

WHAT SEPARATES THE BIRTH OF TWINS

Jordan Kirk

0. OBJECT OF THE COMMENTARY

*Haec enim regula dilectionis divinitus constituta est: diliges, inquit, proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum, deum vero ex toto corde, ex tota anima, ex tota mente.*¹

1. AUGUSTINIAN HERMENEUTICS

In principle, the procedure for the interpretation of scripture laid out in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* is as straightforward as it is well-known. All biblical passages should be referred to the double commandment to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. No matter what a given chapter and verse would seem to say, its ultimate meaning is no more and no less than what has been called the "doctrine of charity." To understand holy writing is to discover in what way it can be seen to command the double love of God and other people. Accordingly, were Augustine to produce a scriptural concordance, every verse would point its reader to Matthew 22:37-9 and the associated places where the "twin commandments" can be found, and under the entries for these verses would be recapitulated the holy writings in their entirety. Augustine does not shy away from the implications of his method. For he does not stop at saying that anyone who thinks he understands some part of the sacred writings, but makes no reference to the "twin love" of God and neighbor, has in fact failed to understand it at all. He goes so far as to maintain that, so too, anyone who does come up with a reading that promotes this love, but misses what the person who wrote the passage in question really meant to say, "has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar."² To discover a reference to the commandments of love in a

¹ Augustine, *De doctrina*, I.22. All passages from this work are taken from the edition by R. P. H. Green with an accompanying translation; Green's English has been modified where indicated.

² *Ibid.*, I.36. *Quisquis igitur scripturas divinas vel quamlibet earum partem intellexisse sibi videtur, ita ut eo intellectu non aedificet istam geminam caritatem dei et proximi,*

passage where no such reference exists is, if only minimally, to understand it.

This is a precept and a method for the production of commentary. It is not a question of declaring that such a reference is invariably present but in elaborating each time the itinerary along which it will pass. This is in no small part because the transfer of sense Augustine calls for is not only a movement from one location to another within the biblical corpus: the reason a given passage is to be brought back to the commandments is that it will be brought thereby to other people. Here is the *doctrina* of the book's title: an instruction of other people consisting in explaining to them the meaning of the holy writings.³ For these writings are sometimes more and sometimes less obscure, but they will become clear from first to last when they have been commented in such a way that their clarities and obscurities both are referred to the commandments of love. Although commentary thus conceived would appear, no doubt rightly, always to produce the same interpretation no matter what it has before it, this seeming reductiveness is only the inverse of the great proliferation of explanations that must result when every verse, even the most intractable, is declared interpretable with reference to a single precept, and explicable to even the least apt. But the commentary Augustine instructs in will lead not just to sanctimonious redundancies for a reason more fundamental still. This is that the "twin commandments" are themselves refractory to the understanding, their meaning obscure not only incidentally or temporarily but permanently and insofar as they remain scripture's principle of intelligibility. The hermeneutic program laid out in *De doctrina* is founded squarely on an inability to understand the passage in whose light all others will become clear, as Augustine indicates in the extraordinary sentence that is the object of the present commentary.⁴

nondum intellexit. Quisquis vero talem inde sententiam duxerit, ut huic aedificandae caritati sit utilis, nec tamen hoc dixerit quod ille quem legit eo loco sensisse probabitur, non perniciose fallitur nec omnino mentitur. On lying, cf. also *De magistro* 13.

³ On *doctrina*, cf. Green, "Qué entendió San Agustín." Still excellent remains Marrou, "Doctrina et disciplina."

⁴ If the frequency of its mention in certain circles is any guide, the threat of "Robertsonianism" remains keenly felt. But to seek references to an Augustinian "doctrine of charity" in medieval literary texts might turn out to be a different endeavor than has been imagined, by champions and detractors alike, if that doctrine itself concerns not the positive enunciations of a law but

