

## THE QUEST FOR TRUTH IN AUGUSTINE'S *DE TRINITATE*

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*[Editor's Note: The author contextualizes Augustine's De Trinitate by attending to themes and motifs of education and learning present throughout. He makes a connection between Augustine's reflections on the Trinity and his theory of signs and culture, and thereby offers an understanding of the relation between Augustine's theory of the Trinity and his account of the possibilities of individual and cultural transformation.]*

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO'S *De Trinitate* is, as he himself remarked, a difficult work,<sup>1</sup> and its difficulty seems only to have increased over time. It is largely out of favor at present. First, because it seems to commentators so hopelessly speculative that it has appeared impossible to locate within any social or polemical context that might somehow mitigate its difficulty by affording some sense of what was at stake in its composition in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Second, from a theological perspective, the *De Trinitate* is now held responsible for having hopelessly interiorized the Christian doctrine of God, for having restricted awareness of God to awareness of the enigma of God's interior image within

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<sup>1</sup> "Libris de trinitate . . . nimis operosi sunt et a paucis eos intellegi posse arbitror," *Epistola* 169.1.1, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 44:612.6-9. For citations from the *De Trinitate*, I use *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City, 1991), by far the best English translation. Latin citations, except where otherwise indicated, are from the edition in the *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, vols. 50 and 50A. Orthography and punctuation have been adjusted. I thank Kathryn Johnson, Jim Buckley, Nancy Cavadini, Lawrence Cunningham, Robert Markus, Jean Porter, Michael Signer, and Jim Turner for their assistance. I acknowledge especially my debt to my late colleague Catherine LaCugna, from whom I learned the importance of thinking in a trinitarian way.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown locates his biography of Augustine "along the side of a mountain-face: . . . above the plains of Augustine's routine duties as a bishop, and far below the heights of his speculations on the Trinity" (*Augustine of Hippo* [Berkeley: University of California, 1967] 277); though Brown does not intend to dismiss Augustine's "speculative masterpiece," subsequent scholarship has tended to neglect it.

the individual mind, and thus for having set the doctrine of God adrift from any meaningful understanding of human community. If God is visible first and foremost to the individual soul in an introspective moment of Neoplatonic ascent, then the attention of the individual seeking God seems irretrievably propelled away from the human community as locus of the economy of God's self revelation. The individual is left almost as a self-sufficient, or self-constituting, subject,<sup>3</sup> the "alone seeking the alone," to quote a Plotinian tag.

#### THE WORK IN ITS CONTEXT

Elsewhere I have suggested that the *De Trinitate* was actually meant to argue against such an interiorized view of the individual's relation to God,<sup>4</sup> but here I would like to experiment with a different strategy of contextualization, focusing on the presence of motifs of education and the liberal arts. The *De Trinitate* is not, of course, a treatise on education or the arts, yet especially in its second half there are multiple references to themes related to education, discussions of how and why one learns,<sup>5</sup> of the "appetite for inquiry,"<sup>6</sup> of the distinction between knowledge and "wisdom"<sup>7</sup> and the place of philosophy,<sup>8</sup> of the function of letters and signs, of the "disciplines" and "doctrina"<sup>9</sup> in

<sup>3</sup> "Augustine's quest for the Trinity within the soul, the inner Trinity, risks reducing the Trinity to theological irrelevance, for it becomes difficult to ask in what way the doctrine of the Trinity may in other ways throw light on the human condition. . . . The outcome is another, theologically legitimated, version of the tendency to individualism. . . ." (Colin E. Gunton, "Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology," in *Persons, Divinity and Human*, ed. Colin E. Gunton [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991] 49); see also the expanded version of this critique in Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 42–48.

<sup>4</sup> "The Structure and Intention of Augustine's *De trinitate*," *Augustinian Studies* 23 (1992) 103–23.

<sup>5</sup> The discussion at *Trin.* 8.4.6, on how we can love something we do not know, becomes by *Trin.* 9.12.18 an explicit discussion of inquiry and learning, continuing well into Book 10 (*Trin.* 10.1.1–2.4, at 10.1.1, explicitly recalls the question from *Trin.* 8.4.6, "no one can love a thing that is quite unknown"). Certainly many of the created "trinities" Augustine analyzes are themselves analyses of *learning*; see, e.g., his characterization of the trinities of sensation and sense knowledge: "All these things [learned from the senses], produce a kind of trinity when they are learnt, consisting of the look which was knowable even before it was known, and of the learner's awareness joined to this, which begins to be when the thing is learnt, and the will as third element which joins the two together" (*Trin.* 14.8.11). This passage tends to qualify all the preceding discussion of sensation and sense-acquired knowledge as an analysis of a kind of learning. And the whole discussion of the "inner word," from its very first suggestion, is a discussion of the begetting of knowledge (see esp. *Trin.* 9.7.12, 9.12.18).

