

“WHAT MY SCRIPTURE SAYS, I SAY”: PRINCIPLES OF SCRIPTURAL
INTERPRETATION IN ST. AUGUSTINE

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This dissertation offers a systematic account of St. Augustine’s principles of interpretation, or hermeneutics. Chapter 1 treats the dialectic of *Confessions* XII and argues that Augustine privileges the intention of the human author of Scripture as the best possible meaning of the text that readers must try to find, though they can still find other valid interpretations as long as they are seeking the author’s intention. Chapters 2-4 then treat six principles that Augustine appeals to in his theory of Scriptural interpretation. Chapter 2 argues for an inherent connection between Augustine’s intentionalism and his starting claim that Scripture is true inasmuch as it is authored by God; it also discusses his first interpretive principle, by which he appeals to general and linguistic knowledge as a prerequisite for interpretation. Chapter 3 explains three principles that Augustine ties together in a series and bases on the content of Scripture: Christ’s command to love God and neighbor as the purpose of all Scripture; the role of “clearly stated” (*aperte posita*) passages in establishing the parameters for the moral and doctrinal content of Scripture; and the use of figurative interpretation in understanding all Scripture, but especially passages that are unclear or objectionable. Chapter 4 argues that Augustine also uses two sources outside of Scripture, the authoritative statements of the Church and the sure arguments of philosophy or science, to limit and to add to the possible meanings of

Scriptural passages. Chapter 5 returns to the issue of the human writer's intention and its role in interpretation, comparing the account in *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessions XII* to the earlier one in *De Utilitate Credendi*, and then proposing a larger theory of the role of the writer's intention in light of some of Augustine's later works.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Theodore Harwood was born in Lisbon, Portugal, and grew up in Milwaukee and La Crosse, Wisconsin, where he was homeschooled for all of his K-12 education. He attended Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan, and graduated *summa cum laude* in 2011 as the salutatorian of his class, with a major in Latin and minor in Greek. He entered the Classics Ph.D. program at Cornell University in 2011, with a focus on Ancient Philosophy. After taking a leave of absence in the 2014-15 year to teach Latin, Greek, and Philosophy at Highlands Latin School in Louisville, Kentucky, he returned to Cornell to complete his dissertation work. He lives with his wife, Anna, and their two children, Thomas and Sylvia.

J.M.J.

For my parents, who taught to me to love God, words, and wisdom.

Uxori carissimae mihi adeodatae Annae—O lux in tenebris meis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Civ.</i>	<i>De Civitate Dei</i>
<i>C. Faust.</i>	<i>Contra Faustum Manichaeum</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	<i>Confessiones</i>
<i>Doct. chr.</i>	<i>De Doctrina Christiana</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Gn. c. man.</i>	<i>De Genesi contra Manichaeos</i>
<i>Gn. litt.</i>	<i>De Genesi ad Litteram</i>
<i>Retract.</i>	<i>Retractationes</i>
<i>Spir. et litt.</i>	<i>De Spiritu et Littera</i>
<i>Trin.</i>	<i>De Trinitate</i>
<i>Util. cred.</i>	<i>De Utilitate Credendi</i>

PREFACE

My purpose in this work is to offer a systematic analysis of Augustine's theory of Scriptural interpretation, that is, of how he enables interpretation and what restrictions he places on it. Since my interest is in Augustine's explicit theory (that is, his hermeneutics), I focus on those passages in which he discusses interpretation or gives general rules and principles rather than those in which he offers particular interpretations (these being his exegesis). But I freely appeal to examples of interpretation that he offers in his theoretical treatment in order to illuminate his points, and I occasionally refer to his examples from non-theoretical contexts in order to clarify certain points and especially certain terms that he uses but does not explain in his theoretical treatment. Though the bulk of this theoretical treatment is found in books I-III of the *De Doctrina Christiana* (*Doct. chr.*) and book XII of the *Confessiones* (*Conf.*; also referred to often as English *Confessions*), there is also a fair amount of material dispersed throughout the *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (*Gen. c. man.*) and the *De Genesi ad Litteram* (*Gn. litt.*), and in book XI of the *De Civitate Dei* (*Civ.*)—where he again takes up the opening verses of Genesis—as well as the more general *De Utilitate Credendi* (*Util. cred.*). Besides these, occasional comments come up in *contra Faustum* (*C. Faust.*), *De Spiritu et Littera* (*Spir. et litt.*), and a number of letters (*Ep.*). The dates of the works' composition are summarized below¹. When the

¹ Taken from O'Donnell's website (<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/chrontable.html>), based on the one found in his 1992 commentary on *Confessions*.

date of the books with which I am concerned can be ascertained, I specify them; otherwise I provide the date(s) for the whole work:

De Genesi contra Manichaeos (388/90)

De Utilitate Credendi (391/2)

De Doctrina Christiana I-III.25.35 (396/397)²

Confessiones (397-401)

Contra Faustum Manichaeum (397/9)

De Genesi ad Litteram (401-15)

De Spiritu et Littera (412)

De Civitate Dei XI (by 417/18)

De Doctrina Christiana III.25.36-IV (426)

I focus on Augustine's requirements for interpretation because recent scholarship has decidedly neglected these and focused instead on what Augustine's theory allows. This is not without reason, since Augustine clearly says that any truth which a reader can find in the text is licit for him to understand there, and even intended by the Holy Spirit, who is—along with particular human beings—the author of Scripture (*Conf.* XI.43, *Doct. chr.* III.27.38). Yet I believe this statement cannot be taken by itself, but rather must be interpreted in accordance with several other requirements that Augustine repeatedly states throughout his theoretical discussions. My interest in this study is to identify the principles that motivate Augustine's views and to elucidate how these principles interact in his system. There are already

² I follow Karla Pollmann on this date. Cf. Pollmann, "Hermeneutical Presuppositions," in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 427.

numerous articles that more or less summarize Augustine's statements about interpretation in his different works; I do not aim to produce another. Rather, I hope to offer a synthetic treatment that takes all of his statements into account and attempts to organize them hierarchically so as to distinguish what is most essential and abstract from what is more particular and mundane. In this way I think I am doing the same sort of interpretive work on Augustine that he did on Scripture—the major difference being that he treated Scripture as necessarily and always true, whereas I obviously do not hold him to such a standard or privilege.

In order to set the stage for the text-focused argument of the chapters, the introduction gives some context for Augustine's life and interest in interpretation, his influences, and the most relevant scholarship. The first chapter discusses Augustine's treatment of the role of the human writer's intention in interpretation in *Confessions* XII. This is meant to stand alone to some degree, and to provide an accessible starting point. In chapters 2-4 I discuss Augustine's principles of interpretation, dividing them up into prerequisites (2), principles internal to Scripture (3), and principles external to Scripture (4). These chapters are meant to address both how Augustine begins and builds interpretation as well as how he judges whether individual interpretations are valid. They all assume, in accordance with his plain statements and some theoretical principles (discussed in chapter 2) that readers are looking for the authors' intention in reading the books of Scripture—though in these three chapters I mostly try to avoid the issue of which author, human or divine. In chapter 5 I return to the issue of the human writer's intention and its role in interpretation, comparing the account in *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessions* XII to the earlier one in *De Utilitate Credendi*,

and then proposing a larger theory of the role of the writer's intention in light of some of Augustine's later works.

INTRODUCTION

Backgrounds

This introduction provides several contexts for the following chapters: the context of Augustine's life in which he wrote the works I will discuss, the context of the other figures who influenced Augustine's theory of interpretation, and the context of recent scholarship in which my arguments operate. I have tried to leave out the argument of my dissertation as much as possible except in the summary of scholarship, where I note the points on which I differ from other scholars. The first two sections will be valuable before reading the dissertation, while the background in scholarship is perhaps best appreciated after or in tandem with the following chapters.

Interpretation in Augustine's Life

Augustine's personal history—as he presents it, especially in the *Confessions*—offers some insight into the approach that he takes to the interpretation of Scripture and into the evolution of his views about Scripture and interpretation in general. The purpose of this section is to provide some background about the role that interpretation and hermeneutics played in Augustine's life. There are three main events in this respect. First, on his first reading of the Catholic Scriptures he found the style vulgar and the text unintelligible. Second, he turned to the Manichees because they rejected the Catholic Old Testament on the grounds of the absurdity of the literal meaning of the text. Third, he learned from Ambrose how to understand the text in a figurative or mystical sense when the literal sense was absurd, and this precipitated his return to

Catholic Christianity. I will say a little about each of these points and then note a shift in Augustine's later exegesis towards explaining the literal meaning of the text in a satisfactory way.

Introduction to Scripture and early distaste

In *Confessions* III.4.7-8 Augustine describes reading Cicero's *Hortensius* while studying treatises on rhetoric in his "nineteenth year" (AD 373/374). Cicero's exhortation to philosophy and his criticism of a number of philosophical positions moved Augustine to think seriously about philosophy. His only hesitation about the text, apparently, was that "the name of Christ was not there,"³ for which he had a deep-seated reverence from his upbringing.⁴ Spurred on by Cicero's exhortation to Wisdom and the missing name of Christ he decided to read the Scriptures, apparently for the first time.⁵ Compared to Cicero's prose, he found their style "unworthy" so that he gave up on them.

The contrast that Augustine will return to several times in the course of his biography is between his love of words and his love of content. Though Cicero presented a balanced picture of high style and deep thought, Augustine was unable to

³ *Conf.* III.4.8: *Hoc solum me in tanta flagrantia refrangebat, quod nomen Christi non erat ibi.*

⁴ *Ibid.*: "My tender heart had drunk and held deeply to that name even with the very milk of my mother" (*Hoc nomen salvatoris mei, filii tui, in ipso adhuc lacte matris tenerum cor meum pie biberat et alte retinebat*).

⁵ Whether or not it was common for Christians at the time to read the Bible, Bonnardière ("Augustine's Biblical Initiation," 7-8) suggests that "in Augustine's judgment, on the whole, there was an imbalance between what he learned in school and his Christian background." On the one hand, this is obvious: Augustine criticizes his teachers and his parents for the importance they put on school work that was, in his view, morally neutral at best, and for the lack of moral education he received. But on the other hand, he always praises the catechesis that he did receive, and he never says directly that he should have read the Bible in his education.

disentangle the two features or to recognize the greater importance of the latter. His summary of his difficulty introduces another recurring theme as well (*Conf.* III.5.9):

Tumor enim meus refugiebat modum eius et acies mea non penetrabat interiora eius.

My pride shunned [Scripture's] style and my insight was not able to penetrate its inner parts.

Augustine had a problem because of his attitude, but also because of his insufficient capacity: he simply did not have the knowledge necessary to understand Scripture's language (presumably its figurative language in particular) or what Scripture was talking about in that language.

The Manichees

After this disappointment in the Catholic Scriptures, Augustine found a sympathetic crowd in the Manichees because of their rejection of the Old Testament texts and portions of the New Testament that they considered corrupted by Jewish redactions.⁶ Augustine joined the dualist sect, in which he remained, he says, for nine years.⁷

Augustine claims (in III.12 and XII.37) that the Manichees' apologetics against the Catholic Scriptures worked on him because he lacked certain key philosophical

⁶ Cf. *Conf.* III.5.9-7.12. For more on Manichaean criticism of supposedly corrupt texts in the New Testament, see Teske's detailed treatment in "Augustine, the Manichees and the Bible," 211-212.

⁷ The dating of Augustine's Manichaean period is a little difficult. He says (*Confessions* III.20, IV.1, V.10) that he was with them for nine years, from his own nineteenth year (AD 372/3) to his thirty-second (381/2). But O'Donnell (commenting on *Confessions* V.10) says that the evidence strongly suggests that he joined the sect in 373 and met the Manichaean Faustus in 383, at which time he became disillusioned and began to drift out; his final break came when he left Rome for Milan in 384 and became a Catholic catechumen.

concepts (most of all about the possibility of immaterial substance).⁸ But we should also note that their position appealed to him because they read the text of Scripture in the same way as Augustine: very literally. In fact, the Manichees refused to consider anything but the literal sense of Scripture, and they praised Mani for speaking “the naked and proper truth with all the coverings of figures removed,” as Augustine records later in his treatise *Contra Faustum*.⁹ Augustine does not seem to have been aware of alternative modes of reading while he was with the Manichees.

Ambrose

Eventually Augustine became disappointed in the Manichees because he could find no one to answer his philosophical questions, and so he took up a Skeptical position on the possibility of finding truth about God. But he became more open to Catholic Christianity upon hearing the preaching of Ambrose.¹⁰ His first interest in Ambrose was directed towards his famed eloquence, despite Augustine’s objections to the content of Ambrose’s speeches, but slowly the sermons had an effect on his

⁸ As Teske notes (“Augustine, the Manichees and the Bible,” 209), Augustine’s “inability to conceive of God and the soul as incorporeal” was really the center of all of his intellectual problems until his conversion to Catholic Christianity, not just the motivating problem for his conversion to Manichaeism. But in his time it was actually quite rare for a person to have a full-blown idea of incorporeals; Augustine was more or less in the African tradition, following Tertullian’s judgment (*De Carne Christi* 11.4, cited by Teske, 218, n.11), “There is nothing incorporeal/without a body except what does not exist” (*Nihil incorporale nisi quod non est*).

⁹ *Contra Faustum* XV.5: “You are accustomed to especially praise Mani for no other reason than that he spoke the naked and proper truth to you with the coverings of figures removed” (*Tibi praecipue laudari Manichaeus non ob aliud solet, nisi quod remotis figurarum integumentis, ipse tibi veritatem nudam et propriam loqueretur*).

¹⁰ Mandouze (*Prosopographie de l’Afrique chrétienne (303-533)*, 476-8; summarized in O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, on VII.13) argues that Augustine heard the sermons which became the following works in this period: beginning of AD 386, *De Iacob et Vita Beata*; Holy Week, 386, *Hexameron*; May 386, *De Isaac vel Anima*, *De Bono Mortis*.

intellect as well.¹¹ The key appeal of Ambrose's exegesis was that it applied spiritual or figurative interpretation to Scripture when the literal sense was for some reason undesirable, based on Paul's statement that "the letter kills but the spirit gives life."¹² Ambrose was able to overcome Manichaean objections to the Genesis narrative and the behavior of the Old Testament patriarchs by offering non-literal interpretations that avoided the difficulties present in a literal reading of the text.¹³

Ambrose's approach to the interpretation of Scripture only solved half of Augustine's problem; it was critical that he also acquire certain metaphysical concepts from the "books of the Platonists," so that he could understand in the way Ambrose did. Augustine then studied Scripture intensely for the two years leading up to his baptism at the Easter vigil of 387.

Later developments

The foregoing would suggest that Augustine first read the Bible literally and hated it, then learned to read it allegorically and loved it. This is partially true, but in his commentaries we also see that he had a respect for the literal meaning of the text which, over time, drove him to try to find an acceptable literal meaning for as much of the Scriptural text as he can. We can see the contrast clearly between the highly allegorical commentary on the first two books of Genesis that he wrote soon after his conversion to refute the interpretations of the Manichaeans (*De Genesi contra*

¹¹ *Confessions* V.23-24.

¹² II Corinthians 3:6.

¹³ *Confessions* VI.6. For more on this passage, see the subsection dealing with the influence of Ambrose on Augustine's hermeneutics, below.

Manichaeos), and the more systematic and literally-minded *De Genesi ad Litteram*, which he wrote in 401-415. He admits in the former¹⁴ that he would yield to anyone who could interpret the text of Genesis 1-3 literally with an acceptable sense, and he cites that admission in the later commentary¹⁵ to say that he thinks he is now able to do so.

We should also note that Augustine's sense of "literal" interpretation comes to encompass more than we today would generally admit: for instance, his "literal" interpretation of the light that God made in Genesis 1:3 is that it refers to the information of the formless spiritual creation, and in *Gn. litt.* IV.28.45 he says that his interpretation of this light as a spiritual light still counts as proper.¹⁶ Shortly after his ordination to the priesthood in 391, Augustine wrote his treatise *De Utilitate Credendi*, in which he proposes his first systematic theory of interpretation, though in an early form, again emphasizing non-literal modes of interpretation.¹⁷ He was ordained as co-adjutor bishop shortly later, in 396, and wrote his major works *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessions* over the next few years.

¹⁴ *Gn. c. man.* II.2.3.

¹⁵ *Gn. litt.* VIII.2.5.

¹⁶ *Gn. litt.* I.4.9-5.10, 9.15-17. See also *Gn. litt.* IV.28.45, where he explicitly says that this interpretation of the light is of the *propria* (proper, literal) sense of the words: "For where there is a better and surer light, there is a truer day." He likewise defends there his *propria* interpretation of the "evening" and "morning" as the knowledge of the angels of created things in God and then in themselves.

¹⁷ For more on Augustine's early hermeneutic, see chapter 5, section "The General Theory: *De Utilitate Credendi*" and especially my analysis of the problems of that theory in the subsection "Reading and interpretation of texts in general."

Influences on Augustine's Hermeneutics

In this dissertation I treat Augustine's theory of interpretation independently of any influences. I do this not because I believe he was working in a vacuum, but because he was original in crafting a systematic approach to the interpretation of the Scriptural text. While it is clear that Augustine's exegesis—his actual *interpretations* of the text—often takes into account the large Christian tradition before and around him, his hermeneutics—his *theory* of interpretation—is largely his own invention, at least insofar as it is a *systematization* of presuppositions, principles, and methods. Though we can trace elements of his system to the Philonic tradition or Neoplatonism, no one else sets out a whole theory of Scriptural interpretation.

In this section I will say a bit about the most obvious influences on Augustine's theory of interpretation, mostly as a way of showing how unique Augustine really is. The foremost among them is undoubtedly Ambrose, though his hermeneutical influence was stronger in the period shortly after Augustine's conversion than it was later. Behind Ambrose stands Origen, the greatest scholar of Christian antiquity, of whom Augustine had both an indirect (mostly through Ambrose) and direct knowledge, which is the subject of much dispute. Augustine was aware of the controversy around Origen and for the most part supported him, even expressing his support for Origen's methods to Jerome—about whom I will also say a bit. Lastly, I will also compare Augustine's theory of interpretation to that of Tychonius, as he describes at length in *De Doctrina Christiana* III.30.42-37.56. Augustine commends Tychonius' *regulae* for interpretation, but they come at interpretation from a different angle than Augustine does.

Ambrose

As we have already seen, the most important impact that Ambrose had on Augustine's interpretive approach to Scripture was his encouragement to read certain passages in a spiritual or figurative sense *rather than* a literal one. I said before that over time Augustine attempts to reduce the passages that must be so read, instead finding acceptable literal meanings, and that even in the highly allegorical *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* he says that he would yield to someone who could provide such a reading.¹⁸ But on the other hand we should note that Augustine never ceases to believe that some passages must still be read figuratively and not literally—and not only based on genre but also because of content, even in what is otherwise an historical narration.¹⁹

Augustine also followed Ambrose in using figurative interpretation not only to solve problems but also to multiply meanings. But Augustine analyzes the different virtues of the many interpretations he finds, while Ambrose seems content simply to offer many. One can see this in comparing Ambrose's *Hexaemeron* to Augustine's *Confessions* XII and *De Genesi ad Litteram*. Though their interpretations of Genesis agree on some minor points (e.g., that God did not speak with vocal organs when he created,²⁰ that God created Adam and Eve as adults in mind and body²¹), Augustine shows more depth and he frequently uses the text as an opportunity to reflect on how

¹⁸ *Gn. c. man.* II.2.3.

¹⁹ See *Doct. chr.* III.10.14 and chapter 3, subsection "Different types of passage requiring figurative interpretation."

²⁰ Ambrose, *Hexaemeron* 2.9.33; Augustine, *Gn. litt.* I.2.4-6.

²¹ Ambrose, *On Paradise* 6.31; Augustine, *Gn. litt.* VI.13.23; cf. Edwards, "Augustine and His Christian Predecessors," 221.

Scripture speaks and how it should be interpreted. We find nothing of the kind in Ambrose, other than general exclamations of the wisdom of the text.

Ambrose therefore had a strong influence on Augustine's *modes* of interpretation (i.e., allegoresis), though Augustine developed a real and sophisticated theory for the application of these modes of interpretation and for their justification—which Ambrose appears not to have done. Ambrose was a great rhetor and a delightful exegete; for Augustine he was both a source of particular interpretations and an anchor of orthodox theology. But Ambrose was, for Augustine, another text, while Augustine was a reader and a systematizer.

Origen

Augustine's relationship to Origen is quite complicated. We can say for sure (1) that he was influenced by Origen's allegorizing methods through Ambrose; (2) that he was aware of Origen, supported his some of his Platonizing tendencies, and later condemned him on several points; and (3) that some of his interpretations strongly parallel those of Origen. The major debate is over what Augustine read of Origen and when. Like Ambrose, Origen influenced Augustine's hermeneutics (in whatever capacity he did) mostly in his allegoresis, though I would also note that Augustine was close to Origen (uniquely) on a point of soteriology that had hermeneutical implications.

Several scholars²² have noted strong parallels between Augustine and Origen: for instance, between Augustine's *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* and Origen's *Homilies on Genesis*,²³ between Augustine's early *Expositio Quarundam Propositionum ex Epistula ad Romanos* and Origen's own commentary on Romans,²⁴ and between Augustine's narrative of his conversion in the *Confessions* (especially the culmination in reading Romans 13:13-14) and Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.²⁵ György Heidl in particular has argued that the parallels between Augustine and Origen suggest that Augustine read Origen even before his conversion, while he was at Milan. Unfortunately, Edwards notes, Heidl underestimates the possibility of intermediate sources and relies on "questionable datings" for the Latin translation of Origen. Yet Heidl still proves that Augustine was influenced by Origen from an early time, even if indirectly.²⁶ This is more or less what Teske had also argued.²⁷

Teske and Edwards both note the importance of considering Origen's (direct or indirect) influence not only on Augustine's exegesis but also on his theology. In this vein I should mention one significant point that relates to the core of this dissertation. As I argue in chapters 1 and 5, Augustine believes that in interpreting Scripture one ought to be looking for the intention of the human writer because he understood the best possible meaning. This latter claim (of Augustine's) seems much more plausible

²² Alexandra Pârvan gives a brief summary of the history of scholars' views on the subject in her article, "*Genesis* 1-3: Augustine and Origen on the *coats of skins*," 57-60.

²³ cf. Teske, "Origen and St. Augustine's First Commentaries on Genesis." See also Heidl, "Did the Young Augustine Read Origen's Homily on Paradise?"

²⁴ cf. Edwards, "Augustine and His Christian Predecessors," 225, though he is there disagreeing with Bammel, "Augustine, Origen and the Exegesis of St. Paul."

²⁵ cf. Heidl, *The Influence of Origen on the Young Augustine*, 47-61.

²⁶ Edwards, "Augustine and His Christian Predecessors," 224.

²⁷ Teske, "Origen and St. Augustine's First Commentaries on Genesis," 183-4.

when one realizes that Augustine believes these authors, even those of the Old Testament, were given a substantial revelation about the “incarnation, birth, life, and death” of Jesus. Berrouard offers the evidence for this belief of Augustine,²⁸ which I cover in chapter 5, subsection “Scriptural authors had supernatural knowledge revealed to them.” Berrouard notes that Augustine is fairly unique for believing this, and that the only other church father who clearly expresses a similar view is Origen.²⁹ The point has obvious hermeneutical implications, and it makes the allegorical (or at least the Christological) interpretation of the Old Testament much more plausible.

In sum, though we can be sure that Origen exerted at least an indirect influence on Augustine, at this point we still do not know what particular works of Origen’s Augustine read, especially before 404 (the latest possible date for Rufinus’ translation of the *Homilies on Genesis*). Augustine engaged somewhat in the controversy over Origen’s theology, but even in this case it is uncertain what he read firsthand.³⁰ It can be hoped that further scholarship will reveal more parallels between Augustine’s and Origen’s thought, which may illuminate how much exposure Augustine had to Origen before and in the years immediately following his conversion.

Jerome

Probably the two most well-known aspects of Augustine’s relationship with Jerome are their disagreement over the interpretation of Paul’s correction of Peter in

²⁸ cf. Berrouard’s note on “La permanence de la foi chrétienne à travers le temps,” pages 413-423 of his text, translation, and commentary on the *Tractatus, Homélie sur L’Évangile de Saint Jean*, especially pages 420-22.

²⁹ Berrouard, *ibid*, 422-3. His relevant citations of Origen there are especially helpful.

³⁰ Edwards, “Augustine and His Christian Predecessors,” 223-4.

Galatians 2 and their disagreement over whether the Hebrew or Septuagint Old Testament should be given preference for Latin translations. Their relationship, then, was somewhat rocky. They likewise differed in their approach to interpreting Scripture, though the difference never blossomed into a real argument. Jerome is essentially a philologist in his approach to the text, while Augustine is a philosopher. While Jerome was an important source for Augustine—for translations and professional opinions—he does not seem to have exerted any influence on Augustine’s hermeneutics because he approached the text in a far less theoretical way: philology gives us these options for the interpretation of the text and doxography gives us these theological opinions. Augustine is assuredly guilty of less responsible interpretations (particularly of the Hebrew context of the Old Testament), but he is more interested in philosophy and much more of a synthesizer.

Tychonius

Aside from Ambrose, Tychonius is the most obvious *possible* influence on Augustine’s hermeneutics, since Augustine summarizes his seven *regulae*³¹ for interpretation in the *Doct. chr.* III.30.42-37.56. All of this was added to *Doct. chr.* much later, in 426, but Kannengiesser has pointed out that Augustine had already read Tychonius in 396 when he was writing the first part of *Doct. chr.*, published in 396/7, as shown by his mention of him in *Epistula* 41 to Bishop Aurelius.³² In that letter Augustine asks Aurelius what to make of Tychonius’ treatise, which Aurelius had

³¹ See below. Augustine probably misunderstood Tychonius’ distinction between the *regulae* in the text and the *claves* he uses in order to understand these *regulae*.

³² Kannengiesser, “The Interrupted *De doctrina christiana*,” 8.

recommended to him, and says that he is writing a work that Aurelius had asked him to. Kannengiesser suggests that this work was the *Doct. chr.* and that Augustine was trying to figure out what to say there about Tychonius' rules, though he was unable to at the time.³³ It is unclear, then, how much Tychonius' *Regulae* could have affected Augustine's initial composition, since he did not seem to have understood them. And indeed, as Kannengieser further argues, Augustine still misunderstood them in his later addendum to book III, where he equates the *regulae*—which Tychonius understands as the mystic rules by which the Holy Spirit composed the text—and the *claves*—which Tychonius proposes as ways of understanding the *regulae*.³⁴

Whether Augustine properly understood Tychonius or not, it is clear that they had a different angle of approach to hermeneutics, even if Augustine does recommend Tychonius' principles as useful to understanding the text. Tychonius' seven rules, as Augustine presents them, explain particular, recurring features of the text: they first look at what the text says and then sort out a way to put it together. Augustine does something similar in identifying what he calls the “clearly stated” (*aperte posita*) passages of Scripture,³⁵ which he claims contain all the content of faith and morals: he says that one should become familiar with the text and find these passages, and then use their content to interpret other passages.³⁶ Both these approaches are examples of a *local* hermeneutic, one that works from the text to structures of meaning.

³³ Ibid. Cf. also Kannengiesser, “Local Setting and Motivation of *De doctrina Christiana*,” 334-5.

³⁴ Kannengieser, “The Interrupted *De doctrina christiana*,” 8-9, “Local Setting and Motivation of *De doctrina Christiana*,” 336.

³⁵ See the beginning of the section “Clearly Stated Passages” in chapter 3.

³⁶ See the subsection “Determining and revising what is clearly stated” in chapter 3.

But Augustine's system also shows features of a *universal* hermeneutic, one that sorts out fundamental questions of interpretation *before* looking at the text. As I will argue in chapters 2-4, Augustine has a series of principles for interpreting the text, which derive semi-sequentially from the belief that the text can only mean what is true because God is its author. Based on this foundational principle, he then moves on to the statements that Scripture makes about itself (meta-statements) in order to guide and order the interpretation of other passages. Tychonius' rules are mostly based on statements of Scripture (or analogues to other rules), but they lack order: the seven rules are a series, but do not follow from each other in the same way as Augustine's do. Augustine's system has an analogue to Tychonius' rules in his various pieces of advice on how to understand figurative passages (esp. in *Doct. chr.* III.24.34-25.37, 29.40-41), but he differs from Tychonius in giving an underlying explanation of why such explanations should work, and why and how the text can and should be used to explain itself.

Conclusion

Though Augustine was undoubtedly influenced by these other exegetes in profound ways, we must not underestimate the uniqueness of his *system* of interpretation, which works from fundamental, explicit assumptions and claims about God, the composition of the text, and the nature of language. Augustine was unique in his appreciation of just how deeply the explanation of interpretation of Scripture could and should go, and in the process he founded the study of not only hermeneutics but also semiotics.

Recent Scholarship

As I explain in opening of chapter 2, I contend that Augustine appeals to six principles in constructing his theory of interpretation and in judging interpretations, and that in addition to these he has a robust idea of the role that the human author's intention plays in the proper interpretation of Scripture. Some of my claims are more controversial than others, and so it will be beneficial to review recent scholarship on these points in particular and especially those works that my dissertation builds upon or essentially disagrees with. As I see it, my most controversial claims are that Augustine has a system of principles and requirements for interpretation, that he privileges the intention of the human writer in the process of interpretation, that he has a robust idea of the relationship between "clearly stated" passages and figurative interpretation, and that he gives a clear role to outside knowledge (particularly from philosophy) in the interpretation of Scripture.

Principles and requirements

The essential point of my dissertation is to explain the *principles* of Augustine's theory of interpretation, their relation to each other, and the requirements they impose on interpreters and interpretations. I am the first to present a systematic account in this way, though all of the principles that I cover have received some individual attention. The requirements drawn from these principles have been largely neglected, however, with the exception of the fundamental requirements that an interpretation be true and build up charity. In order to avoid anticipating too many issues that I do not discuss until chapters 2-4, let me offer the contrasting views of just

two scholars about Augustine's motivating principles and requirements for interpretation.

Isabelle Bochet (1997) is a good representative of the more conservative school of French scholarship with which this dissertation has an affinity. In discussing the plurality of interpretations that Augustine allows, she notes an obvious but neglected point: that proper interpretations must not only "build up charity" (the requirement of Augustine that many scholars focus on exclusively) but also be "compatible with the truth of the faith."³⁷ She notes, moreover, that "all interpretations are by no means equal each other,"³⁸ and she presents several important criteria that Augustine mentions in *Gn. litt.* I.21.41: agreement with the context and with the intention of the author, and compatibility with the sure claims of philosophy and science. Bochet insists that the context includes not only the immediate context, but all of Scripture.³⁹ These criteria cover in a nutshell all the principles of interpretation that I discuss in this dissertation, though Bochet does not indicate how they interact or depend on each other.

Karla Pollmann (2006) presents a more comprehensive view of the principles of Augustine's hermeneutics, though in a more disciplinary sense than I do here. She says that the *De Doctrina Christiana* deals with dogmatics (that all interpretations must conform to the rule of faith), semiotics (Augustine's sign theory and the relation of literal to allegorical interpretation), grammar (fine points about the original

³⁷ Bochet, "Notes Complémentaires" to *La Doctrine Chrétienne*, 559: "les pensées diverses qui se présentent à nous pour interpréter ce texte . . . soient compatibles avec la vérité de la foi."

³⁸ Ibid, 560: "Toutes les interprétations néanmoins ne se valent pas."

³⁹ Ibid, 561.

languages), and the liberal arts (useful knowledge from the traditional disciplines),⁴⁰ but that its most essential principle is ethical: that the point of all Scriptural interpretation is *caritas*, love of God and neighbor, which is “only truly fulfilled in practical application.”⁴¹ Pollmann’s overall thesis is that Augustine thinks of hermeneutics as a “universal discipline” for all people and of the Bible as the “universal book”⁴² for this universal discipline. *De Doctrina Christiana*, then, is a guide to “successful Biblical interpretation,” which “must result in ethically good behavior.”⁴³ Thus she sees action as the purpose and proper product of Scriptural interpretation.

I agree with Pollmann that Augustine’s project is to form a hermeneutics for the “universal” book, and she covers well how many different ideas Augustine pulls together to form his “meta-discipline,” but her idea of the ethical dimension of Scripture obscures two points. First, love of God and neighbor is clearly the ultimate end of interpretation for Augustine, but, in a discussion of how faith will pass away in the next life and give way to knowledge, he also suggests that *knowing* and *loving* God are intrinsically related: “For if we love something that we do not see by believing in it, how much more will we love it when we begin to see it?”⁴⁴ Pollmann says that this vision of God in the next life “will not contain any ethical or altruistic component,”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Pollmann, “Augustine’s Hermeneutics as a Universal Discipline!?” , 212-221. These points more or less correspond to what I discuss in the principles of Church Authority, Clear Passages and Figurative Interpretation, and Linguistic and Ordinary Knowledge, respectively.

⁴¹ Ibid, 212.

⁴² Ibid, 220-223; 223.

⁴³ Ibid, 230.

⁴⁴ *Doct. chr.* I.38.42, translation mine. *Si enim credendo diligimus quod nondum videmus, quanto magis cum videre coeperimus?*

⁴⁵ Pollmann, “Augustine’s Hermeneutics as a Universal Discipline!?” , 231.

but that means it will be possible to love without action when one knows God. But if that is so, why must the love of God that one has by faith always contain such an ethical component? Second, Pollmann's focus on *caritas* as the final goal leads her to neglect some intermediate steps and additional principles in interpretation. She says that right behavior "can even be a substitute for right interpretation."⁴⁶ But why then does Augustine insist that even an interpretation that builds up charity should be corrected if it demonstrably disagrees with the writer's meaning?⁴⁷ As evidence for her claim, Pollmann cites Augustine's claim that those who have mastered faith, hope, and love do not need the Scriptures for themselves any more.⁴⁸ But I think this shows a gap in her analysis. Though she emphasizes throughout the essay the great intellectual synthesis that *Doct. chr.* is, she focuses on the value of the treatise for an individual's learning and spiritual progress and seems to neglect its additional value as an explanation of how Scripture can be interpreted at all. This leads to a de-emphasis of the intermediate steps between picking up Scripture (after acquiring some outside knowledge) and the ultimate goal of *caritas*. But in fact Augustine also uses the principle of building up charity to motivate additional principles of interpretation (e.g., about clear passages and figurative interpretation).⁴⁹ Clearly he has a larger vision of

⁴⁶ Ibid, 230.

⁴⁷ *Doct. chr.* I.36-7.41. See my discussion of this passage in the "Charity" section of chapter 3, subsection "The philosophical answer," and in chapter 5, subsection "Two problems with the new account."

⁴⁸ Pollmann, "Augustine's Hermeneutics as a Universal Discipline!?", 230, citing *Doct. chr.* I.39.43: "Therefore a person relying on faith, hope, and love and holding onto them unshakably does not need the Scriptures except to instruct others" (*Homo itaque fide et spe et caritate subnixus, eaque inconcusse retinens, non indiget Scripturis nisi ad alios instruendos*).

⁴⁹ On this last point, see the opening of the section on "Clear Passages" in chapter 3 and the subsection "The relationship between clearly stated and figurative passages" in the section "Figurative Interpretation" of the same chapter.

hermeneutics as an account of how Scripture works and should be read, not only as an instruction in the latter.

Michael Cameron (2012) represents the viewpoint most opposed to my methods. He insists that “Augustine did not view [Scripture] as a textual object that yields correct content to those operating upon it with the proper analytic method. . . . He did not work analytically upon Scripture (‘What can we observe about this text?’), but hermeneutically from within Scripture (‘How does this text disclose the mind of God?’).”⁵⁰ Cameron is right that Augustine does not just look at the text as an object from the outside, but it is unclear to me why his attitude toward the text as a revelation of the mind of God precludes an analytical study. A later comment perhaps elucidates his meaning and his error: “Augustine’s rule emphasizes not what the text is in itself for an unprejudiced (that is, uncommitted) reader, but how the spiritual reader is to understand the text.”⁵¹ Again, Cameron is right to say that Augustine’s approach is not that of the uncommitted reader, but why should we think that only the uncommitted reader gets to “what the text is in itself”? The statement is surprising, because Cameron otherwise suggests that Augustine thinks that one can only understand Scripture when properly disposed—but the more “analytically” minded would say that the proper disposition includes proper presuppositions and methods. As Cameron points out, in the *Doct. chr.* Augustine is not trying to convince anyone of the authority of Scripture but is telling them what to do with Scripture once they are convinced, and his answer is that they should try to understand all of Scripture in

⁵⁰ Cameron, “Augustine and Scripture,” 202.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

accord with its “core claim . . . love (*caritas*).”⁵² But in fact Augustine has more directions than this, and together they begin to look like a fairly systematic approach.

The writer’s intention

I depart from nearly all scholars in arguing that Augustine gives a pre-eminent place to the intention of the human authors of Scripture. Augustine has generally been heralded as a forerunner of reader response theory based on his statements in *Confessions* XII that readers can validly understand in the text whatever truth they find there since God, as inspirer and author of the text, anticipated all of the truths that readers would see in the text. One of the two major points my dissertation makes is that the predominant interpretation of these statements is wrong. In chapters 1 and 5, I argue that these statements need to be understood (1) in light of his larger dialectic in *Confessions* XII about the God-writer, God-reader, and writer-reader relationships and especially (2) in tandem with his assertion that the reader must seek the writer’s meaning. In addition, while this claim appears to require only that a valid interpretation state something true, in fact that requirement needs to be explained somewhat more and supplemented, as *Confessions* XII and *De Doctrina Christiana* I-III demonstrate.

The first point has gone unobserved in scholarship, while the second usually receives passing mention but no consideration—especially surprising since an obligation to seek the writer’s intention seems inharmonious with an allowance of any interpretation that states something true. In the following I will only cover the notable

⁵² Ibid, 205.

features of each scholar's thesis, rather than cover every point for each, since one finds quite a bit of repetition and summary.

Frederick Van Fleteren (2001) gives more priority to the writer's intention but leaves both the reason for this priority and its relation to God's intention largely opaque. He says that "the precise intention of the human author is important for Augustine, but not as essential as for contemporary exegetes."⁵³ His only comment that further explains this priority is to say that "Augustine realizes that determination of a meaning over and above what is directly intended by the biblical author is a dangerous practice. Better to explain Scripture by Scripture."⁵⁴ It is unclear whether Van Fleteren is here thinking about *Doct. chr.* I.36-37.41 or *Doct. chr.* III.27.38-28.39 (he gives no citation). In the former, Augustine says that the reader who understands the text in a way that is demonstrably not intended by the author must be corrected, and in the latter he says that, when the writer's intention is not clear, the reader should construct his interpretation based on what Scripture clearly says elsewhere. While the passages are obviously related somehow, Van Fleteren seems to have muddled them somewhat. Together the passages show that the reader must follow the writer's intention when it is accessible, and follow other, clear passages of Scripture⁵⁵ when it is not. Confusingly, he also says that Augustine is not "so far distant from contemporary reader response theories," based on the fact that Augustine sees that

⁵³ Van Fleteren, "Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview," 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁵ Actually, Augustine also allows the reader to use evidence from reason or experience that is clearly true in order to form an interpretation, though this passage (*Doct. chr.* III.28.39) makes it a little unclear. In the best case, you can use Scripture to prove your interpretation. In the next best (still acceptable) case, you can use proofs from reason or experience that are "without controversy". In the dangerous (and probably unacceptable) case, you use claims that are controversial.

God as the “primary author (*auctor*) could foresee a later use of the text.”⁵⁶ Like most scholars, Van Fleteren does not note that Augustine’s dependence on God’s intention still makes him an intentionalist—although Van Fleteren has a larger idea of God’s use of the Scriptural text (and other statements and events) as an *admonitio* to readers, which I cannot do justice to here.⁵⁷

Michael Cameron (2012) strongly de-emphasizes the writer’s intention in Augustine. In discussing *Confessions* XII—which he rightly says concerns the literal interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2—he says that the problem with Augustine’s imagined opponents in that book (the *contradictores*) is that they constrain “the possibilities for literal interpretation by funneling them only through the author’s intention, in this case Moses’ intention in Genesis 1. Augustine agreed with this approach in principle (*Doc. chr.* 2.5.6), but on a practical level he thought it problematic.”⁵⁸ Cameron is right that the *contradictores* restrict the possibilities of literal meaning too much, but he is wrong to blame the *contradictores*’ adherence to Moses’ intention. Rather, the *contradictores* constrain the meaning of the text too much because they constrain Moses’ intention too much, as Augustine makes abundantly clear.⁵⁹ Once one understands that, it is no surprise that Augustine says in *Doct. chr.* II.5.6 that “those who read Scripture are seeking nothing else than the thoughts and intention of those by whom it was co-written, and through those [thoughts/intentions] the will of God.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Van Fleteren, “Principles of Augustine’s Hermeneutic: An Overview,” 7, 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6, 7. See also his article “Augustine’s Ascent of the Soul in Book VII of the *Confessions*: A Reconsideration.”

⁵⁸ Cameron, “Augustine and Scripture,” 208.

⁵⁹ See chapter 1, the subsections on *Confessions* XII.33 and 43, for an explanation of Augustine’s elevated view of Moses’ intention.

⁶⁰ *Doct. chr.* II.5.6: *Quam [Scripturam] legentes nihil aliud appetunt quam cogitationes voluntatemque illorum a quibus conscripta est invenire et per illas voluntatem Dei.*

Cameron skips over a similar fact when he says, “If someone chooses an interpretation that misses the author’s intention but still teaches love, then it is a case of “no harm, no foul”: a wrong road to the right place remains useful (*Doc. chr.* 1.36.41).” But immediately following the passage he cites (I.37.41) Augustine says that the reader who understands the text in a way that the writer (demonstrably) did not intend must be corrected, as I already mentioned in regard to Van Fleteren, above. Altogether, then, Cameron simply ignores or puts aside Augustine’s requirement that the reader seek the writer’s intention.

Tarmo Toom (2007, 2013, 2014)⁶¹ has proposed a similar theory, arguing that, for Augustine, the writer’s intention is *less important* than the Holy Spirit’s, because the meanings that are most important and relevant to readers are found only in the Holy Spirit’s intention. By prioritizing the Holy Spirit’s intention the reader can prioritize interpretations of the text that, Toom argues, the human writers could not have known. But his emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s intention *over* the writer’s suggests that there is some separation or even opposition between the two. This is apparent when he says that the Holy Spirit’s intention is more “important”⁶² than the writer’s, and he pushes it to the extreme when he says that “human co-authors may miss the divine intention and thus, intend things other than the Spirit intends.”⁶³ This claim

⁶¹ Tarmo Toom (2007), “Augustine on Ambiguity”; (2013), “Was Augustine an Intentionalist? Authorial Intention in Augustine’s Hermeneutics”; (2014), “Augustine’s Case for the Multiplicity of Meanings.”

⁶² “Was Augustine an Intentionalist,” 192: “As a double-authored text, human authorial intention had, in fact, only a relative, sort of secondary hermeneutical importance.”

⁶³ “Augustine on Ambiguity,” 422-3. In support of his claim that Augustine considers the contemporarily-relevant, Spirit-intended meaning more important than the human author’s original intention, Toom cites Augustine’s judgment in *Ennarationes in Psalmos* 70(1).2 that “this Psalm . . . is not concerned with Israelites.” But the statement must either imply that the human author’s intention was also not concerned with Israelites, or that the human author’s intention should not just be de-

contradicts Augustine's own statement that readers should seek "your [God's] intention [*voluntas*]⁶⁴ through the intention [*voluntas*] of Your servant."⁶⁵ After all, the writer's intention was itself inspired by the Holy Spirit, and, therefore, his intention was included in the Spirit's intention.⁶⁶ Of course, the Holy Spirit's intention is more comprehensive⁶⁷—since it includes many meanings besides the writer's—but I contest the idea that those meanings which only the Spirit intended are more important than that meaning (or those meanings) which the writer also intended under the Holy Spirit's inspiration. In addition, Toom elevates the Holy Spirit's intention precisely because, in his mind, an Old Testament writer like Moses could not have intended

emphasized but discarded. The first option would lead to a suggestion like mine, that Augustine believes that the human author had access to the figurative/prophetic/Christological meaning, while the second would clearly go against the grain of Augustine's statements about the human author's intention. Toom refuses to accept the latter ("Augustine's Case for the Multiplicity of Meanings," 198), but it is not obvious what other option his theory has.

⁶⁴ It is not clear here whether Augustine means will or intention. He plays on that ambiguity in Confessions XII, as it seems to me (see the chapter 1 subsection on *Confessions* XII.43). I think it is more likely that *cogitationes voluntatemque* means "what the writer was thinking and wanted people to think" while the *voluntatem* of God may be what God wants the reader to think and do.

⁶⁵ *Conf.* XII.23.32: *Quaeramus in eis [verbis] voluntatem tuam per voluntatem famuli tui*. See also, *Doct. chr.* II.5.6, quoted later: *Quam [Scripturam] legentes nihil aliud appetunt quam cogitationes voluntatemque illorum a quibus conscripta est invenire et per illas voluntatem Dei*. Toom quotes both of these passages ("Was Augustine an Intentionalist?", 6) in support of his argument that Augustine was looking for the intention of God more than that of the human author. I am not sure that he understands how his point is undermined by them.

⁶⁶ Toom muddies the waters in a footnote, saying, "A further complication in reaching to the (human) authorial intention is the fact that when the Scriptures are read, what is communicated is the meaning that the reader discerns in the text rather than the meaning according to the authorial intention pure and simple. In other words, when the Scriptures are read, there is a combination of three intentional meanings: that of God, human co-author, and reader. These intentional meaning may or may not overlap" ("Augustine on Ambiguity," 423, n.70). This makes an assumption about what communication is: whatever meaning the reader understands. But surely that cannot be the case without restriction; one does not have a case of communication if he says something with one meaning and his hearer understands something totally different.

⁶⁷ Augustine himself says that the writer "may have seen less" (*Conf.* XII.43), but he cannot quite commit to the claim, because he cannot be sure of the contents of another human being's mind. The sure restriction he can place on the author's intention is that it must be such as is compatible with inspiration, i.e., is true.

such meanings.⁶⁸ But in assuming that the writer's intention must be limited by his historical situation, Toom fails to note that this is a historical-critical presupposition that Augustine does not share. In fact, Augustine believes that the inspiration of the writers of the Old Testament included an awareness of the prophetic or figurative significance of what they wrote about.⁶⁹

Like many other scholars, Cameron and Toom mistakenly think that Augustine's opposition to the narrow, contextualized literalism of something like a historical-critical reading makes him also an opponent of authorial intention, the "scientific" study of Scripture, or even (in Cameron's case) monolithic truth, but he is not. His historical and intellectual situation is not ours, and many of the issues debated by those for and against historical-critical interpretation today simply had not arisen for him.

Blake Dutton (2014) draws a distinction in his discussion of *Confessions* XII between an interpretation that "correctly explicat[es] the intentions of Moses" and one that is "fully approvable," that is, one that imputes to the text a meaning that is true.⁷⁰ Dutton correctly insists that Augustine thinks that other minds are inaccessible so that we can never *know* (in the strong sense) that we have understood the text according to the writer's intention, and for this reason, he argues, Augustine prefers to judge interpretations as approvable (true) rather than as correct (corresponding to the writer's intention). Blake then further distinguishes between perfect and imperfect

⁶⁸ "Was Augustine an Intentionalist?" 187, 192. Toom even cites Augustine's "categorical" statement in *Doct. chr.* 1.36.41 that "any who understand a passage in the Scriptures to mean something which the writer did not mean is mistaken" (ibid, 189, n.13).

⁶⁹ The evidence for this claim is set out in chapter 5, subsection "Scriptural authors had supernatural knowledge revealed to them."

⁷⁰ Blake Dutton, "The Privacy of the Mind and the Fully Approvable Reading of Scripture," 155.

fully approvable readings, the former of which correspond to the writer's intention while the latter do not.⁷¹ But since the reader can never know whether his interpretation corresponds to the writer's intention, that correspondence cannot be our standard of judgment for an interpretation.⁷² While I agree in the main with this argument, Dutton seems to me to underestimate the level of certainty that we can have about the writer's intention in two respects: first, though we cannot have knowledge, surely the words do give us *some* (and, in some cases, *much*) indication of what the writer was thinking, or at least what he was not thinking; second, in *Confessions* XII Augustine makes an argument for what Moses could have intended based on the special sort of author he was (i.e., an inspired one). Moreover, Dutton gives little comment about Augustine's direction to try to grasp the writer's intention—but this only makes sense if we can to some degree or in some cases judge whether we are doing so or not.⁷³ Thus the "correctness" of the interpretation is (or can) be an element in judging whether a reading is approvable.

Brett Smith (2014) argues that Augustine's explanation of the multivalence of Scripture in *Confessions* XIII.37, XII.41-43, and *Doct. chr.* III.2.2 demonstrate that he had an idea of "complex authorial intention" in which the author intends for multiple

⁷¹ Ibid, 164

⁷² Ibid, 166.

⁷³ On this point, see chapter 2, subsection "The role of context" and chapter 5, subsection "Two problems with the new account." I would also note that Dutton's theory that Augustine is fundamentally seeking a certain set of truths rather than the writer's intention will bankrupt any idea of Scripture as a source of truth, since Scripture can only "have" a meaning if there is some sort of normative force binding its meaning, and an author's intention seems to be the only adequate source of such a normative force. If Scripture cannot have a definitive meaning, then it cannot function as an independent witness to a truth, but Augustine cannot believe this. The same thesis would undermine any trust that one has understood the statement of another human being. While it is true that Augustine does not regard testimony as a source of knowledge in the strict sense, he plainly relies on it for information about Jesus and his teachings, as he happily argues in *De Utilitate Credendi* 28-34, esp. 31. On this last point, see also Peter King and Nathan Ballantyne, "Augustine on Testimony."

meanings to be understood from his words, though Smith does not clarify whether the author must recognize these meanings in particular or not.⁷⁴ Smith's argument is particularly strong because he pays close attention to what Augustine says in *Confessions* XII.41-43 about believing that Moses had the truest and most useful meaning in mind and to his wavering between, on the one hand, believing that Moses intended for readers to find whatever truth they could or, on the other hand, believing that Moses actually recognized all the truths readers could find. He also gives due attention to Augustine's imperative to seek the writer's intention—an imperative that makes sense because Augustine believes that the writer understood the best meaning of the text. Smith only assigns a complex authorial intention to God the author, but I will argue in chapters 1 and 5 that Augustine assigns one to the human writer as well—which will require some distinctions that Smith does not delve into.

Smith also includes in his article a correction of de Margerie's (1991) explanation of Augustine's ideas about authorial intention,⁷⁵ as well as those of Pamela Bright and Rowan William.⁷⁶ Smith's criticism is that de Margerie's "unipluralism" or "unified polysemy," which includes the meanings that the text picks up from its readers over time, places no limitation on what meanings the text can accrue. As Smith notes, de Margerie acknowledges that for Augustine "the ownership

⁷⁴ Brett Smith, "Complex Authorial Intention in Augustine's Hermeneutics," 216-225.

⁷⁵ de Margerie, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis, Volume III: Saint Augustine*. See especially 59-75.

⁷⁶ Smith looks at Pamela Bright's article, "Augustine: The Hermeneutics of Conversion," and Rowan Williams' "Language, Reality, and Desire in *De Doctrina Christiana*." He categorizes both of them, like de Margerie, as "supporting multiplicity of meaning throughout scripture with little limitation to the range of possible meanings."

of biblical assertions is collective, ecclesial, and divine."⁷⁷ And so Smith picks up on this point later to argue, based on Augustine's statements about the *regula fidei* and the clear passages of Scripture in *Doct. chr.* III.2.2, that God's intention as the author of Scripture is effectively found in the Creed (leaving that term nebulous)—and thus that the potential meanings of Scripture are bounded by the Creed and the clear passages of Scripture.⁷⁸ In contrast to Dutton, Smith admits, "It would seem that for such texts [the *planiores loci*] Augustine assumes the human author's intent is relatively simple and accessible to the reader, conveying a clear portion of the divine authorial intent."⁷⁹

Clearly stated passages and figurative interpretation

In *Doct. chr.* II.9.14 Augustine claims that one can find all the points of faith or morals in the clearly stated (*aperte posita*) passages of Scripture, and that one must construct figurative interpretations of passages based only on this material—though he hedges on this second point quite a bit in allowing Church statements and sure philosophical and scientific claims to provide similar material for figurative readings of Scripture. Augustine's comments on figurative interpretation also reveal that he has a lot of different types of passage in mind: the obviously figurative, the objectionable, and nearly all the historical. I argue that disentangling these categories helps to give a clearer vision of the motivations for his sometimes-maligned propensity to figurative interpretation.

⁷⁷ Bertrand de Margerie, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis Volume III: Saint Augustine*, 62, n.15, quoted in Smith, "Complex Authorial Intention" 207.

⁷⁸ Smith, "Complex Authorial Intention," 222-224.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 224.

Roland Teske (1995) claims that in *De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine adheres to a “maximizing criterion”⁸⁰ for when to read the text figuratively: to understand the text figuratively whenever necessary in order to make it maximally meaningful. He opposes this to the “absurdity criterion”⁸¹ that Augustine set out in the early *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, which Augustine still appeals to in some passages of the *Doct. chr.* (III.16.24 and 11.17): that you understand the text as figurative when it would otherwise be blasphemous, impious, or absurd. Teske correctly suggests, in my view, that Augustine is motivated by the idea that all Scripture must be equally meaningful, so that all passages refer to the “truths to be believed and the moral precepts to be followed,” which are, he says, “comparatively few in number.”⁸² But he objects to figurative interpretation as though it always undermines literal interpretation,⁸³ even though he gives some examples of Augustine’s figurative interpretation of verses which Augustine clearly still believes in the literal sense (for instance, when the disciples catch 153 fish in John 21:11).⁸⁴ The big difference between us is that Teske thinks the minimal absurdity criterion is preferable, because it uses figurative interpretation as little as possible, while I think that figurative-only interpretation of

⁸⁰ Teske, “Criteria for Figurative Interpretation in Saint Augustine,” 110. Tarmo Toom follows the same line (“Was Augustine an Intentionalist?” 8, “Augustine’s Case for the Multiplicity of Meanings,” 199), based on St. Paul’s statement in II Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture must be “useful” (ὠφελεία, *utilis*). The point leads him to argue that Augustine must prefer the Holy Spirit’s intention to the human author’s, under the assumption that the author could not have intended a figurative meaning with prophetic or Christological content.

⁸¹ Teske, “Criteria for Figurative Interpretation in Saint Augustine,” 110.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 115: “The fundamental law for figurative interpretation from the *De doctrina christiana* is precisely a criterion for distinguishing between terms being used in their proper sense and terms being used in their figurative sense.”

⁸⁴ *Tractatus In Ioannis Evangelium* 122.5-9, cited in Teske, 110.

otherwise-absurd passages is more plausible if there is always a figurative meaning anyway in addition to the literal one.

Frederick Van Fleteren (2001) believes that Augustine's approach to non-literal interpretation is best summed up in his early distinction (in *De Vera Religione* L.99) between four types of allegory: 1. allegory of history, 2. allegory of deed, 3. allegory of word, and 4. allegory of sacrament.⁸⁵ Van Fleteren considers this particular 4-part distinction important because it makes no distinction between what we commonly call typology (where one historical person, thing, or event stands for or corresponds to a later person, thing, or event) and several other modes known as allegory (where the historical reality is only on one side or neither). But Van Fleteren's following description of the other three types of allegory, with examples from Augustine,⁸⁶ casts little light on the distinction between allegory of history and of deed, and, moreover, fails to show why this set of distinctions is meaningful. In another article, reviewing Karla Pollmann's monograph on *De Doctrina Christiana*,⁸⁷ he argues that the idea of typology (as being historical, in contrast to non-historical allegory) is foreign to Augustine and thus useless for analyzing his theory.⁸⁸ It is true that Augustine does not draw this distinction plainly, but it is a distinction that one must work out if his theory will hold any water, since it is much easier to believe in the moral and literary justifiability of an a-historical violent or objectionable allegorical description than in

⁸⁵ Frederick Van Fleteren, "Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview," 8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁸⁷ Pollmann, *Doctrina Christiana Untersuchungen Zu den Anfängen der Christlichen Hermeneutik Unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung von Augustinus, de Doctrina Christiana*.

⁸⁸ Frederick Van Fleteren, "Toward an Understanding of Augustine's Hermeneutic," 127

that of a historical action or command that is violent or objectionable.⁸⁹ It seems much more useful to me to use Augustine's later terminology of *figurata* meaning and interpretation⁹⁰ to convey the overlap he sees between these categories, while at the same time acknowledging that the overlap is problematic. Van Fleteren barely treats the relationship between figurative interpretation and clear passages or how one identifies clear passages, other than to restate Augustine's claim that clear and unclear passages are both placed in Scripture for our benefit.⁹¹

Isabelle Bochet (1997 and 2010) argues that Augustine gives equal value to the literal and figurative meaning of a text, because he understands not only the appeal of figurative language but also the necessity of a grounding in real fact: “Augustine is careful not to disassociate meaning from fact: a fact, if it did not have meaning, would not merit being recounted in Scripture; and without factual truth, the figurative sense would be too anemic to lead us to faith.”⁹² The first point implicitly places Bochet in the same camp as Teske, who argued that Augustine has a “maximizing” approach to interpreting Scripture to make sure that every bit of the text is maximally meaningful by relating every passage to the central claims of Scripture. But her second point also contains a subtle insight: that a figurative interpretation, according to Augustine, must obtain its content (though not its mode or images) from real facts, from doctrines. In her *Notes Complémentaires* to Moreau's edition of *De Doctrina Christiana*, she

⁸⁹ On this point, see my discussion in chapter 3, subsections “Different types of passage requiring figurative interpretation,” and “Two types of mixed figurative-literal passage and a contrast case.”

⁹⁰ Bernard explains Augustine's transition from Greek terminology to Pauline *figurata* terminology in his excellent dissertation, *In Figura: Terminology Pertaining to Figurative Exegesis in the Works of Augustine of Hippo*.

⁹¹ “Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview,” 9.

⁹² Isabelle Bochet (2010), “The Role of Scripture in Augustine's Controversy with Porphyry,” 48.

argues, against T. Todorov's thesis,⁹³ that Augustine bases his summary of "Christian doctrine" and his interpretation of obscure passages on the clear passages of Scripture, in accordance with "the grand principle of patristic exegesis . . . that Scripture is explained by Scripture."⁹⁴ Besides this and following C.P Mayer,⁹⁵ Bochet also defends Augustine's ordering of the book based on his idea that one must know a thing (*res*) before one can know a sign (*signum*) that points to it, and thus he summarizes the *res* of Christian doctrine before explaining how to interpret the *signa*. This explanation suggests that the *res* of Christian doctrine are something that one can learn separately from Scripture, and that one can understand the *signa* of clear passages in light of these *res* or doctrines, and furthermore, that one can understand the *signa* of obscure passages in light of the *signa* of the clear passages. I agree with Bochet that this is fundamental point in Augustine's approach to the interpretation of Scripture (and of reality), though I will argue that the relationship between clear passages and the body of Christian doctrine and that between clear passages and obscure ones is not so straightforward.⁹⁶

Brett Smith (2014) gives a little treatment to the role of clear passages in limiting the possible meanings that a reader can validly find in Scripture (as explained

⁹³ T. Todorov, *Symbolisme et interprétation*, 91-124. Bochet ("Notes Complémentaires" to *La Doctrine Chrétienne*, 439-440) summarizes Todorov's argument as follows: Patristic exegesis follows a "finalist" approach in which the text of Scripture is made to match a foreign "text" of "Christian doctrine." Augustine exemplifies this approach in providing a summary of Christian teaching in the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana* before he has explained any principles of interpreting Scripture.

⁹⁴ Bochet (1997), "Notes Complémentaires," 441: "Le grand principe de l'exégèse patristique est toujours que l'Écriture s'explique par l'Écriture."

⁹⁵ C. P. Mayer, *Die Zeichen in der geistige Entwicklung und in der Theologie des junges Augustinus*, t.2, 93-95.

⁹⁶ See chapter 4, subsections "Church authority, Scripture, and the *regula fidei*" and "Return to the hermeneutic circle" as well as "The role of philosophical knowledge in *Confessions* XII" and "The role of empirical knowledge in *Gn. litt.* VII."

above), though he only believes that the clear passages play a negative role, preventing one from interpreting a passage in a way that contradicts these clear texts. He does not think that the clear passages necessarily play a *positive* role in determining possible interpretations. In commenting on Augustine's interpretation of the six waters pots at the Wedding at Cana as the six ages of human history, he says that "supposing that the bit about ages of history is true and is not contrary to the evangelist's intent, the Nicene Creed, or any clear passage of scripture . . . Augustine's theory would suggest that the Holy Spirit intended Augustine's allegory, even if the evangelist did not."⁹⁷ Now Augustine *says* that one must construct figurative interpretations based on the content in the clear passages (and the rule of faith),⁹⁸ though, as I argue in chapter 4,⁹⁹ he goes beyond this limitation both practically and theoretically at some points by bringing in philosophical or scientific claims—but I think Smith is leaning a bit too much on the latter here.

The role of philosophy and science

Here I will mention only one article that sets the stage for my discussion of the role of “secular claims” in interpretation: Matthews’ (2008) discussion of the role of philosophy in Augustine’s investigation of Genesis 1:1-2 in *Confessions* XI and XII. He explains that Augustine’s project in *Confessions* XI consists in reading a verse from Genesis and then asking, “How is it possible that *x*?” where *x* represents some

⁹⁷ Brett Smith, “Complex Authorial Intention in Augustine’s Hermeneutics,” 221, n.94.

⁹⁸ *Doct. chr.* II.9.14, III.26.37-27.38, on which see chapter 3, the subsection “The relationship between clearly stated and figurative passages.”

⁹⁹ See chapter 4, subsection “The general role of secular knowledge in interpretation” and “The effects of secular knowledge on the process of interpretation.”

claim that Augustine thinks the verse to be making. Matthews contends that the book proceeds aporetically, so that for each question Augustine does not reach an answer but instead questions an assumption of the claim that he has taken Scripture to be making and so revises the question.¹⁰⁰ Such questions, corrections, and revisions eventually lead Augustine to a meditation on the nature of time. The important thing Matthews observes is how Augustine intimately ties the understanding of Scripture to philosophical contemplation. This is a point that is easily passed over: interpretation of the Scriptural text is necessarily tied to philosophy (at least with some passages). After considering Augustine's proposal in XII that the Genesis text can have multiple true meanings, Matthews summarizes the project of XI in this way: "Is there any plausible way to understand the words [of Genesis 1] such that, on that understanding, these words make a statement that is possibly true?"¹⁰¹ I agree with Matthews' implication that philosophy, for Augustine, plays a role in determining what interpretations are possible, though I think he undermines the value of philosophy in interpretation when he says that Augustine does not care at all which true interpretation a reader takes.¹⁰² The further question that one has to address is to what degree it is necessary to engage in philosophical reflection if one wants to engage in interpretation properly.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Matthews, "Augustine on Reading Scripture as Doing Philosophy," 149-50.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 160.

¹⁰² Ibid, 159: "If we can actually discern the human author's mind, we may well have received a superior truth. But a truth is a truth."

¹⁰³ See chapter 4, subsection "The effects of secular knowledge on the process of interpretation."

Conclusion

Augustine's writings are rich, and explicating them is a long work. Bochet, Teske, Smith, and Matthews provide the best examples of detailed examination of the text, but their points on the different topics covered here also reveal the need for a systematic account of Augustine's views on authorial intention, clear passages and figurative interpretation, and the role of philosophy in understanding Scripture. The principles of interpretation that Augustine constructs on these topics all connect to each other, as demonstrated by the fact that scholars talking about one principle often have to make claims about another, without treating these others adequately. In order to advance further in understanding what Augustine says and believes about the proper interpretation of Scripture, we need to consider all of the principles together. As I have said, the most original idea I offer is on the role of the writer's intention as the best meaning and proper goal of interpretation, but there is also quite a bit more to explain on how Augustine develops his principles from Scripture and from basic assumptions, and how he balances the evidence of Scripture and external (especially philosophical) truths in order to understand this text that must be true.

CHAPTER 1

An Analysis of the Role of the Human Author's intention in the Interpretation of Scripture in Confessions XII

Though *De Doctrina Christiana* may be the work of Augustine that has had the most impact on theories of language and interpretation throughout western history, *Confessions* XII is the text that has sparked the most interest in more recent scholarship. I am beginning with the latter because it is, frankly, more exciting, especially to readers who are not yet completely engrossed in the issues of interpretation as they apply to the Christian Scriptures. *De Doctrina* can seem boring and pedantic because of its genre (a manual), while the *Confessions* is endlessly fascinating not only because of its intimacy and beautiful yet accessible style, but also because the structure of each book is dialectical in a way that mirrors the complexity of thought. It is easy, on one's first reading, to feel like one is following a stream-of-consciousness narrative, but one discovers upon further study that tremendous care has been poured into word choice and structure. I am inclined to believe that Augustine balanced these two features intentionally—at least in book XII—to imitate somewhat the style that he lauds in Genesis and Scripture more generally.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ See *Confessions* XII.17: “The depth of Your words is wonderful, whose surface—see!—before us is pleasing to the little ones, but the depth is wonderful, my God, the depth is wonderful!” (*Mira profunditas eloquiorum tuorum, quorum ecce ante nos superficies blandiens parvulis, sed mira profunditas, deus meus, mira profunditas*). At the end of the book he declares (XII.43): “See, Lord my God, how many things we have written about a few words—how many things, I pray you!” (*Ecce, domine deus meus, quam multa de paucis verbis, quam multa, oro te, scripsimus!*).