2. NOT OTHERWISE

Given the apparent reducibility of all scriptural *sententia* to that of the twin commandments, it is first of all necessary to ask if the rest of scripture could just be dispensed with, and only the commandments themselves retained, for instance in the form in which they appear in Matthew: *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*⁵ But needless to say, Augustine does not go in for such an efficiency. This is because it is both pleasant and rewarding to be exercised by the obscurities of scripture.⁶ Indeed, it is necessary to affirm of such writing that it should not have been written the least bit differently than it has been. For Christian sacred texts, and this is the presupposition of the “redeemed rhetoric” the later parts of *De doctrina* take up, are not only full of truth, Augustine claims, they are also eloquent. The question arises in Book IV whether it is fit to call *auctores nostri* eloquent, or whether theirs is a wisdom having nothing to do with the realm of rhetoric. The question, Augustine claims, is easily resolved: scripture is not only the wisest writing but also the most eloquent. “I venture to say,” he continues, “that all who correctly understand what [our authors] are saying understand at the same time that it would not have been right for them to express it in any other way.”⁷ The force of this suggestion is clear: to understand scripture at all is to understand simultaneously (*simul intellegere*) that what is understood ought not to have been expressed otherwise. The very words used, no matter how resistant they may be to the would-be commentator, are the best and only words for the purpose.

a contentless principle of intelligibility. As will become apparent below, following the procedures of “historical criticism” to the letter would then mean discovering in *failures* of reference to the twin commandments the most closely guarded inheritance of Augustine’s law of love. (A summary of D. W. Robertson’s program can be found in his “Historical Criticism” and a recent and very rewarding appraisal of that program and its reception in Justice, “Who Stole Robertson?”)

⁵ As the King James version renders 22:37-39.

⁶ Cf. e.g. *De doctrina*, II.6. *Nunc tamen nemo ambigit et per similitudines libentius quaeque cognosci et cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inveniri.* On this point, cf. Pépin, “Saint Augustin et la fonction protreptique.”

⁷ *De doctrina*, IV.6. Translation altered. *Et audeo dicere omnes qui recte intellegunt quod illi loquuntur simul intellegere non eos aliter loqui debuisse.*

Non aliter loqui debuisse, moreover, is not merely a question of which particular words are used, but no less of the order in which they appear. This becomes explicit in Book II, when Augustine undertakes to demonstrate the preeminence⁸ of the Septuagint over all other translations: for, he writes, the mark of the divine assistance afforded the seventy translators is that even though they were separated each in his own cell, “nothing was found in anyone’s version which was not found, in the same words and the same order of words, in the others.” And in the face of this agreement on words and their order, he continues, “who would dare to adapt such an authoritative work, let alone adopt anything in preference to it?”⁹ The authority of the established scriptural text resides in the words it uses and in the order in which it uses them, and it defies anyone either to alter those words and their sequence or to put some other words, or sequence of words, in their stead. This remark about word order, furthermore, is not made casually, nor is it simply occasional; it resumes a doctrine found in Jerome’s famous remarks on translation in his Epistle 57, where the inviolability of the sequence of words is the very distinguishing mark of sacred text: “in fact I not only admit but openly declare that in translation from Greek texts (except in the case of sacred Scripture, where the very order of the words is a mystery) I render the text, not word for word, but sense for sense.”¹⁰ *Ubi et verborum ordo mysterium est*: in scripture, even the sequence of words is holy.

3. AN ALTERED SEQUENCE

These then are the lineaments of Augustinian interpretation. Proper understanding of scripture consists in the simultaneous activity of two distinguishable operations: a reading of the very words on the page in the order in which they appear and no other, and the discovery in them of a reference to the commandments to love God and the neighbor. Something very strange happens, however, when

⁸ Note, however, Augustine’s preference of another version at IV.7, at which last it is exactly the *insufficient* literality of the Septuagint that causes him to prefer Jerome’s translation.

⁹ *De doctrina*, II.15. ...*nihil in alicuius eorum codice inventum est quod non isdem verbis eodemque verborum ordine inveniretur in ceteris, quis huic auctoritati conferre aliquid, nedum praeferre audeat?*

¹⁰ *Epistulae*, 508; Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, 48–9.

these commandments themselves first appear in Augustine’s text. His citation takes the following form:

Haec enim regula dilectionis divinitus constituta est: *diliges, inquit, proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum, deum vero ex toto corde, ex tota anima, ex tota mente.*

For this is the divinely established rule of love: you shall love, it says, your neighbor as yourself, but God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.¹¹

Needless to say, the commandments are in the wrong order. When the commentator introduces that passage to which all others are meant to refer, he alters the order of words and adopts in preference to it his own rendering. The very “summary of the law” itself is subjected to a derangement. If to understand a passage is at once to see how it ought not to read otherwise than it does and to find in it a reference to the twin commandments, to read the twin commandments themselves—it seems—is to make them read otherwise than they do. And this alteration is in fact the mark of an *internal* reference they undergo at Augustine’s hand, their being referred to themselves, each being brought back to the realm of the other. But this reference back to themselves consists in nothing else than their alteration.

