

Article

Naming the Mystery: An Augustinian Ideal

Allan Fitzgerald

The Augustinian Institute, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085, USA;

E-Mail: allan.fitzgerald@gmail.com

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Abstract: This article, by noticing Augustine’s constant questioning, shows that he often talks about not knowing and about his need for God’s help to know more. It is therefore better to see how he identifies the mystery than to focus on his answers, because he too recognizes his limits. His intellectual prowess can be seen more clearly when he “names the mystery” than by thinking that he has solved it.

Keywords: mystery; uncertainty; humility; grace; prayer

1. Introduction

It is not unusual to hear people talk about how important Augustine is today. Some are pleased about that; others are less so. Some see his willingness to be flexible in the interpretation of Scripture and his deeply human understanding of the Christian journey as liberation from the neo-scholastic trends of recent times. Others focus on his influence on ideas like original sin, predestination, infant baptism, and *filioque* as charges to be held against him. Teaching a course—or a part of a course—on Augustine can leave one feeling a bit “hamstrung” by the felt need to take sides, to have to live with a sense of the unresolved tension that these opinions represent. It has become a challenge to appreciate who Augustine really is.

To teach Augustine, therefore, I think that it is important to present him, not primarily in terms of this or that doctrine or view, but as someone with whom people can identify, humanly speaking. The last time that I taught a course on Augustine—a graduate course on his life and thought—I had not found a good way to do that. Some of the same old “issues” came up for discussion more than once: his doctrine of predestination, his presumed condemnation of unbaptized infants, and his heavy, polemical style in the debate with Julian of Eclanum. This talk is about how I have re-visited the teaching of that course,

about how to begin the course in a different key by talking about Augustine’s personal attitude toward the limits of his understanding. Therefore, this paper is not about a specific classroom experience but a proposal for teaching Augustine, presenting him as fully human before discussing the issues that are often seen in controversial terms.

2. Reaching for Something More

One way to present a balanced—and attractive—view of the man is to identify and talk about the ways that he acknowledged the limitations he felt in own understanding of his life and faith. Or, to put it more strikingly, to talk about what Augustine said that he did not know.

If I have understood one of the mainstays of the thought of Paul Ricœur, the study of another age requires that there be a “passing over” and then a “passing back”, that is, a process of leaving the comfort of one’s own way of seeing and thinking for a time, and in that way to pay full attention to that which is different or foreign. Applying such an approach to the study of Augustine is to begin to notice an insistent attention to the limits of his words. Why, then, was so important for Augustine to name limits of his thinking—both by asking for God’s assistance and the prayers of this people when he is preaching and by noting explicitly some things that he does not know or understand. This is, in other words, not a way of proposing a new methodology for the study of Augustine. It is simply an invitation to notice a facet of his writings that is rather consistently ignored [1]. See, for example, what he says about his understanding about those who do not persevere:

“If at this point I am asked why God who gave them the love by which they lived as Christians did not give them perseverance, I reply that I do not know. Not with arrogance, but recognizing my limits...” [2].

“Are you expecting me to tell you why he has mercy on whom he will, and whose will he hardens? Are you expecting it from me, a man? If you’re a human being and I’m a human being, then both of us have heard: *who are you to answer back to God* (Rom 9:20)? So trusting ignorance is better than rash knowledge. God says to me, Christ speaks through the apostle, O man, who are you to answer back to God? And I get indignant, do I, because I don’t understand God’s justice? If I am a man, I shouldn’t be indignant. Let me go beyond being a man, if I can, and reach the source. But even if I do reach it, I may not tell about it to a human being. Let him go beyond himself also, and reach it with me.” [3].

In addition, Augustine often asked for the assistance of God when he preaches on difficult topics. Why does this matter? Did he experience, as has been claimed [4], an uncharacteristic failure in intellectual rigor when he invoked God’s hidden justice instead of trying to address the relationship of human freedom to divine grace? Is this a kind of false humility?