In *Confessions* XII Augustine appears to argue for something like a reader-response theory of Scriptural hermeneutics, in which the Holy Spirit inspires readers with whatever true interpretation they pluck out of the text, thus granting the reader's understanding of the text the same legitimacy as the human writer's.¹⁰⁵ I have said enough in the introduction about how various scholars have applied *Confessions* XII to contemporary hermeneutics, so I will leave aside those issues for now. In this chapter I am only trying to understand what Augustine says in *Confessions* XII about legitimate Scriptural interpretation and the role of the author's intended meaning in interpreting the text. We will find that his argument is far more similar to an intentionalist theory than a reader-response one, but that it is also much more complicated than the common presentations suggest. The structure and dialectic work in circles, progressively looping together several issues until they are finally knotted and re-knotted at the end of the book.

Summary of Book XII

In book XI Augustine looked at the first verse of Genesis, *In principio fecit Deus caelum et terram*, and inquired into the issue of God's relation to time and of the nature of time itself. In book XII he moves on to consider the second verse in addition, *Terra autem erat invisibilis et inconposita et tenebrae erant super abyssum*. He takes the description of *terra* as *invisibilis* and *inconposita* to indicate the formless matter from which the world would be made. He then proposes that the *terra* in verse 1 must

¹⁰⁵ Throughout this chapter and the dissertation as a whole, I use the term “writer” to refer to the human authors of Scripture, while I use “author” to refer to both divine and human authors.

have the same proleptic reference. This raises the further question of what the *caelum* in verse 1 refers to. While one might simply suggest that it refers to the unformed matter from which the material heaven was made, Augustine instead proposes that it refers to the spiritual creation,¹⁰⁶ making *terra* to cover all of the material creation. He does so on the basis of Psalm 113:16 (24), *Caelum caeli domino: terram autem dedit filiis hominum*. This distinction only makes sense, Augustine argues, if it is between what we physically sense and interact with and what we do not: the heaven of heaven cannot be the physical heaven, but the spiritual one.

Thus the *caelum* of verse 1 really signifies the *caelum caeli*, the "heaven of heaven" or spiritual creation. This spiritual creation most obviously includes the incorporeal angels, though it also includes human souls exclusively directed to God (I.e., disconnected from bodies). I here leave aside the issue of exactly what Augustine has in mind: it is sufficient for our purposes to understand the *caelum caeli* as angels. Augustine simply believes that the creation account should include them¹⁰⁷, and that the description of *terra* as unformed in verse two sufficiently suggests that the meaning of *terra* and *caelum* in verse one is not straightforward.

But Augustine imagines certain Catholic readers who accept his metaphysical principles (about form and matter as well as the corporeal and incorporeal creation) but reject his interpretation as impossible and unintended by the writer, Moses. He

¹⁰⁶ In book XII Augustine wavers between taking *caelum* as referring to the unformed matter of the spiritual creation or the formed spiritual creation. But by book XIII (sections 2 and 4) he settles on it as referring to the unformed spiritual creation, which receives form as "light" when God says "Let there be light" in verse 3. This is also his interpretation in *Gn. litt.* I.3.7, 4.9-5.11, 9.15-17. This interpretation raises the issue of how there can be such a thing as spiritual matter, which Augustine does not address in these works.

¹⁰⁷ See also his discussion in *De Civitate Dei* XI.7, which explicitly gives this point and more or less parallels the one in *Gn. litt.* I.

labels these opponents *contradictores*. They propose instead that Moses was writing with only his immediate audience in view, a "crude and carnal people," who have a naïve materialistic view of the universe. Moses therefore was speaking only of the "heaven and earth" which they could perceive with their senses.¹⁰⁸ Augustine spends the rest of the book dismantling the *contradictores'* position on two points: first, by arguing that they have an overly and unjustifiably restricted notion of what Moses intended; second, by using certain external principles as well as some features of the text to argue that Moses must have meant more than what was accessible to his carnal contemporaries.

In the rest of the chapter, I will be dealing mainly with the second half of book XII, which contains Augustine's argument against the *contradictores'* position, and I will only be dealing with the select sections within that half in which the argument is developed. I have therefore provided an outline of the book as a whole in Appendix 1 (after chapter 5), which includes summaries of the different interpretations of verses 1 and 2 of Genesis considered by Augustine in *Confessions* XII. It may be helpful to my readers to consult this overview before proceeding the analysis of the key passages in the rest of this chapter.

¹⁰⁸ *Conf. XII.24: 'Nomine' aiunt 'caeli et terrae totum istum visibilem mundum prius universaliter et breviter significare voluit, ut postea digereret dierum enumeratione quasi articulatim universa quae sancto spiritui placuit sic enuntiare. Tales quippe homines erant rudis ille atque carnalis populus cui loquebatur, ut eis opera dei non nisi sola visibilia commendanda iudicaret.'*

The Argument of *Confessions* XII

In this section of I will look at six passages which I take to be the core of Augustine's hermeneutic argument against the *contradictores* in *Confessions* XII (more or less the six paragraphs marked as the steps of his argument in the above outline). After unwinding the strands in these passages, in the next section I will offer two possible readings of Augustine's theory in *Confessions* XII, one more general and one more particular to the passage he is here investigating (Genesis 1:1-2).

***Confessions* XII.27: The constituents and antitheses of the argument**

Augustine begins his answer to the *contradictores* by setting up the basic constraints of his position in section 27:

Quibus omnibus auditis et consideratis, nolo verbis contendere; ad nihil enim utile est nisi ad subversionem audientium. Ad aedificationem autem bona est lex, si quis ea legitime utatur; quia finis eius est caritas de corde puro et conscientia bona et fide non ficta; et novi magister noster in quibus duobus praeceptis totam legem prophetasque suspenderit. Quae mihi ardentem confitenti, deus meus, lumen oculorum meorum in occulto, quid mihi obest, cum diversa in his verbis intellegi possint, quae tamen vera sint? Quid, inquam, mihi obest, si aliud ego sensero quam sensit alius eum sensisse qui scripsit? Omnes quidem qui legimus nitimur hoc indagare atque comprehendere, quod voluit ille quem legimus, et cum eum veridicum credimus, nihil quod falsum esse vel novimus vel putamus audemus eum existimare dixisse. Dum ergo quisque conatur id sentire in scripturis sanctis quod in eis sensit ille qui scripsit, quid mali est si hoc sentiat quod tu, lux omnium veridicarum mentium, ostendis verum esse, etiamsi non hoc sensit ille quem legit, cum et ille verum nec tamen hoc senserit?

Having heard and considered all these [interpretations], I do not wish to contend in words, for it is useful for nothing except for the subversion of those hearing. But the Law is good for building up, if one uses it legitimately, because its end is charity from a pure heart and good conscience and unfeigned faith. And I know one which two precepts our teacher hung the whole Law and the Prophets. And for me as I

ardently confess these things, my God, Light of my eyes in the dark, for me what is the problem when different things are able to be understood in these words, which are nevertheless true? What, I ask, is the problem for me if I think that he who wrote thought of a different thing than another person [thinks that he thought]? Indeed, all of us who are reading are trying to hunt out and comprehend this thing that he whom we are reading wanted, and since we believe that he is a truthful speaker, we do not dare to think that he said something which we either know or think to be false. Therefore, as long as each [reader] is trying to understand in the Holy Scriptures what he who wrote understood in them, what evil is it if he understands this thing that You, light of all true-speaking minds, show to be true, even if that one whom he reads did not understand this, since he also understood something true, though not this?

This section introduces four essential points around which, with a couple additions, the rest of the argument of book XII will turn.

First, Augustine begins by pointing out that the purpose of Scripture is to build up charity, so the proper use of Scripture by an interpreter involves being charitable toward other interpreters.¹⁰⁹ He then claims with a rhetorical question (*quid mihi obest, cum diversa . . .*) that it is okay for readers to find different truths in the words of Scripture under consideration (Genesis 1:1). The point is that an interpretation that states something true builds up charity, while arguing that another person's true interpretation is illegitimate (*verbis contendere*) does not, and so it is not a correct use of Scripture. The fact that there can be multiple true interpretations will be relevant in considering the charity that an author should have toward readers.

¹⁰⁹ He does not mean “charitable” in our usual sense. Instead, he is referring to Jesus two great commandments in the Gospels to love God and to love one’s neighbor. Jesus says that these two commandments sum up all the Law and the Prophets (which Augustine understands to mean all of Scripture). On this basis, Augustine argues that every passage and every interpretation must build up charity. For more on this point, see the section on “Charity” in chapter 3.

Second, Augustine gives two requirements for a valid interpretation: that the interpretation be true, and that the interpreter be seeking the writer's meaning. He uses a second rhetorical question (*quid, inquam, mihi obest . . .*) to argue that it is okay for readers not only to have different interpretations, but to have different true ideas (*sensit*) of what the author meant (*sensisse*), because they are rightly seeking the author's meaning according to a belief (*credimus*) that he spoke the truth. The idea is that the two interpretations have both followed the essentially correct process and so are both valid or acceptable, even though one or both may not be correct (i.e., not in fact be what the author *meant*). This is confirmed in his final statement, when he says that it is okay for readers to differ even from the author in their understanding of the text, as long as their interpretation is true and they are seeking the author's meaning, "since that man [the author] also understood something true, though not this." This only makes sense as an explanation if we understand the condition that one's interpretation be true as a condition for getting closer to the writer's meaning, that is, as a condition for the interpretation *as an interpretation*.¹¹⁰ Any true interpretation is closer to what the writer meant than any false one, because an interpretation that states something true has the same essential quality as the writer's meaning—truth—even if the content is different. But note that this allowance does not get rid of the notion of a correct interpretation wholesale: a reader can only be seeking the author's intent if he is willing to change his interpretation based on evidence of what the author intended.

¹¹⁰ By this phrase I mean to distinguish a plain "interpretation" of a text which may or may not be trying to apprehend the author's meaning from "an interpretation as an interpretation," in which the reader understands that he is interpreting *the author*, not just the text, and so trying to find the author's meaning.

Thus an interpretation cannot be valid if one *knowingly* departs from what the author intended. True but incorrect interpretations are only valid when readers do not know that they are incorrect.

Third, we find here a hint of distinction that will be important for Augustine's argument. He first speaks of what readers understand the author to have understood in his words (*sensit alius eum sensisse qui scripsit*), but then says that readers “are trying to “hunt out and comprehend what the author wanted [or meant]” (*nitimur hoc indagare atque comprehendere, quod voluit ille quem legimus*). It is possible that the *voluit* here is a shorthand corresponding to the *voluit intellegi* used in section 17 by the imagined *contradictores* in their explanation of their position:

'Non' inquit 'hoc voluit in his verbis intellegi Spiritus Dei, qui per Moysen famulum eius ista conscripsit, non hoc voluit intellegi quod tu dicis, sed aliud quod nos dicimus.'

“The Spirit of God,” they say, “did not want this to be understood in these words—[the Spirit who] composed those [words] through his servant Moses, he did not want this [interpretation] which you say to be understood, but a different one which we say.”

This statement is an excellent representative of how the dialectic works in *Confessions* XII. It introduces terms that will pay off in the end, but which do not propose the problem in the way it will initially be discussed. Though here the *contradictores* refer to what God *voluit intellegi*, Augustine has them focus exclusively on Moses' intention hereafter. But in elucidating his own position, Augustine does return to the point of finding “Your will/intention through the will/intention of Your servant” in section 34, and he brings in the Holy Spirit's intention distinctly in the final section, 43. Likewise,

here the *contradictores* refer to what the author *voluit intellegi*¹¹¹, but later switch to the question of what Moses *sentit*.¹¹² Augustine does not seem to distinguish the terms in this section, and he only uses *volere intellegi* once more, in section 11, but he does point to the possible conceptual distinction in 36: an author may have a meaning in mind for his words (which I will assign to *sentire*), but he may also want his words to be understood (which I will assign to *voluit intellegi*) in other ways that readers will perceive, though he does not.

Fourth, Augustine says that readers must believe that Moses was *veridicum*, but in the last sentence of the section he also says that a reader who understands a different truth in the text than Moses intended has had this truth shown to him by God, the "light of all *veridicum* minds." This is a central part of Augustine's thought, of course: any time we recognize truth God is actually revealing it to us.¹¹³ In this way, he draws a parallel between the truth that Moses understood and expressed under God's inspiration and the truth that a reader understands from that expression under God's inspiration.

Augustine will develop each of these four points in a complex weave as he moves on through his argument: first, the role of charity in reading (and writing);

¹¹¹ In section 24 they also respond to Augustine with slightly modified terminology: '*nomine*' aiunt '*caeli et terrae totum istum visibilem mundum prius universaliter et breviter significare voluit*' ("With the name," they say, "of heaven and earth he first wished to signify universally and briefly that whole visible world"). But I do not see any difference between what one wants to be understood by a reader and what one wants to signify to a reader. Both refer to what the author wishes a reader to understand in his words, as opposed to what the author himself understands in those words.

¹¹² *Conf.* XII.34: '*Non hoc sensit Moyses quod tu dicis, sed hoc sensit quod ego dico*' ("Moses did not understand this thing that you say, but he understood this one that I say).

¹¹³ The idea has more precise consequences in Augustine's doctrine of Illumination, but I think it is sufficient here to note his general idea that we can learn only by means of God illuminating our minds, so that any recognition of something as true involves an illumination.

second, the necessity for truth and seeking the author's intention, and their role in justifying interpretations; third, the distinction between what the author was aware of and what he wanted readers to understand; and fourth, the parallel and almost competing roles in interpretation of Moses' inspired meaning and God's inspiration of the reader. Thus the solution offered in this section is to recognize the parallel relationships between God and writer on the one hand and God and reader on the other, while largely ignoring the relationship between writer and reader, but this makes the requirement to seek the writer's intention all the more puzzling.

Confessions XII.33: Seeing the truth and believing that Moses saw it

The next important passage in the chain of argument is section 33. The argument of this section clearly follows on that of 32, in which Augustine emphasizes that he will only speak with those readers who understand Moses to have meant something that is actually true. The argument here is principally negative, attacking the *contradictores* for claiming to know what Moses meant. But Augustine also lays the groundwork for defending his interpretation as the one which Moses most likely intended.

Sed quis nostrum sic invenit eam inter tam multa vera quae in illis verbis aliter atque aliter intellectis occurrunt quaerentibus, ut tam fidenter dicat hoc sensisse Moysen atque hoc in illa narratione voluisse intellegi, quam fidenter dicit hoc verum esse, sive ille hoc senserit sive aliud? Ecce enim, deus meus . . . Ecce ego quam fidenter dico in tuo verbo incommutabili omnia te fecisse, invisibilia et visibilia. numquid tam fidenter dico non aliud quam hoc attendisse Moysen, cum scriberet, 'In principio fecit deus caelum et terram,' quia non, sicut in tua veritate hoc certum video, ita in eius mente video id eum cogitasse cum haec scriberet? Potuit enim cogitare, 'in ipso faciendi exordio,' cum diceret: 'in principio'; potuit et caelum et terram hoc loco nullam

iam formatam perfectamque naturam sive spiritalem sive corporalem, sed utramque inchoatam et adhuc informem velle intellegi. Video quippe vere potuisse dici quidquid horum diceretur, sed quid horum in his verbis ille cogitaverit, non ita video, quamvis sive aliquid horum sive quid aliud quod a me commemoratum non est tantus vir ille mente conspexerit, cum haec verba promeret, verum eum vidisse apteque id enuntiavisse non dubitem.

But among the so many truths which occur in those words, understood in one way or another, to those investigating them, who of us can ascertain that one [meaning among them] in such a way that he can say that Moses understood this and wanted this to be understood in that narration as confidently as he can say that this is true, whether [Moses] understood it or something else? For see, my God . . . see how confidently I say that in Your unchangeable Word You made all things, invisible and visible. Can I really so confidently say that Moses attended to no other thing than this when he was writing “In the beginning God made heaven and earth,” since I do not see that he thought of this when he was writing these [words] in the way that I see in Your truth that this [statement] is sure? For he could have thought, “At the very start of creation,” when he said, “In the beginning.” And he could have wanted “heaven and earth” in this passage to be understood as a not yet formed and completed nature, whether spiritual or corporeal, each of them inchoate and yet unformed. I certainly see that whichever of these was said could have been said truly, but I do not thus see which of these that man thought of in these words, although—whether so great a man as that saw in his mind one of these or some other which has not been mentioned by me—I would not doubt that he, when he produced these words, saw the truth and expressed it appropriately.

There are four points to note in this passage.

First, note the excess of verbs used to refer to Moses’ mind in writing: he *sensisse* this, he *voluisse intellegi* this, he *advertisse* this, he *cogitasse* this, he *conspexerit* this, he *vidisse* this. One might think that Augustine is trying to set up some complicated distinctions with different terms, but he will clearly equate all of them except for *voluisse intellegi* by the end. For now the distinction is not important; rather, the commonality is: he cannot say what Moses *sensisse* or *voluisse intellegi*

with the same confidence that he can say what is true. But he also does not use *volere intellegi* from now on, which is the reason that I have set it aside for a different use in my own terminology.¹¹⁴ The point here, I think, is to stress that the truth of the matter (about creation) is more fundamental and more important than the fact of what Moses was thinking of.¹¹⁵

Second, Augustine sets up a later dialectical twist with two phrases. He says he cannot find the “one [meaning] among so many truths”¹¹⁶ that Moses meant and that Moses’ meaning may be “one of these or something other which has not been mentioned by me.” In this section these two phrases serve his claim that he cannot *know* what the particular content of Moses’ mind was. The point might seem to be that it is impossible to figure out what Moses meant. That is true in a way: we cannot *know* (in the strong sense) Moses’ thought because we cannot have a direct apprehension of Moses’ mind—even if he were to tell us what was in his mind, as Augustine says in section 35.¹¹⁷ But that example demonstrates the limits of the claim also.¹¹⁸ We would

¹¹⁴ See my comments on section 27.

¹¹⁵ The fact that Augustine says here that he cannot know what Moses *voluisse intellegi* may tell against my use of it, since he firmly claims that Moses wanted or would want all these other truths to be understood in his words. But he bases that claim (made in 36, reiterated in 42) on what he feels compelled to believe about Moses, based on charity. Augustine seems to consider this a strong argument in 36, but he tests the limits of it with a further argument in 42. So it may be the case that he does not think that one can *know* that Moses wanted readers to be able to find whatever true interpretations they could, but merely that there are strong reasons for thinking that he did. See the next two paragraphs for other points along these lines.

¹¹⁶ This is the first sentence of the passage. The *eam* must mean *eam sententiam*, since it is feminine. But he uses the neuter plural *vera* in the next clause. I think he speaks of truths, rather than true *sententiae* here because he is thinking of it from Moses’ perspective: which truth did Moses think of?

¹¹⁷ XII.35: “Why are we arguing about the thought of our neighbor, which we cannot see in the way in which the unchangeable truth is seen, since, if Moses himself appeared to us and said, ‘I thought of this,’ even so we would not see it but believe it?” (*Cur de proximi cogitatione contendimus, quam sic videre non possumus ut videtur incommutabilis veritas, quando, si ipse Moyses apparuisset nobis atque dixisset: ‘Hoc cogitavi,’ nec sic eam videremus, sed crederemus?*)

¹¹⁸ Augustine’s claim that not even Moses’ testimony about what he meant would give us real knowledge of what he meant is a radical and broad one: that testimony can never give us knowledge. But he argues in *De Utilitate Credendi* 27-35 that there are cases where we can justifiably believe

surely say that we have something *like* knowledge of what Moses meant if he told us what he meant, and so there might be other means of figuring out what he meant, other means to get something like but less than strict knowledge. The point here is that the *contradictores* are unjustifiably dogmatic in their claim that Moses did not mean what Augustine says: after all, how do they know what Moses was thinking?

Third, if we think of his negative point this way, then it makes sense that Augustine offers two positive claims at the end when he says that he knows that Moses' words are true, and that he must believe (*non dubitem*) that Moses saw the truth and expressed it appropriately. As he goes on, he will argue on the basis of these two positive claims that we can make some general deductions about what Moses meant, which allow us to figure out to some extent his particular intention—that he must have meant *at least this much*. What is more, he will re-use the above phrases (from the second point) to make this positive claim, which stands in contrast to the initial, negative claim made above.

Fourth, note that Augustine draws a parallel between himself and Moses in the end when he says that he sees (*video*) which interpretations are true (though he cannot see, *video*, which Moses meant) just as Moses saw the truth (*verum vidisse*) when

something based on testimony (most of all, based on the testimony of God/Christ). When commenting on the *Util. cred.* in *Retractiones* 1.14.3, he says that we know *in the strict sense* only what we understand firmly by reason, but that we should also use “know” in the common sense, in which Scripture also uses the term, to mean that which he understands by means of the senses or trustworthy testimony—though he says that we should still distinguish the two senses. King and Ballantyne (“Augustine on Testimony,” esp. 198-201) argue that over time Augustine comes to regard testimony as a source of knowledge: when he writes the *Confessions*, he says that he knows (*scire*) who his parents are only on the basis of testimony (VI.5.7), while in *Util. cred.* 26 he had only said that one must have a belief based on testimony about who his parents were; furthermore, by the time he writes *Epistula* 147.3.8 and *De Trinitate* XV.12.21, he says that our knowledge consists of “things seen and things believed,” and that the latter comes from what others have testified to us.

writing. This reinforces the parallel drawn in the last section based on the divine inspiration that writer and reader each experience in understanding (*sentit/sensisse*) some truth in the words.

Altogether, this section clearly emphasizes the possibility of knowing the truth over the impossibility of knowing what was in the author's mind. Augustine repeatedly emphasizes that he cannot *know* (see) what Moses was thinking or intended (*sensisse, voluisse intellegi, attendisse, cogitasse, conspexerit*)—that is, which one of the interpretations Moses meant or even if he meant one not mentioned—but that he can know (see) the truth. But the fact that we cannot have *knowledge* of Moses' intention does not mean that we cannot have any idea of what he intended; at the very least, we can know (or justifiably believe) that he did not intend something false. After all, as in section 27, Augustine does express a strong belief (there: *credamus*; here: *non dubitem*) that Moses saw the truth.

Confessions XII.36: More roles for charity and the dual purpose of Scripture

In this section Augustine begins to pull some threads together and offers an initial proposal on how to relate the author's intention to the multiplicity of true interpretations that readers can make:

Et tamen ego, deus meus . . . quoniam tu mihi praecipis ut diligam proximum meum sicut me ipsum, non possum minus credere de Moyse fidelissimo famulo tuo quam mihi optarem ac desiderarem abs te dari muneris, si tempore illo natus essem quo ille eoque loci me constituisses, ut per servitum cordis ac linguae meae litterae illae dispensarentur quae tanto post essent omnibus gentibus profuturæ et per universum orbem tanto auctoritatis culmine omnium falsarum superbarumque doctrinarum verba superaturæ. Vellem quippe, si tunc ego essem Moyses (ex eadem namque massa omnes venimus; et quid

est homo, nisi quia memor es eius?), vellem ergo, si tunc ego essem quod ille et mihi abs te Geneseos liber scribendus adiungeretur, talem mihi eloquendi facultatem dari et eum texendi sermonis modum ut neque illi qui nondum queunt intellegere quemadmodum creat deus, tamquam excedentia vires suas, dicta recusarent et illi qui hoc iam possunt, in quamlibet veram sententiam cogitando venissent, eam non praetermissam in paucis verbis tui famuli reperirent, et si alius aliam vidisset in luce veritatis, nec ipsa in eisdem verbis intellegenda deesset.

And yet, my God, since You command me to love my neighbor as myself, I am unable to believe that Your most faithful servant Moses was granted less of a gift by You than I would wish and desire to be granted to me, if I had been born in that time in which he was and you had set me in that place—[a gift] such that through the service of my heart and tongue those letters might be dispensed which would later be such a profit to all peoples and, at such a peak of authority throughout the whole world, would overcome the words of all false and proud doctrines. I would wish, certainly, if I were Moses then (for we all come from the same stuff; and what is man, except that you are mindful of him?)—I would therefore wish, if I were then what that man was and the writing of the book of Genesis were enjoined upon me, that such a faculty of eloquence and way of constructing speech be given to me that those who are yet unable to understand how God creates would not reject the words as beyond their powers and those who are already capable of this would find in the few words of Your servant that whatever true idea¹¹⁹ they had arrived at by thinking was not passed over, and if anyone had seen another idea in the light of truth, that would not fail to be understandable in the same words either.

There are three points to note in this passage.

First, Augustine again appeals to charity, as he did in section 27, but this time it is the charity that he as a reader owes to Moses as the author.¹²⁰ This charity requires Augustine to believe that God gave Moses the ability that Augustine would want in Moses' position. The argument seems a little tenuous—if Augustine were in Moses'

¹¹⁹ Though *sententia* usually means “a proposition understood as the meaning of some set of words” in *Confessions* XII, clearly here it must be a proposition apart from the words, since it is an idea that the reader has before he reads the text about the material the text is talking about.

¹²⁰ Again, this does not mean being charitable to the author in our usual sense (i.e., thinking he meant the more plausible of two options). I explain Augustine's idea of the charity owed to the author more in the next sub-section.

position, why should God give Augustine whatever he wants?—but it makes a little more sense when we see exactly what position Moses is in and how a writer in that position must be charitable to his readers.

Second, then, note what Moses' position is according to Augustine. He is writing something that “will profit all peoples” and which “will overcome the words of all false and proud doctrines throughout the world at such a peak of authority.” Augustine highlights this fact because it is one of the main points that his imagined *contradictores* have missed. They think that Moses wrote Genesis only for his immediate audience, but in fact Genesis is written for all people and all subsequent (*post*) times, and it is supposed to be a source of truth to combat error. These two requirements correspond to the two essential roles that Augustine thinks Scripture fulfills: speaking some truth to people at all levels of knowledge and speaking the highest truth.¹²¹ In other words, Augustine is saying that it is not only okay for readers to understand whatever (relevant) truth they do in a passage of Scripture; in fact, Scripture must have features which allow and enable readers to do this.¹²²

Third, an author in this position must have a particular sort of charity toward his readers, which requires him to want to fulfill the two essential requirements. He

¹²¹ We will see the latter purpose confirmed in section 41 when Augustine says that Moses must have had in mind the meaning that is most useful and most true.

¹²² Note that Augustine says that the Scriptural text should offer a meaning to those who do not yet understand “how God creates.” This could mean three things: either the text could then offer a very basic truth about creation (e.g., that God made all things), or something other than a true idea about how God creates, or a truth that is not about how God creates (i.e., a random thought). Upcoming sections will give us reason to believe that Augustine is definitely thinking of the first, sort of thinking of the second, and not thinking of the third—and the third is the most important. There is no evidence in Confessions XII to suggest that Augustine is considering interpretations which are unconnected to the obvious meaning of the text. In section 42, he restricts the claim a bit more and says that the readers should be able to find whatever truth they are capable of *de his rebus*.

must offer some truth about the matter for readers at all levels, including the highest level. Augustine dwells only on the former point in the rest of the passage. If we concede his claim that God gave Moses this ability, it partially justifies Augustine's initial claim, in 27, that it is okay to find other truths in the text than the author thought of, because God directed the writing of Scripture precisely to this end. But the further question is whether the author was himself aware that his words had this capacity. Now Augustine does not say that Moses must have desired the ability or consciously tried to write in this multivalent way, only that he must have actually been given that ability. But by comparing this section to the end of the previous one, 35, we can see that Moses must have had this desire and intention at least implicitly:

Diligamus dominum deum nostrum ex toto corde, ex tota anima, ex tota mente nostra, et proximum nostrum sicut nosmet ipsos. Propter quae duo praecepta caritatis sensisse Moysen, quidquid in illis libris sensit, nisi crediderimus, mendacem faciemus dominum, cum de animo conservi aliter quam ille docuit opinamur. Iam vide quam stultum sit, in tanta copia verissimarum sententiarum quae de illis verbis erui possunt, temere adfirmare quam earum Moyses potissimum senserit, et perniciosis contentionibus ipsam offendere caritatem propter quam dixit omnia, cuius dicta conamur exponere.

Let us love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and [let us love] our neighbor as ourselves. Unless we believe that Moses thought of whatever he did in those books on account of these two precepts, we will make the Lord a liar, since we would believe something different about the mind of a fellow servant than that one [Jesus] taught. Now see how stupid it is, in such an abundance of very true interpretations which can be dug out of those words, rashly to affirm which of them Moses chiefly thought of and with pernicious controversies to offend that very charity on account of which he, whose words we are trying to expound, said all [those words].

The argument works from two points: first, Moses must have intended to build up charity with whatever he meant; second, readers miss the ultimate meaning or purpose

of the text and fail to build up charity if they argue about which of the true meanings Moses intended. Augustine condemns a “rash affirmation” of what Moses chiefly meant first of all because it is rash: the contradictores’ reading is based on bad principles (that Moses was only speaking to his immediate audience) and glides past observable and deducible features of the text (e.g., the meaning of *terra* in v. 1 as suggested by the *terra invisibilis et inconposita* in v. 2). But this reading is also rash because it shuts out other true interpretations, which goes against the demonstrable purpose of the text.¹²³

Now Moses may or may not have recognized, first, that readers would take his words in different senses and could not know for sure which single meaning he intended and, second, that readers would have different capacities to understand what he was talking about. But if those facts were presented to him, charity would require him to write and mean in a certain way to accommodate those facts—namely, to write so that readers could find whatever (relevant) truth they were capable of and to intend that any true interpretation be legitimate. We thus begin to see that there are two ways for an author to “intend”: in a particular way, explicitly thinking of a meaning, and in a general way, allowing different readings within some parameters. These are what I refer to, respectively, as explicit intention (*sentire*) and secondary intention (*voluit intellegi*).¹²⁴

¹²³ Augustine will in fact affirm (in sections 41 and 43) that Moses chiefly thought of one meaning, but he does not do so “rashly” or at the expense of shutting out other true interpretations.

¹²⁴ Again, Augustine does not clearly use *voluit intellegi* in this sense, but he stops using the term after section 36, while he continues to use *sentire*, *cogitare*, and *videre* as synonyms until the end of the book (sections 42 and 43).

So then, in this section we see that the reader must have a certain charity towards the writer which assumes that the latter had a God-given ability to compose in the way that is charitable toward the readers of such a text: that is, to write so that readers at all levels can understand something true (or at least valuable) and so that the text contains the highest relevant truth. The Scriptural text must do this because it is addressed to all peoples at all (subsequent) times and is meant to combat all false doctrines. Though it is unclear whether the author completely recognized this requirement and was conscious of the capability of his words, an assent to it was implied in his general intention to build up charity with his words.

Confessions XII.41: The nature of Moses' particular meaning and the unity of truth

We now jump past several sections to the concluding three passages of *Confessions XII*. But we pass over a few things worthy of note. In section 37, Augustine compares Moses' narrative to a fountain that feeds many rivers—the few words provide many meanings—but he also addresses the position of very ignorant but good Catholic readers (*parvuli*) who think that God has a body, that he spoke audibly at creation, etc. These still get a good point, Augustine says: that God made everything that their senses perceive.¹²⁵ Such readers find Scripture difficult and some can be led to scorn its humble language (like Augustine did).¹²⁶

¹²⁵ While this claim is true, the problem is that they have a false understanding of what “God” means (a material being) and how He made (from pre-existing stuff). I think, then, that Augustine must believe that what they really get is an indeterminate interpretation that is able to be understood in a true way, though they do not so understand it.

¹²⁶ I do not think sections 38-40 are important for the argument as I interpret it here. See my summary of their contents in the Appendix.

Section 41 begins by looking back at all the proposed interpretations and then tries to tie the project thus far together:

In hac diversitate sententiarum verarum concordiam pariat ipsa veritas, et deus noster misereatur nostri, ut legitime lege utamur, praecepti fine, pura caritate. Ac per hoc, si quis quaerit ex me quid horum Moyses, tuus ille famulus, senserit, non sunt hi sermones confessionum mearum si tibi non confiteor, `nescio.' Et scio tamen illas veras esse sententias (exceptis carnalibus, de quibus quantum existimavi locutus sum) . . . sed omnes quos in eis verbis vera cernere ac dicere fateor; diligamus nos invicem pariterque diligamus te, deum nostrum, fontem veritatis . . . eundemque famulum tuum, scripturae huius dispensatorem, spiritu tuo plenum, ita honoremus, ut hoc eum te revelante, cum haec scriberet, attendisse credamus quod in eis maxime et luce veritatis et fruge utilitatis excellit.

In this diversity of true interpretations/ideas¹²⁷ may Truth itself provide concord, and may our God have mercy on us, so that we may use the law legitimately, according to the end of the precept: pure charity. And because of this, if anyone asks of me which of these [interpretations] Moses, that servant of Yours, was thinking of, these are not the words of my confessions if I do not confess to You, “I don’t know.” And nevertheless I know that those interpretations are true (with the exception of the carnal ones, about I have said as much as I think) . . . But all you whom I confess to discern true things in these words and to say them, let us love each other and together let us love You, our God, fountain of truth . . . and let us honor your servant (the steward of this Scripture, filled with Your Spirit) in such a way that we believe that he, when he was writing these things under Your revelation, attended to this [meaning] which in these words most excels both in the light of truth and the fruit of utility.

The passage knits together the themes of the previous sections through two complex allusions along with two proposals about Moses’ particular intention and our cognitive grasp of it.

¹²⁷ The term *sententia* is ambiguous between “interpretation” and “idea” in Augustine’s usage. When used to describe that idea that a reader gets from the text and understands as the meaning of the text, I use “interpretation.” In a case like this one, however, the point at issue is whether the *sententiae* count as interpretations, so it is hard to decide how to translate.

First, in the opening sentence, Augustine alludes to the problems of 27 to raise a new problem and solution. He refers to the *diversity* of true interpretations and the necessity to use the “Law” (metonymy for Scripture) according to the end of charity. These two points hearken back to the initial points made in section 27, where we started:

Ad aedificationem autem bona est lex, si quis ea legitime utatur, quia finis eius est caritas. . . . Quid mihi obest, cum diversa in his verbis intellegi possint, quae tamen vera sint?

The law is good for building up, if one uses it legitimately, because its end is charity. . . . Why is it a problem for me, when diverse [ideas] are able to be understood in these words, which are nevertheless true?

We have already seen that there is in a fact a problem to be solved when different interpretations are possible: which one did the author intend? Augustine proposed in section 36 that Moses generally (or implicitly) intended any (relevant) truth that a reader can find, but here in section 41 we find that another problem needs to be solved: we need *concordiam* between the *diversa* interpretations or interpreters. Augustine calls on God as Truth Itself to provide this harmony, *so that* readers can “use the Law” in accordance with its unified end of charity. The point is important, because it shows that charity alone does not provide harmony: it has its basis in the unity of Truth that harmonizes the diversity of true interpretations.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ In the second and third sentences Augustine also applies the epistemological claims of 33 to the situation set out in 27. In the second sentence he says that *per hoc* (because of the aforementioned charity) he must admit that *quid horum Moyses . . . sensit . . . nescio*, which alludes to the argument repeatedly expressed in section 33 and summarized at its end: *quid horum in his verbis ille cogitaverit, non ita video*. But, as in section 33, he then contrasts his assurance that the proposed interpretations are true: *scio tamen illas veras esse sententias*. This phrase cleverly adds the *scio* of 33 to a verbal evocation of the passage from 27 that we just reviewed, *Quid mihi obest, cum diversa in his verbis intellegi possint, quae tamen vera sint?* The grammatical structure of *quae tamen vera sint* is also presented in reverse (a, nevertheless not b) at the end of 27—*cum et ille verum nec tamen hoc senserit*—where the contrast is not diversity vs truth, but author’s intention vs truth. The latter is the

Second, in the final sentence (really a continuation of the third sentence, *omnes quos* to the end) Augustine calls on his fellow readers who have true interpretations to love each other, love God, and honor Moses. Readers love each other by acknowledging what Augustine just has just confessed: that we cannot know which meaning Moses intended but that the proposed (accepted) interpretations are all true, and so all valid. He emphasizes the validity of these true interpretations by referring to God as the *fontem veritatis* and so the source of these interpretations. This harkens back to the implication we found at the end of 27, that God in a sense inspires the reader as he does the author since he shows a *veridicum*-minded reader the truth he finds in the text, even when that truth is different from what the *veridicus* author meant. But the term *fontem* is also an allusion to the image in 37 (mentioned above), which treats the words of the text as a *fons* that gushes out streams of clear truth. In that image words are the source of true interpretations, but here in 41 God is the source of truth. The contrast gets to the heart of the tension in *Confessions* XII between God's direct role in a reader recognizing a truth and Moses' (or the text's) mediating role¹²⁹ in conveying a truth.

Third, the view proposed in 36 balances those two factors by having Moses produce a text that is perfectly co-operative with whatever truth (about creation) that God wants to reveal to the reader: Moses wrote so that a reader could find in the text whatever *sententiam* he sees *in luce veritatis*. But the 36 proposal seems to address

contrast 41 focuses on, and so the 41 point is more like the latter point in 27, but 41 uses the structure found earlier in 27: not a, nevertheless b. Thus both of the 27 phrases are alluded to in 41.

¹²⁹ I will explain this point more in the conclusion of this chapter, but I am trying to differentiate between cases in which readers apprehend something that Moses explicitly intended based on his words and cases in which they understand something in his words that he did not explicitly intend. But I will argue that even in the latter case Moses' secondary intention is operative.

only what Moses wanted readers to be able to understand in his words, not what he himself understood: “if anyone had seen a *sententia* in the light of truth,” he (the author) would not want it (*vellem*) to “fail to be understandable (*intellegenda*) in the same words.”¹³⁰ Recall the potential distinction present in 27 and 33 between what the author *sensit* and what he *voluit intellegi*. The proposal in 36 gives Moses only the latter, a general or meta-intention, but not the former, a particular intention. In 41, however, Augustine suggests that Moses *attendisse* the meaning that “excels most in the light of truth and the fruit of utility”—in other words, the best meaning. What Moses *attendisse* obviously must be what he really thought of as the meaning of his words, what he *sensit* according to the above contrast.¹³¹ While he used words that would allow readers to find whatever they could see *in luce veritatis*, Moses himself saw what was best *in luce veritatis*. He is, in this sense, the best interpreter of his own words.

Fourth, note that Augustine's new proposal in 41 is couched in language of belief, that readers should honor (*honoremus*) Moses “in such a way that we believe (*credere*) that he attended to . . .” *Credere* can go two ways in *Confessions* XII. On the one hand, Augustine uses it to talk about things that we are obligated to assent to on some basis. For instance, in 27 he says that “we believe [the author] to be *veridicum*,” and the fact that he later refuses (in 32) to deal with readers who disagree on this point

¹³⁰ XII.36: *Si alius aliam vidisset in luce veritatis, nec ipsa in eisdem verbis intellegenda deesset.*

¹³¹ We might think that *attendere* means “focus on,” in distinction from the mere awareness that *sentire*, *videre*, and *cogitare* express, but section 43 will undermine any such distinction. And we should not be surprised if *attendere* is equivalent to these other terms, since it was used interchangeably with the others in 33. Of course, *velle intellegi* was also used in that section and could be understood as an analogous term. But I think that the further development in the argument in sections 36 and and this section tell against this, whereas there is no evidence from the argument that *attendere* should be taken in a different sense.

stresses the factor of obligation. On the other hand, he also explicitly contrasts believing with knowing. As we have already seen, in support of his claim that we do not know what Moses intended, he says in 35 that “if Moses himself had appeared to us and said, ‘I thought of this,’ even so we would not see it, but believe it.”¹³² Of course, this distinction is implicit even in the 27 example, since we cannot *know* that another person means something true for the same reason that we cannot know *what* he means.

So which aspect of *credere* is Augustine stressing in 41? Clearly he is avoiding a claim to knowledge, since he is again dealing with what Moses was thinking of. But his hortatory *honoremus* also suggests that readers have some obligation to believe this about Moses. This is similar to his claim in 36, that he is “unable to believe that Your most faithful servant Moses was granted less of a gift [of eloquence] by You than I would wish”; in other words, he is compelled to believe that Moses did receive such a gift. The use of *credere* and some expression of obligation in each of these proposals aligns them at some level with Augustine's requirement that his fellow readers believe that Moses spoke/meant something true.¹³³

What is the source of this obligation? Clearly it is charity toward the author, as we saw in 36, and as we now see in 41, since the honor readers owe to Moses is parallel to the charity they owe each other (by allowing each other's true interpretations) and the charity they owe to God (as the source of truth). The difference between loving other neighbors and loving Moses is illuminating. If Moses

¹³² XII.35: *Si ipse Moyses apparisset nobis atque dixisset: “Hoc cogitavi,” nec sic eam videremus, sed crederemus.*

¹³³ Supported also in section 33 with his *non dubitem* at the end. See my first point on that section.

were like any other neighbor, we would allow him his true interpretation but give it no special status. But besides what Augustine says about the quality of Moses' meaning, he also separates Moses from other neighbors in the order of his list: other interpreters, God, Moses. Perhaps this order suggests that the special honor due to Moses in some way depends on the honor given to God as *fontem veritatis*. We can treat Moses' understanding of his words as an interpretation, a *sententia*, and so treat him as a reader like others. But Moses is also the author, and in that way—to some degree—like God. He is closer to the the *fontem veritatis*, to *ipsa veritas*.

In sum, in this section Augustine brings together the major points of the preceding sections and adds to the proposal offered in 36 by suggesting that Moses not only wanted his readers to find whatever (relevant) truth they could in his words, but that he himself explicitly understood the best possible meaning in them. Augustine says that both of these claims should be believed (not known) and bases them on the particular charity owed by readers to the author. He implicitly explains this obligation by the special position of the author as chosen by, closer to, and even analogous to God. In this next section Augustine will try to push this line of reasoning further.

***Confessions* XII.42: A suggestion about how much Moses recognized**

Having suggested that Moses particularly intended the best meaning in his words, Augustine now offers an additional suggestion:

Ita cum alius dixerit, 'Hoc sensit quod ego,' et alius, 'Immo illud quod ego,' religiosius me arbitror dicere, 'Cur non utrumque potius, si utrumque verum est, et si quid tertium et si quid quartum et si quid omnino aliud verum quispiam in his verbis videt, cur non illa omnia vidisse credatur, per quem deus unus sacras litteras vera et diversa

visuris multorum sensibus temperavit?' Ego certe, quod intrepidus de meo corde pronuntio, si ad culmen auctoritatis aliquid scriberem, sic mallet scribere ut quod veri quisque de his rebus capere posset mea verba resonarent, quam ut unam veram sententiam ad hoc apertius ponerem, ut excluderem ceteras quarum falsitas me non posset offendere. Nolo itaque, deus meus, tam praeceps esse ut hoc illum virum de te meruisse non credam. Sensit ille omnino in his verbis atque cogitavit, cum ea scriberet, quidquid hic veri potuimus invenire et quidquid nos non potuimus aut nondum potuimus et tamen in eis inveniri potest.

So when someone says, “He understood this thing that I do,” and another, “No, that thing that I do,” I think that it is more religious for me to say, “Why not rather both, if each is true, and if there is some third or some fourth or if there is any other truth altogether that anyone sees in these words, why should it not be believed that he saw all of them—he through whom the one God arranged the sacred books for the senses of the many, which would see many true things?” I certainly—which I say from my heart with trepidation—if I were writing something at the height of authority, I would prefer to write in such a way that my words would resound with whatever truth each person was able to grasp in these matters, rather than that I should clearly state one true idea pertaining to this so that I exclude others which have no falsity to offend me. Therefore I am unwilling, my God, to be so rash as not to believe that that man merited this from You. He understood completely in his words and thought of, when he was writing, whatever truth we were able to find here, and whatever we were not able to find or not yet able, which nevertheless can be found in these [words].

There are four points to notice in this section.

First, though Augustine begins and ends with the proposal that Moses *sensit* every truth "about these matters" that readers can find in his words, the argument in the middle (from *ego certe* to *meruisse non credam*) is very similar to the one found in 36. This is a little odd, since the argument in 36 only proved that Moses had a certain verbal ability, not that he was aware of that ability, much less that he was aware of all the possible true meanings of his words. But we saw that the proposal in 36 left open some questions about whether Moses did intend to approve other true readings or

whether such an intention was only implicit in his charity—so that he would approve them if someone explained the hermeneutic situation to him. The proposal here implies that Moses had a complete awareness of the situation, of his verbal ability and tactic, and of all the possible true meanings of his words.

Second, building upon the first point, Augustine here says that Moses was aware of all the possible meanings of his words, variously using the terms *sensit*, *vidisse*, *sensit* again, and *cogitavit* without any apparent difference. Whereas the proposal in 36 seemed to address only Moses' secondary intention—what he *voluit intellegi* and not what he *sensit*—the one here makes what he *sensit* co-extensive with what he *voluit intellegi*. This would seem to undermine the proposal in 41, which gives particular value to the meaning that Moses *attendit*, and it would somewhat contravene the second necessary characteristic of Scripture, that it contain the highest meaning, since Moses' particular intention was supposed to enshrine this meaning in a way. We will return to this difficulty in the next section.

Third, we see a clear allusion in the initial claim that Moses *vidisse* any meanings readers see and the ending claim that he *sensit . . . atque cogitavit, cum ea scriberet, quidquid hic veri potuimus invenire et quidquid nos non potuimus aut nondum potuimus et tamen in eis inveniri potest*. The language is parallel to a sentence in section 33 that I tagged at the time. There Augustine said:

Video quippe vere potuisse dici quidquid horum diceretur, sed quid horum in his verbis ille cogitaverit, non ita video, quamvis sive aliquid horum sive quid aliud quod a me commemoratum non est tantus vir ille mente conspexerit, cum haec verba promeret, verum eum vidisse apteque id enuntiavisse non dubitem.

Augustine has moved from his two claims in 33—that he does not know what truth Moses saw/thought of, or whether it was one of the proposed meanings or something else—to claiming now that Moses understood/saw/thought of every proposed meaning and any other not proposed (that are true). It is a rather extraordinary reversal, emblematic of the argument of the book as a whole. Augustine has torn down the claim to knowing which particular meaning Moses was thinking of (on the basis of the text), only to build up his counter claim that Moses was thinking of the best meaning or all true meanings (on the basis of Moses' position).¹³⁴ We can call the latter (the proposal of this section) the maximal account

Fourth, as in sections 36 and 41, the proposal is suggested for belief on the basis of charity, thus dodging Augustine's own objection that we cannot know what Moses was thinking of. But in this section only the middle argument (which is the same as that of 36) is explicitly based on charity. The new proposal, that the author was aware of every true meaning, is claimed to be *religiosius*. Such a term does not otherwise appear in book XII, but there is one instance otherwise in *Confessions* that give us a hint about the meaning.¹³⁵ In V.4, Augustine talks about natural philosophers who can accurately predict eclipses and the like and who take a great deal of pride in

¹³⁴ The same alternation perhaps explains his claim in 35 that it is stupid “rashly to affirm which [meaning] Moses chiefly thought of” (*vide quam stultum sit . . . temere adfirmare quam earum Moyses potissimum senserit*), while in 41 he asserts that Moses *attendere* the truest and most useful meaning. The latter claim is not rash because it does not seize upon a particular interpretation but rather describes the qualities of whatever that interpretation is.

¹³⁵ There are several other instances of interest, mostly with regard to Augustine's mother, whose *religiosissimam conversationem* Ambrose respected (VI.2.2) and whose *anima religioa et pia* Augustine praises (IX.11.28). Besides this, Augustine refers (IX.12.31) to the *fratres et religiosae femines* who mourned Monica's death (though perhaps this is an early usage of the ecclesiological term “religious”). In X.33.49, Augustine also says that our souls are moved *religiosius et ardentius* by words of Scripture set to music.

their ability to do so. He explains, “They do not religiously seek the Source from which they have the talent by which they investigate these matters, and when they find out that You made them, they do not give themselves to You.”¹³⁶ Augustine’s point is that these men cannot acknowledge a power greater than themselves, which is the source of their own intellectual ability. To apply the point to Moses, perhaps Augustine is suggesting that readers should recognize a mind more enlightened than theirs, a mind which is the source (in some sense) of the text in which they find truths.

This comparison perhaps attributes too much to Moses, but Augustine has just implied an analogy between the author and God in the last section, so it would not be surprising if he is working along the same lines here. But the use of a different term, *religiosius*, may also be meant to highlight the limit of the charity argument. Charity towards the author entails a certain humility on the reader’s part since it would be very proud, and so uncharitable, to think that one could do better than the author whom God chose and inspired. Therefore it is reasonable to claim, as in 41, that the author had the best meaning in mind, so that you or I could not find a better one. Presumably the idea here is that one could still be proud of finding a less important though true meaning that the author did not recognize, so readers should assume that the author saw in his words whatever truth they have seen. But it is not clear whether this *religiosius* claim is necessary or plausible: how many meanings are we talking about, especially since Augustine includes “whatever we were not able to find but could be found”? We will have to put this question off until the next section.

¹³⁶ *Confessions* V.3.4: *Non enim religiose quaerunt unde habeant ingenium quo ista quaerunt, et inveniunt quia tu fecisti eos, non ipsi se dant tibi.*

To summarize: though section 42 repeats the claim of section 36 that Moses must have written in a multivalent way, this section really proposes an alternate hypothesis to that of 36. In the earlier section, Augustine addressed what Moses did or should have *voluit intellegi* and leaves aside what he *sensit*, while here he suggests that Moses *sensit* exactly all that he *voluit intellegi*. This new proposal is hard to mesh with the one in 41, which highlighted the highest meaning of the text by having Moses *attendit* (= *sensit, cogitavit, vidit*) it. We also see how Augustine's new proposals in this section and the last turn around or limit the initial claims set out in 33, 35, and 36 about the unknowability of the author's intention. In these new proposals, Augustine argues on the basis of justified and obligatory belief that we can figure out the nature and range of Moses' intention, and so hypothesize its particular content. The new proposals do so by focusing on the nature and range of Moses' intention, rather than its particular content. Lastly, in this section we reach the edge of what can be argued about the author on the basis of charity and the analogy between himself and God. The next section will try to address the limitation of this line of argument.

***Confessions* XII.43: God's role as author and the proper goal for readers**

We should start by noting that the argument of 41 acknowledged the commonality of writer and readers who have true interpretations inasmuch as they are inspired by God, the *fontem veritatis*, but in so doing this argument also highlighted the commonality between God and the author as a source for readers. Section 42, in contrast, spoke only of the truths that readers see, not those that God inspires in them: through Moses God "arranged the sacred books for the senses of the many that would

see diverse truths.” Moses’ recognition of all these truths and formation of his text in accordance with that recognition would form a complete justification for allowing readers to recognize multiple truths in the text. This explanation seems to attribute an unbelievable capacity to Moses—though presumably God could supply Moses with this ability—but, more importantly, it only solves the problem by leaving the God-reader relationship out of the picture. Yet clearly Augustine set out, at our beginning in section 27, to synthesize this relationship with the God-author one. And so the account in 42 is inadequate, not so much in that it attributes too much to Moses, but in that it attributes too little to God. He is only involved at the writing end, not the reading one.

In section 43, Augustine offers an alternate to the proposal in 42—potentially compatible with but certainly superior to the 42 proposal alone:

Postremo, domine, qui deus es et non caro et sanguis, si quid homo minus vidit, numquid et spiritum tuum bonum . . . latere potuit, quidquid eras in eis verbis tu ipse revelaturus legentibus posteris, etiamsi ille per quem dicta sunt unam fortassis ex multis veris sententiam cogitavit? Quod si ita est, sit igitur illa quam cogitavit ceteris excelsior. Nobis autem, domine, aut ipsam demonstra aut quam placet alteram veram, ut sive nobis hoc quod etiam illi homini tuo sive aliud ex eorundem verborum occasione patefacias, tu tamen pascas, non error inludat. . . . Sine me itaque brevius in eis confiteri tibi et eligere unum aliquid quod tu inspiraveris verum, certum et bonum, etiamsi multa occurrerint, ubi multa occurrere poterunt, ea fide confessionis meae ut, si hoc dixero quod sensit minister tuus, recte atque optime (id enim conari me oportet), quod si adsecutus non fuero, id tamen dicam quod mihi per eius verba tua veritas dicere voluerit, quae illi quoque dixit quod voluit.

Finally, Lord, You who are God and not flesh and blood, if man saw something less, could it really be the case that from Your good Spirit could be hidden whatever You yourself were going to reveal in those words to later readers, even if that man through whom they were written perhaps thought of one idea/interpretation from the many true ones? But if this is so, then let the one which he thought of be more excellent than the others. But to us, Lord, show either that very one or

whatever other truth pleases You, so that whether You disclose to us this one which you also disclosed to that man of Yours or another from the occasion of the same words, it is You who feeds us, not Error that plays with us. . . . Allow me therefore to confess to You more briefly in these words [on these other books?] and to choose some one [interpretation] which You will have inspired as true, sure, and good, even if many occur [to me], since many will occur, by the faith of my confession so that, if I speak this [meaning] which Your minister understood, I will act rightly and in the best way (for that is what I must attempt), and if I do not attain that, I will nevertheless say that which Your Truth will have wished to say through his words—Your Truth which also said to that man what It wished.

There are three major points to notice in this section.

First, and most obviously, here Augustine falls back from the maximal account of 42 to the proposal offered at the end of 41: Moses may have seen only the one best meaning, rather than all the possible true meanings. The clearly parallel language shows that the retreat is intentional. In 41 Augustine said that readers should believe that Moses *attendisse . . . quod in eis maxime et luce veritatis et fruge utilitatis excellit*. Here he says that, if Moses did only see one meaning, *sit igitur illa quam cogitavit ceteris excelsior*.¹³⁷ I take it that the jussive in 43 (*sit*) also invokes the *credere* following a hortatory in 41 (*honoremus ut credamus*), and so again make its claim based on charity toward the author. But the fact that Augustine cautiously says that Moses *fortassis* thought of only one of the many meanings also suggests that he is not sure whether the proposal in 42 is wrong. According to his own principles, he cannot rule out the possibility that Moses was aware of all the true meanings of his

¹³⁷ The obvious parallel of this statement to the claim in 41 strongly suggests to me that Augustine means no difference between *attendisse* in 41 and *cogitavit* in 43, unless it is that *attendisse* is ambiguous between explicit and implicit intending (*sensit* vs. *voluit intellegi*) while *cogitavit*, following section 42, clearly means explicit intending.

words, but it is not clear that he has a sufficient cause to believe it either, because now God's intention does all the work that such a multivalent intention of Moses would do.

This final proposal does not undermine the claim, repeated in 42 from 36, that Moses wanted to include whatever truth readers could find, especially if we understand this as an implicit or second order intention on Moses' part. Augustine only steps back from 42's new claim, made at the beginning and end of the section, not the claim in the middle of that section that Moses must have wanted to write in such a multivalent way—regardless of whether he recognized all the meanings of his words. The basis for that claim still stands: as an author, Moses must have (at least implicitly) wanted this as part of the charity which is the essence of his intention.¹³⁸

Second, as I have already suggested, section 42 is deficient in that it leaves out God's role in the inspiration of the reader. The alternate proposal of 43 arises from correcting this deficiency. The 42 account uses Moses' inspired and multivalent intention as a completely sufficient justification for readers to find many truths in the text. But two facts push Augustine toward the alternate solution proposed here: first, as we have already mentioned, Augustine believes that a reader's *recognition* of any truth, in the text or otherwise, is immediately dependent on God's inspiration; second, as he implies here, since God inspired what the Scriptural author wrote, God is in a sense the author of Scripture too, and so we can justify a reading based on His intention just as we can justify one based on Moses'. Together these suggest the solution (perhaps obvious to us from the beginning) that God intended every meaning which He inspires in readers.

¹³⁸ See the analysis of section 35 given in the discussion of section 36, above.

Parallel language with previous sections shows that this proposal is rooted in the consideration of God's role in readers' interpretations. Section 36 says that Scripture "will be a benefit (*profuturae*) for all peoples and throughout the whole world" and section 42 says that through Moses God arranged the text for the "senses of the many, which would see (*visuris*) diverse truths."¹³⁹ Each of these passages address how the text must have been *composed* for future readers. But 43 focuses on how God *will* speak to readers through the text: "whatever You yourself were going to reveal (*revelaturus*) to later readers in those words."¹⁴⁰ The use of the future active participle in each case¹⁴¹ along with the common theme strongly suggests a comparison. Instead of considering what readers will see in the text or what the text will do for them, this last statement refers to what God will do for readers upon encountering the text.

Furthermore, by assigning the future participle not to the text (as in 36) or the reader's sensibility (as in 42) but to God, this proposal breaks down the time barrier between author and reader, composition and interpretation, since God's action does not really admit of temporal division. Thus His inspiration of the author and of readers is, in a sense, contemporaneous, because God's intention must be all at once and always the same. Here we see a point of contact between the two big debates in Confessions XII, about how God created and what the text means. One of the truths

¹³⁹ XII.36: *quae tanto post essent omnibus gentibus profuturae et per universum orbem*. XII.42: *Deus unus sacras litteras vera et diversa visuris multorum sensibus temperavit*.

¹⁴⁰ XII.43: *quidquid eras in eis verbis tu ipse revelaturus legentibus posteris*.

¹⁴¹ The only other instances of the future active participle in *Confessions* XII are in 18 (to refer to "things to come," *rerum venturarum*, along with things past and present) and 37 (*narratio sermocinaturis pluribus profutura*, "the narration that would be a benefit to many future discussers," parallel to the others I have pointed out).

that Augustine depends on to understand the creation and the narrative is that “Your will does not vary with times” (XII.11: *temporibus variatur voluntas tua*). But *voluntas* (along with *velle*, which he also uses of God’s creative will)¹⁴² must remind us of the question of what the author *voluit*. We cannot escape a parallel conclusion that God’s intention as author does not vary, just as His will to create or act does not. Surely this parallelism stands behind the final claim of this section and of Book XII: “I will say what Your Truth wills [*voluerit*] to say to me through his words—Your Truth which also said to that man what it willed [*voluit*].”

Third, Augustine reasserts and builds up his earlier claim that readers must try to find the meaning that the writer had. In section 27 this claim had two formulations:

Omnes quidem qui legimus nitimur hoc indagare atque comprehendere, quod voluit ille quem legimus. . . . dum ergo quisque conatur id sentire in scripturis sanctis quod in eis sensit ille qui scripsit . . .

Indeed, all of us readers are trying to hunt out and comprehend this [meaning] which that writer wanted. . . . Therefore, as long as each one is trying to understand that [meaning] in the holy Scriptures which that writer understood in them. . . .

Note the alternation between what the writer *voluit* and what he *sensit*. I am not sure that he means to draw any distinction in 27, but certainly the rest of what we have seen forces us to dwell on his word choice in 43, where he says:

Si hoc dixero quod sensit minister tuus, recte atque optime (id enim conari me oportet)

If I speak this [meaning] which Your minister understood, I will act rightly and in the best way (for that is what I must attempt)

¹⁴² Cf. also section 18: “Hence He does not will now this, now that, but once and at the same time and always He will all the things that He wills” (*Unde non eum modo velle hoc modo velle illud, sed semel et simul et semper velle omnia quae vult*).

If the writer's intention is to be of any value, it must do something more than simply wish to allow any true meaning that God inspires. Searching for what the writer *voluit intellegi* is no different from searching for any allowable true meaning. But God's intention has already secured these meanings, so there would be no reason to be interested in the writer's intention, if construed only as what he *voluit intellegi*. But it makes sense to give attention to what the writer *sensit* (*vidit, cogitavit, attendit*), if he *sensit* something in particular. This is another strength of the 43 proposal over the 42 proposal, because it has a means to emphasize some particular meaning. As I said in my discussion of 42, if the writer *sensit* every true meaning, then his intention secures one of Scripture's purposes, to speak to readers at every level. But how is the second purpose, to speak the highest truth, secured? That is, how is that meaning given emphasis? By reverting to the 41 proposal, 43 enshrines the highest meaning in what the writer *sensit*, while still securing all other true meanings in what the writer *voluit intellegi*, what he intended to allow because God *sensit* them (as it were) and inspires them in readers. It then makes sense to say that readers have a responsibility to try to find what the writer *sensit*, because that is the best meaning.¹⁴³

To quickly review this section before our final conclusion: in section 43 Augustine pulls back from the maximal proposal in 42 by making God's intention the justification of all the true meanings that readers can find in the text, since it is God that reveals these truths to readers when they find them in the text. Thus we no longer

¹⁴³ We could craft an alternate solution that preserves the maximal proposal of 42 if only we could distinguish *attendere* from *sentire/videre/cogitare*: Moses could have been aware of all the meanings but focused on one in particular. But Augustine does not seem interested in this distinction, since in discussing what the writer meant he switches from *attendisse* in 41 to *cogitavit* in 43.

need Moses to be aware of all of these meanings, though we should still say that charity would require him to approve of whatever true meaning readers could find. But then the role for Moses' particular intention, his *sententia*, is to set apart the truest and most useful meaning of the text—which was the other function Scripture needed to fulfill. This proposal makes sense of Augustine's directive to readers to seek to understand what the writer understood.

A General and a Particular Conclusion

Let me first present a more general explanation of the theory of Scriptural interpretation that Augustine offers in *Confessions* XII and then explain how that theory might be modified a bit given the passage that he is dealing with here. Augustine believes that readers must seek to understand what the human writer particularly understood (*sensit*) in the text, but as long as they are so seeking, they can also legitimately understand other true meanings, which the writer wanted them to understand (*voluit intellegi*), even though he himself may not have been aware of them. More than this, since God reveals these truths to readers in the text and He is the author of Scripture—in that He inspired the author's writing and revealed to him whatever truth(s) he recognized—He certainly intended these true meanings too. We cannot be sure how many meanings the writer was aware of in the text, but charity requires us as readers to believe not only that the writer wanted readers to find any relevant truth they could there (under God's inspiration), but also that he himself understood the truest and most useful meaning possible.

This double intention on the writer's part as well as the double-authoring by man and God secures the two purposes of Scripture, so that we should say that Augustine has a fully intentionalist account of Scriptural interpretation: an interpretation is valid inasmuch as it was intended by the author(s). One might resist this judgment by noting that Augustine's starting premise, in 27, is not that legitimate interpretation is bound by authorial intention, but that it embraces any truth a reader can find. But that is a feature of the dialectic—Augustine begins by asserting the direct opposite of his opponents' thesis—and the section leaves certain problems unresolved, which suggest that this is not the final form of his argument.

The biggest problem with the proposal in section 27 is that it leaves unexplained the relationship between readers and the text or author: are such true interpretations really interpretations *of the text*?¹⁴⁴ That is, is the text simply the occasion for a thought or is it really a means of communication? One could wonder whether invoking God as the author is a way to avoid this dilemma, since any true thought that one has is in some sense a communication from Him, regardless of whether Scripture or something else is the medium. Augustine's plea in 43 certainly makes it appear so:

*Nobis autem, domine, aut ipsam demonstra aut quam placet alteram veram, ut sive nobis hoc quod etiam illi homini tuo sive aliud **ex eorundem verborum occasione** patefacias, tu tamen pascas.*

But to us, Lord, show either that very [meaning that Moses thought of] or whatever other true one pleases You, so that whether You disclose to us this one which you also disclosed to that man of Yours or another **from the occasion of the same words**, it is You who feeds us.

¹⁴⁴ As we will see in chapter 5, this is also the question left unanswered by Augustine's earlier account of interpretation in the *De Utilitate Credendi*.

God can also speak “from the occasion” of a friend’s offhand comment (as in *Confessions* VI.12) or the voice of strangers (*Confessions* VIII.29), and certainly Augustine’s approach to history and typology suggests that we can “read” these events too as part of God’s “text.”¹⁴⁵ But we (and I presume Augustine) would still want to say that interpreting a passage from Terrence as being about Jesus is probably an *error legendi*, however beneficial it may be and even if our interpretation is a God-given and true idea in itself.

The lynchpin that holds the *Confessions* XII theory together as a theory of reading is that the writer could intend for reader to understand other true meanings that God inspires, even if he himself was not aware of these meanings. This might look more like a reader-response theory than an intentionalist one. The fact that the writer intended the text to be “open” (in a restricted way) does not quite entail that the meanings which readers understand are intended by the author, but I think Augustine's account can still be called intentionalist as long as the writer's second-order intention (what I say he *voluit intellegi*)¹⁴⁶ recognizes and points to God's intention and inspiration of the reader. This would imply a recognition on the writer’s part that God reveals to readers whatever truth they understand, at least when it comes to Scripture. Though Augustine's hypothetical situations in 36 and 42 where he puts himself in the writer's position do not clearly say that this is the case, I think we can legitimately take that as his idea.

¹⁴⁵ On this point, cf. Robert Markus, “World and Text in Ancient Christianity I: Augustine” in *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity*, 6-8.