<sup>6</sup> There is an especially noteworthy treatment of the "appetitus inveniendi" at *Trin.* 9.12.18.

<sup>7</sup> *Trin.* 12.14.23; 13.1.2; 13.19.24.

<sup>8</sup> *Trin.* 13.19.24; 14.1.2; 14.19.26; 4.15.20–18.24; etc.

<sup>9</sup> The term *doctrina* in the *De Trinitate*, as in Augustine's usage generally, means more than the word "doctrine" in English can possibly express, including in its most general

general, all along with a wealth of illustrations explicitly appealing to knowledge of the arts.<sup>10</sup> From the viewpoint of Augustine's own corpus, there is even more reason to experiment with reading the treatise from this perspective, for many of the distinctive themes of Augustine's early educational dialogues are here present, as though the *De Trinitate* were in some sense their reissue or restamping.

The deliberate and repeated invocation of the reader as partner in a quest for tracking down truth is reminiscent in tone if not in form of the dialogue genre of the Cassiciacum literature. Book 13 takes up issues *De beata vita* and *Contra academicos*;<sup>11</sup> in both Books 13 and 14 Cicero's *Hortensius*<sup>12</sup> makes an appearance (after a long absence in Augustine's writings). There is even a short soliloquy,<sup>13</sup> and the "interior teacher" himself makes a cameo appearance, although, like all of these ghosts of Augustine past, in a transformed and distinctively anti-

sense the act of teaching and learning considered as one (as at *Trin.* 10.1.2, "speciem doctrinae" which could just as easily be translated "learning" or "teaching"); in the second place simply the act of teaching or communicating (see n. 40 below, and 14.8.11), and thirdly with reference to a particular kind of teaching, a "discipline" (as at *Trin.* 9.12.18, 10.1.1 repeatedly, 10.1.2 the "doctrina" contains the knowledge, so here the discipline itself is not equated with the content; 10.5.7; 15.9.16, which uses *doctrina* and *disciplina* almost as synonyms). It can also refer to the results of teaching and learning, from the point of the learner (one's "learning," as at 10.11.17 *bis*) or more abstractly, as the content taught, "teaching" or "a teaching" (*Trin.* 1.13.31, "sana doctrina"; 14.1.2). More often than not more than one overtone is present, as in the oft-cited John 7.16, *Mea doctrina non est mea* (*Trin.* 1.12-13; 2.2-3; 15.27.48) or at *Trin.* 15.11.20, 15.9.15, and some of the passages already cited. On the meaning of "doctrina" in the *De doctrina christiana*, see Mario Naldini's comments in Saint Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City, 1996) 11-12, and Hill's own comments (ibid. 95-97).

<sup>10</sup> See the brief discussions of such topics as "inventio" ("discovery," or the "research" stage of rhetoric, *Trin.* 10.7.10); grammar (*Trin.* 9.10.15; 10.5.7; see 14.11.14 which appeals to the usage of Virgil as authoritative; 14.14.18); the connection between education and character (*Trin.* 10.11.17); history (*Trin.* 12.14.22; 14.8.11; 14.10.13); how the mind is trained in the disciplines (*Trin.* 12.14.23); Plato's theory of learning by reminiscence (*Trin.* 12.15.24); a man learned in many disciplines (*Trin.* 14.5.8-6.8); the function of literature (*Trin.* 14.6.9-7.9); and the uses of Cicero's *Hortensius* (n. 12 below).

<sup>11</sup> The titles, of course, of Augustine's two earliest works; see *Trin.* 13.3.6 for the introduction of the theme, programmatic for Book 13, that all people desire happiness, explicitly phrased in terms of the "happy life" (*beata vita*) at *Trin.* 13.4.7. This also provides a link to Augustine's antisceptical agenda: that all people want to be happy is a universal truth that even "Cicero the Academic" cannot doubt (see *Trin.* 15.12.21; 10.10.14; 10.1.3).

<sup>12</sup> Augustine's reference to the *Hortensius* recalls his earlier use of it as a school text at Cassiciacum, when he was prompting students to the study of philosophy (*Contra academicos* 1.4, reflecting Augustine's autobiographic comments at *De beata vita* 4; compare with the exhortation to philosophy and inquiry cited by Augustine from the *Hortensius* at *Trin.* 14.19.26), and as a starting point for raising the issue of the happy life (*Trin.* 13.4.7-5.8, see *De beata vita* 10; *Trin.* 14.9.12).

<sup>13</sup> *Trin.* 15.27.50, where Augustine addresses his own soul (*anima*). The word is suggested by Hill, *The Trinity* 434.

