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Chapter XI. Augustine: the importance of meaning and the unimportance of the negative method

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Augustine’s volatile spirit took him into the realm of mystical experience, and he shared an interest in it which was common to his age. The rich Platonist heritage lies behind this interest, and to some extent explains it: however the anthropomorphic imagery of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is equally present, and the ardour of Augustine’s desire has to be expressed in those terms. The imagery of desire plays a great part in the expression of his longing for knowledge: the mouth of Augustine’s heart is turned to the heavenly stream which flows from God himself, and a fiery affection draws him: in such a way he describes the mystical experience enjoyed by himself in company with his mother at Ostia (Conf. IX.10).

In a graphically painted scene, Augustine describes this moment, at a certain house in Ostia by the Tiber, where he and his mother, leaning in a certain window, looked out upon the garden as they waited for their sea voyage. As they conversed their spirits began to range over all material things, eventually going beyond them, to the sun, moon and stars. Ascending still, their spirits reached beyond to their own souls; then higher still to the region of inexhaustible plenty. After some moments poised in this state, their spirits descend to the mundane level again:

... we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which a word has both a beginning and an end. (Conf. IX.10)

How unlike the Word is the human voice, exclaims Augustine, and this is a major theme of the Confessions, not to mention his philosophy of discourse in general. Running through this passage is a twin dichotomy, between time and timelessness. Augustine’s mystical experience has placed him in contact with a Word which has no beginning or end, and he contrasts it with the linear development of human speech, particularly that which is spoken or written. Characteristically of the mystical experience, the pleasures of ordinary existence pale into insignificance, and suffer from the comparison of the higher and lower states.

Elsewhere Augustine describes such a departure from the body in the case of another person, his secretary. This boy desired “to be dissolved and to be with Christ” (Letter 158: cf. Phil. 1.23), and after sixteen days’ illness achieved his ambition. Throughout this period, Augustine notes, the boy continually spoke the language of the Scriptures. When the faculty of speech began to fail him, he attempted to make the sign of the cross on his forehead, and on his mouth. Augustine felt that the boy’s spirit had left the body, and
was now illuminating his own mind. After describing another account of mystical experience, he concludes that the mind has an immense power of resistance. Though subjected to all manner of annoyances, temptations and burdens, which come from the body, the mind can nevertheless resist and win through to higher things.

“The mind does not forsake its own strength ... but since it remembers itself, it is rendered more active and attentive, stimulated by such activity ...” (Letter 158, 4)

The energy of the mind can free it from the body, and here Augustine returns to a theme of the Confessions. The phrase *meminit sui* recalls the *memoria* of the Confessions, and in this work Augustine says much about the power of memory itself. The Confessions is, in both form and content, a eulogy of memory: on the one hand it provides (Book V ff.) a philosophical analysis of the faculty of memory, and on the other it takes the form of an autobiography, and so is a literary product of memory. “Great is the power of memory”, says Augustine (Conf. X.17), “it is my mind, and it is I myself.” All the abilities of memory are gone over here, and the relationship between mind and memory is frequently raised.

... whatever is in the memory, is in the mind ... such is the power of memory, such is the force of life in living man, mortal though he be! (Conf. X.17)

Here mind and memory are brought together, and assimilated as one power. In the Letter, however, the memory focusses on the mind, and this concentration alerts it, stimulates, and releases its energy. But in the Confessions too, memory acts as the consciousness of the self: it triggers the elevation of the mind, which rises beyond memory to God himself (Conf. X.17). The transcendent capacities of the mind wait to be unleashed, and once they are so, they are capable of soaring to unknown heights.

In these passages, then, Augustine the mystic sounds the typical Neoplatonist note. The mind can take flight, like the chariot of the Phaedrus, and in the end reaches its heights through the exploration of its profoundest depths: through focussing on itself, the mind is released, and thus the Aristotelian/Neoplatonist νόησις νοησεως, the self-thought of thought, is deployed once again (Aristotle, Metaph. 1074b35). For Aristotle, self-thought was eternal, unlocated in time (Metaph. 1074a11), and Augustine attributes some similar power to mind’s focussing on itself (see I, p. 77 ff.).

Like Plotinus and Proclus, Augustine stresses the desire for knowledge. This dynamic element of *eros* is the key to much of the progress of mind in Neoplatonism, Greek and Christian. This metaphysical system charts the progress of mind, and endeavours to spell out what happens when mind and reality interact, each exerting their forces in the appropriate way. The energy
The object of desire

unleashed by desire accounts for much of the mechanism of the world of being, and so it is with Augustine as well. The boy referred to in Letter 158 actually desired to be dissolved from the body, and it is in virtue of this stimulus that the release was achieved. The Confessions is full of statements of desire for God, desire for the knowledge of God, or desire for Augustine knows not what. The famous passage about his trip to Carthage (III.1), where he found himself surrounded by lust, has him as a lover too, but a lover who is unaware of the object of his desire. In the admirably lucid words of the Latin: quae rebam quid amarem, amans amare . . . (I sought for something that I might love, loving to be in love). In the lust-filled environment of Carthage, he mistakes his love for a concern with sensual satisfaction: eventually the love-practice of the city of Carthage is found to be misdirected, and he discovers the true object of his desire. Augustine here raises the fascinating idea that one may be ignorant over the object of one’s desire, to the extent that one may mistake sensual satisfaction for one’s true end. In reality, of course, Augustine believes that communion with the divine is his genuine goal, but he points to a stage at which he was unaware of this. One can desire something without knowing what it is, and he moves gradually towards discovering the object of his desire.

These problems are addressed again in The Confessions: in the above passage Augustine is content with the biographical details of his state of mind in Carthage. Now he considers the philosophical problems produced by desire which is ignorant of its object.

How then am I seeking the happy life? For I do not possess it so long as I say: “it is enough, it is there”. In fact I ought to say: “how am I pursuing it? By way of remembrance, as if I had forgotten it, but as if I recalled that I had forgotten it? Or through the desire (appetitus) to learn an unknown thing, which I may never have known, or which I may have so completely forgotten that I do not recall forgetting it. (Conf. X.20)

The answer is found in Conf. X.23: “all men desire that life which only is blessed, all men desire to rejoice in the truth”. Augustine puzzles over whether the knowledge of this is to be found in some actual or potential form in the memory, and concludes that the knowledge of the object of desire is somehow there. And so he rejects the alternative in the passage quoted above, that the appetite felt is for some “unknown thing”, desired but unfamiliar. The strength of our desire for the truth lies in the fact that we already know it in some way, that we perhaps possess it in the memory. We may have temporarily forgotten it, or what it looks like, but it is still secreted in the memory. The appetitus we feel for it is based on the fact that it is something of us, that it is something shared: the desire already has the desired in some form. Desire is not for the alien.
Recollection

It is for this reason that Augustine lays stress, in the quoted passage, on the question of how he pursues his desire for truth. It is not enough to find, or to recognize it; one must also know by what path it has been discovered. This is probably because it is necessary to know what kind of effort is required if one is to discover the true object of desire: is it a search for something other, something unknown and different from oneself? Or is it a search for something familiar, close at hand, which is already within? Augustine chooses the latter:

There is still a dim light in men: let them walk, let them walk, lest the shadows overtake them. (Conf. X.23)

It is clear that the way to the true object of desire is through the procedure of recollecting: the faculty of memory is that which reminds us what is within. An intellectual labour is therefore required for us to uncover the true object of desire, which will emerge as something known already. So we have the explanation to the conundrum of Book III, in which he arrives in Carthage “loving to be in love”, but mistaking the object of his love. One may lose one’s way in the desiring process because of forgetfulness.