¹⁴⁶ Let me stress one last time that Augustine does not clearly use this term in the sense that I have given it. Rather, I adopt it to describe what he claims for the writer in section 36 (and re-iterates in the middle of 42): that he wrote in such a way (and so intended or would have intended, if asked) that readers can find whatever truth God reveals to them in the words.

More importantly, Augustine's theory gives a certain priority to the writer's intended meaning as the best meaning and compels readers to seek this meaning. This stands in stark contrast to the *contradictores'* opinion that Moses' meaning was really only suited to his carnal audience. Though the *contradictores* seem to be intentionalists, their position is absurd, because the writer's intention lacks value even in their understanding. Augustine's intentionalist position is more compelling because it elevates the writer's intention and so makes it worth seeking.¹⁴⁷

A more particular theory

Thus far I have tried to generalize the theory from *Confessions* XII so that it can apply to Scriptural interpretation in general. But we can move a bit further than the above conclusion if we restrict our inquiry to the passage of Scripture which *Confessions* XII addresses, Genesis 1:1-2. If we look at the interpretations that Augustine approves of in the course of the book, we find that they can all be subsumed under the following:¹⁴⁸

In/through Wisdom (that is, the second Person of the Trinity), God made the formless matter of the material/visible and spiritual/invisible realms, each of which He then (logically posterior) endowed with form, making the visible heaven and earth as well as the spiritual heaven of heaven.

The other true *sententiae* mentioned in book XII can be subsumed to this one because they contain just some portion of the truths which this *sententia* contains. All of these

¹⁴⁷ For more on the significance of Augustine's elevation of the writer's intention, see chapter 5, which deals with the role of authorial intention in interpretation throughout Augustine's works.

¹⁴⁸ For a full list of the possible interpretations, refer the summaries in Appendix 1: first list, 25-26; second list, 29-31; third list, 39-40a.

interpretations are literal¹⁴⁹ interpretations—interpretations based on how much the reader “is capable of in these matters”¹⁵⁰— i.e., matters of the constitution of the world. Because they are all concerned with the same matters they can stack, the better or more comprehensive upon the simpler or less comprehensive. The above interpretation—which more or less corresponds to the one that Augustine himself proposes in XII.16 and 41 and XIII.4¹⁵¹—is at the top of the stack.

And so the interpretive theory that *Confessions* XII offers with regard to this particular passage would run as follows: the meaning that Moses *sensit* is the truest in that it contains all the truths that one could find in the text at the literal level, and so other true literal interpretations simply state a lesser version of this. Moses purposefully wrote in such a way that one could understand his words at lower and higher levels. Though we would still say that Moses had a secondary intention (*voluntas intellegi*)¹⁵² and that he was perhaps not aware of every possible interpretive

¹⁴⁹ That is, the words are taken *proprie* and not *translate* or *figurate*. See Augustine’s explanation of these terms in *Doct. chr.* II.10.15 and my discussion of the passage in the “Clearly stated passages” section of chapter 3, subsection “Obstacles to clarity.”

¹⁵⁰ XII.37: *unde sibi quisque verum quod de his rebus potest . . . trahat.*

¹⁵¹ In the interpretation in XIII.4, he says that “Let there be light” refers to the information of the yet-unformed heaven of heaven, while in XII.16 he is ambivalent whether the text speaks of a formed or unformed spiritual creation. The presence of this interpretation in XIII.4 seems like evidence that it is a figurative interpretation, but in fact we find Augustine explicitly switching to figurative interpretation just after this, in XIII.13, where he starts to consider the light and darkness as members of the Church. The change in style of interpretation is quite obvious. In addition, in *Gn. litt.* IV.28.45, he says that his interpretation of this light as a spiritual light still counts as proper: “Let no one think that what I said about the spiritual light [and several other points] . . . is a way of understanding the ‘day’ and ‘evening and morning’ not properly but figuratively and allegorically: it is true that is understood in a way other than the customary one of this everyday and corporeal light; nevertheless, it is not as if here [everyday sense] it is properly understood and there [in Scripture] it is figuratively understood. For where there is a better and surer light, there is a truer day” (*Nec quisquam arbitretur, illud quod dixi de luce spiritali . . . non iam proprie, sed quasi figurate atque allegorice convenire ad intellegendum diem et vesperam et mane: sed aliter quidem quam in hac consuetudine quotidianae lucis huius et corporalis; non tamen tamquam hic proprie, ibi figurate. Ubi enim melior et certior lux, ibi verior etiam dies.*)

¹⁵² There is an ambiguity between the content referred to by “what Moses *voluit intellegi*” and the disposition in Moses’ mind characterized by the fact that he *voluit intellegi* some set of interpretations.

permutation, he still knew every truth that a reader could find in the text at the literal level.

This explanation fits well with two other features of Augustine's argument. First, if there is an arch-interpretation that comprehends the other true ones, then the proposal in 42, that Moses did explicitly recognize all the true meanings of his words, seems more plausible. Remember that Augustine does not fully retract this proposal; he only says that Moses *unam fortassis vidit*.

Second, and more importantly, this explanation works well with what is implied about Moses in section 41. We saw that the proposal in 41 aligned God as *fontem veritatis* with Moses' words as a *fons* that feeds many rivers/interpretations (so described in 37). Besides highlighting the two sources that the reader has in reading Scripture (Moses' words and intention; God's individual inspiration), the parallel also suggests a similarity or co-operation between these two sources. In my analysis of section 41 I claimed that Moses as author was closer to the Source of Truth, as suggested by the *fons* parallel as well as the ordering there of neighbor, God, Moses. That was why his own understanding (interpretation) of the text was the truest and most useful. But to be closer to a source is precisely to comprehend more of what issues from that source. To offer a slightly revised image: perhaps a single stream of water emerges from the ground at first, but then splits into several streams, which in turn split again. The closer you are to the source, the more individual streams you are

Remember that Moses was not aware of the content that his second order intention pointed to, though I claim that he was aware of having such an intention.

upstream from and the more individual streams are fed by the water that passes through your point.¹⁵³

In chapter 5 I will return to the issue of Augustine's more general theory of interpretation in light of some earlier and later works. This will be important if we want to try to integrate his approach in *Confessions XIII*, which deals with figurative interpretations as well and which does not have the same dialectic concerns as *Confessions XII*. The two explanations which I have given are as far as we can go in dealing with book XII, but points made in other places (and very inchoately in book XIII) will help us see how they might be part of a larger theory.

¹⁵³ I have to admit that I may be using the image differently here than Augustine does in 37. When he gives his last rundown of possible interpretations in 39-40, he does so in a hierarchical format with the most indeterminate at the top. The first division is between those who take *in principio* to mean *primo* or *in sapientia*; he then splits up the possibilities for the *in sapientia* reading on the next rung down. Thus the interpretation at the top, from which all the others branch, actually says the least. His statement in 37 that interpreters draw out whatever truth they can *per longiores loquellarum anfractus* suggests this structure: it takes more work, more bends, to get more out of the words. But I still think my alternative image is valid inasmuch as it deals with the *fons veritatis*. That source is non-linguistic, and so the issue of indeterminate meaning is not present: the closer you are to the source of truth, the more truth you get.

CHAPTER 2

Augustine's Six Principles of Interpretation; Preliminary Problems; and the First principle, Linguistic and Ordinary Knowledge

I have offered the first chapter as a more or less stand-alone introduction to Augustine's interpretive theory. *Confessions* XII has provoked the most scholarly interest, and so this seems like the obvious point of entry. But Augustine's system is much larger than the approach he takes in *Confessions* XII, which, as we have seen, primarily focuses on the relationship between interpretations that are true, the meaning the writer¹⁵⁴ intended, and the role of God as inspirer of the writer and reader. In fact, Augustine has a lot more to say about what makes an interpretation unintended by the writer valid: it is not quite right to say that an interpretation that is true suffices, though the necessary truth of Scripture is the ground upon which further requirements are based.¹⁵⁵ My purpose in these three middle chapters is to explain both how Augustine constructs interpretation from the ground up and what requirements he establishes for evaluating interpretations. These middle chapters focus on the content of interpretations, but in the last I return to the role that seeking the writer's intention plays in the construction and evaluation of interpretation.

¹⁵⁴ As I do throughout this dissertation, I here use the term “writer” to refer to the human author of Scripture, as opposed to the divine author. But “author” on its own may refer to either of them.

¹⁵⁵ We saw a glimpse of this already in the discussions of charity in *Confessions* XII: an interpretation must not only be true, but also build up charity. This is so because, as Augustine indicates in XII.35, Jesus says that “all the Law and the Prophets” (a metonymy for all the Old Testament and by extension all Scripture) is summed up in the command to love God and neighbor. But the relationship between truth and building up charity is very complicated. I treat it fully in the section “The Double Precept of Charity” in chapter 3.

The principal works for these three chapters will be the *De Doctrina Christiana*, books I-III, with some help, especially in chapter 4, from the *De Genesi ad Litteram* (mostly books I and VII) and a few other works here and there. The *Doctr. chr.* is a systematic account of interpretation in manual form and has received a lot of scholarly attention. Works produced thus far tend to be one of three sorts: 1. Summaries of what Augustine says with little analysis added,¹⁵⁶ 2. Discussions of particular aspects or sections of the treatise,¹⁵⁷ or 3. Discussions which touch on various individual statements in the work in connection with larger themes.¹⁵⁸ What is lacking thus far is an analysis of the work as a whole theory of interpretation. Summary does not suffice, because Augustine presents his ideas, as Pollmann has shown, according to the form of the manual genre.¹⁵⁹ This is not to criticize Augustine's presentation. I think it is fairly effective if we consider the purpose of the work, which is the training of clerics to preach. But if we want to know what Augustine's theory is that stands behind this treatment, we need to consider the elements of interpretation in a different order. He begins with a summary of doctrine, because that is the object the preacher must know first and must keep in mind as he works through the text. What we are concerned with, in contrast, is Augustine's foundation and his construction of the theory, and so we must piece together his ideas from the ground up, though this does not correspond with his own order of treatment.

¹⁵⁶ For instance, Prosper Grech, "Hermeneutical Principles of St. Augustine in *Teaching Christianity*," and Richard A. Norris, Jr., "Augustine and the Close of the Ancient Period of Interpretation."

¹⁵⁷ For instance, Isabelle Bochet's excellent "Notes Complémentaire" to *La Doctrine Chrétienne*, or Mark Jordan, "Words and Word: Incarnation and Signification in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*."

¹⁵⁸ For instance, Robert S. Eno, "Doctrinal Authority in Saint Augustine."

¹⁵⁹ See Karla Pollmann's discussion of this point in "Augustine's Hermeneutics as a Universal Discipline!?", 214-216.

In these three chapters I will contend that Augustine relies on six interpretive principles in determining what is or is not a *valid interpretation* (as I will call it) of Scriptural passages. There are at least two other principals that are operative in interpretation, but they are never explicitly cited or formulated. I have focused on these six because Augustine gives some explicit indication that he recognizes them as constitutive or binding factors in interpretation. The names I will give to these six principles are:

1. Linguistic and ordinary knowledge
2. Charity
3. Clearly stated passages
4. Figurative interpretation
5. Church authority
6. Secular claims/knowledge

An interpretation that meets the various requirements¹⁶⁰ derived from these principles will count as a *valid* interpretation—that is, an interpretation whose *content* is unobjectionable. In addition to these six, there is the further question of the role of the writer's intention; properly observing this role results in what I will call a *legitimate interpretation*, which is a more narrow species of valid interpretation. I have dealt with this idea somewhat already, but I will return to the question and to this distinction in chapter 5 in order to consider the matter more fully, in light of Augustine's treatment of the role of the writer's intention in other works in addition to *Confessions* XII. The

¹⁶⁰ I summarize the requirements created by each principle at the conclusion of the discussion of each.

issue only comes up in a very limited, though important, way in the *Doct. chr.*, and so I think it is fair to ignore it for now.

In this chapter I will discuss Augustine's foundational ideas about Scripture and the linguistic and pragmatic foundations for his theory of interpretation, which will lead to a discussion of the first of his principles, linguistic and ordinary knowledge. In the next chapter I will deal with three principles that work in a series—charity, clearly stated passages, and figurative interpretation—which Augustine develops from Scripture on the basis of certain reliable linguistic and literary observations. I call these three principles "internal principles" because they derive their content from Scripture itself. In contrast, the last two principles, which I will deal with in chapter 4, appeal to content external to Scripture. The fifth principle, Church authority, is expressed in creeds and other statements, but also certain types of practice. The sixth principle, which I call secular knowledge or secular claims, is a more complicated source (since some secular claims can be wrong) but still acts as a definitive guide to the interpretation of Scripture.

This chapter is by far the most abstract and based on the least explicit evidence from Augustine. While this is certainly a weakness, I think it is necessary to treat these issues as a foundation for what Augustine works out in the material treated in the next two chapters. I have tried as much as possible to avoid importing categories that Augustine does not at least suggest (he offers very few explicitly), but at the same time my intention is to make his theory as robust as possible, and so I have sometimes addressed questions to him based on my own intuitions about what must be dealt with for his theory to be coherent.

First Principles

At the most general level, Augustine's scriptural hermeneutics depends on the *inspiration* and *authority* of Scripture. We will see that he has some rules for interpreting Scripture that also apply to language more generally, but the distinctive principles of Scriptural interpretation are all determined by or related to this basic fact: that the human writers of Scripture were inspired by God with an authority such that they wrote nothing false. Ultimately, the claim to infallibility is based on the idea that God is really the author of Scripture, and since God "lieth not" (Titus 1:2),¹⁶¹ Scripture must assert only what is true.¹⁶²In the first section of this chapter I will argue that Augustine's principles for interpreting Scripture all depend on two basic claims. First, the meaning of any passage of Scripture is determined by the author's intention, which cannot assert anything false. Second, and perhaps obviously, a valid interpretation of Scripture must only state what is true.

Augustine provides his clearest exposition of these points in a passage of his long treatise *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* (XI.5):

. . . distincta est a posteriorum libris excellentia canonicae auctoritatis Veteris et Novi Testamenti, quae Apostolorum confirmata temporibus per successiones episcoporum et propagationes Ecclesiarum, tamquam in sede quadam sublimiter constituta est, cui serviat omnis fidelis et pius intellectus. Ibi si quid velut absurdum moverit, non licet dicere: Auctor huius libri non tenuit veritatem: sed, aut codex mendosus est, aut interpres erravit, aut tu non intellegis. In opusculis autem posteriorum, quae libris innumerabilibus continentur, sed nullo modo illae sacratissimae canonicarum Scripturarum excellentiae

¹⁶¹ All Scriptural translations are from the Douay-Rheims, unless they are translations of text that Augustine gives, in which case they are my own. See also Hebrews 6:18: "It is impossible for God to lie." Though Augustine only quotes the Titus passage for another purpose in *Civ.* XII.16 and does not refer to the Hebrews passage anywhere, clearly he believes what they say.

¹⁶² This point raises the issue of the relationship between God's intention and the writer's, which I have already discussed somewhat in chapter 1 and will return to in chapter 5.

coaequantur, etiam in quibuscumque eorum invenitur eadem veritas, longe tamen est impar auctoritas. Itaque in eis, si qua forte propterea dissonare putantur a vero, quia non ut dicta sunt intelleguntur, tamen liberum ibi habet lector auditorve iudicium, quo vel approbet quod placuerit, vel improbet quod offenderit: et ideo cuncta eiusmodi nisi vel certa ratione, vel ex illa canonica auctoritate defendantur, ut demonstretur sive omnino ita esse, sive fieri potuisse quod vel disputatum ibi est, vel narratum; si cui displicuerit, aut credere noluerit, non reprehenditur. In illa vero canonica eminentia sacrarum Litterarum, etiamsi unus propheta, seu apostolus, aut evangelista aliquid in suis Litteris posuisse ipsa canonis confirmatione declaratur, non licet dubitare quod verum sit: alioquin nulla erit pagina, qua humanae imperitiae regatur infirmitas, si Librorum canonicorum saluberrima auctoritas, aut contempta penitus aboletur, aut interminata confunditur.

. . . there is a distinction between the books of later authors and the excellence of the canonical authority of the Old and New Testament, which, having been secured in the times of the Apostles through the successions of bishops and the extensions of the Churches, as if set up on high in some seat for every faithful and pious intellect to serve. If there is anything seemingly absurd to disturb one there, it is not permissible for us to say, "The author of this book did not grasp the truth," but either the text is corrupt, or the translator has erred, or you have not understood. In the little works of later authors, however, which are contained in innumerable books, but in no way are equal to that most sacred excellence of the canonical Scriptures, even in those in which the same truth is found, the authority is nevertheless far inferior. Therefore if perhaps any statements in those works are thought to be in disagreement with the truth because they have not been understood as they were said, still the reader or hearer has there a freedom of judgment to approve of what is pleasing to him or to disapprove of what offends him; and therefore in all matters of this sort—unless they may be defended by sure reason or by that authority of the canon so that it may be demonstrated that what is there argued or narrated either is completely true or could be true—a man is not blamed if something displeases him or he is unwilling to believe it. But in that canonical eminence of the sacred Books, even if only one prophet or apostle or evangelist is shown to have set something down in his Books in the very establishment of the canon, it is not permissible to doubt that this is true: otherwise there will be no page by which the infirmity of human ignorance may be ruled, if the most wholesome authority of the canonical Books is either thoroughly destroyed by contempt or endlessly confused.

There are three key points to notice here. First, Augustine makes a categorical distinction between Scripture and other works, even other works by holy and ecclesiastical authors. The difference between Scripture and, say, a sermon of Ambrose, is not necessarily that one contains no error while the other contains some. Rather, the difference is found in the *authority* of the two. Second, this difference of authority entails a difference in the authors. In the case of Scripture, Augustine specifies that one may not believe that “the author of this book did not grasp the truth.” Thus Scripture’s authority does not simply mean that it contains no error, but that it *cannot* contain any error. Third, and relatedly, the difference in the authority of the authors requires a different attitude on the part of the reader. One is free to disagree with Ambrose on some point and thus to think that Ambrose erred, as long as the point is not established by clear reason or Scripture itself. Augustine thinks this is even¹⁶³ allowable when the reader actually misunderstands an author like Ambrose, because there is nothing in principle that prevents a non-canonical author like Ambrose from thinking and meaning something false. But in the case of Scripture, the reader must always turn to an alternate explanation when the text seems to say something false: the most telling option is the third, that he himself is mistaken. If there is a choice between positing that the author thought something false or that the reader has misunderstood, one must always choose the latter for Scripture, but one may choose the former with other texts.

¹⁶³ Or perhaps it is allowable *inasmuch as* the reader has misunderstood Ambrose (*propterea . . . quia* in the passage). The force of this is not clear to me, unless he is simply being pious and refusing to suggest that these authors did err (though acknowledging that they could). But the point must be that a reader who misunderstands and thinks the author states something false is not obligated to believe that he has misunderstood, unlike in the case of Scripture—thus my use of “even.”

This passage makes clear that Augustine identifies the meaning of Scripture with what the author thought. It does not matter whether we consider God or the human writers as author, since the authority and truthfulness of Scripture in either case depends on God's truthfulness, either as author (in regard to those meanings that God alone intends) or inspirer (in regard to those meanings that the human writer also intends). Thus Augustine believes that the meaning of Scripture, of the text, is its authors' meaning.

As we see in the passage, the practical result of this principle is that the reader is obligated to believe that the author did not think anything false. Augustine does not explicitly say here that the reader must seek the author's intention, though we have seen that he does elsewhere.¹⁶⁴ While Augustine talks about and sometimes prefers interpretations of secular texts that do not conform to the author's intention,¹⁶⁵ he explicitly warns readers of Scripture not to knowingly interpret the text in a way other than the author intended, since it tends to undermine faith in Scripture and God—note the parallel to his warning at the end of the passage above.¹⁶⁶ It seems that this idea is simply too bizarre for him to entertain.¹⁶⁷ Of course, if the reader were to propose a meaning in the text that he did not claim to be intended by the divine or human author,

¹⁶⁴ See the discussions of *Confessions* XII.27 and 43 in chapter 1, as well as the subsection on “The *Confessions* Investigation Condition” in chapter 5, which is based on evidence from *Confessions* XII as well as the *Doct. chr.*

¹⁶⁵ See the section on *De Utilitate Credendi* 11 in chapter 5. On Augustine's preference for truth over the writer's intention in the case of secular texts, see Isabelle Bochet, “Le statut de l'histoire de la philosophie selon la Lettre 118 d'Augustin à Dioscore,” as well as Charles Brittain's response to her in “Augustine as a Reader of Cicero,” 99, n.41.

¹⁶⁶ See *Doct. chr.* I.37.41, which I discuss in the “Charity” section of chapter 3, subsection “The philosophical answer,” and in the subsection “Two problems with the new account” in chapter 5.

¹⁶⁷ On the possibility of such an interpretive attitude and different ways that Late Antique readers thought of what they were seeking in the text, see Aaron Peltari, *The Space That Remains: Reading Latin Poetry in Late Antiquity*, chapters 1 and 2.

then that interpretation would not be required to avoid falsity, because the author's intention is the authoritative expression, the guarantee of the truth of the meaning of the text.

The foundational issue here is not what particular proposition the writer intended, but the truth value of the proposed proposition. Augustine does not say that the reader should not believe that the writer intended something which he in fact did not, but only that he should not believe that the writer intended something which he *could* not—that is, something false. The claim that the author's intention in any passage asserts only something true is more foundational than the claim that the intention for that passage asserts x or y. This might seem like a weak intentionalism, since it would allow—and in fact does, as we have seen—interpretations that correspond to the quality but not the content of the author's intention. But the proposition intended by the passage must assert *something* particular in order to have a truth value, and so the reader who adheres to the belief that the author meant nothing false and that his interpretation must do likewise is necessarily looking for what the author meant. To give up on this search or willfully to go against the author's intention would undermine the basis for claiming that the text means something true, because one would be willingly ignoring the intentional force that gives a normative meaning to the text¹⁶⁸, without which we could not say that the text must mean something true.

¹⁶⁸ I should stress again that the intention of either author—human or divine—can supply this normative force.

What Is Asserted

The weight given to the author's intention plays another important role as well. If we say that the meaning of the text is determined by the author's intention, then we must figure out a way to find what the author intended. The obvious first step is to read what he wrote. But almost immediately a problem arises, because there are many passages in Scripture which *prima facie* state something false or objectionable. The fundamental problem is the difficulty of the language, but one must also add to the difficulty by interpreting some passages, which seemingly contradict rational claims or other passages, in a less than obvious way. As Augustine says (*Doct. chr.* II.6.7),

Multis et multiplicibus obscuritatibus et ambiguitatibus decipiuntur qui temere legunt, aliud pro alio sentientes; quibusdam autem locis quid vel falso suspicentur non inveniunt, ita obscure dicta quaedam densissimam caliginem obducunt.

Those who read [Scripture] rashly are led astray by many different obscurities and ambiguities, understanding one thing instead of another; moreover, in some passages they cannot figure out even what they would be wrong to believe, with such obscurity do some words spread their densest darkness.

We could try to propose *ad hoc* interpretations that avoid falsity for each troublesome passage, but it would be a messy business. How can the reader know which statements to take at face value, how to resolve apparent internal contradictions, and when to accommodate the meaning of a statement to a rational claim or deny that claim? If a reader desires to interpret Scripture according to a consistent method, he might be overwhelmed by the number of possible interpretations—all interacting with each other—that he would have to keep in mind, and so find the project hopeless.

Some of these questions can only be answered by the principles which we will cover in the upcoming chapters, but a more fundamental question must be addressed now: How do we decide what counts as a passage such that it must state something true? Though the text is authoritative and the author is inspired, Augustine does not claim that every single thing said in Scripture is true, unless we understand "said" in a special sense.¹⁶⁹ But if the meaning of Scripture is established by the author's intention, then what Scripture actually claims as true is equivalent to what the author *asserts*. And so the question becomes: How do we figure out what it is that the author *asserts* in the text?

We have already seen an external limit on what the author could assert (only what is true), but we also want some sort of *textual* rules that help us identify the unit of assertion as a discrete piece of text. Augustine has several pieces of advice on what sort of passages do not count as assertions (or assert something special), but before we even consider that, we also have to make two theoretical provisions on what counts as a discrete piece of text and how the meaning of this assertion, this unit of text, is established in connection to the author and the rest of the text.

First, though the assertion is a discrete unit of text, its meaning almost always depends on more than what that piece of text explicitly says. Scriptural passages have a particular opaqueness that often requires context beyond the normal pragmatic

¹⁶⁹ He does say some things which suggest such a naive view, but I think we understand it in the way that follows in my argument. In *Doct. chr.* II.7.9, for instance, he says that the reader must neither contradict the passages he understands in Scripture nor think that he could write those passages better whose meaning he does not understand: he must "rather think and believe that what is written there is better and truer—even if it is hidden—than what we could understand on our own" (*cogitare potius et credere id esse melius et verius quod ibi scriptum est, etiam si lateat, quam id quod nos per nosmetipsos sapere possumus*).

context set (speaker, addressee, time, place, pronoun reference, etc.).¹⁷⁰ Only rarely does the unit of text on its own provide an adequate guide to its meaning, though we will see that there are a number of difficulties even for passages that Augustine calls "clearly stated."

Second, since Augustine believes that the meaning of the text stands not in the text itself but in the author's intention, the author's understanding of his text might contain much more than the strict literal meaning of the text itself. Thus the author's passage (what is in the author's mind) can meet criteria on its own which the bare text can only meet with the assistance of context or outside information. In John Searle's well-known terminology, my "author's passage" is his "speaker meaning" of the text, while the bare text is his "sentence meaning," which can be somewhat indeterminate. The speaker meaning is purely the object of the speaker's intention, whereas the sentence meaning is determined by the general rules of language.¹⁷¹

Third, just as the assertion intended by the author involves his implicit and explicit thoughts in addition to the bare text, so a proper interpretation by the reader must involve other information beyond the bare text. The speaker meaning and sentence meaning can differ from each other because the speaker can use the elements of the passage in a special sense or in a context that changes the passage's meaning. But in the same way, the reader must bring contextual or external information to his interpretation of the bare text in order to attempt to move beyond sentence meaning to

¹⁷⁰ For more on context sets and how they work, see David Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game," David Kaplan, "On the Logic of Demonstratives," and Robert Stalnaker, "Assertion" in his *Context and Content*.

¹⁷¹ Searle, "Literary Theory and Its Discontents," 645.

speaker meaning. Thus it makes sense to say that in addition to the author's passage and the bare text, there is a "reader's passage" that comprises the text and the relevant information that the reader brings to the bare text.¹⁷² Because readers presuppose that the author meant nothing false (he was, in a sense, required not to mean anything false), they are required to offer an interpretation that does not say anything false, and so are often obligated to use other information in order to reconstruct the author's idea that stands behind the text.

The move from sentence meaning to some intended meaning may be a necessary part of all language understanding by intelligent interpreters.¹⁷³ Regardless, it is quite clear that Augustine is trying to do this in his interpretations, and, as I have already said, the very idea of Scripture being true presupposes that there is an intentional restriction on the meaning or meanings that a passage of Scripture can have. I think it is safe to assume that this much is true for Augustine without any further argument. As I have already said, the principle that the author of Scripture must have meant something true applies equally well to the divine and human authors, because it is God as author or inspirer who guarantees this veracity. Thus I shall use the phrase "speaker meaning" just as "author's intention," without prejudice to either author, human or divine. But we shall see that a somewhat opposite principle also obtains, that the search for the author's intention as the meaning of the text is always

¹⁷² Searle speaks of the same trichotomy in comparing authorial intentionalism, New Criticism, and reader response theory. See Searle, "Literary Theory and Its Discontents," 654-5.

¹⁷³ I mean that when we hear or read a sentence, we seem to necessarily presuppose a mind that produced this sentence from an idea, which is what justifies our use of outside information in understanding the sentence.

attached first to the human writer and then, through him, to God. Augustine makes this clear in *Doct. chr.* II.5.6, a passage I will return to in chapter 5:

Quam [Scripturam] legentes nihil aliud appetunt quam cogitationes voluntatemque illorum a quibus conscripta est invenire et per illas voluntatem Dei.

Those who read Scripture are seeking nothing else than the thoughts and intention of those by whom it was co-written, and through those [thoughts/intentions] the will of God.

I leave many questions about this little passage aside for now in order to highlight one important point: the meaning that we are seeking is a human meaning, something that a human mind is capable of.¹⁷⁴ I think Augustine offers the principle in *Doct. chr.* II.5.6 because it maintains the structure or language and meaning: Scripture is not completely esoteric. God's intention incarnates first in a human intention, and then in human words. And thus our investigation of these words follows human principles, even if some other special principles are added in.

Limits on What Can Be Asserted

I have already said that the unit of text which must be true is what the author asserts. But we need to understand what counts as an assertion. I will first argue that we need to understand "assertion" broadly, to include any predication or implied predication that the author supports. But we will then need to restrict that based on certain textual features that indicate whether an apparent assertion is supported by the author or not.

¹⁷⁴ In chapter 5, I will revise this claim somewhat to include meanings/ideas that the human mind is capable of under supernatural conditions.

In the first place, we need to understand what "assertion" comprises. Let us first consider sentence-types. Declarative sentences offer the clearest example: "God made heaven and earth" is a statement that the author of Genesis clearly means to assert. Augustine understands the clause as an assertion of Moses, though exactly what Moses meant by it is not clear to him.¹⁷⁵ But we can also understand imperative sentences as asserting their corresponding declarative statements (judgments). For instance, the numerous instances of "Praise the Lord" that one finds in the Psalms can be taken as asserting a claim, "It is right to praise God."¹⁷⁶ Of course, rhetorical questions can just as well be carriers of assertions, but their interpretation presents little to no distinct trouble as long as we re-conceive of them as statements.

Moreover, any presuppositions that are contained in larger statements must also be taken as assertions in themselves. For instance, Jesus says in Matthew 23:33-35:

You serpents, generation of vipers, how will you flee from the judgment of hell? Therefore behold I send to you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them you will put to death and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city: That upon you may come all the just blood that hath been shed upon the earth, from the blood of Abel the just, even unto the blood of Zacharias the son of Barachias, whom you killed between the temple and the altar" (D-R).

Augustine refers to this passage often in his debates with the Pelagians. While resisting the Pelagian conclusion that Abel was free from sin, he nevertheless accepts that the passage must entail that Abel was in fact righteous in some sense. The implied

¹⁷⁵ Cf. *Conf.* XI.5, XII.27, 41-2.

¹⁷⁶ If we want to avoid this type of reduction, we could also say that Scripture/Scriptural authors assert only what is true and command only what is right.

predication "Abel is just" is a presupposition, and therefore is necessarily asserted by a statement of the clause in which it is embedded. We could similarly say that this passage presupposes that Zechariah the son of Barachiah existed, and that this is therefore asserted.

This gives us the broadest base to start from: any presupposition, any implied predication can be asserted under the right circumstances. Nevertheless, one must make some careful distinctions and qualifications in order to demarcate what does and does not count as an assertion. Augustine gives us a fair amount of guidance in this matter. Most obviously, the speaker must be a truthful speaker. We can assume this for the narrators in Scripture and for Jesus, and in most cases for those who are praised in the text (though there are limits to this last group).¹⁷⁷ But when the speaker is a bad person, they may, obviously, be lying. But there are more particular considerations as well. First, statements and commands whose logical status depends on context are not directly asserted. Second, in many cases the sentence meaning of a passage must be informed by more distant context or external information in order to specify what is or is not being asserted. Third, and most interestingly, the sentence meaning of some passages simply does not obtain, most often because they are figurative.

1. Assertions requiring immediate context

When a statement or action is attributed to a person who is explicitly and proximately indicated by Scripture to be bad, it is fairly obvious that Scripture cannot

¹⁷⁷ See the section in chapter 3 on "Figurative Interpretation," subsection "Two types of mixed figurative-literal passage and a contrast case."

be said to assert the statement which it quotes. Rather, it asserts that “x said [the quotation],” whether it explicitly states this or not. For instance, the author of Psalm 13:1 (ascribed to David) does not assert, “There is no God,” but rather, “The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Scripture and the author vouch that this is what the fool has said (in his heart),¹⁷⁸ not that what the fool has said (there) is true.¹⁷⁹

Likewise, Augustine notes that the reader must be careful when he runs across a conditional statement or *reductio* argument. As an example in *Doct. chr.* II.31.49-32.50, he uses St. Paul’s line of reasoning regarding the resurrection of the dead in I Corinthians 15:13: If the dead are not raised, then Christ is not raised, and likewise, if Christ is not raised, Paul’s preaching and the Corinthians’ faith is worthless. Though the consequent of each statement could be construed as an assertion in itself, that assertion in itself is false. But when one understands these statements as consequents of a conditional, then one sees that the whole conditional is the actual assertion, and thus that the claim which must be true is the logical relationship between the antecedent and consequent.

Based on these two cases, we should say that Scripture does not assert every predication which is part of a larger logical structure, though it does assert a

¹⁷⁸ However, Augustine says in *De Consensu Evangelistarum* II.12.28 that the gospel writers (and so presumably other Scriptural writers) were free to replace words, reorder speeches, leave out details, and order events as they wanted. So we should presuppose that Scripture asserts that speakers spoke the exact words given, or that events happened in the exact order given, etc., unless the text explicitly claims it or there are other strong reasons to support the claim. On this point, see Carol Harrison, “Not Words but Things: Harmonious Diversity in the Four Gospels,” 162-165. But note that I disagree with her about Augustine’s idea of the Scriptural writers’ intention.

¹⁷⁹ There is also the subtler linguistic matter of what type of statement is here being asserted. The context and the rules of English articles suggest that “the fool” is a generalization, such that the statement is equivalent to the more formal proposition, “all fools say in their heart, etc.” One must, of course, be sensitive to the normal operations and possible ambiguities of language in determining what is being asserted.

predication in a larger argument when the conclusion is clearly asserted and depends on a statement which includes or presupposes that predication. Though even an implied predication can count as an assertion, as a unit of truth, we have to look at the statement to which it belongs to tell whether it is in fact asserted.

2. Assertions requiring distant or external information

In some cases an apparent assertion is not modified by its immediate context but must be understood in light of more distant (Scriptural) context or external information. For instance, in *Gn. litt.* I.14.28 Augustine refers to Wisdom 11:18 (“You made the world from formless matter”) in order to support his interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2 (“In the beginning God made heaven and earth, and the earth was formless and invisible”) as speaking about the formless matter from which God would make the formed, visible world. The passages are mutually informing, since the one from Wisdom makes it clear that God used formless matter to make the world, while the one from Genesis makes it clear that God made the formless matter as well. Independently, they are each unclear on some aspect. Indeed, even together it is not entirely clear what the “formless matter” or “formless and invisible earth” is, and so Augustine suggests the philosophical distinction between matter and form and the logical priority of unformed to formed matter to explain these terms. In this case the apparent assertions of the text are insufficiently specified without consideration of other information.

But other apparent assertions might even make false claims without the consideration of additional information. For instance, in the genealogies of Jesus in

Matthew and Luke,¹⁸⁰ Jesus' (supposed) father Joseph is said to be the son of Jacob and Heli, respectively. At least one of these assertions must be false, if taken at face value. The distant context of the two passages tell us this. As a solution, Augustine appeals to some external information with distant Scriptural support: one list may give Joseph's biological father, the other his adopted father. He claims that adoption was common among the Hebrews and cites Genesis 48:5-6 as evidence of this, saying that the patriarch Joseph adopted his two grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh.¹⁸¹ In this case, again, greater specification has clarified the assertion, the only difference from the previous example being that the sentence meaning of one of the genealogies would appear to assert something false without this additional information.

As I have already suggested, in cases like these the text by itself still counts as an assertion even though we readers have to look to other evidence, because it corresponds to a unit of thought in the author's mind, and that thought presumably includes these further specifications (at least implicitly), since the author must assert only what is true.

3. Assertions based on figurative interpretation

But there are also a great number of passages in Scripture which appear to assert something false or bad, but which Augustine claims do not need other context in order to be further specified or modified; rather, they need to be read in a different

¹⁸⁰ Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38.

¹⁸¹ *De Consensu Evangelistarum* II.3.5. The more well-known solution is that one genealogy is of Joseph, the other of Mary; Luke is generally preferred as giving Mary's descent, since he says that "Jesus was, as was supposed, the son of Joseph," which one could take to mean both that he was not biologically Joseph's son and that Joseph's name is an intrusion in the list.

register, as speaking figuratively and not literally.¹⁸² In such cases the sentence meaning of the text is disconnected from the speaker meaning, and thus from what is actually asserted.¹⁸³ I will return to these cases at length in the section on "Figurative Interpretation" in chapter 3. In some of these cases, the figurative meaning of the passage can be worked out fairly easily, but most of the time Augustine instructs the reader to construct an interpretation based on information asserted in the clearly stated passages of Scripture (though he also has recourse to the authoritative statements of the Church as well as sure philosophical or empirical truths). In such cases, I take it that Augustine would not claim that the passage itself asserts what the interpreter reads in it, but that other sources (ideally in the text, though the other two work as well) supply the assertion. In such cases the reader is not really providing an exegesis, but a placeholder interpretation.

Conclusion

To sum it up: the unit of truth in Scripture is the assertion, which is any predication that the text directly asserts or presupposes, implies through a command, implies through a logical relationship with some assertion, or approves in a character's words or actions. Besides those predications (and commands) which Scripture explicitly does not support, the words or actions of bad characters are not asserted to

¹⁸² For this distinction, see *Doct. chr.* II.10.15 and my discussion of Augustine's theory and terminology of signification in the "Clearly Stated Passages" section of chapter 3, subsection "Obstacles to clarity."

¹⁸³ One might think that sentence meaning could already involve metaphorical meaning, and maybe this is the case for certain metaphors that are very common, but in general any sentence should be able to be *used* metaphorically, just like any sentence can be used ironically, and so we cannot explain the meaning of such utterances based on sentence meaning. For more on this point, see H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Studies in the Way of Words*, 33-34 (example 2a) and Merrie Bergmann, "Metaphorical Assertions," 230.

be true or good, and predications that are part of a larger logical structure (e.g., a hypothetical syllogism) are only asserted on the condition set out above. In some cases, additional information is required to understand the assertion made by a predication: without this information the predication can be insufficiently specific (and so admit undesirable possibilities) or simply false or bad. The latter especially holds in the case of certain texts that have a figurative sense, where the actual assertions of the passage are not definitively accessible.¹⁸⁴ In all of these difficult examples the constant solution is to refer to context or other passages in order to clarify what is being asserted. But we cannot make this appeal *ad infinitum*. Certain passages need to be clear in their assertions, so that nothing outside of the immediate context is required in order to understand them properly. We will see how this problem can be addressed in the next chapter.

Linguistic and Ordinary Means

Though Augustine's hermeneutics focuses on instruments of interpretation that are more philosophical or unique to Scripture, he also offers more practical and general advice. Aside from extended treatments on ambiguity in *De Dialectica* 9-10 and *Doct. chr.* III,¹⁸⁵ his main treatment of what I call "linguistic and ordinary means of interpretation" is found in *Doct. chr.* II.11.16-40.60. I group his wide-ranging advice there together as his first principle of Scriptural interpretation, though much of

¹⁸⁴ See the section on "Figurative Interpretation" in chapter 3, subsection "The relationship between clearly stated and figurative passages," for more on this point.

¹⁸⁵ Tarmo Toom presents a summary and analysis of these two treatments in his article, "Augustine on Ambiguity."

it is applicable to reading other texts too. I will offer a brief summary and then move on to a couple comments from the *Doct. chr.* on the role of context (*circumstantia*) in choosing among possible meanings of a passage.

***Doct. chr.* II.11.16-40.60**

In the first part of book II Augustine presents an introductory treatment of what *signa* are and how they function, in contrast to his treatment of *res* in the first book. After a brief treatment of the canon of the Scriptures¹⁸⁶ and the spiritual preparation necessary for an interpreter, he makes a crucial claim in 10.15:

Duabus autem causis non intelleguntur quae scripta sunt, si aut ignotis aut ambiguis signis obteguntur. Sunt autem signa vel propria vel translata.

There are two reasons why things that are written are not understood: because they are obscured by either unknown or ambiguous signs. Signs, moreover, are either proper or transferred.

These two distinctions mark out the project for the rest of book II and the first half of book III (up to the discussion of Tychonius' rules).¹⁸⁷ The remainder of this book deals with unknown signs, both proper and transferred (or figurative), while book III deals with ambiguous proper and transferred signs.¹⁸⁸ It is enough for now to say that proper signs signify those things "which they were instituted to signify" while transferred

¹⁸⁶ I discuss this treatment in the section on "Church Authority" in chapter 4, subsection "Church authority and the canon of Scripture."

¹⁸⁷ For an outline of the *Doct. chr.* that highlights these distinctions, see Karla Pollmann, "Augustine's Hermeneutics as a Universal Discipline!?", 214-216.

¹⁸⁸ For more on this distinction, see *Doct. chr.* II.10.15 and my discussion of Augustine's theory and terminology of signification in the "Clearly Stated Passages" section of chapter 3, subsection "Obstacles to clarity."

signs signify the thing they were instituted to signify, and through that thing another thing.

In the following sections, Augustine first directs his reader to acquaint himself with the original languages of Scripture, Hebrew and Greek (11.16), as the main remedy for ignorance of proper signs. He recognizes that for most people this is difficult or impossible—he himself did not know Hebrew and was not fluent in Greek. Thus he gives several options for readers who do not know these languages when they come to a difficult passage in the Latin translation: first, compare different translations or different manuscripts of the same translation (presumably the latter would hold for original language manuscripts as well); second, ask someone who knows the original languages to look into it; third, if the problem is a strange *locutio* (an expression translated literally into Latin, which does not quite make sense in Latin), look for a passage that uses the same *locutio* but shows the meaning; fourth, look at the context or other passages, to see if some other information clarifies the difficulty (12.17-14.21). In comparing translations, he also advises readers to prefer the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament and the Latin *Itala* translation of the Old and New Testaments, though he regards the Septuagint as an inspired translation of the Hebrew, and says that it, along with the Greek New Testament, should be preferred to any (other) translation (15.22).¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ See also *Civ.* 18.43, where Augustine makes it clear that he thinks that the Septuagint is just as inspired as the Hebrew text, even in its additions and omissions: *Spiritus enim, qui in Prophetis erat, quando illa dixerunt, idem ipse erat etiam in Septuaginta viris, quando illa interpretati sunt; qui profecto auctoritate divina et aliud dicere potuit, tamquam propheta ille utrumque dixisset, quia utrumque idem Spiritus diceret, et hoc ipsum aliter, ut, si non eadem verba, idem tamen sensus bene intelligentibus dilucesceret, et aliquid praetermittere et aliquid addere, ut etiam hinc ostenderetur non humanam fuisse in illo opere servitatem, quam verbis debebat interpretis, sed divinam potius potestatem, quae mentem replebat et regebat interpretis.*

In contrast, he directs readers to cure their ignorance of figurative signs by a knowledge of both language and things. Regarding language, he says that readers should learn the meaning of the many proper names in Scripture, by which he must mean their etymological meaning (16.23). Regarding things, he suggests that one become familiar with the nature of animals, plants, and minerals so that one can more readily understand the purpose of comparisons and allegories which mention them (16.24). Lastly, he says that the reader should learn the significance of numbers, seasons, periods of life, and music, perhaps meaning musical ratios (16.25-26). His examples mostly focus on number and seem fairly ad hoc.¹⁹⁰ The point is to work out a significance for larger numbers by breaking them down into the basic numbers whose significance is already known (e.g., 3 refers to the Trinity). His explanations from music are similar.

Finally and most generally—after asides on the permissibility of "profane" knowledge and a treatment on why one must not trust in superstitious, magical, or demonic signs—¹⁹¹Augustine advises his readers to learn anything from human matters and disciplines that might be useful for understanding Scripture: human institutions and arrangements like measurements or writing (25.39-26.40), history (28.42), natural science (29.45-46), mechanical arts (30.47), dialectic and logic (31.48-

¹⁹⁰ For instance, in section 25 he explains the significance of 40 and 50 by reference to other numerical objects: Jesus fasts for 40 days because $4 \times 10 = 40$, four representing all time by the four parts of repeating time (e.g., morning, day, evening, night), 10 representing all knowledge, the 3 of the Trinity + the 7 of man, which itself is composed of the 3 parts of ilfē (heart, soul, mind) and 4 parts of the body (the 4 elements). Since we live in time, Augustine says, we must abstain from joy in time, so as to enjoy eternity.

¹⁹¹ Robert Markus ("Augustine on Magic: A Neglected Semiotic Theory," 381-384) argues that this discussion of magic as partaking in demonic signs is reflective of Augustine's theory of signification and sign-communities. The essential fact in language for Augustine in *Doct. chr.*, Markus claims, is intentionality. Thus magic is unlike science in that it is an "illocutionary act."

35.53), the rules and use of rhetoric (37.55), mathematics (38.56-57), and philosophy, especially Platonic philosophy (40.60).¹⁹² Clearly these are *things* which the reader must learn about, but they aid in the *proper* interpretation of the Scriptural text. He concludes by praising those who have written works explaining the significance of Scriptural names and the history that Eusebius compiled to explain those passages in Scripture which require such knowledge to be understood, and he wishes that others would write works explaining only what is necessary in order to understand the passages in Scripture that involve places, or animals, or numbers, etc. (39.59), and he says that Christians must claim as their own any truth wherever they find it, as the Israelites took gold from the Egyptians when they left that land (40.61).

Though Augustine's advice is all fairly humdrum here, it has some profound implications and raises some important questions. First, with regard to language and texts, there is a tension between knowledge of the languages *simpliciter* and knowledge of the languages *as used in Scripture*. Probably Augustine knew of no or very little Hebrew literature outside of the Old Testament, and so a knowledge of the language of the Old Testament was more or less a knowledge of Hebrew for him. But Greek was a different matter, and one should remember that he considered the Septuagint to be of at least equal weight with the Hebrew text.¹⁹³ The question is: how much should an interpreter of the Greek text of Scripture depend on his outside knowledge of the language in interpreting Scripture? Augustine predominantly depends on Scriptural usage to explain Scripture—and this is only good linguistic

¹⁹² I discuss the import of natural science and philosophy at greater length in the section on “Secular Claims” in chapter 4.

¹⁹³ See above, on 15.22, and the note about *Civ.* 18.43.

practice, to treat a text's common usage as its normal usage—but seems to leave open the possibility that one could evaluate the meaning of the text based on parallels in other literature.

Second, though Augustine doubts the value of secular knowledge in itself, he thinks that there is a lot of knowledge one could acquire outside of Scripture which would be of benefit in interpreting Scripture—indeed, that one *must* acquire knowledge that can only be gotten from outside sources in order to understand certain passages. At times, especially with regard to philosophical knowledge, Augustine's approach seems to portray the most capable interpreter as the one who learns everything necessary for interpretation without Scripture, then reads and understands the hidden statements of Scripture on the basis of this outside knowledge. As far as cold, hard facts go (such as those about history), I think this is probably the view he has: this is why he wishes in 39.59 that capable persons would write books explaining all (and only) those facts which one needs in order to understand many passages. But at the conclusion of *Doct. chr.* II (42.63) he explains that Scripture contains everything that is really worth knowing for its own sake:

. . . tanta fit cuncta scientia quae quidem est utilis, collecta de libris Gentium, si divinarum Scripturarum scientiae comparetur. Nam quidquid homo extra didicerit, si noxium est ibi damnatur, si utile est, ibi invenitur. 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 discuntur.

. . . all the knowledge collected in the books of the pagans, even that which is useful, is that much less if it is compared to the knowledge in the divine Scriptures. For whatever a man may learn outside of Scripture, if it is harmful, it is condemned there; if it is useful, it is found there. And although anyone may find there all the things which

he has usefully learned in other places, he will find much more abundantly there those things which are never learned in any other place, but only in the wonderful sublimity and wonderful humility of those Scriptures.

Scripture not only contains important truths that cannot be found anywhere else, but also everything important that can be found elsewhere. As we will see in the section on "Secular Claims" in chapter 4, by this he must mean not that Scripture explains every important and necessary point sufficiently, but that those who know the point can find it there: about form and matter, for instance, or the nature of God's eternity. This is perhaps why he says one can find such points in Scripture but learn them from other sources.

The role of context

The necessity of seeking out knowledge in order to understand Scripture better is the key point Augustine makes about the knowledge of things (what I call "ordinary knowledge") in this section. But he also makes a very important point about language and reading texts in general: that we should use context to understand the meaning of a passage. This may seem obvious, but it is a very valuable idea and one that sometimes is in tension with other elements of Augustine's theory that would maximize the meaning of passages.

I have just said a few pages ago that Augustine predominantly depends on Scripture's common usage to explain a particular usage, and we have seen his direction to seek out other examples of a strange word or *locutio* to explain the particular example under consideration. Though all of Scripture is to a certain degree context for

any individual passage, the more immediate context does seem to hold more weight.

When he moves on to discuss ambiguity in *Doct. chr.* III, he has only three "linguistic" tools to resolve the difficulty—that is, only three tools that do not carry heavy theological presuppositions with them. He says in 4.8:

Rarissime igitur et difficillime inveniri potest ambiguitas in propriis verbis, quantum ad libros divinarum Scripturarum spectat, quam non aut circumstantia ipsa sermonis, qua cognoscitur scriptorum intentio, aut interpretum collatio aut praecedentis linguae solvat inspectio.

Thus only rarely and with great difficulty can one find an ambiguity in proper words (as far as looking at the books of the divine Scriptures goes) which neither the immediate context of the passage—by which the intention of the writers is recognized—nor a comparison of translations nor a study of the original language resolves.

Clearly the appeal to the original languages only works if the ambiguity is not present there, and a lack of ambiguity in translations should carry no weight if the ambiguity of the original cannot be resolved.¹⁹⁴ Conversely, however, differences in translation may signal an ambiguity in the original (or the difficulty of expressing the full idea with a single term in translation), which is why the interpreter who does not know the original languages should consult multiple translations.¹⁹⁵ Sometimes an ambiguous word has radically different meanings, one of which is simply wrong, and so one must watch out for translations that fall victim to this.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Of course, if one is like Augustine and does not really know the original language (just Hebrew in his case), then one can only rely on translations.

¹⁹⁵ *Doct. chr.* II.12.17.

¹⁹⁶ *Doct. chr.* II.12.18. Augustine says that a clause from Romans 3:15 (quoting Isaiah 59:7) is often incorrectly translated as "their feet are *sharp* to shed blood," when it really means "their feet are swift to shed blood." The ambiguity is found in the Greek term ὀξεῖς. The former option would probably have to have a figurative sense, and Augustine's certainty in taking the more sensible interpretation seems to be based on his principle that one should take a passage literally when possible (*Doct. chr.* III.15.23, see my analysis in the subsection "Requirements for clear and figurative interpretation," in chapter 3).

All three of these were suggested before, but his reference to *circumstantia ipsa sermonis* here is a little different from his instruction in II.14.21 to figure out an unknown term or expression by memorizing it and waiting to run across a passage that clarifies it by context. Part of the reason for the change is the difference between an unknown and an ambiguous expression: context sometimes teaches us what a term means, but rarely determines it sufficiently. But in the case of ambiguity we have only two or three options to start with, so there is much less work that the context has to do to resolve the problem.

One might expect a more expansive treatment of the role of context in interpretation, but the only other abstract advice Augustine gives is in *Doct. chr.* I.37.41 (a passage to which I will return often), where he describes a reader who has derived an otherwise-legitimate interpretation of a passage, but then in reading further "runs into other things which cannot be made to fit with his interpretation."¹⁹⁷ In this situation, if the further text of Scripture is true (which it must be), then his interpretation cannot be true. This point seems obvious enough, but note how restricted it is as well: it only offers a case where the context actually *contradicts* something in the proposed interpretation. Again, one might expect more: context seems particularly useful in focusing the topic that the passage must be addressing and in determining whether a proposed interpretation seems relevant. He says a little about this, rather abstractly, in *De Genesi ad Litteram* I.19.38, that the *contextio sermonis*

¹⁹⁷ *Doct. chr.* I.37.41: *Asserendo enim temere quod ille non sensit quem legit, plerumque incurrit in alia quae illi sententiae contexere nequeat.*

could show that a writer was not thinking of some truth, even if it would otherwise appear to be relevant.¹⁹⁸

At many points, particularly in figurative interpretation, one wonders whether he neglects this consideration precisely. The issue arises rather poignantly in *De Spiritu et Littera* 4.6:

Neque enim solo illo modo intellegendum est quod legimus: Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat, ut aliquid figurate scriptum, cuius est absurda proprietas, non accipiamus sicut littera sonat, sed aliud quod significat intuentes interiorem hominem spirituali intelligentia nutriamus. . . . Non ergo isto solo modo intellegendum est quod ait Apostolus: Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat, sed etiam illo eoque vel maxime, quod apertissime alio loco dicit: Concupiscentiam nesciebam, nisi lex diceret: Non concupisces; et paulo post ait: Occasione accepta peccatum per mandatum fefellit me et per illud occidit.

For not in that way alone should we understand that which we read, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” so that we take something written figuratively, whose proper sense is absurd, not as the letter sounds, but we nourish the inner man with a spiritual understanding by considering what else it signifies. . . . Therefore what the Apostle said, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” should not be understood only in this way, but also in that sense—and especially in that sense—which he very openly states in another place: “I would not have known coveting unless the Law said, ‘Do not covet,’” and a little later, “Having seized the opportunity, sin deceived me through the commandment and through it killed me.”

Augustine quotes this passage from Paul many times throughout his works and interprets it in precisely the sense that he here suggests is not primary. He argues here

¹⁹⁸ *Gn. litt.* I.19.38: “If, however, sure reason demonstrates that this is true, even so it will be uncertain whether the writer of the holy Books wished this to be understood in those words or something else no less true. But if the remaining context of the speech proves that he did not mean this, the different thing which that one wished to be understood will not thereby be false; but it also [will be] true and a thing more useful to learn.” (*Si autem hoc verum esse certa ratio demonstraverit, adhuc incertum erit utrum hoc in illis verbis sanctorum Librorum scriptor sentiri voluerit, an aliud aliquid non minus verum. Quod si caetera contextio sermonis non hoc eum voluisse probaverit, non ideo falsum erit aliud, quod ipse intellegi voluit; sed et verum, et quod utilius cognoscatur*).

for a different sense, based on an analogue in another of statement of Paul, the meaning of which is more clearly explained there. Thus Augustine here uses a technique analogous to that suggested for resolving unknown expressions: he found another passage which was talking about the same thing but explained itself more.¹⁹⁹ Yet he could perhaps have gotten this meaning simply by looking at the context of the first quotation, which talks about the "ministry of death, written and engraved on stones," ministered by Moses.²⁰⁰

How much could one push Augustine on the issue of context, then? I have already suggested that his idea of the role of knowing languages in interpretation makes his theory open to studying the language and meaning of Scripture by comparison with other texts. A bigger role for context may also be possible, but other aspects of Augustine's theory also offer more resistance to that role—particularly his dependence on Christ's claim that love of God and neighbor is purpose of the whole Bible. To that point I now turn.

¹⁹⁹ Of course, he has to draw some equivalences to do so, and the correspondence is not totally straightforward, especially since sin does the killing in the latter example, albeit through the (presumably written) commandment.

²⁰⁰ To be fair, in this passage (II Corinthians 3), Paul also uses the image of the veil over Moses' face to image the Old Covenant as veiled, and the New one as revealed, which feeds into Augustine's understanding of how the Old Testament speaks in comparison to the New Testament.

CHAPTER 3

Internal Principles: Charity, Clearly Stated Passages, and Figurative Interpretation

In this chapter we will look at three principles that Augustine appeals to explicitly in his interpretive theory. In contrast to the ordinary and linguistic principles in the last chapter, these interpretive keys are clearly formulated as rules and they are all derived from Scripture itself with some additional insight brought in—though the clearly stated passage principle depends more heavily upon this latter element. Thus these three principles are both explicit and, to a greater degree than the others, internal to Scripture.

These three principles are also deeply related, so that they form a series. The first principle is that the interpretation of any passage must “build up” love of God and neighbor, based upon what Augustine calls the “double precept of charity” in Matthew 22:37-40. The second principle then looks to the “clearly stated passages” of Scripture—which is really to say the passages that clearly build up charity—to explain more specifically and in various modes how charity is built up. The third principle then invokes figurative interpretation in order to align passages that do not seem to build up charity at the literal level with the double precept, based on the content found in clearly stated passages. In their interactions with each other, these principles take on several forms, so that they are really more like three collections of principles—especially the latter two, which depend on each other in a sophisticated way.

The ruling principle is the double precept of charity, though we must keep in mind that this is something substantially different from and larger than a “charitable reading” in modern parlance.²⁰¹ I will deal with each of the principles in turn: first charity, then clearly stated passages, then figurative interpretation, which will include some more discussion of clearly stated passages. But throughout the discussion we will return to the double precept of charity to understand the way in which Augustine builds his principles and requirements.

The Double Precept of Charity

Imagine Augustine with all the text of Scripture before him. He needs to find a way to make all of the passages line up, and he needs to use a consistent method. If he commits to an interpretation for any piece of text, it has ramifications for the whole project in both content and method. What he needs, then, is a secure starting point that will direct the whole project. To find one, he goes to a famous statement of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew (22:37-40). Augustine records it in *Doct. chr.* I.26.27:

Diliges, [*Jesus*] *inquit*, Dominum Deum tuum ex toto corde tuo et ex tota anima tua et ex tota mente tua, et diliges proximum tuum tamquam teipsum. In his duobus praeceptis tota Lex pendet et omnes Prophetiae.

“You shall love,” [*Jesus*] says, “the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commands the whole Law and all the Prophets depend.”

²⁰¹ A charitable reading is one that is charitable to the author, such that it assumes that, given two possible interpretations, the author held the more plausible view. Augustine’s principle of charity here has nothing to do with this, though recall that he does appeal to the charity that readers owe the author in *Confessions* XII (see the relevant sections in chapter 1 on *Confessions* XII.36, 41, 42 and 43). I will not be treating that aspect here, since it is a more extended and perhaps more tenuous application of the principle of charity.

Though the precept itself refers only to the Law and the Prophets, this is a well-known metonymy for the whole Old Testament, and Augustine extends it to include the New Testament as well,²⁰² with some New Testament warrant.²⁰³ Augustine does not explicitly say it, but there are two basic or "linguistic" reasons to take this statement of Jesus as a starting point. First, without making much of an interpretive commitment, we can be sure that the statements of Jesus are relatively important in Scripture.²⁰⁴ Second, this passage is a *meta-statement*, a claim that Scripture makes about itself, so it is a natural place to begin. Augustine's frequent appeals to this statement in his own interpretations suggest that he is aware of this fact. Besides these linguistic reasons, the interpretive principle he derives from the passage also depends on Scripture's truth. Since Scripture must be true, this statement must give us a true guide to understanding the whole thing. Thus this passage fulfills the two needs that Augustine has at the beginning of interpretation: a first passage to which we can give a definitive meaning, and a proto-methodology for handling everything else.

The fundamental thing that any interpretation of Scripture must do, therefore, is build up charity, as he explains a bit later in I.35.39-36.40:

*Haec summa est, ut intellegatur Legis et omnium divinarum
Scripturarum plenitudo et finis esse dilectio [Dei et proximi]. . . .
Quisquis igitur Scripturas divinas vel quamlibet earum partem
intellexisse sibi videtur, ita ut eo intellectu non aedificet istam geminam*

²⁰² It is obvious that he does so in the *Doct. chr.*, though he does not explicitly say it. But he does make it clear in *De Catechezandis Rudibus* 4.8 *inter alia*.

²⁰³ This expanded understanding is supported by two passages from Paul: Romans 13:10 ("Love therefore is the fulfilling of the law," D-R) and 1 Timothy 1:5 ("Now the end of the commandment is charity, from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and an unfeigned faith," D-R), both of which Augustine quotes often. As he also clarifies in *Sermo* 350/A.2: "The Old Testament is called the Law, and it hangs on charity."

²⁰⁴ Augustine sort of anticipates this point by the fact that the first half of Book 1 is a summary of doctrine, leading to the foundation of Christianity in Jesus. It's worth noting that his argument for the authority of Scripture in *De Utilitate Credendi* ultimately depends on Jesus being who he says he is.

caritatem Dei et proximi, nondum intellexit. Quisquis vero talem inde sententiam duxerit, ut huic aedificandae caritati sit utilis, nec tamen hoc dixerit quod ille quem legit eo loco sensisse probabitur, non perniciose fallitur.

This is the sum of [what I've said so far]: that the fulfillment and purpose of the Law and of all the divine Scriptures is love of God and neighbor. . . . So if anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine Scriptures or any part of them, but in such a way that he does not build up that double love of God and neighbor by that understanding, he hasn't understand them yet.²⁰⁵ On the other hand, whoever has teased out the sort of interpretation that is useful for this building up of charity, even though he hasn't stated that which the one whom is reading will be proven to have understood in that passage, does not err perniciously.

As in our discussion of the necessary truth of what the Scriptural authors meant, we again find an assumed normative relationship between the author's intention and an interpretation, so that we can infer from the fact that the author meant whatever he did in order to build up charity means that any valid interpretation must also build up charity. Interestingly, this passage emphasizes that an interpretation of a passage must in some way "build up" charity toward God and neighbor²⁰⁶ even if it does not attain to the human author's meaning.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ In a similar though importantly distinct comment in *Confessions* XII.35, he says that we would make Jesus a liar if we thought that Moses wrote and meant what he did "for the sake of" anything other than "these two precepts of charity," since we would then "think about the mind of our fellow servant something else than that one [the Lord] taught."

²⁰⁶ Augustine reiterates this point in II.7.10 when he enumerates seven steps by which a person becomes a proper reader of Scripture. The third step (knowledge) says that such a reader "will find in [the divine Scriptures] nothing other than the command to love God on account of God and neighbor on account of God. . . . I discussed these two precepts when I dealt with things [*res*, as opposed to *signa*, which he's talking about now] in the previous book" (*nihil in eis aliud inventurus quam diligendum esse Deum propter Deum, et proximum propter Deum. . . . De quibus duobus praeceptis, cum de rebus ageremus, libro superiore tractavimus*).

²⁰⁷ But as we saw in the case of truth also, the requirement for correspondence makes no sense unless the reader is seeking the author's meaning, and so Augustine says in the following section that a reader cannot willingly turn from what the author intended. To do so would destroy faith in the Scriptures, and "if anyone falls from faith, he necessarily also falls from love (*Doct. chr.* I.37.41). I deal with this passage again in the following subsections and in the section in Chapter 5 titled "Two problems with the new account."

Augustine can therefore say that love of God and neighbor is the end or purpose of any passage of Scripture. While in one sense this double charity may be called the meaning of all Scripture at the most abstract level, this is not to say that the meaning of any given passage of Scripture, considered in itself, is equivalent to “Love God and neighbor.” Rather, as Augustine suggests, the meaning of a given passage (as well as any valid interpretation that differs from the author’s intention) is something separate from the double precept of charity, which in turns “builds up” charity. But what does it mean to say that a passage (or, more properly, a meaning or interpretation of a passage) builds up charity? Augustine can offer a linguistic, a philosophical, and a theological answer to this question.

1. The linguistic answer

The most obvious way in which a passage can build up charity is by telling the reader how to be charitable. Considered linguistically, this prioritizes the commands of Scripture. “Thou shalt not have any other gods before me” and “Thou shalt not make any graven image” both spell out in some way what “love God” means. Of course, a statement that makes a judgment is linguistically similar to a command, and so something like “x is an abomination to the Lord” plays just as significant a role. But sometimes these commands or statements need to be unpacked to show what situations they do or do not apply to. This exact consideration arises in Luke 10:25-37, in which a lawyer asks Jesus what he should do “to inherit eternal life.” When Jesus asks him in reply what the Law says, the lawyer offers a formulation of the double precept of charity, but then asks, “And who is my neighbor?” In answer, Christ offers

the parable of the Good Samaritan, and tells the lawyer to “go and do likewise” (that is, to show mercy to his enemy). Some passages of Scripture explain commands this explicitly, but in many cases the reader has to tie things together himself.

Commands such as the Ten Commandments²⁰⁸ are a sort of first step down from the two highest level commands, to love God and neighbor. Likewise, commands that give more specific directions and explanatory statements give the second step down from these more abstract injunctions. The latter include Christ’s parable above (interpreted morally) as well as the statements attached to several of the Ten Commandments.²⁰⁹ While commands, judgments, and explanatory statements do not account for all passages in Scripture, they do provide a start.

2. The philosophical answer

Augustine also marks a distinction between passages concerning faith and those concerning morals that can help to explain how more passages build up charity. I will call this his philosophical answer. In *Doct. chr.* III.10.14, he explains that “the integrity of morals pertains to loving God and neighbor, the truth of faith to knowing God and neighbor.”²¹⁰ But for the reader, the meaning of “love God and neighbor” cannot be clear until he knows at least something about God and neighbor.²¹¹ Thus the

²⁰⁸ Exodus 20:1-17.

²⁰⁹ For instance, the initial command not to worship idols includes several clarifying points (Exodus 20:4-5, D-R): “Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Though shalt not adore them, nor serve them.”

