delight, and great things in a grand way so that he may bend.”⁵² Certainly Augustine recognizes how prudent these

⁵¹ “Neque enim haec humana industria composita, sed divina mente sunt fusa et sapienter et eloquenter; non intenta in eloquentiam sapientia, sed a sapientia non recedente eloquentia” (DDC, IV.7.21).

⁵² “Qui ergo nititur dicendo persuadere quod bonum est, nihil illorum trium spernens—ut scilicet doceat, ut delectet, ut flectat—oret atque agat ut, quemadmodum supra diximus, intellegenter, libenter, oboedienterque audiatur. Quod cum apte et convenienter facit, non immerito eloquens dici potest, etsi non eum sequatur auditoris assensus. Ad haec enim tria, id est ut doceat, ut delectet, ut flectat, etiam illa tria videtur pertinere voluisse idem ipse Romani auctor eloquii, cum itidem dixit: *Is erit igitur eloquens, qui poterit parva summis, modica temperate, magna granditer dicere* [cf. Cicero, *Orator*, I.101], tamquam si adderet illa etiam tria, et sic explicaret unam eademque sententiam, dicens: *Is erit igitur eloquens, qui*



prescriptions were in Cicero's pagan political context. Indeed, perhaps Augustine experienced in his own work as an orator the prudence of these distinctions. And no doubt we ourselves can recognize the absurdity of a professor's entering a classroom and launching into a grand speech. And no doubt a politician is aware that being understated simply does not work well at a rally of thousands just days before a close election. In short, then, Cicero's distinctions and correspondences seem to make eminent sense.

Is it possible, then, that Augustine has a problem with these distinctions and correspondences, which are so sensible? The answer, I believe, is both affirmative and negative. For appears not to have a problem with Cicero's teaching inasmuch as he never denies the validity of distinguishing these styles and connecting them with the activities with which Cicero connects them. Indeed, he even quotes at length both Scriptural passages and passages from ecclesiastical authors in order to illustrate these very distinctions. And yet there is at least one notable wrinkle that appears in Augustine's appropriation of Cicero's teaching. It has to do with the magnitude of the things of which an orator speaks, to which Augustine calls our attention in the following passage:

In our case, however, since we ought to bear back all things, especially things we say to people from a superior position, to the salvation of men—not temporal, but eternal—while eternal ruin is to be avoided, all the things we say are great, even to the point that what an ecclesiastical teacher says about monetary things, whether they are to be acquired or let go, ought not to be seen as small, no matter if the money is great or small. For justice, which we ought to guard even in the case of a small amount of

ut doceat poterit parva summis, ut delectet modica temperate, ut flectat magna granditer dicere" (DDC, IV.17.34).



money, is not small, as when the Lord says, “The one who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in what is great” [Luke 16:10]. What is least, then, is least; but to be faithful in what is least is great. For just as the notion of roundness—i.e., that from a middle point all equal lines are drawn to their endpoints—is the same in a great dish as in a meager coin, so also when small things are carried out justly, the greatness of justice is not diminished.⁵³

Apparently, then, Cicero and Augustine do not measure by the same measure those matters of which an orator speaks.

Broadly speaking, Cicero measures by a temporal measure, which is fitting in a pagan political community that has its eyes set primarily on the relative value of things as they pertain to success or even virtue in this life. Augustine, on the other hand, measures by an eternal measure, one that recognizes how even the smallest of human activities could be anointed by fidelity to God in a manner that would place its value beyond the measures of this temporal dispensation. No matter how big or small that activity may be in the eyes of the world, the notion or form (*ratio*) of fidelity is able to be just as present in its full strength, just as roundness is present in a small coin just as much as in a large plate or, for that matter, the moon. When exercising their eloquence, then, Christians employ different measures than do the worldly. Augustine captures well these different measures thus:

⁵³ “In istis autem nostris, quandoquidem omnia, maxime quae de loco superiore populis dicimus, ad hominum salutem, nec temporariam, sed aeternam referre debemus, ubi etiam cavendus est aeternus interitus, omnia magna sunt quae dicimus; usque adeo ut nec de ipsis pecuniariis rebus vel acquirendis vel amittendis parva videri debeant, quae doctor ecclesiasticus dicit, sive sit illa magna, sive parva pecunia. Neque enim parva est justitia, quam profecto et in parva pecunia custodire debemus, dicente Domino: *Qui in minimo fidelis est, et in magno fidelis est* [Luke 16:10]. Quod ergo minimum est, minimum est: sed in minimo fidelem esse, magnum est. Nam sicut ratio rotunditatis, id est a puncto medio omnes lineae pares in extrema ducantur, eadem est in magno disco, quae in nummolo exiguo; ita ubi parva juste geruntur, non minuitur justitiae magnitudo” (DDC, IV.18.35).



Of course, if we were to advise men as to the manner in which they ought to deal with secular affairs on behalf of either themselves or their own in the presence ecclesiastical judges, we would rightly admonish them that they deal with them understatedly as small things. Since, however, we are discussing the eloquence of that man whom we want to be a teacher of those realities by which we are freed from eternal evils and arrive at eternal goods, wherever they are dealt with . . . they are great.⁵⁴

The eternal measure with which the Christian measures entails, then, a rhetoric that expresses an ascetic detachment from the goods of this world coupled with hopeful attachment to beatitude with God.

As I noted above, though, we must recognize that Augustine does not obliterate or overrun the distinctions and correspondences that he appropriates from Cicero; on the contrary, recognizing their limitations, he nonetheless promotes what he has gathered from him by highlighting the presence of Cicero's teaching in both Scripture and ecclesiastical literature. In sum, Augustine salvifically anoints Cicero's human rhetorical categories with charity, so that Cicero's teaching may be employed by the Christian who has a fundamental concern for eternal goods for both himself and others. Hence the truly Christian orator is able to discern not merely how to display his own skills to his own benefit (which Cicero himself would have abhorred), nor even how to employ his skills in order to promote the good of a political community (which Cicero himself attempted), but ultimately how to deploy eloquence fittingly in relation to the particular needs of his listeners' souls, each of whom is voyaging back to the fatherland. In this way, then, the Christian orator will exercise his skill in a Jesu-Christo-

⁵⁴ "Sane si moneremus homines quemadmodum ipsa negotia saecularia vel pro se vel pro suis apud ecclesiasticos iudices agere deberent, recte admoneremus ut agerent tamquam parva summis. Cum vero de illius viri disseramus eloquio, quem volumus earum rerum esse doctorem quibus liberamur ab aeternis malis atque ad aeterna pervenimus bona; ubicumque agantur haec, . . . magna sunt" (DDC, IV.18.37).



logical manner.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

In Augustine's works, and in *De doctrina* in particular, we are privileged to witness a converted man who is willing to rethink reality and all of its facets in light of his assent to the becoming-flesh of Wisdom itself for the salvation of human souls. In Jesus Christ, the Anointed Who Saves, Augustine recognizes the God-man in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and Jesu-Christo-logic thinking on our part unlocks this treasure-chest. Thinking Jesu-Christo-logically, in other words, brings to light the new modes and orders of reality revealed in Christianity, which does not destroy or diminish the old modes and orders, but rather builds on and completes them, thereby bringing them to their full stature. As in all growth toward maturity, however, there is resistance and tension—growing pains, as it were. This is not only because what is being built on and completed is ill and in need of healing, but also simply because something created and finite is being utilized as a vessel for the Uncreated and Infinite. To be sure, Christ has bridged this chasm between the created and Uncreated, and yet our crossing it intellectually and volitionally still has its share of difficulty. The transitus ever involves a dialectical way of thinking whereby we do justice to both the finite measure of the created and the unmeasuredness of the creative Measure. Augustine is often misunderstood when one reads him as picking one side or the other, when in fact he is doing Jesu-Christo-logical justice to both.

