Augustine's Conception of Divine Incorporeality in Homiletic and Polemical Contexts

La concepción agustina de la incorporeidad divina en los contextos homiléticos y polémicos

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Abstract

This article analyzes Augustine's thinking on God's incorporeality, a doctrine he mainly developed in reaction against Manichaean and Arian reflections in this regard. Augustine's decision to enter the Catholic Church was strongly influenced by his understanding of divine incorporeality, a concept to which he was introduced in the mid-380s in Milan. This means that God is not subject to time and space in any way. This metaphysical commitment enabled Augustine to answer several of his objections to Christianity. Shortly after his baptism, Augustine applied this understanding of the divine to his critiques of the Manichaeans. In this article we see how, decades later, this doctrinal commitment was developed and expressed in his homiletic corpus and in his polemics against the Arians. Knotts looks at sources from the 390s, and then homilies mostly from the second decade of the 400s. This enables us to see how the theme of incorporeality is further developed and deployed in homiletic and polemical contexts. Thus, two closely related themes emerge. First, Augustine holds that we must not think of the generation of the Son according to an earthly logic; we must not seek temporal duration in eternity. Second, we must possess the intellectual humility to realise that our earthly categories are not sufficient for thinking about God. Augustine opts to confess his ignorance of what it means for the Son to be eternal, and rather grounds his theology in scripture. These are two major points that arise in Augustine's critique of the Arians. We shall also see how the Gospel of John forms a *locus theologicus* for Augustine. The development of divine incorporeality figures in Augustine's homilies and polemics as a way to neutralise his opponents and provide further resources for his audience.

Keywords: Gospel of John, incorporeality, Arianism, creation, Augustine, polemics, North Africa.

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza el pensamiento de Agustín respecto a la incorporeidad de Dios, una doctrina que él desarrolló principalmente como una reacción contra las reflexiones maniqueas y arrianas sobre este tema. La decisión de Agustín de integrar la Iglesia católica estuvo fuertemente influenciada por su manera de entender la incorporeidad divina, un concepto con el cual se familiarizó hacia la mitad del año 380 en Milán. Esta implica que Dios no es sujeto de tiempo ni espacio en ningún sentido, compromiso metafísico que le permite a Agustín responder a varias objeciones dirigidas a la cristiandad. Poco después de su bautizo, Agustín aplicó su visión de la divinidad a sus críticas de los maniqueos. En ese artículo vemos cómo, décadas después, este compromiso doctrinal fue desarrollado y expresado en sus homilías y en sus polémicas contra el arrianismo. Knotts examina tanto fuentes del 390, como homilías de la segunda década del 400. Esto nos permite apreciar cómo el tema de la incorporeidad es desarrollado y movilizado en mayor grado en los contextos homiléticos y polémicos. Así, dos temas íntimamente relacionados emergen: primero, Agustín mantiene que no debemos concebir la generación del hijo en los términos de la lógica terrena, no debemos buscar una duración temporal en la eternidad; segundo, debemos tener la humildad intelectual para constatar que nuestras categorías terrenas no son suficientes para pensar acerca de Dios. Agustín opta por confesar su ignorancia acerca de lo que significa que el hijo sea eterno y más bien funda su teología sobre las escrituras. Estos son los dos puntos cruciales que surgen de la crítica de Agustín hacia los arrianos. Veremos también cómo el Evangelio de Juan forma un *locus theologicus* para Agustín. El desarrollo de la incorporeidad divina aparece en las homilías y polémicas de Agustín como una vía para neutralizar a sus oponentes y le ofrece a su audiencia mayores herramientas.
Palabras clave: Evangelio de Juan, incorporeidad, arrianismo, creación, Agustín, polémicas, África del Norte.

Introduction

In this thematic issue, the authors are examining polemics in North Africa in the fourth and the fifth centuries. They have been looking at three particular ways in which preachers established a firm group identity, namely through (i) doctrinal development and articulation, (ii) neutralising opponents, and (iii) providing resources for a community for further debate. Within the relevant framework, the polemics against Donatism, Pelagianism, Manichaeism, and Arianism constitute the particular interest and focus. In this contribution I show how the theme of divine incorporeality figures in Augustine's anti-Arian polemic. The development of divine incorporeality figures in Augustine's homilies and polemics as a way to respond to his opponents and provide further resources for his audience.

As we shall see, Augustine understands Arianism as the view that the Son is inferior to the Father. That is, the Son is a creature, perhaps a pre-eminent creature, but a creature nonetheless. An Arian would point to the generation of the Son from

the Father, and argue on this basis that the Son must have a (temporal) beginning. Augustine locates in his notion of incorporeality two closely related resources by means of which he can oppose the Arians. First, Augustine can argue that the begetting of the Son from the Father is not a temporal birth or one that answers to a worldly logic. Secondly, Augustine can rely on the need to recognise one's own limitations and weakness of intellect when one is confronted with an apparent impossibility or something that does not conform to the ways of this world.

First I discuss the meaning and the significance of "incorporeality" itself. Here I pay particular attention to the foregoing patristic context and Augustine's own intellectual development in the 380s. I also discuss Augustine's early polemical use of the concept of incorporeality, in particular against the Manichees (ca. 390). The discussion in this article of incorporeality and its polemical application is situated within the broader context of Augustine's more basic commitment to the immateriality of the divine.

Then I treat of a set of *sermones* composed for the liturgical feast of the Nativity, or Christmas. Most of these were delivered ca. 410, though one or two may have been delivered as early as the 390s. In my treatment we shall see how the theme of divine eternity is expressed in a homiletic setting and how anti-Arian themes are developed, even if the Arians are not explicitly mentioned.

In the first two sections of this article, I discuss and demonstrate the doctrinal development of the concept of incorporeality, in particular from its early origins to its application in Augustine's preaching. In the final part, I shall consider Augustine's explicit anti-Arian polemical use of the theme of divine incorporeality, showing how he sought to challenge his opponents and provide aid to his own community in opposing these "heresies." This (broadly speaking) chronological treatment will allow the reader to perceive diachronic developments in Augustine's thought and the fact that incorporeality plays a fundamental role therein.

Explicit mentions of Arians or Arianism occur sparingly in Augustine's *Sermones ad populum*. The most notable locations are *ss.* 117, 135, 139, 182, 183, 244, 252, and 380. We shall not consider 380, since its authenticity is disputed, nor shall we consider 182-183, as they have been ably discussed in other locations (cf., e. g., Dodaro, 2007; Knotts, 2015). In the third and final section, I shall focus on Augustine's explicit anti-Arian polemic in *Sermones ad populum* 117 (ca. 418 or 420), 135 (ca. 417-418), 139 (ca. 416-418), and 244 (ca. 412 or 418).[2]

The discussion of these sermons allows us to see the new ways in which Augustine draws upon the theme of incorporeality for a new pressing pastoral concern,

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2   For the dates of these *sermones*, I rely on the *Tavola cronológica dei discorsi* at augustinus.it.

namely the influx of Arians into North Africa in the early fifth century. In addition to the anti-Arian content present in both sources, they also share a common focus on Johannine theology as a source of inspiration for a defence of the Nicene understanding of Christ as true God and true man. We shall see how in his sermons Augustine develops a doctrinal commitment that had influenced his entire orientation to Christianity. He neutralises his opponents by taking their arguments and positions and refuting them. In doing this, he also provides further resources for his audience to use in their own lives.

