

## Misinterpretation in Augustine's *Confessions*

DANIEL BROUGH

In Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, signs exist on two levels: on the level of Augustine's use of signs to represent experience, and on the level of the interaction between characters in the narrative. Misinterpretation of signs occurs rampantly in the *Confessions* because language is incapable of accurately representing truth and because the sign-signified relationship is dependent upon the context and condition in which the sign is delivered. The former is a failure of Augustine's language to accurately represent experience, a failure which has ramifications for evolving misinterpretations across history; the latter is a failure of the narrative's characters to correctly interpret signs. The fact that these misinterpretations occur in the reader is obvious and shows that language is inadequate to represent, but the fact that they also occur among the characters in the *Confessions* shows that Augustine must have anticipated misinterpretation in the use of his own semiotics. I will show this by viewing the possible misinterpretations through the lens of deconstruction, a modern theory of literary criticism.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine makes the proposition that doctrine consists entirely of things and signs; a thing is something which is not used to represent something else, and a sign is what represents a thing (I.II).<sup>1</sup> R. A. Markus writes that words are signs *par excellence* for Augustine, and that his theory of signs was really intended to be a theory of language (65). In speaking about language in terms of signs, Augustine delineates three more distinctions: signs that signify other signs (synonyms), signs which signify things, and things which are known without signs (Burleigh 66–67). When applied to language, the notion of signs referring to signs

<sup>1</sup>Signs are ontologically equivalent to things in the sense that both exist, but they are not equal in being. In *The Teacher*, Augustine notes that "whatever exists on account of something else is inferior to that on account of which it exists" (ix, 26). Likewise, knowledge is better than words.

deals with metalanguage. In describing the relationship between signs and their objects, Augustine notes the dissimilarity between the sign and the signified: the Latin “*homo*,” for instance, is not equivalent to a living, breathing male (*The Teacher* viii, 22). Some things can be known and apprehended by the intellect without the use of signs, such as the nonverbal demonstration of a particular action to an observer (*The Teacher* x, 32). Thus, Augustine’s concept of semiotics allows for extensive variation in semantics and other linguistic fields; his construction of language is liberal in its allowance of particular relationships between sign and object. These allowances will become important later on in our analysis.

The words which make up the *Confessions*, like any other narrative, signify not only material things, but also events which transpired during the course of Augustine’s life. In this sense, Augustine’s life becomes a text—a series of events represented in words. It nearly goes without saying that Augustine intended for his life to be read and interpreted by others; the events in Book VIII that lead up to his conversion set this precedent. Here, Augustine tells of the experiences of Ponticianus, Antony, and Victorinus, the latter of which causes Augustine to “glow with fervour to imitate him” (*Confessions* VIII.5). Victorinus’s narrative inspired Augustine to action, and its inclusion in Augustine’s narrative hints that Augustine has the same purpose in mind for his readers. Let us consider the anecdote of Ponticianus as a representative example: inspired by the presence of Paul’s writings (which contain symbols representing facts), Ponticianus tells the story of how he and his companions found a book containing the story of Antony, which moved them to conversion. The narratives in this case are many and multilayered: the reader of the *Confessions* reads a narrative about Augustine’s experience with a narrative, which in turn contains a narrative. Stories are acting both as signs and things; Ponticianus’s story, for instance, is a sign representing his conversion, and his conversion is a sign stemming from Antony’s narrative. It is in this narrative context that Augustine wishes to place his life; literarily speaking, he wants to fit his life into a particular genre.

There are, however, a few misfires that arise in Augustine’s narrative due to the fallible nature of language as explained by Augustine’s own semiotics. The first is illustrated in the first line of the narrative: “Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty?” (*Confessions* I.1). In the light of Augustine’s opinion that the sign-signified relationship in language is random and inadequate, the idea of worthiness is equivalent to capability; Augustine is asking if his praise, or any of his language, is capable of capturing the Lord’s majesty. Augustine’s confession will surely fall short of being equivalent to the glory and majesty of God because it is presented

in imperfect language; the word "majesty," for instance, is not equivalent to the actual majesty of God.

On a similar note, Augustine recounts his experience in learning language in the following anecdote:

I noticed that people would name some object and then turn towards whatever it was that they had named. I watched them and understood that the sound they made when they wanted to indicate that particular thing was the name which they gave to it . . . when my tongue had mastered the pronunciation, I began to express my wishes by means of them. (*Confessions* I.8)

Here, Augustine is hinting at the randomness inherent in the relationship between signs and things; something has a particular name simply because that is the name assigned to it by consensus. Since signs are assigned so randomly to objects, it seems natural that they should have little to no intrinsic correspondence to that which they signify.

The second and third semiotic incongruities occur, ironically enough, in moments of conversion and introduce the problem of intentionality in semiotics. In Book VI, Augustine the teacher takes an opportunity to illustrate a point in class by referring to the arena games that held so many of his students captive. Alypius, a particular friend of Augustine's who is addicted to the sensuality of the arena, takes Augustine's example as a personal rebuke, in spite of the fact that Augustine had not intended his example as such. Alypius consequently renounces all association with the games and never returns to them (*Confessions* VI.7). This instance illustrates a different kind of incongruity between sign and signified—Alypius understood Augustine's signs in a different way than Augustine had intended.