This way of looking at desire is as old as Plato himself. In effect, the Symposium is all about the object of desire, and of course the nature of desire. All of the speeches raise the question of what is really sought by men, and a variety of answers is proposed. Implicit in all this is the view that love (eros) can be misdirected, and gravitate towards the wrong end. This is the interesting feature of the way the question is raised in the Platonic tradition, that human desire is recognized as a force, but some perplexity over its object is admitted: there is a recognition that one can want something and be simultaneously unaware of what it is. This is indeed a most interesting feature of human experience. A corollary of the Platonic analysis is that all desire is in a sense “good” desire, since it is the same type of energy which is involved; the badness occurs when the energy is misdirected. Thus the Platonic writers (including Augustine here) treat desire holistically, as if it is always, and in all manifestations, the same kind of thing. No distinctions between sexual desire, desire for wealth, desire for fame, desire for beauty, or desire for God, are drawn: the “erotic” energy is one and the same throughout. The problem is simply that it can be misused. Augustine stands squarely within this tradition, in that he associates his interest in sexual desire with his real concern for God: Carthage, the centre of sexual desire, is the place where his desire lost its direction. He nevertheless was aware of a strong enchantment with being in love, and was afterwards to find its true object.

Typically Platonic, too, is the emphasis on recollection. Since the Menant the Socratic education of the slave-boy through the arousal of his memory, Platonists have placed great emphasis on the ability to recall. Augustine
gives a special place to *memoria* in the Confessions, and elsewhere, and he too finds knowledge of God to be innate, though diminished. It is the faculty of recall which stimulates the mind to reach its greatest heights.

This overall analysis of the Augustinian desire is confirmed by various passages in the De Trinitate.

Wherefore, the more a thing is known, but not completely known, the more the mind desires to know the rest. (De Trin. X.1.2)

This is the explanation of the problems raised in the Confessions: it is because one has a little, and finds it precious, that one seeks the fullness. That which one loves is not an alien possession, tantalizingly different from oneself, and always looming ahead as a kind of unattainable — it is rather in oneself in small measure. Our knowledge of it is what stimulates the desire to enhance our possession of what lies both within us and above us. In the De Trinitate Augustine is much more certain of his ground:

If anyone seeks with ardent diligence to know, and he pursues this search inflamed with zeal, can he be said to be without love? What then does he love? Certainly something cannot be loved unless it is known. (loc. cit.)

Here we have the answer: love comes from something known and experienced. It is not a symptom of emptiness (this is implied by the myth of Poverty and Resourcefulness in the Symposium), but a symptom of partial fulfilment. We do not love that which is unknown to us.

Love is of that which is known, and there can be no doubt of this fact. Put differently, the presence of love in a person is a proof that this person has knowledge of something, and is pursuing it further. In this context of the De Trinitate it is instructive to notice what it is which is said to be loved. Augustine is offering an analysis of language, and he is attempting to explain the desire for knowledge of other tongues. He begins X.1.2 by noting that when we hear an unknown sign (*signum*), we react by wanting to know what it means. If we hear the word *temetum*, we immediately want to know what it means: other things we know about it already, such as that it has semantic significance. Because of this we are stimulated into finding out that of which it is the sign. Because one knows that it is a sign, one wishes to know it more clearly.

Throughout this passage the intellectual curiosity for the meaning of language is spoken of as if it is a form of love, taken in its most ardent sense. There is an assumption of a kind of passion for knowledge, activated by the possession of partial knowledge. And further, there is an emphasis on perfection: the desire for increased understanding of discourse is part of a desire to perfect oneself. One cannot be satisfied with merely partial knowledge. Au-
gustine refers to the "splendour" of the knowledge of other languages, as if they had a particular importance. He talks of such knowledge as if it were motivated by love, and its ardent stimulus. He is here transferring the phenomenon of love, with all its tremendous motive power, to the learning of language, and the significance of various symbols. The structure is the same as for all types of desire: partial knowledge acquaints us with the type of that which we are seeking, and causes the desire in us for further knowledge. The fact that we already know the outline, so to speak, of what we seek, actually causes the pursuit that we undertake. Eagerness for knowledge is explained by this initial taste of it: all learning behaviour would seem to come under this type of analysis.

Wherefore every love of a studious mind, that is of a mind wishing to know what it does not know, is not the love of that thing which it does not know, but of that which it knows, and on account of which it wishes to know what it does not know. (De Trin. X.1.3)

The inquisitive man is also one who wishes to know the unknown, but this tendency ought not to be confused with the quality of studiousness. The inquisitive man is motivated not by love of the unknown, but hatred of it: he desires that nothing should be left unknown. The passage begins with the key to the idea outlined above (X.1.1): our minds know the beauty of bodies generically; this establishes a pattern for future understanding, but it also sows the seed of desire. We desire to know what are the species which fill out the genus. So it is the genus which is known, and the various instances which remain to be known in the future. It is in this way that Augustine is able to suggest something in common between the known and the unknown, something which ensures continuity, and provides a series of links for the mind to pursue. We will return to this in relation to the Confessions, with its great emphasis on the progress of discourse. The De Trinitate analysis of love of the semantic will provide an important clue to the Confessions emphasis on language, and the movement from word to word as one reads, recites, sings, or hears. In effect the De Trinitate gives us the answer to the question of linguistic progress: why is it that we do move from one word to the next, one signum to the next? It is because we are inflamed with love for the semantic significance which lies ahead of us.

Book eleven of the De Trinitate raises the question of the will, and what its goal is. Closely related to the question of desire, the issue of the will raises the same problems about objectives. Both desire and the will point in some direction: they are energies which drive towards some goal. In the teleological perspective provided by Aristotle, one must deal with the question of goals. If something is defined as an energy, then it must have a goal. The De Trinitate (XI.6) claims that vision is the true object of the will, at least in re-
spect of sensible matters. But in XI.7 the discussion moves to the memory again, and it is claimed that the memory contains that which is the parent of thought. The memory contains the species, and this provides the model on which thought can operate. The memory contains things which pre-exist material things encountered in human experience. Almost as if countering Karl Marx, Augustine writes as follows:

For the gaze of the mind, which is formed from the memory, when we think of something in the process of recollection, does not proceed from that species which we have remembered, having seen it, since we could not have remembered those things unless we had seen them. But the gaze of the mind, which is formed by recollection, existed also before we had seen the body which we remembered . . . (De Trin. XI.7.11)

The content of the mind is not determined by material processes, says Augustine, but rather it is in the memory long before any such material experience takes place. He therefore takes the “gaze of the mind” out of the realm of learnt material processes, and makes it predate such experiences. There is more in the memory than the sum total of experiences. Augustine’s concern here is a long examination of the will, and its relationship to the mind and to memory, and this question need not detain us here.

The mind, moreover, seeks to know itself: in fact it is inflamed with this desire (De Trin. X.3.5). This Neoplatonic principle of the self-thought of thought plays an important part in Augustine’s system. What is the significance of this reflexive character of mind? In the first place, mind seeks to know itself simply because it is there to be known: “everyone loves knowing” (De Trin. X.2.4). But secondly, mind wants to know itself because of its content. There is more there than is put there by life’s experiences: mind is the entry-point for a whole world of principles, truths and beings. It is the link between the transcendent and the material, and constitutes an image of the supreme Being. It is an imperfect image, but nevertheless an image (De Trin. X.12.19), and so knowledge of it will provide one with a glimpse, by analogy, of the true mind. Thus Augustine, like any Greek, returns to the Delphic maxim: “Know thyself”.

For it is not said to the mind: “Know thyself” as it is said “Know the Cherubim and the Seraphim”. For they are absent, and we believe what is taught about them, that they are certain heavenly powers. (De Trin. X.9.12)

Knowledge of oneself is not like knowledge of an absent being, who has to be sought in order to be known. Nor, Augustine continues, does it have the character of external knowledge, as one when he knows somebody else, through his physically expressed persona. Knowledge of oneself is knowledge of something present, and it is knowledge acquired through the internal mode. The moment the word “thyself” is understood, the self-knowledge
occurs. The moment that the hearer has comprehended the command to know himself, the command has been obeyed. Simply to have the concept of oneself, is to know oneself. Self-understanding is the key to understanding all, because of the content of the mind and the memory.

Thus desire plays an important part in establishing the drive towards knowledge. As noted above, it provides the continuity in the learning process, and as discourse is a matter of pursuing meaning in a linear way, continuity is crucial. If the *signa*, or the semantically significant words, were left to subsist in isolation from each other, they would have no ability to convey meaning at all. The mind goes from one to the other, however, and it is desire which assures this movement. The meaning of a sentence thus falls into place, because the desire for knowledge has stimulated the mind to pursue the progress of the sentence.