²¹⁰ *Doct. chr.* III.10.14: *Morum honestas ad diligendum Deum et proximum, fidei veritas ad cognoscendum Deum et proximum pertinet.*

²¹¹ This much is Augustine’s. My additional claim is simply that the verb “love” needs to be explained as well, and that much of the descriptive content of Scripture can likewise be referred to these commands, either to help the reader understand them better or to further support them.

knowledge of God and neighbor is in certain ways a prerequisite for loving God and neighbor, though knowing God is not merely an intermediate step but also an end that is co-ordinate with loving him.²¹²

Augustine explains the necessity of knowledge as a prerequisite to love in *Doct. chr.* I.37.41 while imagining a situation in which a wrongly-disposed reader understands a passage in a sense that would up charity but disagrees with what the writer intended. Such a reader is not culpable for his error, but Augustine says he should be corrected so that he does not make a habit of erring, even if it normally leads him to the right destination (charity). A reader who habitually departs from the author's sense might come upon a further point in the text that clearly refutes his interpretation and, instead of giving up his interpretation, might be inclined to disagree with Scripture. In this situation, Augustine says,

Quae si vera et certa esse consentit, illud non possit verum esse quod senserat; fitque in eo, nescio quomodo, ut amando sententiam suam Scripturae incipiat offensior esse quam sibi. Quod malum si serpere siverit, evertetur ex eo. Per fidem enim ambulamus, non per speciem; titubabit autem fides, si divinarum Scripturarum vacillat auctoritas; porro fide titubante, caritas etiam ipsa languescit. Nam si a fide quisque ceciderit, a caritate etiam necesse est cadat. Non enim potest diligere quod esse non credit.

If [the reader] agrees that these things are true and sure, the thing that he had understood will not be able to be true; and it somehow happens that by loving his own interpretation he begins to be more incensed

²¹² Augustine suggests that knowing and loving are intrinsically related, at least in our relation to God is concerned. He so explains in *Doct. chr.* I.38.42: "For if we love something that we do not see by believing in it, how much more will we love it when we begin to see [=know] it? . . . For there is this difference between temporal and eternal things, that anything temporal is loved more before you have it, but it is despised once it is present. For it does not satisfy the soul, whose true and sure habitation is eternity. But an eternal thing is loved more ardently when it is gained than when it is desired. (*Si enim credendo diligimus quod nondum videmus, quanto magis cum videre coeperimus? . . . Inter temporalia quippe atque aeterna hoc interest, quod temporale aliquid plus diligitur antequam habeatur, vilescet autem cum advenerit. Non enim satiat animam, cui vera est et certa sedes aeternitas. Aeternum autem ardentius diligitur adeptum quam desideratum*).

with Scripture than with himself. And if this evil is allowed to creep in, he will be overthrown by it. For we walk by faith, not by sight; but faith will falter if the authority of the divine Scriptures is shaken; and if faith falters, love itself is weakened. For if anyone falls from faith, he necessarily also falls from love, for it is impossible to love what one does not believe to exist [or 'be the case'].

There is a bit of a jump in the last part of the argument as Augustine moves from the interpretation of an individual passage to a discussion of belief in God and Scripture as a whole, but the idea must be that the authority of Scripture is undermined as a whole if it is undermined in any passage.²¹³ One cannot fully (obey the commands to) love God and neighbor if one does not believe that all the claims of Scripture—which tell us to and how to love God and neighbor—are true and authoritative.²¹⁴ The problem with the interpretation is that it is incompatible with the context,²¹⁵ and the problem with the reader is that he will not give it up when he discovers this. Once he knows that the interpretation is impossible, holding on to it requires elevating himself above Scripture and Scripture's author, thereby destroying charity.

There are two senses, then, in which this reader's interpretation fails to build up charity. First, by defying the author's intention, it defies the authority of Scripture and even the authority of God, from which Scripture's and the writer's authority derive.

This action in itself contradicts love of God, since loving Him involves respecting His

²¹³ The idea may also be the same as that of Hebrews 11:6: “Without faith it is impossible to please God. For he that cometh to God, must believe that he is, and is a rewarder to them that seek him.” (D-R)

²¹⁴ There is slightly more to the picture here: it is not clear that the wrongly-disposed reader fails to defer to the truth of Scripture, just that he does not defer to the *particular stated truth* which makes his reading impossible. This is the same issue that we saw in Chapter 2 about the relationship between the obligation to hold to a true interpretation and the obligation to seek the author's intention. If the latter obligation does not hold, then it makes no sense to maintain the former.

²¹⁵ Specifically, given that the following text is true, the reader's interpretation of the foregoing text cannot be true. One could see this as an expression of the requirement that the interpretation be true, but I would guess that the truth at issue could be fairly mundane, some detail that shows, for instance, that a character in the narrative was not in the room, as the interpretation would require. It is an issue of truth, still, but I prefer to call it one of context—a regard for the full situation given by the text.

authority.²¹⁶ Second, the reader's interpretation, even if it makes a true statement, ignores the claim that the author is making, and he thereby loses the content of faith or morals that the author offers in the passage. But this knowledge is, to some degree, necessary in order to fulfill charity, since one "cannot love what he does not believe to exist" (or perhaps, "be the case").²¹⁷

The latter argument is the basis for the "philosophical" distinction that I wish to make: readers need a knowledge or belief about God and neighbor (derived primarily from statements) in order to know how to love God and neighbor (as expressed in commands). For instance, Jesus says at the Last Supper, "Do this for a commemoration of me" (Luke 22:19, D-R). But in order to obey this command, one has to know not only what "this" is but also what one is supposed to remember about Jesus. That information primarily comes from descriptive and doctrinal statements.

3. The theological answer

At the philosophical level, then, one needs belief in order to love, and it does not matter if this belief is knowledge or faith, though Augustine's *fides quaerens rationem* model suggests that someone who loves and submits to God's authority is thereby enabled to (and should want to) know Him.²¹⁸ But Augustine more particularly

²¹⁶ One can probably get this much from the first part of the double precept of charity.

²¹⁷ The latter claim is complicated by the fact that in many cases the reader cannot figure out what the author intended—for instance, in very obscure passages. We could point out that the reader is not culpable in such situations, but that does not solve the objective problem of knowledge lost. Augustine solves the problem by appealing to an additional rule—which we will shortly look to—that all the content of faith and morals is found in the clearly stated passages of Scripture, where the author's intention is discoverable enough.

²¹⁸ On this point, see the section on "Church Authority" in chapter 4, subsection "Return to the hermeneutic circle."

highlights the role of faith itself in his theological answer to the question of how to build up charity. Immediately after the preceding discussion, he offers the correct path for a reader in this situation (*Doct. chr.* I.37.41):

Porro si et credit et diligit, bene agendo et praeceptis morum bonorum obtemperando efficit ut etiam speret se ad id quod diligit esse venturum.

But if he both believes and loves, by doing well and obeying the precepts of good morals he brings it about that he also hopes that he will come to that which he loves.

At this point he now has the trio of theological virtues in view, expanding the relationship between faith and love to include hope as a supplement. He further explains that faith and hope are virtues of this life, while love is a virtue of both this life and the next.²¹⁹ A Christian will actually know and have in heaven that which he merely believes in and hopes for on earth, so that his love will continue and increase. Along this line of reasoning, he claims in *Doct. chr.* III.10.14 that any passage of Scripture supports either faith (that is, the knowledge of God and neighbor) or morals (that is, the command to love God and neighbor) or hope, which he awkwardly accommodates as perceiving in one's own conscience "that he has attained to love and knowledge of God and neighbor." He draws a connection to his earlier schematic in I.37.41 by adding, "There was a discussion of all these matters in the first book."²²⁰

²¹⁹ *Doct. chr.* I.38.42: "But the sight which we will see will succeed faith, and the very blessedness to which we will have come will succeed hope, but love will rather be increased even as those [faith and hope] disappear. For if we love what we do not yet see by believing in it, how much more when we will have begun to see it? And if we love that to which we have not yet come by hoping for it, how much more when we will have come to it?" (*Sed fidei succedet species quam videbimus, et spei succedet beatitudo ipsa ad quam perventuri sumus, caritas autem etiam istis decedentibus augebitur potius. Si enim credendo diligimus quod nondum videmus, quanto magis cum videre coeperimus? Et si sperando diligimus quo nondum pervenimus, quanto magis cum pervenerimus?*).

²²⁰ *Doct. chr.* III.10.14: *Morum honestas ad diligendum Deum et proximum, fidei veritas ad cognoscendum Deum et proximum pertinet. Spes autem sua cuique est in conscientia propria,*

Thus in the final analysis, the way in which a passage (or interpretation) of Scripture builds up charity is by stating some matter for belief (faith); something that expresses, encourages, or describes proper hope; or some incitement or command to love. Yet the first two theological virtues feed the last one, and so all passages build charity directly (by encouraging or commanding love of God and neighbor) or as it were indirectly (by stating something about or matter for faith and hope). Most of the time, Augustine only refers to faith and morals when describing what the content of Scripture is, so it is not clear what he thinks the content of hope is: perhaps it is assimilable to faith, or perhaps it is material that encourages the self-perception of one's "love of and knowledge of God and neighbor," as Augustine somewhat opaquely describes. He offers this final summation at the end of *Doct. chr.* I (40.44):

Cum quisque cognoverit finem praecepti esse caritatem de corde puro et conscientia bona et fide non ficta, omnem intellectum divinarum Scripturarum ad ista tria relaturus, ad tractationem illorum Librorum securus accedat. Cum enim diceret: caritas, addidit: de corde puro, ut nihil aliud quam id quod diligendum est diligatur. Conscientiam vero bonam subiunxit propter spem. Ille enim se ad id quod credit et diligit perventurum esse desperat, cui malae conscientiae scrupulus inest. Tertio et fide inquit non ficta. Si enim fides nostra mendacio caruerit, tunc et non diligimus quod non est diligendum, et recte vivendo id speramus, ut nullo modo spes nostra fallatur.

When someone has understood that “the end of the precept is charity from a pure heart and good conscience and faith not feigned” [I Timothy 1:5], so that he will relate every interpretation of the divine Scriptures to those three, he may securely move on to the discussion of those Books [i.e., the Scriptures]. For when he says “charity” he adds “from a pure heart,” so that nothing other may be loved than that which should be loved. But he subjoins “conscience” on account of hope. For he in whom the scruple of bad conscience is present despairs of reaching that which he believes in and loves. And the third, he says, is “a faith not feigned.” For if our faith is free of lying, then we also do

quemadmodum se sentit ad dilectionem Dei et proximi cognitionemque proficere. De quibus omnibus primo libro dictum est.

not love what should not be loved and by rightly looking at it we hope that our hope will not be cheated in any way.

4. The unit of charity

We came up with and defined a unit of text that must be true—the assertion—in response to Augustine’s requirement that every passage and interpretation of Scripture assert nothing false.²²¹ Since he requires that every passage and interpretation of Scripture also build up charity, we need to figure out what the unit of text is to which this requirement applies.

As we have just seen, one of the principle ways that a passage builds up charity is by giving knowledge about God and neighbor so that one can more properly love them or even love them at all. But Augustine’s explanation of the relation of love and faith in *Doct. chr.* I.37.41 implies an equal relationship between love and truth, as we can see by looking at the passage with a little more context:

Sed quisquis in Scripturis aliud sentit quam ille qui scripsit, illis non mentientibus fallitur. Sed tamen, ut dicere coeperam, si ea sententia fallitur, qua aedificet caritatem, quae finis praecepti est, ita fallitur, ac si quisquam errore deserens viam, eo tamen per agrum pergat quo etiam via illa perducit. Corrigendus est tamen, et quam sit utilius viam non deserere demonstrandum est, ne consuetudine deviandi etiam in transversum aut perversum ire cogatur. Asserendo enim temere quod ille non sensit quem legit, plerumque incurrit in alia quae illi sententiae contexere nequeat. Quae si vera et certa esse consentit, illud non possit verum esse quod senserat; fitque in eo, nescio quomodo, ut amando sententiam suam Scripturae incipiat offensior esse quam sibi. Quod malum si serpere siverit, evertetur ex eo. Per fidem enim ambulamus, non per speciem; titubabit autem fides, si divinarum Scripturarum vacillat auctoritas; porro fide titubante, caritas etiam ipsa languescit.

²²¹ In fact, this definition allows a little wiggle room, because in *Confessions* XII Augustine appears to allow interpretations which only *may* be true—that is, interpretations that are indeterminate—so that ignorant readers can derive a valid interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2. See the secular claims section of chapter 4, subsection “The effects of secular knowledge on the process of interpretation.”

Nam si a fide quisque ceciderit, a caritate etiam necesse est cadat. Non enim potest diligere quod esse non credit.

But whoever understands in the Scriptures something different than the writer is mistaken, but not because those things [the words/text] were lying. But nevertheless, as I began to say, if he is mistaken in that interpretation, by means of which he would build up charity, he is mistaken like someone who forsakes the road in error, but still comes through a field to the place where that road leads to. Nevertheless, he must be corrected and shown how much more useful it is not to forsake the road, lest by a habit of deviating he be sidetracked or even forced backwards. For when he rashly asserts what that one whom he is reading did not understand, most of the time he will run into other points which cannot be integrated with that interpretation. If [the reader] agrees that these things are true and sure, the thing that he had understood will not be able to be true; and it somehow happens that by loving his own interpretation he begins to be more incensed with Scripture than with himself. And if this evil is allowed to creep in, he will be overthrown by it. For we walk by faith, not by sight; but faith will falter if the authority of the divine Scriptures is shaken; and if faith falters, love itself is weakened. For if anyone falls from faith, he necessarily also falls from love, for it is impossible to love what one does not believe to exist.

The conclusion of the passage suggests that a reader who knowingly adopts an interpretation that contradicts some assertion of Scripture fails to build up charity, even if his interpretation in itself *would* build up charity (note the subjunctive *aedificet* in the second sentence).²²² But Augustine initially says that the reader who does so unknowingly still gets to the destination (charity) by means going off the road (the writer's intention). In the disapproved case, the reader's interpretation must be false, because it contradicts something true that Scripture says, but it is not clear whether this is also the case in the initial example. I am inclined to think not, since then Augustine would consider an interpretation approvable that actually stated something

²²² I suppose one could also take this as the subjunctive of a relative clause of purpose rather than a potential subjunctive, but even in that case it would express only an intention, not a reality.

false. His conclusion—that one cannot love what one does not *believe* to exist—surely suggests also that one cannot love what does not in fact exist.²²³ As I said in the philosophical answer section, one must believe in the truth of Scripture in order to love God since Scripture’s authority derives from God. I think it is reasonable to say, then, that an interpretation that states something false cannot build up charity.²²⁴

The unit of charity, therefore, will be based on the assertion: that is, for a piece of text to qualify as a unit of charity, it must qualify as an assertion, but additional information will be required in many cases for the true thing asserted by the passage to also build up charity.²²⁵ As we have seen in the past three sections, a passage builds up charity by commanding, encouraging, or explaining faith, hope, or love; and faith and hope similarly provide matter for love. Therefore, one has understood the passage as building up charity when one can relate the thing asserted to the love of God and neighbor, with however many steps in-between as necessary. But I would make a distinction similar to the one I made with assertions: a chunk of text whose logical value changes based on context cannot count as a unit of charity (Thus "Let Jesus be cursed!" cannot be a unit of charity, while "No one speaking by the Spirit of God ever

²²³ Of course, there is an issue here of what the action “love” implies. It might be that the object could be purely psychological, as in popular wisdom—“Do you love me or the idea of me?” Presumably one answers the question not just by loving the person (the reality) instead of one’s idea of them (the psychological object), but also by conforming the psychological object to the reality. Augustine’s claim that we have to believe that something exists in order to love it might appear to secure only the psychological object without reference to a reality, but I think it is much more likely that he means to secure the psychological object as a necessary condition, presuming the reality.

²²⁴ One could, I suppose, conceive of a hermeneutic in which truth and encouraging love are goals that do not overlap. But the ontological and social implications of such a hermeneutic seem very foreign to Augustine. See, for instance, his treatment of Paul’s statement, “I am made all things to all men, so that I might gain all” (I Corinthians 9:22) in *De Mendacio* 42, where he says that Paul did this not by lying but by sympathy.

²²⁵ On this idea of the amount of text required for a unit of charity, compare Markus, “World and Text in Ancient Christianity I: Augustine,” 18.

says, "Let Jesus be cursed!"[I Corinthians 12:3, NRSV]²²⁶ can); but a chunk of text that simply requires more contextual information can.

As I suggested in the last chapter with regard to an assertion, the author's understanding of the passage includes more than the text explicitly says. So, for a passage to build up charity, we will often need to understand a chain of connections to other material, which the author understood in his composition of that passage. Though the unit of text alone does not provide all the necessary material for the reader to derive this, we can still treat the unit as building up charity as long as it forms a whole link on this chain, as it were.²²⁷ This truth leads to that truth, which leads to another truth or command. For instance, consider the passage below, from Matthew 4:18-22 (D-R):

And Jesus walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea (for they were fishers). And he saith to them: Come ye after me, and I will make you to be fishers of men. And they immediately leaving their nets, followed him. And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets: and he called them. And they forthwith left their nets and father, and followed him.

There is an ultimate point to this passage—about the ecclesial role of the apostles in particular and/or the sort of life a Christian should live—and each statement forms a part of explaining that point. The first sentence on its own, for instance, does not obviously build up charity. It simply gives a number of statements of fact that do not

²²⁶ Here I use NRSV instead of the standard D-R just for convenience of phrasing, but the meaning is the same.

²²⁷ I could be persuaded otherwise on this point, since there is not a strict analogue between the unit of truth and the unit of charity in this respect: I think it is likely that the author's idea of the meaning of a passage could include further specification to make it count as a unit of truth. But it seems like a stretch to say that his thought of one sentence includes all the other sentences necessary in order to build up charity.

appear to have any relation to morality or faith. But they give necessary contextual information about the disciples, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to Jesus. They explain why Jesus does what he does in the following sentence, which is more obviously related to the overall point of the passage.

Just as in the case of the unit of truth, a quotation that states something false or bad cannot count as a unit, because additional information substantially changes its evaluation, even its truth value. Such a statement cannot on its own be a step in the chain of reasoning that builds up charity, in way not unlike how a subject cannot be true or build up charity without its predicate: it simply does not do its job yet.

And so truth is a necessary condition for an interpretation to build up charity, but it is not a sufficient one, since not all truths build up charity. St. Paul himself suggests this in his analysis of Deuteronomy 25:4 (“You shall not muzzle an ox which is treading out the grain”) when he asks, “Is it for oxen that God is concerned?” Augustine believes that building up charity requires some level of significance in addition to truth. This is one reason that he doubts that Genesis 1 gives a natural philosophical account of how the universe was formed, because it does not matter for our salvation or sanctification.²²⁸ The Deuteronomy passage and the beginning of Genesis both suggest a need for alternative interpretations, to which I will return in the section on figurative interpretation below.

²²⁸ So he claims in *Gn. litt.* II.9.20. See my discussion of this passage in the section on “Secular Claims” in chapter 4, subsection “The effects of secular knowledge on the process of interpretation.”

Clearly Stated Passages

Augustine's appeal to the double precept of charity as the purpose or ultimate meaning of all of Scripture is plausible, as I have said, because it is an explicit meta-statement from a trusted voice in the text²²⁹ (Jesus). My explanation of how a passage can build up charity works down from this ultimate meaning to more particular levels of meaning: charity can be built up by commands or relevant statements; it consists in right behavior and belief; charity is encouraged not only directly by passages concerning charity, but also by passages concerning faith and hope. These steps down from the top level of meaning are like proximate causes to the final cause, which is love of God and neighbor. But they still do not give us much in the way of specific content.

But readers are now in a position to identify passages which build up charity along one of these routes. Augustine refers to such passages as "clearly stated" (*aperte posita*). He explains the foundational role that these passages play in the interpretation of Scripture in the second book of *De Doctrina Christiana*. In the course of expositing the seven spiritual stages through which would-be interpreters must ascend (an inversion of the list of the seven "gifts of the spirit" in Isaiah 11:1-2), Augustine says that a reader must adopt fear of God and piety before he moves on to the third stage, knowledge, in which he begins to study the books of Scripture (listed in *Doct. chr.* II.8.13). He then explains in 9.14:

In his omnibus libris timentes Deum et pietate mansueti quaerunt voluntatem Dei. Cuius operis et laboris prima observatio est, ut diximus, nosse istos libros, etsi nondum ad intellectum, legendo tamen

²²⁹ This point assumes a unity to the texts of Scripture, of course. On this point, see the next chapter, on the role of Church authority in determining the canon.

vel mandare memoriae vel omnino incognitos non habere. Deinde illa quae in eis aperte posita sunt, vel praecepta vivendi vel regulae credendi, solertius diligentiusque investiganda sunt. Quae tanto quisque plura invenit quanto est intellegentia capacior. In iis enim quae aperte in Scripturis posita sunt, inveniuntur illa omnia quae continent fidem moresque vivendi, spem scilicet atque caritatem, de quibus libro superiore tractavimus. Tum vero, facta quadam familiaritate cum ipsa lingua divinarum Scripturarum, in ea quae obscura sunt aperienda et discutienda pergendum est, ut ad obscuriores locutiones illustrandas de manifestioribus sumantur exempla et quaedam certarum sententiarum testimonia dubitationem incertis auferant.

In all these books those who fear God and are accustomed to piety seek the will of God. And for this work and labor the first thing to be observed is, as we said, to know those books, even if not yet completely understood, at least committed to memory from reading or not left altogether unknown. Then one must investigate with more skill and care those [passages] which are clearly stated in [the Scriptures], whether precepts of living or rules of believing. The more of these one finds, the more capable is his understanding. For in those [passages] which are clearly stated in the Scriptures one finds all those things which comprise the faith and morals of living, that is, hope and charity, concerning which we gave our treatment in the preceding book. But then, once a certain familiarity with the language of the divine Scriptures has been acquired, one must continue on to open up and discuss those things which are obscure, so that examples from the more manifest parts may be taken up to illuminate the obscure locutions and so that some pieces of evidence from sure statements may take away uncertainty from those that are not sure.

There are three steps that the interpreter must go through to gain this spiritual knowledge. First, he needs to acquire a thorough knowledge of the books of Scripture (ideally, by heart), though he is not focused so much on understanding them in this stage. Second, he should study more particularly the passages that speak clearly about faith and morals so that he can, third, interpret the unclear passages based on these clear passages.

The first step is important because one must be familiar with the idiosyncrasies of Scripture in style and language in order to see what is clear and what is not. This is

the reason that Augustine says understanding (*ad intellectum*) is not as important in this stage: the reader is primarily aiming to learn the words and understand the more basic features of the text, rather than its complete meaning. When the reader moves on to the second step, then, he is not looking for passages whose meaning is clear to everyone, but to those who already have a complete but basic knowledge of what Scripture says. There is a learning curve involved, and we will return to that fact often in this section.

The second step is noteworthy because it not only directs the reader to look for passages whose meaning seems clear (those that are *aperte posita*), but to passages that speak clearly about “precepts of living or rules of believing”—meaning, of course, morals and faith. Note that *vel praecepta vivendi vel regulae credendi* is in apposition to *illa quae in eis aperte posita sunt*. A clearly stated passage, then, is a passage that speaks about faith or morals. But, as we have already seen, passages make statements of faith or issue moral commands as a way to build up charity, and so a clearly stated passage is one that clearly builds up charity. This provision may cover up a tough spot for Augustine’s theory: how do you decide what can or cannot be charitable? Augustine’s general answer seems to be that you follow the direction of those passages that relate certain actions to charity or say that others are opposed to it, and that you set aside any passages that are ambiguous in this regard or assign to good people or God actions or commands that are otherwise explicitly condemned. He shows a preference, then, for passages that are like the double precept of charity in being explicit commands rather than simply narratives, which is a point worth

noting.²³⁰ This general solution seems valid as long as Augustine is right to trust in the double precept of charity as a true guide to the meaning of Scripture.²³¹

The third step is unsurprising, though it covers more types of passage than Augustine here suggests. The reader must use the clear to explain the unclear, but unclarity comes in several modes, so that the content of the clearly stated passages is used not only to interpret what is otherwise obscure, but also what seems to contradict charity or what seems irrelevant to charity. As Augustine says here, “In those [passages] which are clearly stated in the Scriptures one finds all those things which comprise the faith and morals of living.” Because of this Augustine uses the content of the clearly stated passages not only to restrict possibilities in interpreting literally, but also to construct figurative interpretations, which cannot independently state any content of faith or morals. The claim that all the content of faith and morals can be found in the clear passages is a big one, for which Augustine has somewhat inadequate support, as we will see.

Introduction of the argument

My central contention in this section is that Augustine looks to these passages, which clearly express charity in faith and morals, as the next step in the interpretive enterprise after and depending on the double precept of charity. Though some passages obviously belong to this category, it takes some careful study to figure out everything

²³⁰ One might also note that statements in the New Testament show themselves to have a broader application: Jesus “expands” commandments against murder to also forbid hate, for instance, and Paul talks about how certain Old Testament ideas (the seed of Abraham, works of the Law) are superseded or re-interpreted in light of Christ’s teaching and redemption.

²³¹ See the earlier discussion on just what the double precept of charity summarizes when it refers to “the Law and the Prophets.”

that counts as "clearly stated," and the interpreter may change his mind over time about what should be included or not. Nevertheless, the outlines of what belongs to this category are clear enough that the text is substantively accessible, especially because of the sure guide given in the double precept of charity.

Many scholars have noted that Augustine gives an outline of doctrines in *Doct. chr.* I.5.5-20.19 before he ever talks about Scripture or its clear passages, and some take this as evidence that Augustine has concluded in advance what Scripture will say. T. Todorov, for instance, argues that Augustine and the other fathers follow a “finalist” method of interpretation, making the text of Scripture fit the foreign set of propositions that is “Christian doctrine.”²³² But, as Isabelle Bochet notes, this does not mean that the doctrines Augustine offers are not taken from the clear passages of Scripture.²³³ Rather, Augustine offers his readers an advance look at what they will find, as a teacher might offer the exciting conclusion of a lesson before explaining the steps that get to that conclusion. As Bochet points out, it is important to recognize the "hermeneutic circle" (or spiral) through which the interpreter climbs slowly upward or inward toward the meaning of the text. Even if a principle, such as Augustine's appeal to clearly stated passages, does not give the interpreter instant access to the complete meaning of the text, it does give him a place to start and a way to *work toward* that meaning.²³⁴

²³² T. Todorov, *Symbolisme et Interprétation*, 91-124. Cited in Isabelle Bochet, *Notes Complémentaires* 3 to *La Doctrine Chrétienne*, 439.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ I talk about this problem more in the “Church Authority” section of chapter 4, subsection “Return to the hermeneutic circle.” In the second section of the chapter, “Secular Truths,” I discuss the fairly major role that rational and empirical claims play in Augustine’s system. Even in his list of doctrines in *Doct. chr.* i.5.5-20.19, we can see that Platonism plays a significant role: for instance, his comments about the nature of God in comparison to other beings in I.7.7, and his ascent in I.8.8 through different levels of

In order to understand what Augustine potentially includes in "clearly stated" passages, we need to explore three points. In the first place, I will look at the terminology that Augustine uses for these passages and their characteristics. But I will retain *aperte posita* as my catch-all term for clearly stated passages, based on *Doct. chr.* II.9.14, above.

Second, we will look at Augustine's linguistic explanation of the passages that count as *aperte posita*. We have already seen what the *content* is that must be clear in these passages (faith and morals), but Augustine also explains that these passages speak *clearly* in that they lack unknown signs, ambiguities, or significant figurative language. None of these obstacles is in principle absolute, and Augustine allows certain passages whose meaning only becomes clear in light of other passages to still count as clear, or "clarified," as I will call them.

But this also raises a third point, that although Augustine uses Scripture's own clear passages to interpret Scripture, interpretation is not a closed system, and the interpreter's judgment about what is or is not clearly stated depends not only on his internal knowledge of Scripture, but also his external information of language and literature, the authoritative statements of the Church, and common as well as philosophical and scientific (what I call "secular") knowledge. Though Augustine's first interpretive step after the double precept of charity is to identify these clearly stated passages, this does not mean that his following steps play only a subordinate role. In fact, we can see the "hermeneutic circle" at work in Augustine's last

being (bodily form, living body, life itself; nutritive, sentient, and intelligent life; and finally unchangeable life). The latter has a clear parallel in his philosophical "ascents" to God in *Confessions* VII.23 and a lesser one in X.65.

interpretive two principles, appealing to authoritative statements of the Church and secular knowledge (both of which I treat in the next chapter), since they also play a revisionary role in determining whether a passage is clearly stated and what it might mean.

The fact that increasing knowledge allows an interpreter to understand more passages clearly does not mean that all of Scripture is clear. Many obscure and uncertain passages will still remain, though Augustine considers this a beneficial feature of Scripture, intended by God. At the end of this section, then, I will offer a summary of how an interpreter can find a passage clearly stated and of the types of problematic passage that still remain to be interpreted. Augustine will address most of these with figurative interpretation, which I will look at in the next section. I will leave aside for now Augustine's claim in the opening quotation that "in those [passages] which are clearly stated in the Scriptures one finds all those things which comprise the faith and morals of living."²³⁵ I will deal with it instead in the section following the next, in which I discuss the relation between clearly stated passages and figurative interpretation.

1. The terminology for "clearly stated" passages

Augustine can say "clearly stated" in a few different ways: *aperte* or *plane* plus *positum* or *dictum*, and a couple other stray terms besides.²³⁶ But two passages show

²³⁵ *Doct. chr.* II.9.14: *In iis enim quae aperte in Scripturis posita sunt, inveniuntur illa omnia quae continent fidem moresque vivendi.*

²³⁶ He also speaks of *planissima verba* and *aperta locutio* (III.11.17; in contrast to a *figurata locutio*) and *aperta narratio* (II.36.54; which *facile insinuat quod intendit*). The two adjectives or adverbs are contrasted with *figurata*, *ignota*, and *obscura*.

that the terms are more or less interchangeable. First, in *Doct. chr.* II.6.8, Augustine says:

*Magnifice igitur et salubriter Spiritus Sanctus ita Scripturas sanctas modificavit, ut **locis apertioribus** fami occurreret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergeret. Nihil enim fere de illis obscuritatibus eruitur, quod non **planissime dictum** alibi repperiatur.*

Magnificently, then, and salubriously the Holy Spirit has tempered the holy Scriptures in such a way that He meets our hunger with the **plainer passages**, but He purges our disgust with the more obscure ones. For almost nothing is found in obscure passages which is not found **clearly stated** elsewhere.

Augustine is clearly using the adverbs interchangeably here, and they both contrast with *obscurus/obscuritas*. In II.9.14 (which we have already seen), he brings in the *positum* term:

*Deinde illa quae in [Scripturis] **aperte posita** sunt, vel praecepta vivendi vel regulae credendi, solertius diligentiusque investiganda sunt. . . . Tum vero, facta quadam familiaritate cum ipsa lingua divinarum Scripturarum, in ea quae obscura sunt **aperienda** et discutienda pergendum est, ut ad obscuriores locutiones illustrandas de **manifestioribus** sumantur exempla et quaedam **certarum sententiarum** testimonia dubitationem incertis auferant.*

Then one must investigate with more skill and care those [passages] which are **clearly stated** in [the Scriptures], whether precepts of living or rules of believing. . . . But then, once a certain familiarity with the language of the divine Scriptures has been acquired, one must continue on to **open up** and discuss those things which are obscure, so that examples from the **more manifest** parts may be taken up to illuminate the obscure locutions and so that some pieces of evidence from **sure statements** may take away uncertainty from those that are not sure.

Here Augustine refers to passages that are *aperte posita*, which he equates with those that are "more manifest" and with "sure statements."²³⁷ These are all contrasted, again,

²³⁷ This last term is not very common, and he also uses *sententia* to mean "an interpretation" (though mostly in *Confessions* XII).

with obscure *locutiones*, which are "opened" by using the information from the clearer passages. *Positum* is close to but slightly different from *dictum*: a thing (that has a figurative meaning) can be *ponitur* in Scripture,²³⁸ and we find numbers and music (with a figurative meaning) honorably *posita* in the Scriptures²³⁹— both of these suggest something like "stuck in there."²⁴⁰ By extension, in III.35.51, certain numbers are *ponuntur pro* all of time, which must mean "used to signify." With a thing signified expressed or implied, an adverb can then describe the significative relationship between the signifier (words or thing)²⁴¹ and thing signified: thus ignorance of numbers causes one *non intellegi translate ac mystice posita*—"not to understand things/passages that are figuratively or mystically stated." Note that this last example is most similar to the one in II.9.14, which also lacks a noun to correspond with *posita*, and that correspondence shows the sense of II.9.14: *aperte posita* refers to terms, expressions, and passages whose significative relationship to the thing signified is clear, open, or obvious. These contrast with terms, expressions, and passages where the relationship is obscure for some reason.

2. Obstacles to clarity

While the term "clearly stated" in all its formulations is intuitively obvious to some degree, Augustine has a few particular linguistic criteria in mind. Although he does not give an explicit definition of "clearly stated," he does list several obstacles to

²³⁸ *Doct. chr.* II.16.24.

²³⁹ *Doct. chr.* II.16.26

²⁴⁰ Similar uses occur in II.39.59, III.25.36.

²⁴¹ In the foregoing examples Augustine speaks of a thing signifying something. This is part of his theory of signification, on which, see below. But of course he is really talking about the word that signifies one or both things.

clarity: first, unknown signs (*ignota signa*); second, substantive ambiguities (*ambiguitates*); and third, significant figurative language (*figurata locutio*). These obstacles operate on a spectrum, so that many can be solved by identifying parallel word usage or ideas in other passages of Scripture and, especially in the case of figurative language, by learning more about the entities used in figurative depictions.

Unknown signs are an obvious obstacle to the reader's understanding, and we have already seen Augustine's means for dealing with them in the section on "Ordinary and Linguistic Means." As I suggested in that analysis, the problem of unknown signs is as much about knowledge of signs as it is knowledge of the things to which they refer. For instance, Augustine brings up Jesus' command to "be wise as serpents" (*Doct. chr.* II.16.24). I might not know what thing "serpent" refers to, but even if I did know that, I still could not understand the simile unless I knew something *about* serpents.²⁴² Thus in some situations the reader can solve (or at least propose a solution for) such passages simply by investigating Scripture, language, or the word. But in some situations the meaning of a sign may be practically inaccessible. One need only think of Augustine's example of the *sarabarae* in Daniel 3:27, discussed in *De Magistro* 10.33, or of any number of Hebrew terms still confusing to scholars today. Of course, it is always possible that we will one day find some way to ascertain their meaning. Thus unknown signs can make a passage unclear to a *particular* reader or group of readers or to readers *in general*, but they do not *necessarily* or definitively

²⁴² In *Doct. chr.* II.16.24, Augustine explains that when attacked, a serpent offers its body to protect its head, and thus that the command means that members of the Church, the body of Christ, should offer themselves for the sake of Christ, the head. It is interesting that he explains the imagery by recourse to another Scriptural image, where the correspondence is explicit.

make the passage unclear. Passages which are unclear because of unknown signs (or lack of sufficient knowledge about the referents) are only unclear provisionally, though perhaps some cases will remain so forever.

Likewise, some ambiguities can be resolved by learning something further that renders all but one option impossible. But not uncommonly a linguistic ambiguity will prove unsolvable, since many words can have multiple meanings and some grammatical or syntactic constructions can be understood in multiple ways according to the normal rules of the language.²⁴³ We should note also the difference between an unknown term, where the reader has no idea of the meaning, and an ambiguous term, where the reader does not know how to decide between two or more meanings. The same distinction holds for clauses and sentences: one could not understand the idea referred to by the clause or be uncertain between two or more possible meanings. Augustine calls the former an *obscure* statement, rather than an unknown one, since it is not so much ignorance of the individual terms that matters as the inscrutability of their relation.

I have already discussed a bit in “Linguistic and Ordinary Means” how Augustine thinks that context, alternate translations, and the original language can be used to resolve nearly any ambiguity when dealing with proper language.²⁴⁴ Leaving aside the issue of translations,²⁴⁵ an ambiguity in the original language has only

²⁴³ Augustine makes it clear that the meaning of the word might also depend on an uncertain pronunciation, and that the meaning of one or multiple sentences might depend on an uncertainty of punctuation. My treatment here is based on *Doct. chr.* III.1.1-37.56. For more on this passage, see Toom, “Augustine on Ambiguity,” which also discusses Augustine’s treatment of ambiguity in *De Dialectica* 9-10.

²⁴⁴ *Doct. chr.* III.4.8. See the sub-section on “Context” in chapter 2.

²⁴⁵ Working from translations is an important practical matter for Augustine, but it is only theoretically important in the case of the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, which Augustine

context to offer a solution, though Augustine perhaps understands context broadly to include not only what is immediate present in the same book of Scripture, but also what we find clearly stated anywhere else in Scripture. Sometimes the alternate options in an ambiguity can also be shown to be close enough or unimportant enough that the passage can still count as clearly stated. In *Doct. chr.* III.2.5, he says that an ambiguity (in this case, one of punctuation) that cannot be decided on the basis of the rule of faith or context (so that none of the options contradict the rule of faith or contextual information) and is not resolved by looking at the original language are "in the power of the reader."²⁴⁶

Figurative language presents a third obstacle, though really it stacks on top of the first two, since there can be an ambiguity not only between possible figurative meanings, but also between the proper (literal) and the figurative, and one can think that a passage speaks figuratively but not have any idea of the figurative meaning. Augustine seems to have the difficulties of figurative language particularly in mind when he warns readers about the difficulties of Scriptural language near the beginning of treatment of Scriptural language in *Doct. chr.* II.6.7:

Multis et multiplicibus obscuritatibus et ambiguitatibus decipiuntur qui temere legunt, aliud pro alio sentientes; quibusdam autem locis quid vel falso suspicentur non inveniunt, ita obscure dicta quaedam densissimam caliginem obducunt.

Those who read rashly are led astray by many different obscurities and ambiguities, understanding one thing instead of another; moreover, in some passages they cannot figure out even what they would be wrong

considers authoritative, though it differs in many respects from the Hebrew versions. I will briefly return to this issue in the section in chapter 4 on the Canon of Scripture.

²⁴⁶ *Doct. chr.* III.2.5: *Ubi autem neque praescripto fidei, neque ipsius sermonis textu ambiguitas explicari potest, nihil obest secundum quamlibet earum quae ostenduntur, sententiam distinguere. . . . Tales igitur distinctionum ambiguitates in potestate legentis sunt.*

to believe, with such obscurity do some words spread their densest darkness.

The terminology of figurative interpretation requires a bit of explanation. As Augustine says in *Doct. chr.* II.10.15, proper signs (or signs used *proprie*) signify “these things on account of which they were instituted”: for instance, “ox” refers to a farm animal. In contrast, in the case of figurative (or transferred, *translata*) signs, “those things which we signify with proper words are used to signify something else”: for instance, in St. Paul’s interpretation of Deuteronomy 25:4—“Do not muzzle an ox treading out the grain”—the farm animal signified by “ox” is used to signify an evangelist, and thus “ox” signifies an evangelist figuratively (or *translate*).²⁴⁷ I will dwell on this idea more in the next section. For now the point at issue is the obscuring effect of figurative language and how to understand its meaning.

It is important to recognize that a passage will not necessarily speak *clearly* just because it speaks at the proper level (as we have seen), nor will a passage with figurative language necessarily be *unclear*. In fact, Augustine explicitly differentiates between passages with figurative language that are obscure and those which are still clear, calling the former *locutio figurata*. For instance, in *Doct. chr.* III.11.17 he quotes Galatians 5:24 to show that a single word with a figurative significance does not make the whole sentence or passage figurative: *Qui autem Iesu Christi sunt, carnem suam crucifixerunt cum passionibus et concupiscentiis* (“But those who are in Jesus Christ

²⁴⁷ *Doct. chr.* II.10.15: *Propria dicuntur, cum his rebus significandis adhibentur, propter quas sunt instituta, sicut dicimus bovem, cum intellegimus pecus, quod omnes nobiscum latinae linguae homines hoc nomine vocant. Translata sunt, cum et ipsae res quas propriis verbis significamus, ad aliquid aliud significandum usurpantur, sicut dicimus bovem, et per has duas syllabas intellegimus pecus quod isto nomine appellari solet, sed rursus per illud pecus intellegimus Evangelistam, quem significavit Scriptura, interpretante Apostolo, dicens: Bovem tritulantem non infrenabis [I Corinthians 9:9 and I Timothy 5:18; quoted from Deuteronomy 25:4]*

have crucified their flesh with their passions and desires"). In this case *crucifixerunt* does not have its proper meaning of killing someone/something on a cross but rather, figuratively, putting an end to something—in this case, the desires of the flesh. *Carnem*, "the flesh," might seem like it is being used figuratively, but it occurs so commonly with this sense in Paul²⁴⁸ that Augustine clearly thinks that this is (or has become) a proper usage: the disordered behavior or excessive desires that come from the body alone.²⁴⁹ Augustine concludes that the figurative terms (referring only to *crucifixerunt* in this sentence, along with terms in another example) are "not so many nor so placed [*ita posita*] that they conceal the sense or make an allegory or aenigma, which I properly call a *figurata locutio*."²⁵⁰ One can see the implied opposition between words that are *ita posita* as to make a *figurata locutio* and those that are *aperte posita*. The *figurata locutio* is what I deal with in the next section.

Figurative language can also be made clear by reference to passages using the same figurative language, where the meaning is clarified. For instance, in *Doct. chr.* III.26.37 he explains the "shield" in Psalm 34:2—"Take arms and a shield and rise to help me"—by reference to Psalm 5:13: "Lord, you have crowned us as with the shield of Your good will." His example clearly demonstrates the principle we saw in the opening passage of this section, *Doct. chr.* II.9.14:

*Facta quadam familiaritate cum ipsa lingua divinarum Scripturarum,
in ea quae obscura sunt aperienda et discutienda pergendum est, ut ad*

²⁴⁸ See also *Doct. chr.* II.12.17, where he interprets one of Paul's uses of *carnem* as the Jews, *propter consanguinitatem*, but seems to take it as a part of a *proprie* reading.

²⁴⁹ See Lewis and Short, *caro* I.A.1 for this basic usage: "the body (n opp. to the spirit) as the seat of the passions," citing Seneca, *Epistle* 65.22 and Cicero, *Against Piso* 9.19.

²⁵⁰ *Doct. chr.* III.11.17: *Sed non tam multa sunt vel ita posita, ut obtegant sensum et allegoriam vel aenigma faciant, quam proprie figuratam locutionem voco*. The *proprie* in the last clause may be a joke on the *proprie/figurata* distinction, used here in a slightly different sense: "the type of sentence that I particularly call *figurata locutio* (in contrast to the others which don't quite make the cut)."

obscuriores locutiones illustrandas de manifestioribus sumantur exempla et quaedam certarum sententiarum testimonia dubitationem incertis auferant.

Once we have a certain familiarity with the language of the divine Scriptures, we should go on to explain and discuss those which are more obscure, so that examples may be taken from the more obvious [passages] to illuminate obscure locutions and so that examples from those of sure interpretation may take away doubt from the uncertain ones.

Thus passages which are more immediately clear allow readers to clarify other passages. The instruction above might suggest that only the more immediately clear passages are necessary to construct the content of faith and morals²⁵¹, and thus that a passage which has even one term that must be explained by recourse to another passage cannot contribute unique material to the doctrines of faith and morals. But I think it is more likely that the process he here describes is a recursive one: once we are familiar with A, we can understand B in light of A; but then we are familiar with B, and so we can understand C in light of B, and so on.

We can also see that the line between *propria* and *translata* use of a word, though conceptually distinct, can become blurred. For instance, Augustine explains the figurative use of *dormitio* in *Epistula* 140.32.76:

Et ista mors saepe in Scripturis dormitio dicitur, propter futuram resurrectionem velut evigilationem. Hinc Apostolus dicit, De dormientibus autem nolo vos ignorare, fratres [I Thessalonians 4:12]; et alio loco, Ex quibus plures manent usque adhuc; quidam autem dormierunt [I Corinthians 15:6]: et alia innumerabilia in hoc testimonia aperte per Scripturas utriusque Testamenti reperiuntur.

And death is often called sleep in the Scriptures, on account of the future resurrection or “waking.” Hence the Apostle says, “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep;

²⁵¹ As noted above, we will see that this does not quite work in the section on “Canon and Summary of Doctrines.”

and in another place, “Of whom many remain even now; but some have fallen asleep; and innumerable other instances of this are clearly found throughout the Scriptures of each Testament.”²⁵²

Scripture's repeated use a term in a special sense, whether *propria* or *translata*, does not prevent the passages using that term from being clearly stated. Perhaps this is what Augustine has in mind when he says in II.14.21 that those who have spent a long time learning the Scriptures “wonder more at other locutions and think that they are less Latin than those which they have learned in the Scriptures and do not find in the authors of the Latin language.”²⁵³ It would be ridiculous to say that a passage cannot be clearly stated if it uses a rare but definitely Latin expression, so why say that it cannot be clearly stated if it uses a common but uniquely Scriptural expression? This is somewhat parallel to the issue of *signa ignota* above: some passages will be unclear to readers who are less familiar with Scripture, but those same passages will be clear to those who are familiar. I would argue, then, that a passage which includes a word or expression (especially one particular to Scripture) which is only clear in light of

²⁵² One can find a similar point in *Epistula* 149.3.33, where Augustine explains the *translata* significance of *gladius* in Psalm 58:8 (*Et gladius in ore eorum*) by reference to another passage in Psalm 104:18-19 about the patriarch Joseph: “For also the sword which passed through the soul of Joseph seems to me to stand for [lit, "be set there for"] a hard tribulation: for it is clearly said, "A sword passed through his soul until his word came"—that is, he was in a hard tribulation until what he predicted happened. For because of this he was considered great and was freed from that tribulation.” (*Nam et ferrum quod pertransiit animam Joseph, pro dura tribulatione positum mihi videtur: aperte quippe dicitur, Ferrum pertransiit animam ejus, donec veniret verbum ejus [Ps. 104:18-19]; id est, tamdiu fuit in dura tribulatione, donec fieret quod praedixit. Hinc enim magnus est habitus, et ab illa tribulatione liberatus.*) The clarification goes through two steps: first Augustine argues from the narrative about Joseph in Genesis 40 for the meaning of *gladius* in Psalm 104. The context in Psalm 104 (105) makes it clear enough what episode in the life of Joseph is being talked about (his time in prison), so that one can see what the proper significance of figurative language in these statements means. He can then apply the same *translata* significance to the *gladius* of Psalm 58.

²⁵³ *Doct. chr.* II.14.21: *qui in Scripturis sanctis quodammodo nutriti educatique sunt, magis alias locutiones mirentur easque minus latinis putent quam illas quas in Scripturis didicerunt, neque in latinae linguae auctoribus reperiuntur.*

evidence from another clear passage can still count as clearly stated (what I will call "clarified" when it is important to distinguish).

3. Determining and revising what is clearly stated

The double precept of charity not only directs *what kind of* content these clear passages must express (matters of faith and morals), but also specifies, to some degree, *what* content they can express. One cannot see how to reconcile loving one's neighbor with the Psalmist's "Blessed be he that shall take and dash thy little ones against the rock." (137:9, D-R). The passage cannot be speaking clearly because in it the human author appears to *wish harm* to other, arguably innocent human beings.²⁵⁴

But such a general appeal will not solve every difficulty. Should we also say that any passage in which a person *does actually* harm another cannot be clearly stated, even if God commanded them to do it? In some cases, as we will see, Augustine thinks that we need the authoritative statements of the Church to discern what is being stated in a passage. His favorite issue, in the *Doct. chr.*, is whether polygamy was licit for the Old Testament patriarchs and whether it is in his own time. He makes an extended argument to answer yes to the first and no to the second, but his ending comment is the most telling (III.22.32):

Etiam illa quae proprie lector acceperit, si laudati sunt illi qui ea fecerunt, sed ea tamen abhorrent a consuetudine bonorum, qui post

²⁵⁴ Of course, one can also find passages in which God commands similar actions: e.g., I Samuel 15:2-3, where he tells the Israelites to wipe out the "both man and woman, child and suckling" of the Amalekites. But I take it that there may be a difference in what is allowed for what some individual wishes on his own (as in Psalm 137) and what God commands, since one could easily say that God gives life and so could take it away or give a special command to take it away, though the latter would imply a tension between loving God (obeying his command) and loving neighbor that Augustine does not discuss. Note that Augustine's rules would require a figurative interpretation of I Samuel passage (see "Different types of figurative passage requiring figurative interpretation" in the next section).

adventum Domini divina praecepta custodiunt, figuram ad intelligentiam referat, factum vero ipsum ad mores non transferat.

Even those things which a reader takes properly, if those who did these things are praised, but these are nevertheless inconsistent with the customary practice of those good people, who since the coming of the Lord guard the divine precepts—let him refer the figure to his understanding, but let him not transfer the deed itself to his behavior.

Leaving aside the issue of how to figuratively interpret the passage, the point is simply this: even if a passage does assert the literal or historical truth that the action was done by the person and that the action was approvable for that person, it does not assert that the action is universally approvable. In other words, it does not count as a passage clearly stating the “precepts of the faith or rules of life” because the seemingly clear meaning contradicts the teaching or at least the practice of the Church.

Similarly, ordinary (i.e., non-revealed) knowledge plays a role in determining which passages are clearly stated, or at least in determining what it is that is clearly stated. We have already seen the role that knowledge of, e.g., history can play in understanding what the text says. The knowledge of the things (animals, plants, minerals) that Augustine encourages for the sake of understanding figurative language could also be sufficient to render some passages clear (depending on how much figurative language there is and how well established the proverbial nature of the fact about the thing is). Knowledge from everyday experience can similarly help us, though Augustine does not usually discuss this; it plays more of a background role for him, unconsciously dismissing interpretations that would be absurd. We will see in the section on “Secular claims” that knowledge, or claims to knowledge, about empirical or rational matters (roughly, scientific and philosophical) also play a large role in

determining what a passage cannot say, which helps determine whether it is speaking clearly or not.

With such examples Augustine makes it clear that relying on what *seems* to be clearly stated alone will turn out to be inadequate. But the category “clearly stated” does provide a starting point; it is just not sufficiently constrained. Many passages that seem to be clearly stated and which contribute content not provided by the constraints will end up being clearly stated after we apply the constraints (except perhaps the teaching of the Church, since it tends to echo Scripture). In a way, this should not be surprising. We start with what is obvious when we are trying to understand a book, and if it is a difficult book, we usually come to a point where we have to reinterpret a statement whose meaning we originally took as obvious. So it is in this case. We begin with what seems clear, but we cut it down a bit with some other constraints and we build it up with additional information and scrutiny.

Summary and remaining problems

A passage can be clear, and so provide primary content, even if it contains unknown signs, because one can learn what they mean. Likewise, passages with verbal or structural ambiguities can also be made clear either by resolving the ambiguity or showing that both (or all) the possibilities say the same thing or something close enough not to make a difference. In the case of figurative language, Augustine explicitly differentiates between passages that are completely figurative (and so not transparent) and those which can still speak clearly, calling the former a *figurata locutio*. Finding clearly stated passages is an ongoing project for the interpreter,

dependent especially on his "familiarity with the language of the divine Scriptures"²⁵⁵ and how much he already recognized as clearly stated, so that the more he understands already, the more he can come to understand ("The more of these [clearly stated passages] one finds, the more capable is his understanding").²⁵⁶ But external knowledge of the world, language, Church teaching, and matters of philosophy and science also helps the reader to better identify clearly stated passages and to distinguish what certain statements mean.

Figurative Interpretation

Though the interpreter can identify a number of passages as clearly stated, some passages will remain unclear. These passages can be grouped into four types: First, those that seem to speak at the literal level but contain some unintelligible terms or other obscuring features. Second, those that form a *figurata locutio*,²⁵⁷ not able to be resolved simply by translating the figurative terms into proper speech based on other passages. Third, those passages that seem to speak at the literal level but would assert, command, or approve something false or bad. Fourth, passages that likewise seem to speak at the literal level but, although they do not involve anything false or bad, do not seem to have any relation to charity. While the first group is more or less left in interpretive limbo (until the reader finds the information necessary to understand these expressions), with passages from the other three groups Augustine

²⁵⁵ *Doct. chr.* II.9.14. See the first passage of this section.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ We will see shortly that Augustine applies this designation to the third and fourth types of passage as well.

directs readers to use figurative interpretation to find a meaning, though for different reasons and with different levels of satisfaction in each case.

We modern readers would probably recognize a single basic distinction between the last three types of passage: those that are obviously figurative (based on linguistic and stylistic signals) and those that are read figuratively because of objectionable material. Augustine deals with each type separately (though he also separates further sub-types according to some different distinctions), but he does not explicitly separate them. Perhaps he thinks that just as we recognize ordinary figurative language (metaphorical or poetic) because it is out of place or does not make sense at the literal level,²⁵⁸ so we recognize the need to interpret objectionable material figuratively, because the literal meaning is incompatible with the summary of Scripture given by the double precept of charity. I think this is the best overall argument that Augustine could make for the route that he takes, though, in the other direction, the need to interpret so many seemingly-literal passages figuratively could also be taken as a reason to doubt that the double precept of charity really does legitimately sum up all of Scripture. But there are a number of smaller points and considerations that we will look at which make Augustine's approach more plausible, though certainly not air-tight. A more convincing argument would require a more consistent structure of resolving problematic passages than Augustine's account provides; in the case of obscure and problematic passages, his advice is simply to

²⁵⁸ For this theory of metaphor, see Merrie Bergman, "Metaphorical Assertions," 229-245, esp. 237-242.

“turn over” possible figurative readings until an acceptable one (i.e., one that agrees with statements in clear passages) is found.²⁵⁹

In order to explain and evaluate Augustine’s treatment of figurative language and interpretation, I will first look at the justifications he offers for figurative interpretation. There are five as I see it, two of them more general and three taken from Scripture. Second, I will explain the different types of passage in which Augustine says that figurative interpretation is required, how he handles each of them, and how the expected interpretive solutions differ. There are three principal types of passage, but the third includes two sub-types and a contrast case, so I will discuss the latter, third, in their own sub-section. Fourth, I will expand on the relationship between clearly stated passages and figurative interpretation, explaining how and to what degree Augustine makes the latter depend on the content of the former. This dependence is based on Augustine’s assertion that all or nearly all the content of faith and morals is found in the clear passages—an assertion for which he has limited justification. But the primacy of clearly stated passages and the dependence of figurative interpretation on them also shows that Augustine has fundamental preference for the literal, clear, and intended meaning of Scripture.

²⁵⁹ *Doct. chr.* III.15.23, 24.34. See the subsection “The relationship between clearly stated and figurative passages” below. There is actually a bit more to it than this: the figurative interpretation of the terms needs to be based on some type of similarity (*Doct. chr.* III.25.25), and the interpretation also needs to have some structural correspondence to the passage (needs to understand the passage *congruenter*). Neither of these sets a very high bar, though whether an interpretation *fits* a passage (interprets *congruenter*) probably depends on the judgment of the interpreter, which can be more or less informed. For relevant examples of *congruenter/incongruenter* understanding of a passage in an extended but not necessarily figurative sense, see *Confessions* XII.24, XIII.4, *Gn. litt.* II.1.4, IV.18.34, XII.24.51, XII.34.67.

1. Justifications for figurative interpretation

I have already mentioned the two more general justifications that Augustine has for interpreting a passage figuratively: first, obvious linguistic or stylistic signs of figurative language; second, material that would be objectionable for some reason if taken literally. But he also appeals to three ideas from Paul: first, that the events of the Old Testament were “done in a figure for us” (I Corinthians 10:6, D-R); second, that everything (in Paul’s example, every precept) in the Old Testament was “written for our sakes” (I Corinthians 9:9-10, D-R); and third, that “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (II Corinthians 3:6),²⁶⁰ and so the figurative meaning must sometimes be accepted to the exclusion of the literal.

Oddly, Augustine does not draw explicit attention to the first point, that some passages use language that is obviously figurative. But he does note that some figurative expressions have an easily understood meaning, and his examples show that this amounts to roughly the same point. We already saw one example of this in *Doct. chr.* III.11.17, where he quotes Galatians 5:24.²⁶¹ But he gives an even clearer indication in III.25.36, where he offers several examples that are “not at all doubtful in their meaning, since only plain instances should be recalled as examples.”²⁶² The easiest is from I Peter 5:8: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” Here the meaning of the lion, which Augustine

²⁶⁰ This and the following quotations from Scripture in the next paragraph are translated from Augustine’s citations.

²⁶¹ See my treatment of *figurata locutio* in the subsection “Obstacles to clarity” of the section previous to this one.

²⁶² *Doct. chr.* III.25.36: *Et haec quidem quae commemoravi, minime dubiam significationem gerunt, quia exempli gratia commemorari non nisi manifesta debuerunt.*

focuses on, is already laid out for us through the simile.²⁶³ He identifies a slightly more difficult example in Revelation 5:5, “The lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered,” where, he says, the lion stands for Christ. The context makes this obvious enough, though we do not have such a straightforward explanation as in the I Peter passage. Notably, he also refers to the command, “Be wise as serpents” (Matthew 10:16) as an example whose meaning is manifest, though the meanings that he attributes to this phrase in *Doct. chr.* II.16.24 are not incontestable.²⁶⁴ In the next section (III.26.37), he says that when the sense is not clear in its own passage, we can draw it from a more open statement elsewhere. As an example, he says that Psalm 35:2, “Take hold of arms and shield and rise to help me,” can be explained by looking at Psalm 5:12, “Lord, You have crowned us as with the shield of Your good will.” Though he points out that the figurative meaning of “shield” does not always need to be “God’s good will,” it makes good sense in this passage. These latter two examples show, as I said in the last section, that what counts as clearly stated can include that which takes some investigation.

In cases like these readers have a fair chance of apprehending what the writer really intended in using terms figuratively. As anyone would guess, it is easier to

²⁶³ Augustine does not differentiate between simile, metaphor, or allegorical language. They are all simply *translata* or *figurata*.

²⁶⁴ See my commentary on this passage in the “Clearly Stated Passages” section, subsection “Obstacles to clarity.” The passage is notable in that Augustine explains its meaning based on another figurative image from Paul, that of the body and head of Christ. *Doct. chr.* II.16.24: *Nam et de serpente quod notum est, totum corpus eum pro capite obicere ferientibus, quantum illustrat sensum illum, quod Dominus iubet astutos nos esse sicut serpentes, ut scilicet pro capite nostro, quod est Christus, corpus potius persequentibus offeramus, ne fides christiana tamquam necetur in nobis si parcentes corpori negemus Deum! Vel illud, quod per cavernae angustias coartatus, deposita veteri tunica vires novas accipere dicitur, quantum concinit ad imitandam ipsam serpentis astutiam exuendumque veterem hominem, sicut Apostolus dicit, ut induamur novo; et exuendum per angustias, dicente Domino: Intrate per angustam portam!*

understand the significance of these terms when they are explained in the immediate context or at least the context of the individual book of Scripture. That is why the lion-devil and the lion-Christ, respectively, are easy to understand. The explanation of the shield makes sense, but it is a bit less sure—which is no doubt why Augustine does not include it among his examples which have *minime dubiam significationem* in the first section (25.36). It should in principle be a good argument, since he is explaining one Psalm attributed to David (35) on the basis of another (5).²⁶⁵ But he offers “be wise as serpents” as an indubitable example in III.25.36, even though his explanations of it are not taken from the immediate context: they each use some piece of knowledge about serpents to equate the statement with some other idea present in the clear passages of Scripture.²⁶⁶ In III.25.36, he only claims that serpents signify something good, without mentioning his treatment of the verse in II.16.24, so perhaps that is all that he is claiming to be clear.

Thus we see that the possibility of such an obviously figurative passage speaking clearly (that is, of the writer’s intention being clear) depends largely on the

²⁶⁵ Augustine and the other fathers believed that the attributions and summaries at the beginning of each Psalm (found in the Septuagint) were part of the inspired text, even though they were not present in the Hebrew. Note that Augustine regards the Septuagint as equal with (or maybe even superior to) the Hebrew text, though he knows about the differences between them. See *Doct. chr.* II.15.22 and his letter to Jerome on the subject of which text to translate from, *Epistulae* 28 and 71.

²⁶⁶ I think Augustine’s first interpretation of the passage—that serpents guard their heads when attacked, and so a Christian should guard Christ, who is the head of the body (the Church), by adhering to the faith. This is line both with Christ’s other imagery (“I am the vine; you are the branches,” John 15:5, D-R, as well as his commands (“He that shall deny me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven.,” Matthew 10:33, D-R). But obviously one could come up with something else just as plausible. Perhaps, for instance, Christ is not using figurative language but instead invoking a characteristic of serpents found in tropes, and so telling his disciples simply to be wise or shrewd. As support for this interpretation, one could point to Paul and Silas in Romans 16:24-40, who do not escape from prison when an earthquake sets them free (and so convert the guard), but do force the magistrates to apologize for beating them though they are Roman citizens. The former shows their innocence, the latter their shrewdness.

context—specifically, on whether the text offers equivalent proper formulations or even explicitly equates figurative and proper terms. The further the figurative passage and the interpretive key are from each other, the less dependable the key is, since, as we see in the two examples with “lion,” terms are not always used with the same figurative sense. Readers reasonably depend on the proximity of the passage and the interpretive key or at least their common place in a single book to indicate that they are probably speaking in the same register. But in the example of the serpents—and generally when Augustine explains a term or passage in one book by recourse to a passage in another book—I do not think we should attribute to him the same level of confidence that he has in the other examples we have just looked at—unless the interpretive key explicitly offers itself as the interpretation of the other passage.²⁶⁷

This leads to the second point. In the foregoing examples it is clear that reader must understand the terms with a figurative sense, but, as I have already noted, in many cases Augustine uses figurative interpretation on expressions that do not show obvious markers of being figurative. Instead, he claims that they are figurative because the literal meaning either contradicts or is simply irrelevant to loving God and neighbor. The general justification for these latter two cases is implicit but obvious: if Jesus’ claim that ‘Love God and Love your neighbor’ sums up all of Scripture²⁶⁸ is

²⁶⁷ As, for instance, Paul’s interpretation of “You shall not muzzle an ox that is treading out the grain” (Deuteronomy 25:4) in I Corinthians 9:9-11 and I Timothy 5:18. Similarly, Augustine says (*Epistula* 106.37, question 6) that we cannot figuratively interpret Jonah’s three days and nights in the belly of the huge fish (Jonah 1:17) except in the sense that Jesus interprets it: as a prefiguration of his “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). I will return to this matter shortly.

²⁶⁸ Recall that Jesus only says that these two commands sum up the Law and the Prophets, though this is clearly a metonymy for the Old Testament. See my explanation of why it can be taken as a metonymy for all of Scripture in a footnote to my analysis of that verse and Augustine’s use of it in the “Charity” section of chapter 2.

true, then passages that seem contrary to that love or unrelated to it must have some other meaning or purpose. When we were dealing with clearly stated passages, I noted that Augustine uses *aperte posita* to describe passages that are both linguistically clear and clearly build up charity. Here we see that he similarly conjoins passages that are obviously figurative and those that need to be understood figuratively in order to build up charity. The difference is that an *aperte posita* passage must fulfill both qualifications (be clear and build up charity), while a term or passage can be classified as *figurata* for either reason (being obviously so or being problematic). The double constraint for the first limits the number of passages that count as clearly stated, while the two possible grounds for the second maximizes the number of passages that can be categorized as figurative. This makes sense when we realize that figurative interpretation is meant to cover passages that fail in one, the other, or both qualifications for being *aperte posita*.

While it is obvious that we should interpret language of a metaphorical or poetic sort figuratively, it is not as obvious that we should use figurative interpretation in particular as the means to solve problematic passages. But Augustine has a strong justification for preferring figurative interpretation as the solution, based on three related ideas in Paul's writings.

The first idea serves as a justification for understanding even passages with an acceptable literal meaning as having an additional, figurative significance. This is important, because it shows that figurative interpretation is not simply a fallback or an *ad hoc* explanation for difficult passages. Paul suggests this with his statements in I

Corinthians 10:1-6 and Galatians 4:21-31.²⁶⁹ In the former²⁷⁰ he says the events in the Exodus history were “figures for us” (*figurae nostrae fuerunt*). Augustine cites this passage in the opening of the *De Genesi ad Litteram* (I.1.1), where he says:

In narratione ergo rerum factarum quaeritur utrum omnia secundum figurarum tantummodo intellectum accipiantur, an etiam secundum fidem rerum gestarum asserenda et defendenda sint. Nam non esse accipienda figuraliter, nullus christianus dicere audebit, attendens Apostolum dicentem: Omnia autem haec in figura contingebant illis: et illud quod in Genesi scriptum est: Et erunt duo in carne una, magnum sacramentum commendantem in Christo et in Ecclesia.

Therefore in the narration of actions and events we investigate whether all the things should be taken only according to an understanding of the things figured, or if the actions and events should also be asserted and defended according to a trust in their historical reality. For no Christian will dare to say that they should not be taken figuratively, attending to what the Apostle says, "But all these things happened to them in a figure," and to that which is written in Genesis, "And they will be two in one flesh" [Genesis 2:24], commending a great mystery in Christ and in the Church.