Incorporeality

Let us begin by considering a major "weapon" in Augustine's polemical arsenal, namely incorporeality. Simply put, to be incorporeal means to admit of no material or temporal properties, to be extended neither in space nor in time. God is not a "type" of thing within the universe, not an object that can be quantified or circumscribed. This commitment is central to Augustine's entire life and thought. According to figures such as É. Gilson and B. J. Cooke, the concept of divine immutability can even be seen as the foundation of much of the rest of his theology (O'Donnell, 1992, p. 394). Indeed, Augustine is the first known source to use terms such as *incommutabilitas* (O'Donnell, 1992, p. 395). It is, therefore, important to realise that Augustine's understanding of incorporeality is a fundamental aspect of his thought. Its use in a polemical context is not *ad hoc*; rather, it appears in various other (non-polemical) contexts. This commitment also provides a basis for engaging in a sort of apophatic theology, namely talking about God by what he is not, a method which would become fundamental for later interpreters, like Aquinas.

In this section, we shall consider the historical background and the eventual genesis of this concept in Augustine's oeuvre. Such a treatment will allow us to identify and understand its significance in homiletic and polemical contexts.

Historical background

Griffin and Paulsen attempt to contextualise the theme of divine (in)corporeality by relating Augustine's approach to this theme to the broader Christian milieu (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 98). They describe a situation in which Christians of Stoic sympathies, who conceived God in corporeal terms, held the majority over their counterparts who thought of God in non-spatial and non-temporal terms. Augustine's early corporeal conception of God was not his own idea, but was the standard view of his time, especially in the early African Church (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 98). It was this conception of God as something extended in time and space which

prevented Augustine for so long from accepting Christianity (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 98). Griffin and Paulsen assert, following the Louvanist Verbeke, that in the Christian west prior to Augustine, the belief in the incorporeality of God was not widely held, and in fact the reverse was true, and was strenuously defended by figures such as Tertullian and Lactantius (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 105). With the exception of a coterie of Christians with Platonic sympathies, Christians had no conception of God as purely spiritual (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 107).

These authors trace the transmission of Christian thought on incorporeality from Origen to Basil, Basil to Ambrose, and Ambrose to Augustine (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 116). The first Christian defender of divine incorporeality was Origen (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 101), whose reaction was occasioned by the ideas of two groups within Christianity, namely those who adhered to Stoic ideas, on the one hand, and those who emphasised a literal reading of passages which described God in human terms, on the other (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, pp. 101-2). As Griffin and Paulsen (2002, p. 115) write, "Origen enunciated a theology of the *kat' eikona* which removed it from the body entirely and placed it in the soul alone, removing any implication of anthropomorphism." The war over divine incorporeality was fought on the battlefield of image theology. Though Jewish theology had interpreted accounts of the creation of man in the image of God (Gen 1:26-7) in a physical or corporeal way, not all Christians (though obviously many) followed this view (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 114). For Augustine, the question of the corporeality of God is ultimately a question of hermeneutics, especially scriptural hermeneutics (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 110). He is clearly situated within the context of patristic exegesis, according to which predicates not "worthy" of God ("theoprepes/Deo dignum") must be interpreted in some non-literal or equivocal fashion (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, pp. 110-11).

Hence, Origen prepared the way for Basil to defend incorporeality in the East. As the latter states, "Do not circumscribe God with corporeal concepts, do not confine him with your mind" (Basil, *Or. Hom.* 1.5, sc 160, p. 176, in Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 103). This brief admonition could just as well be placed in the mouth of Augustine. Furthermore, as Van Winden (1997, p. 11) notes, Basil preached his sermons on the Hexaëmeron ca. 379, and in 380 Ambrose cited these homilies, even quoting from them verbatim. In these homilies, Basil speaks of the *arche* as timeless, suggesting that it cannot be extended temporally or spatially (Van Winden, 1997, pp. 23-24, n. 31).

Masai credits Marius Victorinus and the Platonists in Milan as influencing the development of incorporealism in the West (in Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 105; Lössl, 1994, p. 81). Lössl and Nielsen have also discussed how Augustine's time in Milan with figures such as Simplicianus, Ambrose, and Victorinus led him to

eschew his quondam attachment to a material conception of God (Lössl, 1994, p. 92; Nielsen, 2009, pp. 99-100). G. A. McCool also argues that Ambrose exerted a strong influence on Augustine in this respect (McCool, 1959, pp. 72-74, in Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 117). Indeed, one can see Augustine's own positions anticipated if not explicitly stated in the works of Victorinus and Ambrose (Boersma, 2016, pp. 58, 60, 71). The former is comfortable with describing God as *me on* (not being) (Boersma, 2016, p. 58). However, though Victorinus is uncomfortable with applying "substance" language to God, instead of saying that God is *anousion*, he says that God is "supersubstantial," *hyperousion* (Boersma, 2016, p. 58 [n. 31]).[3] Victorinus is also adamant about that God admits of no material or temporal qualities (Boersma, 2016, p. 60 [n. 40], 71; cf. Edwards, 2010, p. 105). Citing *conf.* (6.3.4-4.5), Griffin and Paulsen argue that Augustine began to think of God as incorporeal as a result of his encounter with Ambrose in Milan (Griffin & Paulsen, 2002, p. 117; cf. Jeanmart, 2006, p. 62). Augustine's move from a corporeal conception of God to an incorporeal one marked a fundamental shift in his thinking.

The foregoing has provided us with an overview of the historical development of the concept of incorporeality. In what follows we shall consider Augustine's own approach to this subject, in particular by focusing on a location in his *conf.* in which he describes his "conversion," experience that allowed him to think of God as neither spatial nor temporal. Though the *conf.* was composed in the late 390s, in the part considered below Augustine is recounting a period about a decade earlier in the 380s.

Augustine's "Conversion"

Augustine opens the seventh book of his *Confessions* by reflecting on a major shift in his thinking about the nature of reality and the divine.[4] He recalls with approval how he had begun to think of God in a way which did not conceive of him in human form: "I was no longer thinking of you, O God, in the figure of a human body, from which I began to hear something of wisdom"[5] (Augustine, *conf.* 7.1.1). In his commentary, O'Donnell notes the retrospective presentation in *conf.* 7; in other words,

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3   See Vict., *Ad Cand.* 1.13, csel 83,1, p. 30; *Adu. Ar.* 2.1, csel, 83,1, p. 169.

4   For more on the structural elements of the *conf.*, see, e.g., Williger (1929) and Madec (1970).

5   *conf.* 7.1.1, ccsl 27, p. 92: "non te cogitabam, Deus, in figura corporis humani: ex quo audire aliquid de sapientia coepi." For most quotations not in parentheses, I provide a full footnote reference and a parenthetical reference in the text. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

after his encounter with Platonic thought, Augustine came to understand his prior beliefs in the way that he presents them in this book of *conf.* (O'Donnell, 1992, p. 392). With respect to Augustine's shift or "conversion" to thinking of God as incorporeal, Teske distinguishes two particular developments as recounted in book seven. The first, which is presented in the opening passage of this book, pertains to thinking of God no longer in anthropomorphic terms (Teske, 2008, pp. 140-141). This describes Augustine in 385 at the age of 31 (Teske, 2008, pp. 140-141). Though Augustine began to hear the faint murmuring of truth, "something of wisdom" (*aliquid de sapientia*), this was undermined by his "materialistic" reflex, namely to think of God in other spatio-temporal terms: "I was not able to think something of a substance except such as the type of thing which is often seen through these eyes,"[6] by which he means the eyes of the flesh and the body (Augustine, *conf.* 7.1.1). Augustine is emphasising that the attempt to think of God in the familiar categories of time and space is bound to fail to capture him, not simply adequately, as that is not possible, but altogether. God is beyond all categorisation, and the logic of such worldly thinking can insinuate itself into one's reasoning process, subtly subverting it. Even when Augustine had disabused himself of the error of anthropomorphising God, and thought that he had risen to a higher level of understanding, his ideas were still vitiated by material categories: "although not in the form of a human body, I was nonetheless bound to think of you as something corporeal through spaces of places, whether infused in the world or even diffused outside the world through infinite spaces"[7] (Augustine, *conf.* 7.1.1). In the next paragraph, Augustine recounts how his way of thinking resulted in the conclusion that God could be "more present" in larger parts of the world and could be divided into various parts (Augustine, *conf.* 7.1.2). But Augustine thought this way for God had not yet shed light upon his intellectual darkness (Augustine, *conf.* 7.1.2). In his tractates on 1 John, as in the seventh book of his *Confessiones*, Augustine decries the error of thinking of God according to some corporeal form, even some form which is infinitely extended in space (Augustine, *ep. Io. tr.* 7.10). This is not to deny that God can and does take some form of mediation in order to interact with the world. Rather, the mistake for Augustine is reducing God to the forms of his mediations. Describing this error, Augustine writes that one makes for oneself an image of God perhaps as some "huge shape […] or he stretches out some immeasurable vastness through