This linear image of discourse has a prominent place in the Confessions. For Augustine, discourse is time-bound, and he sees it unfolding much as any other events unfold. It is well-known that Augustine sees time in a linear way, as progressing from a beginning to an end, and this influences his view of discourse as well. As everything in the created world comes into being, and passes away, so speech has its growth and disappearance. All in the material world is subject to the law of senescence and death:

Our speech follows the same rule, through significant signs. A sentence is not complete unless each word gives way to the next, once its syllables have been pronounced. (Conf. IV.10)

The pattern of birth, growth and decay also applies to language, and Augustine offers an overall conclusion about these things, namely that if the soul sets its heart on them, it will be torn apart by desires which can destroy it. Nothing can halt the progress of such transient things, which move inexorably from their beginning to their end. Augustine’s originality here is to picture language as having the same type of growth and decay pattern as any other sensible being. He sees lines on the printed page, and possibly hears speech as a continuous line of words, and sees it in the same way as he sees other forms of development: that is, he sees material life as evolving in a linear manner. This contrasts with the Neoplatonism, of say Plotinus, who sees time as moving “in a circle” (Enn. III.7 [45].4). The famous distinction between Augustinian linear time, and Neoplatonist circular time, has a particular application here, in respect of the philosophy of language, since the lines on a page represent the most clearly of all the nature of progress within time, namely from a beginning to an end.

Of course Augustine does not condemn such progress within time, because he sees the human unfolding as actually making progress. The realm of time will receive a greater degree of approbation from him than it will from the
Neoplatonist tradition. That he chooses the unfolding of a sentence as an analogue for this general unfolding in time is confirmed by a passage later in the Confessions. He takes as an example of passing from the past into futurity, the recitation of a psalm. The quality of expectation is there, which assures the drive onwards from one word to the next, and his expectation “reaches over the whole” (Conf. XI.28). As we saw with the desire of the semantic in the De Trinitate, the presence of a small beginning is enough to whet the appetite for the remaining words and syllables, and the presence of a starting-point creates the desire for the rest. He repeats the psalm and one part of it recedes into the past; it is now kept in the memory, for future reference. In this way the “life” of his action is extended two ways, forward into the arena of his expectation, and back into the receptacle of his memory. As the expectation is shortened, so the memory is enlarged: eventually the expectation vanishes, and the whole psalm passes into the memory. The image is extended: what applies to the whole psalm applies to every part of it; that is, each letter in a word is traversed with the same expectation and the same receding into memory, until the whole word is completed. That which applies to the microcosm also applies to the macrocosm: the psalm can be taken as a mere part of the linear movement of life as a whole. There are many psalms, and many other activities, and each is consumed with this same linear movement, under the stimulus of expectation and with the rearguard action of memory.

... it holds also through the whole age of the sons of men, the parts of which are the whole lives of individual men. (Conf. XI.28)

So much emphasis is placed on the consumption of time by Augustine, and that quality of eagerness which characterizes it – the studium, intentio, amor, appetitus, and so on – that the choice of a specifically linguistic example is extremely revealing to anyone interested in Augustine’s philosophy of discourse. After the example of the psalm, he continues along the lines of his ardent pursuit of the future. Yet stretching forward, he finds truths that “were before”: he uncovers the eternal present. There is a quality of eagerness which is present throughout Augustine’s autobiography, and which plays an important part in his general philosophy of human endeavour: it is a crucial element in his understanding of human living, and a crucial element in his understanding of discourse. Language is traversed in a linear way, and when grasped, passes into the memory. The past never quite disappears, and in the same way, used language never quite disappears, but finds its way into the “innumerable palaces” of the memory (Conf. X.8).

The contrast between knowledge laid out in lines of words and between the eternal and timeless knowledge of God is the starting-point for Book XI of the Confessions. Augustine asks whether God sees everything happening
in this time-bound way: if not, he wonders, what point is there in spreading before him so many narratives. He finds his answer in the idea of confession, and claims an ardent desire to continue with the sequential tale. Every drop of water in the hour-glass is precious to him, and so he proceeds with vigour to outline the story of his confessions. But he returns to the contrast between the human word and the divine word in XI.7:

You call us therefore to understand the Word, who is God, God with you: which word is spoken everlastingly; in it all things are spoken everlastingly. For that which was spoken was not concluded, and another thing said, in order that all things might be said, but rather all at once and everlastingly.

The simultaneity and immediate holism of the divine Word contrasts with the step by step unfolding of the human word. This linearity of human knowledge, contrasted with the wholeness and immediacy of divine knowledge is really the theme of Book XI, and in section 9 Augustine furthers the comparison by a Johannine reminiscence of the Word as the beginning. Like the Gnostic Marcus, Augustine toys with the prologue to John’s gospel, and finds the deliberate intention to associate the Word with the idea of “beginning”: and so he is able to conclude that the conventions of human discourse were adopted for the sake of revelation. In order to speak in a human way, God chose a beginning for his word. Some people foolishly imagine that this sequential tale is the whole of God’s story, but it is not the case (XI.10). If anyone were to ask what God was doing before he made heaven and earth, he would be making the mistake of thinking that the linear type of human tale also applied to God: he should rather realize that God exists and acts and thinks out of time, in the eternity which characterizes the true Word. “They strive to know eternal things, but their hearts flutter still between the motions of things past and to come, and remain empty still” (XI.11).

Man is caught with the paradox that he must understand the eternal through the temporal: his whole understanding is riddled with process and development, and so his grasp of the eternal is extremely tenuous. A leap of the imagination is required in order to take us from the linear to the simultaneously whole; Augustine wonders whether he might be the agent of such a leap (XI.11). This itself is strange, since it is at the hands of Augustine that we have the Confessions, the most complete exercise in linearity in early Christian literature, with the exception of Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History. Yet here is the paradox he is struggling with: the linear mode of discourse is appropriate to the human condition, as is memory, the faculty which deals with linearity, but in the end the object is to move from such a mode of thinking.

Who shall hold back the heart of man, that it may stand and see, how eternity stands
and orders future and past times, though it is neither past nor future itself? Is my hand capable of this task...? (Conf. XI.11)

The whole of the latter part of Book XI is about time, process and human knowledge, and in the last words of the book, Augustine will differentiate between the kind of knowledge which comes from human discourse and the knowledge of God, and this is a crucial passage. In effect we cannot grasp Augustine’s epistemology, nor his philosophy of discourse without placing everything in the overall context of time and eternity. Plato had established that these two concepts should be considered together, and Plotinus discusses them in an elaborately interwoven way, so that time and eternity help to define each other. In the same way, Augustine proceeds as if these two concepts can only be understood in relation to each other, and within the framework of time is placed the whole mechanism of human knowing, learning and thinking. Human knowledge is time-bound, and in Augustine’s understanding of time, it must therefore proceed in a linear way. The characteristics of time are inherited by knowledge and discourse: thus he who sings, or listens to another singing a psalm, will be drawn on from syllable to syllable by the zeal for knowledge outlined above, but while he does this his feelings and attention are diffused. His mind will jump from the past to the future, and so will be in some ways distracted. Yet God himself is changeless, and grasping him truly will be an experience of a totally different character. At the outset therefore, we must posit two entirely different types of knowledge. Augustine has thus far told us about the psychology of human knowledge, and the universe in which human knowledge operates.

This time-bound characteristic of human knowledge provides a constant obstacle for the person who would grasp the sublime theological truths. The dilemma is reflected in the attempt to grasp the concept of the Trinity, which is beyond ordinary human understanding. It is asserted that the three parts of the Trinity work together inseparably, but for this reason the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, cannot be named by our voices without creating an interval, measured in time, as the words move from syllable to syllable. Yet the three members of the Trinity are in fact identical, and they exist without any temporal movement, “without intervals of time or place” (De Trin. IV.21.30). Clearly then the representation of the Trinity in discourse loses something, and in a sense this cannot be otherwise. But Augustine in this passage offers a way of combating the linear character of discourse from within discourse itself: he offers a way of conceiving of the Trinity which is based on the analogy with a trinity of human faculties. The memory, the understanding, and the will are each mentioned separately in the line of human speech, but this separation conceals a basic unity. Each of these words has in fact been produced individually, but by the memory, understanding and will acting together. Without this simultaneity of purpose, the three words could not have
been produced, and the oddity of the situation is that the multiplicity of the words belies the unity of the source (De Trin. IV.21.30). Augustine has on his mind here the greater problem of the Trinity, and the question of whether the Son is lesser than the Father, or not. His basic concern is with safeguarding the unity of the Trinity, and so he develops the analogy: the Son, Father and Holy Spirit are three separate words, but again, the plural character of the words misleads us into imagining a plurality of characters in the Trinity. This in turn leads to the tendency to separate functions, and to assign higher and lower degrees of importance—all the result of the linear character of speech which, because of its need to unfold in time, tends to separate into items what simply constitutes an underlying unity. The separateness of the Trinity is simply an illusion fostered by the nature of speech.