Augustine's comments here suggest that readers should always assume a figurative meaning in Scripture, at least in the genre of *narratio rerum gestarum*, and that the

²⁶⁹ The former is quoted in *De Utilitate Credendi* 8. The latter is quoted in *De Utilitate Credendi* 8, *C. Faust.* 22.30-2, and the *Epistulae ad Galatas Expositio* 40.

²⁷⁰ About the latter passage (Galatians 4:21-31), Augustine makes very similar comments. Paul there interprets the story of Sarah and Hagar and their sons (Genesis 16ff) based on the principle that “these things are spoken through allegory” (*quae sunt per allegoriam dicta*). We should note that in the latter phrase “allegory” is not used as we typically use it: Paul is not denying the truth of the proper, historical meaning of the story. In his *Epistulae ad Galatas Expositio* 40, Augustine says that he takes Paul’s use of figurative interpretation as a justification for interpreting other passages figuratively: “But if, on the basis of the confidence given by the Apostle which shows very clearly that those two [sons] are to be taken allegorically, anyone wishes also to look at the sons of Keturah in some figure of future things (for not in vain were these events written about such people under the management of the Holy Spirit), he will perhaps find that heresies or schisms are signified.” (*Quod si data per Apostolum fiducia, qua duos illos allegorice accipiendos apertissime ostendit, voluerit aliquis etiam Cethurae filios in aliqua rerum figura futurarum inspicere (non enim frustra de talibus personis administratione Spiritus Sancti haec gesta conscripta sunt) inveniet fortasse haereses et scismata significari*). Keturah is the wife that Abraham takes after the death of Sarah, and Augustine thinks that if Sarah and her son had some “figure of future things” in them, then it is reasonable to think Keturah and her sons do too. But his aside seems to justify even more: nothing written in Scripture is pointless. This is clearly part of his justification for reading those passages figuratively which cannot be related to the double precept of charity (faith and morals) on the proper level.

real uncertainty is whether such a passage bears its literal-historical meaning as well. But this is a point of tension in Augustine's thought, since in *Doct. chr.* III.15.23 and 16.24, he tells readers not to look for a figurative meaning if the literal one is satisfactory.²⁷¹ But we will return to that issue in the last sub-section.

The second idea from Paul comes in his treatment of Deuteronomy 25:4, "You shall not muzzle an ox that is treading out the grain."²⁷² Though there is nothing objectionable in this statement, it is unclear how it could be related to love of God and neighbor. Augustine bases his figurative interpretation of this verse (more or less, "Do not deprive an evangelist of a living") on Paul's explanations in I Corinthians 9:9-11 and I Timothy 5:18. In the Corinthians passage, Paul asks rhetorically, "Doth God take care for oxen?" (D-R). The verse has to mean something more, even if the proper meaning is still true—and I take it that the meaning intended by the writer must be

²⁷¹ In addition, throughout the rest of the twelve-book *Gn. litt.* Augustine makes an attempt to understand the first two chapters of Genesis in the literal sense, and he quotes his own comments from his earlier, much more allegorical *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* to say that the person who could offer a literal interpretation is a "particularly praiseworthy man of understanding." *Gn. c. man.* II.2.3 (*Gn. litt.* VIII.2.5): "Anyone, obviously, who would like to take all the things that are said according to the letter—that is, to understand them not in any way other than the letter sounds—and would be able to avoid blasphemies, and to recommend all things agreeing with the Catholic faith—not only must one not begrudge him, but he should be held as a particular and very praiseworthy man of understanding. But if no way out is possible so that we may understand what is written in a way that is pious and worthy of God unless we believe that those things are set down figuratively and in aenigmas, let us hold onto the mode in which we are endeavoring, having apostolic authority, by which so many aenigmas of the books of the Old Testament are solved."

(*Sane quisquis voluerit omnia quae dicta sunt, secundum litteram accipere, id est non aliter intellegere quam littera sonat, et potuerit evitare blasphemias, et omnia congruentia fidei catholicae praedicare, non solum ei non est invidendum, sed praecipuus multumque laudabilis intellectus habendus est. Si autem nullus exitus datur, ut pie et digne Deo quae scripta sunt intellegantur, nisi figurate atque in aenigmatibus proposita ista credamus; habentes auctoritatem apostolicam, a quibus tam multa de libris Veteris Testamenti solvuntur aenigmata, modum quem intendimus teneamus).*

²⁷² *Bovem triturantem non infrenabis.* Given as the paradigm example for the difference between *propria* and *translata* meaning in *Doct. chr.* II.10.15.

more than just the proper meaning.²⁷³ In both passages Paul bases his interpretation on a saying of Jesus. In the Corinthians passage (v.14) he says, “The Lord ordained that they who preach the gospel, should live by the gospel” (D-R), and in the Timothy passage (v.18) he even gives a quotation, “The labourer is worthy of his reward” (D-R)—which is also preserved in Luke 10:7.²⁷⁴ This gives a clear justification for Augustine's larger instruction to use figurative interpretation when a meaning that supports faith or morals (and therefore charity) is not apparent at the literal level (*Doct. chr.* III.10.14). Every piece of Scripture needs to be meaningful, to serve the purpose of the whole.²⁷⁵

These two points from Paul provide a more obvious justification for reading figurative meanings in addition to the literal meaning of both historical and prescriptive texts, especially when the literal meaning does not seem to give positive support for love of God and neighbor. That fact certainly makes the figurative

²⁷³ See my discussion of *Confessions* XII.41 in chapter 1 and the section on “The Scriptural Theory” in chapter 5, sub-section “The *Confessions* Charity Condition,” on the writer having the most useful meaning in mind. A meaning that does not build up charity could not be the most useful.

²⁷⁴ Indeed, a similar command is given in another passage of Deuteronomy close to this one, 24:14-15: “Thou shalt not refuse the hire of the needy, and the poor, whether he be thy brother, or a stranger that dwelleth with thee in the land, and is within thy gates: But thou shalt pay him the price of his labour the same day, before the going down of the sun, because he is poor, and with it maintaineth his life: lest he cry against thee to the Lord, and it be reputed to thee for a sin” (D-R). Or Paul and Jesus are both quoting a non-Scriptural source. I leave that option aside.

The expression in Timothy and Luke is “For the laborer deserves his wages” (Αζιτος ὁ ἐργάτης τοῦ μισθοῦ αὐτοῦ; n.b., the variant τῆς τροφῆς in Matthew 10:10). Besides the Deuteronomy reference in the previous note, the point is also made in Leviticus 19:13, but there also the wording is not similar, which suggests that the saying of Christ had become well-known or that Paul had access to some proto-gospel document.

Of course, scholars since the nineteenth century have doubted the Pauline authorship of I Timothy, suggesting an anonymous source who wrote at a later date. Most now hold this view (cf. Raymond F. Collins. *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 2004: 4). A later author and date would make it possible for the author to quote from one of the gospels. But since Augustine believed that Paul was the author of I Timothy, I will continue with that assumption.

²⁷⁵ Of course, as I suggested in the section on charity, a statement could support charity indirectly, by being, for instance, a piece of necessary or useful background information for another statement that does clearly support charity.

interpretation of passages that seem to go against charity more plausible, through in such cases Augustine also needs to explain why we should take the passages only figuratively, and not literally as well. These are the cases that particularly bothered Augustine before his conversion, and he at least initially found a solution in our third statement from Paul, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (II Corinthians 3:6).²⁷⁶ The point Augustine seems to draw from it is that there is a radical difference between the literal and figurative meaning of many passages, and that to read according to the former can be positively harmful. In *Doct. chr.* III.5.9-9.13 he refers to such interpretations as "carnal" and the tendency to such reading as "slavery to signs." He claims that this was a common problem among the Jews—even that this was the reason that many of them did not recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, because they did not think that it needed to be fulfilled.

²⁷⁶ Later on, in the *De Spiritu et Littera* (written 412) he admits that the primary meaning of Paul's phrase is about Law and grace, not different types of reading, though he still claims that the latter is a valid additional meaning. *De Spiritu et Littera* 4.6: "For not in that way alone should we understand that which we read, 'The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,' so that we take something written figuratively, whose proper sense is absurd, not as the letter sounds, but we nourish the inner man with a spiritual understanding by considering what else it signifies. . . . Therefore what the Apostle said, 'The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,' should not be understood only in this way, but also in that sense—and especially in that sense—which he very openly states in another place: 'I would not have known coveting unless the Law said, "Do not covet,"' and a little later, 'Having seized the opportunity, sin deceived me through the commandment and through it killed me.' See what 'the letter kills' means. . . . Indeed, I wish, if I am able, to show that what the Apostle said, 'The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,' was said not about figurative language—although it can be taken congruently in that sense too—but rather was clearly said concerning the Law which prohibits what is evil." (*Neque enim solo illo modo intellegendum est quod legimus: Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat, ut aliquid figurate scriptum, cuius est absurda proprietas, non accipiamus sicut littera sonat, sed aliud quod significat intuentes interiorem hominem spiritali intelligentia nutriamus. . . . Non ergo isto solo modo intellegendum est quod ait Apostolus: Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat, sed etiam illo eoque vel maxime, quod apertissime alio loco dicit: Concupiscentiam nesciebam, nisi lex diceret: Non concupisces; et paulo post ait: Occasione accepta peccatum per mandatum fefellit me et per illud occidit. Ecce quod est: Littera occidit. . . . Volo enim, si potuero, demonstrare illud, quod ait Apostolus: Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat, non de figuratis locutionibus dictum, quamvis et illic congruenter accipiatur, sed potius de lege aperte quod malum est prohibente).*)

But if that is all there is to the story, it seems very odd: why did God bother to inspire a book whose apparent meaning misleads so many readers? In *Doct. chr.* III.6.10-11, Augustine explains that all peoples (in the time of the Old Testament, presumably) were enslaved to signs in one way or another—to temporal things, or, even worse, to false gods²⁷⁷—and so God used a particular set of signs to point to the ultimate reality. Augustine claims that even in subjecting themselves to these signs of the Old Testament that they did not understand, the Jews were doing what was right, and at the advent of Christ and the Church many of them understood what the content of the Old Testament had really pointed to. He points out that only the members of the church at Jerusalem are said by Scripture (Acts 4:32-35) to have sold all their worldly goods and put them at the Apostles' feet—an indication of their freedom from worldly things. He notes that "it is not written that any of the churches of the Gentiles did this, since they had not been found so near [to spiritual things] who held images made by their hands as gods."²⁷⁸

Now of course this does not answer some of the major difficulties of the Old Testament, such as why God commands the Hebrews to destroy certain ethnic groups,²⁷⁹ since it is hard to believe that in such passages the narrative suddenly switches to being only figurative and not literal. This is probably the most difficult

²⁷⁷ This point reveals that Augustine's notion of *signa* includes more than words, as he explains in *Doct. chr.* I.1.2 and II.1.1. Things themselves can act as signs, which is the basis for his idea that a verbal sign which usually refer to such thing can *translate* refer to the other thing which the first thing acts as a sign for (*Doct. chr.* II.10.15)

²⁷⁸ *Doct. chr.* III.6.11: *Non enim hoc ullas ecclesias Gentium fecisse scriptum est, quia non tam prope inventi erant, qui simulacra manufacta deos habebant.*

²⁷⁹ See, for instance, God's command to wipe out the "both man and woman, child and suckling" of the Amalekites in I Samuel 15:2-3, which I mentioned in a note in the last section. Augustine seems like he would say that this has a figurative meaning.

problem that one finds in the interpretation of the Old Testament, and Augustine's answer to this particular issue is not so much unconvincing as unprovided.²⁸⁰ But this also ties into a larger tension in his theory between looking for the writer's meaning in accordance with context and having to support charity and look for the best meaning.²⁸¹ But as we have seen, Augustine clearly has some justification for reading Scripture figuratively, on the basis of its obvious figurative language, Jesus' summary of it as all supporting love of God and neighbor, and Paul's invocation of figurative interpretation to find higher additional or replacement meanings.

2. Different types of passage requiring figurative interpretation

Augustine has several ways of using literal and figurative interpretation in different types of difficult passages, and though his explanation is rather wanting when it comes to passages in historical books where God seems to command something bad, he does at least have a system in place to distinctly interpret in this and other situations. We can classify passages in which figurative interpretation is necessary into three different groups: first, passages that have a figurative meaning but not a literal one; second, those that have both a figurative and a literal meaning; third, passages

²⁸⁰ At least he provides no explanation for the sudden switch between the literal meaning obtaining or not in his theoretical treatments. There may be something in the *Quaestiones in Heptateuchem* or *Octo Quaestiones ex Veteri Testamento*, but I have not found it yet.

²⁸¹ On the role of context in determining the author's intended meaning, see the subsection on "The role of context" in chapter 2. Note, however, that the passage treated there (*Doct. chr.* III.4.8) seems to deal only with passages that speak literally. It is possible that Augustine thinks reliance on local context must simply be abandoned in which the meaning would then violate larger principles. In the subsection "Two problems with the new account" in chapter 5 I return to this tension between context and higher meaning, but with regard to interpreting passages literally with a maximally true and useful meaning.

that have a single meaning which is a combination of literal and figurative. The third type also comprises several more sub-types which I discuss in the next sub-section.

First, besides those which are obviously figurative, Augustine says there are two types of passage that must be taken figuratively without any literal meaning. On the one hand there are passages in which "harsh or as it were savage" words or deeds are attributed to God or holy people (*Doct. chr.* III.11.17), and on the other there are prescriptions which command something bad or forbid something good (III.16.24). In the first case, Augustine says that the harshness or savagery must be directed toward "destroying the kingdom of lust," and if the passage cannot be understood to do this at the literal level, then it must be a *figurata locutio*. Likewise in the latter case, any command to harm self or others or not to help self or others must be a *figurata locutio*. Recall that Augustine defines a *figurata locutio* in III.11.17 as a passage which does not just contain a few figurative terms (where the literal sense still basically obtains) but is figurative as a whole. The fact that Augustine refers to both of the types of passage here as *figuratae locutiones*, based merely on their content and not on identifiable features of their language, shows the elision that he creates between such passages and those that use many obviously figurative terms. But otherwise, this category is relatively straightforward

Secondly, there are also passages which must be taken in a figurative sense in addition to their literal sense, though the distinction between this category and the first one is hidden in the *Doct. chr.*. Augustine general direction near the beginning of his treatment of figurative passages (which extends from III.5.9-28.39) exemplifies his fuzzy categories. In *Doct. chr.* III.10.14, he says

Demonstrandus est igitur prius modus inveniendae locutionis, propriane an figurata sit. Et iste omnino modus est, ut quidquid in sermone divino neque ad morum honestatem neque ad fidei veritatem proprie referri potest, figuratum esse cognoscas.

Therefore we first need to show the way of figuring out the style of speech [*locutio*], whether it is proper or figurative. And the way is just this, that whatever in the divine speech cannot be referred in a proper sense either to the honorableness of morals or to the truth of the faith, you understand to be figurative.

The statement itself suggests that readers should interpret passages figuratively both when they oppose faith and morals and when they are unrelated to them: when the passage [*non*] *referri potest* to these. But in the following sections Augustine only address the two extreme possibilities: he advises figurative interpretation for passages that would contradict charity at the literal level (11.17, 16.24), and literal interpretation for passages that build up charity in their proper sense (15.23, 16.24). This leaves the middle case (in which the passages have no relation to charity) untreated.

My sense is that this general rule should cover that middle case also, since that is the idea suggests by Paul's explanation of the ox verse from Deuteronomy. But the issue also comes up in Augustine's commentary on Paul's allegorical exegesis of Sarah and Tamar in the Galatians passage mentioned earlier (4:21-31). There Augustine proposes that Abraham's later wife, Keturah, and her sons must bear some figurative (prophetic) significance as the two other women and their sons do, since "not for no reason were these events written about such people under the management of the Holy Spirit."²⁸² This historical detail must have some relation to faith and morals. But in

²⁸² *Epistulae ad Galatas Expositio* 40: *Non enim frustra de talibus personis administratione Spiritus Sancti haec gesta conscripta sunt.* He says this when explaining that Paul's practice licenses an investigation of the figurative or prophetic significance of Keturah, the wife that Abraham takes after the death of Sarah, and her children. He suggests that the children signify heresies or schisms.

either of these examples—and in the case of passages unrelated to but not opposed to charity in their literal meaning—there is no reason to deny the literal meaning. There is no reason to think that Abraham did not have a later wife named Keturah, and obedience to the literal command not to muzzle a working ox is not incompatible with—indeed, perhaps it actually supports—a further understanding of the figurative significance of the command.

Roland Teske has proposed an alternate to this theory that is worth some attention.²⁸³ He understands the above passage (*Doct. chr.* III.10.14) to be proposing what he calls a “maximizing criterion”²⁸⁴ for when to read the text figuratively: to understand the text figuratively whenever necessary in order to make it maximally meaningful. He contrasts this with what he calls the “absurdity criterion”²⁸⁵ explicitly offered in the earlier *Gn. c. man.*, and partially set out in *Doct. chr.* III.16.24 and 11.17: that you understand as figurative whatever would be blasphemous, impious, or absurd. Teske believes that the absurdity criterion is the more defensible, but that the maximizing criterion is the one that Augustine really uses in his interpretations (even when he claims to only be using the absurdity criterion, as in *Gn. c. man.*). He correctly suggests, in my view, that Augustine’s adherence to the maximizing criterion is motivated by the idea that all Scripture must be equally meaningful, so that all

²⁸³ Teske explains his position in his article, “Criteria for Figurative Interpretation in Saint Augustine.” I presented it briefly in the review of scholarship in my Introduction, subsection “Clearly stated passages and figurative interpretation.” I repeat much of what I said here.

²⁸⁴ Teske, “Criteria for Figurative Interpretation in Saint Augustine,” 110. Tarmo Toom follows the same line (“Was Augustine an Intentionalist?” 8, “Augustine’s Case for the Multiplicity of Meanings,” 199), based on St. Paul’s statement in II Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture must be “useful” (ὀφελεία, *utilis*). The point leads him to argue that Augustine must prefer the Holy Spirit’s intention to the human author’s, under the assumption that the author could not have intended a figurative meaning with prophetic or Christological content.

²⁸⁵ Teske, “Criteria for Figurative Interpretation in Saint Augustine,” 110.

passages refer to the “truths to be believed and the moral precepts to be followed,” which are, he says, “comparatively few in number” (this explains why Augustine says in *Doct. chr.* I.39.43 that “a person supported by faith, hope, and charity and holding on to them unshakably does not need the Scriptures except to teach others”).²⁸⁶ In fact, this is why I disagree with Teske and think that Augustine is right to adhere to the maximizing criterion. It better fits his other beliefs about Scripture, and it does not relegate figurative interpretation to being merely a fallback when he cannot figure out how to make the text fit his picture of it.

Teske objects to figurative interpretation as though it always undermines literal interpretation,²⁸⁷ even though he gives some examples of Augustine’s figurative interpretation of verses which Augustine clearly still believes in the literal sense (for instance, when the disciples catch 153 fish in John 21:11).²⁸⁸ Teske’s preference for the more minimalistic absurdity criterion makes sense if one believes that figurative interpretation must negate literal meaning. But I think that figurative-only interpretation of otherwise-absurd passages is more plausible if there is (nearly) always a figurative meaning anyway in addition to the literal one. Thus I agree with Teske that Augustine has a “maximizing criterion” for interpretation, but I do not think

²⁸⁶ *Doct. chr.* I.39.43: *Homo itaque fide et spe et caritate subnixus, eaque inconcusse retinens, non indiget Scripturis nisi ad alios instruendos.*

²⁸⁷ Teske, “Criteria for Figurative Interpretation in Saint Augustine,” 115: “The fundamental law for figurative interpretation from the *De doctrina christiana* is precisely a criterion for distinguishing between terms being used in their proper sense and terms being used in their figurative sense.”

²⁸⁸ *Tractatus In Ioannis Evangelium* 122.5-9, cited in Teske, 110.

that this undermines the literal meaning of the text in all cases²⁸⁹—only those, as he notes, which would otherwise be blasphemous, impious, or absurd.²⁹⁰

The maximizing criterion is also evident in Augustine's statement a bit later (*Doct. chr.* III.22.32) that "all or nearly all the deeds that are contained in the books of the Old Testament should be taken not only properly but also figuratively."²⁹¹ This is in harmony with his statement from *Gn. litt.* I.1.1, cited earlier, that "No Christian would dare to say that [the things in a narration of deeds] should not be taken figuratively." I think, then, that the *Doct. chr.* III.10.14 passage is really telling readers when they *must* understand a passage from the historical narratives figuratively, regardless of whether the literal meaning obtains or not. In the *Gn. litt.* passage, he

²⁸⁹ The problem with Teske's position arises from his interpretation of *Doct. chr.* III.10.14, which seems to have been affected by Henri-Irénée Marrou's translation: "Tout ce qui dans l'Écriture ne se rapport pas directement à la foi et aux mœurs doit être tenu pour figuré" (*Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, 478). Teske translates thus (112): "everything in Scripture that does not directly refer to faith and morals must be regarded as figurative." Note that Marrou has translated *proprie* as "directly" ("directement"). Though Teske translates *proprie* as "in the proper sense" when he gives the passage himself, his interpretation follows the same assumption as Marrou's, and is supported by his belief, again following Marrou, that Augustine's interpretation and understanding of inspiration make the word or phrase, rather than the sentence or the passage, the fundamental unit (Teske, 118). He seems to mean by this something different than I do when I say that the assertion is the fundamental unit, since I take the assertion to be informed by context. As I have argued in the previous section, many assertions of Scripture or even passages in the normal sense only indirectly contribute to the statement of some higher truth or to encouraging love of God and neighbor. These assertions and passages inform larger sections that make a point about faith or morals.

²⁹⁰ My position was inspired by Robert Markus ("World and Text in Ancient Christianity I: Augustine," see esp. pages 8-10), who argues that Augustine over time retreats from purely allegorical meanings in order to emphasize typology, thus conceiving of the world as God's text, which the human authors of Scripture merely record under God's inspiration, which directs them to the most essential events and details. Figurative (typological) meaning is thus not a feature of Scripture, but a feature of history. Markus, in turn, credits Robert Bernard's "magisterial" dissertation, *In Figura: Terminology Pertaining to Figurative Exegesis in the Works of Augustine of Hippo*, with much insight on this topic.

²⁹¹ *Doct. chr.* III.22.32: *Omnia vel paene omnia quae in Veteris Testamenti libris gesta continentur, non solum proprie, sed etiam figurate accipienda sint.* It is unclear to me whether the "all or nearly all" limits what should be taken literally or what should be taken figuratively, though in the following context he says that even in the case of passages which one does take literally, if the actor is a praised person is the action is not in line with the practice of apostolic authority, one should understand the figurative significance and not imitate the action. The fact that he begins this caution with, "even those things which the reader takes literally" (*etiam illa quae proprie lector acceperit*) suggests that there are passages which one does not take literally, but I am still unsure if that determines what "all or nearly all" modifies.

allows that there are passages of historical narrative that can be read both ways, while in *Doct. chr.* III.22.32 he says that these same passages *should* be read in both ways. I am not sure whether that "should" (a gerundive) is as strong as the *cognoscas* in III.10.14, which appears to be a jussive. Presumably some passages of historical narrative do support charity at the literal level, but perhaps in some cases there is a further, higher significance that these passages bear in light of New Testament events and doctrine. Note, however, that some events in the New Testament historical narratives should suffice at the literal level: for instance, that Jesus died and rose again.

These first two categories of passage make it clear that there are at least two separate considerations. First (regarding the first category), does the passage at the literal level assert anything contrary to love of God and neighbor? If not, the literal meaning obtains; if so, it does not, and so must have only a figurative meaning. Second (regarding the second category), does the passage at the literal level build up love of God and neighbor? If it does, it may still have a figurative meaning; but if it does not, it must have a figurative meaning in addition to its literal meaning.

But this does not exhaust the possibilities or the ways of being figurative. There is a third category of passage that must be interpreted figuratively, but whose figurative meaning is intertwined with its literal meaning. It may be the case that this category is not exactly distinct from the first two but rather specifies how a figurative interpretation can resolve the different problems at the proper level. For instance, in the passage just cited (*Doct. chr.* III.22.32), Augustine goes on to say:

Quamquam omnia vel paene omnia quae in Veteris Testamenti libris gesta continentur, non solum proprie, sed etiam figurate accipienda sint; tamen etiam illa quae proprie lector acceperit, si laudati sunt illi qui ea fecerunt, sed ea tamen abhorrent a consuetudine bonorum, qui post adventum Domini divina praecepta custodiunt, figuram ad intellegentiam referat, factum vero ipsum ad mores non transferat.

Although all or nearly all the deeds that are contained in the books of the Old Testament should be taken not only properly but also figuratively, nevertheless even those things which the reader takes properly—if those who did the deeds have been praised, but the deeds are nevertheless abhorrent to the practice of the good men who since the coming of the Lord guard the divine precepts—let him refer the figure to his understanding, but let him not transfer the deed itself to his habits.

The instruction at the end is obvious enough: in these passages there is a literal and figurative meaning, but you should not think the truth of the literal action by a praised person means that their action is universally approvable. I think we can draw a very useful inference from this: that even descriptive, historical passages can have a point or lesson, but that this point might be at the literal or the figurative level. A passage like this, in which a praised person does some action, carries an almost prescriptive force, since, normally speaking, you should imitate the actions and abstinences of the people praised in Scripture. But in this case that prescriptive force fails, and we then need to turn to the figurative level to understand how the passage builds up charity, even though the literal level is still true—it is simply not relevant. There can be three reasons for this difference between the character's action and contemporary (apostolically-endorsed) practice: first, because the action can be permissible to certain people given the right intention; second, because the action was approvable in the past but is not now; third, because the character, though praised, was actually doing something wrong. While in the first case Augustine clearly appeals to the figurative

intention of the actors, the additional meaning beyond the literal is complicated in the latter two examples, though still akin to a figurative reading.

3. Two types of mixed figurative-literal passage and a contrast case

Augustine explains the first possibility early on, in III.12.18, where he discusses passages in which God or holy people say or do things that “appear to the unexperienced” to be *harmful to self*²⁹² (what he calls a *flagitium*).²⁹³ Though he refers to such passages as *tota figurata*, in his two following examples he offers passages which he obviously regards as being literally true in their description of the actions involved. For the first, he points to the anointing of Christ’s feet in John 12:1-8.²⁹⁴ Even in the narrative the mischievous disciple Judas questions the action, saying that the money for the perfume should have been given to the poor. The action would be wrong, Augustine says, if Christ allowed it with the intention which extravagant men at detestable parties have: presumably an excessive desire for sensual pleasure or appeal. Instead, Augustine says, Christ allowed his feet to be perfumed with this “good

²⁹² *Doct. chr.* III.12.18: *Quae autem quasi flagitiosa imperitis videntur, sive tantum dicta, sive etiam facta sunt, vel ex Dei persona vel ex hominum quorum nobis sanctitas commendatur, tota figurata sunt.*

²⁹³ He explains his terminology in *Doct. chr.* III.10.16: “I call the motion of the soul to enjoy God for this own sake and to enjoy oneself and one’s neighbor for God’s sake *caritas*; But I call the motion of the soul to enjoy oneself or one’s neighbor or any bodily thing not for God’s sake *cupiditas*. Moreover, what unchecked *cupiditas* does to corrupt one’s own soul and body is called a *flagitium*; and what it does to harm another is called a *facinus*. *Caritatem voco motum animi ad fruendum Deo propter ipsum et se atque proximo propter Deum; cupiditatem autem motum animi ad fruendum se et proximo et quolibet corpore non propter Deum. Quod autem agit indomita cupiditas ad corrumpendum animum et corpus suum, flagitium vocatur; quod autem agit ut alteri noceat, facinus dicitur.*

Augustine similarly uses the terms *flagitia* and *facinora* distinctly in *Confessions* III.15-17, though he seems to use the former to refer to acts that are shameful in themselves, which would not fit what he says in *Doct. chr.* III.12.18, that these acts can be done for a purpose that makes them not bad.

²⁹⁴ The other possible reference is to the parallel stories in Matthew 26:6-13 and in Mark 14:3-9. I think Augustine must be referring to John passage in which Judas Iscariot suggests that the money for the perfume should have been given to the poor. This explains why he differentiates Christ’s action from that of *luxuriosorum hominum*. The other passages emphasize the questionable virtue of the (possibly different) woman, which Augustine does not address.

odor” to signify the “good reputation which anyone has by the works of good living, as long as he follows in Christ’s footsteps”²⁹⁵ (though Jesus himself refers to it as being for his burial). Likewise, in his second example, taken from Hosea 1:2, he says that Hosea's marriage to a prostitute does not signify the same thing that it would for someone of depraved morals—namely, an overwhelming lust that ignores the purpose of marriage.²⁹⁶ In either case, he says, "What is an act of harm to oneself [*flagitium*] for other people, for a divine or prophetic person is a sign of something great."²⁹⁷ When he says that such passages are *tota figurata*, he must mean that the intention behind the action in these instances is not what it normally would be for such an action, and so the point readers can draw from the passage is not that such an action is categorically approved, but whatever special intention or meaning the actor had in doing the action.

Augustine discusses the second, related issue of passages which describe actions whose moral value is affected by time and place in the following passage, III.12.19:

Quid igitur locis et temporibus personisque conveniat, diligenter attendendum est, ne temere flagitia reprehendamus. Fieri enim potest ut sine aliquo vitio cupiditatis vel voracitatis, pretiosissimo cibo sapiens

²⁹⁵ *Doct. chr.* III.12.18: “Nor would anyone in his right mind believe in any way that the feet of the Lord were perfumed with the precious unguent by the woman in the way that the feet of luxurious and wicked men commonly are, whose parties of this sort we detest. For the good odor is a good reputation, which anyone has by the works of good living, as long as he follows in Christ’s footsteps, as if he perfumed his feet with the most precious odor.” (*Neque ullo modo quisquam sobrius crediderit, Domini pedes ita unguento pretioso a muliere perfusos, ut luxuriosorum et nequam hominum solent, quorum talia convivia detestamur. Odor enim bonus fama bona est, quam quisquis bonae vitae operibus habuerit, dum vestigia Christi sequitur, quasi pedes eius pretiosissimo odore perfundit*).

²⁹⁶ Hosea is explicitly directed to marry a prostitute in order to signify God’s love for Israel, who was “prostituted” herself to other gods. No doubt in his example of people marrying a prostitute with bad intentions Augustine has the trope of New Comedy in mind, in which a young man falls in love (Augustine would say lust) with a prostitute and ends the play by finding a way to marry her.

²⁹⁷ *Doct. chr.* III.12.18: *Ita quod in aliis personis plerumque flagitium est, in divina vel prophetica persona magnae cuiusdam rei signum est.*

utatur; insipiens autem foedissima gulae flamma in vilissimum ardescat. . . . Nam in omnibus huiusmodi rebus, non ex earum rerum natura quibus utimur, sed ex causa utendi et modo appetendi vel probandum est vel improbandum quod facimus.

Therefore, we have to pay careful attention to what is suitable for places, times, and persons, so that we not do rashly make an accusation of sins against self [*flagitia*]. For it possible for a wise man to use the costliest food without any vice of gourmandism or voracity; but a fool may crave junk food with the vilest tingle of the throat. . . . For in all matters of this sort, it is not because of the nature of those things that we use, but because of our reason for using them and our manner of desiring them that we should be approved or disapproved of for what we do.

Note that, just as in the previous section, Augustine is only speaking here of actions that can be categorized as *flagitia*, harmful to self, not those that are *facinora*, harmful to others.²⁹⁸ One could not very well do something that harms another person and claim that one had an intention that is prophetic (in the cases above) or moderate (here). The question in cases like these is whether there is a legitimate intention (or use) which justifies the action and excludes the normal harm or corruption involved. Some of the examples Augustine addresses in the following section (12.20) seem paltry: whether one wears a tunic with sleeves or not, for instance. But he brings up a more substantive issue in 18.27: how it was approvable for the Old Testament patriarchs to practice polygamy (polygyny) while it is never approvable now. He explains that there was a need to increase the population in that time, and so it was possible for, e.g., Abraham, to “use the fecundity of many women²⁹⁹ (!) for something

²⁹⁸ See the note on *flagitium*, above, for an explanation of these terms.

²⁹⁹ A later comment makes it clear that he means both wives and concubines (*uxores et concubinas*, III.20.30). Augustine suggests in *De Bono Conjugali* 5 that a cohabitative, exclusive sexual relationship that is open to children might constitute a marriage, as long as the partners continue in this state until death. Presumably for the Old Testament figures under examination, the exclusivity is not important.

else [*propter aliud*],”³⁰⁰ rather than simply to satisfy sexual desire. But now, Augustine says, there is no need to increase the population (“the time [is] not to throw stones but gather them”).³⁰¹ This example is interesting in that it parallels the ones of Jesus and Hosea, who also did an otherwise-*flagitium* “for the sake of something else,” but in their case the something else was a figurative meaning, whereas in this case it is simply a different but normal motive. We can call this type of interpretation, then, quasi-figurative.

Unsurprisingly, the case we saw of "harsh or savage" words or deeds (III.11.17) made no mention of this possibility. Seemingly in response to this difference, Augustine brings up a third type of passage in III.23.33 that forms a contrast case to the first two in that the text uses a bad action to teach a negative lesson:

Si qua vero peccata magnorum virorum legerit, tametsi aliquam in eis figuram rerum futurarum animadvertere atque indagare potuerit, rei tamen gestae proprietatem ad hunc usum assumat, ut se nequaquam recte factis suis iactare audeat et prae sua iustitia ceteros tamquam peccatores contemnat, cum videat tantorum virorum et cavendas tempestates, et flenda naufragia.

But if [the reader] reads of any sins of great men—even if he can attend to and pick out some figure of future things in them—still let him accept the literal truth of the thing done for this purpose: so that he may not dare to boast of his good deeds or despise other people as sinners in

³⁰⁰ *Doct. chr.* III.18.27: *Magis enim probo multarum fecunditate utentem propter aliud quam unius carne fruentem propter ipsam.*

³⁰¹ *Doct. chr.* III.18.27: “Therefore if the coming of the Lord had found those men still alive—when the time was not for throwing stones but gathering them, immediately they would have castrated themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (*Itaque si eos in hac vita invenisset Domini adventus, cum iam non mittendi sed colligendi lapides tempus esset, statim se ipsos castrarent propter regnum caelorum*). The stones are a reference to Ecclesiastes 3:5. “Castrating” oneself for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matthew 19:12) was usually interpreted to mean pledging oneself to celibacy, even in marriage.

view of his own justice, since he may see that even men as great as this had tempests to watch out for and shipwrecks to weep over.

Here he uses the more general term *peccata*, and so presumably he could be thinking about actions harmful to self, *flagitia*, as well as those harmful to others, *facinora*. His example from a couple sections before (21.31) of David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed, suggests both: though murder is certainly a *facinus*, adultery is probably more of a *flagitium*.³⁰² But his emphasis here on accepting the literal meaning of the passage and so blaming an otherwise exemplary figure also brings to mind his earlier treatment of the patriarch Jacob in *Contra Mendacium* 24. There he tries to defend Jacob's apparent lie to his father Isaac—when he clothed himself like his brother, Esau, and even told his father that he was Esau—by claiming that Jacob's *locutiones actionesque* were really intended prophetically, to refer to something else.³⁰³ He tries there to subsume Jacob's words and actions into the same class as “parables and figures of some things to be signified, which should not be taken literally [*ad proprietatem*], but in them one thing should be understood from another.”³⁰⁴ The problem with drawing an analogy to parables is obvious, since Jacob's words and actions were in a literal context and cause harm to others. No

³⁰² So he suggests in his treatment there, and in his final comment about Solomon, who, he says, was a “lover of women” and lost his wisdom “by his carnal lust.” This seems to mean to me that Solomon disordered his own soul, whatever effect he had on his partners: *At vero in eius filio Salomone non quasi hospes transitum habuit, sed regnum ista libido possedit. De quo Scriptura non tacuit, culpans eum fuisse amatorem mulierum. Cuius tamen initia desiderio sapientiae flagraverant; quam cum amore spiritali adeptus esset, amisit amore carnali.*

³⁰³ *Contra Mendacium* 24: *Mendacia iudicanda sunt, sed locutiones actionesque propheticae ad ea quae vera sunt intellegenda referendae.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid: Parabolae et figurae significandarum quarumcumque rerum, quae non ad proprietatem accipiendae sunt, sed in eis aliud ex alio est intellegendum.* Augustine goes on to offer a very clever figurative interpretation of Jacob's actions and words, which probably does have something to it, especially in view of the the complexity of Jacob's identity and the use of the story by Paul in Romans 9. But it does not explain the moral problem of his reading.

matter what he intended, he said and indicated things which would naturally be interpreted by his father in a false way, as Isaac later indicates to Esau: “Thy brother came deceitfully and got thy blessing” (Genesis 27:35, D-R).

Augustine’s distinction between actions that have an effect on self and those that have an effect on others makes the problem of the *Contra Mendacium* account clear, and it seems that he has a case just like this in mind when he says in *Doct. chr.* III.23.33 that “even if [the reader] can attend to and pick out some figure of future things in them—still let him accept the literal truth [*proprietaem*] of the thing done.” This stands in direct contrast to his comment, above, that Jacob’s words and actions, like a parable, should not be taken *ad proprietaem*. I think Augustine’s explanation in III.23.33 is much stronger for this acknowledgement (and the theoretical distinctions it is based on), though it also raises an interesting distinction that he does not discuss, between a figurative meaning intended by a speaker or actor in the narrative, and a figurative meaning that the author had in mind in recording the persons’ words or actions.³⁰⁵ The former can justify a speaker or actor in doing some otherwise-*flagitia*, while the latter is simply a case of the author using actions of characters whose moral value can vary. This third example presumably falls into the second category.³⁰⁶

One may wonder why Augustine does not simply allow that all apparent the apparent mistakes of praised characters are literally true and simply a reminder that we

³⁰⁵ There are some major questions involved in this distinction, such as whether historical events and statements are given a figurative meaning by the author of the text, or if they somehow carry that figurative meaning in themselves by God’s involvement, as if He were the author of history. I take it that Augustine believes that latter. On this point, see Robert Markus, “World and Text in Ancient Christianity I: Augustine,” 3-8.

³⁰⁶ Augustine does not consider the possibility of a character intentionally doing something wrong in order to give a figurative meaning, though the reluctant prophet Balaam (Numbers 22-24) might fit the bill.

can all fall. I see two reasons. First, Scripture makes it clear that Jesus did not sin, and so we cannot say that any of his actions are wrong; but if it is necessary to interpret some of his actions in a non-literal way, then we have a license to interpret others this way. Second, there are many instances where characters are implicitly or explicitly reproved for their bad actions (such as when the prophet Nathan accuses Daniel for sleeping with Bathsheba and killing her husband—which Augustine talks about in III.21.31). But when there is not clear disapproval expressed, what should we do. It might be a problem to take all of the apparent sins as sins, since so many of these troublesome characters—Abraham, Jacob, David—are praised even in the New Testament (e.g., the "cloud of witnesses" in Hebrews 11).

It may be that the two categories of necessarily figurative passage from the last section can overlap with the three given here, but we would need to be sure that the *flagitium/facinus* distinction holds. For instance, it will not work to claim that when God says, “When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you . . . then you must utterly destroy them” is an instance where God is saying something that would otherwise be “bitter or savage” but with a figurative intention, since the context appears literal (the Israelites are judged in other passages for literally obeying this command) and it would harm other people.³⁰⁷ But for passages with a meaning simply unrelated to charity, the mixed literal/figurative interpretation is quite useful: Paul’s own explanation of “Do not muzzle an ox . . .” follows this line, since God must have

³⁰⁷ The obvious alternative is that such a command from God would not be immoral, since He, as creator, has the right to give life and take it. But I do not know that Augustine ever discusses this possibility.

spoken the command (to Moses) with the figurative intention that Paul finds in it. In this case, the speaker is aware of the figurative intention (as in the Jesus and Hosea examples). But in Paul's "allegorical" interpretation of Abraham's wife Sarah and concubine Hagar (and Augustine's suggested interpretation of Keturah), the significance is presumably assigned by the author, rather than by the figures themselves.

We can see, then, that Augustine has a sophisticated system for analyzing the different types of passages that require figurative interpretation and for applying different types of figurative, quasi-figurative, or moral lens to them. Though his terminology to differentiate different types of passage is insufficient, his distinction between *flagitium* and *facinus* greatly aids in addressing different situations differently.

4. The relationship between clearly stated and figurative passages

We are proceeding, to some degree, backwards, in that we have seen how Augustine uses different types of figurative interpretation for different types of passage, but I have said very little so far about where the interpreter even gets the content for figurative interpretation. But the same direction applies here as applied when dealing with clearly stated passages. Recall the passage in which Augustine sets out the essential principle, *Doct. chr.* II.9.14:

In iis enim quae aperte in Scripturis posita sunt, inveniuntur illa omnia quae continent fidem moresque vivendi, spem scilicet atque caritatem, de quibus libro superiore tractavimus. Tum vero, facta quadam familiaritate cum ipsa lingua divinarum Scripturarum, in ea quae obscura sunt aperienda et discutienda pergendum est, ut ad obscuriores

locutiones illustrandas de manifestioribus sumantur exempla et quaedam certarum sententiarum testimonia dubitationem incertis auferant.

In those [passages] which are clearly stated in the Scriptures one finds all those things which comprise the faith and morals of living, that is, hope and charity, concerning which we gave our treatment in the preceding book. But then, once a certain familiarity with the language of the divine Scriptures has been acquired, one must continue on to open up and discuss those things which are obscure, so that examples from the more manifest parts may be taken up to illuminate the obscure locutions and so that some pieces of evidence from sure statements may take away uncertainty from those that are not sure.

We have seen that some figurative usages are easy enough to understand in their context that they do not keep the passages that contain them from counting as clear, since some figurative usages are common or intelligible enough that they do not impede our understanding, and other uses can be *clarified* by referring to plain instances or parallels in proper language. I also argued, near the beginning of the section on “clearly stated” passages, that Augustine does not use *aperte posita* or related terms to describe passages that are clear at first glance, but rather directs the reader to gain a thorough knowledge of Scripture before turning to these passages. And yet, despite these two facts, we should mark a strong distinction between those passages that are more fundamentally clear and those whose interpretation requires more knowledge of other passages. In other words, we must mark a difference between what I will call the “primarily clear” and the “clarified.”

Something similar holds for passages that do form a *figurata locutio*, though it is slightly more nuanced in that case. In this sub-section I will, first, explain how Augustine makes figurative interpretation depend on the content of the clearly stated passages and what the limits for figurative interpretation are. Second, I will give an

explanation (delayed from the clear passages section) of Augustine's idea that all the content of faith and morals can be found in the clearly stated passages. This leads to the final, related point, that Augustine's theory shows a preference for definitive and literal interpretation, despite his propensity to figurative and creative interpretation in practice.

When dealing with passages that do not merely contain figurative terms but form *figuratae locutiones*, the same principle applies, as Augustine explains with regard to figurative language in *Doct. chr.* III.26.37:

Ubi autem apertius ponuntur, ibi discendum est quo modo in locis intellegantur obscuris.

But where things are stated more openly, there we must learn how things should be understood in the obscure passages.

We should note that even this point has a Scriptural precedent: as I noted earlier, Paul bases his figurative interpretation of Deuteronomy 25:4 in I Corinthians 9:9-11 and I Timothy 5:18 on a statement of Jesus, summarized in the first passage and quoted in the latter.³⁰⁸ Of course, he does not do so in his allegorical interpretation of Sarah and Tamar, but I think Augustine would say Paul is not bound by the rules of other interpreters—he just models the practice for them in these instances.

In *Doct. chr.* III.27.38, Augustine expands on the direction given in the last section to deal with passages that admit of more than one figurative interpretation:

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

³⁰⁸ In the Corinthians passage (v.14) he says, “The Lord ordained that they who preach the gospel, should live by the gospel,” and in the Timothy passage (v.18) he even gives a quotation, “The labourer is worthy of his reward”—which is also preserved in Luke 10:7. See my note on the point, above.

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.

But when not one thing but two or more are understood from the same words of Scripture, even if what the writer understood is unknown, as long as each of those [interpretations] can be shown to agree with the truth from other passages of the holy Scriptures, there is no danger. Nevertheless, as long as he who is studying the divine utterances is trying for it, so that he may get to the intention of the author through whom the Holy Spirit produced that Scripture—whether he attains [the writer’s meaning] or he digs out some other meaning from those words which does not oppose right faith, having evidence from some other passage of the divine utterances.

In the first passage (III.26.37), Augustine goes on to explain how the meaning of some figurative language can be clearly grasped.³⁰⁹ But in the second (III.26.38), he is dealing with passages where the meaning intended by the writer is not definitively accessible. While one must still look for the writer’s meaning (*id eo conante*) in the latter situation,³¹⁰ any interpretation supported by “another passage of the divine utterances” is allowed. This means that figurative interpretation in such situations is *provisional*,³¹¹ and that it should offer no more than we could find clearly stated

³⁰⁹ See the examples from this passage that I deal with in first point of the sub-section “Justifications for figurative interpretation” in the “Clear passages” section of this chapter.

³¹⁰ On this point, see the discussions of chapter 1 on *Confessions* XII.27 and 43, and chapter 5, subsection “The *Confessions* Investigation Condition.”

³¹¹ One other case worth considering is when one passage could be given an authoritative reading by another. Paul’s interpretation of the law in Deuteronomy, or the events of the Exodus, or the wives and children of Abraham may all belong to this group. What definitely belongs to this group is Jesus’ interpretation of passages, for which Augustine has a clear example. In *Epistula* 106.37 (question 6), he proposes a figurative interpretation of several events in the story of Jonah: “Certainly one may explain in another way—as long as it is in agreement with the rule of faith—any one of all the other things which are hidden in mysteries about the prophet Jonah. But clearly it is not allowed to understand the fact that he was in the belly of a whale for three days in any other way than that which we have recalled, since it was revealed by that heavenly teacher in the Gospel [Matthew 12:39]” (*Liceat sane cuilibet quamlibet aliter, dum tamen secundum regulam fidei, caetera omnia quae de Iona propheta mysteriis operta sunt, aperire. Illud plane quod in ventre ceti triduo fuit, fas non est aliter intellegere, quam ab ipso coelesti magistro in Evangelio commemoravimus revelatum.*)

elsewhere.³¹² Augustine does say that one could follow the *periculosa* track of using reason to explain a meaning, without Scriptural backing, though he seems very hesitant to do this (“It is much safer to walk by means of the divine Scriptures”).³¹³ We will see in the next chapter that he does not really abide by this warning in his other instructions about the integration of Church teaching and strong rational and empirical claims.

I should note that Augustine gives a lot of particular advice on how to extract a figurative meaning from an obscure passage, most of which I have mentioned in my treatment of "Linguistic and Ordinary Means" in chapter 2 (covering *Doct. chr.* II.11.16-40.60), though he gives additional advice in III.25.34-26.37, which we went over in the first subsection, above. He also sets out the seven rules of Tychonius (an inconsistently-Donatist exegete whom he approves of) in III.29.40-37.56,³¹⁴ though these are not all related to figurative interpretation.

³¹² in such cases the Holy Spirit’s intention still contains the other valid meanings that readers can find. And so when dealing with figurative passages, the interpreter has to depend more on the support that the Holy Spirit’s intention gives.

³¹³ *Doct. chr.* III.28.39: *Ubi autem talis sensus eruitur, cuius incertum certis sanctarum Scripturarum testimoniis non possit aperiri, restat ut ratione reddita manifestus appareat, etiam si ille cuius verba intellegere quaerimus eum forte non sensit. Sed haec consuetudo periculosa est; per Scripturas enim divinas multo tutius ambulatur.* We will return to this passage in the next section when considering the role of secular claims in forming and evaluating interpretations.

³¹⁴ They run as follows: 1. Distinguish what is attributed to the Lord and his body (the Church) when they are referred to under one person.
2. Distinguish what is attributed to the true body of Christ and what is attributed to false members of the Church.
3. Distinguish the promises and the Law, or the spirit and the letter.
4. Understand sometimes a species or part for the genus or whole, and by the genus or whole a species or part.
5. Understand sometimes a part for whole in expressions of time, and significant numbers as expressions for some whole.
6. Note that sometimes the narrative switches temporally backward without any mention.
7. Distinguish what is attributed to the Devil and his body when they are referred to under one person.

But the essential restriction he places on figurative interpretation is this: it can only state what is clearly stated elsewhere (though, again, this gets modified later), and so one can only derive universal points (such as moral commands), particular points that have been critical in the history of salvation (such as where Jesus was born or how many days he was in the tomb), and particular points that relate to the yet-future part of salvation history (about Christ's return to earth, for instance). But even the particular points can have a sort of universal significance, inasmuch as Christ's life is taken as a model, or in the fact that apocalyptic literature describes both the end of the world and the end of life.

We must, however, carefully distinguish what counts as an interpretation and what counts as a personal application. As far as I can tell, the passage itself and so a proper interpretation only addresses universals and the particular points that are important in salvation history (universalized or not), but they do not address a reader's situation *in particular* (unless that reader, like Jesus, plays a significant role in salvation history). The latter involves a legitimate inference on the reader's part that a universal statement covers his particular situation, but I do not see that it is properly part of the interpretation of a passage. What is clearly stated in Scripture is not that *you* particularly should do something, but that something should be done. The further conclusion that the point applies to oneself is a matter beyond the text.

But why, one might wonder, should there even be such figurative passages if they can only be understood to state what is stated elsewhere? Augustine has several answers. First, he says that everyone acknowledges that it is more enjoyable to dig out

a hidden point than to have it simply handed to you.³¹⁵ Second, being forced to work to understand the text is a good counter to the pride we might have in easily understanding everything.³¹⁶ More than this, in *Confessions* XIII.36 he says that there is something good about the fact that one phrase in Scripture can have many meanings and that the same idea can be found represented in many statements (literally or figuratively). In this he sees an analogue to the simplicity of loving God and one's neighbor compared to the "many sacraments, in innumerable languages, and in each language the innumerable ways of speaking" that express or enact that love.³¹⁷ Though Augustine does not say it, I presume that part of the joy of this multiplicity and variation on the same theme is that it highlights different aspects of the same truth by tying it together with different truths. It is a common teacher's technique to explain a new concept in different ways by reference or analogy to different known concepts. Perhaps part of the virtue of having the same point restated in figurative language is that it connects particular truths in a different way that makes them more accessible to this or that person. The overwhelming number of possible figurative interpretations and the seemingly extreme repetition of Scripture in figurative passages is simply a

³¹⁵ See *Doct. chr.* II.6.7-8, where he figuratively interprets a passage from Song of Songs 4:2(=6:6) and says that he says that it is "sweeter in some unknown way" (*nescio quomodo suavius*) to think about the point made through the lens of such imagery. Why he feels that way, he says, "is difficult to say and a separate question" (*difficile est dicere et alia quaestio est*), but that "no one doubts that whatever is understood through figures is understood more pleasantly and that what is sought with some difficulty is found much more gratefully" (*nemo ambigit et per similitudines libentius quaeque cognosci et cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inveniri*).

³¹⁶ *Doct. chr.* II.6.7: "I do not doubt that this was all divinely arranged to subdue pride with labor and to rejuvenate the intellect from disdain" (*quod totum provisum esse divinitus non dubito, ad edomandam labore superbiam et intellectum a fastidio renovandum*).

³¹⁷ *Confessions* XIII.36: *Ecce simplex dilectio dei et proximi, quam multiplicibus sacramentis et innumerabilibus linguis et in unaquaque lingua innumerabilibus locutionum modis corporaliter enuntiatur!*

manifestation of the number of different intellects and dispositions that Scripture can touch—it is Scripture’s way of providing occasions for as many epiphanies of the truth as possible.³¹⁸

Augustine's exclusive dependence on the clearly stated passages has some Scriptural backing, but it depends on a premise for which he has inadequate defense.

We see this premise expressed openly in *Doct. chr.* II.9.14:

In iis enim quae aperte in Scripturis posita sunt, inveniuntur illa omnia quae continent fidem moresque vivendi, spem scilicet atque caritatem, de quibus libro superiore tractavimus.

For in those [passages] that are clearly stated in the Scriptures one finds all those things which comprise the faith and morals of living, namely, hope and love, which we discussed in the first book.

He gives a more hesitant version of the statement earlier, in II.6.8:

Nihil enim fere de illis obscuritatibus eruitur, quod non planissime dictum alibi repperiatur.

Almost nothing is found in obscure passages which is not found clearly stated elsewhere.

It may be that the difference can be accounted for by the fact that the first passage is speaking only about the content of faith and morals, while the second passage is not so limited. But Augustine has reason to hesitate even in this claim, because in some cases the teaching of the church can solve an ambiguity or obscurity that Scripture alone could not, as we will see in the next chapter.

And why should we not be able to find something in the obscure passages and *figuratae locutiones* which is not present elsewhere? Augustine does not give a

³¹⁸ Or, more likely, as many as are useful. Presumably Scripture could provide more if it were just a bit longer, but maybe those more would not help anyway or something like that.

straightforward justification, though I think we can spot something that may serve as an answer in II.6.8, right before the above statement. There he says:

Qui enim prorsus non inveniunt quod quaerunt, fame laborant; qui autem non quaerunt, quia in promptu habent, fastidio saepe marcescunt: in utroque autem languor cavendus est. Magnifice igitur et salubriter Spiritus Sanctus ita Scripturas sanctas modificavit, ut locis apertioribus fami occurreret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergeret. Nihil enim fere de illis obscuritatibus eruitur, quod non planissime dictum alibi repperiatur.

Those who do not find at all what they are seeking suffer from hunger, but those who do not seek, because they have it at hand, often grow languid with disgust; but in each case apathy must be avoided. Magnificently, then, and salubriously the Holy Spirit has tempered the holy Scriptures in such a way that He meets our hunger with the plainer passages, but He purges our disgust with the more obscure ones. For almost nothing is found in obscure passages which is not found clearly stated elsewhere.

Rhetorically, Augustine seems to be making this statement as a comment on an already established situation in the text, but I think that it probably also functions as a justification for his view of the text: if God did not provide the information necessary to salvation in a clear way, how providential would He be? The fact that Augustine includes the “almost nothing” comment after this statement suggests that he might recognize other ways for us to grasp at least some pieces of the important information, besides its clear presence in the text (for instance, through Church teaching or philosophical investigation). But he says too little for us to be sure.

Regardless of the sufficiency of his explanation, Augustine places the most foundational emphasis on the clearly stated passages, and we can see that the interpretation of literal-but-less-than-clear passages as well as figurative and obscure ones depends entirely on the content that we find in these primarily clear passages. An

obvious but interesting consequence of this provision is that some passages must be taken literally, as Augustine directs in *Doct. chr.* III.15.23:

Servabitur ergo in locutionibus figuratis regula huiusmodi, ut tam diu versetur diligenti consideratione quod legitur, donec ad regnum caritatis interpretatio perducatur. Si autem hoc iam proprie sonat, nulla putetur figurata locutio.

Therefore in figurative *locutiones* a rule of this sort will be kept: that what is read should be turned over with diligent consideration as long as is necessary until an interpretation is drawn out for the reign of charity. But if this [kind of meaning is what the passage] already says at the literal level, it should not be thought to be a figurative *locutio*.

And likewise, shortly following this passage, in 16.24:

Si praeceptiva locutio est aut flagitium aut facinus vetans, aut utilitatem aut beneficentiam iubens, non est figurata.

If there is a prescriptive *locutio* that forbids either self-harm or harm of others, or orders self-help or help of others, it is not figurative.

In both of these passages, Augustine tells the reader not to take a passage whose literal (“proper”) meaning clearly supports charity or condemns cupidity as figurative. But we have already seen that *figurata* can refer to three different types of passage: first, those that must be figurative and figurative only (since their literal meaning contradicts charity); second, those that must have a figurative meaning in addition to the literal one (because the latter is unrelated to charity); and third, those whose literal meaning suffices, but which still can be understood as having further figurative significance. I am convinced that he is here telling his readers not to take these passages in the first and possibly the second³¹⁹ sense. But he cannot be forbidding them from figurative interpretation in the third sense, since he otherwise says that ‘all

³¹⁹ One would be missing the literal point of such a passage if he thought it needed a figurative meaning in order to build up charity.

or nearly all' the *gesta* (presumably including word and deed) of the Old Testament should be taken figuratively as well as literally,³²⁰ and Paul himself justifies taking prescriptions as being “for our sake.” I think it is not unlikely that Augustine believes that all genres of text in Scripture have a figurative meaning, though not all have a literal one,³²¹ but he may make exceptions for passages which straightforwardly state fundamental realities. For instance, “Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners” (I Timothy 1:15, D-R) could not really have a figurative meaning, because there is nothing further for it to state. Other passages figuratively refer to *this*.

But the point of these two directions is that some passages must have a literal meaning. This may seem obvious, even uninteresting, but it is critical for Augustine’s theory, if the interpretation of passages that are not primarily clear (whether literal or figurative, clarified or provisional) works entirely from the content of faith and morals in those passages. It may be surprising—if one looks at his many uses of figurative interpretation in his other works—but Augustine shows an increasing preference for the clear and the literal as time goes on. This point is most obvious when one contrasts the highly figurative *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (388/90) and his later *De Genesi ad Litteram* (401-415). In the latter, he quotes a passage from his earlier commentary to show that his use of figurative interpretation was only provisional, to explain what he could not understand literally, and that his preference has always been for literal interpretation. In *Gn. litt.* VIII.2.5 (quoting *Gn. c. man.* II.2.3), he says:

³²⁰ See *Doct. chr.* III.22.32, treated above, and *Gn. litt.* I.1.1, referenced in the discussion of that passage.

³²¹ For instance, he tells us in *Gn. litt.* VIII.1.2 that the Song of Songs belongs to the *genere locutionis figuraturum rerum*, which he contrasts with the genre of *gestarum*, for which his example is the four books of Kings.

Sane quisquis voluerit omnia quae dicta sunt, secundum litteram accipere, id est non aliter intellegere quam littera sonat, et potuerit evitare blasphemias, et omnia congruentia fidei catholicae praedicare, non solum ei non est invidendum, sed praecipuus multumque laudabilis intellectus habendus est. Si autem nullus exitus datur, ut pie et digne Deo quae scripta sunt intellegantur, nisi figurate atque in aenigmatibus proposita ista credamus; habentes auctoritatem apostolicam, a quibus tam multa de libris Veteris Testamenti solvuntur aenigmata, modum quem intendimus teneamus.

Anyone, obviously, who would like to take all the things that are said according to the letter—that is, to understand them not in any way other than the letter sounds—and would be able to avoid blasphemies, and to declare all things agreeing with the Catholic faith—not only must it not be begrudged to him, but he should be held as a particular and very praiseworthy man of understanding. But if no way out is possible so that we may understand what is written in a way that is pious and worthy of God, unless we believe that those things are set down figuratively and in aenigmas, let us hold onto the mode in which we are endeavoring, having apostolic authority, by which so many aenigmas of the books of the Old Testament are solved.

His point in quoting this passage in *Gn. litt.* VIII.2.5 is to support his claim that the text of Genesis should be read literally, in opposition to those who would only read it figuratively. Presumably he makes this claim because he thinks it is what the text actually presents itself as: he says in VIII.1.2 that it is in the same genre as the books of Kings, rather than that of the Song of Songs. But there is a more fundamental point: if the text is speaking literally, it might be telling us things that we could not otherwise know—things that we could not gain from a figurative interpretation based on other passages.

Conclusion: Discoveries and Remaining Problems

I hope it is clear that for Augustine the three principles of the double precept of charity, clearly stated passages, and figurative interpretation form one continuous

whole. Jesus' meta-statement about the two great commandments gives us the starting point: both a first passage that we can be confident of and a guide to all the rest of the text. The passages that clearly support this love of God and neighbor through various routes (commands of how to love and statements giving knowledge; or supporting faith, hope, and in turn love) give us the next group whose meaning we can rely on, though exactly what belongs to this group can evolve over time as our knowledge increases. Figurative interpretation—also based on meta-statements from Paul—allows us to understand the remaining passages (a few obscure but clearly literal ones accepted) in some way, even if not in the way that the author intended. Together these principles give readers a way to understand the whole of Scripture—that is, they construct a basic approach to interpreting Scripture. But they also give two rules by which to judge a proposed interpretation: first, does it agree with the double precept of charity? Second, if it does not, or if it is linguistically obscure, is the proposed interpretation based on the content of faith and morals from clearly stated passages?

Some problems remain for which Augustine does not seem to have an answer: how can we justify a switch from literal speech to purely figurative speech in a continuous passage based only on objectionable content? Why should there be no content of faith and morals found only in the obscure and figurative passages? As I have mentioned many times thus far, in the next chapter we will be examining the role that church authority and philosophical or scientific knowledge play in interpretation. The continuous system of the three principles in this chapter might give the impression that Augustine thinks Scripture is a sufficient guide to its own interpretation, but I think his further considerations undermine that. We will see that some content of faith

and morals can be found clearly stated only in the Church's teaching, and that philosophy has a considerable role to play in Augustine's determination of what some passages can or cannot be saying—even about issues that are largely theological.

CHAPTER 4

Two External Principles: The Authority of the Church and Secular Claims

In this chapter we will look at the roles that Augustine assigns to Church authority and secular claims in the interpretation of Scripture. In both cases we find that Augustine's claim that the clearly stated passages of Scripture contain all the content of faith and morals (*Doct. chr.* II.9.14) and nearly everything the obscure passages contain (*Doct. chr.* II.6.8) does not really stand up. In *Confessions* XII, *Gn. litt.*, and even in the third book of the *Doct. chr.*, he says that church authority and secular claims can provide content that plays the same role in interpretation as clearly stated passages, and that these sources can, at least to some degree, modify the interpretation of clearly stated passages themselves.

This change does not entail that his interpretive theory is untenable, merely that he has a more complicated system of sources than his overly-simplified statements in *Doct. chr.* II indicate. Augustine has a very high view of Scripture and believes its every assertion to be true, but he does not think it is the lone source of truth. What Scripture says fits into a bigger picture. He firmly claims that it points out the most essential features of that picture, but we will see that a reader needs, at the least, some background knowledge from other sources in order to see all those essential points in Scripture.

Church Authority

There are two areas in which the Church's (that is, the Catholic church's) authority plays a major role in Augustine's interpretive system. The first is a preliminary to the whole project, the selection of books that belong to the canon of Scripture. Here the Church's role is even more foundational, practically speaking, than the principle that Scripture asserts only what is true. In order to interpret Scripture, one has to know just what books are included in Scripture, and it is doubtful that there is any basis internal to the texts themselves upon which to decide which are in and which are not. Just as Augustine supports his claim that Scripture is true based on the authority of God, mediated by the inspired author, so he supports a certain canon of Scripture based on God's authority, but through several more levels of mediation.

The second area of the church's authoritative influence on interpretation is parallel to or supplementary to Scripture's. In book III of the *Doct. chr.*, Augustine revises his earlier statements to say that it is the *regula fidei* that contains all the content of faith and morals, and that this *regula* comprises not only clearly stated passages but also the authority of the Church. It is not clear what expressions of that authority are included, but at the very least he must be referring to creedal formulae and apostolic practice. In this role the Church's authority can both provide content at the level of clearly stated passages and revise what counts or does not count as a clearly stated passage.

In the following subsections I will, first, explain how Augustine uses Church authority to establish the canon of Scripture and offer a theoretical justification for this move. Second, I will try tease out what Augustine means by the *regula fidei* and how

Church authority interacts with Scripture to establish this. This will entail, third, a return to Augustine's summary of doctrines in the first half of *Doct. chr.* I and a reconsideration of the idea of a hermeneutic circle that I raised in discussing how the reader determines what counts as a clearly stated passage.

1. Church authority and the canon of Scripture

Probably the most obvious problem for Augustine's foundational claim that Scripture asserts only what is true is that "Scripture" is a name for a collection of many different books, from different times, by different authors. Why should we believe that these books share this exceptional quality and that they altogether compose a unit? The problem is that one must somehow demonstrate not only that these books assert only what is true, but also that they form a whole.³²²

There are three essential qualities that Augustine ascribes to Scripture: first, that it asserts only what is true; second, that it provides the most necessary and important information for human beings, and that the text is everywhere oriented toward these most important points (maximally meaningful);³²³ and third, that it also contains some parts that are difficult or obscure (often requiring figurative interpretation) to provide a healthy exercise for the reader and believer.³²⁴ Augustine

³²² I take it that Augustine thinks that the books of Scripture not only agree with each other (i.e., do not contradict each other), but that they have some united vision, purpose, and emphasis, so that the all the other books are to some degree *salient* (to use a term from Pragmatics) to the meaning of each book.

³²³ For the latter half of this point, see my discussion of Teske's view in the section on "Figurative Interpretation" in chapter 3, subsection "Different types of passage requiring figurative interpretation."

³²⁴ For the latter two points, see *Doct. chr.* II.6.8: "Nevertheless, no one now doubts that each thing is recognized more pleasingly through similitudes and that things sought with some difficulty are found with much more appreciation. For those who do not find at all what they are seeking suffer from hunger; but those who do not seek, because they have it at hand, often grow languid with disgust; but in each case apathy must be avoided. Magnificently, then, and for our salvation the Holy Spirit has

clearly believes that these are three qualities that make Scripture excellent, but that judgment might appear *post hoc*, because these qualities are not easily identifiable in a text unless one already presupposes that they are there. But if you already know what is true or not and what the most important truths are, it is not clear why you would even be looking for a book to tell you. Furthermore, the third point could be used to explain away difficulties and apparent falsities of any sort, making it easy to justify lots of texts as standing at this level.

