

# *I Know That I Do Not Know: Nicholas of Cusa's Augustine\**

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## ■ Abstract

Nicholas of Cusa read Augustine, like he read Dionysius the Areopagite, as teaching that God was best known and encountered in an understanding of one's own ignorance of ultimate reality (learned ignorance). Cusa's use of Augustine in *Defense of Learned Ignorance*, *On the Vision of God*, and *On the Not-Other* helps recover the importance of learned ignorance in Augustine's own writings. This study tracks learned ignorance as an essential mechanism of Augustine's pursuit of wisdom through his early writings, the *Confessions*, and the later anti-Pelagian treatises. Learned ignorance functioned as philosophical dialectic in his earliest treatises, a practice of prayer in the *Confessions*, and as both polemic and apophatic theodicy in his later writings. Augustine's shifting conceptualization of learned ignorance, in turn, helps recover how Cusa often preached learned ignorance as the humility of faith. Thus, Cusa's commitment to learned ignorance derived from both the Neoplatonic dilemma of knowing the unknowable and the Augustinian understanding of original sin as pride and redemption as humility.

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## ■ Keywords

Nicholas of Cusa, Augustine, learned ignorance, Negative Theology, the darkness of faith, apophatic theodicy

Augustine says that God is attained by ignorance rather than by knowledge.  
—Nicholas of Cusa<sup>1</sup>

## ■ Introduction

As postmodern theologies have experienced a surge of interest in Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), so too have recent studies begun to recover the importance of ignorance in Augustine’s writings.<sup>2</sup> Along these lines, a retrieval of Cusa’s reading of Augustine serves to further illuminate the theme of ignorance in the writings of Augustine. Cusa read Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite as teaching that one can best know and encounter God through “learned ignorance” (*docta ignorantia*), that is, a profound understanding of one’s ignorance of ultimate reality.<sup>3</sup> Much recent scholarship has placed Cusa’s essential apophaticism within

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *Apologia doctae ignorantiae discipuli ad discipulum*, in *Nicholas of Cusa’s Debate with John Wenck* (ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins; 3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Banning, 1988) 467. All Latin references to Cusa are from *Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia, iussu et auctoritate academiae litterarum heidelbergensis* (Leipzig and Hamburg: Meiner, 1932–); accessed through the Cusanus Portal of the Institute for Cusanus Research at the University of Trier, <http://www.cusanus-portal.de> (hereafter h).

<sup>2</sup> For postmodern theological retrieval of Cusa, see Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (Insurrections; New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) 87–123; and David Tracy, “The Post-Modern Renaming of God as Incomprehensible and Hidden,” *Cross Currents* 50 (2000) 240–47. For ignorance in Augustine, see Andreas Nordlander, “Nescio: The Pedagogy of Ignorance in Augustine’s *Confessions*, Book X,” *Patristica Nordica Annua* 28 (2013) 37–58; idem, “Remembering Mind: Augustinian Moves in Continental and Analytic Philosophy,” in *Monument and Memory* (ed. Jonaa Bornemark, Matthias Martinson, and Jayne Svenungsson; Nordic Studies in Theology 1; Zurich: LIT, 2015) 211–38; Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine* (trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky; Cultural Memory in the Present; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); idem, *Negative Certainties* (trans. Stephen E. Lewis; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 18–19, 103; Karmen MacKendrick, Mark D. Jordan, and Virginia Burrus, *Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 14; T. J. van Bavel, “God in between Affirmation and Negation According to Augustine,” in *Augustine: presbyter factus sum* (ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, Earl C. Muller, and Roland J. Teske; Collectanea Augustiniana; New York: Lang, 1993) 73–97; Vladimir Lossky, “Elements of ‘Negative Theology’ in the Thought of St. Augustine,” *SVTQ* 21 (1997) 67–75; Andrew Louth, “Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology,” in *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman; Cambridge Companions to Religion; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 137–46, at 143; and Knut Alsvag, *What No Mind Has Conceived: On the Significance of Christological Apophaticism* (Studies in Philosophical Theology; Leuven: Peeters, 2010) 93.

<sup>3</sup> For Cusa’s initial exposition of learned ignorance, see *On Learned Ignorance* (1440), in Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings* (trans. H. Lawrence Bond; CWS; New York: Paulist, 1997) 87. I refer to the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* as “Dionysius the Areopagite” rather than the modern

the context of his appropriation of Dionysius and Dionysian traditions;<sup>4</sup> Cusa's use of Augustine and Augustinian traditions toward this same end, on the other hand, has received less attention.<sup>5</sup> Alexia Schmitt has recently demonstrated the importance of Cusa's reception of Augustinian interiority,<sup>6</sup> while David Albertson has tracked the impact of Augustinian traditions via the so-called school of Chartres.<sup>7</sup> This study builds upon the recent scholarship of Albertson and Schmitt by tracing connections between Cusa's formulation of learned ignorance and Augustine's shifting conceptualizations of faith. If Augustine and Augustinian traditions were central to Cusa's formulation of learned ignorance, then this also lends credence to Volker Leppin's hypothesis that medieval "mystics" probably received more Augustinian theology than interpreters usually recognized.<sup>8</sup>

The argument of this study is twofold: Cusa helps us rediscover the importance of learned ignorance in Augustine's writings, while Augustine's shifting conceptualization of learned ignorance, in turn, helps us recover how Cusa preached learned ignorance as a coincidence of humility and faith. The first section looks at Cusa's use of Augustine in three treatises (*Defense of Learned Ignorance*, *On the Vision of God*, *On the Not-Other*). From the formulation of prayer as learned ignorance to the preference for the abstract trinitarian ideas (rather than persons) of "Unity, Equality, and Connection," Cusa synthesized Augustine with myriad other witnesses to stress the utterly transcendent nature of ultimate reality.

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and often pejorative "Pseudo-Dionysius" (see Charles M. Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No Longer I"* [OECIS; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012]; idem, "Dionysius, Paul and the Significance of the Pseudonym," *Modern Theology* 24 [2008] 541–55).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Peter Casarella, "Cusanus on Dionysius: The Turn to Speculative Theology," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008) 667–78; and Matthieu van der Meer, "Divus Dionysius: Jean Gerson, Nicholas of Cusa, and the Interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius's Mystical Theology," *Viator* 44 (2013) 323–42.

<sup>5</sup> Jasper Hopkins, "Nicholas Cusa," in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine* (ed. Karla Pollman et al.; 3 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 1444–445; F. Edward Cranz, "Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa in the Tradition of Western Christian Thought," *Spec* 28 (1953) 297–316; and Sarah Powrie, "Nicholas of Cusa's Dialogue with Augustine: The Measure of the Soul's Greatness in *De Ludo Globi*," *Renaissance and Reformation* 38 (2015) 5–25. Nancy J. Hudson, on the other hand, does not include Augustine as a source for Cusa's understanding of transcendence (*Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007] 89–133).

<sup>6</sup> Alexia Schmitt tracks Cusa's reception of Augustinian interiority—the mind's ability to return to itself and in so doing to transcend itself—through explicit references, Cusa's marginalia on Augustine's *Confessions* (Codex Cusanus 34), and the mediation of key figures such as Anselm, Bonaventure, and Eckhart (*Interioridad y trascendencia. Asimiliación de la interioridad agustiniana en el pensamiento cusano: hacia la subjetividad moderna* [Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2017]). See also Paula Pico Estrada, review of *Interioridad y trascendencia*, by Alexia Schmitt, *American Cusanus Society Newsletter* 35 (2018) 43–44.

<sup>7</sup> David Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies: Nicholas of Cusa and the Legacy of Thierry of Chartres* (OSHT; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 176–78.

<sup>8</sup> Volker Leppin, "The Mystics the Protestants Read," in *Protestants and Mysticism in Reformation Europe* (ed. Ronald K. Rittgers and Vincent Evener; St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History 14; Leiden: Brill, 2019) 17–33, at 32.