On this basis Augustine will now be able to say that the God-in-flesh is only apparently a separate facet of the Trinity, and that all three members cooperated to form their envoy, who is himself part of this fundamental unity. The interesting aspect of it all for our purposes however, is that Augustine sees a possibility of language curing itself of this tendency, by itself. The analogy he chooses belongs to the realm of ordinary speech, and demonstrates a capacity of language to overcome one of the most fundamental and binding defects in itself, that of its linear character. Language can become the instrument which mends its own deficiencies.

It should be emphasized that Augustine chooses to stress the linear character of language, or in other words, that it is time-bound. His particular philosophy of time translates into a particular philosophy of language, and this marks him off from his Neoplatonist sources. His view of time emphasizes movement from a starting-point to a finishing point, and has therefore frequently been referred to as "linear". He strongly endorses the notion of purpose in human affairs, and regards the exercise of the will as a necessary part of the pursuit of goals which is required by time. For this reason he was able to take a great interest in human culture and the movement of history, and for this reason again became the author of the City of God, and his own autobiography. Given this whole backdrop of the philosophy of time, we are able to come to a better understanding of his philosophy of language, which he simply sees in the same terms as any other unfolding set of events. The syllables of language are like the component facts of history. Both have a limited validity, but nevertheless a validity of their own.

It is here that we notice a difference from Plotinus. The philosophy of time of the two thinkers is closer than we might think, but Plotinus does not choose to place discourse in the context of time. Augustine frequently does so, but this is quite absent from Plotinus' treatise on time (Enn. III.7). Rather, Plotinus treats discourse in the context of number: intelligence divides, separates, diversifies, and language bears with it this characteristic. Intellect is the arché of number (Enn. III.8[30].9,4), and consequently all its activities
are marked by this factor. Discursive thought proceeds by units, and anything which has unity is eventually broken up by it. The predicates which form the substance of the linguistic task of description are always inappropriate to non-material reality, not because they are inaccurate or incomplete so much as because they numeralize reality (see also Enn. VI.9[8].5, 17 ff.). Predicates are many, and the essence of things is one. The difference between the two is therefore quite marked: Plotinus puts the problem of language in the context of the One and the Many, whereas Augustine places it in relation to questions of Time and Eternity. The difference is of great significance, since for Augustine the whole assessment of human history, of life in time, and the value of human progress applies equally to language and its products.

Augustine sees the descent of the divine Word into flesh as analogous to the descent of word into speech. The De Doctrina Christiana I.12.13 specifically makes this comparison, in order to suggest that no decay is implied by the descent into flesh, of the descent into sound in the case of a word. It is necessary for a word in the mind to be vocalised for it to make an impact on the hearing of another, and so be understood by him. In both cases there is a descent into the material, from a higher and purer state, and Augustine’s comparison here only serves to underline his picture of language as a series of events in the material world. This picture of language as the instantiation of a transcendent principle was originally noted as being most highly developed by the Gnostic Marcus, and it is a view which exhibits the structure of Platonic exemplarism. It is used elsewhere:

Similarly, the word which we form within our hearts, becomes voice when we bring it forth from our mouth: it is not changed into voice, but that in which it proceeds forth is conjoined to the word, which nevertheless remains whole… (Sermon 187.3)

This material stage means that what was previously thought in silence is now thought in sound: it has become material, concrete. It is worthy of note that Augustine reiterates the comparison with the Word made flesh: this issuing forth in another form does not do any damage to the Word, which is greater than the lower form it assumes. It adds the material form to itself without in any way being diminished, and this is clearly a response to the opponents of Christianity from Celsus onwards who laid emphasis on the degradation involved in passing from an alleged higher state to an alleged lower state. Augustine’s response is based on an analogy with thought and voice suggested to him by the Johannine characterization of Christ as logos (verbum). He argues from analogy on these occasions, but in doing so effects a fundamental reversal of the axioms of Neoplatonism: descent no longer means diminution. The higher principle remains whole (illo integro: “which nevertheless remains whole”, loc. cit.), despite its proceeding forth into matter. The voice
Augustine on signs

Augustine does not diminish the thought from which it has sprung, and with this analogy Augustine makes a thoroughgoing correction of the basic Neoplatonist postulate that a principle exists in lower form where it is found at a lower level. It cannot simultaneously be its pure self, and conduct an existence at a lower stage of reality. Augustine now claims that this can be done, and he does it in such a way as to indicate that human speech has the same kind of validity as human flesh and human history. Voice does not invalidate thought any more than matter invalidates spirit, or than history injects decay into the divine.

The De Doctrina Christiana together with the De Trinitate form Augustine's most probing examination of language and its functions, the latter through the examination of certain conceptual problems, and the former through the examination of language itself. The former begins with the promise that the method of "discovering" will be discussed, and by this is meant the method of reading the Scriptures with a view to finding truths therein.

Therefore every sign is also a thing . . ., but not every thing is a sign. (De Doctrina Christ. I.2)

That is to say, a sign signifies something, and this is always the case. Yet some things, such as the tree itself, can also be significant. The word "tree" is undoubtedly a signifier, but the tree itself, under certain conditions, can also be one. Some allegorical significance can lie behind the thing itself, so that the world of things can be impregnated with meaning. But of course Augustine is speaking of the world of things which lies within the pages of Scripture, because these "things" are often there in order to convey some significance. (As we saw in respect of Clement of Alexandria, things in the world proper may be significant: the world itself is a discourse full of signifiers. For Augustine, it is the things in Scripture which are the signifiers, because this narrative was handed down for just such a purpose.) This issue is taken up again in Book II, where he returns to the question of signa. This word "sign" receives a very broad definition: a footprint may be a sign because it directs our attention towards the creature who may have left this track; smoke signifies fire. Some signs are natural, and others result from the will to signify something, and these are conventional. Conventional signs are given by human beings to each other, and they do so in order to transfer into each other's mind that which is in their own. The animal kingdom performs in the same way: the dove calls to his mate, and his mate understands what is signified (De Doctrina Chr. II.2).

Jesus used many non-verbal signs, such as the sacrament of his body and blood (II.3), but in the main, his communication is by word-signs. And following this comes the crucial point: for Augustine, the scriptures are read in
order to discern the intentions of the author (II.5). The purpose of a sign is to communicate something to the mind of a reader, and so the purpose of reading the Scriptures must inevitably be the ascertaining of some purpose in the mind of the author.

Some writings may be misunderstood, because the signs involved are unknown, or ambiguous (II.10). This can be cured by the study of language, and knowledge of Hebrew and Greek is of particular importance. Problems in translation can prevent the understanding of what is there to be understood, and when translation errors occur, the translator has failed to understand the purpose of the writer. The pursuit of the meaning of the author requires us to make a careful study of the languages in which the Scriptures were originally written (II.12–13), and there can be some reaction of impatience with this discipline (II.20). This is a sign of weakness, however, and the spiritually strong will have the zeal to pursue the real meaning, however it may be found.

Words whose meaning is unknown to us should be studied if they come from foreign languages, and the memory should be used to retain them. Existing translations of the Bible into Latin are to be corrected where necessary (II.15). The nature of things is to be studied, where this will help understand Biblical allusions: if we are unaware of the behaviour of serpents, for example, then we will not understand the command to be "wise as serpents" (II.24). Numbers deserve particular study, because numbers have figurative meanings (II.25), and here Augustine shows that there was a great body of theory about the symbolic meaning of numbers, which could be used to clarify the connotations of periods such as forty days, or seven. The numbers are broken down in various ways, and it is clear that there was what was regarded as an authoritative body of doctrine on number theory, which of course is in evidence much earlier, with Alexandrian writers such as Philo and Clement, and which must have come from Neopythagorean speculation. Augustine speaks as if one could get clear guidance on this matter, and that all it required was a little study. He presupposes an orthodoxy on the subject of number symbolism.