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6   *conf.* 7.1.1, ᴄᴄsʟ 27, p. 92: "cogitare aliquid substantiae nisi tale non poteram, quale per hos oculos uideri solet."

7   *conf.* 7.1.1, ᴄᴄsʟ 27, p. 92: "quamuis non forma humani corporis, corporeum tamen aliquid cogitare cogerer per spatia locorum siue infusum mundo siue etiam extra mundum per infinita diffusum."

space, as though spreading across open places—as much as he can—the light that he sees with these eyes"[8] (Augustine, *ep. Io. tr.* 7.10, trans. Ramsey, 2008, p. 111). As Helm (2014, pp. 120-121) explains, in *conf.* 7 Augustine is describing one of the stages in the process whereby he finally came to a realisation of God's incorporeal character. What allowed him to do this was a Platonic "way of thinking about the Church's language about God that would free it of physical implications, implications about time and space, and so of the need for physical imagery" (Helm, 2014, pp. 120-121). Augustine gradually comes to realise the truly radical implications of human creatureliness and finitude, and in particular how it is realised epistemically, which we shall see in reference to intellectual humility.

This theme is continued throughout the seventh book of the *Confessiones*. For instance, later Augustine describes himself as having been plunged into a region of shadows and false images when he was still ignorant of God's incorporeality: "I found that I was far from you in a region of unlikeness"[9] (Augustine, *conf.* 7.10.16). As Menn writes, Augustine describes this tendency as the *consuetudo carnalis*,[10] which designates that particular weakness in human nature which causes it to think in merely "four-dimensional" terms, and to allow itself to be confined to such thinking (Menn, 2014, p. 93). In addition to *conf.* 7.17.23, Augustine makes a similar point in *trin.* 8.3 on the misleading nature of sensory images (Menn, 2014, p. 99). The result is that one tends away from the contemplation of unchanging truth to particular lesser reflections of it (Menn, 2014, p. 103). Augustine notes the contingency, finitude, and inherent limitations of all the particular entities he observes in the world around him, and how they differ from God in that they derive their being from him (Augustine, *conf.* 7.11.17). As Augustine writes of created things, they seem "neither completely to be nor completely not to be"[11] (Augustine, *conf.* 7.11.17). Moreover, Augustine also describes God in terms of an incorporeal light, far different from the light to which we are accustomed at the physical level (*aliud ualde*) (Augustine, *conf.* 7.10.16). Reiterating the point of God's infinite difference from creation in the fourteenth chapter, Augustine goes on to say that the soul is bound to remain in a state of disquietude and unease if it persists in conceiving of God along the lines of some finite, spatially extended substance (Augustine,

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8   *ep. Io. tr.* 7.10, PL 35, p. 2034: "ingentem formam, aut magnitudinem aliquam inaestimabilem distendit per locos, uelut lucem istam quam uidet his oculis, auget per campos quantum potest […]."

9   *conf.* 7.10.16, CCSL 27, p. 103: "inueni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis."

10 See *conf.* 7.17.23, CCSL 27, p. 107.

11 *conf.* 7.11.17, CCSL 27, p. 104: "nec omnino esse nec omnino non esse."

conf. 7.14.20). In another location, Augustine expresses this point, stating that it is a great thing to arrive at a conception of God as incorporeal, which according to him means "something which may not be extended through locations, nor change through times"[12] (Augustine, *en. Ps.* 146.14).[13] This incorporeal character is also distinctive of the form of wisdom, *species sapientiae* (Augustine, *en. Ps.* 146.14).

Continuing with *conf.* 7, one can notice a shift in Augustine's consideration of the transcendence of God. Whereas in the opening stages of this book, his language was redolent of physical and spatial imagery (e.g., *corporeum*, *diffusum*, *per spatia locorum*, *minorem partem*, etc.), Augustine takes a step further, including time in this consideration as well, thereby laying the logical foundation for a more extended discussion of time in the later books of this work (Augustine, *conf.* 7.15.21).[14] For Augustine, time is not the measure of motion (as he makes clear later in the *conf.*), but is itself co-extensive with a type of corporeal motion. Here he suggests that time arises as a result of creation. This move to link space and time is neither obvious nor self-evident; what Augustine is doing implicitly is positing an essential link between the two, viewing both of these as ineluctable conditions of finite, material creation. According to Helm, Augustine sees time and our experience of it in terms of past, present, and future, as a subtle if indubitable mark of our creaturely finitude, in contrast to God's eternity (Helm, 2014, p. 136).[15] Augustine's intuition is that extension, both temporal and spatial, intrinsically characterises created being, in contrast to the eternal and immutable God.[16] In due course, we shall see this theme developed in Augustine's sermons and in his polemical discourse.

The logical trajectory of Augustine's thought on time and distention comes as a result of his doctrine of *Creatio ex nihilo*.[17] The attempt to think of God as eternal,

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12 *en. Ps.* 146.14, ccsl 40, p. 2132: "aliquid quod non per loca extendatur, nec per tempora uarietur."

13 According to the *Tavola cronológica delle Esposizioni sui Salmi* of augustinus.it, this *enarratio* dates to 412.

14 *conf.* 7.15.21, ccsl 27, p. 106: "et uidi, quia non solum locis sua quaeque suis conueniunt sed etiam temporibus et quia tu, qui solus aeternus es, non post innumerabilia spatia temporum coepisti operari, quia omnia spatia temporum, et quae praeterierunt et quae praeteribunt, nec abirent nec uenirent nisi te operante et manente."

15 However, even if he separates time and space conceptually, it seems that *de facto* we cannot separate time and space, or rather that our experience of time and space are part and parcel of one another.

16 For more on this theme, see Flasch (1993).

17 Though scholars such as Tornau (2014) emphasise the distinctively Christian character of this doctrine, G. May has nuanced this assertion. See May (1978, pp. 9-26).

whilst we are situated within time, occasions one of the seminal reflections on the notion of time. As O'Regan (2012, p. 136) claims, "Augustine's reading of time is profound and [much] of the profundity derives from his specifically Christian commitments." In this sense, one can view Augustine's programme in the *Confessiones* as an expression of the "scriptural imagination," or what K. Anatolios (2007, p. 246) calls "biblical reasoning."

Manichaeism

As we have seen, Augustine in *conf.* 7 establishes the incorporeality of God, which, in addition to spatial categories, is also taken as applying to time. We see the intellectual results of this shift, for example, in the latter books of the *conf.*, when Augustine tries to understand what it is he loves when he loves God, and how God can be said to have created Heaven and Earth through his word. The shift described in the *conf.* occurred in the mid-380s during Augustine's time in Milan. Shortly thereafter, ca. 390, Augustine employs this concept in his polemics against the Manichaeans, his former co-religionists.