The next three sections trace Augustine's shifting conceptualization of learned ignorance. In Augustine's earliest treatises, a posture of learned ignorance led him to search for truth within himself through philosophical dialectic. Because everyone had access to this inner voice, the path to wisdom was quite open, though few embarked on the journey, let alone reached their destination. As Augustine's pursuit of knowledge progressed, truth became increasingly externalized to the incarnate Logos and the canonical Scriptures. In his later polemics against Pelagianism, a posture of learned ignorance stressed the unquestionable truthfulness, clarity, and certainty of select propositions of Scripture. When faced with the questions of why God chose some and not others for salvation or why God gave some the gift of perseverance and not others, Augustine consistently adopted a position of learned ignorance. It was better to admit one's ignorance of the ways of God than to fall into the trap of pride, the root cause of all sin (and heresy). Thus, learned ignorance functioned as an apophatic theodicy, which in turn functioned as a mechanism of humility. Standing between this transition is the *Confessions*, in which Augustine's unanswered and unanswerable questions drove him to search the Scriptures for a knowledge that transcended the grasp of his cognitive abilities while simultaneously advocating for a hermeneutic that could encapsulate a plurality of possible interpretations.

The final section uses this reading of Augustine to reread Cusa. With Augustine as a mirror, Cusa's formulation of learned ignorance takes on new contours. In particular, we see how Cusa preached learned ignorance to the laity as "the humility of faith." Several of Cusa's sermons on the Day of Visitation and Christmas, for example, linked Mary's humility with faith. Cusa depicted such simple faith as a higher form of knowledge than mystical theology. The section ends by describing the potential shadow side of such a position: once we realize that the exemplar of humility was a powerless handmaid, we are more attuned to the fact that even in Cusa's approach to learned ignorance there could be a fine line between an optics of comfort and an optics of coercion.<sup>9</sup>

## ■ Cusa's Augustine

The ambiguity of the medieval Augustine is due, in part, to omnipresence. His writings were among the most cited patristic authorities in medieval scholastic theology.<sup>10</sup> The sheer size of his oeuvre facilitated the varied nature of medieval reception. Further, a medieval reader would most likely have known Augustine's writings not through individual codices, but through "prooftexts" in a florilegium,

<sup>9</sup> I have taken the notion of an "optics of comfort" from Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> As Heiko Oberman noted, "one's closeness to truth in general and to the gospel in particular was measured against one's proximity to Augustine" (*The Masters of the Reformation: The Emergence of a New Intellectual Climate in Europe* [trans. Dennis Martin; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981] 70–71).

theological compendia such as Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, or in the writings of others. It was not until the printed edition by Johann Amberbach in 1505 and 1506 that Augustine's works were collected into one easily accessible edition.<sup>11</sup> We should also remember that the medieval Augustine was encountered not only in books but also as a living saint in dreams and visions.<sup>12</sup> Medieval reception of Augustine, especially in relation to the reception of Dionysius, is further complicated by the fact that John Scotus Eriugena (ca. 800–ca. 877) had combined the two authorities and insisted that they could not contradict each other.<sup>13</sup> The synthesis of Augustine and Dionysius led to what modern interpreters label the “affective” tradition of Dionysian mystical theology.<sup>14</sup> There were also heated debates about which works constituted the “real” Augustine. Martin Luther, for instance, would take Augustine's writings against heretics (especially the anti-Pelagian treatises) as the interpretive center of Augustine's works.<sup>15</sup> The alternative position, that Augustine's writings against heretics should be taken with a grain of interpretive salt, was established by Bonaventure (1221–1274) and then articulated in its axiomatic form, “Augustine speaks exaggeratedly” (*Augustinus excisive loquitur*), by Duns Scotus (ca. 1265–1308).<sup>16</sup>

Cusa chose the Augustinian epithet *docta ignorantia* to name his early theological method of unknowing that he claimed derived from an experience of rapture. In a letter appended to *On Learned Ignorance* (1440), Cusa narrated an experience en route from Greece in which he was “led to embrace incomprehensibles incomprehensibly in learned ignorance, by transcending those incorruptible truths that can be known humanly.”<sup>17</sup> Augustine's description of *docta ignorantia* had at least been used by Hervé de Bourg-Dieu (ca. 1080–1150), Bonaventure, and Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), but Cusa put the terminology at the forefront of theological writing.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For more on the book history of Augustine's writings, see Arnoud S. Q. Visser, *Reading Augustine in the Reformation: The Flexibility of Intellectual Authority in Europe, 1500–1620* (OSHT; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> For the case of Hadewijch of Antwerp, see Willemien Otten, “Between Praise and Appraisal: Medieval Guidelines for the Assessment of Augustine's Intellectual Legacy,” *AugStud* 43 (2012) 201–18, at 207–9.

<sup>13</sup> I owe this observation to a conversation with Don Duclow; see also Willemien Otten, “Eriugena, John Scotus,” in *Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine* (ed. Pollman et al.) 938–41.

<sup>14</sup> See Boyd Taylor Coolman, “The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition,” *Modern Theology* 24 (2008) 615–32.

<sup>15</sup> See Christopher B. Brown's introduction to the preface to Augustine's *On The Spirit and the Letter* (1533?), by Martin Luther, in *Luther's Works: American Edition* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, et al.; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955–) 60:35–43 (hereafter LW); see also Luther, *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* (1517), LW 31:9.

<sup>16</sup> LW 60:38. See Scotus, *Ordinatio* 2 dist. 33, in *Opera omnia* (ed. Carolo Balic; Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950–) 8:364–67.

<sup>17</sup> Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 206.

<sup>18</sup> See Herveus Burgidolensis, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, in *Saeculum XII. Ven. Hervei Burgidolensis monachi opera omnia demum restituta et nunc primum in unum collecta* (ed.

Cusa's method of "embracing incomprehensibles incomprehensibly" received early, sharp criticism from John Wenck.<sup>19</sup> Wenck accused Cusa of violating Aristotle's teaching that knowledge necessarily derived from a subject/object distinction. For Wenck, Cusa instead taught "that with regard to the simplest and most abstract understanding all things are one."<sup>20</sup> He was concerned that Cusa's methodology of the coincidence of opposites led to an obliteration of nonnegotiable orthodox distinctions within the Trinity and between the Creator and creatures. It is also of interest that Wenck's one reference to Augustine described him as "the Hammer of Heretics" who uncompromisingly stressed the Word made flesh.<sup>21</sup>

A response to Wenck, Cusa's *A Defense of Learned Ignorance from a Disciple to a Disciple* (1449) enlisted an impressive array of twenty-five classical and Christian authorities.<sup>22</sup> He first turned to the classical examples of Socrates, Philo, Hermes Trismegistus, and Avicenna. The primary figure behind this wisdom tradition was, of course, Socrates, who excelled the intelligentsia of his day "in that he knew that he was ignorant, whereas the others . . . did not know that they were ignorant."<sup>23</sup> After the classical authors, Dionysius and then Augustine were the first Christian authorities enlisted.<sup>24</sup> Cusa read both Augustine and Dionysius as imitating Plato's emphasis on simplicity and transcendence that coincided with a knowledge of one's own ignorance of ultimate reality.<sup>25</sup> Just as Dionysius had instructed "that most perfect ignorance is knowledge," so too Augustine taught "that God is attained by

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J. P. Migne; PL; 217 vols.; Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1844–1864) 181:714b; Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* 5.6.8, in *The Works of St. Bonaventure* (ed. Robert Karris et al.; 18 vols.; St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005) 9:196; Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man: Patrarca, Valla, Ficino, Pico, Pomponazzi, Vives* (ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) 64.

<sup>19</sup> See *On Unknown Learning*, in *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate* (ed. and trans. Hopkins) 425–56.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 444. For "validissimus malleus haereticorum," see Bernard of Clairvaux, *Homiliae super Canticum Canticorum* 80.7, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera* (ed. J. Leclercq et al., 8 vols.; Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–1977) 282; Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* (trans. William Granger Ryan; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 514; Rudolph Arbesmann, "The Malleus Metaphor in Medieval Characterization," *Traditio* 3 (1945) 389–92.

