

Augustine's Ambiguous Book of Nature: The Inward Turn and the Role of the Visible World

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Introduction

In her seminal article on the medieval analogy of nature and Scripture, Willemien Otten identifies the theory of signs in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* as the key source behind the idea of seeing the visible creation as another divine 'text'.¹ Otten is not alone in this, as it is quite common to refer to Augustine as one of the originators of the metaphor of the book of nature.² Volker Henning Drecoll has also argued that the Augustine's *Contra Faustum* 32:20 is the first instance of the combination of the words *liber* and *naturae* (in either Latin and correspondingly in Greek), which were widely employed in medieval and early modern literature.³

To what extent, however, is the medieval idea of the two books of God consistent with Augustine's theology? What role did the visible world play in his thought? This paper approaches the question by relating Augustine's idea of the book of nature to a central theme in his thinking, known as the inward turn. It will show that, unlike the bold medieval analogy and nature and Scripture, Augustine's approach to the book of nature was ambiguous and almost paradoxical. Augustine did not invite his fellow believers to

¹ Willemien Otten, "Nature and Scripture: Demise of a Medieval Analogy," *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995): 257–84, at 261 (citing *doct. chr.* 1.1.1.–5.5, CCSL 32:6–9).

² Augustine is conventionally given pride of place in histories of the metaphor following Heribert M. Nobis, "Buch der Natur," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter, vol. 1 (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 1971), 957. Augustine is also the only patristic author cited in the influential works of Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, 47–50; Rothacker, *Das Buch der Natur*, 44–46. The book of nature in Augustine is briefly discussed in Wolfgang Hübner, "Liber (libellus)," in *Augustinus-Lexikon, Vol. 3 [Figura(e)–]*, ed. Cornelius Mayer (Basel: Schwabe, 2004), 959; Joachim Söder, "Natura," in *Augustinus-Lexikon, Vol. 4 [Meritum–]*, ed. Robert Dodaro, Cornelius Mayer, and Christof Müller (Basel: Schwabe, 2012), 171.

³ Volker Henning Drecoll, "'Quasi Legens Magnum Quendam Librum Naturae Rerum' (Augustine, C. Faust. 32:20): The Origin of the Combination Liber Naturae in Augustine and Chrysostomus," in *The Book of Nature in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Arjo Vanderjagt and Klaas van Berkel (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 35–48.

explore the wonders of the natural world in the same fashion as they should explore the wonders of Scripture. Instead, the visible world reminds human beings of the inferiority and mutability of material beings, inviting them to return to themselves and then transcend themselves in an upward movement toward God.

This finding may appear disappointing to some: Augustine does not, for example, provide us with a patristic model for engagement between science and faith. Upon closer inspection, however, the finding illuminates a different set of questions, namely in what sense the visible world becomes a book in the first place and how it is meant to be 'read'.

The paper is divided in three sections. The first outlines the metaphor of the book of nature in Augustine's writings. The second explains the notion of the inward turn and how it challenges the book of nature. The third clarifies the positive role of the visible world in terms of Augustine's notion of *admonitio*.

The Metaphor

There are several Augustinian passages that have been associated with the metaphor of the book of nature, although only some of them are really concerned with the visible world.⁴ One is *sermo* 68, which speaks of the way in which God has hidden things from the wise and the understanding and revealed them to the little ones (Matthew 11:25). Referring to Romans 1:20, Augustine argues that the mysteries have been revealed in the things that have been made, and the visible world is thus akin to a book:

Others, in order to find God, will read a book. Well, as a matter of fact there is a certain great big book, the book of created nature (*magnus liber ipsa species creaturae*). Look carefully at it top and bottom, observe it, read it. God did not make letters of ink for you to recognize him in; he set before your eyes all these things he has made. Why look for a louder voice? Heaven and earth cries out to you, "God made me."⁵

⁴ For a detailed examination of the texts, see Oskari Juurikkala, "The Two Books of God: The Metaphor of the Book of Nature in Augustine", forthcoming in *Augustinianum*.

⁵ s. 68, 6 (MA 1, 360; PLS 2, 505): alius, ut inueniat deum, librum legit. est quidam magnus liber ipsa species creaturae: superiorem et inferiorem contuere, attende, lege. non deus, unde eum cognosceres, de atramento litteras fecit: ante oculos tuos posuit haec ipsa quae fecit. quid quaeris maiorem uocem? clamat ad te caelum et terra: deus me fecit. English translation according to *Augustine, Sermons, (51–94) on the New Testament*, translated by E. Hill, Brooklyn, NY: New City Press 1991 (The Works of Saint Augustine III/3).