Pelagian way.<sup>14</sup> How would the *De Trinitate* look if we featured these aspects in interpretation without reducing it to these aspects?

One could say initially that we find what we might expect from Augustine's reworking of educational themes in the *De doctrina christiana*.<sup>15</sup> The process of "seeking" or "tracking down truth"<sup>16</sup> is not in the first instance an appeal to the disciplines or to the moral or speculative truths of the philosophers; it coincides with the investigation and explication of Scripture, complete with rules of interpretation coming not from grammar or rhetorical criticism but from Scripture itself and the rule of faith.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, the *De Trinitate* is not a study of a dogma comparable to medieval or modern treatises "De Deo trino"<sup>18</sup>—in fact nothing seems less comparable to the spirit of this work, undogmatic, open-ended and experimental as it constantly proclaims itself to be.<sup>19</sup> Rather, it is self-consciously an example of the

<sup>14</sup> At *Trin.* 14.15.21, once we receive the Lord's Spirit, we are taught by an inner "teaching" or "instruction" that we cannot rise from sin except by the action of grace.

<sup>15</sup> For this reworking, see my "The Sweetness of the Word: Salvation and Rhetoric in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, ed. Duane W. H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995) 164–81, and the literature cited there.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine writes "carried away with the love of tracking down the truth" (*Trin.* 1.5.8), echoing Cicero's exhortation to inquiry, which Augustine cites at *Trin.* 14.19.26 and summed up as "this course, set in the love of and inquiry into truth." In what follows, Augustine, having accepted Cicero's terms, qualifies his acceptance: for mortals this course cannot succeed by reason alone, without faith in the Mediator. One can think of the *De Trinitate* as a whole as a demonstration of that claim, a deployment of the *doctrina* which bases itself on that claim.

<sup>17</sup> Note the collocation of "the discovery of truth" and "the interpretation of Scripture" (*Trin.* 2.P.1). Augustine has just finished explaining that those who "seek God and strive for an understanding of the Trinity" will have to negotiate the difficulties and complexities of Scripture. He argues (*Trin.* 2.1.2–3, echoing 1.6.12) that Scripture itself, as explicated by previous Catholic interpreters, provides a "rule" (*canonica regula*) to assist the interpreter to understand correctly passages about Jesus (based on Phil. 2.6–7), and that it provides an additional rule to supplement the first one (based on passages such as John 5:26; see J. Pelikan, "*Canonica Regula: The Trinitarian Hermeneutics of Augustine*," in *Proceedings of the PMR [Patristic, Mediaeval, Renaissance] Conference 1987–88* (vols 12 and 13) 17–29; Cavadini, "Structure and Intention" 118 n. 42. Augustine mentions the "rule of faith" at *Trin.* 15.27.49 and again at 15.28.51, where it is presented as a summary of what we read in Scripture ("litteris veritatis").

<sup>18</sup> As, e.g., English translators (before Hill) had characterized it. Stephen McKenna groups it with "medieval [and] modern studies of this dogma" (*Fathers of the Church*, vol. 45 [Washington: Catholic University of America, 1963] xii); Haddan and Shedd call it the "most weighty" of Augustine's "doctrinal treatises" (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ser. 1, vol. 3, p. iii).

<sup>19</sup> Augustine disclaims authoritative status for the work, saying he will learn by writing ("So I have undertaken this work . . . not so much to discuss with authority what I have already learned, as to learn by discussing it with modest piety," *Trin.* 1.5.8), and proclaiming his willingness to inquire and to learn ("Nor will I for my part, wherever I stick fast be loath to seek, nor wherever I go wrong be ashamed to learn," *Trin.* 1.2.4). He asks the reader to recall him from error if necessary as he and the reader set out together on a joint venture of inquiry, emphasizing his willingness to accept correction, posthumously if necessary (*Trin.* 1.3.5). Augustine continues to be insistent about the active

deployment of a new kind of "teaching" or *doctrina* in which "seeing truth" is coincident with understanding the scriptural text, and all the arts and philosophy itself are drawn into that enterprise.<sup>20</sup> They can be used by, but do not define this *doctrina*, and in fact are often qualified in the process.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE HUMAN AS IMAGE OF THE TRIUNE GOD

I would argue further, however, that Augustine's positioning of the cultural disciplines in this manner is not limited to his explicit observations on the arts but is carried over directly into his trinitarian theology, where it is replicated, and given a kind of theoretical underpinning, in his analysis of the human person as an image of the triune God. For as Augustine presents it, the *imago Dei* is among other things specifically an image of word production. The mind is an image of God precisely in its capacity to beget a "word" wholly consubstantial and equal to itself. Augustine is careful to remark however in several places that he is speaking of an "inner word" (*intimum verbum*) which precedes all individual words or even thoughts in any language, including Latin or even Greek.<sup>22</sup> It is a word which precedes all signs and

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involvement of the reader and his own openness to correction (*Trin.* 2.P.1; 3.P.2), warning the reader not to value his work above Scripture or Catholic faith, keenly aware both of his liability to error (*Trin.* 4.P.1) and of the way in which all knowledge of God is hardly a final result, but itself the occasion for further inquiry (see *Trin.* 9.1.1; 15.2.2).