Augustine's own conversion demonstrates a similar experience. While in Vercundus's garden, tormented by the disunion of his own will, Augustine hears a child singing, "Take it and read, take it and read." Augustine assumes this is a child's game, but since he cannot remember which game it could be, he takes it as a divine message to read the first passage of scripture he can get his hands on; this, of course, is the catalyst to his conversion (*Confessions* IX.12). Again, this is a misinterpretation of a sign; the children were not singing to prompt Augustine's conversion. There are a few additional considerations here, as with the other example: it could be that God speaks through other humans, and that his message is in fact not misunderstood—a point which is supported by the fact that Augustine reads a scripture (which could be interpreted as the direct voice of God) that actually does address his particular concern. However, the fact still remains that Augustine heard a message that the children were not

intending to sing; this is the message and misinterpretation that prompts him to action, and the sign-signified dichotomy takes on an entirely new meaning due to a misinterpretation of intentionality.

Augustine's theory of signs combines literal and figurative interpretation of scripture, thus allowing for a broad spectrum of exegesis (Markus 65). Augustinian semiotics, however, subject a text to the possibility of two kinds of *mis*-interpretation. First, the insufficiency of language itself makes it impossible to communicate an idea accurately, or rather to assimilate language to reality. The second possibility arises in the misinterpretation of the signs themselves; signs are contextual and therefore subject to misinterpretation depending on the background of the receiver. Viewing these possible misinterpretations through a modern lens will magnify the impossibility of texts, in Augustine's semiotic perception, of ever receiving correct interpretation.

Augustine's semiotics lend themselves to a forceful deconstruction. In Book II of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine uses a contrast between Latin and Greek as an example:

Therefore just as . . . significations move men's minds in accordance with the consent of their societies, and because this consent varies, they move them differently, nor do men agree upon them because of an innate value, but they have a value because they are agreed upon. (2.XXIV)

In this sense, we see signs coming to function as variables which can mean just about anything, depending on the interpreter. The notion of a variable coincides with Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist notion of "freeplay." Derrida defines freeplay as "a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble . . . The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more" (967). Furthermore, Derrida mentions "two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay" (970). One seeks to decipher and find an absolute truth, and the other is content with the vast possibilities of meaning. John Haldane concurs with this interpretation when he recognizes that Augustine's theory of memory—"Mentalese," as he calls it—can produce signs that can either stand for one thing or for many (460). Deconstructionist criticism, therefore, gives a variety of possible meanings to a given sign or text and exposes contradictions between signs. In this sense, Augustine and Alypius merely assign two possible meanings to their respective experiences out of an infinite set.

Augustine accepts Derrida's second "interpretation of interpretation" in his explanation of the ineffability of God. On this topic, Augustine

writes that assigning God the sign “ineffable” creates a contradiction in terms, since something ineffable is un-describable and the assignation of the term describes something. Augustine concludes that “this contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally”(On *Christian Doctrine* 1.VI). Here he seems to be accepting the multiplicity of interpretations and passing off the doctrine of God (Trinitarianism) as a mystery. Logically, a contradiction implies all statements; any interpretation, therefore, can be assigned to this particular sign/variable. Here, the two possible misinterpretations are melted into one: God is inherently un-describable by language, and Augustine’s signs referring to God enjoy unlimited freeplay in their possible significations. Augustine also cites ambiguities in understanding the grammar of a particular language as sources for multiple interpretations (On *Christian Doctrine* 1.XIII). Deconstruction thus establishes a binary relationship between nothing and everything; since everything is a possibility, nothing is certain. Herein, perhaps, lies the rub of the inability of language to correspond to reality, especially to the reality of God. J. J. O’Donnell writes that “Human words used by humans fail in the presence of the divine, and whatever can be said is only approximation, and most human discourse fails to say anything of God at all, despite endless loquacious efforts” (“Augustine’s Idea of God” 23–24). A multiplicity of *possible* words exists because of the lack of one *precise* word, or a word that precisely corresponds with its signified object.

Gene Fendt melds the incompetence of language and deconstructionist freeplay into a startling assertion: Augustine’s praise to God in fact consists of effecting his own deconstruction. Fendt notes that in four chapters, Augustine eliminates “even the possibility of speaking to or of God,” but it is not true that there is pure nothingness in the text. According to Fendt, textuality exists, “the presence of the absent” (35–40). Augustine is writing an “impossible text.” Augustine plans on doing away with the world, and since the world is a world of signs, he plans on doing away with them as well. According to Fendt, Augustine uses the impossibility of constructing a sign worthy of God as a paradoxical tribute to God. Out of all the possible signs which might signify God’s majesty (all of which are, of course, inadequate), Augustine chooses “no sign,” thus implying that Augustine accepts the various possibilities of meaning inherent in his text. By a strict definition this would fall into the category of representation that Augustine designates as that which is signified by no sign at all. If Fendt’s interpretation is carried further, however, the absence of a sign is itself a sign, since it seems to signify some other intangible truth. Thus, there seems to be another, existential sign-signified relationship: that which is signified by nothingness. Regardless whether one accepts Fendt’s explanation, the fact remains that the fallibility of Augustine’s semiotic doctrine

is perpetrated in his own text; this only shows a possible awareness on the part of Augustine of his theory's imperfection.

Augustine's own semiotic theory allows misreadings to occur both *of* the *Confessions* and *in* the *Confessions*; the inclusion of semantic errors in Augustine's account of his life suggests that Augustine is responding to the inadequacy of his own system of signs relative to language. The fact that Augustine's characters fall victim to the same misreadings as his text hints that Augustine was aware of the fallibility of his semiotics. Augustine never regards any interpretation as a misinterpretation; I have supplied that misnomer here in the present. The infinite freeplay of signs allows for an infinite number of possible interpretations. As O'Donnell notes, "When we are best at explaining Augustine, we are then perhaps furthest from his thought" ("Extended Remarks on Augustine's *Confessions*").

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: This has since been moved to *Papers on Augustine by J.J. O'Donnell*, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/Extended-Remarks-on-Confessions>. Accessed 29 July 2019. There is no permanent link at this time.