What they are referred to, in other words, is no longer entirely identifiable as the “double law” itself, insofar as the order of words is inseparable from their meaning; and thus it appears that Augustine’s citation at once alters the order of a scriptural passage and refers it to something that is not quite the commandments of love. This is for Augustinian interpretation to reach the limit separating its two simultaneous operations. The citation of the commandments in a mode of *hysteron proteron* allows a question to pose itself which might not otherwise have been addressed: if the means by which a given scriptural utterance becomes understandable is its being referred back to what has been understood already, the twin commandments, how are these themselves to be understood? The internal reference of the *hysteron proteron* is first of all an indication that their meaning is not

¹¹ *De doctrina*, I.22. Translation modified.

altogether clear, that they too demand to be understood.¹² They should thus prove susceptible to the method Augustine lays out.

When faced with an expression that is not yet understood, he says, the interpreter must determine whether it is *propria* or *figurata*, literal or figurative.¹³ This can be done by seeing in what way it can be referred *ad regnum caritatis*: if the passage in question commands love *proprie*, it is not figurative, but if it seems to teach something other than or opposed to love, it should rather be considered a figure.¹⁴ That is, if it says just “love god and the neighbor,” its significance is literal and no figurative explanation is to be sought. Augustine’s point is one that has been underscored in an important article by Kathy Eden: that the opposition between literal (*propria*) and figurative (*figurata*) is by no means to be identified with that between literal (*literals*) and spiritual (*spiritualis*). As Eden puts it, “Augustine resists identifying the spiritual with the figurative reading, the corporeal with the literal (*propria*), and preserves at least a theoretical distinction” between them.¹⁵ It is possible for the spiritual reading, which for Augustine will always consist in an ultimate reference to the twin commandments, to correspond to the literal meaning of the words, and for the literal sense thus to take precedence over the figurative. “Augustine, in other words,” Eden writes, “upholds the literal over the figurative reading whenever the

¹² Augustine’s influence is so great that the meaning he finds in the two commandments, and even the fact that he finds such great meaning at all, seems scarcely remarkable; its novelty will be seen in some instructive remarks by Oliver O’Donovan: “it is surprising how little attention is paid to the ‘summary of the law,’ the ‘two commands’ of love-of-God and love-of-neighbor, in either the Western or the Eastern Fathers. Clement of Alexandria and Origen both comment on the summary and argue that the ‘neighbor’ whom we are to love second to God is Christ; Gregory of Nyssa mentions it, and adds as a third command love of one’s wife. ‘Barnabas’ tactfully glosses the phrase ‘as yourself’ to mean ‘more than your own life.’ Until more detailed research proves otherwise, we must make the supposition that Augustine is responsible not only for the currency of ‘self-love’ in the theology of the West but also for the predominance of the ‘summary’ in Western Christian ethics.” *Problem of Self-Love*, 4.

¹³ Cf. *De doctrina*, III.24. *Maxime itaque investigandum est utrum propria sit an figurata locutio quam intellegere conamur.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, III.15.

¹⁵ Eden, “Rhetorical Tradition and Augustinian Hermeneutics,” 58.

former provides an interpretation in keeping with charity. In some cases, then, the spiritual and the literal (*propria*) coincide.”¹⁶