All the material in the preceding two paragraphs illustrates Augustine's approach to the reading of his authoritative documents, and they give a practical guide to hermeneutics, which is set in a theoretical framework about the analysis of language. One observation that may be made is that clearly a discipline is envisaged: the reading of the Bible recommended by Augustine requires research of all kinds, and begins with the requirement of linguistic competence. What he spells out is a science of exegesis, and it is obvious that for Augustine there are meanings to be ferreted out and to be regarded as decisive: he envisages no loose allegorizing, or personal imaginative flights of interpretation such as the Gnostics might offer: there is a science of interpretation, and it will find the right reading. The idea of the right reading is
based on the idea of purpose: behind every text is an intended authorial view, and this intention is considered to lend clear interpretability to the text in question. A person can only mean one thing. (A comparison could be drawn here with Clement of Alexandria, whose philosophy of reading is markedly different, and strays in the direction of the Gnostic approach to reading, in which greater stress is laid upon the meditative and imaginative capacities of the reader. Clement places less stress on authorial intention, and relates meaning to the capacities of the reader rather than the purpose of the writer. See pp. 38–41.)

A subtle shift now occurs in, the direction of the De Doctrina Christiana. Having given his philosophy of reading the Scriptures, Augustine now turns to the finding of meaning elsewhere: meaning is not only found in words, but in reality in general. The universe is a universe of meaning. Thus the movement of the stars is not considered to provide real information about the future lives of men, and this view is characterized as superstition (I.22); Augustine here condemns any kind of science which is based on the alleged collaboration between men and demons, and his target here is obviously the theurgical teachings of the Greek Neoplatonists, and any discovery of meaning guaranteed by that kind of collaboration between man and the divine will be ruled out d’office.

There follows a long discussion of the value of omens and symbols of various kinds, and throughout the question is about legitimacy of interpretation. Perhaps the key passage occurs in III.9.13:

He who produces or worships anything which has a symbolic value, and who does not know what it means, is a slave to a sign.

Two dangers are indicated here, firstly that of manufacturing symbolism without a proper awareness of its significance, and secondly, that of being symbol-bound. This last is the issue dwelt on in the passage, which stresses the need to look beyond the symbols themselves to the meanings they indicate. A person who performs the Christian rituals without a proper grasp of their significance will be subject to a “carnal slavery”. Interpreting things to the letter results in this kind of slavery, and a person who is spiritually aware will focus on the realities designated by them. What is noticeable here is that Augustine dwells on meaning as the important part of the Christian symbols, and not on will. The person who practises Christian ritual ineffectively is guilty not so much of a failure of commitment, or a failure of will, but a failure of semantic awareness. What has to be cultivated is an awareness that words and entities have meanings, that they point the mind to other realities, and that they cannot be taken at face value. The literal interpretation of things is a slavery to material reality, and the truly spiritually minded will always be aware of the meaning which lies beyond. This part of the De Doctri-
Authorial purpose in Scripture

The De Doctrina Christiana is devoted to spelling out the rules which govern this leaping of the mind to the realm beyond the literal. For example:

If the passage is didactic, either condemning vice or crime, or commanding utility or beneficence, it is not figurative. But if it appears to command vice or crime, or to forbid utility or beneficence, it is figurative. (III.17.24)

This passage lays down the limits of allegorical exegesis, in a way which is familiar since Origen. The world of meaning which lies beyond it is not to be apprehended by random or fanciful means, but in accordance with a certain disciplined interpretation. Whilst Augustine does not limit the scope of symbolism to the Scriptures, he always speaks as if the only legitimate linguistic symbols are to be found in Scripture. He is prepared to see all sorts of natural phenomena as symbols, but when it comes to the verbal, scriptural examples only are brought forward. Apparently only one set of writings has the power to launch the mind into this other world of meaning. In this respect Augustine shows himself to be less open than Clement of Alexandria, in the area of semantic significance. Whereas Clement, in the fifth and sixth books of the Stromateis, was able to find symbolic meanings in all kinds of literature, both Greek and Christian, Augustine limits himself to those suggested by Scripture alone. However it is important to note that both have that belief, which seems peculiarly Alexandrian, that the mind must leap upwards from the material realities which it perceives, or reads. For both, reading does not focus one’s mind on the text, but releases the mind from it.

For these reasons, it is clear that Augustine has a strong sense of the importance of the words of Scripture: we have seen above that two things are stressed in the De Doctrina Christiana. Firstly, authorial purpose: this consideration is essential to safeguard the notion of a fixed meaning for the words of Scripture. Augustine is like an economist who favours a return to the gold standard, in opposition to those advocating floating exchange rates, these being the Gnostics of matters of scriptural exegesis. Against the possibility of subjective and fluctuating interpretations he advocates the idea of a proper, objective interpretation. This is not to say that one may not be mistaken about the meaning of some passage: such a thing could happen as a result of defective use of exegetical techniques. But there is nevertheless a proper interpretation to be found. Exegesis is to be put on a scientific footing with all the backing of philological and textual study, and the researcher may have confidence because at the other end of the process, the text has been anchored by the purpose of the author. Authorial intention guarantees objective meaning. But at the same time, the emphasis on signs allows a degree of latitude into the interpreting process, since meaning is seen to lie elsewhere than in the text itself. Slavery to the sign is a form of carnal-mindedness, and this way Augustine allows for the mind to take wing and soar upwards, to
use the language of Plato's Phaedrus. But by the same token, a certain amount of slippage is allowed, and the refusal of literalism opens up the semantic field of the words under consideration. In this way the meaning of words is deregulated, and the restriction of meaning which would come with literalism is avoided.

Clearly then, despite the objectivist stance taken by Augustine on the interpretation of the text, there is a fundamental doubt running throughout his writings about the value of language; one suspects here a debt to Platonism, in that he sees a word as a beginning, but also as a stage to be got beyond, as one rung in the ladder. The mind will always have to go further, and there is no sense in which the word captures all. Thus in Sermon 188, there is considerable emphasis, as there was throughout the Confessions, on the limited character of the word.

It is not therefore surprising if man, made along with all things, cannot explain in words the Word, by which all things were made. (Sermon 188, 1)

Human words are inadequate to this task. Why is this so? There can be many reasons for claiming that transcendent powers are essentially mysterious, and it is important to discover the exact reasons for this. Augustine offers a kind of verbal hierarchy in this sermon, in which the divine Word is given priority over the human word.

For these words which are thought and brought forth are formed by our mind, itself formed by that Word. (Sermon 188, 1)

Our words, therefore, are the products of our own minds, and are very limited tools indeed. One could however posit some value in our words if some continuity were established between the Word of God, and our own words. But Augustine explicitly refuses any relationship between Christ the Word, and the human word:

Nor does man fashion words in the same way in which man was made by the Word.

God's production of the world through his Word is quite different from man's own production of language. This is an unusual point of view, since the Fathers generally stress the comparison between the two words, and Augustine here announces a complete discontinuity between human language and the Word of God which is very striking: this discontinuity assures us of the very fallible character of the human word. There is no underpinning from the Word himself which guarantees the success of human language. The Word was not made, whereas language is part of the realm of that which was made, and is therefore transitory, and this is a point which we saw em-
phrased in the Confessions, where language and time were seen as closely interrelated.