Augustine's ontological system departs from his Platonic influences insofar as the division consists no longer of the intellectual and the material, but rather between God and creation.[18] In his letter to Celestinus, Augustine divides reality into that which is God and that which is not God: "What I have hinted at here is that what is mutable in some way is called a creature, and what is immutable is called the Creator"[19] (Augustine, *ep.* 18.2). Elsewhere Augustine describes the contrast between mutable and immutable in the following way: "Other things which have been created are able to be in one way and then another. The one who created, however, is not able to be one way and then another"[20] (Augustine, *en. Ps.* 146.11). God cannot suffer change in any way (*mutari ex nulla parte potest*), nor does he admit of parts or pieces (Augustine, *en. Ps.* 146.11). As Cilleruelo puts it, "En Dios no tiene validez la dialéctica de este mundo" (Cilleruelo, 1965, p. 11). As we shall see presently, this theme finds its way into Augustine's anti-Arian homilies.

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18 Cf. Helm (2014, p. 136); Cilleruelo (1965, p. 11): "En cambio, el ser creado es espacio, tiempo, composición, extensión, etc."

19 *ep.* 18.2, CSEL 34,1, p. 45: "quod hic insinuaui quoquo modo mutabile, creatura dicitur; quod inmutabile, creator."

20 *en. Ps.* 146.11, CCSL 40, p. 2130: "Cetera quae sunt creata, aliter et aliter possunt esse; qui autem creauit, aliter et aliter non potest esse."

The context of Augustine's early discussion of time and creation is his anti-Manichaean polemic. As he writes in *De Genesi aduersus Manichaeos*, the Manichaeans refused to accept Genesis as a canonical book, and dismissively asked what God was doing before he made Heaven and Earth (Augustine, *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.2.3). Augustine responds by arguing that *principium* should not be understood as temporal, but as atemporal, eternal, as the foundation of all things in a conceptual and intelligible sense. In other words, the *principium* is the Son, the source of all the forms of creation (Augustine, *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.2.3). As a result of his exegesis of Genesis 1:1, Augustine states that time is a result of creation, and hence there is no time with God (Augustine, *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.2.3). Augustine takes a further step stating that time came to be as a result of the creation of Heaven and Earth: "And if time began to be with Heaven and Earth, a time at which God had not yet made Heaven and Earth is not able to be found"[21] (Augustine, *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.2.3).

In various locations, Augustine emphasises that God's eternity implies no passage of time, indeed, no aspect of time altogether. Thus Augustine says:

> [T]he Word of God, God with God, the only Son of God, is co-eternal with the Father, although when God said this in the eternal Word, a time-bound creature was made. While "when" and "some time" are time words, all the same the time when something should be made is eternal for the Word of God, and it is then made when it is in that Word that it should have been made, in the Word in which there is no "when" nor "some time," because that whole Word is eternal. (Augustine, *Gn. litt.* 1.2.6, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 170)[22]

In the early 390s, Augustine applied to the concept of incorporeality to a point of contention with the Manichaeans. The upshot is that because God is not subject to the flow of time, these categories do not apply to him. Hence, there was no "before" the creation of the world during which God would be doing things in the way we do them. We cannot think of God according to our familiar earthly categories, a point which Augustine uses against the Arians.

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21 *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.2.3, CSEL 91, p. 69: "Et si tempus cum coelo et terra esse coepit, non potest inueniri tempus quo Deus nondum fecerat coelum et terram."

22 *Gn. litt.* 1.2.6, CSEL 28,1, pp. 6-7: "Verbum Dei, Deus apud Deum, filius unicus Dei, patri coaeternus est, quamuis Deo haec in aeterno uerbo dicente creatura temporalis facta sit. cum enim uerba sint temporis, cum dicimus quando et aliquando, aeternum tamen est uerbo dei, quando fieri aliquid debeat, et tunc fit, quando fieri debuisse in illo uerbo est, in quo non est quando et aliquando, quoniam totum illud uerbum aeternum est."

Christmas Sermones

The liturgical feast of the Nativity, Christmas or Christ's birth as man provides the occasion for the exploration of the fuller breadth of the Christian mysteries. To put it another way, one cannot understand the full significance of the (human) nativity of Christ without understanding his complete identity, which is to be the eternally begotten Son of the Father (Augustine, *s.* 196.1). A particularly helpful biblical text for substantiating this view is the Gospel of John, to which Augustine looked for scriptural support for his view of divine eternity and immateriality. It also bespeaks the fundamental importance of this concept for Augustine. Moreover, this Gospel will also provide the basis for Augustine to challenge Arian understandings of filial generation.

One of the major themes running throughout the Christmas sermons is that of the two births, or the *duae natiuitates* of Christ, one eternally from the Father, and the other temporally from the Virgin (Augustine opens *s.* 139, one of the sermons considered below, with a theme from his Christmas sermons, namely the *duae natiuitates* of Christ; Augustine, *s.* 139.1.1). Both of these births are equally ineffable, incomprehensible, and miraculous. The first generation of the Son is the one that takes place in eternity from the Father, and which is described by the opening verse of John, which he quotes verbatim (Augustine, *s.* 196.1). In a characteristically dialectical style, Augustine plays on the complementary aspects between Christ's two generations, "one divine, the other human, both remarkable; the former without a woman as a mother, the latter without a man as a father"[23] (Augustine, *s.* 196.1). Augustine's conclusion is that "Catholic faith, you see, obliges us to accept two births for the Lord, one divine, the other human; the first apart from time, the second in time; both, however, wonderful; the first without mother, the second without father"[24] (Augustine, *s.* 190.2.2, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 39). As Berrouard (2004, p. 51) notes, Augustine particularly enjoys noting the paradoxical situations arising as a result of Christ's incarnation, such as his birth from the Virgin, whom he created. Christ and his mother, though they enjoy the same relationship that any child shares with its mother, also enjoy a much deeper relationship, which is similar to he one that all of us enjoy with our Creator. This entire dynamic is one

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23 *s.* 196.1, PL 38, p. 1019: "una diuina, altera humana: ambae mirabiles; illa sine femina matre, ista sine uiro patre." See also *s.* 187.1, PL 38, p. 1001: "Filius Dei de Patre sine matre, filius hominis de matre sine patre." Cf. Berrouard (2004, p. 51).

24 *s.* 190.2.2, PL 38, pp. 1007-8: "Debemus enim fide catholica retinere duas esse natiuitates Domini unam diuinam, alteram humanam; illam sine tempore, hanc in tempore. Ambas autem mirabiles: illam sine matre, istam sine patre."

of remarkable, ineffable, paradoxical beauty, which leads Augustine to exclaim, "O manifest infirmity and wondrous humility in which was thus concealed total divinity!"[25] (Augustine, *s.* 184.3, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 19).