Chief among these “some cases” would of course be the giving of the law of charity itself. According to Augustine’s criteria, the twin commandments of love should be utterly literal, to be withheld totally from any figurative reading. It would be an absurdity, at best, to seek anything besides their literal meaning. It is instructive, however, to consider the account Augustine provides of figurative expression: “the words in which it is expressed will be found to be taken either from things that are similar or things that are in some way connected [*ab aliqua vicinitate attingentibus*].”¹⁷ What distinguishes figuration is that it produces signification by means of the *similitudo* and *vicinitas* that can obtain between things. While this might seem to be a reference to something like the distinction between metaphor and metonymy, more than an identification of any particular types of figure, which Augustine treats elsewhere and distinctly, this is the return in *De doctrina* of exactly what his inversion of the commandments has elided. For Augustine does not only alter their sequence; he also removes from between them the verse that, in the form they are given in Matthew, separates the one from the other, 22:38: *this is the first and great commandment, and the second is like it*. This verse, which declares—if obscurely—both the fact and the manner of the commandments’s *twinness* at the same time as it holds them apart by being interpolated between them, does not appear when the second commandment is placed before the first. For clearly its discussion of a *first* and a *second* could not easily survive the derangement of the sequence to which these ordinals refer. But in addition to the difficulty its retention would pose for Augustine’s *hysteron proteron*, the presence of the verse would be liable to raise doubts about the exclusively literal nature of the commandments. What it declares is that a relation of *similitudo* obtains between the two of them, and that, their being subsequent the one to the other, so too does a relation of *vicinitas*. Any interpretation of the commandments taking this verse

¹⁶ Ibid., 59. Denys Turner has remarked this point more recently, and with a slightly different emphasis, in his “Allegory in Christian late antiquity,” 77–8. On Augustine’s refusing, in a series of letters with Jerome, to deny a literally true meaning to any portion of scripture at all, cf. Nirenberg, “Politics of Love,” 596–8.

¹⁷ *De doctrina*, III.25. ...*verba quibus continetur aut a similibus rebus ducta inveniuntur aut ab aliqua vicinitate attingentibus*.

into account would have to understand them insofar as something of their significance can be established on the basis of their being similar and proximate, and thus, according to Augustine's own indications, insofar as they are at least partly figurative.

4. TWINS

The inversion of the commandments thus accomplishes at least two things: it is the recursive interpretive movement of a reference to the twin commandments having come up against its internal limit; and it is the stripping from them of their susceptibility to figuration. It thus insists on their literal signification even as it makes plain that this is not altogether established in advance. Much of the work of *De doctrina* goes, in fact, into establishing that literal meaning, and not just in the book devoted to *things* as over against *signs*, that is, the first book, where the inversion in question appears. No, the precise elements of Augustine's inverting commentary on the twin commandments must be pieced together from indications spread throughout the treatise. The way to do this is to work backwards from figurations to be found elsewhere in the book of the "literal" double law in its inverted form. Now, if Augustine instructs those who would interpret holy text to always find in it the twin commandments, he does not neglect to follow his own dictum: for instance, and most famously, by identifying some twin-bearing sheep in the Song of Songs as an indubitable figure of, among other things, the love of God and neighbor.¹⁸ In so doing, because his reading there and elsewhere is by any measure quite far-fetched, he opens himself to such charges as that he peddles in mumbo-jumbo and "arbitrary exegesis and number-symbolism."¹⁹ There is agreement in some quarters that Augustine finds in scripture what he wants to find, indulging in a kind of hermeneutics of superstition that misrepresents totally indifferent things as if they were significant—as if they referred, namely, to the *regnum caritatis* when in fact they do not. But he himself has quite a bit to say about superstitious interpretation; and it appears to have gone unremarked, first of all by Augustine himself, that in that connection too he is centrally concerned with nothing else than a pair of twins.

Appearing as it does in a book preoccupied with what it calls tirelessly a *gemina caritas*, a *dilectio gemina*, the twin commandments of a

¹⁸ Ibid., II.6.

¹⁹ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 457.

twin love, this single mention of twins in *De doctrina* in an apparently distinct context should be attended to carefully. Augustine adduces a pair of twins, Jacob and Essau, in order to dispute the legitimacy of a superstitious interpretive system: horoscopy. Like ascribing meaning to bird flight or to the spilling of salt, divination according to astral position at the time of birth, Augustine declares, rests on arbitrary facts that take on significance only because of an agreement entered into with demons. His ire is directed at something very like the “arbitrary exegesis” for which he will himself come under suspicion: “the signs by which this deadly agreement with demons is achieved have an effect that is in proportion to each individual’s attention to them . . . These signs are null and void unless accompanied by the observer’s agreement.”²⁰ The point is not first of all that superstitious interpretation leads to false results—for things regularly come to pass in accordance with the predictions and indications of these interpreters²¹—but that it is based on demonic rather than human convention. Still, the falsity of this basis can itself be demonstrated. To refute horoscopy, for example, it suffices to recall that “it can happen that some twins follow one another so closely out of the womb that no interval of time can be perceived between them and recorded in terms of constellations. It follows that some twins have the same constellations, and yet their actions and experiences turn out to be not the same but often quite different.”