<sup>20</sup> As recommended at *De doctrina christiana* 2.40.60. It is Scripture itself which engages us on the ascent to the vision of eternal things, accommodating itself to our present "sickly" power of seeing (*Trin.* 1.2), while on the other hand presenting difficulties sufficient to recommend God's grace to us (*Trin.* 2.P.1).

<sup>21</sup> E.g., the discussion of how the categories of predication apply or do not apply to God, on the evidence of scriptural usage (*Trin.* 5.8.9); also the disruption of the absolute contrast between accidental and substantial predicates to include the category of non-accidental eternal relations on the basis of scriptural teaching (*Trin.* 5.5.6).

<sup>22</sup> *Trin.* 14.7.10. See also *Trin.* 15.10.19: "If anyone can understand how a word (*verbum*) can be, not only before it is spoken aloud but even before the images of its sounds are turned over in thought—this is the word that belongs to no language, that is, to none of what are called the languages of the nations, of which ours is Latin; if anyone, I say, can understand this, he can already see through this mirror and in this enigma some likeness of that Word of which it is said, *In the beginning was the Word . . .* [John 1:1]." Later in the same section, "It is the thought (*cogitatio*) formed from the thing we know that is the word which we utter in the heart (*verbum . . . quod in corde dicimus*), a word that is neither Greek nor Latin nor any other language." As a "thought," however, it is still prelinguistic: "if you wish to arrive at some kind of likeness of the Word of God . . . do not look at that word of ours which sounds in the ears, neither when it is uttered vocally nor when it is thought of silently, for the words of all spoken languages are thought of silently . . ." (*Trin.* 15.11.20). This inner word, before all thought of sound, is a kind of seeing of what is known and thus its image: "a word before any sound, before any thought of sound. For it is then that the word is most like the thing known and most its image, because the seeing (*visio*) which is thought springs direct from the seeing which is knowledge, and it is a word of no language, a true word from a true thing, having nothing from itself, but everything from that knowledge from which it is born" (*Trin.* 15.12.22). See also 15.14.24–15.25; 15.21.40; 15.27.50; 14.10.13; 9.7.12–11.16, and esp. 9.12.18. It was in listening to a talk by David Dawson that my attention was drawn

sign systems,<sup>23</sup> and therefore all the arts and disciplines, all cultural reality as we might put it. In other words, the individual's status as *imago Dei* is not dependent upon what we might think of as a particular cultural identity. It is an eternally valid precultural reality focused on a capacity for self-awareness and self-expression which is productive of culture—of signs and sign systems—but not reducible to any particular cultural expression.

Augustine points out, as well he might, that this is an exceedingly difficult idea to grasp, and that is why, after he first brought it up in Book 9 and analyzed it further in Book 10, he had chosen to exercise the reader in a series of considerations about the workings of sensation and sense-related thought where the "word" which the mind begets is temporally distinct from the knowledge it expresses.<sup>24</sup> But these trinities of sensation and perception, of knowledge based on sensation and of discursive thought, are all analyses of our involvement in the world of body and time and thus of sign and signification, of language and culture. They are not merely heuristic exercises in any simple way, but in fact, if read backwards from Book 15's final analyses of the *verbum* before language, they represent the movement from the mind's inner word of self-awareness as image of God, to the ways in which the mind's prelinguistic self-expression is actualized in the world of sign and signification, that is, of culture.

#### INNER WORD TO OUTER WORD

To put it this way is to overstate the case somewhat, for none of these trinities, either alone or together, provide an account of the actual

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back to the inner word of *Trin.* 15, and I have benefitted from his excellent and suggestive comments now published as "Sign Theory, Allegorical Reading, and the Motions of the Soul in *De doctrina christiana*," in Arnold and Bright, ed., *De doctrina christiana* 123–41, esp. 126–27.

<sup>23</sup> "[T]he word which is neither uttered in sound nor thought of in the likeness of sound which necessarily belongs to some language, but which precedes all the signs (*signa*) that signify it and is begotten of the knowledge (*scientia*) abiding in the consciousness (*animo*), when this knowledge is uttered inwardly (*intus dicitur*) just exactly as it is" (*Trin.* 15.11.20). Gunton (*The Promise* 44) cites this passage but ignores Augustine's crucial contextualization of it in his sign theory, aided by John Burnaby's translation which translates "signa" as "tokens" (*Library of Christian Classics* [London: SCM, 1955] 8.147). Augustine's distinctions, between the presignified and the signified, are evidence unobserved and unaccounted for by Gunton, who sees a distinction only between the "abstract" and the "concrete" or "material," distinctions which Augustine's categories seem to override (the inner word is not "abstract," but knowledge "intended" in some very concrete act of the will, and the "material" is itself an abstract, never entering human experience unmediated by culture).