It makes sense, then, that Augustine does not try to defend the canonical books of Scripture on the basis of their observable qualities. Rather, he claims that these books are authoritative and that they derive their authority from the fact that they were inspired by God. From the claim that the books are inspired by God, he infers their truth and their value, and on the basis of assertions and tendencies in the texts themselves, he claims that they are maximally meaningful and that their difficult and troublesome parts have a salutary purpose. But one also needs to a way to figure out which books were inspired by God, and for that Augustine relies on the confirmatory authority of the Catholic churches, also in some way sanctioned by God.

And so we come to Augustine's practical advice on how to determine what belongs in the canon of Scripture. In *Doct. chr.* II.8.12, before offering a list of those

tempered the holy Scriptures in such a way that He meets our hunger with the plainer passages, but He purges our disgust with the more obscure ones. For almost nothing is found in obscure passages which is not found clearly stated elsewhere.” (*Nunc tamen nemo ambigit et per similitudines libentius quaeque cognosci et cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inveniri. Qui enim prorsus non inveniunt quod quaerunt, fame laborant; qui autem non quaerunt, quia in promptu habent, fastidio saepe marcescunt; in utroque autem languor cavendus est. Magnifice igitur et salubriter Spiritus Sanctus ita Scripturas sanctas modificavit, ut locis apertioribus fami occurreret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergeret. Nihil enim fere de illis obscuritatibus eruitur, quod non planissime dictum alibi reperitur*).

books that he considers canonical, he sets out the basis upon which books are held as canonical or not.³²⁵

In canonicis autem Scripturis Ecclesiarum catholicarum quam plurimum auctoritatem sequatur; inter quas sane illae sint, quae apostolicas Sedes habere et epistulas accipere meruerunt. Tenebit igitur hunc modum in Scripturis canonicis, ut eas quae ab omnibus accipiuntur Ecclesiis catholicis praeponat eis quas quaedam non accipiunt. In eis vero quae non accipiuntur ab omnibus, praeponat eas quas plures gravioresque accipiunt, eis quas pauciores minorisque auctoritatis Ecclesiae tenent. Si autem alias invenerit a pluribus, alias a gravioribus haberi, quamquam hoc facile invenire non possit, aequalis tamen auctoritatis eas habendas puto.

But with regard to the canonical Scriptures, let [the would-be interpreter] follow the authority of the greater number of the Catholic churches, and among them are surely those which merited to have apostolic sees and to receive letters. Therefore he will hold to this rule with regard to the canonical Scriptures: that he prefer those Scriptures that are accepted by all the Catholic churches to those that some do not accept. But among those that are not accepted by all, let him prefer the ones that more churches or the more important ones accept, to those that fewer churches and those of lesser authority hold. But if he finds that some are held by most, some by the more important—although this cannot happen easily—still I think that they should be considered to have equal authority.

It is important to see that Augustine's approach is not simply to appeal to what the Catholic church says, since in his own time there was a diversity of opinion and at the time of this work no supreme judgement had been given.³²⁶ Follow what is unanimous, and failing that, follow what the majority or the most authoritative say.³²⁷

³²⁵ Augustine's list in the following section (II.8.13) is identical to the modern Roman Catholic canon. The index of the canon was so given by the synod of Hippo (393), the council of Carthage (397), and the council of Carthage (419), in all of which Augustine participated (though the first two may not have included the book of Revelation). The same list (with the possible exception of the letter to the Hebrews, about which Augustine also expressed doubts) was also ratified by popes Innocent I in 405 A.D. and Gelasius I (reigned 492-496 A.D.).

³²⁶ I leave aside the issue of the relation of Roman pronouncements to those of other churches. It need not concern us there.

³²⁷ One might think it is circular to say that we should trust the churches that received an apostolic letter to decide what belongs in the canon, but the question of whether the apostolic letter belongs in the

These three points show what Augustine thinks of as the basis for or indication of authority: what is universal or close to it in the *Catholic* church, and what those particular churches say who can, as it were, trace their ancestry to an apostle.

Augustine appeals to and explains these two principles in other places. In *De Utilitate Credendi* 19 he argues to his Manichaean addressee that Christianity is the religion with the most adherents and that the Catholic church is the biggest to claim that name, and in 31 he notes that it has had adherents in all times and places. His point seems to be that everyone recognizes which church is the Catholic church, and that its position is vouched for by the fact that it finds adherents everywhere, while other sects have not been able to move beyond a small number or their particular time or place. The argument is one based on appearances and plausibility, but that is because Augustine is trying to force his addressee to consider his fundamental or initial choices about whom to trust: at the surface, it makes sense to follow the authority that the most people in the most situations have followed. The line of argument is very similar to the one in *Doct. chr.* II.8.12 above, except that there Augustine is looking for consensus *within* the Catholic church(es).

But he also makes a more precise point in *Util. cred.* 20, where he urges his addressee to "follow the way of Catholic discipline, which has flowed from Christ himself through the apostles even to us."³²⁸ In *Contra Adversarium Legis et Prophetarum*

canon is a separate matter. And in fact, every letter that claims to have been written by an apostle was received into the canon—or at least there are no extant examples to the contrary.

³²⁸ *Util. cred.* 20: *sequere viam catholicae disciplinae, quae ab ipso Christo per Apostolos ad nos usque manavit.* See also *Contra Faustum* XI.5: "There is a distinction between the books of later authors and the excellence of the the canonical authority of the Old and New Testament, which, having been secured in the times of the Apostles through the successions of bishops and the extensions of the Churches, as if set up on high in some seat for every faithful and pious intellect to serve" (*Distincta est a posteriorum libris excellentia canonicae auctoritatis Veteris et Novi Testamenti, quae Apostolorum*

I.20.39, he draws further invokes the successors to the apostles as the authority regarding the canon.³²⁹

Sane de apocryphis iste posuit testimonia, quae sub nominibus apostolorum Andreae Iohannisque conscripta sunt. Quae si illorum essent, recepta essent ab Ecclesia, quae ab illorum temporibus per episcoporum successiones certissimas usque ad nostra et deinceps tempora perseverat.

Clearly that man [Augustine's anonymous opponent] has offered proofs from apocryphal works, which were composed under the names of the Apostles Andrew and John. And if those were their works, they would have been accepted by the Church, which from the times of those men [Andrew and John] through most reliable successions of bishops perseveres even to our own times and beyond.

Note that there are two justifications given here. First, Augustine says that the successions of bishops would recognize these books if they were canonical, and so he appeals to the successors of the apostles as a confirmatory authority. But, second, he also implies that the authority of the books themselves would come from the fact that they were written by the apostles. This is different kind of authority; it does not just confirm another statement as true and authoritative, but it makes statements that are true and authoritative. Of course, the apostles did not come up with these ideas themselves, since Augustine notes in the first quotation that the Church's discipline comes "from Christ himself through the apostles."

This latter point also shows Augustine's deeper justification for the very idea of a canon, at least in the case of the New Testament. It is not just that the writers were

confirmata temporibus per successiones episcoporum et propagationes Ecclesiarum, tamquam in sede quadam sublimiter constituta est, cui serviat omnis fidelis et pius intellectus).

³²⁹ Cf. Eno, "Doctrinal Authority in Saint Augustine," 142. He also refers to the "most certain successions of bishops" (*Contra Faustum* XXII.79) and the "authority of the true Scriptures come down to us by a well defined and well-known line of succession" (*De Civitate Dei* XV.23), though I have not been able to locate the latter quotation in the passages he cites.

inspired, but that they had a specific mandate to write as apostles.³³⁰ Of course, some of the books (e.g., the gospels of Mark and Luke) were not written by apostles, but Augustine follows the standard line in claiming that the books were composed based on apostolic reports.³³¹ The epistle to the Hebrews, whose authorship was highly debated, would offer a test case for this proposal, except that Augustine thought the author was Paul. Presumably the basis for accepting books of the Old Testament is what the apostles accepted.³³² The basis of Scripture's authority, then, is apostolic authority, and the basis of that is Christ's authority. Likewise, the basis of the Church's authority to determine the canon is the succession of bishops, especially in the apostolic sees, again going back to the apostles and to Christ.

³³⁰ Augustine drives home this point in *Contra Faustum* XI.5. Though he or another ecclesiastical writer may say something true, what they say will never be on a level with Scripture: “But in the little works of later times, which are contained in innumerable books but are in no way coequal with that most sacred excellence of the canonical Scriptures—although in some of them the same truth may be found, yet their authority is unequal by far” (*In opusculis autem posteriorum, quae libris innumerabilibus continentur, sed nullo modo illae sacratissimae canonicarum Scripturarum excellentiae coaequantur, etiam in quibuscumque eorum invenitur eadem veritas, longe tamen est impar auctoritas*).

³³¹ See *De Consensu Evangelistarum* I.1.2: “And lest it be thought that, in what pertains to the perception and preaching of the gospel, it matters at all whether those men announce it who followed the same Lord when he appeared here in the flesh with his disciples in his company, or these men who believed the things faithfully learned from those men—divine providence has taken care through the Holy Spirit that even to some of those who followed the first apostles the authority should be given not only to announce but even to write the gospel. These men are Mark and Luke. But other people, who tried or dared to write some things about the acts of the Lord or of the apostles, did not stand out so much in their time that the Church had faith in them and received their writings into the canonical authority of the holy Books: not only because they were not such as ought to be believed as narrators, but also because they deceitfully introduced certain points in their writings that the Catholic and apostolic rule of faith and sound doctrine condemns” (*Ac ne putaretur, quod attinet ad percipiendum et praedicandum Evangelium, interesse aliquid, utrum illi annuntient qui eundem Dominum hic in carne apparentem discipulatu famulante secuti sunt an hi, qui ex illis fideliter comperta crediderunt, divina providentia procuratum est per Spiritum Sanctum, ut quibusdam etiam ex illis, qui primos Apostolos sequebantur, non solum annuntiandi, verum etiam scribendi Evangelium tribueretur auctoritas. Hi sunt Marcus et Lucas. Ceteri autem homines, qui de Domini vel de Apostolorum actibus aliqua scribere conati vel ausi sunt, non tales suis temporibus exstiterunt, ut eis fidem haberet Ecclesia atque in auctoritatem canonicam sanctorum Librorum eorum scripta reciperet, nec solum quia illi non tales erant, quibus narrantibus credi oporteret, sed etiam quia scriptis suis quaedam fallaciter indiderunt, quae catholica atque apostolica regula fidei et sana doctrina condemnat*).

³³² Of course, the Old Testament canon has proven a more difficult issue in subsequent history, though it was also a question in Augustine's time, since Jerome had doubts about books only found in Greek.

2. Church authority, Scripture, and the *regula fidei*

I have now shown that the Church—or rather, the successors to the apostles—has a confirmatory authority in identifying the canonical books of Scripture. Readers need such an authority in order to identify what material counts as Scripture, because, according to Augustine, the presuppositions and principles that they are supposed to bring to the interpretation of Scripture are so strong: it is all true and maximally meaningful. Once the text is confirmed, readers can assume these properties and interpret accordingly. We have seen how this works, using the double precept of charity to identify clearly stated passages. We saw in the last chapter that Augustine says we can find all the content of faith and morals in these clearly stated passages, but I also noted that this claim is not as straightforward as it appears. To understand which passages are clearly stated, one needs to have a thorough knowledge of Scripture, and the possibility of clarifying passages based on the primarily clear ones (and then clarifying others based on the clarified ones, etc.) shows that the contents of the category, "clearly stated passages," are not totally clear. Readers will probably see increasingly more as they study more.

That is the first nuance to his claim, but now we come upon a more significant one. We already saw how Augustine appeals to contemporary ecclesial mores to guide the interpretation of some passages (*Doct. chr.* III.22.32):

Si laudati sunt illi qui ea fecerunt, sed ea tamen abhorrent a consuetudine bonorum, qui post adventum Domini divina praecepta custodiunt, figuram ad intelligentiam referat, factum vero ipsum ad mores non transferat.

If those people [in the text] who did the deeds have been praised, but the deeds are nevertheless abhorrent to the practice of the good men

who since the coming of the Lord guard the divine precepts—let [the reader] refer the figure to his understanding, but let him not transfer the deed itself to his habits.

Here he must be appealing to the same group of people as in the last section: the bishops who can trace their succession back to the apostles. But now he assigns to them not merely a confirmatory authority, but an interpretive one. The meaning or point of the text must be understood in light of their practice or teaching,³³³ and in this case that means a change in whether the passage is clearly stated or what it is clearly saying.

In fact, in *Doct. chr.* III.2.2, Augustine clearly modifies his earlier claim that the clearly stated passages of Scripture alone suffice to give us the content of faith and morals. He there says:

Cum ergo adhibita intentio incertum esse perviderit quomodo distinguendum aut quomodo pronuntiandum sit, consulat regulam fidei, quam de Scripturarum planioribus locis et Ecclesiae auctoritate percepit; de qua satis egimus cum de rebus in libro primo loqueremur.

Therefore when an applied effort has discerned that it is uncertain how [a clause] ought to be punctuated or how [a word] ought to be pronounced, let [the reader] consult the rule of faith, which he has learned from the plainer passages of the Scriptures and from the authority of the Church—which we discussed enough when we were speaking about the facts [of the faith, as opposed to the words] in the first book.

There are two big things to note here. First, the *regula fidei* comprises not only the clearly stated passages, but also the authority of the Church, and that suggests that the two are in some way on a level or complementary. Second, he says that he discussed

³³³ Augustine only mentions the *consuetudo* of these people, but I presume that this implies a moral judgment, which is implicitly taught by that *consuetudo* and which could be made explicit.

this *regula fidei* (the *quam* of the last clause must have *regulam* as its antecedent) in *Doct. chr.* I.

Let me explain the second point first. In the first half of *Doct. chr.* I Augustine offers a summary of doctrines that seems to be based on a creedal formula.³³⁴ He covers the Trinity (5), the existence and nature of God (I.6-8), the Incarnation (11-12), the life of Christ (13), Christ's resurrection and ascension (14), his redemptive death (16), the Church, (17), and the general resurrection (18-19). We already saw in chapter 3 that some scholars wonder whether he thus pre-establishes the doctrines he will find in Scripture and interprets accordingly. I will return to that point in the next subsection, but for now we should note that there is considerably more doctrine here than one could extract from Scripture alone. For instance, about the Trinity he says in I.5:

Ita Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus et singulus quisque horum Deus, et simul omnes unus Deus et singulus quisque horum plena substantia, et simul omnes una substantia. Pater nec Filius est nec Spiritus Sanctus, Filius nec Pater est nec Spiritus Sanctus, Spiritus Sanctus nec Pater est nec Filius, sed Pater tantum Pater et Filius tantum Filius et Spiritus Sanctus tantum Spiritus Sanctus. Eadem tribus aeternitas, eadem incommutabilitas, eadem maiestas, eadem potestas. In Patre unitas, in Filio aequalitas, in Spiritu Sancto unitatis aequalitatisque concordia. Et tria haec unum omnia propter Patrem, aequalia omnia propter Filium, connexa omnia propter Spiritum Sanctum.

Thus the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, each of these individually is God, and at the same time they are all one God; and each of these individually is a complete substance, and at the same time all are one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son; but the Father is only the Father, and the

³³⁴ Isabelle Bochet (*Notes Complémentaires 3 to La Doctrine Chrétienne*, page 440) suggests the Apostles' Creed. Propser Grech ("The *regula fidei* as Hermeneutical Principal Yesterday and Today," 151-2) follows Kelly (*Early Christian Creeds*, 175ff) in suggesting a Baptismal Creed of Hippo (reconstructed by Kelly from Sermon 215) rather than the Nicene or Constantinopolitan Creed, which were not put to that use in the West until later. Lewis Ayres ("Augustine on the Rule of Faith," 36-7) agrees that something is in the background but does not commit to one particular creed.

Son is only the Son, and the Holy Spirit only the Holy Spirit. The three have the same eternity, the same unchangeableness, the same majesty, the same power. Unity is in the Father, equality in the Son, unity and equality and concord in the Holy Spirit. And these three attributes are all one on account of the Father, all equal on account of the Son, all harmonious on account of the Holy Spirit.

There is quite a bit of theological definition that goes into this passage, though it is unclear here whether Augustine thinks that all of these points can be proven from Scripture (he suggests that the points can so be proven in *De Trinitate* VI).

But we can see Augustine apply this Trinitarian doctrine in *Doct. chr.* III.2.3, which immediately follows the *regula fidei* passage, above. He offers an example of how to apply the *regula fidei* to a passage, John 1:1-2, where the division of clauses is uncertain:

Illa haeretica distinctio: In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat, ut alius sit sensus: Verbum hoc erat in principio apud Deum, non vult Deum Verbum confiteri. Sed hoc regula fidei refellendum est qua nobis de Trinitatis aequalitate praescribitur ut dicamus: Et Deus erat Verbum, deinde subiungamus: Hoc erat in principio apud Deum.

That heretical punctuation, “In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and God was”—so that the next sentence has a different sense—“This Word was in the beginning with God,” comes from an unwillingness to confess that the Word is God. But this must be rebutted by the rule of faith, by which we are directed concerning the equality of the Trinity, so that we say, “And the Word was God.” And to this we then add, “This one was in the beginning with God.”

The problem here is that the end of the colon is uncertain: should *verbum* be the subject of *Deus erat*, allowing *hoc* alone to be the subject of *erat in principio apud Deum*, or should *Deus erat* be alone, while *verbum hoc* is the subject of *erat in principio apud Deum*? (One could raise other questions, of course, especially about the meaning of the predication *Deus erat Verbum*, but I leave that aside for now). The “heretical punctuation” Augustine refers to—the one that leaves *Deus erat* by itself

and makes *verbum hoc* the subject of the next clause—would provide no basis for arguing that the Word is the second person of the Trinity and thus is just as divine as the first person of the Trinity, the Father, here understood in the single word *Deus*. In fact, this reading would strongly suggest that the Word is not God, especially since the phrase “the Word was *with* God” would then have no corrective, simply suggesting that the Word is not God in any sense. Those who would deny that the Word is God just as much as the Father is—Arians, for instance—would therefore take this reading. But the Catholic position, which Augustine supports, claims that Christ is God, an equal member of the Trinity. The ambiguity is only resolved by resorting to an authoritative statement about the persons of the Trinity, as found in I.5.

The question is whether Church teaching in these cases simply decides between possible readings of the text or adds information to the text. The line between these is not very clear, but consider it this way: must Church teaching be used to clarify passages which are on the edge of being clear before it can be used to interpret figurative passages, or can the reader also use Church teaching as an independent source of doctrine about faith and morals, upon which to base figurative interpretations, without showing that the point is present (in light of Church teaching) in a clearly stated passage? Simply put: does Church authority only *resolve* interpretation or also offer its own content?

I take it that the case of the ambiguity in John 1:1-2 is an example of the former, while the issue of interpreting passages partially figuratively based on the *consuetudo* of the guardians of the divine precepts could be more like the latter, though the only case that Augustine considers (polygyny allowed in the Old

Testament, but not now) could probably be resolved on the basis of the New Testament. A better test case would be beliefs about Jesus' mother—whether she remained always a virgin and whether she ever sinned. Augustine supports both claims³³⁵ though there is no *clear* Scriptural evidence for either.³³⁶ But it is uncertain whether he is consistent in so doing, because his remarks come in very un-theoretical contexts.

Augustine's actual interpretations are highly influenced and bound by the interpretive tradition to which he belongs (depending largely on Ambrose, Cyprian, and possibly Origen, through Ambrose as well as Rufinus).³³⁷ But here I am only trying to address Augustine's theoretical treatment of how Church authority (whatever that includes) influences Scriptural interpretation. On the basis of what we have seen, we can definitely say that it influences which passages count as clear and that it alters to some degree or adds specification to the interpretation of clear passages. But the question that remains unresolved is what Church authority on its own can supply doctrine: it all comes down to whether the conjunction of clearly stated passages and Church authority in the *regula fidei* indicates that the two sources do the same thing or are mutually reinforcing. We have mostly seen evidence for the latter, that Church

³³⁵ That Mary was without sin, *De Natura et Gratia* 26.42. That Mary remained a virgin, *De Sancta Virginitate* 4.

³³⁶ However, as can be seen in the passage in the previous note, he does argue for Mary's making a vow of perpetual virginity based on her question to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?". Augustine says that, since she was betrothed to Joseph, that she would know how it would work, unless she means that she will never "know" a man.

³³⁷ On the influence of Origen on Augustine through Rufinus, see Berrouard, "La permanence de la foi chrétienne à travers le temps," pages 413-423 of his text, translation, and commentary on the *Tractatus, Homélie sur L'Évangile de Saint Jean*. The relevant material is found on pages 422-3. See also Teske, "Origen and St Augustine's First Commentaries on Genesis."

authority is *confirmatory* and *interpretive* in nature, though we cannot say that Augustine shuts out the possibility that it is also *originative*.

3. Return to the hermeneutic circle

Let us return briefly to consider the role of Augustine's doctrinal summary in *Doct. chr.* I.5.5-20.19. We could wonder whether Augustine has pre-determined the meaning of Scripture by giving us so much of the content up front. But I think there are two reasons to reject this claim. First, as I said in the last chapter, Augustine is offering this content as a preview of the results of investigating and interpreting Scripture. It seems to be here because he is writing a manual for clergy to use in studying Scripture and preaching, and he offers the conclusion, as it were, in order to make sure they stay on the right track with his method. It is just as if I had offered all the conclusions at the beginning of this dissertation: that would not mean that I had pre-determined what the texts I was going to look at would mean (maybe I have done this, but it is a separate matter). Second, we have seen that Church authority has some role in interpretation, but that role is mostly an interaction with Scripture. The critical points at which Church authority really exerts some control over Scriptural interpretation are when we have to choose between conflicting possibilities, either in the interpretation of one passage or between passages. But Scripture itself provides the general guidance of the double precept of charity, and it is more a literary principle

than a theological one that we next look for passages that are obviously related to that charity.³³⁸

We cannot deny that Church authority exerts an influence on the interpretation of Scripture and the determination of clearly stated passages, but we can understand that role as an analogue to the reader's developing understanding of what counts as a clearly stated passage. By this I mean two things. First, Augustine's appeal to what I called "ordinary and linguistic knowledge" already uses external sources to understand Scripture better, and so there is no absolute reason that there should not be theological sources as well which *help to explain* Scripture. When Augustine says that all the content of faith and morals can be found in the clearly stated passages (*Doct. chr.* II.9.14), then, or that Scripture contains every useful piece of knowledge you can find elsewhere (II.42.63), perhaps we should take him to mean that one could *find* it all there, as long as one knew what to look for.³³⁹ This explanation would still suggest that there is no content of faith and morals that one finds *only* externally—i.e., not mentioned by Scripture at all—and I am not sure that he can hold to that position, given what he accepts as belonging to the *fides*, but this is as close to a solution as I can find.

But, second, just as a reader can understand more and more passages as clear as gains a more and more thorough knowledge of Scripture, so he can come to understand the justification for creedal formulae and other expressions of Church

³³⁸ However, as we saw, Augustine does seem to have a theological justification for his idea that all the content of faith and morals should be able to be found in the clearly stated passages—though we have now seen that the claim is not quite true.

³³⁹ For more on this issue and this passage (*Doct. chr.* II.42.63), see the "Secular Claims" section of this chapter, the end of subsection "The general role of secular knowledge in interpretation."

authority more and more as he learns about Scripture. This idea is what Augustine refers to as *fides quaerens intellectum*, and I think it is critical to understand. The *regula fidei* is an authoritative guide for faith, but you are supposed to move beyond faith as much as possible to understanding. It cannot be done completely, because there are some things that one can only know on the basis of Scripture, but one should still attempt to understand these points in Scripture (and from other sources) for himself. Reason can "never completely forsake authority," he says in *De Vera Religione* XXIV.45³⁴⁰. Rather, reason trusts a reasonable authority.³⁴¹ So there is always a place for faith in this life, but "sight will replace faith" in the next life.³⁴²

What readers are trying to do now, then, is to understand the text as much as they can. They are *working toward* a goal. Augustine exemplifies this in his commentaries on Genesis. He largely relies on figurative interpretation in the *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* to explain difficult passages, but he admits there that if someone can explain the passages *ad litteram*, then he would yield to them. And of course *ad litteram* explanation is exactly what he does in his later *De Genesi ad Litteram*. Augustine rarely claims to have found the specific meaning of the text with certainty,³⁴³ though he does close in the parameters more and more. Likewise, his

³⁴⁰ *De Vera Religione* XXIV.45: *neque auctoritatem ratio penitus deserit.*

³⁴¹ *De Utilitate Credendi* 23-24. For a useful history of Augustine's views on the relation of reason and authority, see Frederick Van Fleteren, "Authority and Reason, Faith and Understanding."

³⁴² *Doct. chr.* I.38.42

³⁴³ Augustine's reticence to claim that he has found the writer's intended meaning is based on his belief that it is impossible to *know* what another human being is thinking or has thought. This seems like a trivial claim, since we can be fairly sure of what the author was thinking in a number of situations. But I think Augustine is particularly concerned that we can underestimate what the author is thinking, that a person's words almost necessarily underdetermine his meaning for hearers. Quite a lot of inference is necessary, and it is always possible that we, the readers or hearers, do not have adequate information to make all the possible and proper inferences.

method in the *Doct. chr.* shows that he conceives of interpretation as an ongoing project. It is quite transparent at several points in the *Doct. chr.* that figurative interpretation is meant not only to explain passages which the author intended as figurative, but also to explain passages where the interpreter cannot currently find an acceptable literal meaning, though the writer seems to have spoken literally. In the latter case the interpreter explains the passage in accordance with other clearly stated passages and the Church's teaching—that is, an external truth supplies a sort of secondary meaning when the primary, internal meaning cannot be found.³⁴⁴

Conclusion

The overall point we should draw about Augustine's view of Church authority is that it plays many roles. The apostles were given authority to write the books of the New Testament, and the particular churches by apostolic succession have the authority to confirm what does or does not belong to the canon of Scripture. But by the same means, the successors of the apostles have authority to set parameters on interpretation and to further specify content that could not be decided on the basis of Scripture alone, perhaps even providing content that Scripture does not give—though this is uncertain. But knowledge of the Church's authoritative expressions is also simply useful for interpreters, particularly when they are starting out, as an aid in identifying the clearly stated passages and in clarifying further passages.

³⁴⁴ My distinction here is a simple critical one between what the writer consciously or at least implicitly intended and what he did not. As I made clear in chapter 1, I think Augustine must believe that the author has a secondary, open and unspecified intention, rooted in the incomprehensibly broad intention of the Holy Spirit, which readers can access based on these external constraints.

Obviously, then, Augustine is committed to certain ecclesiological views which require more defense, but that is not my concern. The point we need to recognize is that, for Augustine, the authority of the Church in interpretation of Scripture and matters of doctrine is unsurprising once we see that our ability to recognize the canon of Scripture depends on the Church's authority too (albeit in a slightly different sense). If Scripture asserts only what is true, Augustine seems to think, it has to agree with this other source of truth, inasmuch as it is established by God.

Secular Claims

Though the role that Augustine gives to church authority in setting the canon and interpreting Scripture may be controversial, it is not surprising. But Augustine also refers to the knowledge gained by *certissima ratione vel experientia* as a guide to what passages of Scripture can and cannot be saying. Though later in the *Doct. chr.* (III.2.2) he suggests that the clear passages need some help from the authority of the Church in order to give all the content of faith and morals, he does not admit straightforwardly in that work that philosophy especially, but also "science,"³⁴⁵ can play a similar supplementary role in interpreting some passages.

Recall the passage I pointed to in chapter 2 as expressing Augustine's fundamental interpretive claim that Scripture asserts only what is true—*Confessions*

³⁴⁵ I have put "science" in quotation marks to indicate that I do not mean it in the modern sense, but only in contrast to the more strictly rational work of philosophy. I do not mean to equate empirical claims with scientific or physical ones, nor rational claims with philosophy. But Augustine seems to draw a line between rationalist, Platonist philosophy (generally viewed positively) and more empirically- or at least physically-oriented natural philosophy (generally viewed less positively, or at least as less useful), which I am trying to represent with these two terms.

XII.32. In that passage, while dealing with his hermeneutic opponents in the book, Augustine makes a summary dismissal of any interpreters of Genesis who either believe something false (and so impute the same belief to Moses), or know the truth yet believe that Moses meant something false. He says (*Conf.* XII.32):

Duo video dissensionum genera oboriri posse cum aliquid a nuntiis veracibus per signa enuntiatur: unum, si de veritate rerum, alterum, si de ipsius qui enuntiat voluntate dissensio est. Aliter enim quaerimus de creaturae conditione quid verum sit, aliter autem quid in his verbis Moyses, egregius domesticus fidei tuae, intellegere lectorem auditoremque voluerit.

I see that two types of disagreement can arise when something is expressed through signs by truthful reporters: the one, if there is disagreement about the truth of the matter, the other, if there is disagreement about the intention of the one who expresses it. For in the one case we are seeking what is true about the creation of the universe, but in the other case we are seeking what Moses, the distinguished servant of Your faith, wished a reader or a hearer to understand in these words.

I want to focus now on the notion that what Moses asserted (and so what readers believe and interpret) must agree with "the truth of the matter" (*veritate rerum*)—in this case, the truth about "the creation of the world." Augustine's use of "truth" in this case includes not only truths of the faith, but also those that we learn about from secular sources. I will refer to the truth of the matter about things not strictly belonging to revelation as "secular truths" (which are abstract) and to attempts (successful or not) to formulate these truths as "secular claims."

Now in fact, while discussing the possibility of the creation of a physical (rather than spiritual) light in Genesis 1:3 in *Gn. litt.* I.19.38, Augustine suggests that

the knowledge we gain from sure secular claims is as much of a constraint as the content of the *fides*³⁴⁶—indeed, a part of it:

Esse autem lucem corporalem coelestem, aut etiam supra coelum, vel ante coelum, cui succedere nox potuerit, tamdiu non est contra fidem, donec veritate certissima refellatur. Quod si factum fuerit, non hoc habebat divina Scriptura, sed hoc senserat humana ignorantia. Si autem hoc verum esse certa ratio demonstraverit, adhuc incertum erit utrum hoc in illis verbis sanctorum Librorum scriptor sentiri voluerit, an aliud aliquid non minus verum. Quod si caetera contextio sermonis non hoc eum voluisse probaverit, non ideo falsum erit aliud, quod ipse intellegi voluit; sed et verum, et quod utilius cognoscatur.

But the existence of a corporeal light (whether belonging to the heaven, or even above the heaven, or [existing] before the heaven) which might follow *is not contrary to the faith, unless it is refuted by most certain truth*. But if this happens, divine Scripture did not have [the idea], but human ignorance thought of it. If, however, sure reason demonstrates that this is true, even so it will be uncertain whether the writer of the holy Books wished this to be understood in those words or something else no less true. But if the remaining context of the speech proves that he did not mean this, the different thing which that one wished to be understood will not thereby be false; but it also [will be] true and a thing more useful to learn.

There are three points here that I will address in the course of this section. First, a claim that is “refuted by most certain truth” is contrary to the faith in some sense, even separate from the issue of interpretation. It is not surprising that a false assertion about something like this could not be part of a valid interpretation of Scripture, since Scripture can only assert what is true, but here we see that claim subsumed into a larger one, that the faith—which embraces but goes beyond Scripture—does not contain anything false. Second, the fact that a claim is true does not mean that the Scriptural writer's intention included that claim. There is also, obviously, the issue of

³⁴⁶ I take *fides* in this passage to be equivalent to *regula fidei* as I explained it in the last section.

relevance, and as we have seen a bit before,³⁴⁷ the text itself has to guide what we take to be the writer's meaning. Third, the fact that a Scriptural writer did not intend some claim does not mean that it is not true, but it does mean that what he intended is more useful (and still true). This is a point we have seen before, in considering Augustine's implicit principal that Scripture must always support charity and so be "maximally meaningful," as Teske would say.³⁴⁸ We saw Augustine tie in this claim in his consideration in *Confessions* XII of what the writer meant—the truest and most useful meaning—and we will talk about it again in the next chapter. But here it already raises a question: how obligated is the reader to look for this maximal, this most useful meaning, since he must try to find what the writer meant? How much effort does he need to spend on learning truths relevant to Scripture from philosophy and "science"?

In this section the major thing I will do is explain the role that secular knowledge—both philosophical and empirical—plays in interpretation. In contrast to the previous two chapters and the first section of this chapter, in this section we will be looking mostly at the *De Genesi ad Litteram* and *Confessions* XII, though there will be some material from the *Doct. chr.*, as well as *Confessions* VII and some other works. First, I will look at the issue generally and then move to an analysis of, second, the role that Augustine gives to philosophy in interpretation, especially in *Confessions* XII, and, third, the role that empirical claims play in interpretation, especially in *De Genesi ad Litteram*. Fourth, I will consider two difficult questions about how this

³⁴⁷ See the sub-section on "Context" in chapter 2, as well as my discussions of *Confessions* XII.36 and 42 in chapter 1.

³⁴⁸ See my discussion of Teske's claims about what he calls the absurdity criterion and maximizing criterion in the "Figurative Interpretation" section of chapter 3, subsection. "Different types of passage requiring figurative interpretation."

secular knowledge influences the process of interpretation: first, to what degree are readers compelled to seek out a knowledge of these subjects and to use that knowledge in interpretation? Second and relatedly, does it affect the ability of ignorant readers to find valid interpretations?

1. The general role of secular knowledge in interpretation

The first thing we should note about the use of philosophy and science in interpretation is that Augustine has already pointed readers toward them in his treatment of the knowledge that is useful for interpretation in *Doct. chr.* II.16.24-26, 26.40-40.60—but especially in II.29.45-46, where he deals with medicinal and astronomical science, and in II.40.60, where he talks about the utility of philosophy and particularly that of the Platonists.³⁴⁹ Natural philosophy gets limited mention, and he principally talks about the distinction between superstitious practices (e.g., hanging herbs as charms around one’s neck, or astrology) and mere descriptive study (e.g., of the effect of eating an herb, or studying and predicting the motion of the planets). He also says little about just what one is supposed to get from Platonist philosophy, but his limited comments are an occasion for a larger point:

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 nostrum vindicanda. Sicut enim Aegyptii . . . habebant . . . 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 . . . liberales disciplinas usui veritatis aptiores et quaedam

³⁴⁹ We should also note, however, that in II.28.43 he suggests that Plato learned much of his doctrine from meeting Jeremiah in Egypt, a statement that he regrets in *Retractions* II.4.2.

morum praecepta utilissima continent, deque ipso uno Deo colendo nonnulla vera inveniuntur apud eos.

But those who are called philosophers, if by chance they have said anything true and appropriate to our faith—most of all the Platonists—not only are these truths not to be feared, but they ought to be appropriated from those people for our use, as if from those who possess these things unjustly. For just as the Egyptians . . . had . . . vases and ornaments made of gold and silver and clothing that that people leaving Egypt secretly appropriated for themselves as for a better use, and not on their own authority but by the precept of God (the Egyptians themselves unknowingly giving those things which they were not using well)—so all the doctrines of the Gentiles . . . contain liberal disciplines more suited to the use of truth and some very useful moral precepts, and some truths are found among them concerning the worship of the one God Himself.

The point is that truth, wherever it is found, is God’s truth, and it ought to serve a divine purpose. Augustine would appear to be justifying not only those bits of pagan learning that restate points of Christian doctrine, but also those that in some way help to understand Christian doctrine.

While Augustine’s comments here are vague, I think they provide an adequate basis for introducing philosophical and empirical points to the interpretation of Scripture. After all, if we must use our ordinary knowledge of the world to understand what Scripture is talking about or claiming, why should we not be allowed to use a more systematic and careful knowledge of the world for the same purpose? If Scripture only asserts what is true, then other guides to truth, inasmuch as they really do find truth, should help readers understand what Scripture could or could not be claiming.

But of course “philosophy” and “science” are not monolithic systems. We therefore need a standard by which to judge whether some point is sufficiently worthy

of trust so that we can depend on it in interpreting Scripture—all the more so the more difficult, abstract, or fundamental the claim is. Augustine’s answer to this need is somewhat inadequate, but in the passage we saw a few pages ago (*Gn. litt.* I.19.38) he appeals to *veritate certissima* and *certa ratio* as the arbiters of whether the claim that there could be a physical light created in Genesis 1:3 is to be accepted. In I.19.39 he similarly says that those who know something about the constitution and movement of the heavens by means of *certissima ratione vel experientia* will deride Christians who interpret Scripture wrongly on the basis of their ignorance of these matters and consequently assert their false beliefs as being supported by Scripture. The point in these two situations is the same: *certa ratio* (or some terminological variant) serves as the basis to say that some claim is false, and thus that some interpretation is impossible. In principle, this should mean that what one can know from philosophy or science can affect what counts as a clear passage, since a passage that seems to speak clearly but would assert something false would not be speaking clearly, absent any easy alternate interpretations. Or perhaps a passage might have two possible interpretations, and a piece of secular knowledge denies one possibility, allowing the passage to count as clear, asserting the other possibility.

Augustine also makes the opposite point in *Gn. litt.* VII.1.1, where he says that secular knowledge can be the positive basis for an interpretation:

. . . illud scientes, nisi quantum ipse [Deus] adiuuaret, recte non esse locuturos. Recte est autem veraciter atque congruenter, nihil audacter refellendo, nihil temere affirmando, dum adhuc dubium est, verum falsumne sit, sive fidei, sive scientiae christianae; quod autem doceri potest vel rerum ratione apertissima, vel Scripturarum auctoritate certissima, sine cunctatione asserendo.

[I delayed talking about Genesis 2:7], knowing that, except inasmuch as [God] himself gives help, I would not speak correctly. But “correctly” means truly and appropriately³⁵⁰, not refuting anything brazenly, nor rashly affirming anything, as long as there is a doubt whether [the interpretation considered] is true or false, whether in regard to faith or Christian knowledge [or perhaps, “Christian faith or knowledge”]—instead asserting without hesitation what can be learned either by a very clear explanation of things or by the most certain authority of the Scriptures.

Here *apertissima ratio rerum* is not just the basis for denying claims, but for asserting them, and so a philosophical or scientific claim could serve as the basis not only for rejecting an interpretation, but for positing one. This is a big point, and we can see how it plays out in the parallel at the end, where Augustine places *rerum ratione apertissima* in parallel to *Scripturarum auctoritate certissima*. He would thus seem to say that a reader can base their understanding of what a passage says not only on what they find elsewhere in Scripture but also on what they know from reason. As we will see in sub-section 3, Augustine goes on in book VII to use medical knowledge³⁵¹ to explain what this troublesome verse, Genesis 2:7, means.

But he is not clear about what sort of passages in general this tactic is permissible for: can one use it to understand a highly doubtful passage, or in figurative interpretation? Recall that in *Doct. chr.* III.28.39, Augustine said that it is dangerous to interpret a figurative passage solely on the basis of reason, and that it is better to rely on what Scripture itself asserts:

³⁵⁰ This word translates *congruenter*, an important but difficult term for Augustine, used to describe proposed interpretations. He seems to mean that an interpretation which speaks *congruenter* with the passage says something that is likely to be what the passage is talking about, rather than an interpretation which, while true, just does not seem to be what the text is saying. Edmund Hill renders it as “relevantly” in his translation.

³⁵¹ Note that this, along with astronomical science, was one of the few areas of natural science that he specifically directed readers to in *Doct. chr.* II.29.45-46.

Ubi autem talis sensus eruitur, cuius incertum certis sanctarum Scripturarum testimoniis non possit aperiri, restat ut ratione reddita manifestus appareat, etiam si ille cuius verba intellegere quaerimus eum forte non sensit. Sed haec consuetudo periculosa est; per Scripturas enim divinas multo tutius ambulatur. Quas verbis translatis opacatas cum scrutari volumus, aut hoc inde exeat quod non habeat controversiam, aut, si habet, ex eadem Scriptura ubicumque eius inventis atque adhibitis testibus terminetur.

But when a meaning is drawn out, such that it has some uncertain part which cannot be cleared up by the sure statements of the holy Scriptures, it can still be made manifest by offering reasoning, even if that man, whose words we are seeking to understand, perhaps did not think of that [meaning]. But this practice is dangerous; for it is much safer to make one's way by means of the Scriptures. And when we wish to examine [passages] packed with figurative words, either let the result be that which holds no controversy or, if there is controversy, let it be ended by witnesses found and applied from the same Scripture wherever of it.

The passage may only be dealing with what information one can use in constructing a figurative interpretation (certainly the last sentence is), but, given the little attention Augustine gives to the role of philosophical and empirical knowledge in interpretation in the *Doct. chr.*, it seems not unreasonable to think that the first part of this passage applies to interpretation more generally. While the warning here is not strictly contradictory to his practice in *Gn. litt.* and *Confessions* XII, those two treatises would certainly seem to count as *periculosa* by this definition.

But that seems to me to be an obvious weakness of the *Doct. chr.* account, and one that can be modified without too much difficulty. As I have suggested, the ordinary knowledge of the world that *Doct. chr.* 16.24-26, 26.40-40.60 does talk about is continuous with the more sophisticated forms of philosophical and scientific claims that can also be of use in interpreting Scripture. This is pretty clearly the view that Augustine comes to by the time he writes *De Civitate Dei* XI, where he says (XI.19):

Quamvis itaque divini sermonis obscuritas etiam ad hoc sit utilis, quod plures sententias veritatis parit et in lucem notitiae producit, dum alius eum sic, alius sic intellegit; ita tamen ut, quod in obscuro loco intellegitur, vel attestazione rerum manifestarum vel aliis locis minime dubiis asseratur.

Therefore although the obscurity of the divine speech may be useful for this purpose—because it occasions many ideas that are true and leads them into the light of recognition, while one reader understands it this way, another that—nevertheless, it should be interpreted in such a way that whatever is understood in an obscure passage is maintained either by the testimony of manifest facts or by other passages that are free from doubt.

I think it is reasonable to understand the *attestazione rerum manifestarum* as a synonym for the *rerum ratione apertissima* that we already saw in *Gn. litt.* VII.1.1, in which case Augustine is placing the clearly true on the same level as clearly stated passages in providing content for the interpretation of obscure passages generally. This is what I will take as his view for the rest of this section.

But we should still pay attention to his hesitation in the passage above (*Doct. chr.* III.29.38) to trust *ratio* as much as he trusts Scripture, since this is only reasonable if Scripture is an infallible authority and reason is not. Of course, it is not always clear what a passage of Scripture means, and this is the point where *ratio* can be really useful. But it may also be the case that in *Doct. chr.* III.29.38 Augustine is just as much afraid of ignorant applications of philosophy or science to Scripture. He speaks of this danger in *Gn. litt.* I.19.39, where he says that Christians should beware of rashly saying that Scripture supports some claim that knowledgeable non-Christians know to be false.³⁵² Here we can see Augustine's unflinching criticism of those who

³⁵² We can practically hear Augustine's frustration (*Gn. litt.* I.19.39): "For one cannot say enough what trouble and sorrow the rash and presumptuous people bring upon their more prudent brothers when, if ever they are caught in their crooked and false opinion and exposed by those who do not hold to the

“think that they know things that are actually false” (*Confessions* XII.32). Again, with regard to secular truths one must rely only on what is proven by *certissima ratione vel experientia*, and perhaps the difficulty of knowing whether a claim is so proved is a reason for his hesitation toward *ratio* in the *Doct. chr. periculosa* passage.

Of course, these other guides to truth do not claim to be infallible, and so there could be cases where the Scriptural writer intends to claim something that the philosophical or scientific consensus speaks against. Augustine brings up this possibility in *Gn. litt.* I.21.41:

Quidquid ipsi de natura rerum veracibus documentis demonstrare potuerint, ostendamus nostris Litteris non esse contrarium. Quidquid autem de quibuslibet suis voluminibus his nostris Litteris, id est catholicae fidei contrarium protulerint, aut aliqua etiam facultate ostendamus, aut nulla dubitatione credamus esse falsissimum.

Whatever those people [who make fun of Scripture] are able to demonstrate about the nature of things by sure proofs, let us show that it is not contrary to our Writings. But whatever they bring forward from any writings of theirs against our Writings, that is, against the Catholic faith—either let us show with some ease or believe without any doubt that it is false.

Augustine portrays the split as being between what can be surely proven (=what agrees with Scripture and the catholic faith) and what other writers have claimed (=what disagrees with Scripture and the catholic faith). Just as in the image of the

authority of our Books, to defend what they have said with the most capricious rashness and most open falsity they try to bring forward the same holy Books from which to prove their opinion and even recite from memory what they think counts as proof, not understanding either the things that they are saying nor the things about which they are making assertions.” (*Quid enim molestiae tristitiaeque ingerant prudentibus fratribus temerarii praesumptores, satis dici non potest, cum si quando de prava et falsa opinione sua reprehendi, et convinci coeperint ab eis qui nostrorum Librorum auctoritate non tenentur, ad defendendum id quod levissima temeritate et apertissima falsitate dixerunt, eosdem Libros sanctos, unde id probent, proferre conantur, vel etiam memoriter, quae ad testimonium valere arbitrantur, multa inde verba pronuntiant, non intellegentes neque quae loquuntur, neque de quibus affirmant*).

Egyptians, whatever is true or good does not really belong to the writer and so is not said to be from their writings, but only what is false and discordant with the faith belongs to those writers.³⁵³ This works as a summary attitude—accept what can be accepted, refute what cannot—but it leaves aside the major complication that can result when one has to decide between *what appears to be* a clear statement of Scripture and a well-supported claim of philosophy or science. How flexible is the idea of “clear passage”? Surely the statements of Scripture cannot be entirely liquid in meaning.³⁵⁴ But perhaps that is why he appeals to the Catholic faith more generally, which would also include creeds and such statements that would address some secular claims more directly.³⁵⁵

I think we can see more of how this relationship (or tension) plays out by looking at some specific examples, and so in the next two sections I will look at the integration of philosophical claims into the interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2 in *Confessions* XII and the integration of medical scientific claims into the interpretation of Genesis 2:7 in *Gn. litt.* VII.

³⁵³ This is a consistent trope in Augustine, and he uses the opposite point in *Confessions* XII.34: that if *x* is true, then it does not belong to you or me, but to the Truth above us.

³⁵⁴ For more on how Augustine balances secular claims and the statements of Scripture, cf. Ernan McMullin, “Galileo on Science and Scripture” in *The Cambridge Companion to Galileo*. Cambridge, 2006: 271-347, esp. 294-5. McMullin seems sure that when reason and evidence cannot give a completely certain account, Augustine gives more authority to statement of Scripture; but I am not quite convinced. *Ratio* can have more or less certainty at various times, so does Scripture’s authority go up and down too? He also claims that when natural knowledge offers us a sure claim, we must assent to it, against whatever other interpretations might be offers; but that cannot always be the case, since it would make Scripture completely subject to rational and empirical claims. I think he describes the balance better when he describes a more complicated situation on page 296: “If the Scriptural passage lends itself to different interpretations, might not a well-supported (though not demonstrated) knowledge-claim make a difference in deciding on the proper interpretation?” The relative authority and certainty of Scripture and natural knowledge can create more complicated problems. My problem with his earlier claims is that they too readily suggest that reason and empirical study can attain to a level of certainty that is equal to Scripture’s.

³⁵⁵ On this point see Robert Eno, “Doctrinal Authority in Saint Augustine,” 143-5.

2. The role of philosophical knowledge in *Confessions* XII

We have already seen sufficiently in chapter 1 what Augustine's project is in *Confessions* XII, and so I will not spend much time on summary here.³⁵⁶ Augustine's clear aim in the course of the book is to show that his reading of Genesis 1:1-2 both states the truth and was intended (or at least allowed) by Moses. The former is my interest here.

Augustine summarizes the truths that he thinks are relevant to the interpretation of verses 1 and 2 three times in the course of the book: first, as a list of claims which "You have spoken to me with a loud voice in my inner ear" (sections 11-14); second, as a (partially corresponding) series of questions to his opponents—"Can you say that those things are false which the Truth spoke to me in a loud voice in my inner ear..." (sections 18-22); and third, as a straightforward list of points all beginning with "it is true that..." (section 28). Below is a synthesis of the philosophical points of interest³⁵⁷ from the first two lists, marked by the sections where they can be found. I will call these list A:

A1. God is eternal (11); He does not change by any change of species (11); His substance does not vary with time (18).

A2. God's will does not change with time (11, 18) because it is not separate from His substance (18).

A3. God made all natures and substances (11); everything formed and formable comes from the *Summum Bonum*=God (19).

³⁵⁶ For a summary of the whole book, see the subsection "Summary of Book XII" in chapter 1, as well the outline of the book in Appendix 1.

³⁵⁷ I leave out a consideration of Augustine's theological-philosophical point about the *caelum caeli*, simply because it is so complicated. He has Scriptural references to support it, but it is clearly a Neoplatonic notion as well.

A4. Since God's will does not change, He created the world not by any new direction of His will (18).

A5. Without species/form there is no change (*varietas*), and without changes of motion (*varietate motionum*) there is no time (14); where there is no form there is no order, and where there is no order there is no change of time (22).

In section 28, he homes in on several more details. He gives ten points, all begun with *verum est*; I give only the relevant ones here,³⁵⁸ but the numbers indicate their position in the whole listing. I will call these list B:

B1. God made heaven and earth (connected to B3).

B3. The two parts of the visible world, heaven and earth, sum up all things and natures in the world (cf. A3).

B4. Every mutable thing has some informity by which it changes.

B6. Informity, inasmuch as it is almost nothing, cannot undergo changes (cf. A5).

B9. God made not only what is created and formed but also what is creatable and formable.

B10. Anything formed from what is unformed is first unformed, then formed.³⁵⁹

It is obvious that A5, B4, B6, B9, and B10 are derived from philosophical (Platonist) reflection and not from Scripture. B1 is clearly given in Scripture, and Augustine uses the more general point B3 to expand on it. A1, A2, A3, and A4, though, represent a hybrid between Scriptural and philosophical claims—or rather, an expansion on Scriptural claims by means of philosophical ones.

³⁵⁸ Again, leaving out the point (what would be B5) about the *caelum caeli*.

³⁵⁹ Augustine provides a long discussion of four different types of priority in section 39.

Though these last four (A1-4) have Scriptural support, which Augustine usually quotes obliquely, few of these verses definitely say what Augustine is claiming. Rather, we see that Augustine has derived each of these from philosophical argument. But once discovered the points can also be *recognized* in Scripture—which is to say that philosophical claims can enable us to understand better what a passage states and even clearly states.

Consider point A1, attested in sections 11 and 18. In 11 he says that God “spoke to [him] with a loud voice in [his] inner ear” that “You [God] are eternal.” Though Augustine says that God tells him this, he does not mean that God tells him through Scripture, but rather through reason, that voice in his inner ear. He does support this claim with a Scriptural quotation—*quia tu aeternus es, solus habens immortalitatem*—the latter half coming from Paul in I Timothy 6:16. In 18 he claims that God, His substance, and His will are eternal, and supports it with an oblique quotation, *deus autem noster aeternus est*.³⁶⁰ But either quotation is insufficient for what Augustine wants to prove: that God’s eternity means that He does not experience a succession of times, and so He could not decide to do now one thing, now another. There are, after all, also a number of passages, especially in the Old Testament, where God does appear to or even is said to change his mind,³⁶¹ and so Scriptural passages by themselves seem at odds. In fact, a clear philosophical justification for these claims

³⁶⁰ Skutella and O’Donnell (*ad loc*) propose Psalm 47:15 as the reference. That passage says: *Hic est Deus noster in aeternum*.

Besides the passages Augustine cites, one could think of the numerous times in Scripture where it is said that God “does not change,” that he is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” But, conversely, there are passages that are hard to explain with respect to these principles, especially in the Old Testament, where God is said to (or says through the mouth of a prophet) that He is changing his mind about something.

³⁶¹ See, for instance, Genesis 6:6, Exodus 32:14, or I Samuel 15:11.

is found a book earlier, in XI.9, where he explains why eternity is incompatible with succession (thus preventing any change). Likewise, in XI.12, he explains why God's will belongs to his substance and so also cannot change. While Scripture is involved in and supports these claims in some way, it is clear that the "loud voice in [his] inner ear" is reason, which specifies or explains more than the text of Scripture on its own.³⁶²

But we should also note that these are the very principles that he learned "from the books of the Platonists," in VII.13. There he quite explicitly says that philosophy taught him the same principles regarding the deity of the Word that are found in John 1:1-5, 9-10 and Philippians 2:6,³⁶³ both of which he quotes in VII.13-14. He says that in the books of the Platonists he found these verses "not in these words but the same idea with many and various arguments."³⁶⁴ But this description flips around the relationship: it suggests that the biblical passages on their own give the content that he finds in the Platonists, though it really seems that the points he found in the Platonists were a necessary background to understand the passage. Indeed, philosophy seems to

³⁶² Though he does not make it to verse 3 ("And God said, 'Let there be light'") in the course of book XII, in *Gn. litt.* I.2.4, he is able to rule out the possibility that God literally said something for exactly this reason, because it would mean that God changed. *Gn. litt.* I.2.4: *Et quomodo dixit Deus: Fiat lux? utrum temporaliter, an in Verbi aeternitate? Et si temporaliter, utique mutabiliter; quomodo ergo possit intellegi hoc dicere Deus, nisi per creaturam; ipse quippe est incommutabilis?* He goes on to rule out the possibility of a creature saying this with physical voice, since the physical world lacked form at this point.

³⁶³ John 1:1-5, 9-10, as given by Augustine (*Conf.* VII.13): *In principio erat verbum et verbum erat apud deum et deus erat verbum. Hoc erat in principio apud deum. Omnia per ipsum facta sunt, et sine ipso factum est nihil. Quod factum est in eo vita est, et vita erat lux hominum; et lux in tenebris lucet, et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt. . . . Inluminat omnem hominem venientem in hunc mundum. . . . In hoc mundo erat, et mundus per eum factus est, et mundus eum non cognovit.*

Philippians 2:6, as given by Augustine (*Conf.* VII.14): *Sit filius in forma patris, non rapinam arbitratus esse aequalis deo, quia naturaliter idipsum est, sed quia semet ipsum exinanivit formam servi accipiens, in similitudinem hominum factus et habitu inventus ut homo, humilavit se factus oboediens usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis.* Note that Augustine adds in *quia naturaliter idipsum est.*

³⁶⁴ *Confessions* VII.13: *non quidem his verbis sed hoc idem omnino multis et multiplicibus rationibus*

have helped him trace out the meaning of the latter passage, Philippians 2:6, more precisely, since he explains that passage—"The son, being in the form of the father, did not consider it robbery to be equal to God"—by adding "because he was by nature the very same."³⁶⁵ This reminds one not only of the more developed *consubstantialis* language of later of the creed, which is itself taken from Greek philosophy, but also of his previous point in VII.4.6 that *ipse est deus, et quod sibi vult bonum est, et ipse est idem bonum*.

Furthermore, in the following sections he draws out another version of a point we have already seen, imitating the example of St. Paul (VII.15):

Intendi in aurum quod ab Aegypto voluisti ut auferret populus tuus, quoniam tuum erat, ubicumque erat. Et dixisti Atheniensibus per apostolum tuum quod in te vivimus et movemur et sumus, sicut et quidam secundum eos dixerunt, et utique inde erant illi libri.

I turned my attention on the gold which you wanted your people to carry off from Egypt, since it was yours wherever it was. And you said to the Athenians through your apostle that "in you we live and move and are," just as certain people among them [the Athenians] said, and certainly those books were from there [among the Athenians].³⁶⁶

This is the same point that he makes and the same image that he uses in *Doct. chr.*

II.40.60. In the following sections, VII.19-23, Augustine begins a Platonic ascent to

God, based on his conviction that unchanging Truth exists, which is "perceived, being

³⁶⁵ *Confessions* VII.13: *filius in forma patris, non rapinam arbitratus esse aequalis deo, quia naturaliter idipsum est.*

³⁶⁶ Augustine uses the same image in *Doct. chr.* II.40.60 when he tells his reader that he can find useful material among the philosophers: *Philosophi autem qui vocantur, si qua forte vera et fidei nostrae accommodata dixerunt, maxime Platonici, non solum formidanda non sunt, sed ab eis etiam tamquam ab iniustis possessoribus in usum nostrum vindicanda. Sicut enim Aegyptii . . . habebant . . . 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 [habent] . . . liberales disciplinas usui veritatis aptiores et quaedam morum praecepta utilissima continent, deque ipso uno Deo colendo nonnulla vera inveniuntur apud eos.*

understood though those things which have been made"—a quotation from Paul in Romans 1:20.³⁶⁷ Thus the beginning of Augustine's approach to God is founded on a philosophical conviction informed by the existence of things *that are made*.³⁶⁸ At the peak of this ascent he wonders, "Can it be that truth is nothing," and God (through reason) says to him, *ego sum qui sum*, which he hears "as it is heard in the heart." Thus he equates God with truth, since he has already drawn a connection in VII.17: *id vere est quod incommutabiliter manet*, "That truly is which unchangeably remains."³⁶⁹

The parallels to book XII are strong. Book VII describes the situation in which God "spoke to [Augustine] with a loud voice in his inner ear" about his eternity. But we can see that what he is describing is a rational event, though an elevated one, and that it is occasioned by reading the Platonists. Augustine's equation of Platonist principles with parts of John 1 and Philippians 2:6 blurs the distinction between what those passages say on their own and what they can be understood to say under Platonist presuppositions.

But once we recognize the role that Platonist philosophy played in Augustine's approach to the Bible, then we can see that Augustine's lists of true propositions in book XII provide a straightforward presentation of his presuppositions in interpreting Genesis, based on what he believes to be clearly true, and that they are just as applicable as clearly stated passages of Scripture in understanding the difficult and

³⁶⁷ Romans 1:20, most completely given by Augustine in VII.23: *invisibilia [Dei] a constitutione mundi per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur, sempiterna quoque virtus et divinitas tua.*

³⁶⁸ When he details his ascent to God in book X.9, he places greater emphasis on this fact by depicting all created things as saying to him, "He [God] made us."

³⁶⁹ We find a similar philosophical discovery that will serve as the basis for a point in book XII in VII.18: "I saw and it was made manifest to me that You made all good things and that there are absolutely no substances that you did not make" (*Vidi et manifestatum est mihi quia bona tu fecisti et prorsus nullae substantiae sunt quas tu non fecisti*).

obscure points in Genesis 1. Of course, this fact suggests that his philosophical presuppositions may be at work in his other interpretations too, though I do not think that anyone will be surprised to hear that Augustine applies distinctly Platonist (and less clearly Scriptural) principles in his understanding of many passages of Scripture. As I have already noted, even in his list of doctrines in *Doct. chr.* I.5.5-20.19, Platonism plays a significant role. In I.8.8, for instance, he works toward what the nature of body must be by examining ascending levels of being: bodily form, living body, life itself; nutritive, sentient, and intelligent life; and finally unchangeable intelligent life, which is God.³⁷⁰ But he goes through a very similar sequence in his philosophical ascent to God in *Confessions* VII.23: the excellence of earthly and heavenly bodies, the soul that perceives the excellence, the sentient power of the soul, the power of reasoning, and finally the unchanging—which leads to his glance of “that which is.”³⁷¹ The connection is clear at the end of *Doct. chr.* I.8.8, where he talks about how human beings come to perceive the unchangeable:

³⁷⁰ *Doct. chr.* I.8.8: *Et quoniam omnes qui de Deo cogitant, vivum aliquid cogitant, illi soli possunt non absurda et indigna existimare de Deo qui vitam ipsam cogitant. Et quaecumque illis forma occurrerit corporis, eam vita vivere vel non vivere statuunt, et viventem non viventi anteponunt; eamque ipsam viventem corporis formam, quantalibet luce praeifulgeat, quantalibet magnitudine praemineat, quantalibet pulchritudine ornetur, aliud esse ipsam, aliud vitam qua vegetatur intellegunt, eamque illi moli quae ab illa vegetatur et animatur, dignitate incomparabili praeferunt. Deinde ipsam vitam pergunt inspicere, et si eam sine sensu vegetantem invenerint, qualis est arborum, praeponunt ei sentientem, qualis est pecorum; et huic rursus intellegentem, qualis est hominum. Quam cum adhuc mutabilem viderint, etiam huic aliquam incommutabilem coguntur praeponere, illam scilicet vitam quae non aliquando desipit aliquando sapit, sed est potius ipsa Sapientia. Sapiens enim mens, id est, adepta sapientiam, antequam adipisceretur non erat sapiens; at vero ipsa Sapientia nec fuit umquam insipientis, nec esse umquam potest.*

³⁷¹ *Confessions* VII.23: *Quaerens enim unde approbarem pulchritudinem corporum, sive caelestium sive terrestrium, et quid mihi praesto esset integre de mutabilibus iudicanti et dicenti, ‘Hoc ita esset debet, illud non ita’ — hoc ergo quaerens, unde iudicarem cum ita iudicarem, inveneram incommutabilem et veram veritatis aeternitatem supra mentem meam commutabilem. Atque ita gradatim a corporibus ad sentientem per corpus animam atque inde ad eius interiorem vim, cui sensus corporis exteriora nuntiaret, et quousque possunt bestiae, atque inde rursus ad ratiocinantem potentiam ad quam refertur iudicandum quod sumitur a sensibus corporis. Quae se quoque in me comperiens mutabilem erexit se ad intellegentiam suam et abduxit cogitationem a consuetudine,*

Quam si non viderent, nullo modo plena fiducia vitam incommutabiliter sapientem commutabili vitae anteponerent. Ipsam quippe regulam veritatis, qua illam clamant esse meliorem, incommutabilem vident; nec uspiam nisi supra suam naturam vident, quandoquidem se mutabiles vident.

If people never saw this [unchanging wisdom], there is no way that they would with full confidence value the unchangeably wise life over the changeable one. For they see that rule of truth, by which they claim that the former is better, is itself unchangeable. Nor do they see this rule anywhere except above their own natures, since they see that they themselves are mutable.

And so even in *Doct. chr.* I, which Augustine later refers to as his summary of the *regula fidei*,³⁷² he also appeals to the *regula veritatis* as a guide to the basic points of Christian doctrine.³⁷³ The truths that we can derive from reason are put at a level with the ones we are given by faith, because they both reveal the truth about God and the order of the world.

3. The role of empirical knowledge in *Gn. litt.* VII

We have already seen that empirical claims can play a restrictive role on the meaning of a passage, as Augustine makes clear in *Gn. litt.* I.19.38, when dealing with the question of what the light is which God creates in Genesis 1:3:

Esse autem lucem corporalem coelestem, aut etiam supra coelum, vel ante coelum, cui succedere nox potuerit, tamdiu non est contra fidem, donec veritate certissima refellatur. Quod si factum fuerit, non hoc habebat divina Scriptura, sed hoc senserat humana ignorantia.

subtrahens se contradicentibus turbis phantasmatum, ut inveniret quo lumine aspergeretur, cum sine ulla dubitatione clamaret incommutabile praeferendum esse mutabili unde nosset ipsum incommutabile (quod nisi aliquo modo nosset, nullo modo illud mutabili certa praeponeret), et pervenit ad id quod est in ictu trepidantis aspectus.

³⁷² This back-reference is given in *Doct. chr.* III.2.2.

³⁷³ For a thorough analysis of different types of *regulae* in Augustine, see Dawidowski, “*Regula Fidei* in Augustine: Its Use and Function.”

But the existence of a corporeal light (whether belonging to the heaven, or even above the heaven, or [existing] before the heaven) which might follow *is not contrary to the faith, unless it is refuted by most certain truth*. But if this happens, divine Scripture did not have [the idea], but human ignorance thought of it. (emphasis mine)

But empirical claims can also help readers positively, offering material for a proposed interpretation.

As I have already mentioned, we can see this latter tactic in *Gn. litt.* VII, where Augustine deals with scientific claims that bear on the interpretation of Genesis 2:7 (“And God formed the dust from the earth into a man and puffed [*flavit*] into his face the puff [*flatum*] of life, and man became a living soul”).³⁷⁴ Let me cite the opening of the book again (1.1):

. . . illud scientes, nisi quantum ipse [Deus] adiuuaret, recte non esse locuturos. Recte est autem veraciter atque congruenter, nihil audacter refellendo, nihil temere affirmando, dum adhuc dubium est, verum falsumne sit, sive fidei, sive scientiae christianae; quod autem doceri potest vel rerum ratione apertissima, vel Scripturarum auctoritate certissima, sine cunctatione asserendo.

[I delayed talking about Genesis 2:7], knowing that, except inasmuch as [God] himself gives help, I would not speak correctly. But “correctly” means truly and appropriately, not refuting anything brazenly, nor rashly affirming anything, as long as there is a doubt whether [the interpretation considered] is true or false, whether in regard to faith or Christian knowledge [or perhaps, “Christian faith or knowledge”]—instead asserting without hesitation what can be learned by a very clear explanation of things or by the most certain authority of the Scriptures.