What will dismantle the claims of the arbitrary exegetes who read horoscopes, Augustine says,²² is the inescapable presence of a minimal interval, what he goes on to call a *momentum minimum atque angustissimum temporis, quod geminorum partum disterninat*: the smallest and most constrained moment of time, which separates the birth of twins. This interval is at once that by which twins remain always distinguishable, different people with different destinies, and the proof of their indistinguishability under the scrutiny of a certain

²⁰ *De doctrina*, II.24. . . . sic etiam illa signa, quibus perniciosa daemonum societas comparatur, pro cuiusque observationibus valent . . . nulla ista signa sunt nisi consensus observantis accedat.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II.23.

²² The argument certainly does not originate with Augustine; it can be found as well, for example, in *De divinatione*, II.43, where Cicero puts it in the mouth of Diogenes the Stoic. Augustine makes use of it in a great number of places, notably *City of God*, V.4 and *Confessions*, VII.6., where he ascribes his learning of it to one Firminus. A useful account of its history can be found in Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, 43–84.

superstitious reading. This minimal temporal difference is what definitively separates each twin into his own time and ensures that the two times remain impossible to tell apart, that they pass for a single time. It cannot be recorded, and by the same token it cannot go unrecognized, for its signs are everywhere apparent in the divergent lives of the twins whose birth it has separated: “one may live to be blissfully unhappy,” Augustine continues, “the other to be desperately unhappy, like Esau and Jacob who, we are told, were born as twins with Jacob, the second to be born, holding in his hand the foot of his brother born before him.”²³

Is this not just how the commandments themselves are born? Brought hand to foot by the deletion of an intervening verse (*this is the first and great commandment . . .*), they are nevertheless still separated by the “vero” (*and, but, in truth*) Augustine inserts to mark their distinctness. This particle, however, is placed not between the two commandments but within one of them, so that even as they are emphatically differentiated they nonetheless go on touching “hand to foot” with no separation at all: *proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum deum vero ex toto corde*, “your neighbor as yourself god however with all your heart.” And just as it is the confutation of interpretation not grounded in the commandments of love, *what separates the birth of twins* is the confirmation of the reading practice Augustine teaches. Inasmuch as it is a figuration of the “literal” commandments, the adducing of twins in the context of the confutation of horoscopy can only be understood to mean that there is a minimal difference, impossible to ignore and impossible to record, between the commandment to love God and the commandment to love your neighbor.

5. LOVE OF SELF

Augustine does not fail to name this minimal difference. When the two commandments change places, when the moment in which each is uttered becomes the moment in which the other is uttered, they remain distinct, the love of God being distinguishable from the love of the neighbor. But something else emerges when their order is

²³ *De doctrina*, II.22. *Unde necesse est nonnullos geminos easdem habere constellationes, cum paria rerum vel quas agunt vel quas patiuntur eventa non habeant, sed plerumque ita disparia ut alius felicissimus, alius infelicissimus vivat, sicut Esau et Iacob geminos accipimus natos ita ut Iacob, qui posterior nascebatur, manu plantam praecedentis fratris tenens inveniretur.*

changed, something that might otherwise have escaped notice. “Although love of God comes first and the manner of loving him is clearly laid down,” Augustine writes, “nothing seems to have been said about self-love. But when it is said at the same time [*simul*] ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ your own self-love is not neglected.”²⁴ Because the commandment to love God comes first, in other words, something remains obscure; and this obscure thing emerges into clarity not when eventually the second commandment comes to be issued but rather when it is said *simul*, at the same time as, in the very time of the first.²⁵ What emerges when the commandments switch places is that your love of yourself is seen not to have been left out after all.