<sup>22</sup> Cusa, *Defense of Learned Ignorance*, in *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate* (ed. and trans. Hopkins) 459–92. Not counting biblical authorities, Cusa cites the following figures: Socrates, Philo, Hermes Trismegistus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Avicenna, Plato, Algazel, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Mechlin, Ambrose, Pope Celestine, an anonymous commentator on Boethius's *De Trinitate*, Athanasius, Meister Eckhart, Marius Victorinus, Honorius Augustudonensis (*Clavis physicae*), John Scotus Eriugena, David Dinant, John of Mossbach, Hierotheus, Pope Leo, and Fulgentius. The *Clavis physicae* contained edited excerpts of Eriugena's *Periphyseon*.

<sup>23</sup> Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, 460.

<sup>24</sup> Cusa references Augustine six times and Dionysius eighteen times.

<sup>25</sup> "The divine Dionysius imitated Plato to such an extent that he is quite frequently found to have cited Plato's words in series" (*ibid.*, 466). Cusa refers to Augustine as "the Platonist Aurelius Augustine"; see Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 101.

ignorance [*ignorantia*] rather than by knowledge [*scientia*].”<sup>26</sup> The text to which Cusa turned in order to support such a claim was Augustine’s *Letter 130 to Proba*.<sup>27</sup> In his interaction with this letter, Cusa correctly captured Augustinian “learned ignorance” as a practice of prayer, in light of Rom 8:26, due to estrangement from ultimate reality. Cusa also depicted well Augustine’s teaching that knowledge of God was a never-ending search for understanding. Elsewhere, in *On the Summit of Contemplation* (1464), Cusa also followed Augustine by stating that nothing that is altogether unknown is sought after. If something is not known, then it will not be sought after, but if it is fully known, then one will not keep chasing after it.<sup>28</sup>

Cusa’s *On the Vision of God* (1453) is arguably his most “Augustinian.”<sup>29</sup> The treatise was first sent to the abbot and monks at Tegernsee accompanied by an all-seeing “icon of God.”<sup>30</sup> It begins with detailed instructions: the monks should hang the icon on the wall, stand at various places, and all look at the image. Each one will see the icon as if it gazed directly at him. They should then walk around and consult their neighbors to learn whether the icon was also gazing directly at them. As they witnessed the impossible possibility of the all-seeing icon, they should analogously contemplate the sight of God that sustained and undergirded all things. Just as the monks’ contemplation was preceded by and predicated upon the icon’s gaze, so too human contemplation existed within the prior reality of God’s contemplation of humanity. It was the loving, ecstatic gaze of God that elicited the desire of the contemplative. Cusa explained this through an adaptation of a well-known passage from Augustine’s *Confessions*: “My heart is restless, O Lord, because your love has inflamed it with such desire that it can find rest only in you.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cusa, *Defense of Learned Ignorance*, 467–68; h ii, 13.

<sup>27</sup> “But Aurelius Augustine—expounding the word of Paul in Romans 8 (‘We do not know what to ask for’)—declared, after other things, how it is that we have learned ignorance: ‘We know that what we seek exists; but we do not know what kind of thing it is. We have this ‘learned ignorance,’ so to speak, through the Spirit, who helps our infirmity. . . . Since Paul says that the Spirit implores with unutterable groanings, he indicates that the unknown thing is both unknown and not altogether unknown. For if it were altogether unknown, it would not be sought with groaning” (ibid.).

<sup>28</sup> *De apice theoriae*, in *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations; Six Latin Texts Translated into English* (trans. Jasper Hopkins; 2 vols.; Minneapolis: Banning, 1998) 504; see Augustine, *On the Trinity* (*Trin.*) 15.2.

<sup>29</sup> Cusa, *On The Vision of God*, in *Selected Spiritual Writings* (trans. Bond) 235–89; h vi, 3–90. For more on the treatise, see the debate by Emmanuel Falque and Jean-Luc Marian: Falque, “The All-Seeing Fraternity and Vision of God in Nicholas of Cusa,” *Modern Theology* 35 (2019) 760–87; Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen: Nicholas of Cusa’s Contribution in *De visione Dei*,” *JR* 96 (2016) 305–31; see also Bernard McGinn, “Seeing and Not Seeing,” in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance* (ed. Peter J. Casarella; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006) 26–53.

<sup>30</sup> Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 235. For Cusa’s interaction with the monks of Tegernsee, see K. M. Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* (Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 225; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 137–98.

<sup>31</sup> Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 247. The other Augustinian features of *On the Vision of God* are more stylistic in nature. The majority of the text, like the *Confessions*, is a first-person prayer to God. Cusa also imitates the penitential tone of the *Confessions*. The Augustinian hamartiological



One of Cusa's most consistent ways of referring to God as Trinity also derived from Augustine.<sup>32</sup> Before Cusa quoted either Augustine or Dionysius in *On Learned Ignorance*, he stated that "Our very doctors called Unity 'Father,' Equality 'Son,' and Connection 'Holy Spirit' because of a certain likeness to these transitory things."<sup>33</sup> Cusa explained that the personal names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit pointed to these abstract ideas.<sup>34</sup> The Christian God was named Father, Son, and Spirit because the names illustrated the concepts of Oneness, Unity, and Equality, not vice versa. Cusa attributed this formulation of the Trinity to Augustine and understood himself to have followed this approach to the Trinity in both *On Learned Ignorance* and *The Vision of God*.<sup>35</sup>

In the later treatise *On God as Not-Other* (1463), Cusa affirmed that those who spoke of the Trinity as "Oneness, Equality, and Union" (*unitas, aequalitas et nexus*) did so more clearly than those who used the scriptural terminology of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>36</sup> In fact, the infinity of the divine nature was better conveyed with the triune "this, it, and the same" (*hoc, id, et idem*),<sup>37</sup> or in Sermon 22 as "this, same, and identity" (*id, idem, et identitas*).<sup>38</sup> Even better was the phrase "not-other, not-other, and also not other" (*non aliud, et non aliud, atque non aliud*).<sup>39</sup> To understand why Cusa preferred this nomenclature over the traditional orthodox terminology, it is important to remember that *non-aliud* had the ambiguous meaning of either "not-other" or "none-other."<sup>40</sup> In this treatise Cusa attempted to bridge the philosophical traditions of Neoplatonism and Neo-Aristotelianism by following Aristotle in placing definition as the mode of knowledge and following the Platonic tradition by using the simplest definitions possible. The definition of

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rationale of ignorance is also heightened by the epistemological distinction among sense, reason, and intellect. Meredith Ziebart argues that this distinction "will become the philosophical lynchpin of his epistemological doctrine as of his solution to the *fides-ratio* problem" (*Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith*, 9–10).

<sup>32</sup> See Bernard McGinn, "Unitrinum Seu Triunum: Nicholas of Cusa's Trinitarian Mysticism," in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia* (ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard; Religion and Postmodernism; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 90–117.

<sup>33</sup> Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, in *Selected Spiritual Writings* (trans. Bond) 98 (h i, 18).

<sup>34</sup> "Because God is unity, God is begetter and Father; because God is equality of unity, God is begotten or Son; and because God is their connection, God is Holy Spirit" (*ibid.*, 123 [h i, 50]).

<sup>35</sup> *De venatione sapientiae* 21, in *Metaphysical Speculations* (trans. Hopkins) 1318. This articulation of the Trinity can be found in various places in the earlier writings of Augustine; see, for instance, *Doctr. chr.* 1.5. As Bernard McGinn notes, Augustine eventually abandons this way of referring to the Trinity in his later writings. However, Augustine's formulation was eventually picked up and made prevalent in the work of Thierry of Chartres (McGinn, "Unitrinum Seu Triunum," 92–93).

<sup>36</sup> Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa On God as Not-Other: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud* (3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Banning, 1987) 1117 (h xiii, 13).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Sermon 22, in *Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons: 1430–1441* (ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins; Loveland, CO: Banning, 2003) 365.

<sup>39</sup> Hopkins, *On God as Not-Other*, 1117 (h xiii, 13).