We come therefore to that part of Augustine which casts doubt on the value of language, and which enters into the debate over the *via negativa*, itself a means of systematically doubting language. The famous statement, of course, is that of the De Ordine:

God is better known through not knowing . . . (De Ordine II.16.44)

This is often quoted to demonstrate Augustine’s interest in negative theology, and indeed it does seem to provide a clear statement of such a position. The real position, however, is much more complex than this, and even in this passage the meaning of the above words has to be carefully scrutinised. These words come in almost incidentally, in the course of a statement about man’s limited ability to grasp the deeper truths about his own soul. The wider context concerns problems of the province of reason, and the lesser images of true reality which may present themselves to it, and the remark about the knowledge of God is quite unrelated to these issues. It is rhetorical; thrown in as an a fortiori reinforcement of the weakness of the human intellect in relation to its own self. And since it is not part of a protracted concentration on the negative theology issue, we must be careful not to place more weight on it than it will bear. It should be seen in its own context, as part of Augustine’s reaction to the negative way. This overall question will be examined in what follows.

Hochstaffl (Negative Theologie . . .) does not deal with Augustine at all, but since the publication of that book we have a thoughtful article by Lossky (Elements of Negative Theology in the Thought of St. Augustine), who has long been established as an exponent of the negative way in the Patristic tradition. Lossky begins with a caveat: that the negative way is not necessarily associated with mysticism. One may insist that negations are the more satisfactory mode for conceptualizing God, without insisting that there is a mystical end to the process. Lossky further argues (67–8) that the determining issue on this question is that of the ontological position of God: if God is placed beyond being, then it is inevitable that human epistemology will end in mysticism. It is true that this is a crucial issue, and it provides a clear example of the way in which ontological positions can determine epistemological positions. This has been seen to be important from the Middle Platonists onwards, and perhaps even from Speusippus onwards. However another claim of Lossky’s arouses some doubt, namely that in expressing itself the *via negativa* can limit itself to the principles used in natural theology, such as the way of eminence, or the method of analogy. Negative theology is endemic in all religious discourse, Lossky argues, where such discourse is aware of the divine transcendence, but it can choose to handle the necessity of negating
misleading positive claims by having recourse to the methods of natural theology described above. However, this is a claim which must be tested in relation to each period, and each author, on its own merits, unless it is a claim made absolutely, from some given theological perspective. Against Lossky we may take Proclus as an example, a good example, since he has the most positive view of negation as a linguistic tool, and we find that here the negative way does not lead into a series of adjustments carried out through analogical argument, for example. Negation is the supreme instrument, and while it may engender new affirmations, it ends in that final, total, negation of negation itself. After this there is nothing but silence to be observed.

Clearly there can be many answers to the question raised over Lossky’s claim, and the period under study will yield particular answers from time to time and place to place. This period cannot be understood in terms of a misleading coherence born of the Thomist reinterpretation of the via negativa. The interpretation of Thomas Aquinas, of vast importance though it was, is not the key to the understanding of complex earlier developments.

Returning to Augustine’s consideration of the via negativa, we have here an interesting case of one who had felt the strong pull of contemporary Platonism, and yet passed it by to a certain extent. Augustine’s greater conservatism on the nature and value of language will place him close to Origen, who was seen to have given an oblique refusal to Celsus’ proposal of the via negativa. Clearly, of course, Augustine will endorse the idea of the inadequacy of language. This has been noted earlier, and in Sermon 188 Augustine begins by noting the failure of discourse. This, he says, is not to be considered strange, and contrasts the power of the tongue with that of the heart. This is consistent with his attempt to return to moral issues at the expense of epistemological issues: the pure in heart shall see God, but not through the faculties of discourse and of the mind. It is this theme of the purity of heart which we shall find reiterated in the following debate over whether we shall “see” God.

Arguing in the context of preceding work by Ambrose and Jerome, Augustine raises in his 147th and 148th Letters, the question of the nature of our perception of God. The whole of Letter 147 is devoted to this question of the manner of seeing God, and the problem confronting him is the comparison of physical seeing with the “gaze of the mind” (obtutus mentis: 147, 3). We do not see God with our physical eyes “as we see the sun”, but with the mind. There is implicit here a remark on the classic Middle Platonist comparison of God and the Sun (Festugière, La Révélation ... IV, 92–140), and Augustine adds a new note when he compares the gaze of the mind to the gaze by which one observes oneself, in the acts of living, wishing, seeking, knowing, and so on. The idea of such self-observation could not have been put forward by the Middle Platonists, since this sense of the clinical observation of oneself had not achieved currency before the Confessions. It is no doubt in
writing this work, in which he does observe himself as an outsider, that Augustine was able to develop a new analogy for the knowledge of God: it was like observing oneself, with all the same abstractions, and the same problem of incorporeality. The capacity to observe oneself will become the axis of his case (147, 4) that we can in fact observe God in a manner befitting his non-material presence.

Prominent in this discussion, and constantly reiterated, is a quotation from Ambrose. It revolves throughout the discussion, taking its place alongside quotations from Scripture. Augustine will quote it in 147, 25; 29; 30; 39; 47; 52, and will endorse it in each case. The statement of Ambrose enjoys a curious authority with Augustine, to which authority he seems to allude in 147, 52. Ambrose’s dictum consisted of a series of negatives:

God is not seen in any place; he is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch, nor heard in utterance, nor perceived in approach (147, 39).

Ambrose sounds here like the Middle Platonist Apuleius, since a series of spatio-temporal characteristics are denied by him in the same way. But in 147, 47 the question appears differently, with the words added that God is seen “in the clean heart” (mundo corde). This is also found in 147, 46, and adumbrated in 147, 39. It is these words, of course, which mark him out from the ranks of the Platonists, and which constitute an anti-Platonist element in Augustine’s own work: it is a moral condition which enables the vision sought after by all, rather than an intellectual condition. But Ambrose’s negations are well within the tradition of Graeco-Christian negative theology, since they do aim to come down on one side of the apparently conflicting scriptural injunctions. In this letter Augustine moves between those verses which speak of seeing God, and those which proclaim the impossibility of this, such as John 1, 18: “No man has seen God at any Time”. It is an effort to resolve the seeming contradiction in scriptural language on the matter which causes him to turn to Ambrose, and Ambrose’s response is categorically on the side of non-material perception.

What lies behind this, apart from the difficulty of resolving the scriptural contradictions? The opening of the Letter 147 purports to respond to Paulina on this problem, of how the invisible God can be seen by bodily eyes. The issue has undergone some mutations since these negative formulae were first encountered among the Middle Platonists. The debate is still between immanentism and transcendentalism, but in the febrile climate of the Christianized late Roman Empire, the onset of superstition was taking a different form. The manifestation of God in dreams and visions was a regular feature of life, as we read in the correspondence of Augustine, Jerome and others. The holy was making itself available in all sorts of places, and in particular the veneration of relics showed a new sense of the immanence of the divine.
It is this climate which prompted an investigation of the nature of the vision of the divine. As Markus notes (The eclipse ... 205), conundrums arising from Scripture are often solved by means of the ordering of concepts provided by philosophy. Markus explains the concept of vision in this paper, noting that Augustine had developed his concept of vision firstly in the De Genesi ad litteram, and later in the De Trinitate and the De Civitate Dei (see also Markus in the Cambridge History..., ed. A. H. Armstrong). Vision was now a major question: what kinds of vision were there, and how did they function? Augustine develops in response to those questions, his theory of the three types of vision, *corporale, spiritale* and *intellectuale*. Basically worked out in the twelfth book of the commentary on Genesis, the theory of vision aims to distinguish between illegitimate and legitimate appearances. The book turns on the vision of Paul, when caught up in the third heaven, and moves from there to questions of visions in general. There follows a genuine psychological account of perception: Augustine recognizes that visions had in sleep may be retained in waking life, and wishes to analyze these. Though they appear to be real, yet they are not: but one can sometimes yield to illusion, recognizing that what one sees is part of one's dream life, yet accepting it nonetheless. A difficulty of judgment such as this may have affected Paul, in that he may not have been able to determine whether he discerned the content of his vision through the eyes of his flesh, or the eyes of the spirit (XII.ii.4–5).

This distinction between the "gaze of the mind" and that of the body has to be made, if one is to distinguish between messages of corporeal and transcendent significance. It is the intellectual vision which is of the highest order (De Genesi ad litt. XII.x.21), and this vision is infallible (XII.xiv.29). There is here a Plotinian touch, in that vision of such a pure kind is held to be not so much a form of seeing, but a form of communion. (Pépin has given parallels between the two in Une curieuse déclaration idéaliste ...) There is no clear solution to the relation between the types of seeing, which do not seem to be logically distinct, and the fact that visions of the transcendent often carry with them corporeal images, remains a difficulty.