3. Naming the Mystery for the Common Good

In the case of Augustine, it is all-too-easy to let the focus shift from the study of his thought—set within its own cultural context—to taking a stance on the answers that we think he gives. It is almost as if his texts are often analysed—exhaustively—in relation to the way we think in our time and culture. By highlighting the place that Augustine gives to what he does not know or does not yet understand,

there is a greater chance of giving appropriate attention his intention, to the interior dimension of his thinking. Rather than a failure in intellectual courage or a kind of false humility, Augustine is doing something quite positive and useful. He *names the mystery* in a way that does not put an end to his searching but acknowledges a simple reality: there is always going to be more to know about any real mystery. To name something as a mystery, therefore, is not a way of closing the discussion but of accepting present limits and of making the searching a truly Christian moment where the human effort and divine grace are both necessary. Hence, the focus is not on Augustine's ignorance. It is an acceptance of that which is—and will remain—open-ended—a point that is clearly affirmed in a fascinating article by Charles Mathewes [5].

Augustine never claimed to have all the answers; he had no desire to be an "*auctoritas*". Neither skeptic nor dogmatist, he was nonetheless able to give positive value to his humanity by invoking the assistance of God and by recognizing the inscrutability of God. I chose to entitle this paper "naming the mystery" because I think that it is important to pay attention to the way that Augustine was constantly trying to do more than talk about some truth [6]. His searching was always set within the context of his faith-seeking-understanding and was a part of his spiritual life and prayer as well. He is, practically speaking, acknowledging the importance of continuing to seek, ask and find (*cf.* Mt. 7:7), not in order to *end* with an answer but to affirm his ongoing relationship with the one who is Truth.

Again and again he asks for divine assistance, requests correction if his readers/listeners notice that he has erred, confesses his own sins, and respects differences of opinion where the truth is not compromised. Another way to say this can be found in a book by Paul van Geest on Augustine's negative theology:

"The reading of Augustine's works acquires a new brilliance when they are viewed in the light of... [his] reticence and uncertainty. It is true to say that for him, *apophasis* [=unknowing] formed the heart of his 'theology'. Whenever the fact is forgotten that his treatment of the great theological themes...was accompanied by caveats about the relativity of such discourse, its essential tenor is obscured." [7].

Paul van Geest wrote persuasively about Augustine's awareness of the incomprehensibility of God. Again and again he insists that we cannot know God. But Augustine's interest is not a pessimistic theology or a cop-out. Let me again quote van Geest:

"[Augustine's] familiarity with Scripture and tradition imbued him with the idea that humans are part of a 'reality', of a whole, which they cannot possibly comprehend, but upon which they depend." Even intelligent fish can't say much about the sea in which they swim! Paul van Geest continues: "Therefore they cannot analyse things merely as spectators. Human beings are encompassed by a Mystery of which they themselves form a part, and which, moreover, determines their highest 'I'. For Augustine the mystagogue, the fact that this recognition causes a salutary uncertainty is an intended purpose rather than a chance result." [8].

It was already important for Augustine to name the mystery. That applies to his concerns about the salvation of the unbaptized, to his life-long quandary about the origin of the soul [9], and to his efforts to identify analogies for the Trinity. Even more important, however, was his ability to see that he was

part of that mystery and not a spectator, thus providing a model that was a way of working for the good of all without setting oneself apart. In other words, to recognize his ignorance was to affirm a larger picture: seeking in a way that did not make him the teacher, but “said” that only one is Teacher.

How does that understanding become an integral part of teaching others about Augustine’s life and thought? Examples can be found in the way he frequently prayerfully asks for divine assistance along with the community to whom he spoke, and asserts the unknowability of the mind of God when it comes to the application of justice and mercy.

4. Divine Assistance in Preaching

Augustine often says that his preaching needs the help of God and the prayers of the community. Thus does he that he is not reading from a script but that he is developing his message as it unfolds; he improvises as he speaks [10]. Here are a couple of examples from his sermons on John’s Gospel:

“I put off until today the task of opening up, with his help, what is mysteriously contained in the sacraments [11] that are in the event described in the gospel reading.” [12].