Though Augustine's discussion in this book touches on a number of philosophical issues (whether God can have a body, whether the human soul is corporeal), he also

³⁷⁴ Genesis 2:7, as given by Augustine in *Gn. litt.* VII.1: *Et finxit Deus hominem pulverem de terra, et flavit in faciem eius flatum vitae, et factus est homo in animam viventem*

brings in some evidence from medical science to solve part of the problem of what the “puff of life” is that God “puffed,” thereby making the man into “a living soul.”

Since Augustine insists for philosophical reasons that the soul is not corporeal (and note that he suggests it is a matter of the faith),³⁷⁵ it makes no sense to say that this puff is air or any other corporeal substance which was fashioned into a soul. But then what is this puff and what is it doing? In VII.13.20-19.25, he makes a suggestion based on information from the *medici*. He begins (VII.13.20):

Deinde si non est contemnendum quod medici non tantum dicunt, verum etiam probare se affirmant, quamvis omnis caro terrenam soliditatem in promptu gerat, habet tamen in se et aeris aliquid, quod et pulmonibus continetur, et a corde per venas, quas arterias vocant, diffunditur; et ignis non solum fervidam qualitatem, cuius sedes in iecore est, verum etiam luculentam, quam velut eliquari ac subvolare ostendunt in excelsum cerebri locum, tamquam in coelum corporis nostri; unde et radii emicant oculorum, et de cuius medio velut centro quodam, non solum ad oculos, sed etiam ad sensus caeteros tenues fistulae deducuntur, ad aures scilicet, ad nares, ad palatum, propter audiendum, olfaciendum, atque gustandum.

Finally—if we should not disregard what the medical men not only say, but also assert that they can prove—although all flesh obviously bears the solidity of earth, it still has in it some air too, which is both contained in the lungs and distributed from the heart through the veins which they call arteries; and [from a certain amount] of fire it not only has a hot quality, whose center is in the liver, but also that a bright one, which they demonstrate to be refined and to fly up, as it were, to the highest spot in the brain, as if into the heaven of our body. From here also the rays of the eyes shine out, and from the [the brain’s] mid-point, from a kind of axis, other fine tubes are led out not only to the eyes but also to the other senses: to ears, to nostrils, to palate—for hearing, smelling, and tasting.

Augustine goes on to claim that the soul directs the “coarser material of the body” (damp earth) by means of the material that is closest to immateriality: the fire (really

³⁷⁵ cf. *Gn. litt.* VII.12.19, where he says that the faith “does not hold that a body can be converted into a soul or any incorporeal nature.”

light) and air, distributed especially in the brain but also throughout the body through these “fine tubes.”³⁷⁶ Thus the “puff of life” is a puff of something like Stoic *pneuma* which enables a soul to communicate with and govern the body. He concludes by saying that the medical scholars can prove these things by means of *certis indiciis*: when some function in the body fails, a cure applied to the appropriate area of the brain restores the function.³⁷⁷

In this case a philosophical claim about the immateriality of the soul makes a passage hard to understand, and a scientific claim about the nature of the body, along with a suggestion about the relation of the soul to the more rarified elements, enables a satisfactory interpretation. *Certis indiciis* in this passage seem to be the basis for saying that an empirical claim is proved by *certa ratione*, though it is unclear exactly what the *medici* claim is proven by their evidence: they certainly seem to have proven that the “fine tubes” act as channels of communication between the brain and parts of the body, but not that fire/light/air is the means of communication. Whatever the merits of Augustine’s particular evidence, it is clear that that he allows empirical proofs to provide content on the same level as clearly stated passages, since he explains Genesis 2:7 on this basis, and Scripture offers no such explanation of God’s “puff of life.”

³⁷⁶ This argument is, of course, absurd, especially since Augustine stresses so much the absolute difference between corporeal and non-corporeal being.

³⁷⁷ *Gn. litt.* VII.24: *Ipsae partes aliquo affectae morbo vel vitio, cum defecissent officia vel sentiendi, vel movendi membra, vel motus corporis reminiscendi, satis quid valerent singulae declararunt, eisque adhibita curatio cui rei reparandae profecerit exploratum est.*

4. The effects of secular knowledge on the process of interpretation

It is quite clear, then, that Augustine allows readers to use robust philosophical and empirical claims both to restrict and to provide possible interpretations. Secular claims can thus play a role like that of clearly stated passages, providing independent evidence from which to construct an interpretation of an obscure passage. This tells us how Augustine uses secular claims to construct interpretation, but we should also consider what requirements secular claims place on interpretation. There are three points to consider. First, secular claims (inasmuch as they are true) provide an absolute guide on what an interpretation cannot say. But, second, they provide a more variable guide on what the passage does say, because Scripture is not necessarily concerned with finer points of philosophy and science. Third, if Scripture should speak to all levels of readers, then we have to wonder about readers who are not capable of some secular, especially philosophical, points that Augustine takes to be essential to some passages of Scripture.

First and most fundamentally, a valid interpretation must not assert anything false, and so inasmuch as philosophy or science present true claims, valid interpretations cannot contradict them.³⁷⁸ The reader is therefore obligated to know as much about the relevant issues as possible. Even if his interpretation builds up charity and he bases his interpretation on the assumption that Scripture is true, it is still invalid if the interpretation ends up asserting something false with respect to philosophy,

³⁷⁸ As I have already said, philosophy and science are neither monolithic nor infallible, and so they could contradict Scripture in some cases. If the contradiction cannot be resolved by an alternate interpretation, the reader has no choice but to side with Scripture against the secular claims (cf. *Gn. litt.* I.21.41).

science, or anything else. Thus secular claims—or rather, secular truths³⁷⁹—*always* act as a negative guide, setting up standards for what an interpretation *cannot* assert.

Second, it is not clear whether these secular claims must always be consulted as a positive guide on which to base one’s interpretation. At the very least, readers are only required to do so based on their ability, because Augustine says in *Confessions* XII that there are many meanings that a reader could legitimately extract from Genesis 1:1-2 based on their recognition of the truths involved,³⁸⁰ though all of these interpretations must avoid falsity. And this is the position that Augustine takes in *Gn. litt.* as well (I.20.40);

Ad hoc enim considerandum et observandum librum Geneseos multipliciter; quantum potui, enucleavi, protulique sententias de verbis ad exercitationem nostram obscure positis; non aliquid unum temere affirmans cum praeiudicio alterius expositionis fortasse melioris, ut pro suo modulo eligat quisque quod capere possit.

For this purpose, I have explained in many ways what ought to be considered and observed in the book of Genesis as much as I have been able to, and I have offered interpretations of words stated obscurely for our exercise—not rashly affirming some one [interpretation] against the judgment of another explanation that is perhaps better—so that each person may choose what he is able to grasp according to his measure.

But at the same time, he also insists in *Confessions* XII that we should believe that the writer meant the truest and most useful possible meaning, and that readers should be

³⁷⁹ By this term I mean the truths in themselves that do not exclusively belong to Scripture or revelation. Secular *claims* are the attempts of people to understand these truths.

³⁸⁰ See *Confessions* XII.42: “If I were writing something at the height of authority, I would prefer to write in such a way that my words would resound with whatever truth each person was able to grasp in these matters, rather than that I should clearly state one true idea pertaining to this so that I exclude others which have no falsity to offend me” (*Si ad culmen auctoritatis aliquid scriberem, sic mallem scribere ut quod veri quisque de his rebus capere posset mea verba resonarent, quam ut unam veram sententiam ad hoc apertius ponerem, ut excluderem ceteras quarum falsitas me non posset offendere*).

trying to understand the text according to the writer's meaning.³⁸¹ Surely secular truths might then be relevant in rendering the truest and most useful interpretation? And so, even though readers can still find a valid interpretation if they fail to attain this meaning, their obligation to seek the truest meaning must include an obligation to integrate secular claims into their interpretation when relevant.

The question is, when are secular claims relevant? As we have seen already, Augustine says in *Gn. litt.* I.19.38 that even if there is some true and seemingly relevant secular claim, it is not necessarily the case that the Scriptural writer was thinking of that, but what he was thinking of must have been “no less true” and “more useful to learn.”³⁸² Utility, then, is an important measure of what makes an interpretation the best (as we also saw in *Confessions* XII.41), and Augustine has a fairly narrow idea of what is really useful: namely, what is useful for salvation. We see him show a bit of attitude on this topic in *Gn. litt.* II.9.20:

Quaeri etiam solet quae forma et figura coeli esse credenda sit secundum Scripturas nostras. Multi enim multum disputant de iis rebus, quas maiore prudentia nostri auctores omiserunt, ad beatam vitam non profuturas discentibus; et occupantes, quod peius est, multum pretiosa, et rebus salubribus impendenda temporum spatia. Quid enim ad me pertinet, utrum coelum sicut sphaera undique concludat terram in media mundi mole libratam, an eam ex una parte desuper velut discus operiat? . . . Breviter dicendum est de figura coeli hoc scisse auctores

³⁸¹ On these two points from *Confessions* XII, see the sections in chapter 1 on XII.42 and XII.41, respectively.

³⁸² *Gn. litt.* I.19.38: “If, however, sure reason demonstrates that this is true, even so it will be uncertain whether the writer of the holy Books wished this to be understood in those words or something else no less true. But if the remaining context of the speech proves that he did not mean this, the different thing which that one wished to be understood will not thereby be false; but it also [will be] true and a thing more useful to learn” (*Si autem hoc verum esse certa ratio demonstraverit, adhuc incertum erit utrum hoc in illis verbis sanctorum Librorum scriptor sentiri voluerit, an aliud aliquid non minus verum. Quod si caetera contextio sermonis non hoc eum voluisse probaverit, non ideo falsum erit aliud, quod ipse intellegi voluit; sed et verum, et quod utilius cognoscatur*).

nostros quod veritas habet; sed Spiritum Dei, qui per ipsos loquebatur, noluisse ista docere homines nulli saluti profutura.

People commonly ask what form and figure they should believe that the heavens have, according to our Scriptures. For many people debate a lot about these things, which our authors have passed over with greater prudence, since these matters offer no profit for their students with regard to the happy life, and, what is worse, they take up a lot of precious time that should be spend on matters relating to salvation. For what does it matter to me whether the heaven surrounds the earth on all sides like a sphere, which is balanced in the middle of the mass of the world, or if [heaven] covers [the earth] on one side, from above, like a discus? . . . It must be briefly stated that our authors knew about the figure of the heavens just what the truth holds, but that the Spirit of God, who spoke through these very authors, did not want to teach human beings those things that have no profit for their salvation.³⁸³

We should not simply assume, then, that the writer's meaning must contain the most intellectually sophisticated truth, no matter what it is a truth about.

Indeed, Augustine's principle here would suggest that any secular truth that we bring into an interpretation must have a sufficient, salvific (or sanctifying) reason for being there. This is not to say that it must be a point that is necessary for salvation in general (e.g., on the same level as “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ . . . you will be saved”), but it must be a point which, as Augustine says, has to do with the happy life: with knowing and loving God, with sanctification. This reminds us of the double precept of charity and those cases in which it demands that a passage be speaking figuratively as well as literally—when the literal meaning is unrelated to charity. But in this case, the relevance of a secular truth to charity perhaps also helps determine whether the writer is even talking about some secular claim, such as the shape of the world. The context has to play some role here too, of course, so that

³⁸³ Here is a fascinatingly strange point: the Scriptural writers knew something very sophisticated, which they were not talking about.

perhaps there will be some passages where the literal meaning must be addressing a secular truth, but a further figurative meaning is necessary in order to relate to charity. Augustine does not give any direction about when to follow this route and when to simply reject a charity-irrelevant secular truth as part of the literal meaning for the sake of a charity-relevant literal meaning. But in either case clearly the meaning he is more interested in is the charity-relevant one.

Augustine does not claim to have given a complete exposition of all the possible meanings of these verses of Genesis, but to have explained it in as many ways as he could. Likewise, he tells the reader to choose the interpretation(s) which he can understand. The phrase *pro suo modulo* suggests that some interpretations contain more advanced concepts than others, and that the reader has a duty to understand *as much as* he can, just as Augustine explained the passages in *as many ways* as he could. This may sound like a burden, but he considers it a benefit. The obscure passages, which prompt the most interpretations, are so written *ad exercitationem nostram*. As he describes it in *Confession XII.38*:

*Alii vero, quibus haec verba non iam nidus sed opaca frutecta sunt,
vident in eis latentes fructus et volitant laetantes et garriunt scrutantes
et carpunt eos.*

But there are some for whom these words are not a nest but dark thickets, and they see fruits hidden in them and they fly joyfully, chattering as they search for them, and they pluck them.

While for some Scripture is a nourishing nest that keeps them safe, for others it is a fruitful thicket, in which they are happy to search and pluck *some* fruit, even if not all.

But this leads the third point, since one might wonder whether there are passages in Scripture which are really talking about sophisticated points, especially

philosophical ones, and how ignorant readers are supposed to understand them. This issue comes to the fore in Augustine's analysis of the first verses of Genesis, where he wants to distinguish the spiritual creation from the corporeal one and formed from unformed matter. He has a partial explanation in that he does not think that every reader *must* understand these points in these verses (though he does appear to think they should so interpret if they are able to understand the points). Augustine insists that the author (in this case, Moses) could have intended multiple meanings in such cases, where the meaning is obscure, and that even if the human writer did not intend all of the true meanings which readers are able to find in his words, the Holy Spirit must have, since He also inspires those interpretations in readers.³⁸⁴

But, one might object, even to understand the word "God" requires one to understand immaterial being. Augustine partially concedes this point. In *Confessions* XII.37, he addresses the difficulty of readers who conceive of God and the creation in a crude, materialist way. They think of God as a physical body in space, who at a change of His will (in time) decides to create heaven and earth, in which all things are contained, by speaking audible, temporal words. These ideas are almost completely false, but Augustine notes that there is a kernel of truth that these *adhuc parvuli animales* get in their understanding of the text: God made everything which the senses perceive.³⁸⁵ But this kernel, itself an interpretation, is only true if "God" is not understood in the way just described.

³⁸⁴ See my discussion of this point in the section in chapter 1 dealing with *Confessions* XII.43 (see also *Doct. chr.* III.27.39, which offers a parallel claim) and my discussion of Scripture as the ideal object of reading in chapter 5.

³⁸⁵ *Confessions* XII.37: *Alii enim cum haec verba legunt vel audiunt, cogitant deum, quasi hominem aut quasi aliquam molem immensa praeditam potestate novo quodam et repentino placito extra se ipsam tamquam locis distantibus, fecisse caelum et terram, duo magna corpora supra et infra, quibus omnia*

I think there are two possible solutions. First, we could treat the ignorant readers' interpretation not as a whole which must be true or false altogether, but in its separable parts. For instance, it is perfectly true that God made all things perceived by the senses, and if you asked who God is, an ignorant person could answer, "The one who made all the stuff we see, hear, etc." The interpretation is true in that aspect. But if you asked *what* God is, then you would get a false answer, "A really big guy really far away," or something like that. The interpretation is false in that aspect. But this way of analyzing it presents a second option, to think of the interpretation as "true" as long as certain elements are not completely determinate. Thus an ignorant reader could interpret the verses to mean "God made all the visible world," and this would be a true interpretation as long as he did not include in it his more determinate (and false) concept of God as a physical being. The same goes for "made," which could more determinately mean "bring into being *ex nihilo*" or "produce from some pre-existing stuff not made by God."³⁸⁶ If we want these ignorant readers to be capable of a valid interpretation (and Augustine's tactic in *Confessions* XII suggests that this is one of his goals)³⁸⁷ then this indeterminate meaning is probably the best candidate. These naive

continenter, et cum audiunt, 'Dixit deus: fiat illud, et factum est illud,' cogitant verba coepta et finita, sonantia temporibus atque transeuntia, post quorum transitum statim existere quod iussum est ut existeret, et si quid forte aliud hoc modo ex familiaritate carnis opinantur. in quibus adhuc parvulis animalibus, dum isto humillimo genere verborum tamquam materno sinu eorum gestatur infirmitas, salubriter aedificatur fides, qua certum habeant et teneant deum fecisse omnes naturas quas eorum sensus mirabili varietate circumspicit.

³⁸⁶ Of course, Augustine's view is a more nuanced version of the first option. God makes heaven and earth from pre-existing stuff that he also made, though there is only a logical, not a temporal, separation between that pre-existing stuff (unformed matter) and what is made from it (formed natures).

³⁸⁷ For instance, he says early on, in XII.4, that Moses chose the language that he did in Genesis 1:2 ("earth and the abyss") so that he could "insinuate formlessness" to "those who are slower in sense" (*Quid ergo [in]formitas vocaretur, quo etiam sensu tardioribus utcumque insinuaeretur, nisi usitato aliquo vocabulo? quid autem in omnibus mundi partibus reperiri potest propinquius informitati omnimodae quam terra et abyssus?*). And he says in XII.42 that, were he in Moses' position, he would want to write in a way such that each reader would be able to grasp "whatever of the truth he was

persons will probably quickly make the interpretation determinate and so corrupt, but that initial light of inspiration is still offered them.

Though this explanation does give ignorant readers some valid connection to the text, it does nothing to secure them against false interpretations. This is the inherent danger of their position, for two reasons. First, because even if they avoid determining their interpretations in a false way, an indeterminate understanding is unstable and easily overturned by objections. Second, their interpretations typically do not account for all the words or surface content of the verse, so an opponent can exploit either their undeveloped ideas or the bits they have missed in order to subvert their Christian beliefs. Augustine himself, in his younger days, is a good model of such a person whose beliefs were easily overthrown by Manichaean questions.³⁸⁸ So the position of these ignorant readers is not a good one, perhaps falling short of the qualities necessary for proper interpretation of Scripture.

Conclusions

I have drawn out three main points in this half of the chapter. First, secular truths (claims that are true), both philosophical and scientific, play a double role in interpretation, providing some absolute guides to what a passage *cannot* say and offering content which is of variable utility and necessity in rendering an interpretation of passages. Thus, when these claims are demonstrated by *certa ratione*, they fulfill

capable of in these matters” (*Si ad culmen auctoritatis aliquid scriberem, sic mallet scribere ut quod veri quisque de his rebus capere posset mea verba resonarent*). And in

³⁸⁸ See *Confessions* III.12-18 for the story of how Augustine’s naive understanding of Scripture was overthrown by the Manichees.

the same role as clear passages in restricting and enabling the interpretation of obscure passages. Second, Augustine relies on philosophical truths particularly heavily, especially in his interpretation of Genesis, and his recognition of certain Platonist principles seems to be deeply intertwined with his ability to understand Scripture in a way that was plausible to him. Third, though readers should look for the truest meaning possible (assuming that this is the writer's intended meaning), they should appeal to secular claims somewhat hesitantly in interpreting Scripture, not only because a thorough knowledge of these matters is required but also because the point may not be the most useful (the second necessary quality of the writer's intention).

The first and third points are the most important in that they respectively correct and integrate with the points we have already seen from Augustine in the last chapter. The clearly stated passages alone do not give all the content of the faith (as we saw also in the section on Church Authority in this chapter) and they are not the lone basis for interpreting obscure passages. But we should not underestimate their ability to provide much of the primary content of Scripture, to which the rest of the passages point at the literal or particularly the figurative level. Still, it would appear that some of the most important points that Augustine draws from Scripture (about the nature of God and human souls) do depend on certain philosophical points about being and immateriality that he takes largely from Neoplatonism.

CHAPTER 5

The Human Author's Intention as a Principle of Interpretation Across Augustine's Works and the Purpose of Reading Scripture

In the last three chapters we have seen how Augustine constructs requirements for Scriptural interpretation based on certain passages or features of the Scriptural text as well as rational claims and literary techniques. But there is one more requirement for Scriptural interpretation that we have already seen in chapter 1: to seek the human writer's intention. Recall that in *Confessions* XII Augustine treats God and Moses as the authors of Genesis, and he says every true interpretation was intended in text and inspired in readers by God, so that all of these interpretations are valid. In the last three chapters I have spelled out what it means for an interpretation to be true or valid.³⁸⁹ But Augustine also gives a special emphasis to the particular intention that the writer Moses had in writing Genesis, saying that this is the truest and most useful meaning and that all readers must try to find it. I argued in chapter 1 that Augustine enshrines the writer's particular intention as a way of setting apart the highest meaning of the text. As I said there,³⁹⁰ Augustine believes that stating the highest truth of the

³⁸⁹ It is not quite the same thing to say that an interpretation is true and that it meets our requirements, since the requirement to build up charity is in fact based on the truth of another text in Scripture (the double precept) that must apply to this text. In addition, the requirement to evaluate secular claims does not have the same normative force as the others, so that it is not exactly a matter of truth. But the equivalence will have to do for this purpose.

³⁹⁰ See the conclusion in chapter 1.

matter is one of the purposes of Scripture, and aligning the human writer's³⁹¹ intention with this meaning is necessary to fulfill that purpose.

While *Confessions* XII gives some evidence to support this last assertion, a broader examination is in order. My overall goal in this chapter is to explain how the requirement to seek the writer's intention works and what it is motivated by. I propose to do this by looking at the development of Augustine's views on this subject, asking two questions: first, what role does the human author's intention play in determining the validity of an interpretation? Second, what sort of thing is the human author's intention, when we are dealing with the authors of Scripture? I will begin by looking at his account in *De Utilitate Credendi* (394, hereafter *Util. cred.*), which deals with interpretation in general and so only with my first major question, but it anticipates many of the issues Augustine will return to. Then I will move on to the account given in the *Doct. chr.* I-III.25.35 (396/7) and the nearly contemporary account in *Confessions* XII (397-401). These accounts are part of a united theory that contrasts in some ways with the *Util. cred.* account. The relationship between their approach and that of the *Util. cred.* casts more light on the material from *Confessions* XII that we have already considered and explains Augustine's motivation for his requirement to seek the writer's intention. By comparing these accounts of interpretation and intention with the one in the *Util. cred.*, we can see clearly Augustine's motivation for his interesting and neglected claim, that readers must seek the intention of the human

³⁹¹ In general I use the term "author" to refer to any author of any text, but I use the term "writer" in the case of Scripture to refer to the human author of any given book, in contrast to God, whom Augustine also considers the author of all the books of Scripture. Thus in the case of Scripture, "author" is purposefully ambiguous between God or human unless specified.

writers of Scripture, and how his treatment in Confessions XII and Doct. chr. I-III portrays Scripture as the ideal object of reading, thus answering the first question and beginning to address the second. Lastly, I will complete my answer to the second question with a section on evidence from various works about what knowledge Augustine thought the writers of Scripture were privy to, and in the final section I will propose a larger and more speculative picture of the author's intention based on his comments in *Confessions* XIII and the treatise *De Deo Videndo* (*Epistula* 147).

The General Theory: *De Utilitate Credendi*

Augustine's first relevant account of interpretation is found in *De Utilitate Credendi* 10-13, which he wrote soon after his ordination. In this treatise addressed to his Manichaean friend, Honoratus, he offers a defense of belief in the authority of the Catholic Church as derived from the authority of Christ and as the proper way to knowledge of religious matters. In the section that concerns us, he defends the Catholic interpretation of the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament, against Manichaean attacks, first by laying out different ways in which the Old Testament should be interpreted (5-9) and then by analyzing the Manichaean charge against Catholics of erroneous interpretation (10-13), after which he continues on to a general defense of the Catholic faith.

There are three major points of importance in the work. First, it is Augustine's only treatment of errors in reading (*error legendi*) and misinterpretation as such.³⁹² It

³⁹² Though Augustine has a clear term for "reading" (*legere, legendi*) he does not explicitly refer to "interpretation" by any special term. Nevertheless, we will see that he has a clear idea of interpretation as something separate from (or rather, part of) reading.

is valuable not only in its systematic treatment of how the reader goes wrong, but also in its distinction between interpretation, which seeks the author's intention, and reading, which also seeks truth. Second, it is an account of (mis)reading and (mis)interpretation for texts in general, not just in the case of Scripture, and it shows by contrast how the peculiar qualities of Scripture influence Augustine's later theory of Scriptural interpretation. Third, it offers three inchoate points that Augustine will develop in his later works: that there are different modes of meaning and interpretation, that it is permissible under certain conditions to miss the author's intended meaning, and that the reader is obligated to interpret in a way that is charitable to the author. I will explain the importance of these three major points in this order.

1. Errors in reading (*error legendi*) and misinterpretation

First, it is quite important to note that in this work Augustine gives an account of errors in reading, *error legendi*. By this he does not necessarily mean misunderstanding what the author means—what I will call misinterpretation—rather, he identifies two types³⁹³ of error that can combine in various ways *when one reads*: one can miss the author's intention, but one can also miss the truth. Augustine only considers cases³⁹⁴ where the reader believes that the author meant something true and believes that his own interpretation states something true;³⁹⁵ he does not consider

³⁹³ I consistently use “types” of error to refer to these two separate problems. I do not refer to a combination of these two errors (or of one error and one correct thing) as different types.

³⁹⁴ In contrast to “types,” I consistently use “cases” of error to refer to different *combinations* of reader and author beliefs. There are many more possible cases than Augustine deals with.

³⁹⁵ Notably, he leaves aside whether the reader believes that his interpretation is what the author really meant. As we will see, this is a weakness of the *De Utilitate Credendi* account.

cases where the reader believes that his interpretation is correct as an interpretation but false as a statement—that is, cases in which the reader believes that the author stated something false.³⁹⁶

In section 10 he offers three cases of errors in reading (*errores legendi*). He gives one example for each of the first two cases, and two examples for the third. But he also presents two "most approvable" cases without examples—one of which is still an instance of error in reading, and the latter of which is correct and in fact the ideal situation.³⁹⁷

1. In the first case, the reader understands the text to say something which is actually false and not what the author meant.³⁹⁸ This, as Augustine says, is a double error, since the reader misses both the author's intention and the truth. As an example, he says that a reader might think that Rhadamanthus really does judge the souls in the underworld because (*eo quod*) he read it in Vergil, even though Vergil did not himself believe or mean that this was true.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ It is noteworthy that in his cases and their examples Augustine differentiates between getting the author's meaning and getting the truth, but he does not allow his reader to make such a distinction. In searching for the author's meaning, the reader presumes it is true, and in searching for the truth of the matter, the reader presumes the author meant this.

³⁹⁷ These five cases are based on various permutations of three factors, which result in some combination of the two possible errors of reading: 1. Did the author mean something true? 2. Does the reader's interpretation state something true? 3. Does the reader's interpretation correspond to the author's intention? There should be six combinations of these factors, but Augustine leaves out the case in which the writer and reader both mean something false, but different. See the note on case 2 for more about this.

³⁹⁸ Augustine does not say whether the writer meant some different false claim or something true, only that he did not mean to assert what the reader understands. But the situation that he imagines parallel to this error in section 11 does specify that the writer meant something profitable while the reader did not understand something profitable.

³⁹⁹ *Util. cred.* 10: "The first case is that in which a thing that is false is thought true, when the writer thought something else. . . . An example of the first case is that if someone, for example, were to say and believe that Rhadamanthus in the underworld hears and judges the cases of the dead, because he read it in Maro's poem. For here he errs in a double way, because he both believes a thing that should not be believed and the one whom he is reading should not be thought to have believed it" (*Primum genus est, in quo id quod falsum est verum putatur, cum aliud qui scripsit putaverit. . . . Primi generis*

2. In the second case, the reader understands the text to say something which is actually false (though the reader does not know it), which the author did in fact mean. Even though the reader has only committed one type of error, Augustine thinks this situation is no better, since it is of no advantage to know what the author meant if it leads you to a false belief.⁴⁰⁰ As an example, he says that a reader might believe that the soul is made of atoms because (*quia*) he read it in Lucretius—something which Lucretius did believe and mean in various statements.⁴⁰¹

3. In the third case the reader understands the text to say something true but different from what the author meant. Despite this error of interpretation, Augustine says that this case contains “no little utility; in fact . . . the whole and entire fruit of reading [*legendi fructus*] is there.”⁴⁰² In this instance the author really meant

exemplum est, ut si quisquam, verbi gratia, dicat et credat Rhadamanthum apud inferos audire ac diiudicare causas mortuorum, eo quod Maronis in carmine id legerit. Hic enim errat duobus modis; quod et rem non credendam credit, neque id putandus est credidisse ille quem legit).

⁴⁰⁰ Augustine does not consider the additional possibility that the reader could understand something false while the author meant some different false claim. I think he would not find it important to distinguish this from the first case, since in both cases the reader commits a double error. We are only concerned with errors of *reading*, not with the errors of the author (unless they are carried through to the reader).

⁴⁰¹ *Util. cred.* 10: “The second case, although not so extensive, is nevertheless no less harmful: when a thing that is false is thought true, and nevertheless that this thing is what the writer thought. . . . The second case can be observed if someone, because Lucretius writes that the soul is made of atoms, thinks that the claim that after death it dissolves into the same atoms and perishes is true and should be believed by him. For here also he is no less miserable, if in so great a matter he has persuaded himself of that which is false as being certain—even though Lucretius, by whose books he was deceived, did think that. For what is the advantage in being sure about the meaning of the author, when one has chosen him for himself not to avoid his error but to err with him?” (*Alterum est, quamvis non tam late patens, non tamen minus noxium, cum id quod falsum est verum putatur, id tamen putatur quod etiam ille qui scripsit putavit. . . . Alterum genus animadverti sic potest: si quis, quia Lucretius animam ex atomis esse scribit, eamque post mortem in easdem atomos solvi atque interire, id verum ac sibi credendum arbitretur. Nam et hic non minus miser est, si de re tanta id quod falsum est pro certo sibi persuasit; quamquam id Lucretius, cuius libris deceptus est, opinatus sit. Quid enim huic prodest de auctoris sententia certum esse, quando sibi eum non per quem non erraret, sed cum quo erraret, elegerit?*).

⁴⁰² *Util. cred.* 10 (translated quotation underlined): *Tertium est, cum ex alieno scripto intellegitur aliquid veri, cum hoc ille qui scripsit non intellexerit. In quo genere non parum est utilitatis, immo si diligentius consideres, totus legendi fructus est integer.*

something false or morally bad, but the reader does not apprehend it. Augustine gives two examples. First, a reader might understand Epicurus' praise of continence to mean that Epicurus "placed the supreme good in virtue and therefore [the reader might think that Epicurus] should not be blamed"—though Epicurus did not in fact believe this or mean it in his statement. Augustine says that “this [case of] error is not only human, but also often very worthy of a human being.” In his second example, he imagines hearing secondhand the statement of an elderly friend, that he missed his childhood and wished to live in the same way again. If Augustine had no way to inquire what his friend meant (he imagines that the man died very shortly after saying this) and wished to believe the best of his friend, he might understand him to mean that he missed the innocence of childhood, when his friend really meant that he missed the freedom of a lifestyle without responsibility. Augustine says that no one could blame him for his misinterpretation; in fact, he should be praised for thinking “well of [his] fellow man in a doubtful matter, when [he] was able to think badly of him.”⁴⁰³

⁴⁰³ Note that the phrasing suggests that imaginary Augustine was aiming for his friend's intention, but perhaps did not really believe that he had attained it. *Util. cred.* 10 (translated quotations from the text are underlined): *Tertio generi est illud accommodatum: si quis Epicurum, lecto eius in libris aliquo loco ubi continentiam laudat; in virtute illum summum bonum posuisse asseveret, et ideo non esse culpandum. Huic etiam quid obest error Epicuri, si summum bonum hominis voluptatem ille corporis credit; cum iste non se dederit tam turpi noxiaeque sententiae, neque ob aliam causam ei placeat Epicurus, nisi quod eum sensisse non putat, quod sentiri non oporteat? **Hic error non modo humanus est, sed saepe etiam homine dignissimus.** Quid enim, si mihi de aliquo quem diligere nuntiaretur quod sibi, cum esset barbatus, pueritiam atque infantiam ita placere multis audientibus dixerit, ut etiam iuraverit se similiter velle vivere, idque ita mihi probaretur, ut impudenter negarem? num reprehendendus quipiam viderer, si eum existimarem, cum hoc diceret, significare voluisse, sibi placere innocentiam, et ab eis quibus hominum genus involveretur cupiditatibus animum alienum, et ex eo illum magis magisque diligere, quam antea diligebam; etiamsi fortasse ille in puerorum aetatibus libertatem quamdam in ludendo et cibando atque ignavum otium stultus adamasset? Fac enim eum esse defunctum postquam hoc mihi nuntiatum est, nec interrogari a me potuisse quidquam, ut aperiret sententiam suam; essetne quisquam tam improbus qui mihi succenseret, cum hominis laudarem propositum et voluntatem per illa ipsa verba quae acceperam? Quid, quod etiam iustus rerum existimator non dubitaret fortasse laudare opinionem ac voluntatem meam, cum et innocentia mihi placeret, et homo de homine in re dubia bene potius existimarem, cum etiam male liceret?*

4. The fourth and fifth cases are split from one larger case in which the author means something true or good and the reader understands something true or good. Augustine says that this larger case is “most approved and, as it were, most cleansed.”⁴⁰⁴ And yet, he says, this still does not entirely exclude error, since the reader can understand a different true or good thing than the author did. Such is the fourth case. Augustine gives no examples for it, but says that this outcome is more common, especially in obscure matters, than that in which the author and reader understand the same truth.⁴⁰⁵

5. The fifth case presents the ideal. Here the author meant something "most fit for living well" which the reader also understands. In this situation Augustine says that there is no "opportunity for falsity from any direction." But in fact this case very rarely occurs, and it is impossible to have knowledge (in the strict sense) of what the author meant. Only belief is possible in most situations, even if we can ask the author about his meaning.⁴⁰⁶

There are five things to notice about these cases and their examples.

First, it is clear that Augustine puts more weight on error with regard to the truth than error with regard to the author's intention. He says that the reader is in no

⁴⁰⁴ *Util. cred. 11: Unum igitur genus est probatissimum, et quasi purgatissimum, cum et bona scripta sunt, et in bonam partem accipiuntur a legentibus.*

⁴⁰⁵ *Util. cred. 11: Id [quartum genus] quoque tamen adhuc in duo dividitur; non enim penitus excludit errorem. Nam evenit plerumque, ut cum bene senserit scriptor, bene etiam lector sentiat; sed aliud quam ille, et saepe melius, saepe inferius, utiliter tamen.*

⁴⁰⁶ *Util. cred. 11 (translated quotations from the text are underlined): Cum autem et hoc sentimus quod ille quem legimus, et id est **vitae bene agenda accommodatissimum**, cumulatissime sese habet veritas, **nec aliunde aperitur falsitatis locus**. Quod genus cum de rebus obscurissimis lectio est, rarissimum omnino est; neque id, mea sententia, liquido sciri, sed tantummodo credi potest. Quibus enim argumentis absentis vel mortui hominis voluntatem ita colligam, ut de illa iurare possim; cum etiam si praesens interrogaretur, multa esse possent, quae, si malus non esset, officiosissime absconderet?*

better position in the second case than in the first, and the only difference is that the reader in the second case has understood the text as the author intended. In contrast, he describes the third and fourth cases as still possessing the *fructus legendi* whole and entire,⁴⁰⁷ because in each the reader still finds something true, even though in both he misses the author's intention. Additionally, in his example of the third case he says that no one could *blame* him for understanding his friend's statement in the way he did. There must be a way to exonerate⁴⁰⁸ a reader's misunderstanding of the author, though misunderstanding the truth of the matter cannot be exonerated.

Second, the first four cases are, again, cases of error, and the second example for the third case makes it clear that they all presuppose that the reader does not know what the author intended but is trying to figure it out. And so even though Augustine exonerates the third and fourth cases of their misinterpretation, we have to keep in mind that he does so only as long as the author's intention is not clearly or definitively accessible. Of course this will be the case much of the time, especially, as he says, when dealing with obscure texts and matters. Perhaps we could also use the principle to exclude certain interpretations that contradict the text or have really inadequate support there, though one would think that such is possible for the reader who misunderstands Epicurus in the third case, and Augustine makes no mention of it.

Third, though the reader in each case seems to assume that the author meant something true, it is not always the case that the writer did, and this raises two issues.

⁴⁰⁷ Actually he only says that the third case has the *fructus legendi* whole and entire, but *a fortiore* this must be true for the fourth case, which he groups among those that are "most approvable."

⁴⁰⁸ By this I mean that the reader would not be culpable for his error with regard to the author's intention, so that in some sense his reading *could* be approvable if it is true. We will see more about this as we go on.

First, what does proper reading consist in when the author meant something false?

One might think that we should judge an interpretation based on whether it correctly understands the author's meaning and correctly judges the author's claim to be true or false, but Augustine seems to judge an interpretation based solely on the latter: the interpretation is fine as long as it states something true, even if the author did not mean that.⁴⁰⁹ Second, this attitude creates a danger, because in Augustine's examples the reader still assumes that the writer did mean something true. Such a reader could fall into trouble if he figures out that the author meant something different, which, unknown to him, is actually false. He might be tempted to side with the author rather than the truth. Or, if the author meant only a different truth, as in case 4, the reader might be tempted to give up the assertion of the truth that he first understood in the text. The difficulty at the center of this problem is how much readers should depend on a text for their beliefs, and what role external knowledge or predispositions should play in interpretation. The issue is raised but not commented on in the two examples for the case three, where the reader of Epicurus and Augustine seem to use their pre-existing judgments to interpret what Epicurus and Augustine's friend meant.

Fourth, the passage might seem to suggest that it does not really matter to Augustine if an interpretation corresponds to the author's meaning, as long as it states

⁴⁰⁹ To be clear, I am not saying that he allows readers to *knowingly* depart from the author's sense. It is critical to realize that his judgments on these various situations are third-person: Augustine is looking at someone who makes an interpretation (which Augustine knows to be true or false) of the statement of an author (which Augustine knows to be true or false). Of course, this is a problem with his account, because he is trying to use these examples to defend Catholic interpretations, so he is not really a third party. I deal with the issue a bit later. Isabelle Bochet discusses this oddity of Augustine in her article on *Epistle 118*, which also discusses this section of the *Util. cred.*, "Le statut de l'histoire de la philosophie selon la Lettre 118 d'Augustin à Dioscore," 49-76. She thinks that Augustine approves of misinterpretation when the author was wrong. Charles Brittain briefly rebutted this point in his article "Augustine as a Reader of Cicero," 99, n.41.

something true. After all, he says that the fourth case is a species of the situation which is *probatissimum* and that the third case still contains the *totus legendi fructus integer*. Yet Augustine definitively refers to these cases as cases of *error*.⁴¹⁰ He says that the fourth case belongs to the *probatissimum* genus because author and reader both understand something true or good, but we see that it is an *error legendi* because the act of communication has failed. This is even clearer in the third case, where he introduces the “fruit of reading” as distinct from reading itself. As I have just noted, the author's intended meaning might contain something false or bad, and so finding that would not provide any real benefit, any *fructus*, to the reader. The fruit of reading, then, only comes when the reader sees something true or good in the text. This is possible even when he reads in the wrong way—indeed, in some cases, only because he reads in the wrong way. But this is somewhat disconcerting, and, as I have just said, it might create a problem, since the reader could have a true belief based on what he thinks the text says and then learn that the text does not say that, leading him to wrongly abandon his true belief.⁴¹¹

⁴¹⁰ 10, the third case: *Tria genera sunt erroris. . . . Tertium est, cum ex alieno scripto intellegitur aliquid veri, cum hoc ille qui scripsit non intellexerit.*

11, the fourth case: *Unum igitur genus est probatissimum, et quasi purgatissimum, cum et bona scripta sunt, et in bonam partem accipiuntur a legentibus. Id quoque tamen adhuc in duo dividitur; non enim penitus excludit errorem. Nam evenit plerumque, ut cum bene senserit scriptor, bene etiam lector sentiat; sed aliud quam ille, et saepe melius, saepe inferius, utiliter tamen.*

⁴¹¹ The problem is one of interpretation, not of trusting another person. In fact, the whole treatise of the *Util. cred.* depends on trusting others for information. Augustine clearly states elsewhere that we should believe certain points based on testimony, and that beliefs based on testimony can count as knowledge, in the non-strict sense. *De Trinitate* XV.12.21: “Far be it from us too to deny that we know what we have learned from the testimony of others; otherwise we do not know that the Ocean exists; we do not know that there are lands and cities which the most common report points out; we do not know that those people or their works that we have learned about in historical reading existed; we do not know the things that are reported to us every day from any direction and are confirmed by agreeing and constant evidence; in the end, we do not know in what place or from what people we were born, since we have believed all these things on the basis of testimony. And if this is really absurd to say, then we must admit that not only our bodily senses but also those of others add to our knowledge” (*Absit etiam ut scire nos negemus, quae testimonio didicimus aliorum: alioquin esse nescimus Oceanum; nescimus esse*

This leads to the fifth point, that because there are two goals in reading (truth and author's intention), there are some texts that simply cannot be read correctly in both ways. When the author meant something false, then we prefer something true to what he meant, and even when he meant something true, we might prefer a more important or bigger truth. This is made especially clear in the ideal case, where Augustine specifies that the author not only meant something true but something *vitae bene agendaecommodatissimum* (*Util. cred.* 11):

Cum autem et hoc sentimus quod ille quem legimus, et id est vitae bene agendaecommodatissimum, cumulatissime sese habet veritas, nec aliunde aperitur falsitatis locus.

But when we understand the same meaning as the writer [did], and that meaning is most suited to living a good life, truth enters its most perfect state, and no opportunity for falsity is open from any direction.

Only in this ideal case does "truth enter its most perfect state" (*cumulatissime sese habet veritas*), and only in this case do we shut out all opportunity for error with regard to the truth (*nec aliunde aperitur falsitatis locus*). Avoiding *error* with regard to the author's intention in some way protects against *falsitas*, straying from the truth of the matter. Presumably this is because it is easiest to hold onto the correct interpretation, because it comports with the text. The fifth case thus avoids the potential danger of cases three and four.

terras atque urbes, quas celeberrima fama commendat; nescimus fuisse homines et opera eorum, quae historica lectione didicimus; nescimus quae quotidie undecumque nuntiantur, et indicibus consonis constantibusque firmantur; postremo nescimus in quibus locis, vel ex quibus hominibus fuerimus exorti; quia haec omnia testimoniis credidimus aliorum. Quod si absurdissimum est dicere; non solum nostrorum, verum etiam et alienorum corporum sensus plurimum addidisse nostrae scientiae confitendum est).

To sum up my first major point, then: *Util. cred.* 10-13 offers an account of four cases of *error legendi*, in which the reader errs with regard to the author's intention and/or the truth of the matter. The *error legendi* which leads a reader to believe something false is more of a problem, and so the principal thing to be avoided is an interpretation that states something false (as long as one believes it to state something true), though perhaps it is also important to avoid having a belief the sole support of which is one's interpretation of the text. Although the first four cases are all cases of error, the reader can be justified when he understands something true or good that is not intended by the author, as long as he does not know that the author did not intend that. This is so because we have two goals in reading that can conflict, finding the truth and finding the author's meaning. Because the fifth, ideal case can meet both these goals, it avoids both of the dangers of erroneous reading.

2. Reading and interpretation of texts in general

The second major feature of the *Util. cred.* account is that it is of reading and interpretation of texts in general,⁴¹² as the aforementioned cases and their examples make clear. Even when Augustine considers, in section 12, in what sense Catholics are charged by the Manichaeans with erroneous interpretation of Scripture, he treats Scripture like any other (authoritative) text: the inspiration of the authors and God's intention in inspiring the text receive no mention. Indeed, Augustine's responses to the

⁴¹² Augustine does seem to be restricting himself to texts (or statements) that the reader considers authoritative or worthwhile. His defense of the likely truth of what the Scriptural authors meant in section 13 is based on the analogy of Scripture to other works that have been shown to be great by their effect on many readers, in which cases we also assume that their authors meant something great.

various charges show that his treatment is really too general to handle adequately the issues of interpreting Scripture. In his response in section 11 to the charges paralleling the first two cases of error (that the Catholic interpretation states something false, which the author either [1] did not or [2] did intend), he says it is sufficient to show that Catholics do not understand anything false in and from the text. Thus he gives no defense of what the author meant or of the correspondence between the author's intention and the Catholic interpretation.

In defending the truth of what the Catholic interpretation asserts, he moves the discussion to "what is true" rather than "what this passage means." Thus the Catholic response to a charge like the first case would be that they hold a true, independently verifiable doctrine, without claiming any correspondence to the author's intended meaning; but this would be the same more or less as the fourth case.⁴¹³ And the Catholic response to a charge like the second case would be (again) that they hold a true, independently verifiable doctrine, without refuting the claim that the author's intended meaning asserted something false or bad; but this would then be identical to the third case. And yet both case 3 and case 4 are cases of error, though, as Augustine suggests, they still allow the *totus fructus legendi integer*.

But besides the truth of what the interpretation states, we also need to address whether the interpretation corresponds to the author's intended meaning. Augustine's treatment of this latter issue is unsatisfactory. In response to a Manichaean charge along the lines of the third case, he says (section 12),

⁴¹³ The first case does not specify whether the author's meaning was true or not, but the imagined charge does specify that the author wrote *utiliter*.

. . . *Nullum crimen est. . . An illud dicent: Quamvis bene a vobis accipiantur, mali sunt tamen? Quid est aliud vivos, cum quibus res agitur, adversarios absolvere, atque olim mortuos, cum quibus nulla contentio est, accusare?*

. . . It is no charge at all. . . Or do they say, "Although [those authors] are taken in a good sense by you, nevertheless they are bad"? What is this but to absolve the living adversaries with whom you are debating the matter, while accusing those long dead with whom you are not arguing?

This response might be adequate if we were dealing with just any text, but it will not work in the case of Scripture. Augustine seems to be trying to restrict the debate so as to exclude Catholic beliefs *about* Scripture, but presumably this is just the point on which the Manichaeans can press Catholics: if you believe that Scripture is all true in what it actually says, how do you explain this or that passage in the Old Testament that says something false or bad? Augustine's response here, that Catholics do not believe anything false or bad, is inadequate because it fails to show how Scripture only asserts what is true or good.

In order to defend the truth of Scripture he also has to defend the Catholic interpretation *as an interpretation*: that is, he has to show that the Catholic interpretation is plausibly what the author meant, so that his defense of the Catholic interpretation as true will also be a defense of the author's meaning as true. Instead, he argues at the end of 11 that “[that author] is very fairly believed to be good whose writings have been a benefit to the human race and posterity⁴¹⁴.” This probabilistic argument could be plausible as a general defense of what some respected author has said, but only if we can point to a number of passages which appear to have a bad or

⁴¹⁴ *Util. cred. 11: Honestissime tamen bonus creditur, cuius litteris generi humano posteritatieque consultum est.*

false meaning and then show how this is not the case. Furthermore, the argument is too general and too weak to support the very strong claim that Catholics make about the Scriptural authors, that they did not make any false assertions at all.

3. Three inchoate points

Third, the *Util. cred.* presents three points that Augustine will return to and develop in his theory of Scriptural interpretation presented in *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III. The first occurs in the sections (5-9) leading up to our passage, in which Augustine explains non-literal modes of interpretation and offers Scriptural precedents. Once we know that such modes of interpretation are not only possible but actually promoted by Scripture,⁴¹⁵ we can see a way out of the hyper-literal mode of interpretation that the Manichaeans use to criticize Scripture. Presumably this is the primary tool by which Augustine can defend Catholic interpretations as interpretations, though he does not state that outright in sections 10-13. I have already dealt with Augustine's more sophisticated use of and justification for figurative interpretation in chapter 3, so I will not say anything more about his treatment here, except to note that it is clearly different from his later approach (the one discussed in chapter 3) in that it imports Greek terminology and categories (*historia*, *aetiologia*, *analogia*, *allegoria*) rather than the more Latin terms he uses later, partially under

⁴¹⁵ See the section on Pauline figurative interpretation in chapter 3, subsection "Justifications for Figurative Interpretation."

influence from Paul (*proprie, ad litteram, translate, figurate*). Clearly the system given here is borrowed from other, Greek sources, possibly through Ambrose.⁴¹⁶

The second point has already been suggested: that readers can be justified in understanding the text in a different way than the author did, even though this is an *error legendi*. There are two necessary conditions that a reader must meet in order to justify such an interpretation: first, his interpretation must state something true; second, he must not be aware—and perhaps must not be able to make himself aware—of what the author actually intended. The first condition is obvious throughout his treatment, and we can also see the second condition in his two examples for the third case, especially the latter, where he justifies his misinterpretation by saying that it would be impossible for him to ask his friend what he actually meant, because the friend is dead.⁴¹⁷

The first condition is a safeguard against one kind of *error legendi*, believing that which is actually false. Of course, the reader could also avoid such an error simply by believing that his interpretation (and the author's meaning) state something false, but Augustine does not consider this possibility. The second condition removes the reader's *culpability* for making the second kind of *error legendi*, missing the author's intended meaning. The reader's error is an unwilling one.

⁴¹⁶ Cf. *Confessions* V.24 and VI.6. But these only refer to “figurative” interpretation and the famous verse, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” While Ambrose certainly introduced Augustine to the general method of reading the Bible, it is not clear whether he introduced him to the four categories of interpretation given here.

⁴¹⁷ Of course, he says in section 11 that the even if the author were present, he might conceal what he meant, so strict knowledge is always impossible. Augustine will return to the problem (even invoking a parallel example with Moses) in *Confessions* XII. The simple answer, which will suffice for now, is that being able to ask the author/speaker what he meant would almost certainly put us in a better epistemological situation than not being able to. So even if we cannot get knowledge of what he meant, we can get a well-justified belief.

These two conditions create a rather strange picture of reading, one in which the text is treated as a sort of oracle—that is, as an esoteric and multivalent source of truth—*unless* it is constrained by some knowledge⁴¹⁸ of what the author meant. If nothing else, this would seem to create an incentive not to investigate what the author meant (if our obligation to the author’s sense is very weak), or to avoid putting oneself in a situation where one could find the author’s intention with reasonable effort (if our obligation is stronger). One might think that this is exactly the position that Augustine subscribes to in *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III with regard to Scriptural writers’ intentions, but we will see that this is not the case when we come to those treatises.

And in fact, it is not *quite* the case here either, because Augustine has another condition for justifying such misinterpretation, which is the third point that he will develop further later. One should assume the best of the author, or at least be charitable to him, when one does not or cannot know what he intended. Instead of just removing the reader’s culpability for erring with regard to the author’s intention, this condition actually gives the reader a direction on how to find that intention. Obviously it is based on the assumption that the author meant something true or good, but Augustine says this is a justifiable assumption, at least in cases where we are dealing with a text that has led a lot of readers to believe something true or good.⁴¹⁹ His very general defense of Scripture and the Scriptural writers in section 13 argues along these lines: clearly many people have come to believe true and good things as a result of

⁴¹⁸ I use the term loosely here. In the upcoming section I will make some clarifications about the type of “knowledge” that is possible with regard to the author’s intent.

⁴¹⁹ *Util. cred.* 11: “Nevertheless, he is most honorably believed to be good, whose writings have been a benefit to the human race and posterity” (*Honestissime tamen bonus creditur, cuius litteris generi humano posteritatique consultum est*).

reading these Scriptures, and just as we trust not critics of Aristotle but followers of him to explain his obscure sayings to us, we should trust not critics of Scripture but students of it to explain what it means,⁴²⁰ especially in difficult passages.

In sum, leaving aside figurative interpretation, Augustine has given three conditions in *Util. cred.* 10-13 for permissible error with regard to the author's intention: the interpretation must state something true, the author's intention must be unknown, and the reader must assume something good of the author. The first condition justifies the interpretation as a statement, the second removes culpability for misinterpreting, and the third justifies the interpretation *as an interpretation*. We are still left with an interpretation that does not correspond to the author's intended meaning and so remains erroneous in that regard, but it can be a justifiable substitute, and in cases where the author actually meant something false, this substitute produces a better outcome since it still supplies the "fruit of reading, whole and entire."

Conclusion

Augustine's account in *Util. cred.* 10-13 shows us that his foremost concern in interpretation is to derive something true, and that it is permissible to derive a truth

⁴²⁰ *Util. cred.* 13: "But surely there is nothing more rash (and this was a trait of us when we were boys) than abandoning the expositors of any books who profess to comprehend them and to be able to pass them on to students, and [instead] looking for an interpretation of those books from those who, compelled by some unknown cause, publicly declare a most bitter war upon their creators and authors. For who ever thought to himself that the concealed and obscure books of Aristotle ought to be explained by someone who hates him—to speak of these studies in which the reader can perhaps err without sacrilege?" (*Sed nihil est profecto temeritatis plenius (quae nobis tunc pueris inerat), quam quorumque librorum expositores deserere, qui eos se tenere ac discipulis tradere posse profitentur, et eorum sententiam requirere ab his qui conditoribus illorum atque auctoribus acerbissimum, nescio qua cogente causa, bellum indixerunt. Quis enim sibi umquam libros Aristotelis reconditos et obscuros ab eius inimico exponendos putavit; ut de his loquar disciplinis, in quibus lector fortasse sine sacrilegio labi potest?*).

that the author did not intend, as long as we do not know what he intended. Augustine makes an argument for this based on non-literal modes of interpretation, the greater reliability of interpreters who find something of value in the text, and charity toward the author. It is worth noting that at least the latter two arguments are based on parallels in the interpretation of non-Scriptural texts and so should hold for non-Scriptural texts as well, and of course the non-literal modes of interpretation that he expounds are in fact based on Greek categories that antedate Scripture. While this account is sufficient in general, we need a bit more to defend the Catholic interpretation of Scripture, because Catholics believe that the authors meant only what is true. As of yet, Augustine has not offered a specifically Scriptural theory of interpretation.

The Scriptural Theory

Augustine wrote *Confessions* and *De Doctrina Christiana* I-III.25.35 only a few years after *Util. cred.*, but the difference between the earlier work and the later ones is quite marked. Augustine clearly has a better grasp on Scripture by this point, and he has developed his ideas about interpretation significantly. With these two works his theory of Scriptural interpretation enters its mature state, though it does get a bit more filled out in other works.

The combined account from these two works provides a definite answer to the first question that I set out at the beginning of the chapter—what role does the human author’s intention play in interpretation? It also begins to answer the second question—what kind of thing the human author’s intention was—which shows why

Augustine prioritizes the Scriptural authors' intended meanings. In the first sub-section I will look at the points of continuity between *Util. cred.* and these two works, examining those elements from *Util. cred.* that I indicated would be further developed. In the second sub-section I will turn to the issues that *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III uniquely address. The account derived from these two works builds on what Augustine already said about the ideal interpretive situation in *Util. cred.* (the fifth case), but the particular nature of Scripture and Scripture's writers allow for a significantly more sophisticated picture. As I noted in the introduction, I will be looking at some material from *Confessions* XII that we already saw in the introduction, but we can note a number of new features in this text by comparing it with the account of interpretation found in *De Utilitate Credendi* 10-13.

Continuity with the *Util. cred.* and basic developments

Let us begin with the points of continuity between *Util. cred.* on the one hand and *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III on the other. In regard to the role that the author's intention plays in interpretation, the *Util. cred.* left us with the following: finding the author's intention is not as important as stating something true in your interpretation (when you believe the text/your interpretation to state something true), but missing the author's intention is still an error. However, one can justifiably miss the author's intention on three conditions: that one's interpretation states something true, that one does not (or cannot) know the author's intention, and that one charitably assumes (on some basis) that the author meant something true.

It is important to note that these conditions justify a misinterpretation in view of the two types of *error legendi* that *Util. cred.* treats—missing the truth and missing the author’s intention. Let me apply the following names to each.

1. The *Util. cred.* Truth Condition: Only an interpretation which avoids the first kind of *error legendi*, with regard to the truth, can be justified.
2. The *Util. cred.* Ignorance Condition: The reader is not culpable for an *error legendi* of the second type, with regard to the author's intention, if he does not realize what the author meant.
3. The *Util. cred.* Charity Condition: If the Ignorance Condition is satisfied, an interpretation that errs with regard to the author's intention but presumes a true and/or good meaning on the author's part is not only not blameworthy but approvable.

These three conditions can justify two cases of misinterpretation: one in which the interpretation states something true, while the author meant something false (what I called case 3); and one in which the interpretation and author’s intended meaning state different truths (what I called case 4).

The account found in *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III differs from the one in *Util. cred.* in that it deals only with Scripture. Since whatever Scripture says must be true, any account of allowable misinterpretation for Scripture will only deal with the case in which the reader and author understand different truths in the text (case 4). But this also means that the conditions for allowing and justifying such a misinterpretation need to be updated.

1. The *Confessions* Truth Condition

Let us look first at the requirement that an interpretation state something true. While the *Doct. chr.* simply assumes that everything stated in Scripture is true and thus

that any valid interpretation must state something true, *Confessions* XII makes it explicit that the interpreter must believe this. In book XII, before trying to refute some hypothetical opponents who have a narrow, materialistic view of what Moses intended in writing the opening of Genesis, Augustine makes clear that he is not willing to deal with certain other opponents. In *Confessions* XII.32 he distinguishes two types⁴²¹ of error which make an interpretation invalid, and for which he dismisses a potential opponent:

Duo video dissensionum genera oboriri posse cum aliquid a nuntiis veracibus per signa enuntiatur: unum, si de veritate rerum, alterum, si de ipsius qui enuntiat voluntate dissensio est. Aaliter enim quaerimus de creaturae conditione quid verum sit, aliter autem quid in his verbis Moyses, egregius domesticus fidei tuae, intellegere lectorem auditoremque voluerit. In illo primo genere discedant a me omnes qui ea quae falsa sunt se scire arbitrantur; in hoc item altero discedant a me omnes qui ea quae falsa sunt Moysen dixisse arbitrantur.

I see that two types of disagreement can arise when something is expressed through signs by truthful reporters: the one, if there is a disagreement about the truth of the matter; the other, if there is a disagreement about the intention of the one who reports. For in the one case we are seeking what is true about the nature of creation, but in the other case we are seeking what Moses, the distinguished servant of Your faith, wished a reader or a hearer to understand in these words. With regard to the first type [of disagreement], let all depart from me who think that they know things which are [actually] false; with regard to this other [type of disagreement] likewise let all depart from me who think that Moses asserted things that were false.

⁴²¹ This would be a “type” of error in a slightly different sense than I have used it, though with the same idea: you can err with regard to the truth and with regard to your idea of the author’s perception of the truth (rather than with regard to the author’s meaning).

As a whole, the point of this passage is the same as that of the *Util. cred.* Truth Condition: a valid interpretation must not err with regard to the truth. Thus I will refer to the requirements of this passage as a whole as the *Confessions* Truth Condition.⁴²²

The *Confessions* Truth Condition: A valid interpretation of Scripture must not state anything false.

But the passage further details two ways *for a reader* to fail in that condition, based on something like the two types of *error legendi* in the *Util. cred.* account, though they are here treated as mutually exclusive: either the reader is wrong about the fact of the matter but believes that the author spoke truly or he is right about the facts but believes that the author said something false.⁴²³ Augustine thus has two sub-conditions to support the overall condition that the interpretation state something true.⁴²⁴

The first sub-condition deals with a matter that the *Util. cred.* only touches on. Recall that in Augustine's examples of the third case in the *Util. cred.* the reader (or hearer) uses his pre-existing beliefs or predispositions to understand the text in a way that he thinks is true.⁴²⁵ But Augustine never squarely deals there with how a reader's beliefs influence his interpretation. The first sub-condition here tackles it head-on: a reader who has a false idea⁴²⁶ about the subject matter of the passage but believes that

⁴²² Though I refer to this condition as the "*Confessions* Truth Condition," it is really the *Confessions* and *Doct. chr.* Truth Condition. As I said, the condition is more of an assumption in the *Doct. chr.*, so I cite only evidence from *Confessions* XII.

⁴²³ I doubt that Augustine considers the problems to be mutually exclusive in reality. One could, of course, have a wrong idea about the facts and attribute what one thinks to be a false idea to the author, which turns out either to be actually true or to be a second false idea.

⁴²⁴ We can find two similar sub-conditions in *Confessions* XII.27, though in reverse order. There Augustine says that when we are reading an author who is *veridicum*, we must not believe that he said anything false, and that a valid interpretation of the Scriptural text must be true. See the subsection on *Confessions* XII.27 in chapter 1 for more on this passage.

⁴²⁵ The reader of Epicurus appears to believe beforehand that the supreme good is virtue, and imaginary Augustine believes beforehand that youth was a time of innocent pleasures.

⁴²⁶ Though Augustine is a bit stronger in this passage than I represent him, I think my more general claim is born out in the rest of *Conf* XII. Here he is dealing with readers who do not just have wrong

the author meant something true will import his false idea into his interpretation, precisely because he believes his false idea to be true.⁴²⁷ Thus, if a valid interpretation must be true, the reader must not have any beliefs which stand in the way of understanding the text as saying something true.⁴²⁸ The problem is particularly pronounced here—these errant readers think that they *know* something which they do not—but presumably even a lower cognitive state like belief could also get in the way. I will call this requirement *Confessions* Truth Condition A.

Confessions Truth Condition A: A reader's interpretation is invalid if he has a false belief about the subject matter (that renders his interpretation false).⁴²⁹

The second sub-condition specifies a requirement that the *Util. cred.* account assumes but never addresses. With this sub-condition Augustine explicitly forbids a

ideas, but who actually “think that they *know*” things that are false. But in many passages he focuses simply on the requirement that an interpretation be true, so that it would suffice to exclude an interpretation if it states something false, whether the interpreter merely believes that it is true or claims to know that it is true. For instance, in the sentence directly following this passage he says, “In you, Lord, I join myself to those and I delight in You with those who feed on Your truth in the latitude of charity” (*coniungar autem illis, domine, in te et delecter cum eis in te qui veritate tua pascuntur in latitudine caritatis*). In addition, in XII.27 he allows readers to find interpretations not intended by the human writer “which You, Light of all true-speaking minds, show to be true” (*quid mali est si hoc sentiat quod tu, lux omnium veridicarum mentium, ostendis verum esse, etiamsi non hoc sensit ille quem legit*). Likewise, in XII.42, when he imagines himself in Moses’ position, he says that he would want to write in such a way as not to exclude any truths “that had no falsity which could offend me” (*quarum falsitas me non posset offendere*).

⁴²⁷ In describing the first type of disagreement, Augustine does not mention interpretation: it seems to be only a debate about what is true. But given that the first sentence of this passage is about disagreement with regard to truthful reporters’ statements, he must mean what I have suggested: that the disputants’ disagreement about what is true has an impact on what they think the truthful reporter meant.

⁴²⁸ Of course, this is only a problem if the reader assumes the author means something true, which is why I say that the two rejections are exclusive.

⁴²⁹ I add this provision because it is necessary for my explanation of why readers with false beliefs are dismissed. Augustine does not restrict his dismissal, but that is probably because he wants to talk about the whole passage in Genesis. But when we talk about smaller passages and statements, it seems plausible that one could have a false belief about the subject matter that does not affect the truth value of one’s interpretation. Augustine probably gives a summary dismissal because he is talking about readers who not only have false beliefs, but who actually think that they know (*scire arbitrantur*) something false. He is more generous, though still cautious, with readers who have no claims to knowledge but do have false beliefs (cf. *Confessions* XII.37).

reader of *Scripture* from understanding the author to have meant something which the reader knows or believes to be false. I will call this requirement *Confessions* Truth Condition B.

Confessions Truth Condition B: A reader's interpretation must not assert that the author meant something which the reader knows or believes to be false.⁴³⁰

This condition does the same work that the *Util. cred.* Charity Condition did: it justifies a mis-interpretation that is made on the assumption that the author spoke something true. Just as the *Util. cred.* Charity Condition was based on a reasonable belief that the author meant something true, so here the reader of *Scripture* must hold to the reasonable belief that the inspired writer only spoke the truth.⁴³¹ While the *Util. cred.* Truth Condition and *Confessions* Truth Condition A set a requirement for the interpretation as a statement of fact, the *Util. cred.* Charity Condition and *Confessions* Truth Condition B set a requirement for the interpretation *as an interpretation*.

2. The *Confessions* Investigation Condition

We can also find a greatly modified version of the *Util. cred.* Ignorance Condition in *Confessions* XII and the *Doct. chr.*. A clear positive formulation of the rule is given in *Doct. chr.* II.5.6:

⁴³⁰ Because this sub-condition, like the first one, addresses the interpretation as the reader conceives it, it opens up the possibility that an interpretation could be invalid when the reader incorrectly believes that something true is false and that the writer meant that thing that he thinks is false (though it is actually true).

⁴³¹ Of course, Augustine insists on the latter while he only makes a probabilistic argument for the former. But this is merely a difference of degree, not of kind; neither claim amounts to knowledge, only belief.

Legentes [Scripturam] nihil aliud appetunt quam cogitationes voluntatemque illorum a quibus conscripta est invenire et per illas voluntatem Dei.

Readers [of Scripture] are seeking to find nothing other than the thoughts and intention of those people by whom [Scripture] was composed, and through those [thoughts/intentions] the intention/will of God.

Likewise in *Confessions* XII.32, shortly after the text we just looked at, we find:

Accedamus simul ad verba libri tui et quaeramus in eis voluntatem tuam per voluntatem famuli tui, cuius calamo dispensasti ea.

Let us go on together to the words of Your book and let us seek in them Your will/intention through the will/intention⁴³² of Your servant, by whose pen you dispensed these [words].