The alteration of their sequence thus constitutes an attempt to come to grips with one of the more daunting of the obscurities that prevent the literal meaning of the commandments from being already understood, namely, the force and function of the words *as yourself*. When nothing at all has yet been said about loving yourself, already it is the model on which another kind of love is to occur, the love of other people. Augustine’s solution to this difficulty is, in brief,²⁶ to claim that everyone loves himself, whether he wants to or not, whether commanded to do so or otherwise, by a kind of natural law; but that the commandment to love God entirely means that he should *refer* that inevitable and ineradicable love to God, to love

²⁴ Ibid., I.26. Translation modified. *Cum enim praecurrat dilectio dei eiusque dilectionis modus praescriptus appareat, ita ut cetera in illum confluant, de dilectione tua nihil dictum videtur. Sed cum dictum est, diliges proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum, simul et tui abs te dilectio non praetermissa est.*

²⁵ The second commandment’s issuing in a first instance can be seen as following from the necessary firstness of all commandment—from the coincidence of “commandment” and “origin” in the word *arche* that has been the emphasis of recent lectures by Giorgio Agamben. Insofar as the place of commandment and the place of origin are the same, if it is to be any commandment at all the second commandment must occupy the position of the “first and great.” But it should be noted here that what Augustine says will emerge when the second commandment attains to its first position is something else again, a third element alluded to in this second commandment but not located there.

²⁶ Considerations of space preclude an adequate discussion of this matter; Oliver O’Donovan’s study *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* is much to be recommended, as are the careful and thorough readings contained in two articles by Raymond Canning: “Love of Neighbor in St. Augustine”; “Love your Neighbor as Yourself.”

himself not for his own sake but for the sake of God. And thus *as yourself* is to say, “in the same way that you are to love yourself”: by referring love from one thing to another; so that in short the neighbor too is to be loved not for his own sake but for the sake of God. This is the doctrine Augustine lays out in Book I of *De doctrina*. But why does he think it becomes clear when the order of the commandments is altered? For nothing further has been said about the love of self, only the order has changed, and indeed the Matthean intervening verse removed. What consultation with the example of the twins who confute horoscopy makes clear, however, is that love of self is “not left out,” *non praetermissa est*, when the minimal interval obtaining between the commandments is made to appear. Love of self is just the interval separating love of God from love of neighbor.

Neither the positivity of a natural law nor the imperative of a commandment, the love of self as it shows itself here is no more and no less than the possibility of distinguishing between the love of neighbor and the love of God. But if it is the possibility of telling the difference it is at once the impossibility of telling what that difference might be, like the obvious but unregistrable distinction between the moments of the birth of twins. The self-love that is revealed in the re-ordering of the commandments answers to a different description than the self-love that is dictated *inconcussa naturae lege*, by an unshaken law of nature, though no doubt they are the same love. What Augustine uncovers is not *amour propre*, not self-esteem, not the pulsing of the organism in self-preservation: it is rather the barest understanding, a minimal recognition that there is a difference between love of other people and love of God, that other people are not God, nor God other people. This knowledge is simultaneous and coincident with a permanent failure to understand in what that difference might consist, just as the good interpreter knows even less, perhaps, than the reader of horoscopes what will be the particular fates of two twins born under the same constellations, but unlike him does know that these fates are not, in principle, the same. What this amounts to is a final impossibility of saying how and why there is not simply one commandment of love but two.

6. TWO ORDERS

Still, that there are and must be two cannot be doubted.²⁷ What remains uncertain, however, is how Augustine conceives of the inverting operation by which he brings about the interpretability of the commandments, an operation so seemingly at odds with his hermeneutic program. *De doctrina* itself is of no help here, but an explanation is not lacking. It is to be found elsewhere, in the seventeenth of Augustine's tractates on John.²⁸ In that commentary, on John 5:8, the method for interpreting scripture laid out in *De doctrina* can be observed in full swing: Augustine takes Christ's words to a sick man "Arise, take up your bed and walk" to signify, as might be expected, nothing else than the twin commandments. That there are three imperatives here gives the commentator only the slightest pause: "He said three things: 'Arise,' 'Take up your bed,' and 'walk.' But 'Arise' was not a command of work, but the working of a cure. But he commanded the cured man two things, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" Having dispensed with the word *arise*, Augustine continues: "How, then, may we find, in these two commands of the Lord, those two commandments of love signified?" He explains that, in the sick bed, the invalid has been taken care of by others; so that