We are familiar with Augustine describing Christ as light, though in some Christmas *sermones* he also describes the Son as eternal day (*dies Filius ex die Patre, Deus ex Deo, lumen ex lumine*) (Augustine, *s.* 190.3.4). "Who is that day from day," Augustine asks rhetorically, "except the Son from the Father, light from light?"[26] (Augustine, *s.* 189.1). In *s.* 195, Augustine exhorts his listeners, "So let us celebrate this day as a high and happy holiday; and faithfully long for the eternal day through him, who being eternal was born for us in time"[27] (Augustine, *s.* 195.3, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 58). Hence, in the opening paragraph of the following *sermo*, Augustine can refer to the feast of the nativity as the day that "day" was born: "The birthday, on which the Day was born"[28] (Augustine, *s.* 196.1, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 60). As eternal day, he admits of no beginning or end, no rising or setting (*dies ergo ille non habet ortum, non habet occasum*) (Augustine, *s.* 189.1). He is the day of the heavenly homeland, where the angels dwell and await man to join them. This eternal, incorporeal light is the same who takes on flesh and is born of the Virgin (Augustine, *s.* 189.2).[29]

In the Christmas sermons, we see a deepening of the theme of the immutability and eternity of the divine Word. The liturgical observance of the human birth of Christ also offers an opportunity for discussing this child's identity with the divine Word. In the Christmas homilies, Augustine attempts to understand the eternal generation of the Son from the Father, faithful to the tenets of Nicene theology. He holds that the eternal Word is begotten by the Father apart from any temporal consideration (Augustine, *s.* 186.3). As Augustine states,

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25 *s.* 184.3.3, sᴘᴍ 1, p. 76: "O manifesta infirmitas, et mira humilitas, in qua sic latuit tota diuinitas!"

26 *s.* 189.1, ᴍᴀ 1, p. 209: "Quis est iste dies de die nisi Filius de Patre, lumen de lumine?"

27 *s.* 195.3, ᴘʟ 38, p. 1019: "Hunc ergo diem laeti solemniter celebremus et aeternum diem, per eum qui nobis aeternus in tempore natus est, fideliter exoptemus."

28 *s.* 196.1, ᴘʟ 38, p. 1019: "Natalis dies, quo natus est dies." See also: "illud sine die, hoc certo die."

29 See also *s.* 195.1, PL 38, p. 1018: "[Q]uis enim enarrabit quomodo natum sit lumen de lumine, et unum lumen utrumque sit ? quomodo natus sit Deus de Deo, nec deorum numerus creuerit? quomodo uelut de re transacta dicatur quod natus est, cum tempus in illa natiuitate nec transierit, quo praeterita esset; nec praecesserit, quo futura esset; nec praesens fuerit, quasi adhuc fieret, et perfecta non esset?"

> the one who was before all ages the Son of God, without beginning
> of days, was prepared in these last days to become a son of man; and
> that the one who was born of the Father, not made by the Father, was
> made in the mother whom he had made; so that he might exist here for
> a time, being born of her who could never and nowhere have existed
> except through him.[30] (Augustine, *s.* 191.1.1, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 42)

One and the same Christ, the eternally begotten Son who is also *born of a woman* in the Incarnation, is the one who establishes time itself (*de Patre ordinans omnem diem*) (Augustine, *s.* 194.1). Moreover, in his divine nature, he is entirely beyond and outside of time (*de Patre sine tempore*) (Augustine, *s.* 194.1). Not only does the Son, though begotten, not admit of temporal features such as having a beginning, but also he stands as the condition for any beginning whatsoever (*sine initio generato nullum est initium*) (Augustine, *s.* 196.1). This is because the Son is the principle through which God the Father creates all things, a point made clear by the frequent references to John 1:1 throughout this homily (Augustine, *s.* 196.1). Augustine admonishes his listeners not to seek a "when" in Heaven, that is, in the Son's eternal begetting from the Father (Augustine, *s.* 189.4). This generation is beyond any notion of time whatsoever, whereas one rightly notes the temporal character to Christ's human birth (*ambae generationes mirabiles. Prima generatio aeterna, secunda temporalis*) (Augustine, *s.* 189.4). In his divine nature, however, Christ exists beyond time and space, without beginning or end (*ipse [=Filius] apud Patrem praecedit cuncta spatia saeculorum*) (Augustine, *s.* 191.1.1). Furthermore, the eternal generation of the Son from the Father is qualitatively distinct from the act of creating all things through the Word; whilst the Son is eternally begotten and neither created nor made, this is not the case of creation (Augustine, *s.* 188.1.1). The created world admits of flux, motion, change, none of which are present in the divine nature (*mundum autem fecit Deus; mundus transit, permanet Deus*) (Augustine, *s.* 188.1.1). And just as God is eternal and beyond time, so too is he beyond space. In fact, God's invisibility and his eternity are part and parcel of his incorporeality. In his divine nature, God is invisible, and wholly different from the sun, which we can see with our eyes (Augustine, *s.* 186.1). In speaking of the discarnate Word, Augustine describes him as not located in a particular place or admitting of change over the course of time: "[the Word of God] is neither confined in places,

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30 *s.* 191.1.1, PL 38, p. 1010: "erat ante omnia saecula sine initio dierum Dei Filius, esse in nouissimis diebus dignatus est hominis filius; et qui de Patre natus, non a Patre factus erat, factus est in matre quam fecerat; ut ex illa ortus hic aliquando esset, quae nisi per illum nunquam et nusquam esse potuisset."

nor stretched out through times, nor varied by short and long quantities, nor woven together out of different sounds, nor ended by silence"[31] (Augustine, *s.* 187.2, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 28).

The Christmas *sermones* serve as an occasion for Augustine to emphasise the incomprehensible and ineffable quality of the mystery of Christ and his (double) generation (*utrumque sine humana aestimatione, et cum magna admiratione*) (Augustine, *s.* 196.1). A human mind is incapable of understanding neither of Christ's births, a point to which Isaiah 53:8 testifies (*generationem eius quis enarrabit?*) (Augustine, *s.* 196.1). As if it were not difficult enough to understand how the Son was eternally begotten without any beginning, his entry into our material reality is even more unfathomable, and this is a result of our finitude. As Augustine states, "Who could ever grasp that, who could ever think worthy thoughts about it? Whose mind would dare to scrutinise it, whose tongue dare to pronounce upon it? Whose thought would be capable of grasping it?" (Augustine, *s.* 196.1, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 60).[32] "Small wonder therefore," Augustine says, "if we human beings, who are among all the things that were made, cannot explain in words the Word through which all things were made" (Augustine, *s.* 188.1.1, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 31).[33] Any thoughts or words that our mind could produce are inherently conditioned by the temporal, finite, contingent, and created nature of the mind itself. He speaks of the mind as forming words about that by which it was itself formed (Augustine, *s.* 188.1.1). Indeed, one is attempting to understand the very Word which made one, using discursive thought to understand what is beyond temporal transition. Hence, there will always be some limitation in our ability to comprehend God, always moving towards this understanding asymptotically. The realisation of this fact should not surprise us; rather, once we recognise and acknowledge it, authentic deepening in wisdom can take place (Augustine, *s.* 188.1.1). In a very real sense, then, our created nature represents an "ontological" prejudice of sorts, not to mention the sinfulness inherent in humanity.

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31 *s.* 187.2, PL 38, p. 1001: "nec locis concluditur, nec temporibus tenditur, nec morulis breuibus longisque uariatur, nec uocibus texitur, nec silentio terminatur."

32 *s.* 196.1, PL 38, p. 1019: "Quis hoc capiat? Quis hoc digne cogitet? Cuius mens hoc audeat perscrutari? Cuius lingua audeat pronuntiare? Cuius ualeat cogitatio capere?" See also *s.* 196.1, PL 38, p. 1019: "Quomodo, nescio. Quaeris ab homine quomodo sit genitus Deus?" See also *s.* 189.3, MA 1, p. 210: "Creauit omnia, creatus est inter omnia; fecit diem, uenit in diem; erat ante tempora, signauit tempora. Dominus Christus in aeternum sine initio apud Patrem."

33 *s.* 188.1.1, PL 38, p. 1003: "Non igitur mirum si homo factus inter omnia, uerbis non explicat Verbum, per quod facta sunt omnia."