Peter Brown, in his chapter on relations between Ambrose and Augustine (Augustine of Hippo, ch.8), claims in emphasizing the transcendence and other-worldliness of God, "Ambrose... introduced Augustine to some totally new ideas" (p.86). In other words, Brown is inclined to feel that is was the mediation of Ambrose which introduced Augustine to the Platonic ideas, whose attractiveness he mentions in the Confessions. This view seems to be shared by Courcelle (Recherches sur les Confessions ... 122 et passim). Whatever the solution to these questions of priority of influence, it is clear that in Letter 147 it is the statement of Ambrose which is the dominant factor. Ambrose's collection of negatives set the pace for Augustine's treatment of the transcendence issue, since it is reiterated over and over again. Am-
Ambrose’s negative statements are a familiar echo from any Middle Platonist or Platonist source, but they emerge in Augustine’s text in quite a different way. He is concerned with visio, and Ambrose’s negatives are taken as correcting the tendency to place emphasis on corporeal images in visions. It is the dream life and the life of the imagination which concerns Augustine. There is a seeming unwillingness to relinquish that astonishing parade of figures and scenes which apparently unfold in the minds of Romans of that period, and it is really this which is at stake in Augustine’s discussions of the various types of vision. The rich frescoes of the spiritual imagination are something which Augustine holds dear, but against them he must balance the Platonic other-worldliness that he has learnt to appreciate. Augustine’s spiritual background accustoms him to material and corporeal images, through which a higher value could be perceived, but against this he had to weigh the negatives of Ambrose and the Platonists. Though he repeatedly endorses them in Letter 147, he limits their applicability to his chosen context, namely the philosophy of vision. And in his three-fold theory of vision (De Genesi ad litt. XII.xi.22), he is never concerned to dismiss completely corporeal images, as his endorsement of Ambrose would seem to imply. He is rather inclined to dwell on the kind of interpretation given to such mental images, and to concentrate on the way they are seen. When one takes the Letter 147 in the overall context of his discussion of vision, as found in the De Genesi ad litteram and certain passages of the De Trinitate, then one comes to see Augustine’s endorsement of Ambrose’s negative theology as somewhat misleading. In fact Ambrose’s statement is too uncompromising for him: he is not really prepared to relinquish the shadow play of mental images which seems so fundamental a part of the religious life to him. In Letter 147, 43, he speaks of ridding the mind of corporeal images: in the event of being unable to do so, we must remind ourselves that these things are not objects in our minds, but copies of them held in the memory. Yet, curiously, Augustine goes no further than this: he does not propose the systematic deconstruction of these memory images, and we know from the Confessions that the faculty of memory is an important part of his concept of personal history and progress. And again in 147, 47 the spiritual value of some visions is retained, even if it is stressed that these are not the visions of the highest kind. Augustine takes Ambrose’s negative theology as indicating that there is a hierarchy of visions, not as a broad condemnation of the ordinary knowing process. Augustine never advocates a general negation of kataphatic theological statements, and appears to have no interest in the kind of experiential growth which, in the Neoplatonist tradition, such systematic negation provides.

The main tension felt by Augustine over the usefulness of language is in the area of the Trinity. Here the variant interpretations of the Christian triad, which constituted the heterodoxies and orthodoxies of the late antique world, gave rise to the most concern. The orthodox had to face the apparent
paradox that God was both one and three, and language was stretched to its capacity to accommodate this. If this had been a statement of Mahayanic Buddhism, one would not have found any attempt to unravel it into a plausible statement. However the Graeco-Christian tradition did feel the need to make the statement that God is both one and three into a set of component claims which did not infringe the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction. It had to be dissolved into rationally compatible sub-propositions. It has already been noted that Augustine sees the problem of describing the Trinity as, in part, a problem of time (see 202), since there is an unfolding of terms in the linear sentence structure. It is inevitable, in this situation, that the unity of the Trinity should be unravelled into the three discrete elements: discourse has this effect.

In fact in the De Trinitate (V.7.8) there is an investigation of negation with a view to the specific issue of language and the Trinity. Here Augustine raises some of the issues discussed by the present author in relation to the alpha privative (Fundamentals of the via negativa . . .). What is the meaning of the alpha privative in a negative statement about God, or in the case of Latin the privative “in-” (inflex etc.)? Augustine's judgment on this issue is that the Latin “in-” has the same meaning as the simple negative “non” (De Trin. V.7.8) and he notes that the Latin language does not permit all words to be negated by the use of “in-.” We cannot say “infilius” for example, since the Latin language does not contain the word, and so “filius” must be negated by the word “non”. For this reason, Augustine says, in discussing the Trinity he will refrain from the use of “in-” adjectives, and simply use the “non” formation, which can in fact be used in all cases. (Augustine here finds the use of “in-” to be equivalent to that of “non . . .”, and in this he differs from Aristotle’s assessment of the Greek alpha privative, the equivalent of the Latin “in-”, since Aristotle found the alpha privative to have many shades of meaning apart from the simple negative: see our article Fundamentals . . .)

Augustine’s analysis proceeds to the types of statement which can be negated. There are statements about quality, quantity, relation, position, and so on, and this basis is necessary for the treatment of the relation of the Son to the Father. “He is the Son of God” is taken (De Trin. V.7.8) as a relational statement, since a remark is being made about the relation of the Son to someone else, not about the substance of the Son. The relational statement does not imply a difference of substance between the Father and the Son.

Coming now to the crucial point, the adjective “unbegotten” (ingenitus) needs some analysis, since the Son is declared to be both the Son of the Father, and at the same time to be unengendered by him. This contradiction is an acute problem for Augustine, in the context of the trinitarian debates, and it is resolved as follows. To say that Christ is “unbegotten”, is the same as saying he is “not begotten”: this is the point already established by him in the preamble. But to say not begotten is not to deny a relationship between the
Son and the Father: rather it leaves the relationship there, but modifies it. Such a statement is tantamount to asserting that there is a relationship between Father and Son, but it is not the relationship of begetter and begotten.

But each statement is understood as within that category we call relational. (De Trin. V.7.8)

Thus, to argue that Christ is begotten, or that he is not begotten, points in both cases to a relation: in the latter case, the relation is said to be of a filial kind, but not of a certain specific form of this. The argument used by Augustine here does not entirely convince, but that is beside the point. The real issue, so far as this study is concerned, is that a classic manoeuvre of the *via negativa* has been used, in order to solve the problem of the language of the Trinity. A kataphatic statement (Son) has been modified by a negative statement (not begotten): a model is posited, then an element is removed, or withdrawn from. The relationship is said to be filial, but not one of begetting. Augustine’s use of the negative statement is however quite limited, and the negation is overshadowed by the force of the positive model which has been invoked, that of the Son. This is the idea to retain, and the negative statement merely adds a nuance to the original model.

The scope of the negative statement is therefore very limited in this case. Augustine avoids the full-blooded negative theology of a Proclus, though it is not so far different from that of Plotinus. The use made by Plotinus of the *via negativa* limits it to the method of abstraction, and in Plotinus’ case it is generally true that the original model promulgated holds. The aphairetic form of negative theology which Plotinus uses ensures simply that the primary image for the One is moderated through the subtraction of one or other characteristic of the One, but the image itself is left to dictate the shape of discourse about the One. Such a moderate use of the *via negativa*, or more exactly the *via remotionis*, is much more akin to that deployed by Augustine, than it is to that of the Athenian Neoplatonists.

One mystery here is the question of why Augustine operates the initial shift from *ingenitus* to *non genitus* before he builds his argument. Though he declares “in-” to be the equivalent of “non”, there must be a shade of doubt over this. He must find it preferable to say that God is “non-begotten”, rather than “unbegotten”. Perhaps there is too much breadth in the prefix “in-”, a suggestion of contradiction for example, which would rob the concept of any applicability at all. He in fact wants the concept of *ingenitus* to have some applicability, and wants to understand it as a negative statement which is shorthand for a more elaborate statement such as this: “God and the Son have a filial relationship, but not one which involves procreation”.