But we can also find a normative formulation in *Confessions* XII.41:

*Si hoc dixerō quod sensit minister tuus, recte atque optime (id enim conari me oportet) . . .*⁴³³

If I have stated this [meaning] which Your servant understood, [then I have spoken] rightly and in the best way (since that is what I must attempt) . . .

In fact, even where he supports the validity of (truthful) interpretations not intended by the writer, Augustine also emphasizes that he and other proper readers are trying to find the writer's meaning. In XII.27, for instance, he says:

Dum ergo quisque conatur id sentire in scripturis sanctis quod in eis sensit ille qui scripsit, quid mali est si hoc sentiat quod tu, lux omnium

⁴³² I am ambivalent about the translation here because, on the one hand, *Confessions* XII discusses what the writer *voluit intellegi* (XII.27), but on the other hand it also asserts that God's *voluntas* does not change (XII.11). I think the overlap is intentional.

⁴³³ The passage goes on: “. . . but if I have not attained it, I will nevertheless speak that [meaning] which Your Truth has willed to speak to me through his [Your servant's] words—Your Truth which also spoke to that man what It willed” (. . . *quod si adsecutus non fuero, id tamen dicam quod mihi per eius verba tua veritas dicere voluerit, quae illi quoque dixit quod voluit*). This reverses the order of points given in XII.27, in the text, below, but I do not think it makes any difference.

veridicarum mentium, ostendis verum esse, etiamsi non hoc sensit ille quem legit, cum et ille verum nec tamen hoc senserit?

Therefore as long as each [reader] is trying to understand that [meaning] in the Holy Scriptures which the writer understood in them, what evil is it if he understands this [meaning] which You, light of all true-speaking minds, show to be true, even if that writer did not understand this?

Besides offering more support for the *Confessions* Truth Condition, this passage also clearly makes seeking the writer's⁴³⁴ meaning a requirement for valid misinterpretation. This is a bit more than the *Util. cred.* Ignorance Condition did, which merely specified that the reader can validly miss the author's intention only when he does not know (and perhaps also cannot know) that intention. I will call this requirement the *Confessions* Investigation Condition.⁴³⁵

The *Confessions* Investigation Condition: The reader must seek to understand the text of Scripture according to the writer's intention.

Note also that this new condition could be in conflict with *Confessions* Truth Condition A if the assumption of *Confessions* Truth Condition B were not true: if the Scriptural writers could mean something false, then the reader could not be bound to interpret the text in a true way and according to the writer's intention.

This condition includes the provision of the *Util. cred.* Ignorance Condition, since if one knows the author's meaning, then one can only seek it in interpretation by understanding the text in that sense. But this updated version is also stronger than the

⁴³⁴ Note here an important difference. In the case of Scripture, there is a human author (writer) and a divine one. One might think that a reader could satisfy the *Util. cred.* conditions with respect to Scripture by treating God as author, putting aside the writer's meaning. But in all of these passages from *Doct. chr.* and *Confessions*, Augustine requires readers to seek the writers' intent as a way of seeking God's.

⁴³⁵ Again, though I refer to it as the "*Confessions* Investigation Condition," it clearly belongs to the *Doct. chr.* account as well.

Util. cred. Ignorance Condition, and it partially solves the difficulty I raised about that condition. In the *Util. cred.* account, it seems beneficial for a reader to avoid finding out what the author meant, so that he can keep interpreting as he will and finding whatever truths he wants, including truths that are better than what the author meant. But here the reader is really obligated to seek the writer's intended meaning. The same fallback is still available, but it is firmly situated as a fallback, while the *Util. cred.* approach has no way to keep reader-response from dominating. The *Confessions* Investigation Condition also generates a problem, however, since now the reader could be bound by a meaning that is true but inferior to the one that he saw on his own. While in the *Util. cred.* account Augustine preferred truth to author's intention, with Scripture, once truth is secured, it might appear that he prefers the writer's intention to higher truth.

3. The *Confessions* Charity Condition

We find the solution in a new requirement parallel to but different from the *Util. cred.* Charity Condition. It again requires the reader to assume something about the author in order to justify his interpretation, and it is again motivated by charity, though charity means something significantly more expansive in the *Confessions* condition. Augustine states the condition first as an exhortation in *Confessions* XII.41:

Diligamus nos invicem pariterque diligamus te, deum nostrum, fontem veritatis, si non vana sed ipsam sitimus, eundemque famulum tuum, scripturae huius dispensatorem, spiritu tuo plenum, ita honoremus, ut hoc eum te revelante, cum haec scriberet, attendisse credamus quod in eis maxime et luce veritatis et fruge utilitatis excellit.

Let us love each other and equally love you, our God, the fount of truth (if we thirst not for empty things but for [truth] itself) and that same servant of Yours—let us honor him (the steward of this Scripture, filled with Your Spirit) in such a way that we believe that he, when he was writing these things under Your revelation, attended to this [meaning] which excels most in those [words] both in the light of truth and fruit of utility.

Augustine lists those to whom readers owe charity: other readers, God, and the Scriptural writer. But in the case of the writer, he spells out that this charity entails *honoring* the writer by *believing* that he had the truest and most useful meaning in mind. Thus he is making a stronger claim here than he does with regard to the *Util. cred.* Charity Condition, where he made a case for a reasonable *assumption* that the writer meant something true. Here there is really an obligation. This motivation is also at work in his alternate proposal in section 42, where he suggests that the writer may have recognized not just the best meaning, but *every* possible true meaning. Yet he pulls back again to the original claim in section 43:

[42] *Ego certe . . . si ad culmen auctoritatis aliquid scriberem, sic mallet scribere ut quod veri quisque de his rebus capere posset mea verba resonarent. . . . Nolo itaque, deus meus, tam praeceps esse ut hoc illum virum de te meruisse non credam. Sensit ille omnino in his verbis atque cogitavit, cum ea scriberet, quidquid hic veri potuimus invenire et quidquid nos non potuimus aut nondum potuimus et tamen in eis inveniri potest. . . . [43] Si quid homo minus vidit, numquid et spiritum tuum bonum . . . latere potuit, quidquid eras in eis verbis tu ipse revelaturus legentibus posteris, etiamsi ille per quem dicta sunt unam fortassis ex multis veris sententiam cogitavit? Quod si ita est, sit igitur illa quam cogitavit ceteris excelsior.*

[42] I certainly, . . . if I were writing something at the height of authority, would prefer to write in such a way that my words would resound with whatever truth any [reader] was able to grasp in these matters⁴³⁶. . . . I am unwilling, therefore, my God, to be so rash as not

⁴³⁶ Augustine never rejects this portion of the proposal. I take it that this means that part of Moses' intention was to allow readers to find whatever truths they do in his text under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, though he himself was not aware of these meanings.

to believe that [Moses] merited this from you. That man completely understood in his words and thought about whatever of the truth we have been able to find here, and whatever we have not been able to find—or not yet able, though it nevertheless could be found in them. . . . [43] If the human [writer] saw something less, could it really be the case that . . . whatever You yourself were going to reveal in those words to later readers could be hidden from Your good Spirit, even if that man through whom they were written perhaps thought of one idea/interpretation from the many true ones? But if this is so, then let the [meaning] which he thought of be more excellent than the others.

Again, Augustine argues in this alternate proposal for some view of the writer based on the particular sort of charity owed to that writer—that is, based on what we readers ought to believe about him.⁴³⁷ He says that Moses must have written in the way Augustine himself would wish to write (that is, in the best way that Augustine can think to write),⁴³⁸ explicitly thinking of all the true meanings that readers can find.⁴³⁹ He rejects that proposal for somewhat complicated reasons,⁴⁴⁰ but it is clear that he

⁴³⁷ Interestingly, the suggestion in 42 bears a strange parallel to Augustine's argument for the *Util. cred.* Charity Condition. He says in *Util. cred.* 11 that an author who has benefitted so many readers and whose words have shown them so many truths should be assumed to have seen the truth himself. In *Confessions* XII.42, he argues more strongly that Moses, as an inspired author, actually recognized all of the truths that readers would find in his words when he wrote the text. Thus he attributes to Moses a recognition of his multivalent value as writer—the very value based on which people can assume the truth of his intended meaning—and even of all the specific contents of that multivalence!

⁴³⁸ In *Confessions* XII.36 he argues: “But I cannot believe that there was less of a gift for Your most faithful servant Moses than I would wish and desire to be given to me by You” (*Non possum minus credere de Moyse fidelissimo famulo tuo quam mihi optarem ac desiderarem abs te dari muneris*).

⁴³⁹ Interestingly, the claim in 42 is somewhat parallel to his argument for *Util. cred.* condition 3. He says in *Util. cred.* 11 that an author who has benefitted so many readers and whose words have shown them so many truths should be assumed to have seen the truth himself. As we see above, in *Conf.* XII.42, he argues more strongly that Moses, as an inspired author, actually recognized all of the truths that readers would find in his words when he wrote the text. Thus he attributes to Moses a recognition of his multivalent value as author—the very value based on which people can assume the truth of his intended meaning—and even of all the specific contents of that multivalence!

⁴⁴⁰ As I explained in chapter 1, his suggestion in 42 that the writer was aware of every possible true meaning would more or less completely undermine the idea that the human writer played any significant role, since in that case his intention would be coterminous with the Holy Spirit's. Augustine does not entirely reject the proposal in 42 (he begins section 43 by saying, “If the human [writer] perhaps saw only one of these many truths. . .”), but this is probably only because, as he claims several times in *Confessions* XII, there is no way to see into the author's mind, and we have no external constraint (such as that the author could not mean anything false) to limit the number of truths he could mean. It might seem implausible that the writer would recognize every truth a reader could find, yet

can only do so because the 41 proposal suffices as an explanation of what charity requires readers to believe about the Scriptural writers. This is the claim he returns to in *Confessions* XII.43: that even if the author was only aware of one meaning, it was the one that is *ceteris excelsior*. This is clearly a back reference to section 41 and the meaning that *maxime et luce veritatis et fruge utilitatis excellit*. Thus we can set out the *Confessions* requirement:⁴⁴¹

The *Confessions* Charity Condition: The reader must believe that the meaning that the Scriptural writer had in mind is the truest and most useful valid interpretation, and interpret accordingly.

We have already seen that the role of the *Util. cred.* Charity Condition was fulfilled by *Confessions* Truth Condition B, but we can also see that Augustine makes a claim in the *Confessions* Charity Condition that is structurally similar to the *Util. cred.* Charity Condition: out of charity, we must assume that the human author had the best possible meaning in mind. If we do this, then we can avoid the potential problem with the *Confessions* Investigation Condition of having a better interpretation than the writer but still being obligated to follow his intended meaning.

Of course, neither this condition nor the *Confessions* Investigation Condition oblige the reader to actually find the writer's intended meaning. As the above quotation of section 43 states, the Holy Spirit anticipated all the true meanings that readers would find, and thus, we can infer, He intended them.⁴⁴² But readers are still obligated

presumably the Holy Spirit *could* give him this ability—but the question is whether we have a good reason to think that Holy Spirit did do so.

⁴⁴¹ In contrast to the other two conditions, it is less clear that this one belongs to the theory in *Doct. chr.* I-III as well as to *Confessions* XII. Augustine makes no mention of this idea in *Doct. chr.* I-III.

⁴⁴² We see the same strategy of suggestion, pull back, and affirmation in *Doct. chr.* III.27.38. The passage makes a very compressed form of the whole argument given in *Confessions* XII: it is okay to find a meaning that the author didn't intend, as long as it's true/attested elsewhere in Scripture and as long as the reader is trying to figure out what the writer said; in fact, maybe the author saw this

to seek the writer's meaning because the Holy Spirit chose him to be the writer (to be the author, in the ordinary sense) and revealed the best meaning to him, and that means that readers are obligated to prefer the interpretation that attributes the best and most useful meaning possible to the words. But as we will see in the next section, the issue of what is possible for the words is rather complicated.

To sum up, then, the conditions for valid misinterpretation that *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III impose are as follows: that the interpretation not state anything false, either as a result of the reader's false belief (Truth Condition A) or because the reader believes that the author meant something which he knows to be false (Truth Condition B); that the reader be seeking the writer's intended meaning (Investigation Condition); and that the reader believe that the writer meant the truest and most useful thing possible, and interpret accordingly (Charity Condition).

4. Two problems with the new account

Two potential problems arise for the *Confessions* Investigation and Charity Conditions. First, Augustine believes that it is actually impossible to *know* what the writer meant, since one cannot enter another person's mind (XII.33):

meaning, or at least the Holy Spirit did. This passage lacks the claim that the writer intended the truest and most useful meaning, though it still maintains that readers must seek out that meaning. *Doct. chr.* III.27.38: *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 intellegere volumus, et ipsam sententiam forsitan vidit et certe Dei Spiritus, qui per eum haec operatus est, etiam ipsam occurrenturam lectori vel auditori sine dubitatione praevideat, immo ut occurreret, quia et ipsa est veritate subnixa, providit.*

Ecce ego quam fidenter dico in tuo verbo incommutabili omnia te fecisse, invisibilia et visibilia. numquid tam fidenter dico non aliud quam hoc attendisse Moysen, cum scriberet, 'In principio fecit deus caelum et terram,' quia non, sicut in tua veritate hoc certum video, ita in eius mente video id eum cogitasse cum haec scriberet?

See how confidently I say that You made all things, invisible and visible, in your unchangeable Word. Can I so confidently say that Moses was applying his attention to no other thing than this when he wrote, “In the beginning God made heaven and earth”—since I do not see in his mind that he thought of this when he was writing these things in the same way that I see this certainty in Your truth?⁴⁴³

And again a bit later (XII.35):

Si ipse Moyses apparuisset nobis atque dixisset: 'Hoc cogitavi,' nec sic eam videremus, sed crederemus.

If Moses himself had appeared and said to us, “I thought of this,” even so we would not see it but believe it.

We have already seen an antecedent of this claim in *Util. cred.* 11:⁴⁴⁴

Quod genus cum de rebus obscurissimis lectio est, rarissimum omnino est; neque id, mea sententia, liquido sciri, sed tantummodo credi potest. Quibus enim argumentis absentis vel mortui hominis voluntatem ita colligam, ut de illa iurare possim; cum etiam si praesens interrogaretur, multa esse possent, quae, si malus non esset, officiosissime absconderet?

And this situation [understanding the same truth as the author] is extremely rare when the text is about very obscure matters; nor, in my opinion, is [what the author was thinking of] able to be known clearly, but only to be believed. For from what arguments could I so gather the intention of a man absent or dead, so that I would be able to make a judgment about it—since even if he were present and questioned, there could be many things which, if he were not a bad man, he might very dutifully conceal?

⁴⁴³ He also says that his opponents, who claim to know what Moses meant, have the “rashness not of knowledge but of audacity” (XII.34: *ista temeritas non scientiae sed audaciae est*).

⁴⁴⁴ In the summary of the fourth case. See the section on the *Util. cred.*, above.

Though the last clause—about the usefulness of concealing difficult matters from ignorant readers⁴⁴⁵—is a little strange, the overall point is clear: it is impossible to know what another person is thinking. An extreme version of this claim could be used more or less to nullify *Confessions* condition 2 since, if the writer's intention is unknowable, one could claim to be “seeking” that intention with any interpretation.

But Augustine is not so skeptical. In the section on “context” in Chapter 2, we saw the more general, positive role that context plays in illuminating the author’s meaning, at least in the case of literal language.⁴⁴⁶ The claim in the above passages from *Confessions* and *Util. cred.* is not in contradiction to this, because there is a distinction between *scire*⁴⁴⁷ and *cognoscere*: the former is knowing in the strong, classical sense, while the latter is merely getting the idea. The former is definite, the latter probable.

⁴⁴⁵ I take it that Augustine means that there are some things that the author would usefully hide from his hearer: things that the hearer was not ready for or could not understand. This is how he explains the “hidden” language of the Old Testament, which had a useful literal meaning for carnal readers, but also has a hidden spiritual meaning which we see now: “We say that the Law is not necessary except for those to whom servitude is useful: and therefore it was usefully hidden, because the people who were not able to be restrained from sin by reason had to be coerced by such a Law, that is, by the threats and terrors of those punishments which can be seen by fools; and when the grace of Christ sets people free from these things, it does not condemn that Law, but it invites us to yield to its love, not to serve in fear of the Law. . . . Therefore those [provisions of the Law] were not taken away through the grace of the Lord as if they were useless things that were hidden there; but rather they were a covering, with which useful things were hidden.” (*Nec illam legem necessariam esse dicimus, nisi eis quibus est adhuc utilis servitus: ideoque utiliter esse latam, quod homines qui revocari a peccatis ratione non poterant, tali lege coercendi erant, poenarum scilicet istarum quae videri ab stultis possunt, minis atque terroribus; a quibus gratia Christi cum liberat, non legem illam damnat, sed aliquando nos obtemperare suae caritati, non servire timore Legis, invitat. . . . Non igitur per Domini gratiam, tamquam inutilia ibi tegerentur, ablata sunt; sed tegmen potius, quo utilia tegebantur*)

⁴⁴⁶ See Chapter 2, subsection “Context,” the discussion of *Doct. chr.* III.4.8, where he says that in the case of *propriis verbis* he refers the reader to “the context of the statement, by which the intention of the writer is recognized” (*circumstantia ipsa sermonis, qua cognoscitur scriptorum intentio*).

⁴⁴⁷ Note that Augustine also uses *videre* in *Confessions* XII.33 and 35. As far as I can tell, he means this as a synonym of *scire*, with Platonic overtones.

As I argued at the end of chapter 1, Augustine presents many possible interpretations of Genesis 1:1-2 in *Confessions* XII, but they are all literal, and they all have to do with the same thing: the creation of the world and what that world consists of. Though some of the suggested interpretations (especially the one that Augustine is committed to)⁴⁴⁸ seem to us to take the words in a non-literal sense, there is no indication that he believes these interpretations to be non-literal, *non secundum litteram*.⁴⁴⁹ It is very reasonable, then, to say that this is a case in which the *intentio* of the *auctoris* (Moses) has been *cognoscitur* to some degree.⁴⁵⁰

Furthermore, after harping on the inaccessibility of the writer's mind, Augustine then opens another route to the writer's intention by means of the *Confessions* Charity Condition, arguing that the writer must have meant what was supremely true and useful. Thus the Charity Condition helps the reader to fulfill the Investigation Condition. This provides a new way of finding whether an interpretation conforms to the writer's intention that does not depend on the impossible task of entering the writer's mind. The strategy is not perfect, since, as Augustine admits, we may not yet recognize the best meaning, but it does allow a theoretical basis to judge the relative worth of interpretations, by how true and useful they are. Thus the text

⁴⁴⁸ See my discussion of these interpretations in my conclusion to chapter 1.

⁴⁴⁹ I have three pieces of evidence for this claim: 1. In *Confessions* XII, he never uses any terms for figurative meaning or interpretation (*figurate, allegorice, translate, etc.*) 2. Though he acknowledges in section 28 that his understanding of *terram* in v. 1 as the stuff from which the earth was made depends on a “certain way of speaking” by which a thing is given the name of that which comes to be from it (i.e., prolepsis), this is a different case from his paradigm of *translata significatio* in *Doct. chr.* II.10.15, where the sign refers to a thing, which refers to another thing. Here the sign directly refers to a related thing. 3. The same interpretation is preferred in *De Genesi ad Litteram* I; this rather suggests that the interpretation is *ad litteram*.

⁴⁵⁰ For instance, Augustine makes his imaginary opponents admit that the “invisible and empty earth” of v. 2 can plausibly be construed as formless matter, but then, he responds, why not think that the “earth” of v. 1 can be also?

itself and the “bestness” of the writer's meaning do offer some substantial boundaries on what the writer might be saying, so the *Confessions* Investigation Condition really does have some weight.

But this provokes the second issue, namely, how do we balance the indicators that the text gives us about its meaning with the general direction to assume that the writer meant the truest and most useful thing possible? This question arises, in a way, in Augustine's argument with his imagined opponents in *Confessions* XII, the *contradictores*, though they think that Moses' audience, rather than his words, is the effective constraint on his meaning: the ancient Hebrews were a "carnal people" who could not understand anything immaterial, and so, the *contradictores* claim, Moses did not mean to say anything about immaterial realities.⁴⁵¹ Augustine argues, in contrast, that Moses had more than his immediate audience in mind when he wrote,⁴⁵² but this claim is only plausible if he can show that the words have a resonance beyond a naively materialistic view of the world.

I do not intend to address whether this perspective is valid or merely an artifact of Augustine's distance from and ignorance of Near Eastern literature. But given the

⁴⁵¹ In *Confessions* XII.24 Augustine imagines the *contradictores* saying the following: “That rude and carnal nation to whom he was speaking were, of courses, just those kind of people, so that he judged that nothing except the visible works of God only should be commended to them” (*Tales quippe homines erant rudis ille atque carnalis populus cui loquebatur, ut eis opera dei non nisi sola visibilia commendanda iudicaret*).

⁴⁵² When, in *Confessions* XII.36, he imagines what he would want were he in Moses' position, he describes Moses' words as having an important meaning for all times and places: “. . . if I had been born in that time in which he was and You had set me in that position such that through the service of my heart and tongue those letters might be dispensed which would later be such a profit to all peoples and, at such a peak of authority throughout the whole world, would overcome the words of all false and proud doctrines” (*. . . si tempore illo natus essem quo ille eoque loci me constituisses, ut per servitutem cordis ac linguae meae litterae illae dispensarentur quae tanto post essent omnibus gentibus profuturae et per universum orbem tanto auctoritatis culmine omnium falsarum superbarumque doctrinarum verba superaturae*).

position he was in and the knowledge that he could have had of that literature, I do not think his approach is unreasonable. In general his strategy for reconciling the particular features of the text with its “bestness” is to find traces in the text that might betray some greater meaning or justify a figurative reading, though he uses figurative interpretation even in the absence of these features, based on the justification given by Paul.⁴⁵³ In the event that one does find an impossible interpretation that seems superior to a possible one, one must submit to Scripture, as he explains in *Doct. chr.* I.37.41:

*Asserendo enim temere quod ille non sensit quem legit, plerumque
Asserendo enim temere quod ille non sensit quem legit, plerumque
incurrit in alia quae illi sententiae contexere nequeat. Quae si vera et
certa esse consentit, illud non possit verum esse quod senserat; fitque
in eo, nescio quomodo, ut amando sententiam suam Scripturae incipiat
offensior esse quam sibi.*

For in rashly asserting what the writer did not mean, most of the time [the reader] runs into other things which cannot be made to fit with that interpretation. And if [the reader] agrees that these things are true and sure, the thing that he had understood will not be able to be true; and it somehow happens that by loving his own interpretation he begins to be more incensed with Scripture than with himself.

While the situation under consideration in this passage (straightforward contradiction) may be narrower than what I am addressing, it seems fair to say that this instruction can be applied more generally to interpretations that cannot be made consistent with the text for whatever reason.⁴⁵⁴ In such a situation the reader must yield to the text and abandon his interpretation, trusting that the meaning of the text—whatever it is—is

⁴⁵³ About which, see the section “Figurative Interpretation” in Chapter 3.

⁴⁵⁴ I think that this passage is only dealing with interpretations that cannot be true, given that another passage (which must state what is true) says something contrary to the interpretation. Of course, there are inconsistencies between interpretation and text that do not amount to full contradictions.

better than what he could come up with. Augustine suggests this again in *Doct. chr.* II.7.9 when he describes the second of seven spiritual stages an interpreter must proceed through:

Deinde mitescere opus est pietate, neque contradicere divinae Scripturae sive intellectae, si aliqua vitia nostra percutit, sive non intellectae, quasi nos melius sapere meliusque praecipere possimus, sed cogitare potius et credere id esse melius et verius quod ibi scriptum est, etiam si lateat, quam id quod nos per nosmetipsos sapere possumus.

Then he needs to be softened by piety and not to contradict divine Scripture, whether it is understood and strikes some of our vices, or it is not understood and we make as if we were able to understand better or to give better precepts. But he needs to think rather and to believe that what has been written there is better and truer, even if it is hidden, than what we could understand on our own.

The idea must be that it would be very proud to imagine that you could find a better meaning than the person whom the Holy Spirit inspired to write the text. He says something much the same in *Confessions* XIII.33:

Spirituales ergo. . . spiritualiter iudicant . . . neque de ipso libro tuo, etiam si quid ibi non lucet, quoniam summittimus ei nostrum intellectum certumque habemus etiam quod clausum est aspectibus nostris recte veraciterque dictum esse.

Spiritual people, then . . . judge spiritually . . . but not concerning Your book itself, even if what is there is not clear, since we submit our intellect to it and hold it as certain that even what is closed to our sight has been rightly and truly said.

This certainly makes interpretation a more interesting enterprise that requires more work. Though the reader has to have correct beliefs about the matters that the text is dealing with (as we saw in *Confessions* Truth Condition A), he does not simply fit the meaning of the text to his pre-existing knowledge. As we have already seen, Augustine believes that Scripture's figurative language is useful because it keeps

readers from becoming proud of or bored with their ease in understanding the text.⁴⁵⁵

But we could extend this principle to say that the useful difficulty of Scripture involves not only understanding the reference of figurative signs but also understanding the point of a passage. One has to work to see how it relates to the whole and the highest truths. This is, arguably, the task and the outcome of *Confessions* XII (as well as the *De Genesi ad Litteram*): to figure out how the text as it is can speak to the highest truths that we know, which then reveals truths which we had perhaps not previously seen.

Conclusion of the first question and of the *Util. cred.*, *Confessions* XII, and *Doct. chr. account*

We can see how much *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III achieve in their combined account of the role of the author's intention in Scriptural interpretation by recalling the deficiencies of the *Util. cred.* account. First, since reading, according to Augustine, involves both looking for the truth and looking for the author's intention, a text can only be a satisfactory object for reading if the author meant nothing false, since otherwise readers have to choose which goal to neglect, truth or what is intended. While Augustine asserts the truth of whatever the Scriptural writers meant in the *Util. cred.*, he emphasizes it much more in *Confessions* XII. Perhaps this is an

⁴⁵⁵ *Doct. chr.* II.6.8: "For those who do not find what they seek suffer from hunger; but those who do not seek because they have at hand, often grow languid with disgust; but in each of them faintness must be avoided. Splendidly, therefore, and profitably has the Holy Spirit so tempered the Scriptures that he might meet hunger with the clearer passages but sweep away disgust with the more obscure ones" (*Qui enim prorsus non inveniunt quod quaerunt, fame laborant; qui autem non quaerunt, quia in promptu habent, fastidio saepe marcescunt: in utroque autem languor cavendus est. Magnifice igitur et salubriter Spiritus Sanctus ita Scripturas sanctas modificavit, ut locis apertioribus fami occurreret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergeret*).

accident of the audience for each work. In neither case do we find a full justification for this view, but we see better in *Confessions* XII how the claim can have a useful impact on interpretation.

Second, we see this difference in approach born out in each account's conditions regarding knowledge of the author's intent. The *Util. cred.* Ignorance Condition merely removes culpability for missing the author's intention when the reader does not or in some sense cannot know it. It is unclear how strong the last bit of the claim is: while in Augustine's second example for the third case⁴⁵⁶ the hearer misunderstands the words of his dead friend in a defensible way, in the first example the reader misunderstands Epicurus in a sense that could easily be corrected by reading more of what Epicurus wrote. And so the question is, how much of an obligation do readers have to try to cure their ignorance of what the author meant in some particular statement, especially in cases like the Epicurus example, where finding the writer's meaning would force the reader to understand the text as saying something false?

The *Confessions* Investigation Condition appears to handle this objection, since it deals only with the Scriptural writers, who must have meant something true. Thus it can absolutely obligate the reader to seek the writer's intention (presumably, according to the reader's ability) without the danger of forcing the reader to accept a false statement, since any meaning that *appears* to be intended but states something false can be categorically rejected. The remaining problem—of an intended meaning

⁴⁵⁶ The third case is that in which the reader understands a true or good meaning while the author (or speaker) meant something false or bad.

that is true but inferior to the truth the reader has found—is handled by the *Confessions* Charity Condition, since it specifies that the writer must have had the truest and most useful meaning possible, at least at the literal level, and this in turn becomes a guide for what the writer could have meant.

But the real excellence of the *Confessions* and *Doct. chr.* account comes out when we compare it to the ideal case of reading that Augustine sets out in *Util. cred.*

11:

Cum autem et hoc sentimus quod ille quem legimus, et id est vitae bene agenda accommodatissimum, cumulatissime sese habet veritas, nec aliunde aperitur falsitatis locus.

But when we understand the same meaning as the writer [did], and that meaning is most suited to living a good life, truth enters its most perfect state, and no opportunity for falsity is open from any direction.

There are two obvious points to gather from this. First, the ideal case of reading requires an author with an outstanding meaning, and that is what Scripture offers us.

Second, for some reason truth is most secure and falsehood is most completely excluded when the reader's interpretation corresponds to the writer's intention.

Presumably this is not only because it is easiest to hold onto the correct interpretation (because it fits the text) but also because, in this case, the author's intention offers a truth that probably exceeds what the reader can find on his own (definitely so in the case of Scripture).

Yet, unfortunately, the reader often fails to find the writer's intention. As we have already seen, Augustine acknowledges shortly before this passage that in obscure matters it is very rare for a reader to apprehend exactly what the writer was thinking

of.⁴⁵⁷ Though he can still obtain a true interpretation and thus the fruit of reading, his incorrect interpretation commits an *error legendi*. But now we see how the depiction of reading Scripture in *Confessions* XII not only instantiates the ideal case of the *Util. cred.*, but actually exceeds that ideal. We find this when we look again at *Confessions* XII.43:

Si quid homo minus vidit, numquid et spiritum tuum bonum . . . latere potuit, quidquid eras in eis verbis tu ipse revelaturus legentibus posteris, etiamsi ille per quem dicta sunt unam fortassis ex multis veris sententiam cogitavit? Quod si ita est, sit igitur illa quam cogitavit ceteris excelsior. nobis autem, domine, aut ipsam demonstra aut quam placet alteram veram. . . . Sine me itaque . . . eligere unum aliquid quod tu inspiraveris verum, certum et bonum, etiamsi multa occurrerint . . . ut, si hoc dixerero quod sensit minister tuus, recte atque optime (id enim conari me oportet), quod si adsecutus non fuero, id tamen dicam quod mihi per eius verba tua veritas dicere voluerit, quae illi quoque dixit quod voluit.

If the human [writer] saw something less, could it really be the case that . . . whatever You yourself were going to reveal in those words to later readers could be hidden from Your good Spirit, even if that man through whom they were written perhaps thought of only one meaning from the many true ones? But if this is so, then let the one which he thought of be more excellent than the others. But to us, Lord, show either that very one or whatever other truth pleases You. . . . Allow me therefore . . . to choose some one [interpretation] which You will have inspired as true, sure, and good, even if many occur [to me] . . . so that, if I speak this [meaning] which Your minister understood, I will speak rightly and in the best way (for that is what I must attempt), and if I do not attain that, I will nevertheless say that which Your Truth will have wished to say through his words—Your Truth which also said to that man what It wished.

While the writer's intended meaning is the best that a reader could find and the one he ought to seek out, the Holy Spirit's intention legitimates those true

⁴⁵⁷ *Util. cred.* 11: “And this situation [understanding the same truth as the author] is extremely rare when the text is about very obscure matters; nor, in my opinion, is [what the author was thinking of] able to be known clearly, but only to be believed” (*Quod genus cum de rebus obscurissimis lectio est, rarissimum omnino est; neque id, mea sententia, liquido sciri, sed tantummodo credi potest*).

interpretations that do not match the writer's. When readers fail to attain to the ideal situation—when they miss the writer's *excelsior* meaning—they still can attain an interpretation that is true and intended, in a certain sense. This is something that no other text can do, legitimizing what would otherwise be an error while still maintaining the position of the ideal. Many scholars have recognized that with the Holy Spirit's intention Augustine opens up Scripture to readers at different levels and in different places, but if this were all his theory did, it would elevate the truth component of reading and more or less remove the interpretation component as something distinct. In so doing it would destroy reading as a shared endeavor, since readers would be absolutely legitimated in whatever truth they each find but would have little or no reason to reconcile their interpretations. Augustine's requirement to seek the writer's intention, bolstered by his provision that this intention contains the highest meaning, gives them a goal that motivates further reading and study, and it preserves reading and interpretation as an activity that readers can progress in together.

The Author's Intention in the Later Accounts

We have now answered the question of what role the writer's intention plays in proper interpretation according to Augustine. We have also seen some relevant claims about what sort of thing the writer's intention is: the truest and most useful meaning that the text could bear, a meaning that encapsulates the highest truth of the matter in question. In chapter 1 I argued that in *Confessions* XII the best meaning is the one that is comprehensive of other possible meanings: Augustine's proposed interpretation thus

wins out, because it includes the truths that all the other proposals variously and partially present.

Now this reading is somewhat at-odds with the dominant scholarly view. As I explained in the introduction, the common understanding of Augustine's theory is that the author had some particular intention appropriate to his historical situation but that it pales in comparison to the meanings that can be drawn out now. Readers are also inspired by the Holy Spirit, Augustine tells us, so those interpretations which show the mark of inspiration (building up charity, being true) should be just as valuable as the author's meaning—perhaps even more so, since they can take other revelation and later knowledge into account.

I have yet to see an account like this that addresses⁴⁵⁸ Augustine's claim that the author's intention excelled all others in truth and utility—a claim that he clearly states in *Conf.* XII.41 and reaffirms in 43.⁴⁵⁹ Nor do these accounts address his specific direction for readers (including himself) to seek the author's intent, found in *Confessions* XII as well as the *Doct. chr.*⁴⁶⁰ Indeed, explanations which take the author's intention to be inferior work directly against this. At the root of these

⁴⁵⁸ Carol Harrison (“‘Not Words but Things:’ Harmonious Diversity in the Four Gospels,” 167) brings up this passage, but for some reason thinks that Augustine is saying the same thing here as he did in section 36, which she explains as that “he [Augustine, so also Moses] would write in such a way that . . . all would find in his work whatever truths they had already arrived at in their own understanding.” She translates the critical passage in 41 as follows: “When under your inspiration he wrote these words, he had in mind whatever is most excellent in them by the illumination of truth and their fruitfulness for our profit.” This construes *in eis* (“in them”) as if it refers to the words, but I think it must refer to the *veras sententias* under consideration in this paragraph and the *in* must mean “among,” so that *quod in eis* is another way of saying *quod earum*. The gender of *quod* is probably a result of switching from talking about *veras sententias* to *vera* a few clauses earlier. I do not think this changes the sense of the sentence, however.

⁴⁵⁹ See my discussion of *Confessions* XII.43 in chapter 1.

⁴⁶⁰ See the previous section on the *Confessions* Investigation Condition, which gives all the relevant passages.

accounts is a simple failure to realize that Augustine believed that these authors were recipients of a substantial *revelation* in their inspiration by God. Let me address this first before moving onto some larger considerations in the next section about how the author's intention could be "best."

Scriptural authors had supernatural knowledge revealed to them

In *De Doctrina Christiana* III.9.13, Augustine tells us that the writers of the Old Testament were "spiritual people" who understood what the signs in the Old Testament were signs of—that is, Christ and the doctrines of the New Testament:

Qui vero aut operatur aut veneratur utile signum divinitus institutum, cuius vim significationemque intellegit, non hoc veneratur quod videtur et transit, sed illud potius quo talia cuncta referenda sunt. Talis autem homo spiritualis et liber. . . . Tales autem spirituales erant Patriarchae ac Prophetae omnesque in populo Israel per quos nobis Spiritus Sanctus ipsa Scripturarum et auxilia et solacia ministravit.

But he who serves or venerates a useful divinely-instituted sign whose meaning and signification he understands does not venerate this thing which is seen and passes away, but rather that to which all such [visible, passing] things are to be referred. And such a person is spiritual and free. . . . Moreover, all the Patriarchs and Prophets in the people of Israel through whom the Holy Spirit provided the very aids and consolations of the Scriptures were such spiritual people.

In the *Treatise on the Gospel of John* XLV.9,⁴⁶¹ he even specifies that the Old Testament fathers "believed that [Christ] would be born from a virgin, would suffer,

⁴⁶¹ I must credit M.-F. Berrouard for pointing out this and the next reference (and the one from *Contra Faustum* in my next note) in his note on "La permanence de la foi chrétienne à travers le temps," pages 413-423 of his text, translation, and commentary on the *Tractatus, Homélies sur L'Évangile de Saint Jean*. See especially pages 420-22.

would rise again, would ascend into heaven.”⁴⁶² In *City of God* XI.4.1, to explain how the Old Testament writers gained this knowledge, he quotes Wisdom 7:27:

Numquidnam ibi fuit iste propheta, quando fecit Deus caelum et terram? Non; sed ibi fuit sapientia Dei, per quam facta sunt omnia, quae in animas sanctas etiam se transfert, amicos Dei et prophetas constituit eisque opera sua sine strepitu intus enarrat. Loquuntur eis quoque angeli Dei, qui semper vident faciem Patris, voluntatemque eius quibus oportet adnuntiant. Ex his unus erat iste propheta, qui dixit et scripsit: In principio fecit Deus caelum et terram. Qui tam idoneus testis est, per quem Deo credendum sit, ut eodem spiritu Dei, quo haec sibi revelata cognovit, etiam ipsam fidem nostram futuram tanto ante praedixerit.

Could that prophet have been there when God made heaven and earth? No, but the Wisdom of God was there, through which all things were made, which carries itself also into holy souls, makes them friends of God and prophets, and tells its works to them interiorly without a sound. The angels of God, who see always the face of the Father, also speak to them and announce His will to those who must do it. One of these was that prophet who said and wrote, “In the beginning God made heaven and earth.” And he was so fit a witness, though whom we should believe God, that, by the same Spirit of God by which he knew these things that were revealed to him, he also predicted so long beforehand that future faith of ours.

He specifies that this was the means by which Moses, whom he calls a “prophet,” was able to write about the creation of the world, though Moses was, obviously, not a direct witness of it.

⁴⁶² In *Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus* XLV.9: *In eius sunt fidei societate nobiscum et illi patres qui crediderunt de Virgine nasciturum, passurum, resurrecturum, in caelum adscensurum.* Likewise, in *Contra Faustum* XIX.14 he says ““All the saints and the just of these ancient times believed and hoped for the same things as we do” (*nam eadem credebant, eademque sperabant omnes iusti et sancti etiam temporum illorum*). And even in *Confessions* X.68, he says, ““He [*hic*] was shown to ancient saints so that they might be saved through faith in his future passion, just as we are through faith in that passion of the past” (*hic demonstratus est antiquis sanctis, ut ita ipsi per fidem futurae passionis eius, sicut nos per fidem praeteritae, salvi fierent*).

On this point he disagrees with most of the Fathers, with the large exception of Origen, who may have been his source for this view. One should note, however, that even Origen seems to waver on whether the major figures of the Old Testament had an *explicit* knowledge of Christ’s incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. For more on the possible influence of Origen and a discussion of the relevant passages in his work, see Berrouard, *ibid*, 422-3.

Thus Augustine believes that the writers of the Old Testament had a large amount of prophetic and theological knowledge revealed to them. His suggestion that divine Wisdom taught the prophets "interiorly" might describe a process that they were aware or unaware of, but his claim that the angels spoke to them definitely suggests a conscious experience. We might be tempted to say that this applies only to the writers' description of things or events that they could not otherwise have known about, like the creation of the world. But Augustine's statement that the writers knew what the signs of the Old Testament were signs of, and that they anticipated the core events of Jesus' life, suggests that even in narrative passages of the Old Testament, the writers had a divinely-revealed knowledge of the figurative significance of events, above and beyond their ordinary knowledge about the historical matter.

I think this is sufficient to prove that, in Augustine's opinion, the Scriptural writers' knowledge and intended meaning was not limited by their historical situation. This should not be surprising. Though Augustine and his imaginary opponents in *Confessions* XII discuss what is true and what Moses intended, they never discuss whether Moses could have known the truths that they agree on: the *contradictores'* objection is only that Moses was speaking to his carnal audience and so had a meaning in mind that they were capable of. They do not say that this was all Moses himself could have understood.

A Larger Theory

I suggested at the end of chapter 1 that Augustine's idea of the truest and most useful meaning (that the Scriptural writer intended) might be fulfilled by a meaning

that was comprehensive of all other interpretations, and it was easy to see how this would be possible in *Confessions* XII, where all of the interpretations proposed for Genesis 1:1-2 are literal and so address the same points at different levels of complexity. But the obvious question, given all that we have seen about figurative interpretation in chapter 3, is how the writer's intention relates to non-literal meanings. Should we believe that his intention includes these too, based on Augustine's argument for charity toward the writer? Unfortunately, Augustine does not provide a clear answer.

The obvious place to look for one is in his figurative interpretation of the rest of Genesis 1 in book XIII. But while book XII is clearly concerned with what Moses intended and ends by tying in what God intended, in book XIII Augustine ceases to speak of Moses' intention. Instead he refers only to what Scripture or God intended. For instance, in XIII.37 he discusses the phrase "increase and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) and claims that it has a figurative meaning as well as a literal one:

Itaque si naturas ipsas rerum non allegorice sed proprie cogitemus, ad omnia quae de seminibus gignuntur convenit verbum crescite et multiplicamini. Si autem figurate posita ista tractemus (quod potius arbitror intendisse scripturam, quae utique non supervacue solis aquatiliis et hominum fetibus istam benedictionem attribuit) . . .

Therefore if we consider the very natures of the things not allegorically but literally, the phrase "increase and multiply" applies to all the things which are born from seeds. But if we treat those things as being stated figuratively (which I rather think that Scripture intended, since it certainly does not assign that blessing to the birth of sea creatures and humans without reason) . . .

It is rather odd to speak of what the text intends, so I am inclined to conclude that Augustine is being deliberately vague about which author he has in mind. It is certain,

of course that God is still involved and that His intention anticipates, as it were,⁴⁶³ these figurative interpretations as well.

Augustine explains the relationship of God's intention to the text and to readers' interpretations in XIII.44, building on his proposal from XII.43:

Et attendi, ut invenirem utrum septies vel octies videris quia bona sunt opera tua, cum tibi placuerunt, et in tua visione non inveni tempora per quae intellegerem quod totiens videris quae fecisti, et dixi, 'O domine, nonne ista scriptura tua vera est, quoniam tu verax et veritas edidisti eam? Cur ergo tu mihi dicis non esse in tua visione tempora, et ista scriptura tua mihi dicit per singulos dies ea quae fecisti te vidisse quia bona sunt? . . . Ad haec tu dicis mihi . . . : 'O homo, nempe quod scriptura mea dicit, ego dico. Et tamen illa temporaliter dicit, verbo autem meo tempus non accedit, quia aequali mecum aeternitate consistit. Sic ea quae vos per spiritum meum videtis ego video, sicut ea quae vos per spiritum meum dicitis ego dico. Atque ita cum vos temporaliter ea videatis, non ego temporaliter video, quemadmodum, cum vos temporaliter ea dicatis, non ego temporaliter dico.'

And I paid attention to find out whether You saw seven or eight times that Your works are good because they pleased You, and in Your sight I found no times through which I could understand that You saw what You made so many times, and I said, "O Lord, isn't Your Scripture true, since You, truthful and Truth, have given it? Why then do You say that in Your vision there are no times, and Your Scripture tells me that You saw the things that You made through individual days, that they are good?" . . . To these things You replied to me . . . : "O man, of course I say what My Scripture says. And yet it says those things temporally, but no time touches My Word, since it exists with Me in equal eternity. So those things which you see through My Spirit, I see, just as those things which you say through My Spirit, I say. And thus although you see them temporally, I do not see them temporally, just as although you speak of them temporally, I do not speak temporally."

The reply addresses not just the statements attributed to God in Scripture, but the text in its entirety. We can see this if we look at the argument step by step. First, God speaks what Scripture speaks, but they do not speak in the same way. God's "speech"

⁴⁶³ Recall the temporal collapse between God's inspiration of the author and inspiration of readers, as discussed in my commentary on section 43 in chapter 1.

is not temporal, and so we can probably say that it is not linguistic either, inasmuch as language depends on temporal or quasi-temporal distension⁴⁶⁴ in order to express concepts. Second, whatever truth a person sees or says under God's inspiration ("through My Spirit"),⁴⁶⁵ God sees or says, but not in a temporal sense. Recall that Augustine habitually uses *videre* in *Confessions* XII as a synonym for *intelligere* or *scire*; here I think he means the former. There is a bit of a play, since *videre* is parallel to *dicere* in describing a sensible-temporal action, but I think the two terms also indicate two components of interpretation: on the one hand, perceiving or understanding some meaning, and on the other asserting something (as the meaning, as true). Third, the relationship between what God says and what the text says is somehow parallel to that between what God says and what the reader says when he interprets the text truly. But based on that parallel, we can see that the image of God speaking multiple times in Scripture runs deeper: the numerous times that different readers understand some truth from the text do not correspond to numerous acts of inspiration on God's part. Scripture temporalizes and draws out what is a single action for God, and readers throughout time have drawn out different meanings from Scripture's single expression. Thus God's a-temporal intention can comprehend many meanings, literal and figurative, singly.

This point will form a background for us as we go on and inquire about Moses' intention: Was he aware of figurative meanings? And is the meaning he intended still

⁴⁶⁴ I mean that language (and ratiocinative thought) as we know depends on an ordering of elements, so that some element is before another in a statement. The particular order does not matter, but the elements are never given all at once (the language of the aliens in *Arrival*, aside).

⁴⁶⁵ Recall that Augustine believes that anytime a person sees something true, it is under God's inspiration in some sense.

the truest and most useful in comparison with them? While Augustine does not specifically address it, I think we can build follow a line similar to the one in the passage above, drawing on my idea from chapter 1 that Moses had a comprehensive meaning. By putting some pieces together from XII.41, Augustine's epistolary treatise *De Deo Videndo* (letter 147), and a few passages in XIII, we can suggest that Moses' particular intention was a vision of the united Truth in God himself. Again, I offer this theory only as a suggestion, and I mean it to be compatible with the explanation I have given of *Confessions* XII and literal interpretation alone. At the end I will explain how this can work.

A complement to *Confessions* XII

Recall first that Augustine's idea of God as the *fontem veritatis* in XII.41 and his appeal there for Truth itself to provide harmony.⁴⁶⁶ I have already proposed that this language points to Moses' intention as comprehensive of others. Augustine claims that the figurative meanings of the text say no more than we can find at the literal level elsewhere in the text. We have seen that this is not strictly true, since he also appeals to church authority and secular truths for restrictive and positive content in the interpretation of some passages. But Augustine still holds that we interpret figurative passages based on what is assuredly true; the authority of the church and secular claims simply play the same role as clearly stated passages, which are mostly literal. Thus the literal meaning of a passage still has a kind of primacy, since without literal statements (from Scripture or otherwise) we would not have any truths from which to

⁴⁶⁶ See my discussion of this section in chapter 1.

compose figurative readings. But this also means that figurative and literal meanings of the text draw from the same set of truths, though a figurative reading of an individual passage can obviously address a truth totally different from those are accessible at the literal level. We might then propose that Moses' intention, whatever it was, comprehended all the truths that can be found at the literal and figurative levels.

A larger vision

But what would such an intention look like? How could it be a single thing and not a collection of simply different interpretations? Such a collection would hardly be Truth providing concord (as Augustine begs Truth to do in *Confessions* XII.41). We can only make sense of such an intention by understanding it as something higher than a mere *sententia*: a vision of the Truth unbroken into pieces—the very vision of Truth itself, God himself, who does not speak or see temporally. Indeed, in a later letter, 147, commonly called *De Deo Videndo*, Augustine discusses in what way Moses saw God based on an incident from Exodus 33 (8.20):

Huius enim desiderii sui flammam sanctus Moyses, fidelis famulus eius ostendit, ubi ait Deo, cum quo ut amicus facie ad faciem loquebatur: Si inveni gratiam ante te, ostende mihi temetipsum. Quid ergo? Ille non erat ipse? Si non esset ipse, non ei diceret, ostende mihi temetipsum; sed, 'Ostende mihi Deum': et tamen si eius naturam substantiamque conspiceret, multo minus diceret, ostende mihi temetipsum. Ipse ergo erat in ea specie qua apparere voluerat; non autem ipse apparebat in natura propria, quam Moyses videre cupiebat. Ea quippe promittitur sanctis in alia vita. Unde quod responsum est Moysi verum est, quia nemo potest faciem Dei videre, et vivere; id est, nemo potest eum in hac vita videre vivens sicuti est. Nam multi viderunt; sed quod voluntas elegit, non quod natura formavit. Et illud quod Ioannes ait, si recte intellegitur: Dilectissimi, nunc filii Dei sumus, et nondum apparuit quod erimus. Scimus quia cum apparuerit, similes ei erimus; quoniam videbimus eum sicuti est: non sicut eum homines viderunt, quando

voluit, in specie qua voluit, non in natura, qua in semetipso, etiam cum videretur, latuit; sed sicuti est, quod ab eo petebatur, cum ei diceretur, ostende mihi temetipsum, ab eo qui cum illo facie ad faciem loquebatur.

For holy Moses, His faithful servant, showed the flame of this desire when he said to God, with whom he was speaking as a friend face to face: "If I have found favor with You, show me Yourself." What then? Was He not Himself? If He was not Himself, [Moses] would not say to Him, "Show me Yourself," but, "Show me God." And yet if [Moses] was looking upon His nature and substance, still less would he say, "Show me Yourself." Therefore He was in that form in which He wished to appear; but He did not appear in His own nature, which is what Moses was desiring to see. That, of course, is promised to the saints in another life. Hence what He responded is true, that no one can see the face of God and live; that is, no living person can see Him in this life as He is. For many have seen, but they saw what His will chose, not what His nature formed. And if what John said is rightly understood—"Beloved, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet appeared. We know that when it/He appears, we will be like Him, since we will see Him as He is" [I John 3:1-2]—not as people have seen Him when He wished: in the form in which He wished, not in His nature, in which He lies hidden in Himself even when He is seen; but as He is, which was asked of Him when it was said to Him, "Show me Yourself," by him who was speaking with Him face to face.

The most important thing to note is in the middle of the passage: Moses desired to see God's own nature, which is promised to the saints in another life. This, of course, is what the tradition calls the Beatific Vision. After a long discourse on the conditions for this vision, Augustine points out that it seems to be possible for a person to have it in this life only if they are cut off from the body. He points to Paul's vision, described in II Corinthians 12 and suggests that other saints experienced such a vision (*De Deo Videndo* 13.31):

Sic enim raptus est qui audivit illic ineffabilia verba quae non licet homini loqui: ubi usque adeo facta est ab huius vitae sensibus quaedam intentionis aversio, ut sive in corpore, sive extra corpus fuerit, id est, utrum, sicut solet in vehementiori ecstasi, mens ab hac vita in illam vitam fuerit alienata, manente corporis vinculo, an omnino resolutio

facta fuerit, qualis in plena morte contingit, nescire se diceret. Ita fit ut et illud verum sit, quod dictum est: Nemo potest faciem meam videre, et vivere; quia necesse est abstrahi ab hac vita mentem, quando in illius ineffabilitatem visionis assumitur; et non sit incredibile quibusdam sanctis nondum ita defunctis, ut sepelienda cadavera remanerent, etiam istam excellentiam revelationis fuisse concessam.

For in this way he was taken up who heard there the ineffable words which a human may not speak. And in that case there was a certain turning of the attention from the senses of this life to such a degree that he said that he did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body—that is, whether the mind was transferred from this life into that life while the chain of the body remained (as is usual in very strong ecstasy), or a complete unfastening occurred such as happens in full death. So it happens that what was said is true, “No one can see my face and live,” since the mind has to be forcibly removed from this life when it is taken up into the ineffability of that vision; and it is not unbelievable that to some saints who were not yet dead even that excellence of revelation was conceded, so that they left their bodies to be buried.

While Paul mentions two possibilities, Augustine seems to think that he experienced the latter and that other saints experienced this sort of temporary death vision of God, which he calls a *revelatio*.

He then specifies that Moses also must have had this vision, based on evidence from Numbers 12:8 (*De Deo Videndo* 13.32):

Quod autem dicere institueram, desiderio eius etiam illud quod petierat, fuisse concessum, in libro Numerorum postea demonstratum est; ubi Dominus arguit contumaciam sororis ipsius, et dicit aliis Prophetis in visione se apparere et in somno, Moysi autem per speciem, non per aenigmata: ubi etiam addidit dicens: Et gloriam Domini vidit. Quid ergo est quod eum sic fecit exceptum, nisi forte quia illa contemplatione dignum etiam tunc habuit populi sui talem rectorem, et ministrum in tota domo sua fidelem, ut quemadmodum concupiverat, videret Deum sicuti est; quae contemplatio cunctis filiis in fine promittitur?

But what I had begun to say, that what he had sought was also conceded to his desire, is shown later in the book of Numbers: when the Lord is blaming the stubbornness of [Moses’] sister, and He says

that He appears to other prophets in vision and in dream but to Moses in sight, not through enigmas: and there He also adds, “And he saw the glory of the Lord.” Why is it that He made such an exception of him, unless perhaps because He then held such a great ruler of His people and faithful minister in His whole house to be worthy of that contemplation, so that just as he had desired, he saw God as He is—which is the contemplation promised in the end to all His children?

Augustine’s justification may need some more teasing out, but his commitment is clear: Moses saw God in the very way in which human beings will see Him in the next life.

If we return to book XIII, we find that Augustine describes this vision, which the angels also experience, as one that is separated from language and time. In the course of his allegorical explanation of creation, in XIII.18 he interprets the firmament as Scripture, and the waters above the firmament as angels. About these angels he says:

Non opus habent suspicere firmamentum hoc et legendo cognoscere verbum tuum. Vident enim faciem tuam semper, et ibi legunt sine syllabis temporum quid velit aeterna voluntas tua. Legunt eligunt et diligunt; semper legunt et numquam praeterit quod legunt. Eligendo enim et diligendo legunt ipsam incommutabilitatem consilii tui. . . . Super hoc firmamentum ordinasti eos, quod firmasti super infirmitatem inferiorum populorum, ubi suspicerent et cognoscerent misericordiam tuam temporaliter enuntiantem te, qui fecisti tempora.

They have no need to inspect this firmament or to read to recognize Your Word. For they see Your face always, and there they read without syllables of time what Your eternal will wishes. They read, they choose, and they love: they always read and what they read never passes away. For by choosing and loving they read that unchangeableness of Your plan. . . . You have ordered them above this firmament, which you set above the infirmity of the lower peoples, so that they could look there and recognize Your mercy announcing You in time, You who made time.

Here Augustine sets up the contrast between mortal, temporal knowledge of God, mediated through Scripture, and the immediate knowledge of him that angels possess. But then at the end of the section (again, *Confessions* XIII.18) he cites the passage also cited in *De Deo Videndo* 8.20, I John 3:2:

Sed cum apparuerit, similes ei erimus, quoniam videbimus eum sicuti est. *Sicuti est, domine, videre nostrum, quod nondum est nobis.*

"But when He appears, we will be like Him, since we will see Him as He is." To see Him as He is, Lord, is ours, but it is not yet given to us.

Again Augustine points out that this immediate vision of God is, for humans, reserved for the next life. The section is useful because it shows that the vision the angels currently have of God is the same as the one humans will have of Him.⁴⁶⁷ But the vision that humans will have of God in the next life is the same one that Augustine claims Moses, Paul, and some other saints have miraculously had in this life. And so Moses must have had a vision of God such as the angels have: a vision without “syllables of time.”

Based on this idea, my final and speculative proposal about Moses' intention is this: Moses' intention (or rather, the object of his intention) was a supra-linguistic vision of the unified Truth in God himself—or rather, it was a vision of God Himself. Though many different true ideas (*sententiae*) proceed from this Truth, the Truth itself is singular. Just as in my proposal at the end of chapter 1, Moses had a secondary intention that allowed for true interpretations (*sententiae*) that he was not thinking of, but this does not mean that his intention was open because he still knew the parameters of meaning. But in this case Moses' intention is not even the same sort of

⁴⁶⁷ Augustine also argues for this point in *De Deo Videndo* 8.22.

thing as the many true interpretations that readers can draw out, in that the very multiplicity of interpretations indicates that they are at a lower level of understanding than Moses. Again, I offer this as a speculative solution based on what Augustine says, but we have to do a considerable amount of work to construct it. As an exegesis of *Confessions* XII, however, I am happy to stick with the comprehensive proposal that I gave in chapter 1, specific to Genesis 1:1-2.⁴⁶⁸

What might tell against this theory, at least as far as *Confessions* XII is concerned, is Augustine's statement in XII.43:

. . . etiamsi ille per quem dicta sunt unam fortassis ex multis veris sententiam cogitavit? Quod si ita est, sit igitur illa quam cogitavit ceteris excelsior.

. . . even if that man though whom these things were said thought of perhaps just one *sententia* from the many truths? But if this is so, then let that one which he thought of be more excellent than the others.

If what Moses *vidit* and *cogitavit* was in fact the Truth Itself in God Himself—if that was his primary intention—it seems odd to speak of his *sententia*, an idea put into language. That is clearly the sense in which *sententia* has been used up to this point, and it would not make much sense to put a supra-linguistic, unified idea of all Truth on the same level as a propositional idea about some particular truth or truths.

But my speculative proposal can still hold if we make use of the distinction I hinted at above. It may be true that Moses had a thought that he intended, a *sententia* that he *cogitavit*, that only comprehends literal meanings. But the *object of his*

⁴⁶⁸ I should also note that in *Confessions* XII Augustine is only concerned with the truths that readers find in the text *de his rebus*: that is, he is concerned not just with literal but with relevant interpretations. But he claims in 41 that Moses attended to the meaning that is truest and most useful *in his words*, so it not clear if that claim is restricted only to literal interpretations. One might also wonder how we should consider figurative interpretations to be relevant or not, based on Augustine's scheme.

intention could still be the united Truth in God Himself, a whole from which he draws off a particular, temporal-linguistic *sententia*. This particular *sententia* motivates his particular use of language (since, after all, he writes an account in a more or less ordinary, distended way). But if we make this distinction between Moses' intention and the object of his intention, we cannot resolve how Moses' intention is best in comparison to figurative meanings, since only the objection of his intention, the united Truth, comprehends these as well.

But that may not be an issue. The inclusion of figurative meanings among the possible intentions for Moses is problematic, since these figurative meanings could include any truth of the faith, and the issue of what the best intention is would become what the best truth is. Augustine certainly has some sort of hierarchy of truths—for instance, the nature of the Trinity is more important than the number of days that Jesus spent in the desert — but to reduce every passage to mean just one, highest truth, would be crazy. It would go against the nature of language and ratiocinative thought, which is presumably the very medium that Scripture is meant to embrace and to translate the united Truth into. And so I would hold onto the proposal I presented in chapter 1 *alongside* the speculative one I have presented here: the writer's intention was the best and comprehensive literal⁴⁶⁹ meaning, but the object of his intention was God Himself.

⁴⁶⁹ We may have to admit some level of flexibility in the notion of literal in order to make sense of this proposal: for instance, what about passages that do not have a literal meaning or those whose literal meaning does not build up charity? In such cases, the writer's intention must be or include a figurative meaning. Augustine sometimes suggests an idea of "literal" meaning that seems more like a contextually-appropriate meaning, which can use the figurative register. I think that is what we would have to mean here, as opposed to figurative readings which are not so contextually bound.

Conclusion

This final proposal is meant to balance three desires that Augustine seems to have in Scriptural interpretation. First, readers have to seek the writer's meaning in the ordinary sense, which is searched for in the particular language and information that the text presents and presupposes. And yet, second, the text can clearly speak at many levels to readers of different capability, and there should be some real basis for claiming that these other true interpretations are valid. These are the two points, as I see it, that he fails to resolve in the *Util. cred.* account but successfully joins in *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III. As I said earlier in this chapter, *Confessions* XII and *Doct. chr.* I-III present Scripture as the ideal text because it allows many true readings, but pushes readers toward a single and highest meaning, so that reading is a shared project. But I think Augustine has a third desire, that we see expressed in these works but only accomplished in my speculative proposal: Scripture should be a preparation for God. It should lead readers not only to a particular *sententia*, not only to a particular point that is true and builds up love of God and neighbor, but to God himself, preparing them for "the contemplation promised in the end to all His children," when loving and knowing come together in one single and infinite vision.

APPENDIX

Outline of *Confessions* XII

I have placed this outline outside chapter 1 primarily because it impairs the flow of the argument, but also because it is relevant to other chapters, especially chapter 5.

1. Invocation: seek and you will find⁴⁷⁰
2. The heaven of heaven, Psalm 113:16(24)
- 3-8. Difficulties with formless matter and explanation
- 9-10. No order or time without form (development from previous book)
- 11-14. First list of truths: truths made clear by reason
 - 11a. God is eternal and His will does not vary with time.
 - 11b. God made everything else that exists.
- 12-13. No creature coeternal with God, but the *caelum caeli* escapes time by its exclusive focus on God.
14. Any change in creatures implies a kind of formlessness, so that it can change forms; and there is no time without variation, and no variation without form.
- 15-16. Interim view
 15. God made two things unaffected by time: formless matter and heaven of heaven.

⁴⁷⁰ His quotation of Matthew 7:7-9 calls to mind the theme of *fidens quaerens intellectum*, which I cannot go into here except to make one point upon which the whole book is predicated: if you begin by believing that the Scriptural writer meant something true and important, you will find something true and important in reading and thinking about Scripture.

16a. Reasons for his interpretation: place for *caelum caeli* and explanation of *terra invisibilis et inconposita*.

16b. Provisional interpretation of v. 1: *caelum* = *caelum caeli* and *terra* = unformed matter of physical world.

17. First distinction of opponents: haters of Scripture and lovers of it

18-22. Second list of truths: points agreed upon by opponents

18a. God's substance and will do not vary with time.

18b. Our awareness consists of expectation, attention, and memory, which shows that our awareness is temporal, unlike God's.

18c. God did not create by a new act of will.

19a. Every formed and formable nature is made by God.

19b. There is a creature that escapes time by contemplating God alone.

20-21. Interlude: identification of *caelum caeli* with created wisdom, the free Jerusalem (Galatians 4:26), and where Augustine hopes to return.

22. Final agreement on all previous points.

23-24. The *contradictores*

23. Second distinction of opponents: those that agree to truths (and desire for Jerusalem=*caelum caeli*).

24a. *Contradictores'* interpretation of verse 1: Moses did not mean *caelum caeli* by *caelum* nor formless matter by *terra*; rather, he signified in sum the whole visible world, the creation of which the subsequent narrative explains day by day; he was speaking to a *rudis et carnalis populus* that could only understand sensible things.

24b. *Contradictores* on verse 2: But *terra invisibilis et inconposita* and *tenebrae super abyssum* can be taken not unreasonably as formless matter.

25-26. Possible interpretations 1: incremental alternatives to the *contradictores'* reading

25a. Why not allow that *caelum et terra* in verse 1 is the formless matter of verse 2, which will be formed into the whole visible world?

25b. Why not allow that *caelum et terra* in verse 1 is the formless matter from which the whole of creation, visible and invisible, is made? Then in verse 2, *terra invisibilis et inconposita* = formless matter for visible creation, while *tenebrae super abyssum* = formless matter for invisible creation.

26. A proposal very similar to 25b.

27. First step in Augustine's counter-argument: Charity towards other readers requires that any true interpretation seeking author's intention is true

28. Third list of truths: ten points relevant to interpreting Genesis 1:1-2

29-31. Possible interpretations 2

29. Five possible interpretations of verse 1.

30. Five possible interpretations of verse 2.

31. Potential problem with last two interpretations of verse 2 and reply: created things left unmentioned in creation account are still created by God.

32. Third distinction of opponents: disagreeing about truth of the matter vs. disagreeing about whether author meant something true

33-35. Second step in Augustine's argument

33. We can be sure that certain claims are true, but we cannot be sure about which claim Moses meant; yet we must believe that he meant something true.

34. Folly of saying "Moses did not mean what you say but what I say" when both interpretations are true; truth does not belong to us.

35. Truth is above us, given by God; we can know truth but cannot know Moses' mind. Primacy of double precept of charity.

36-38. Third step in Augustine's argument

36. God must have enabled Moses to write so that readers could see in his words whatever truth they were capable of about how God creates.

37a. The words of Moses compared to a spring that feeds many rivers.

37b. The situation of ignorant readers.

38. The situation of sophisticated readers.

39-40a. Possible interpretations 3: splitting the rivers

39a. Whether *in principio* means *primo* or *in sapientia*.

39b. Among those who take it as *in sapientia*, whether they take *caelum et terra* as formless matter, formed natures, or one formed and one unformed nature.

39c. Among those who take *caelum et terra* as unformed matter, whether they take it to be unformed matter for invisible and visible creation or just visible.

39d. Among those who take *caelum et terra* as formed, the same issue.

40a. Among those who take *in principio* as *in primo*, *caelum et terra* must mean unformed matter.

40b. Four types of priority: in eternity, in time, in choice, in logic

41. Fourth step in Augustine's argument: Moses' must have meant the truest and most useful meaning

42. Fifth step in Augustine's argument: Perhaps Moses recognized all possible true meanings

43a. Final step in Augustine's argument: Holy Spirit recognized all possible true meanings, since He would reveal them to readers, and Moses at least recognized the best meaning

43b. Conclusion: Augustine has sought to find Moses' meaning, and asks God to show it or some other true interpretation to him

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