²⁷ This notwithstanding the widely held view that Augustine so far subordinates the love of neighbor to that of God that, in effect, he does away with it altogether. Among the more vituperative—and influential—statements of this position (where Augustine is guilty of a "perversion" that "destroys just what is most characteristic of the Christian idea of love") is that of Anders Nygren: "It is a basic idea of Augustine's that the commandments of love to God and to neighbor are not really two, but *one single* command. God is the only worthy object of our love. When God commands us to love our neighbor, we are not strictly to love our neighbor, who is not worthy of such love, but God in our neighbor." (*Agape and Eros*, 97–8; 549. A summary of the debate over Nygren's claims will be found in O'Donovan, "Usus and Fructus," 361–4.) So also e.g. Hannah Arendt: "every beloved is only an occasion to love God [...] It is not really the neighbor who is loved in this love of neighbor—it is love itself" (*Love and Saint Augustine*, 97.) Although it is quite true that Augustine allows himself to be understood in this way, it is exactly the purpose of his inversion of the commandments to make plain their absolute discretion, even as it is to insist that *both* loves, not just that of the neighbor, are always virtually each other. The idea that Augustine considers love of the neighbor a special and inferior case of love of God is strictly mistaken.

²⁸ The following passages will be found in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 36, 173–5; *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 2:115–17.

take up your bed means to take care of those others, and thus signifies *love your neighbor*. Moreover, *and walk* means that the sick man should not simply care for others but should conduct them toward God, so that it can be seen to signify, in its turn, *love God*.

This explication shows *take up your bed and walk* to be a figuration of the double commandment *love your neighbor as yourself and love God*: a figuration of the commandments not, in other words, in their proper sequence but in the same order they are given when they first appear in *De doctrina*. Augustine is quite aware that this irregularity demands an explanation, and he provides one:

The love of God is first in the order of commandment [*praecipiendi*], but the love of neighbor is first in the order of action. For one who would enjoin [*praecipere*] this love on you in two commandments [*praeceptis*] would not recommend to you the neighbor first and God afterwards, but God first and the neighbor afterwards. But because you do not yet see God, by loving your neighbor you merit seeing him; by loving your neighbor you cleanse your eye for seeing God.

This is, at last, the answer Augustine will offer to the questions this essay has posed. *Dei dilectio prior est ordine praecipendi, proximi autem dilectio prior est ordine faciendi*. There is an order of doing and an order of commanding, and the one is the inverse of the other. To put the love of the neighbor before the love of God is not to derange the order of commanding but rather to observe the order of doing.

What, however, is the *ordo faciendi*? Where is it in effect? Augustine's homiletic remarks allow it to be imagined that it is *you* who are commanded who follow the order of doing in carrying out commandments issued in their own proper order. And this is no doubt the case. Christ commands in the order of commanding; you obey according to the order of doing. But the occasion of Augustine's making this distinction, the instance of *ordo faciendi* that must be explained, is nothing else than an imperative issued *by Christ*, namely *take up your bed and walk*. It is these words that follow the order of doing, and not first of all any action you may or may not take: so that the *ordo faciendi* is, in the first place, that sequence in which Christ himself rephrases the twin commandments for the purposes of instruction. In other words, if to *do* the commandments is to invert them, this is not because, generally speaking, doing is the reciprocal

form of commanding. *Facere praecepta* does not merely entail but consists in *hysteron proteron*: the inversion of the order of the commandments is itself their observation.

As Augustine has it, the reason Christ rephrases his own commandments is that in their proper order—the order of commanding—they are obscure. What is necessary is a “cleansing of the eye” that will be brought about by putting the love of neighbor before the love of God, by substituting for the *ordo praecipendi* an *ordo faciendi* that will make the meaning of the twin commandments clear. In short, to alter the sequence of the commandments as Augustine does in *De doctrina* is to fulfill them by making them understandable to others. This is why, as Oliver O’Donovan has rightly summarized, “in practical terms”—as who should say, in the *ordo faciendi*—“love of the neighbor is evangelism.”²⁹ It is to produce, for the purposes of *doctrina*, a minimal commentary, one whose operation is to change the sequence of the verses that are its object and to remove from around and between them every other verse, while maintaining the totality of scripture, down to its last particular, as virtually present in the two verses remaining. At the heart of the hermeneutic homiletics of *De doctrina* is this mere slip of an exposition, a form of commentary that adds nothing more to the commented text than a particle (“vero”), but reduces and reordinates what is to be read in view of its impartability. So that what is spread abroad in love of neighbor as “evangelism” is the barest interpretability of the commandments, and it is because even that interpretability is not assured in advance, because it must be taught, that love can operate at all: “there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans.”³⁰ The proximity in which love of neighbor can come about is the fact that you are susceptible of being taught.