The other main example of the book of nature in Augustine is *Contra Faustum* 32:20. The context of the text is the Manichean belief in the existence of two different nature, good and evil, in the world.⁶ Augustine responds that what they perceive as good or evil is just a reflection of what seems pleasant or unpleasant to their earthly senses. This, however, is not a trustworthy method of discernment. Instead, just like with the Scriptures which one does not always like or understand at the first reading, one also must first learn to look at the whole creation as coming from God: “in order to attribute it to God as its author, you should first look at the whole of creation as if reading a certain great book about the nature of things.”⁷

Taken in isolation, these texts may not seem to be much. They are, nevertheless, sufficient for identifying Augustine as one of the earliest exponents of the metaphor, especially when one considers that in other writings Augustine depicts nature as ‘speaking’ (e.g., *en. Ps.* 18 and *conf.* 10).

Moreover, the idea of nature as another divine book relates harmoniously to different elements of Augustine’s broader theology. In Drecoll’s words, the idea behind in *liber naturae* is Augustine’s “recognition of an *ordo* in Creation.”⁸ Indeed, in his early work *De ordine* (386), Augustine writes (describing a cockfight!) that the eternal “reason (*ratio*) which rules and governs all things” is able to “give a signal” (*signum dare*) of herself through the created order.⁹ Even if not all the individual details in their materiality

⁶ For an analysis of the text in its context, see Drecoll, “‘Quasi Legens Magnum Quendam Librum Naturae Rerum’ (Augustine, C. Faust. 32:20),” 35–45.

⁷ *c. Faust.* 32, 20: atque ita si quid ibi te offenderet, causam te tamquam hominem latere posse tutius crederes quam in operibus dei quicquam reprehendere auderes, numquam incidisses in sacrilegas nugas et blasphema figmenta, quibus non intellegens, unde sit malum, deum implere conaris omnibus malis. English translation (slightly emended) according to *Augustine, Answer to Faustus, a Manichean*, translated by R. Teske, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 2007 (The Works of Saint Augustine I/20).

⁸ Drecoll, “‘Quasi Legens Magnum Quendam Librum Naturae Rerum’ (Augustine, C. Faust. 32:20),” 45.

⁹ *De ordine* 1,8,25 (CSEL 63, 137–138): deinde ego quoque surrexi reddisque deo cotidianis uotis ire coeperamus in balneas, ille enim locus nobis, cum caelo tristi in agro esse minime poteramus. aptus ad disputandum et familiaris fuit, cum ecce ante fores aduertimus gallos gallinatis ineuntes pugnam nimis acrem. libuit attendere. quid enim non ambiunt, qua non peragrant oculi amantum, ne quid undeunde innuat pulchritudo rationis cuncta scientia et nescientia modificantis et gubernantis, quae inhiantes sibi sectatores suos trahit quacumque atque ubique se quaeri iubet? nam unde aut ubi non potest signum dare? ut in eisdem ipsis gallis erat uidere intenta proiectius capita, inflatas comas, uehementes ictus, cautissimas euitationes et in omni motu animalium rationis expertium nihil non decorum quippe alia ratione desuper omnia moderante; postremo legem ipsam uictoris, superbum cantum et membra in unum quasi orbem collecta uelut in fastum dominationis; signum autem uicti, elatas a ceruice pinnulas et in uoce atque motu deforme totum et eo ipso naturae legibus nescio quomodo concinnum et pulchrum. Transl. Robert P. Russell in “Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil” in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 5, ed. Ludwig Schopp (New York, CIMA Publishing, 1948), 227–332, 262–263.

are necessarily beautiful, nevertheless an intelligible beauty is manifested in the harmony and laws of nature that order the movement of these irrational beings (in this case, cocks).

Carol Harrison has further argued that Augustine's understanding of the analogy of creation and Scripture should be based on his theology of the Word.¹⁰ She argues that, for Augustine, "they are 'words' whose source is the eternal Word," so that all the works of creation "might well be described as the 'first incarnation' of the Word."¹¹

The Inward Turn

Now, the challenge is this. There is always the danger of reading too much into Augustine's (or anyone else's) writings, or attributing a mindset to him that is not quite his. For example, Harrison goes on to write that "like Scripture and the Incarnation of the Word of God, it [creation] contains and engenders symbols, allegories, and, indeed, sacraments, which enable its invisible, spiritual sense—its Creator—to be seen more clearly through and in the visible."¹² But to what extent is this Augustine's idea, as opposed to an idea inspired by his theology? Similarly, when Otten equates Augustine's theory of signs and the medieval analogy of nature and Scripture, how strongly can this identification be drawn?