<sup>40</sup> I owe the following elucidation of *non-aliud* to a lecture by Andrea Hollingsworth (Boston University; 29 March 2016).



definition itself was *non-aliud* because it simultaneously pointed to individuality (none-other), which was striven for by the Aristotelians, and to transcendence (not-other), which was sought after by the Platonists. It indicated indivisible individuality because the definition of any object is that it is none other than itself, that is, the sky is none other than the sky. It also better captured the Neoplatonic emphasis on transcendence because it was simpler than the term “One.” This was the case because “not-other” had no opposite and therefore was the definition that all language and thought presupposed. Nevertheless, even with *non-aliud*, Cusa did not settle on a definitive name for God; instead, he continued to take up and discard concepts and methods in order to attempt to name the unnamable, that is, to think of and articulate (and, yes, encounter) God as God.<sup>41</sup>

### ■ Learned Ignorance in Augustine’s Early Writings

Augustine used the phrase *docta ignorantia* in Letter 130 (411 CE) to Proba to describe a practice of prayer based on Paul’s description of “ineffable sighs” (Rom 8:26).<sup>42</sup> Proba asked why Paul said, “we do not know what to pray for as we ought,” if Jesus taught what to pray for in the Lord’s Prayer. Augustine responded that Proba should pray for happiness, but, because true happiness consisted in eternal communion with God, she could not conceive of this reality. In the meantime, Proba should adopt a practice similar to that of the Egyptian monks who cast aside all thoughts because they could not capture what the heart truly desired.<sup>43</sup>

Augustine’s approach to learned ignorance was established much earlier, in his first extant writings, the Cassiciacum Dialogues (386 CE).<sup>44</sup> *Against the Academics* addressed the skeptical position of the Academics that the philosopher could never arrive at certainty regarding truth. Instead, Augustine determined that certitude of truth and wisdom may in fact be attained, but admitted that he had not yet attained such knowledge.<sup>45</sup> He knew that it was possible to know Wisdom and that he did not know her.

A similar learned ignorance undergirded the *Soliloquies* (386/387 CE), in which Augustine set out to know the depths of himself (the soul) and God through

<sup>41</sup> For a modern take on theology as an attempt to name the unnamable, see Wesley Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumbblings at the Limits of Language* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, “Letter 130,” in *Letters 100–155* (trans. Roland Teske; vol. II/2 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, 50 vols.; Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1998–) 183–99 (hereafter WSA).

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (trans. Benedicta Ward; New York: Penguin, 2003) 148.

<sup>44</sup> *Against the Academics (Acad.)*, *The Blessed Life (Beat.)*, and *On Order (Ord.)*; see also Erik Kenyon, “The Order of Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues,” *AugStud* 42 (2011) 173–88; and Augustine, *Conf.* 9.4.7–5.13.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *Against the Academics* (trans. John J. O’Meara; ACW 12; Ramsey, NJ: Newman, 1951) 150.

reason.<sup>46</sup> He confessed in prayer that the only thing he knew was that “transient dying things are to be rejected,” while “certain and eternal things are to be sought after.”<sup>47</sup> He knew that this was the path of wisdom but admitted that “this only I know, O Father, but how to come to thee I know not yet.”<sup>48</sup> Augustine surmised that God was best known through the purgation of vices and the pursuit of virtue.<sup>49</sup> The path of purgation followed the theological virtues: the wayfarer *believed* the vision of Wisdom would procure ultimate happiness, *hoped* that this vision was possible, and *desired* more than anything to behold the object of their affection. The medium of faith was fundamentally internal and the metaphors visual. Faith caused the viator to reject the senses and to believe the superior world of the mind. The path toward wisdom was also quite open: “Not by one way is she approached.”<sup>50</sup>

*The Teacher* (389 CE), a dialogue with Augustine’s son Adeodatus on how signs (*signa*) relate to the things they signify (*res*), continued to emphasize that universals and intelligibles were known through an Inner Teacher, not through external words.<sup>51</sup> Nothing was taught by words unless the reality of the thing signified was already known. No one would be foolish enough to say that when they went to school they learned from their teacher. Instead, they searched within themselves to discern whether or not the teacher’s words correspond to the truth they already knew. To know and love this inner voice, which is the Christ, constituted the happy life that many sought but few had the joy of finding.<sup>52</sup>

At this early venture, Augustine pursued his unanswered questions through the philosophical and Platonic discipline of dialectic, not primarily through an exposition of the Christian Scriptures. The path to wisdom and knowledge was open because everyone possessed the inner voice of reason, but the ascent was steep and few reached the top. The wisdom of the majority of wayfarers, therefore, consisted in learned ignorance. Such deference served to purify continually the desires and propel the viator onward toward the future goal of eternal happiness.

### ■ Learned Ignorance in the *Confessions*

Augustine’s past confessions of what he did not know predominated in Books 1–8 of his *Confessions*, especially after he began his philosophical quest in Book 3 (*Conf.* 3.4.7).<sup>53</sup> Augustine’s first confession of himself was shrouded with the

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, *Soliloquies (Solil.)*, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. John H. S. Burleigh; LCC 6; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) 17–63.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *On the Teacher (Mag.)*, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. Burleigh) 64–101.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine admits his ignorance at least seventy times: *Conf.* 1.6.7; 1.6.8; 1.6.10; 1.7.11; 1.7.12; 3.7.12; 3.7.14; 3.10.18; 3.8.21; 4.2.3; 4.4.9; 4.6.11; 4.7.12; 4.12.19; 4.13.20; 4.15.24; 4.15.25; 4.15.26; 4.16.30; 5.10.20; 5.13.23; 6.3.3; 6.3.4; 6.4.5; 6.4.6; 6.5.7–8; 6.11.20; 6.16.26;

darkness of ignorance. After trying to find words to answer his question “What is my God?” and failing (*Conf.* 1.4.4), Augustine questioned himself. He wanted to speak, but what should he say? He began with ignorance: “I have no idea where I came from” (*Conf.* 1.6.7). He attempted to push his memory to the furthest recesses of existence: the state of his soul before it joined his embryo. What was he before he was born? The only honest answer was the constant refrain *nescio*—“I do not know.” Nevertheless, he continued to attempt to peer beyond the veil: “Did I exist somewhere? Was I someone at all?” (*Conf.* 1.6.9).<sup>54</sup>

Why question an aspect of his existence that he knew would exceed the capacity of his memory? Was he trying to solve what he would later refer to as the “problem of the soul,” or was something else going on? After posing these unanswered questions, Augustine asked a final question and used the verb *confiteor* for the first time: “Or do you smile at me for asking these questions—and decree that I must praise you for what I do know about you, and confess my faith in you?” (*Conf.* 1.6.9).<sup>55</sup> The reference to God’s smile points to a certain playfulness to his confessions of ignorance. There is also a deep irony in the fact that the famed Bishop Aurelius Augustine set out on a philosophical quest for truth, only to learn that he must praise God for what he did not know as much as, or even more so, for what he thought he knew.

The remainder of his confessions of past ignorance fall into three categories. First, Augustine admitted his ignorance as a Manichaean of the nonsubstantial nature of evil and the truth of the reality of spiritual substance (*Conf.* 3.7.12–14). He reiterated his ignorance of the possibility of spiritual reality three more times before his conversion to Platonic transcendence in Book 7.<sup>56</sup> Second, in Book 4 Augustine reflected upon his ignorance of true love while grieving the loss of an unnamed friend, Augustine’s “twin” (*alter eram*).<sup>57</sup> His confusion over his grief occasioned the first admission that he had become a great question (*magna quaestio*) to himself (*Conf.* 4.4.9).<sup>58</sup> Third, Augustine began his famous garden experience with a story of his ignorance of Antony of Egypt and desert monasticism (*Conf.* 8.6.13). Once the place of Antony is highlighted through this admission of ignorance, it is easier to understand Augustine’s experience in Book 8 not as a conversion to the truth of Christianity (much of this already happened in Book 7), but instead as a

7.1.1; 7.1.2; 7.7.11; 8.6.14; 8.6.15; 9.4.9; 9.5.13; 9.7.16; 9.10.23; 9.11.28; 9.13.37; 10.5.7; 10.8.15; 10.10.17; 10.15.23; 10.20.29; 10.28.39; 10.33.49–50; 10.37.60–62; 11.2.2; 11.4.6; 11.8.10; 11.9.11; 11.12.14; 11.14.17; 11.18.23; 11.19.25; 11.22.28; 11.25.32; 11.26.33; 11.29.39; 11.31.41; 12.5.5; 12.6.6; 12.30.41; 13.7.8; 13.11.12; 13.14.15; 13.23.33; 13.38.53.