7. VITA AETERNA

A recent collection of essays on the neighbor has begun with the axiom, as it affirms, “that it is only with the emergence of the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious—with the emergence of the

²⁹ *Problem of Self-Love*, 112.

³⁰ *De doctrina*, praefatio. *Deinde ipsa caritas, quae sibi homines invicem nodo unitatis astringit, non haberet aditum refundendorum et quasi miscendorum sibimet animorum, si homines per homines nihil discerent.*

subject of psychoanalysis—that we can truly grasp the ethical and political complexity introduced into the world by the injunction to love one’s neighbor as oneself.”³¹ This psychoanalytic concept of the self is put to compelling use there; and yet it is worth noting that in Augustine’s account, in which the authors show little interest, it is exactly the “complexity introduced into the world by the injunction to love one’s neighbor as oneself” that generates its own “emergence of the subject.” In *De doctrina*, that is, the interpretive difficulty of the commandments discloses a love of self otherwise withheld. Augustine’s reading sets up a thinking of the self as minimal differentiability between other people and God that remains distinct both from the “psychoanalytic concept of the self” and from the Levinasian subject to which it is opposed.³² The authors are entirely right to maintain that “neighbor-love functions more as an obstacle to its own theorization than as a roadmap for ethical life...the injunction to ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ involves interpretive and practical aporias in *all* its individual terms, and even more so as an utterance...something in the call to neighbor-love remains opaque and does not give itself up willingly to univocal interpretation.”³³ Consultation with Augustine allows for the further specifications that these interpretive aporias are the very basis of neighbor-love itself, as the possibility of *doctrina*; and that what remains opaque to interpretation is the self as minimal differentiability, an obstacle to theorization but the beginning of love as sharing of intelligibility.

For *De doctrina* presents love of neighbor as a program for producing and understanding a certain kind of commentary: one that builds up *gemina caritas* by locating the minimal difference between love of God and love of neighbor; considering it as their principle of intelligibility; and identifying it as a form of self-love without positive content, consisting only in the slightest recognition that there is—that it itself is—some distinction. Commentary thus conceived consists in the exposition of an unregistrable differentiation, that is, it amounts finally to a reading of no text at all. Its object is not this passage of scripture or this other but what maintains some distinction between them even when they have been chopped up, rearranged, expunged. Likewise, when it is before its proper object commentary speaks in its own voice only a single word, a mere particle, some indeterminately

³¹ Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard, *The Neighbor*, 10.

³² Cf. especially Žižek’s contribution to the volume.

³³ *The Neighbor*, 5.

assenting punctuation: *vero*. Commentary is thus, at its most characteristic, the minimization to the point almost of removal of both its object and itself. In this it resembles Augustine's famous description, in another of his commentaries on John, of the "eternal life" as a fullness of understanding in the presence not of the text of the gospel but of its giver, "when the pages of the text and voice of the reader and the exegete have been removed."³⁴ Commentary is the production, today,³⁵ of this fullness of understanding. Its eternal life is the working of a minimal intelligibility assured only by human instruction: the understanding that God is not other people and other people not God, coincident with the utter failure to understand in what their difference might consist. This utter failure is the paradise of a self-love without object.

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³⁴ ...remotis omnibus lectionis paginis, et voce lectoris et tractatoris. *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 36, 223; *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 2:198.

³⁵ Cf. Nicola Masciandaro's remarks on the anagogical sense of *hodie* in his "Getting Anagogic."

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Jordan Kirk is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at Princeton University, where he is writing a dissertation on the concept of non-significative utterance in medieval logic, Chaucer, and the *Cloud of Unknowing*.