<sup>24</sup> Explained at *Trin.* 14.7.10, the "inner word that is not part of any people's language," that is, the "thought formed" as the "offspring" of memory, is easier to observe in cases "where something crops up in time and where parent precedes offspring by an interval of time." These cases include all the "trinities" in Books 11, 12 and 13 (as Augustine explains at length at *Trin.* 14.1.3, 14.3.5, 14.7.10, 14.8.11, 14.10.13), embracing all dealings with "sensible things" and "knowledge of human affairs" (14.7.10) and thus including all under the domain of "word production."

mechanism by which the mind produces particular signs, moving from the inner word to specific outer words and gestures. Augustine is not interested in this precise mechanism—he takes it for granted, and there is a certain legitimate arbitrariness attached to it: Augustine will not say which language is better, Latin or Greek.<sup>25</sup> Still, if even the “outer” trinities do not take us over the boundary between the pre-linguistic inner word and its particular expression in exterior sign, they take us right to it, and in fact they characterize all voluntary bodily action precisely as the incarnation of an inner word,<sup>26</sup> as expressive, as a kind of language, though not necessarily Latin or Greek. For despite his depiction of the *imago Dei* as antecedent to cultural specification, Augustine is acutely aware of the culturally specified character of all human experience.<sup>27</sup> He describes how beautiful is the “discipline (*doctrina*) that contains all knowledge of all signs,” because without any means of communication, human society would in effect cease to exist as such; it would be “worse than any kind of solitude if people could not exchange their thoughts in conversation (*colloquendo*)”; awareness of the “lovely and beautiful form,” “the ideal of learning” (*speciem doctrinae*), prompts the urge to cultivate the arts of communication and the disciplines based on them (*Trin.* 10.1.2). Embodied subjects are necessarily involved in the “utilization of changeable and bodily things without which this life cannot be lived” (*Trin.* 12.13.21); nor can we come to know, much less “love” and “enjoy” (*perfruendi*) (*Trin.* 9.6.11, see 9.8.13; 10.9.12) the neighbor, “unless bodily signs are given,” whether these are gestures (*Trin.* 15.10.19), or spoken or written words.<sup>28</sup>

Augustine's trinitarian analysis of the origin of these signs in a pre-linguistic inner “word” does not permit us to know whether any given sign is a particularly effective means of communication. But to cast our participation in the bodily and temporal as expressive of an inner “word” is, in a way, precisely to identify our experience of the bodily and the temporal as what we now would call the “cultural.” If we read backwards, we go from the inner word of Book 15, the mind aware of itself becomes aware of God and the divine form of justice (8.9.13; 9.6.11; 14.15.21), to the inner words conceived in the outer trinities of

<sup>25</sup> He normally respects the customs of speech in individual languages as valid; see, e.g., the advice on translations at *De doctrina christiana* 2.13.19.

<sup>26</sup> “Nobody voluntarily does anything that he has not previously uttered as a word in his heart” (*Trin.* 9.7.12); “so there are no human works which are not first uttered in the heart. . . . [W]e cannot have a work which is not preceded by a word” (*Trin.* 15.11.20).

<sup>27</sup> At least since the *De doctrina christiana*, where not even illiterate eremitic ascetics are permitted a culturally unmediated understanding of Scripture, since all of them heard it read in a particular language which they had to learn at some point (*De doctrina christiana*, Preface 4–5), and since even the signs divinely given in the Bible are of the “conventional” type and were presented through human beings (*De doctrina christiana* 2.2.3).

<sup>28</sup> Augustine remarks further that there is no one so indifferent to the good of cultural life that “when they hear an unknown word they do not want to know what it means, and do not ask if they can,” and presents an extensive discussion of this (*Trin.* 10.1.2).

Books 13, 12, and 11, i.e. to the subject poised for action. The question is not how well the particular signs generated communicate, but how well our cultures reflect or even image that eternal form of justice.<sup>29</sup> How truthful are they?