Unsurprisingly, then, there is tension in Augustine's attempt to modify education in *De doctrina*. One way to understand this modification is to see it as the transformation of education into a process that promotes virtue in the full Augustinian sense of the word, i.e., that promotes the fulfillment of natural human capacities in such a way that all their activity is enabled by charity to be borne back through Jesus Christ



toward the abovementioned Triune God. In order both to understand this modification and to make it applicable in our own day, it may be helpful to conclude these reflections on Augustine's *De doctrina* by considering Christian liberal education as a "virtuous" or excellent mean between two possible "vicious" extremes. As Aristotle knew, achieving and observing a virtuous mean is difficult and rare, and often we understand it best by a sort of *via negativa*, i.e., by seeing what is lacking in the vicious extremes and how they fall short of paradigmatic excellence. When it comes to Christian liberal education, then, one extreme may be called "fundamentalist" education; the other, "secularist." Allow me briefly to depict these modes of education rather starkly—although hopefully not too unrealistically—in order to locate the proper ever-excelling character of a truly Christianized liberal education.

Fundamentalist education fails to respect the manifold distinctions within the natural and human dimensions of reality, insofar as it indelicately bathes all that is taught with a clear-cut, didactic "Biblical" message, one often rooted directly in apparently self-evident Scriptural categories. Compared to an education in the Jesu-Christo-logical mode, fundamentalist education is void of anything substantial to anoint. It is Docetistic education, i.e., a disembodied, ostensibly divine education permeated with an in-your-face salvific drive. Such education is often rooted in fear-based anger in the face of a secularized world, and it attempts to take shortcuts in trying to Christianize students. It is underlyingly irascible.

Secularist education operates from the diminishment and perhaps even the denial of that transcendent Wisdom that touches from end to end strongly and disposes all things sweetly. Thereby it eliminates the subtle flavor (*sapor*) of liberal education that can draw us toward becoming tasters (*sapientes*) of Wisdom (*Sapientia*). Unlike fundamentalist education, secularist education respects in its way the manifold distinctions within the natural and human dimensions of reality. What it lacks,



however, is the organic unity of those dimensions insofar as their principle of integrity and finality, Wisdom itself, is rejected from the start. Such education is not salvific, nor does it aim to be. Absent Wisdom as a final principle, it tends to multiply distinctions within the natural and human dimensions according to the preferences of those who provide and consume what is taught. Secularist education is historical-Jesus education, i.e., an education that has been stripped of the anointing of the Divine and thus has lost its integrity and bearings; instead, it caters simply to the desires of those involved in it. It is underlyingly concupiscible.

It would be foolish of me, of course, to attempt to paint a full and determinate picture of Christianized or Jesu-Christo-logical liberal education. At best I can sketch a rough outline of it as a viruous mean in contrast to the vicious extremes just articulated. Truly Christianized education respects—indeed, even celebrates—the distinctions within the natural and human dimensions of reality while at the same time not resting in their limitedness, but rather seeing that limitedness as a reason to strive further. Christianized liberal education is informed, therefore, by a trajectory toward that Wisdom which touches from end to end strongly, and hence it embraces all that the various sciences and disciplines do in order to bring such Wisdom to light. But this same Wisdom disposes all things sweetly, and so a Christianized liberal education must perceptively discover in its study of natural and human realities those aspects that can signify to both teacher and learners the attractive beauty of the becoming-flesh of Wisdom itself, who himself alone is the *via* toward enjoyment of the Wisdom that he is. In short, a Christianized liberal education is sacramental in character, i.e., salvifically anointed by Wisdom itself in a way that can lead those well-disposed by faith toward beatitude. It is underlyingly rational, but with a reason measured by the divine Reason, the *Logos*, who became flesh in order to lead us to our *patria*.

Institutionally speaking, for such an education to become actual would require, it



seems, teachers and administrators possessed of a Sapiential touch, capable of providing the real and natural nourishment of the arts and sciences while simultaneously flavoring them with the subtle savor of Wisdom. Such liberal education is, of course, no small or easy task, and so it goes without saying that to the degree that it is accomplished institutionally would be owing to the liberal emanation of grace from our liberal Father of Lights.