Due to the limitations caused by sinfulness and finitude, the dynamic of human knowing is reversed, as it is Christ who first comes to us, and our subsequent movements are responses to his initiative. As Augustine states, "You were sleeping, he comes to you; you were snoring, and he has roused you; he made a way for you through himself, lest he lose you" (Augustine, *s.* 189.2).[34] It is fitting and even necessary that Truth would come to us, as in virtue of sin darkness had entered the world. Hence, the one who wishes to speak the truth must turn towards the Truth itself (Augustine, *s.* 189.2). Beginning from visible things, Christ is always moving us to a knowledge of the invisible, but in and through, and without demeaning the former (*ad illum imus, per illum imus, non perimus*) (Augustine, *s.* 189.1).

In this section we have seen how incorporeality is developed in some of Augustine's homilies. In the next section, we shall see how these same themes are directly applied to his anti-Arian polemic.

Anti-Arian Sermons

Before beginning, however, I should say something about the situation of Augustine's anti-Arian polemics. Augustine was born only a few decades after Nicaea, whose reception was uneven and uneasy, to say the least. Even still, the Bishop of Hippo is not known for engaging in Alexandrian debates from the early fourth century. Due to the socio-political unrest of the early fifth century, more and more Christians of an Arian persuasion found their way to North Africa, precipitating a major pastoral challenge. According to M. Pontet (1946), the introduction of Arian thought into North Africa was one of the motivations for Augustine to compose his monumental *Tractatus* on John's Gospel. In *s.* 117, Augustine is also speaking about John, in particular the first three verses, in order to challenge the Arians. The Christmas sermons as well contain copious Johannine references. Other scholars have noted that Augustine reacted against Arian tendencies in such works as his *ep.* 147, composed ca. 415 (Vannier, 2006, p. 280; Studer, 1971, pp. 8, 37).[35] As we shall see in due course, Arianism was a serious concern for Augustine as a pastor and theologian.

As I consider *s.* 117, I shall begin by addressing Augustine's non-polemical approach to incorporeality and how it informs about what one might call a negative

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34 *s.* 189.2, ма 1, p. 210: "Dormiebas, uenit ad te: stertebas, excitauit te: uiam tibi fecit per se, ne perderet te."

35 For the date of *ep.* 147 and other letters, I refer to the *Tavola cronológica delle lettere* at augustinus.it.

theology. Then, I shall consider the manner in which he applies this concept in his critique of Arianism.

The implications of divine incorporeality for human knowing are manifold, but one that Augustine specifies here is the importance of a confession of one's ignorance and finitude. Because God is so different from us, we must be reticent to map our spatio-temporal categories onto the divine. This realisation is at the foundation of the claim that we should be willing to accept pious ignorance with respect to God.

The Gospel of John is invested with protreptic potential according to Augustine. Rather than trying to speak about the Word, Augustine decides to describe the reasons why it is so difficult to speak meaningfully about this Word (Augustine, *s.* 117.2.3). In a sense, the point of the text is negative; one is not meant to arrive at understanding because of it, but rather realise one's lack of understanding, and, from this quest, remove the impediments to understanding (Augustine, *s.* 117.2.3):

> We say how incomprehensible what was read may be. Nevertheless it was read, not so that it may be comprehended by a person, but so that a person may sorrow because he does not understand it, and may discover whence he is impeded from comprehension and remove those things, and may desire the perception of the unchangeable Word, being himself changed from something lesser into something better. (Augustine, *s.* 117.2.3, pl 38, p. 663)[36]

According to P. van Geest, Augustine is emphatic that certain truths, and especially truths about God, escape complete knowledge and understanding on this side of the veil. Hence, the search for truth and wisdom transcends the merely intellectual, and include the dispositions and attitudes of the hearts of seekers of truth. In this way, according to Van Geest, Augustine is a true mystagogue (Van Geest, 2011, p. 66). What this implies is that Augustine's discussion is ultimately about something more than just a theory about (the conditions of) knowledge, but admits an eschatological character, indeed, a mystical one, in that it pertains to the soul's intimate union with God, not only in Heaven, but already, albeit imperfectly, here on Earth (Vannier, 1991, p. 160).

Augustine elaborates on the Word's immutability in relation to time and space. Nothing we do, Augustine says, can effect or cause any change in the divine Word.

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36 *s.* 117.2.3, pl 38, p. 663: "Dicimus quam incomprensibile sit quod lectum est; tamen lectum est, non ut comprehenderetur ab homine, sed ut doloret homo quia non comprehendit, et inueniret unde impeditur a comprehensione, et remoueret ea, et inhiaret perceptioni incommutabilis Verbi, ipse ex deteriore in melius commutatus."

He remains intact and whole at all times. Furthermore, just as the objects to which we are accustomed in our daily experience are confined to certain times and places, they are limited and circumscribed by these spatio-temporal indices. In virtue of being *there*, my book cannot be *here*. The result is that in a particular part or region of time and space, a part of an object is less than the whole, or at least different. In virtue of being situated in a corporeal matrix, one is *ipso facto* exposed to conditions of contingency, flux, and spatial limitation. This is not the case with the divine Word, because, as immaterial, is not confined to a place, and yet is mysteriously present in all times and places (*manens in se, et innouans omnia*), and is their very condition and ground.[37] Augustine describes this Word as "the form of all things, the form not fashioned, without time, as we have said, and without spaces of places" (Augustine, *s.* 117.2.3).[38] The approach here is dynamic, as the broadening of one's perspective simultaneously reveals the limits of that perspective. Augustine warns us about applying the worldly categories we have gleaned from regular experience to the divine Word. Rather, we must seek to challenge and overcome these prejudices:

> Thus, all things that are in a place are less in the part than in the whole. Let us understand no such thing about that Word, let us think nothing of the sort. Let us not conceive spiritual things from the suggestion of the flesh. That Word, that God is not less in the part than in the whole. (Augustine, *s.* 117.3.4)[39]

The upshot, as Augustine puts it, is that "Thus let us understand the Word of God, dearest brethren, as born incorporeally, inviolably, unchangeably, without a temporal birth; nevertheless born from God" (Augustine, *s.* 117.4.6).[40]

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37 *s.* 117.2.3, PL 38, p. 663.

38 *s.* 117.2.3, PL 38, p. 663: "forma omnium rerum, forma infabricata, sine tempore, ut diximus, et sine spatiis locorum."

39 *s.* 117.3.4, PL 38, p. 663: "Sic omnia quae sunt in loco, minora sunt in parte quam in toto. Nihil tale de illo Verbo sentiamus, nihil tale cogitemus. Non de suggestione carnis spiritalia imaginemur. Non est ille sermo, non est ille Deus minor in parte quam in toto." See also *s.* 117.3.4, PL 38, p. 663: "Omne autem quod spatium loci occupat, minus est in parte quam in toto."

40 *s.* 117.4.6, PL 38, p. 664: "Itaque Verbum Dei, fratres carissimi, incorporaliter, inuiolabiliter, incommutabiliter, sine temporali natiuitate, natum tamen intellegamus a Deo." See also *s.* 117.2.3; 3.5, PL 38, pp. 663-664: "sed quando aspicis aliam partem, quam non uideras, nisi memoria tecum faciat ut memineris te uidisse unde recedis, numquam te dixeris aliquid uel in superficie comprehendisse. Tractas quod uides, uersas huc atque illuc, uel ipse circuis ut totum uideas. Uno ergo aspectu totum

Augustine admonishes his audience to remember that God is far different from anything we have experienced in our daily lives, whether we perceived it by the senses of the body or thought it in the mind: "Before all things keep this: that whatever we have been able to collect, whether by a sense of the body or a thought of the mind, indescribably transcends the Creator" (Augustine, *s.* 117.10.15). In order to know this, and indeed, to know anything about God, one must cleanse and purge one's mind. Augustine suggests that the purity of heart required to see God is a sort of ontological purgation. That is, one cleanses one's heart by ceasing to think of God in corporeal categories, and constantly reminds oneself by a sort of apophatic reflex that God is ultimately transcendent. As Augustine states, "Do you wish to touch him mentally? Purge your mind, purge your heart. Cleanse the eye by which that may be attained, whatever that is. Cleanse the eye of the heart, for 'Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God'" (Augustine, *s.* 117.10.15; Mt 5:8).