<sup>54</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (ed. and trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond; 2 vols.; LCL 26–27; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014–2016) 26:11, 15 (hereafter LCL).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> *Conf.* 6.3.4 (LCL 26:245); *Conf.* 6.5.8 (LCL 26:253); and *Conf.* 7.1.1 (LCL 26:293).

<sup>57</sup> For an exposition of the theme of the divine double in early religious thought, see Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>58</sup> LCL 26:146.

conversion to celibacy.<sup>59</sup> The choice of celibacy enabled Augustine to quit his job as a rhetorician and embark on the unhindered quest of philosophy (*Conf.* 9.4.7–5.13).

Confessions of ignorance increased in the later books, as does the reader's own bewilderment. Nevertheless, the dizzying, mind-bending nature of Books 10–13 was quite intentional.<sup>60</sup> Alongside a playful irony of ignorance, the latter books evidence how ignorance also functioned as a practice of prayer. Augustine expended his intellectual effort on topics that he knew were beyond the powers of his mind in order to exhaust his analytical efforts and, in such a state of intellectual depletion, to grasp for a kind of understanding beyond his cognitive abilities. In other words, Augustine's last chapters were a spiritual practice intended to break the mind.

Book 10 was a meditation on self-knowledge and a prayer to understand topics that remained beyond the grasp of his intellect.<sup>61</sup> Building on the contrast between the plenitude of God's knowledge and the dearth of his own, Augustine playfully confessed that he knew something about God that he could not know about himself: "I know you cannot be harmed in any way. But I do not know which temptations I may have the strength to resist, or to which I may succumb" (*Conf.* 10.5.7).<sup>62</sup> He confessed this because the weight of his sin kept him from rising and grasping the truths of ultimate reality. He proposed, therefore, to confess to God what he knew of himself and what he did not know of himself (*Conf.* 10.5.7). Notice the connection of "to confess" (*confiteor*) with "to know" (*scire*) and "not to know" (*nescire*). He stated again that he had become a problem/question to himself: "Before your eyes I have become a puzzle [*quaestio*] to myself, and this itself is my weakness" (*Conf.* 10.33.50).<sup>63</sup> Augustine's self-reflection in Book 10 was, therefore, a continuation of the endless onslaught of unanswered questions found in the previous books, questions which attempted to peer beyond the veil of his own understanding toward a "sudden" rapturous knowledge given by God.<sup>64</sup>

In Book 11 Augustine turned from himself to the text of Scripture.<sup>65</sup> His plan was to confess what he understood of Scripture and what remained beyond his powers

<sup>59</sup> See *Conf.* 8.6.13; 8.12.30.

<sup>60</sup> See Nordlander, "Nescio: The Pedagogy of Ignorance."

<sup>61</sup> Cusa's marginalia evidence his interest in Book 10. In descending order: Book 10 (82 notes); Book 9 (78 notes); Book 7 (56 notes); Book 8 (47 notes); Book 1 (43 notes); Books 6 (35 notes); Book 11 (35 notes); Book 12 (33 notes); Book 13 (15 notes); Book 4 (7 notes); and Book 5 (7 notes). See Schmitt, *Interioridad y trascendencia*, 225–307.

<sup>62</sup> LCL 27:79.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 154–55. "In cuius oculis mihi quaestio factus sum, et ipsi est langur meus." Sometimes "quaestio" here is rendered in English as "enigma," as in "I have become an enigma to myself" (see *The Confessions* [trans. Maria Boulding; vol 1/1 of WSA; Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1997] 270).

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Trin.* 8.2.3; see also Lossky, "Elements of 'Negative Theology,'" 74; and Alexander Golitzin, "'Suddenly Christ': The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites," in *Mystics* (ed. Kessler and Sheppard) 8–37.

<sup>65</sup> In *Retract.* 2.6, Augustine explained the structure of *Conf.* as first having to do with himself (Books 1–10) and then having to do with Scripture (Books 11–13) (see Augustine, *Retract.*, in WSA I/2:114).

of cognition (*Conf.* 11.2.2).<sup>66</sup> The bulk of Book 11 fell to an elaborate discussion of time, which, very much like memory, Augustine could not fully understand. In daily speech, what was easier to talk about than time? But, once he started thinking about it, its nature eluded the grasp: “if no one is asking me a question about it, I know what it is; but if I want to explain it to the questioner, I do not know how to” (*Conf.* 11.14.17).<sup>67</sup> He suggested that time is a distention, but a stretching out of what, exactly, he did not know (*Conf.* 11.26.33).<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, he did not give up the burning desire to know and understand what eluded his grasp: “my mind has burned to understand this most intricate mystery” (*Conf.* 11.22.28).<sup>69</sup> Then, in an often-misquoted passage, he ridiculed those who attempted to answer the question of what God was doing before the creation of the world with the joke: “creating hell for those who look into profundities.” Instead he preferred the honest answer, “nescio, quod nescio”—I do not know, what I do not know (*Conf.* 11.12.14).<sup>70</sup> When faced with the profundity of his own ignorance, Augustine asked God to open the door of the hidden meaning of the Scriptures: “Let it be pleasing in view of your mercy that I find grace in your presence, so that the deeper truths of your words may be opened to me when I knock” (*Conf.* 11.2.4).<sup>71</sup> The exact nature of time, then, was another unsolvable riddle upon which Augustine chose to crash the waves of his intellect in an attempt to receive understanding from God.

Lastly, in Books 12–13 the questions narrowed to the creation account contained in Genesis. A major theme of the exposition was Augustine’s ignorance of the exact truth that Moses intended to convey. The interpretations were conjectural: “this is what I infer for the time being” (*Conf.* 12.13.16).<sup>72</sup> He listed nine axioms he knew to be true of creation but was unsure which one Moses intended (*Conf.* 12.19.28). Instead of vying for one meaning, it was better to take up an interpretation that could embrace a plurality of views. Why should the words of Moses, especially if they were divinely inspired, not incapsulate the largest number of truths possible? He even called exclusive views of what Moses really meant “stupid” (*Conf.* 12.25.35).<sup>73</sup> Instead, a diversity of true views would engender concord among believers. After all, he admitted that he would not be using the language of his confessions if he failed to confess that he did not know (*Conf.* 12.30.41).<sup>74</sup>

What Augustine attempted to do in these last two books was to get beyond the surface-level meaning of the text to the deep-down realities that it gestured toward. “What wonderful profundity there is in your utterances! The surface meaning lies

<sup>66</sup> LCL 27:193.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 213; translation altered.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>73</sup> *Stultus*; *ibid.*, 317.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

open before us and charms beginners. Yet the depth is amazing, my God, the depth is amazing” (*Conf.* 12.14.17).<sup>75</sup> Ignorance led to wonder, which in turn led to praise. Books 12–13, then, marked another instantiation of the importance of learned ignorance, this time exegetical, that drove Augustine beyond the entanglement of creaturely existence toward the profundity of the depths of God’s truth. Such a purpose is evident in the last words of the text:

What human being can give another the power to understand this?  
 What angel can give it to another angel?  
 What angel can give it to a mortal?  
 We must ask it of you.  
 We must seek it from you.  
 We must knock at your door.  
 This, this, is how it will be received.  
 This is how it will be found.  
 This is how it will be opened. (*Conf.* 13.38.53)<sup>76</sup>

The last word “will be opened” (*aperietur*) was not a closing but an opening, pointing to Augustine’s confessions of ignorance as a prayerful search for an understanding that exceeded human—even angelic—resources.<sup>77</sup>

## ■ The Hammer of the Heretics

Augustine’s first writing against Pelagius, *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones* (ca. 411 CE), alerts the reader that ignorance will continue to play an important function in the argumentative strategy of the subsequent “anti-Pelagian” treatises.<sup>78</sup> The problem Augustine faced in this treatise was the claim that infants did not need to be baptized because they did not have original sin. If baptism made one righteous, why would two Christians (two righteous people) produce a sinner? Augustine admitted that he was “disturbed” when he first heard the new theories of the “Pelagians” because they called into question things that tradition had taught with certainty.<sup>79</sup> His argumentative strategy was to insist on the clarity of certain propositions of Scripture and then interpret obscure matters through these clearer passages. Augustine knew, on account of Rom 5:12, that due to original sin, all who died without Christian baptism would not be saved. Nevertheless, he remained ignorant of the reason why God chose some and not others. If God was omnipotent and desired for everyone to be saved, then why

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.