#### THE PRODUCTION OF CULTURE

And so one could think of the whole "boxed set" of trinities described in Books 9 to 15, not simply as analyses of human consciousness, but also as a kind of phenomenology of culture production, an account of the necessary movement from the mind's precultural self-expression in an inner *verbum* antecedent to language, to the expression of the *verbum* in the particularities of sign and signification. One might even suggest, in a particularly experimental moment, that Augustine transforms the Plotinian account of the fall of mind into bodies into an account of the way in which the embodied mind, although always transcendent with respect to any particular cultural form, descends as it were into specification in expression—and hence identity—in particular signs and sign systems. This is no longer a "fall" in a pejorative sense; it is simply an account of how human beings, who are inescapably social beings, are able to "enjoy" the fellowship which social living implies.

Still, this descent into cultural specification of the mind's prelinguistic self-expression can go awry and become a full-fledged fall.<sup>30</sup> Yet it is not, as Augustine presents it, the descent into cultural specification which is itself the problem. The problem occurs, rather, on the level of the inner *verbum* and, in particular, the will. The role of the third member of the internal trinity is crucial, for as Augustine presents it, the inner word is "conceived either in covetousness or charity" and is born "when on thinking it over we like it either for sinning or for doing good" (9.8.13; 15.11.20, 23). It is only "loved knowledge" (9.10.15) that constitutes an inner "word" which is then capable of signification. The sign systems we create are no better than the love in which they were ultimately begotten, and the soul which is dominated by pride, analyzed in the *De Trinitate* as a disordered love of power over justice,<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Strictly speaking it is inappropriate to talk about as "imaging" God anything but the innermost trinity of the mind's memory, understanding, and love of itself remembering, understanding, and loving God, but Augustine himself warrants our extension of this language of imaging, if not of "image," from the innermost trinity to the "outer" trinities, and even to the "outer actions" which they produce (*Trin.* 11.5.8). The implication is that the more reformed or transformed our innermost image, the less our actions will be "conformed to this age" (Romans 12:2), and the more they will image God for others.

<sup>30</sup> Described, in particular, in Book 12; see esp. 12.8.13–11.16.

<sup>31</sup> "Just as the devil in his pride brought proud-thinking man down to death, . . . so he holds him in subjection by his swollen self-esteem and his determined preference for power over justice" (*Trin.* 4.10.13). Since the devil's pride makes him a "lover of power and deserter and opponent of justice" (*Trin.* 13.13.17), and since human beings, in their studied devotion to power and their neglect of justice, have imitated him, God wills in

will inevitably produce cultures which instantiate or express this preference of power over justice.

Worse still, to the extent that this preference is instantiated in cultural systems, the options for sign and signification of the inner word become radically delimited. The inner word, as presignificatory, has a kind of vulnerability to deformation when even the gestures, not to mention the words, in which it is forced to express itself, are contextualized by sign systems which have encoded in them the preference for power over justice. Those described in Book 2 of *De doctrina christiana* and recalled in Book 4 of *De Trinitate* as superstitious or demonic are completely corrupted.<sup>32</sup> Others, the arts and disciplines of learning, retain their ability to raise their practitioners to philosophical contemplation of eternal truths. "For example, the sheer arithmetic of a beautiful piece of music" can lead one to the "sight" of "intelligible and incorporeal ideas (*rationes*)," however fleeting (12.14.23), and literature can assist the reader in discovering the truth that illuminates the mind (14.7.9). But these disciplines, the mastery of which is a "beautiful" thing (10.1.2) granting access to truth, can just as easily "puff up" (1 Corinthians 8:1).<sup>33</sup> That is because, in Augustine's trinitarian analysis of the matter, one can never simply reproduce one's knowledge in an unmediated fashion. It has to be "spoken," even interiorly, that is, in the inner *verbum*, begotten in a particular act of the will, in a particular kind of love or intention. There is no knowledge which is not in some sense "intentional."<sup>34</sup> The intention or love is part of the "word" in which the knowledge is begotten and communicated, so that a preference for the creature over the Creator, for "correctness of words over the truth of things" (14.11.14, describing the use of words in "secular literature") is easily encoded into the discipline itself. One learns to value correctness of form over truth at the same time as one learns letters.<sup>35</sup>

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Christ to conquer the devil not by power but by justice, a work of God's humility (*Trin.* 13.14.18; cf. 15.19.34; 15.25.44).

<sup>32</sup> The demons appeal to our preference for power over justice by flaunting the immortality and prodigies of their "airy" bodies over our weakness, and thus establish themselves as false "mediators" in superstitious rites (*Trin.* 4.11.14–12.15; 4.13.18–14.19) and in false sciences such as soothsaying and divining (*Trin.* 4.16.21–17.22, see 14.1.3; see also *De doctrina christiana* 2.20.30–24.37). At *Trin.* 12.9.14 and 12.11.16 the fall is analyzed as originating from the soul's inordinate love of its own power (*potestas*).