Christ remains fully God and is not changed into man, but rather changes man in himself.[41] Augustine confirms such a reading, stating that what came to be through the Word is re-made through him as well: "what has been made through the Word, this is returned to [the Word], so that it might be restored" (Augustine *s.* 117.2.2).[42] Augustine establishes in the opening lines of *s.* 117 the logical foundation for a theology of re-creation, stating that, in his divine nature, Christ is the source of all creation, and in his human nature, he is the source of the restoration of a fallen world: "As John teaches in his Gospel, we take the Lord Jesus Christ according to his divinity as founding all creation, and according to his humanity as repairing fallen creation" (Augustine, *s.* 117.1.1).[43] "He descends to us," Augustine says, "and will we not ascend to him? For us he takes our death, and is he not about to give us his life?" (Augustine, *s.* 119.5).[44] Christ comes in the flesh as milk for children, allowing himself to be perceptible to our bodily senses. In virtue of the incarnation, we are given a point of contact with the divine in this world: "Therefore he comes,

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uidere non potes. Et quamdiu uersas ut uideas, partes uides; et contexendo quia uidisti alias partes, uideris totum inspicere. Non autem hic oculorum uisus, sed memoriae uiuacitas intellegitur."

41   *s.* 117.10.16, PL 38, pp. 670-1.

42   *s.* 117.2.2, PL 38, p. 662: "quod per ipsum Verbum factum est, hoc ei redditur ut reficiatur."

43   *s.* 117.1.1, PL 38, p. 661: "Dominum enim nostrum Iesum Christum accepimus secundum di-uinitatem ad condendam uniuersam creaturam, secundum humanitatem ad reparandam lapsam creaturam, euangelizante Ioanne."

44   *s.* 119.5, PL 38, p. 675: "Descendit ad nos, et non ad illum ascendemus? Accepit pro nobis mortem nostram, et non nobis daturus est uitam suam?"

therefore he takes our infirmity, so that you might be able to grasp the strong utterance of the God who is carrying your infirmity" (Augustine, *s.* 117.10.16).[45] Even though one cannot see the Word in his divinity, one can still hear him in the flesh: "But so that we may arrive, if we are not yet able to see the Word as God, let us hear the Word as flesh. Because we were made carnal, let us hear the Word made flesh" (Augustine, *s.* 117.10.16).[46] One can understand divine things to a greater or lesser degree, in particular with God's help.[47] When we believe in the true Christ, God and man, Christ enables us to see who he truly is.

Thus far in *s.* 117, we have seen how Augustine elaborates on his understanding of incorporeality in his exegesis of John. He speaks of the immutability of the divine and hence of the Son's eternal, that is, non-temporal generation. A direct implication of this position is to consider the weakness of our own intellect when trying to think about God. For example, in *s.* 119, whilst discussing the remarkable mystery of the Incarnation, Augustine suggests that his listeners must learn to think in a new modality, not to think about things according to their earthly categories, but according to divine ones (*nec nosti diuina cogitare*).[48] As suggested above, Augustine's apophaticism (if it can be so called) is an intrinsic aspect of his thought, and we see further evidence for this in *s.* 117. However, in light of various contextual circumstances, Augustine can also appeal to or elaborate upon this doctrine in order to respond to a position that to him seems heretical, in this case the Arians.

In *s.* 117, Augustine presents two distinct if closely related arguments against the Arians, arguments that he had previously used against the Manichaeans. First, whereas the *ecclesia* is able to distinguish between the things of this world and those of God, the Arians succumb to the temptation of thinking of the divine in worldly terms. Secondly, whereas the true Christian appeals to a humble faith, the Arians fall into the sin of intellectual pride, and they are led astray by their reasoning. The realisation of God's difference from us requires the humility already suggested. These two moves allow Augustine to re-enforce a sense of group identity.

The particular Arian position with which Augustine is concerned is presented as follows: the Father and the Son cannot be equal, for the Father begets the Son,

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45   *s.* 117.10.16, PL 38, p. 670: "Ideo enim uenit, ideo suscepit infirmitatem nostram, ut possis firmam locutionem capere Dei portantis infirmitatem tuam."

46   *s.* 117.10.16, PL 38, p. 670: "Sed ut perueniamus, si nondum possumus uidere Verbum Deum, audiamus Verbum carnem; quia carnales facti sumus, audiamus Verbum carnem factum."

47   *s.* 117.9.12, PL 38, p. 667.

48   *s.* 119.6, PL 38, p. 675.

which means that the Father precedes the Son in time. They look to the example of human generation, in which a father is always born before his son. The conclusion is that the Son must be somehow less than the Father.

In his polemical reaction against the Arian position, Augustine seizes the opportunity to apply his doctrinal understanding of God's eternity, a position that have already been in his thought for decades. As we have seen, to be incorporeal for Augustine means not to be extended in space or in time. The Arian position suggested here aligns more closely with the Stoic idea that claims that God still exists within time, but simply for a longer or even indefinite period. Rather, Augustine wishes to say that God exists beyond or outside of time altogether. In this particular context, incorporeality provides Augustine with the resources to think about generation apart from temporal categories.

In *s.* 117 Augustine is not willing simply to appeal to mystery. Rather, he wants to beat the Arians at their own game. Just as they use examples taken from creation, so too does Augustine, but with the appropriate qualifications. In his mind, the Arians have drawn from the wrong comparison.

Though he expresses his misgivings about comparisons between the temporal and the eternal, Augustine feels confident presenting a certain analogy between co-eternity, which he applies to the Father and the Son, and coevality, or the condition of being of the same temporal duration. Augustine compares the Father's begetting of the Son to the warmth that proceeds from a fire. The latter are coaeval, that is, of the same temporal duration. They cannot be separated, as they come to be at the same time. However, the relationship is asymmetrical: the fire generates warmth and not vice-versa. This suggests some model for thinking about the relationship between the Father and the Son, though, of course, the Trinity is not subject to time, but is the foundation of all time (Augustine, *s.* 117.8.11). One must always remember that both the fire and the warmth thereof come to be in time (*ambos tamen esse coepisse*, Augustine, *s.* 117.7.10).

Given all of Augustine's warnings about thinking of God in earthly terms, it seems curious that he would turn to the fire and heat example. However, I do not think Augustine is contradicting himself here, especially in light of what he says about recalling that fire has a beginning. Rather, I think his point is the following: Even within the world of time and space there are situations in which causal efficacy does not necessarily imply temporal priority.