<sup>77</sup> See Charles T. Mathewes, “The Liberation of Questioning in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *JAAR* 70 (2002) 539.

<sup>78</sup> *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins (Pecc. merit.)* (WSA I/23:18–132).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.12 (WSA I/23:123). Augustine offers a further autobiographical description of his interaction with Pelagius’s views in *The Deeds of Pelagius (Gest. Pelag.)* 22.46 (WSA I/23:354).

was it that only some were baptized and others were not? Or, in the case of adults, if faith was a gift from God, then why was it that only some received this gift?<sup>80</sup>

Augustine's consistent answer to the "why" problem of election was to assert simultaneously that God was just (Rom 9:14) and that God's ways were inscrutable (Rom 11:33).<sup>81</sup> What was required of the Christian, therefore, was not curiosity but the assent of faith. In fact, the teachings of Scripture were often strange facts that seemed horrific to the uninitiated. For instance, Paul began his exclamation in Rom 11:33 with a profound "statement of amazing depth, when he said, for God has enclosed all in unbelief so that he might have mercy upon all." Augustine continued, "As if struck by horror at this depth, he says, 'O the depths.'" <sup>82</sup> Thus, the unanswered "why" questions created a deep fissure not only in the text of Scripture, but also in Augustine's own mind. He prayed for understanding and in its absence bent his intellect and the intellect of his readers under the weight of Romans.

One of the questions that Augustine did answer was why human rational capacities were so inept. How was it that infants came into the world in total noetic darkness—so needy, so unaware, and then, even when they grew to the height of their rational capacities, still failed to understand the basic inner workings of themselves, let alone the depths of reality? Augustine rejected the theories that stunted rational faculties were due to the transmigration of the soul or that ignorance was a natural human state. Instead, he defended the view that the ignorance of infants was due to punishment.<sup>83</sup> If human ignorance was natural, then why was Adam not born this way? Augustine speculated that if Adam and Eve had not sinned, their offspring would have been born with small bodies but developed rational faculties. Augustine followed this logic to what, for him, were its natural implications: because the infant Jesus was sinless, he was not relegated to noetic darkness.<sup>84</sup> Augustine knew full well that claims like these rested on faith in authority and not experience.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> This last question seems to stem from Augustine's work as a preacher. Why is it that some are moved by the words of a sermon and others are not? (See *The Predestination of the Saints* [*Praed.*] 8.14 (WSA I/26:110); *The Gift of Perseverance* [*Persev.*] 14.37 [WSA I/26:171–72]).

<sup>81</sup> For these "why" questions, see *Pecc. merit.* 1.19.25–21.30, 2.5.6, 2.18.32, 2.33.53 (WSA I/23:47–50, 82, 98, 111); *The Spirit and the Letter* (*Spir. et litt.*) 34.60, 36.64 (WSA I/23:184–85, 187); *Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians* (*C. du. ep. Pelag.*) 4.6.16 (WSA I/24:198); *Rebuke and Grace* (*Corrept.*) 8.17 (WSA I/26:63); *Praed.* 8.16, 12.23–14.26 (WSA I/26:111, 117–120); *Persev.* 9.21, 11.27, 12.30, 14.37 (WSA I/26:156, 163, 165, 172); *The Nature and Origin of the Soul* (*Nat. orig.*) 2.13.18 (WSA I/23:492).

<sup>82</sup> *Pecc. merit.* 1.21.29 (WSA I/23:49).

<sup>83</sup> See *Pecc. merit.* 1.35.65–39.70, 2.29.48 (WSA I/23:71–75, 108); *Nature and Grace* (*Nat. grat.*) 3.3, 22.24 (WSA I/23:218, 227); *The Perfection of Human Righteousness* (*Perf.*) 2.1–4.9 (WSA I/23:279–82); and *Persev.* 12.29 (WSA I/26:164).

<sup>84</sup> *Pecc. merit.* 2.29.48 (WSA I/23:108).

<sup>85</sup> See, for instance, *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin* (*Grat. Chr.*) 2.35.40–36.41 (WSA I/23:440–41).



The unanswerable nature of these questions bolstered the darkness of faith.<sup>86</sup> Why, for instance, was it that the transgression of the first Adam led to the death of all, whereas the obedience of the second Adam led only to the life of some? Or, if the penalty of sin was death, why was it that Christians whose sins were forgiven still die? Augustine explained that if all were saved or if Christians did not die like everyone else, then faith would not be faith: “what would be so great about believing that one is not going to die, when one sees that those who believe do not die?”<sup>87</sup> The very definition of faith, after all, was “argumentum non apparentium” (evidence of things that do not appear). God did not want Christians to see what they believe. This was why Jesus ascended to heaven, for unless he left the sight of his disciples, they would not develop spiritually by learning the art of believing in things unseen. Too much evidence was a bad thing. Therefore, when faced with such difficult questions, Augustine’s readers were to rely on what they heard proclaimed in the Scriptures and not on the sight of their rational faculties. After all, no one would doubt the clear authority of the canonical texts “except someone who is fully separated from the Catholic faith.”<sup>88</sup>

The onslaught of unanswered questions continued and intensified in *The Spirit and the Letter* (412 CE).<sup>89</sup> In this text Augustine introduced the problematic notion that it was possible for humans to live a sinless life with the help of God’s grace but, nevertheless, that this did not occur.<sup>90</sup> He made such a statement in order to emphasize that righteousness was a pure gift from God, but the dilemma of such a possible-impossibility opened another deep fracture. If perfect righteousness was possible, the only answer for why it remained unrealized was the inscrutable will of God. If the problem does not seem that significant, the modern reader should keep in mind that when Augustine said that it was possible for humans to be sinless by God’s grace, he meant perfect happiness. What father would not want each one of his children to be happy? What mother would choose misfortune for her daughter? If the fact that God chose some not to experience happiness was disturbing, Augustine reminded his readers that the human intellect could never fully grasp the wisdom of God.

Toward the end of the treatise, the conundrum intensified. Scripture simultaneously taught that God produced the will to believe and that God desired for everyone to be saved. Augustine admitted once again that the only honest answers to this problem were the two refrains from Paul: “O the depth of the riches” (Rom

<sup>86</sup> The “darkness of faith” intends to emphasize the auricular (over visual) nature of faith (see, for instance, *Spir. et litt.* 23.38–40, 28.49, 31.54, 36.65 [WSA I/23:167–68, 175, 179, 187–88]; *Perf.*, 7.17, 8.19 [WSA I/23:285, 287]; and *Grat. Chr.* 2.35.40–36.41 [WSA I/23:440–41]). For Martin Luther’s use of *tenebrae fidei*, see Samuel J. Dubbelman “‘Faith from Hearing’ in Luther’s Sermons on the Visitation” *LQ* 33 (2019) 276–86.

<sup>87</sup> *Pecc. merit.* 2.31.50 (WSA I/23:109).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.33.53 (WSA I/23:111).

<sup>89</sup> *Spir. et litt.* (WSA I/23:135–94).

<sup>90</sup> See also *Nat. grat.* 60.70 (WSA I/23:252).

11:33) and “Is there injustice in God?” (Rom 9:14).<sup>91</sup> At the close of the treatise, Augustine again speculated that, even here and now, God could grant incorruptibility to a person in such a way that “that person would know the omnipresent God as the saints will know him hereafter.”<sup>92</sup> God could theoretically grant the viator the ability to transform faith into sight, unhappiness into happiness, death into life, but for some reason God did not do this. No one would be insane enough to suggest that God could not do these things. Therefore, Augustine found shelter in what he did know and ended with an admission of learned ignorance. He knew that God was just; that God resisted the proud; and that when Paul asked for his “thorn” to be removed, he was told “my grace is sufficient for you, for virtue is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, there always remained in the judgments of God an inexplicable depth. “But who is able to examine this, who is able to search it out, who is able to come to know it?” The answer was no one, and the last words of the treatise were once again, “Oh the depths and wisdom of the knowledge of God.”<sup>93</sup> The unknowable rationale of God’s will caused Augustine to long for the day when his faith would become sight, when his thorn—his “why” questions—would find answers.