To be sure, there is nothing wrong in writing theology that is inspired by earlier thinkers, nor is there cause to doubt the decisive influence of Augustinian theology on medieval theology. But there are two reasons for being cautious (trusting that a correct exegesis will yield its own fruit).

The first is that Augustine himself was at best reserved in his use of the visible nature as a source of cognition in things divine. Unlike in Ambrose, as well as Basil the Great and Cyril of Alexandria before him, we find in Augustine no *Hexameron* that would explore the wonders of God's creation and find images and parables for our moral and spiritual edification everywhere. Augustine was deeply interested in the

¹⁰ See Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992, 112–22.

¹¹ Harrison, 116.

¹² Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 120.

biblical account of creation, but he directed his attention more to the intricacies of the scriptural text than to the mechanisms of the works of creation.

If Augustine's actual reading of the works of creation is better described as the two books metaphor in potency rather than in act, the same seems true of his theory of signs. *De doctrina christiana* does, no doubt, present an insightful and fruitful framework for treating the works of creation as signs. In fact, however, he provides no example in the same work of seeing natural signs as instruments of divine revelation. One gets the impression that the idea is ours (or at least of later thinkers), not Augustine's.

To be sure, Harrison is right in writing that, for Augustine, the entire creation "betraying vestiges (*vestigia*) of its Creator."¹³ However, it is typical of thinkers like Bonaventure to explore this idea further, whereas Augustine's attention in *De Trinitate*, for example, is directed to the analysis of the spiritual soul, not the visible world.

The second reason for being cautious is that Augustine's own relationship with the visible world was, if not tense, at least ambiguous (and this may be a cause for his modesty in the use of nature as a source of cognition). In his earlier writings, Augustine was especially critical of the external world, exhorting the seeker of wisdom to "entirely flee from things of sense."¹⁴

Of course, one may see some youthful extremism behind this attitude, inspired by the zeal of a convert whose change of mind was very much a change of lifestyle and of relationship with the sensible reality. As David Hunter points out, Augustine in his *Retractationes* "showed some embarrassment about the manner in which his earlier writings had treated the body with barely veiled contempt."¹⁵

¹³ Harrison, 116.

¹⁴ *Sol.* 1,14,24; trans. Burleigh 1953.

¹⁵ David G. Hunter, "Augustine on the Body," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey with Shelley Reid, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 353–364, 355. For example, he writes concerning *Sol.* 1,14,24 that "I should have been on my guard lest I be thought to hold the opinion of the false philosopher, Porphyry, according to which every body must be fled from" (*Retr.* 1,4).

But a shift towards a more balanced approach does not mean a reversal.¹⁶ The inward turn was not a passing phase, but a characteristic feature of Augustine's understanding of both his own path and the general Christian calling.¹⁷ It is necessary to turn on the inside, not because of any dualistic vision that demonizes matter, but because the intelligible world and God are accessible to the mind only within itself (*intus*), whereas the sensible world is contrasted to this inner realm as 'the outer' (*foris*).¹⁸ Considered in its materiality, the outer realm of the visible creation is but an instrument, but an ambiguous one, because it is prone to become an obstacle.

A passage of *De uera religione* (390) might be treated as a synthesis of Augustine's program: "do not go outside, return to yourself! Truth resides in the inner man. When you find out that your nature is mutable, transcend also your own self."¹⁹ The goal is truth, not mere experience of transient things. The very mutability of the material world serves as a reminder of the need to turn back, return to oneself, and ascend to God. And this is what makes the inward turn fascinating for any student of the theology of the book of nature: the goal is truth, and the inward turn is part of a theory of knowledge.

The Visible World as *Admonitio*

How, then, should one approach the visible world? What role does it play? Perhaps none at all, if we take the inward turn strictly and narrowly. But this is not Augustine's intention, either.

The visible world is a teacher, but what it teaches is not principally concerned with information. Augustine explains his idea of learning and teaching especially in *De magistro* (389), which highlights the interplay of

¹⁶ A leading argument in favor of fundamental continuity in Augustine's thought is Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). It is interesting to note that the debate is normally framed in terms of the young and optimistic Augustine the philosopher, and the mature and pessimistic bishop of Hippo. Here the picture is almost reversed: it was only with time that Augustine came to think of sensible things in a more positive manner.

¹⁷ See for example Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Phillip Cary, "Interiority," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, Michigan – Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), 454–56.