<sup>33</sup> *Trin.* 12.11.16, 12.14.21; see *Trin.* 4.P.1. Note that at *Trin.* 12.11.16 it is the soul's attachment to power that leads it to the point where knowledge "puffs up." The theme is familiar from *De doctrina christiana* 2.41.62; 2.42.63; etc.

<sup>34</sup> The "intentional" character of signification, based on the involvement of the will, has been brought out well by Dawson, "Sign Theory," and by Robert A. Markus, "Augustine on Magic," in his *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University, 1996) 138–39.

<sup>35</sup> See the "wine of error" drunk in with the exquisite and precious vessels of beautiful words (*Confessions* 1.26). To put it another way, the usefulness and importance of the doctrine of the inner word is that it enables Augustine to show how human beings cannot

## THE ASCENT TO PHILOSOPHY AND GOD'S DESCENT

Not only the liberal disciplines but philosophy itself is infected, as the case of Cicero shows (14.19.26). Philosophy cannot make good on its own promises, because even when successful, its achievements are formatted by the glacial drift of a culture in which the very attainment of contemplation has become an occasion for complicity in pride (4.15.20; see 15.24.44 with reference to philosophies of mind). The very vision of God's eternal things is seized as a personal accomplishment, available to an educated few, who then "affect to be above other souls which are given over to their senses" (12.9.14). One may be able, with the aid of the liberal arts, to ascend to philosophy and learn to contemplate God's image, but it is an image distorted by pride as one's attention is riveted, finally, on only one thing—the power, or at least the prestige, of being oneself "wise."<sup>36</sup> As Augustine points out, the image ceases to function as an image<sup>37</sup>—it loses its power to refer one to God—and so do all the cultural artifacts, signs and sign systems, disciplines, and *doctrina* leading up to it, the whole boxed set of trinities of word production and their cultural products. None of them present words adequate to image God or serve as signs pointing to God.

That is why God, the very divine Word, "became flesh," which for Augustine in the *De Trinitate* means that God's very Word chose to

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simply transmit pure knowledge independent of value judgments. Knowledge cannot simply be read off the mind and replicated in the exterior world of sign. But the problem in the communication and signification of knowledge is not primarily the difficulty of representing what is "inner" in what is "outer" (a problem more characteristically emphasized by the earlier Augustine), but rather the difficulty that knowledge cannot be represented at all until it is "spoken" within, "conceived" by a love which binds it to the understanding as a word "begotten." And because the image of God within is distorted by original sin, by a primal preference for power over justice, our sign systems will inevitably be marked by and inevitably transmit this preference encoded into them, and so fail in their own way to "image" God effectively.

<sup>36</sup> *Trin.* 4.17.23, recalling *De doctrina christiana* 2.18.28, and *Confessions* 7.20.26. The philosophers have been able to ascend beyond creatures to a vision of the "light of unchangeable truth," but this very success only increases their pride because they seize their success as due to their own "power" or "virtue" (*virtute propria*; 4.15.20).

<sup>37</sup> *Trin.* 15.23.44–24.44. It is interesting to note that the soul, as the image of God, is a "mirror" which is also an "enigma," an obscure mirror (see 1 Corinthians 13:12). Augustine indicates that "enigma" is a trope under the category of allegory, so that "every enigma is an allegory." Since, as Augustine points out, allegories can be things as well as texts (like the two sons of Abraham), the soul as image is thus the most fundamental or primary "allegory" we have (certainly after the fall but even before the fall, since in its finiteness it can only inadequately represent its eternal archetype (*Trin.* 15.11.21–16.26). As in the case of the two sons of Abraham, so in any "enigma" or "obscure allegory," we need to be told that it is an allegory. It is the rule of faith which provides the interpretive key to this "allegory," and thus permits us to read this "text" (in the broadest sense of the word) as it should be read (see *Trin.* 15.27.49; also 15.23.44–24.44, where without faith one doesn't know the mind is an image; in a way then it is the rule of faith which tells us we are not exhaustively identified by, or restricted to, whatever identity a given culture might assign us, but are each of us, properly "interpreted," the image of God).

make a descent into the world of embodied signification. Augustine is careful to talk about the Incarnation as a process parallel to our own production of (descent into) signs and signification: "Thus in a certain fashion our [inner] word becomes a bodily sound by assuming that in which it is manifested to the senses of human beings, just as the Word of God became flesh by assuming that in which it too could be manifested to human sense."<sup>38</sup> That is why, too, as Augustine explains further, it is specifically the Word, not the Father or the Holy Spirit, that became flesh, because precisely as flesh the Word becomes the "Good Teacher" (*magister bonus*) whose divine "doctrina" will (using Pauline language) "transform" our own inner word by enabling it to be conformed to his "example."<sup>39</sup> Augustine characterizes this *doctrina* of the "Good Teacher" specifically as persuasive, appealing to the will by presenting to it a moving sign of God's love, capable of detaching it from its addiction to power and returning it to justice in the exercise of charity.<sup>40</sup>