Augustine suggests that a pitfall of theological reasoning is aligning oneself too closely with custom and habit, especially when it comes to the very categories of our world, as in the case of the Arians: "the Church of God has often been sorely tried, when materialistically-minded people find it easier to accept what they have

been accustomed to see" (Augustine, *s.* 117.4.6, trans. Hill, 1993, p. 212).[49] He warns his audience about the danger of too closely linking material of reality with that of the divine: "By this habit of seeing, they desire to transfer carnal things to spiritual ones, and they are easily led astray by the extension of carnal things" (Augustine, *s.* 117.5.7).[50] Our customs and our daily experience teach us to think of words in terms of the individual words of our languages, but Augustine warns us against thinking of the divine Word in this way (*solemus, audiendo quotidie humana uerba, uile habere nomen hoc Verbi. Hic noli habere uile nomen Verbi*).[51] As he states, "I produce a word concerning the Word. But what kind of word concerning what kind of Word? I make a mortal word concerning an immortal Word, a mutable word about an immutable Word, a transitory word about an eternal Word" (Augustine, *s.* 120.3.3).[52]

According to S. Heßbrüggen-Walter, Augustine's critique of dialectic can be understood in light of his reaction against Arianism (Heßbrüggen-Walter, 2005, p. 186). Whilst his early confidence in dialectic comes close to the methods of the Arians, by *doct. chr.*, this position has been qualified. Heßbrüggen-Walter suggests that this was caused by his scandal at the Arians' approach to philosophy and dialectic (Heßbrüggen-Walter, 2005, p. 202). About this, Augustine is close to Ambrose, and I think it is likely that the latter could have been an inspiration in this respect. Ambrose claimed that the Arians, in contrast to the "true" church, appealed to philosophy and abstruse argumentation, not to a humble faith (Heßbrüggen-Walter, 2005, p. 186). He applied Col 2:8-9 to the Arians, using the words of Paul to claim that the followers of Arius took (human, worldly) philosophy as their starting point or their hermeneutic (Heßbrüggen-Walter, 2005, p. 192). Ambrose warns his audience to be wary of human things, for example, in his *De fide* 5.41-2, in which he states that salvation comes through faith, not knowledge: "It has not pleased God," writes Ambrose, "to save his people by dialectic" (Heßbrüggen-Walter, 2005, pp. 192-193). In addition to the Arians in *s.* 117, Augustine directs the same accusation towards the Manichaeans, whom he claims fail to acknowledge and appreciate the

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49 *s.* 117.4.6, PL 38, p. 664: "Ecclesia Dei saepe tentata est, cum carnales homines id facilius accipiunt quod uidere consueuerunt."

50 *s.* 117.5.7, PL 38, p. 665: "Hac consuetudine uidendi, carnalia transferre illi ad spiritalia cupiunt, et intentione carnalium facilius seducuntur."

51 *s.* 119.2, PL 38, p. 674; cf. Ferri (2007, p. 61).

52 *s.* 120.3.3, PL 38, p. 677: "Verbum facio de Verbo. Sed quale uerbum, de quali Verbo? Mortale uerbum, de immortali Verbo; mutabile uerbum, de immutabili Verbo; transitorium uerbum, de aeterno Verbo."

limitations of human reason. Augustine learned from his own experience how human reason can be limited, especially if it views itself as self-sufficient. He is also concerned with the vanity associated with intellectual enquiry and is concerned about the vicious potential of *curiositas* (Harrison, 1992, p. 47). In certain cases, it is better to accept one's ignorance than to place an exceedingly high trust in one's own knowledge.

In *s.* 135, Augustine again appeals to the language of the opening verse of John in order to substantiate his claim that the Son is of the same substance of the Father and eternal, noting that instead of opting to say that the Word was made, for example, John writes simply that it was (*erat*) (Augustine, *s.* 135.3.4). Augustine takes this observation to mean that the Son is begotten apart from any consideration of time, for God is capable of such an act (Augustine, *s.* 135.3.4). He also reads Ps 109:3 as supporting this position (Augustine, *s.* 135.3.4). Augustine refuses to read Ps 109:3 in a literal way about the bodily features of God, denying that the divine nature possesses corporeal parts. Rather, the Father's begetting of the Son *ex utero* signifies that the Son is of the same substance (Augustine, *s.* 135.3.4). By some miracle the two "persons" of the Trinity are able to be one God, whereas in this world a father and a son are simply two separate people, even if they are of the same nature (Augustine, *s.* 135.3.4). A heart cleansed of blindness is able to recognise and acknowledge the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son (Augustine, *s.* 135.4.5).

As in *s.* 117, Augustine states in *s.* 139 that the generation of the Son by the Father does not answer to a worldly logic of times (Augustine, *s.* 139.2.3). In *s.* 244, Augustine states that his Arian opponents falsely claim that the Son's birth implies a temporal aspect. He accuses them of thinking according to an earthly fashion (Augustine, *s.* 244.4). In response, the interlocutor in this sermon asks Augustine to explain how the Son could be "born" if he existed eternally, or always (*quomodo natus, si semper fuit*) (Augustine, *s.* 244.4). In contrast to his strategy in *s.* 117, Augustine confesses that he cannot, but rather appeals to the words of Isaiah, "Who will describe his begetting?" (Augustine, *s.* 244.4; Is 53:8).

Augustine also suggests that the Arians' own arguments do not make sense even on a terrestrial level. The inequality between human fathers and sons consists in their difference in age, not in nature. It is highly unusual for any animals we know, even humans, to produce offspring of a different or lesser nature. If this does happen, the child is called a monster. How awful, Augustine states, is it to suggest that God's Son is a freak or a mistake (Augustine, *s.* 139.2.3). (Later he wryly remarks that the Arians will be hard-pressed to find solace in a God after describing the Father as begetting a degenerate; Augustine, *s.* 139.4.5.)

Conclusion

In this contribution I have addressed how the theme of incorporeality is present in Augustine's earliest works, how it is applied in an early polemic, and how it is continuously developed in homiletic and polemical contexts. I discussed the broader historical context to the discussion of incorporeality and Augustine's gradual "conversion" to this position, a conversion integrally connected with his decision to forsake Manichaeism. We have also seen how the Christmas homilies more fully develop these themes in conversation with John's Gospel with no apparent polemical intent. Augustine elaborates a way of thinking about a non-temporal birth that avoids identifying the Son as created. The mystery of these births as recounted in John serves to make one aware of one's own limitations in thinking about the divine.

   The conception of incorporeality would later become significant for Augustine in another way, namely disputing Arian Christology. Incorporeality provides Augustine with a conception of the divinity exempted from the vicissitudes of time and space. Therefore, it provides a way of thinking about how the Son can proceed from God but not in time, and hence not have a beginning. It provides resources for articulating an eternal begetting of the Son that avoids associations with creation, or, put it differently, preserving the divinity of the Son. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the mystery of incorporeality, or rather the weakness of our intellect in thinking about what is not spatial or temporal, provides Augustine with the latitude to confess ignorance in his polemic against the Arians. He can in a sense concede their point, namely that the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity is difficult if not impossible to comprehend. But why should we be surprised if we cannot comprehend the incomprehensible?

   We see these points encapsulated in *s.* 117, preached on the Gospel of John. In this homily Augustine appeals to incorporeality as a principle to aid in his exegesis. It provides him with the resources to explain generation in a Trinitarian sense. The reader may perceive Augustine's commitment to the importance of recognising the weakness of one's intellect apart from any polemical interest. Nonetheless, he does find a place for such polemics in *s* 117. He launches two closely related attacks at his opponents, claiming that they lack the capacity to think of God in appropriate, that is, non-worldly terms, and that they have fallen into the sin of intellectual pride. Indeed, this allows Augustine to communicate to his listeners a template for thinking about the eternal generation of the Son and to re-enforce a shared sense of identity grounded in Nicene doctrine.

   One result of this study is to show Augustine's emphasis on the place of intellectual humility when speaking about God. One can ask whether the Bishop of Hippo is entirely consistent, as at times he wishes to appeal to mystery and confess his pious ignorance, but at other times he wishes to match his opponents with arguments

and examples of his own. In other words, Augustine's apparent double standard would undermine the validity of his conclusions. In any case, both strategies served to provide his audience with a sense of identity grounded in the development of his doctrine of incorporeality.

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