I have had that reading read to you again, so that in Christ’s name and with the help of your prayers I may finish what there was not time to deal with then [13].

Whatever I cannot manage will be supplied for you by the same one by who helps me do what I can [14].

It could be easy to think that Augustine is just trying to arouse the people’s sympathy or using a rhetorical commonplace to engage or co-opt his people. Such phrases are rarely given much attention by commentators. But he is being fully faithful to his faith in the Word of God: any helpful understanding of that Word requires God’s help—both for him to explain it accurately and for it to be well received.

But there is more to this example than may at first be obvious. Not only is he making his limitation quite plain [15], but, by asking his listeners to pray, he is proclaiming that the process of discovery, of understanding the Word is a communal process. His listeners are fellow-learners (*condiscipuli*); their teacher is Jesus Christ, the interior master. In this way, Augustine also refuses to be the *auctoritas*. It’s as if his time as imperial rhetor showed him the danger of setting oneself up as an oracle on whose expressions and doctrines the others may sit in judgment. His preaching, however, is not just giving his listeners a sound hermeneutical understanding; it is part of his lifelong truth-seeking and that cannot happen if he allows himself to be, as it were isolated from the love of God and the love of neighbor. That may be a difficult reality to introduce into a college classroom, but it does help to see that prayer is more than a religious practice; it is also an act that is integral to the community of learning and to the truth that is being sought.

5. Doctrinal Limitations

More complicated—and perhaps more interesting—is the frequency and the consistency with which he cites Romans 11:33 in relation to the justice and mercy of God. That biblical passage reads: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how

unsearchable his ways!” It is invoked when he is touching upon a difficult theological issue: God’s justice.

Several scholars have criticized Augustine’s appeal to God’s inscrutable mystery, suggesting as I have already said that it represents a failure in intellectual rigor, suggesting that such failure is unusual for Augustine [16]. Paul Rigby prefers to see Augustine’s use of that verse in a positive light, addressing the value of Augustine’s appeal to ignorance in topics as fundamental as predestination, original sin and unbaptized infants. By failing to look for Augustine’s positive motivation, scholars have pointed out a lack of coherence in what he does say, but without offering any way to avoid a dilemma. Is it even possible that a human being will know the mind of God or know how to speak about God’s application of his salvific will? Of course not. Augustine, therefore, is not suffering from a failure of nerve; he is proposing a significant Scriptural truth: God’s justice is a mystery. He names the mystery without abandoning the search.

In the case of unbaptized infants, for example, Augustine cites Romans 11:33, acknowledging his ignorance. Augustine repeats the criticism that has been brought against him: “if, as you would have it, it’s only a small pain, a small punishment; even a small one is great, if there is no fault. Defend God’s justice here; why should even a small punishment be inflicted on the innocent, in whom absolutely no sin at all is to be found?”

Augustine responds:

“I am myself keenly aware of how profoundly problematic this question is, and I recognize that my powers are not sufficient to get to the bottom of it. Here too I like to exclaim with Paul, *Oh the depths of the riches!* (Rom 11:33). Unbaptized babies go to damnation; they are the apostle’s words, after all: From one to condemnation (Rom 5:16). I cannot find a satisfactory and worthy explanation—because I can’t find one, not because there isn’t one. So where I cannot find bottom in the depths, *I must take account of human weakness, not condemn divine authority.* I certainly exclaim, and I’m not in the least ashamed of it, *Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments, and untraceable his ways!*...For my part, I fortify my weakness with these words.” [17].

Has Augustine, once again, shown nothing but his lack of intellectual rigor and proclaimed his weakness? He says elsewhere:

“It is indeed, to be wondered at, and greatly to be wondered at that [baptized Christians lapse and the wicked are converted and that the children of Christian’s die unbaptized and the children of pagan parents die baptized]...who would not wonder at this? Who would not be exceedingly astonished at this! Certainly, in this case the judgments of God, because they are righteous and deep, may neither be blamed nor penetrated.” [18].