Note here that our inner trinity is not healed by a contemplative escape from the world of sign and signification, but rather by conformation to the divine *paideia* over a lifetime of loving attention to and imitation of the example of the Good Teacher.<sup>41</sup> Gone for the most part is the interior teacher of the *De magistro*; he has been replaced by

<sup>38</sup> *Trin.* 15.11.20. This is a frequent theme in Augustine's preaching: see, e.g., *Sermones ad populum* 28.5; 119.7; 288.4; 187.3; 223A.2; and esp. 225.3

<sup>39</sup> "And the reason why it was not God the Father, not the Holy Spirit, not the trinity itself, but only the Son who is the Word of God that became flesh (although it was the trinity that accomplished this), is that we might live rightly by our word following and imitating his example; that is, by our having no falsehood either in the contemplation or in the operation of our word. . . . To achieve it we are instructed by the Good Teacher in Christian faith and godly doctrine (*doctrina*), in order that we might be transformed into the same image from glory to glory [2 Cor. 3:13]" (*Trin.* 15.11.20; compare the reference to transformation in the first line of *Trin.* 15.11.21). *Doctrina* here refers not in the first instance to the content of the teaching (that is, "Christian faith"), but to the act of communicating or teaching it. The same usage is found at *Trin.* 13.2.5, where faith "comes by hearing" (Rom. 10.17, prominent in *Doctrina* 4 on preaching), impressed from one single (act or manner of) teaching on the hearts of all believers. It is appropriate that the Son and not the Father or Holy Spirit become incarnate because precisely as unique and eternal Word he already is the Father's *doctrina* (*Trin.* 1.12.27), "for the Father's teaching (*doctrina*) is the Father's Word, who is his only Son"; cf. 2.2.4). The Father's *doctrina* incarnate becomes the Good Teacher (Matthew 19.16; Mark 10.17; Luke 18.18).

<sup>40</sup> Augustine notes, e.g., that when we think of Jesus it is not relevant that we do not picture his face exactly as it was. Just as in languages and other exterior signs of inner words, in the Incarnation the particular sign is not as important as the love in which the inner word, represented by the sign, was begotten. It is the "love of God for us" that the Incarnation "demonstrates" or is a sign of. This is the "medicine" which heals the pride of our hearts (*Trin.* 8.5.7), persuading us of what we need persuading of most, God's love for us (*Trin.* 4.1.2). The Word of God made flesh "persuades" us not to despair over our mortality by demonstrating the "great value" God places on us (*Trin.* 13.10.13); on Christ Incarnate as not merely God's Word but God's rhetoric or persuasive eloquence, see Cavadini, "The Sweetness of the Word" 166.

<sup>41</sup> Using language taken from Romans 12.2, the "reformation" of the image in a lifelong process of healing initiated and sustained by grace is described at *Trin.* 14.16.22-

one who justified us by his blood (Romans 5:9).<sup>42</sup> This is not in the first place an exhortation to look within but to look without, for paradoxically that is how the inner image becomes healed and transformed. We never outgrow the divine *paideia* until the image is perfected in eternity. God's entry into the realm of sign and signification does not mean that *we* leave it behind—nor does it necessarily mean that God has provided a specific blueprint for a Christian society—but rather that in our use of cultural forms (at least those not classified as hopelessly demonic), they become more and more transparent to the justice the divine *doctrina* is teaching us to love, themselves ever more able to participate in imaging God. The whole boxed set of trinities, which I have characterized as Augustine's phenomenology of culture-production, becomes a phenomenology of cultural *transformation*. The transcendence of the inner word over culture is now recognized not in any immunity from culture but specifically as its ability to work transformatively within it—a capacity for cultural self-critique formed by the tutelage of the divine *doctrina*.

Thus in the *De Trinitate* we have a theology which is strictly speaking neither apophatic nor kataphatic, but specifically trinitarian in its call neither to renounce language nor to accept its limitations as received, but to present the image of God ever more clearly in a transformed and transforming begetting of words.

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19.25; see *Trin.* 14.17.23 especially for the metaphors of healing. It is a "renewal" (*renovatio*) which does not occur "in a single moment of conversion," but in a life of "progress little by little," of "daily advances" in the "recognition of God" [Colossians 3:10], that is, in 'justice and holiness of truth' [Ephesians 4:24]" (*Trin.* 14.17.23).

<sup>42</sup>The theme of *Trin.* 13.11.15–16.21. The philosophers who "philosophized without the mediator" lacked precisely something to consider in the exterior realm, and so set up false mediators to help them obtain the heights they had fleetingly glimpsed (*Trin.* 13.19.24).