¹⁸ See Norbert Fischer, "Foris-intus", in *Augustinus-Lexikon, Vol. 3, Figura[e]–Mensura*, ed. C. P. Mayer et al. (Basel: Schwabe, 2004–2010), 37–45.

¹⁹ *De uera religione* 39,72 (CCSL 32, 234): *noli foras ire, sed te ipsum redi, in interiore homine habitat ueritas et si tuam naturam mutabilem inueneris, transcede et te ipsum.*

the outer and inner dimension in learning: the inner dimension is the interior illumination of Christ, while the outer dimension is the *admonitio* provided by external things.²⁰ External teaching is principally provided by human words, but it can also be provided by the created order in general. Thus, in *De libero arbitrio* (written shortly after *De magistro*) Augustine writes: “Turn where you will, wisdom speaks to you by the imprint it has left on its works, and, when you are slipping back into what is outward, it entices you to return within by the beauty of those very forms found in things external.”²¹

But we immediately note something peculiar here. The lesson provided by the world is described as a kind of reminder, not exactly new information in the modern sense of the word. Indeed, the use of the word *admonitio* is notable: although there is the word ‘admonition’ in English, Augustine’s sense of better expressed by ‘a prompting’ (and so it is usually translated).

According Manninen and Dupont, “the main purpose of *admonitio* is to prompt people to return to themselves, to turn their attention away from material reality towards the intelligible world.”²² And: “At the most fundamental level, therefore, *admonitio* refers to God’s action in converting people (back) to him.”²³

If we are expecting to find in Augustine a modern theory of dialogue between science and faith, we are likely to be disappointed. But should we expect to find it? After all, the picture that emerges from the preceding texts is much more coherent with Augustine’s thinking as a whole. Consider the following facts.

In *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine argues that the goal of all Scripture is love of God (and the parallel love of neighbor).²⁴ But he takes this so far as to say that any interpretation of Scripture if it leads us to an

²⁰ See Eetu B. Manninen and Anthony Dupont, “The Evolution of *Admonitio* in Augustine’s Early Treatises (386–391),” *Sacris Erudiri* 59 (2020): 37–60.

²¹ lib. arb. 2,16,41 (CSEL 74, 77): quoquo enim te uerteris, uestigiis quibusdam quae operibus suis inpressit loquitur tibi et te in exteriora relabentem ipsis exteriorum formis intro reuocat. Transl. Robert P. Russell, O.S.A, in *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation*, Vol. 59, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 151.

²² Manninen and Dupont, 38.

²³ Manninen and Dupont, 51.

²⁴ (add ref)

increase in charity.²⁵ Ultimately, the purpose of divine revelation is not to provide information, but to provoke transformation.

In a recent work, Susannah Ticciati has argued that the entire Augustinian theory of signs might be interpreted in terms what she calls *a new apophaticism*.²⁶ Its point is not, however, the potential and failure to speak about God, but the ability of words to *transform* human beings in their relationship with God.²⁷

In a somewhat similar vein, Matthew Knotts has suggested that, when Augustine writes of creation *speaking* (e.g., *en. Ps.* 18 and *conf.* 10), he means principally in terms of an invitation to conversion and praise.²⁸ Again, more than information, it is about transformation.

Conclusion

Augustine's understanding of the book of nature is ambiguous, because for him, the purpose of the visible world is not so much to provide information as to prompt men to return to themselves, turn on the inside, and transcend themselves by rising to God in prayer and praise.

Carol Harrison has argued that we should see in Augustine something more than this "in then up" process,²⁹ namely another turning on the outside: there is "a simultaneous turning away from Creation and looking beyond it to its Creator, and a turning towards it, and looking in and through it for its Creator."³⁰ It is not clear to me, though, whether this "turning towards it" is typical of Augustine, although it is very typical of the medieval book of nature.

The reason for my deconstructive approach to Augustine's idea of the book of nature or the two book is the following. I believe that Augustine contributed decisively to laying the foundations of these celebrated

²⁵ (add ref)

²⁶ Susannah Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

²⁷ See Ticciati, p. 2-3.

²⁸ See Matthew W. Knotts, *On Creation, Science, Disenchantment and the Contours of Being and Knowing* (Bloomsbury, 2020), chapter 5.

²⁹ Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*, 105.

³⁰ Harrison, 114.

metaphors, but his thinking about their role is nuanced and cautious. This caution and these nuances are interesting in their own right. Especially since the Middle Ages, the metaphor of the book has become widely used in a wide range of contexts (especially book and article titles), but often without much reflection on its implications and requirements. Augustine's ambiguous approach to the metaphor might give us further clues into what it actually means to view nature as a book.