The position of learned ignorance in relation to unanswerable questions becomes more explicit in *The Nature and Origin of the Soul* (ca. 420/21 CE).<sup>94</sup> The unanswerable question in the previous treatises was why God chose some and not others; here, Augustine questions how souls were joined to bodies. Did the soul originate from physical propagation like the body or from God breathing a new soul into each individual? The question behind the question entailed why the soul was subject to sin in the first place. Augustine maintained that the question was unanswerable because it lacked clear scriptural proof. Scripture asserts that God creates the soul, not how.<sup>95</sup> Far better that the inquirers admit “that they did not know what they did not know than to fall into a heresy already condemned or to found a new one.”<sup>96</sup> The point of a posture of learned ignorance in this treatise was to uphold the teaching that all infants were tainted by original sin. Augustine could not admit that either the soul merited sin through attachment to the body or unbaptized infants were forgiven. If he were not afraid of falling into one of these two traps, he said he might be able to come to a decision on this question. Instead, he was happy to leave the origin of the soul in obscurity and affirm what he did know based on more certain statements of Scripture.

Learned ignorance continued to play an important role in the argumentative strategy of the later treatises that dealt with the problem of perseverance.<sup>97</sup> Why was it that some Christians who were given the gift of faith were not likewise given the

<sup>91</sup> *Spir. et litt.* 34.60 (WSA I/23:185).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.66 (WSA I/23:189).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Nat. orig.*, WSA I/23:451–542.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.11.15 (WSA I/23:524).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.19.34 (WSA I/23:477).

<sup>97</sup> *Grace and Free Choice (Grat.)*, *Corrept.*, *Praed.*, and *Persev.*

gift of perseverance? Augustine dealt with this problem by again simultaneously placing the impetus in God's election and its rationale in obscurity. He continued to confess "I do not know" while finding shelter in "the depths" (Rom 11:33).<sup>98</sup> Like faith, the gift of perseverance was indeed a "strange and very strange" fact.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, if one had already swallowed the sour draught that God elected certain children over others, then it would not be too hard to apply the same logic to perseverance, while relegating the questions and the horror to "the depths." If one tried to find a reason, one would inevitably place too much emphasis on the human will. Therefore, the inquirer should instead adopt a posture of learned ignorance: "Let them be content not to know along with us why God gives this to some and not to others."<sup>100</sup> Augustine even used ignorance as a corporate identity of true Christians—"us who do not know."<sup>101</sup> Like in *The Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine claimed that it was theoretically possible for God to give everyone the gift of perseverance. So, why was perseverance not given to all God's children? Augustine had no idea.

I have nothing to say; if you ask me why, I admit that the reason is that I do not find anything to say. And if you again ask why, I reply that the reason is that, just as in this area his anger is just, just as his mercy is great, so his judgments are inscrutable.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, learned ignorance did not disappear in Augustine's later treatises against Pelagianism but increased as a polemical strategy and apophatic theodicy. Augustine's learned ignorance of theodicy should also be seen as a theological move connected to humility. Learned ignorance was a mechanism of humility intended to oppose pride, the source of all sin. To pretend to know the will of God in regard to salvation or damnation was to risk repeating the very sin that was original. That is, to assert knowledge of God's theodicy risked imitating Adam.<sup>103</sup>

## ■ Cusa and the Humility of Faith

How does the progression of Augustine's conceptualization of learned ignorance help us understand Cusa in different and creative ways? At first glance, it appears that Cusa's Augustine was the earlier speculative philosopher and not the later polemicist. But, when we use Augustine's shifting conceptualization of learned ignorance as a mirror to reread Cusa, it helps direct our attention to Cusa's sermons,

<sup>98</sup> See, for instance, *Corrept.* 8.17 (WSA I/26:63).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.18 (WSA I/26:64).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.19 (WSA I/26:65).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.46 (WSA I/26:89).

<sup>102</sup> *Persev.* 8.18 (WSA I/26:154).

<sup>103</sup> I owe the above clarification of apophatic theodicy as a mechanism of humility to an anonymous reviewer (see also Elizabeth Groppe, "After Augustine: Humility and the Search for God in Historical Memory," in *Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility among Jews, Christians, and Muslims* [ed. James L. Heft, S.M., Reuven Firestone, and Omid Safi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011] 191–205).

which, in turn, reveal a different side of Cusa's approach to learned ignorance.<sup>104</sup> Joel Harrington has recently highlighted the radical nature of Meister Eckhart's vernacular sermons, especially the way he translated Latin concepts into German neologisms like *Gotheit*.<sup>105</sup> Cusa was unique in his open endorsement of Eckhart and in some ways followed Eckhart's style of mystical preaching. Cusa's 293 sermon notes take up almost a third of his collected works.<sup>106</sup> The sermon notes are an important source to track how Cusa translated his more speculative concepts to different audiences, especially the laity. At times, Cusa is quite specific about which sections of his sermons were intended for the learned, for the unlearned, and for contemplatives.<sup>107</sup> Also, one of the most striking features of Cusa's sermons is how they depict faith as vanquishing reason.<sup>108</sup> The recent scholarship of Meredith Ziebart and Peter Casarella has helped recover the epistemological priority of faith in Cusa's theology.<sup>109</sup> However, whereas Ziebart has argued for a continuation of Cusa's intellectualist approach to epistemological faith in his sermon notes, this section describes how Cusa also consistently conveyed learned ignorance in his sermons in terms of the coincidence of humility and dogmatic faith, or, as he put it in Sermon 275, as "the humility of faith."<sup>110</sup>

Whereas Augustine's later apophatic theodicy derived from the inscrutable nature of the revealed will of God, Cusa's apophatic theology is often understood as

<sup>104</sup> Citations of Cusa's sermons will be by section and page in h, followed by citation of the translation by Hopkins: *Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons* (ed. and trans. Hopkins) (hereafter ES); idem, *Nicholas of Cusa's Didactic Sermons: A Selection* (ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins; Loveland, CO: Banning, 2008) (hereafter DS).

<sup>105</sup> Joel Harrington, *Dangerous Mystic: Meister Eckhart's Path to God Within* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

<sup>106</sup> For an introduction to Cusa's sermons, see Lawrence F. Hundersmarck, "Preaching," in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man* (ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson; New York: Paulist, 2004); Walter Andreas Euler, "Sermones. Die Predigten des Nikolaus von Kues," in *Handbuch Nikolaus von Kues: Leben und Werk* (ed. Marco Brösch et al.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2014) 306–52; ES, vii–xx; and Richard J. Serina, *Nicholas of Cusa's Brixen Sermons and Late Medieval Church Reform* (Studies in the History of Christian Thought 182; Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>107</sup> Cusa uses this three-fold division, for instance, in Sermon 12, 4 (h xvi, 230) ES 255; Sermon 16, 5 (h xvi, 264) ES 291; and Sermon 22, 6 (h xvi, 335) ES 359.

<sup>108</sup> See DS, xi.

<sup>109</sup> See Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith*; Peter Casarella "Justification by Faith in Nicholas of Cusa," in *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition: Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson* (ed. Thomas M. Izbicki, Jason Aleksander, and Donald F. Duclow; Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 188; Leiden: Brill, 2019) 175–96; idem, *Word as Bread: Language and Theology in Nicholas of Cusa* (Buchreihe der Cusanus-Gesellschaft 21; Münster: Aschendorff, 2017); see also Jason Alexander, "Faith as *Poiesis* in Nicholas of Cusa's Pursuit of Wisdom," in *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition* (ed. Izbicki, Aleksander, and Duclow) 197–218.