In other words, there are no options at all. Rather than trust his own logic and reasoning, he prefers to accept the Word of God. Wisdom demands acknowledgment of our small measure. It forces us to confess that God’s mercy and justice are far beyond ours. He is not callous but knows the limit of human knowing.

Has the dilemma that Augustine and his contemporaries faced ever been answered? Limbo was no better an answer. Baptism is, in fact, required. By re-defining baptism as baptism of desire and not using that as a way to deny the existence or interest of original sin, we did what Augustine wanted to do: neither deny our need for Christ nor our human condition in the process of trying to understand God's plan. But the mystery remains as an invitation to further searching.

6. Humility

Augustine is not satisfied with naming the mystery as insoluble. That would be too simple. By turning exchanges away from information-sharing, something more lasting can develop. While the cultural context helps to move beyond this or that fact or this or that idea, what is really needed is a way to address Augustine's attitude: what emotion was part of his thinking? What was at the heart of his thinking? It seems to me that a course on Augustine needs to *begin* with some significant presentation on how Augustine saw himself, shifting the tonality beyond "answers" toward ideas with a "feel" to them. It turns out to be important to those beginning to know Augustine that they be able to relate to him and not just to some idea of his or some ideas about his culture. That happens when the limits to what he knows are noticed. That would mean that a course on Augustine would begin by noticing how impossible it was for him to stop himself from asking questions [19], because questioning is a way of making progress rather than an effort to end reflection with a firm answer.

Augustine does not just seek to foster humility—in the face of mystery—but to engage in the kind of reflection that places everyone at the level of discovery rather than placing the focus on a detached, as it were, objective reading of the ideas of others. This reflection from within the human community is capable of integrating prayer, thought, exchange and awareness of meaning without "sitting in judgment" on the theological or philosophical adequacy of this or that expression or doctrine. Instead of systematic presuppositions, this process avoids mere intellectual speculation and is therefore forced (from within) to emphasize historical context. Is that a denial of systematic theology? No it is an historical statement.

7. Concluding Remarks

This paper has suggested that Augustine's awareness of his own limits often led him to identify those questions and issues that he did not understand and which he still tried to penetrate. By thus naming the mystery, he made it clear that he was not a kind of dogmatist nor a skeptic. Rather, he wanted others to know the value of searching—even when there would be no conclusion to that effort.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References and Notes

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3. Augustine. *Sermon 27*, 4.
4. John M. Rist. “Augustine on Free Will and Predestination.” *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969): 439–40. In Rist’s exclusively ethical interpretation, the doctrine of original sin reveals a “puppet-like status of fallen man”.
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7. Paul van Geest. *The Incomprehensibility of God. Augustine as a Negative Theologian*. Leuven: Peeters, 2011, p. 227.
8. Paul van Geest. *op. cit.*, p. 218.
9. See the lucid article by Michael Mendelson. “‘The Business of Those Absent’: The Origin of the Soul in Augustine’s *De Genesi Ad Litteram* 10.6–26.” *Augustinian Studies* 28 (1998): 25–81.
10. See J. William Harmless, S.J. “A Love Supreme: Augustine’s ‘Jazz’ of Theology.” *Augustinian Studies* 43 (2012): 145–73.
11. *In sacramentis, i.e.*, in the sacred signs that are part of this gospel narrative.
12. Augustine. *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 9, 1.
13. Augustine. *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 12, 1.
14. Augustine. *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 17, 1.
15. He asks for the help of the Holy Spirit: “*Sanctus Spiritus Adiuuat Infirmittatem Nostrum*”; cf. *Ep.* 130, 28: *Docta Ignorantia*.
16. Susanah Ticciati. “Reading Augustine Through Job: A Reparative Reading of Augustine’s Doctrine of Predestination.” *Modern Theology* 27 (2011): 414–41.
17. Augustine. *Sermon 294*, 7.
18. Augustine. *On Rebuke and Grace (de correptione et gratia)* 8, 18.
19. This practical emphasis is linked to Augustine’s statement that there is no better way to learn than by questioning and answering (*Soliloquies* II, 7, 14).