Elsewhere in the De Trinitate (VIII.2), Augustine illustrates again his moderate use of the *via negativa*. Here he outlines a preparatory discipline
Augustine suspicious of language

for the understanding of the Trinity, which requires that one begin with negatives.

Let no one think through local contact or embrace, as if there were three bodies, nor any conjunction like the three-bodied Geryon of the fables . . . (De Trin. VIII.2.3)

Here he scarcely goes beyond the usual attack on anthropomorphism; nevertheless he does state that before we know what God is, “we can already know what he is not” (loc. cit.). Not even an intensification of attributes we are familiar with, such as the light of the sun, can yield us an accurate picture of God. Even if we imagine light a thousand times brighter, yet this is still not God. The point is that ordinary thought should be negated, rather than amplified, in any attempt to reach knowledge of God.

All this leads us back to the De Ordine II.16.44, a passage frequently cited in support of Augustine’s negative theology:

... God, who is better known by knowing what He is not . . .

Granted, this remark occurs in an epistemological context: granted, the subject is the knowledge of unity, as opposed to the fragmentary images which might draw the mind away from it, but still the statement is thrown in without any development, and without any preparation. We simply do not know what is meant here, and in all probability we cannot attribute to this statement any more significance than has already been seen in the passages of the De Trinitate, which advocate an initial negation as preparation for the ultimate affirmation. This bears no relationship to the more developed negative thinking of the Neoplatonists. It is a casual remark in the vocabulary of the Neoplatonists, but in the spirit of the Hebrew Prophets: God is spirit, and must not be thought of in time or place.

The point at which Augustine reaches his most agnostic on the value of language occurs in the De Doctrina Christiana I.6.6.

Have I spoken anything, or uttered any sound which is worthy of God? On the contrary, I am aware that I have done nothing other than wish to speak. But if I have spoken anything, this is not what I wished to say. How do I know this, unless God is ineffable?

This radical statement takes him close to the author of the Gnostic treatise, the Tripartite Tractate, where it is said that we make utterances simply to glorify God; or to Damascius, for whom the desire to speak of the One is simply a useless subjective impulse. It is not a matter of clarifying his nature, or some aspect of his being. Language becomes a form of obeisance, and is no longer seen to have any semantic force. The second point made here is that there is a psychological experience of dissatisfaction with what one is
saying, when one attempts to put God in words. Augustine speaks of an awareness that one is wrong when one utters any phrase about God. The explanation of this psychological experience is that God is in fact ineffable: it is the unspeakability of the object which generates the unease in the consciousness of the subject over the value of one's words.

This passage is the key to those seeking for traces of negative theology in Augustine. It is the high point of the negative approach in the whole of his writing, and in fact represents a more extreme view than is in general advocated by him. The famous passage of the De Ordine - *deus qui melius scitur nesciendo* - is misleading in this regard: this is a casual remark, and it stands quite undeveloped. One cannot attribute a full-blown negative theology to Augustine on the basis of this text. The text does not warrant it, but this is also the case for the remainder of Augustine's writings: there is no strong interest in negative theology in them. Occasionally the language of the Platonists makes its appearance, but inevitably an ultimate affirmation will stand its ground. Statements about God are what Augustine is interested in, not negatives.

Yet this passage of the De Doctrina Christiana, quoted above, must be the most radical of his commitments to the negative way. In it, ineffability becomes an ontological concept. Unspeakability is part of the being of God, and since unspeakability is there, it has its effect. (As the existence of God had, for Anselm, its effect on the mental apparatus.) For Augustine, then, this ontic unspeakability determines the state of mind of the would-be knower of God. A sense of doubt pervades the rational process, and the potential knower of God becomes aware that his attempts to conceive of God are failures: it is somehow clear that they are inaccurate. One becomes aware of not knowing. It is this psychological awareness of the unsatisfactory character of religious discourse which tells the tale: it is a caused awareness; it is merely a symptom of the realities governing the situation, and those realities include the sheer unspeakability of God. This last characteristic has its effect: it brings about an awareness of the inappropriateness of language.

Elsewhere Augustine will not uphold this negative judgment on language. Even with his most acutely difficult issue, that of the value of trinitarian formulae, he valiantly preserves the linguistic contribution. The negative way is a propaedeutic, a means of clarifying one's thought before the ultimate stage before the primary and binding statement; that the three Gods are one, and that the Father and the Son have a filial relationship which is not the filial relationship of ordinary human family experience.

The passage of the De Doctrina Christiana discussed above is, in the end, a remarkable departure from the linguistically conservative position normally adopted by Augustine. It was noted earlier (p. 208) that he emphasizes the purpose in the sacred writings of Scripture, that purpose which guarantees the meaning to be culled from the text. Augustine is a textual objectivist: it is
not sufficient (or even accurate) to say that he is a literalist, but he is certainly an objectivist. Truth lies in the objectively (or universally) determined meaning of the text. For this reason, the admission of the De Doctrina Christiana I.6.6 is exceptional. Apart from the claim that psychological uncertainty is generated by epistemological and ontological indescribability, Augustine adds the following problem:

Therefore God should not even be spoken of as ineffable, because when this is said, something is indeed said, and this causes some sort of contradiction . . . (Loc. cit.)

There is certainly a contradiction here, and Augustine suggests that silence be preserved over it, rather than that an attempt at resolving it be performed. It is an interesting contradiction that that which is said to be unspeakable can indeed be described by the word “ineffable”, and this may point to the logical impossibility of declaring a thing to be outside the range of language. The word “ineffable” is of course a negative one, and it does not make a positive claim: but it is nonetheless a linguistic manoeuvre, and furthermore, any negative can be seen to be transformable into a positive statement of some kind. Perhaps this is why Proclus sought to take the ultimate step of negating negation itself, prior to moving into transcendental silence. In this way the awkwardness of a self-refuting negation is overcome, and it may be that it is this set of problems which Augustine was touching on. There is no evidence, however, in Plotinus of interest in this final problem of a self-refuting negative as ultimate description of the One, and nor does there seem to be in Porphyry. It is the problem of a later generation of Platonists, not that of those who may have influenced Augustine. It is of course just possible that other influences did come to exert themselves on Augustine. Proclus and Augustine did coincide in time at least, and there is evidence that the negative way was the subject of discussion in Proclus’ circle. It is conceivable that some of this may have touched Augustine during his own life-time, through some point of contact which we can only guess at.

It may be suggested that Augustine had in fact become aware of this development in Neoplatonism. As has been noted on p. 116 the recently edited conclusion of Proclus’ Commentary on the Parmenides shows Proclus grappling with a similar issue: he claims here that negative propositions do not express anything about the One, and proposes the ultimate negation of negation itself, and the move into silence. The contemplation of the One is concluded in silence. Language engages in an act of self-destruction, and is followed by the new phase, of total silence. Now Augustine does not say this exactly, but he seems to be nibbling at the same question: he notes the inappropriateness of the ultimate negation, and he advocates silence on the issue. The silence of Augustine is tantamount to deciding to overlook the problem, whereas that of Proclus is a logical result of his negative theology. Augustine’s words are:
This linguistic contradiction should be guarded against (cavenda) by silence rather than resolved by speech. (De Doctrina Christiana 1.6.6)

It seems that Augustine has got hold of the notion that silence is somehow the resolution to the problem which he is confronted with, but that he has not quite understood how it works. His rhetorical soul was not quite capable of the great leap into silence of the Greek metaphysicians, and so he chooses to present the need for silence as a simple recommendation to hush up the problem.

If the above hypothesis is correct, what we have here is an attempt to tone down the stronger form of negative thinking advocated by the Neoplatonists. Even if it is not correct, it may be said that this passage of the De Doctrina Christiana is the most radical endorsement of the negative way in any of Augustine's writings, an endorsement not generally sustained elsewhere.

Augustine's sense of history, of the importance of the unfolding of time, and his view of discourse as having this unfolding temporal structure, must in the end draw him away from a strong use of the negative way. In an occasional flourish he will seem to approve of it, and he will in fact use it in effect to resolve the problem of how to conceive of the Trinity, but never could he envisage that ultimate Proclan stage of the negation of all language, followed by silence. At the apex of the epistemological procedure, there will always be a statement, so far as the philosophy of Augustine is concerned.