<sup>110</sup> Sermon 275, 29 (h xix, 541) DS 185. Ziebart draws a distinction between epistemological and dogmatic faith in Cusa's thought, and prioritizes the former (Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith*, 24; see also Ziebart, "Laying Siege to the Wall of Paradise: The Fifteenth-Century Tegernsee Dispute over Mystical Theology and Nicholas of Cusa's Strong Defense of Reason," *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41 [2015] 41–66).

primarily deriving from his metaphysics of God as Infinity. Accordingly, apophatic theology was necessary because no comparative relationship existed between the finite and the Infinite (*finiti ad infinitum nulla sit proportio*).<sup>111</sup> All language and conceptions of ultimacy were therefore *aenigma*, that is, metaphor and symbol. Even with finite comparisons, “jedes Gleichnis hinkt” (every likeness limps); how much more so with Infinity? Along these lines, Alexia Schmitt notes that while Augustine explained the inability of humans to attain truth through hamartiology, Cusa offered a more philosophical rationale based on the Infinity of the Principle.<sup>112</sup> The necessity of apophatic theology based on Infinity can, of course, be found throughout Cusa’s sermon notes, but the Augustinian reverberations of *docta ignorantia* remind us that Cusa’s posture of learned ignorance did not have to do solely with Neoplatonic notions of interiority and transcendence or the dilemma of effing the ineffable, but also with an Augustinian discourse that understood original sin as pride and redemption as humility.

Humility was one of the chief virtues expounded by Cusa in his sermons, and the chief representative of the virtue of humility for Cusa was the Blessed Virgin Mary, the *mater humilis*. Mary’s humility was so profound that, according to Lk 1:48, it caught the divine gaze. Cusa’s sermons on the new feast day of Visitation (of Mary to Elizabeth) on 2 July channeled Augustine’s depiction of humility as a mechanism to combat the original sin of pride.<sup>113</sup> In his sermon notes for 2 July 1431 (Sermon 6), Cusa relied heavily on Augustine to depict pride as the essence of original sin and humility as the essence of redemption. He also turned to Augustine’s Letter 130 (where Augustine uses the terminology *docta ignorantia*) to explain the proper kind of devotion and prayer that issued from humility. Likewise, Cusa noted that the first step of the ascent of humility, according to Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, was self-knowledge and that self-knowledge, according to Augustine in *On the Trinity* IV, always entailed a knowledge of one’s own weakness. This is why Augustine’s Letter 130 explained *docta ignorantia* following the Pauline logic that we do not know what to pray for on account of our infirmities, and the biggest infirmity of all was the presumption of pride.

In his sermon notes for the Day of Visitation from 2 July 1446 (Sermon 68), Cusa made the connection between Mary’s humility and the nature of faith more explicit.<sup>114</sup> The notes connected Mary’s question about the “how” of conception to the nature of belief in heavenly things (like spiritual rebirth) in general that necessarily transcended all comparison. Cusa explained the unknowability of

<sup>111</sup> For this axiom in his sermons, see Sermon 3, 11 (h xvi, 48) ES 49; Sermon 7, 32 (h xvi, 140) ES 153; Sermon 11, 3 (h xvi, 224) ES 250; Sermon 16, 7 (h xvi, 265), ES 292; Sermon 22, 32 (h xvi, 351) ES 368; Sermon 172, 1 (h xviii, 248–49) DS 85.

<sup>112</sup> Schmitt, *Interioridad y trascendencia*, 60–63 and 165–70.

<sup>113</sup> Sermon 6 (h xvi, 99–118) ES 108–30. For the Marian festival of the Day of Visitation, see, for example, Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) 156–57.

<sup>114</sup> Sermon 68 (h xvii, 394–405) DS 452–65.

the *quomodo* of faith not in terms of *quidditas* (his normal rational for negative theology) but in terms of *voluntas*. Because God's will, as "Absolute Necessity itself," transcended all modes of possibility and impossibility, the word of God should be accepted with the simple trust of the handmaid (*ancilla*).<sup>115</sup> The Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3 had tried to compare heavenly birth with earthly birth and, therefore, could not accept the teaching of Jesus. Thus, the difficulty of belief arose from the fact that there was no comparative relationship between the finite and the Infinite, and one solved the problem by accepting the authoritative Word. Elsewhere, Cusa reiterated that while articles of faith such as the hypostatic union of Christ or transubstantiation were beyond comprehension, they were nevertheless not unbelievable.<sup>116</sup> In this regard, Cusa followed the Augustinian notion that in order to understand one had first to believe.<sup>117</sup> Likewise, Cusa could describe faith as a kind of intellectual servitude in terms of Augustine's influential definition of faith as "thinking with assent" (*est cum assensione cogitare*), for, as Cusa explained, "in believing the intellectual eye assents to the ears."<sup>118</sup> One did not believe what one saw but, rather, what one heard on account of the authority of the speaker. So, one did not understand the *quomodo* of God's will, but one knew what God willed through the revelation of the spoken word. In the case of Mary, it was the word of the angel; in the case of Nicodemus, it was the word of Jesus; for the majority of Cusa's unlearned listeners, it was the word of the priest.

Cusa could also describe faith as a higher form of knowledge than mystical theology. In a sermon preached in Augsburg on Christmas Day in 1440 (Sermon 22), Cusa again connected the nature of Infinity with the necessity of faith. The divine "is not apprehended by reason or by imagination or by the senses; for He surpasses all the senses and all power of reason. Rather, He is apprehended by faith. For unless you believe, you will not understand, says Isaias."<sup>119</sup> Therefore, faith was also necessary to investigate the *quidditas* of God. God as Infinity could not be approached through the typical mechanisms of definition or conception, because there was no opposite in God. To say that God is *this* implied God is not *that*. Therefore, the language of "true theologians" attempted to express how God transcended and transgressed all opposition through negative theology.<sup>120</sup> After expounding the quandary of talking about the untalkable, the second part of the sermon turned to the importance of faith in God's revelation. Though God was hidden, God had revealed Godself in the Word, as when someone reveals the hidden mental state through vocalization.<sup>121</sup> Such a mental state, Cusa carefully explained, was only available to those who drew near to Christ in faith and devotion.

<sup>115</sup> Sermon 68, 3 (h xvii, 395) DS 453.

<sup>116</sup> Sermon 17, 10 (h xvi, 277) ES 303.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Sermon 22, 7 (h xvi, 336) ES 359; Sermon 135, 6 (h xvii, 72) DS 117.

<sup>118</sup> Sermon 189, 19 (h xviii, 367) DS 285.

<sup>119</sup> Sermon 22, 7 (h xvi, 336) ES 359.

<sup>120</sup> Sermon 22, 10 (h xvi, 338) ES 360.

<sup>121</sup> Sermon 22, 39 (h xvi, 355) ES 371.

Likewise, in a sermon preached in Brixen on Christmas Day in 1456 (Sermon 258), Cusa again placed faith as a higher form of knowledge than mystical theology.<sup>122</sup> The sermon categorized four ascending levels of the knowledge of God: 1) natural; 2) mystical; 3) faith; and 4) beatific vision. Cusa depicted Jesus as the revelation of the mental word of God and stressed that “those who by faith accept the word that is in the Son receive unto themselves the mind-of-God.”<sup>123</sup> Mystical theology was a higher way of knowing the divine than natural knowledge because it better expressed how the Invisible was revealed through the visible. Through the process of denying God all names and all concepts, “we enter negatively into the darkness wherein God dwells.”<sup>124</sup> And yet, this was to enter the darkness through negation, not necessarily to look upon the face of God. In order to see God’s face, it was “necessary that revelation and grace be added to nature.”<sup>125</sup> Cusa then explained that for the viator (or church militant), the vision of God’s face only occurred through the third kind of knowledge, “in a dark manner in and through faith” (*hic in fide aenigmatice*).<sup>126</sup> The language of *aenigma* derived from 1 Cor 13:12, a well-established proof-text for the nature of faith. Jasper Hopkins often translates *aenigma* in Cusa’s sermons as “symbolic,” which is correct but has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the connection of *aenigma* to the larger tradition of Christian discourse on the theological virtue of faith.<sup>127</sup>

This section concludes by briefly pointing out the shadow side of the intersection of learned ignorance and the humility of faith in Cusa’s sermons. In a sermon on 27 March 1457 (Sermon 275), Cusa used the Virgin Mary to depict the bareness of faith.<sup>128</sup> Faith was “barren” because it was devoid of reasons, “and the more reasons it would have, the more diminished it would be.”<sup>129</sup> That Cusa’s most consistent illustration of the humility of faith was a powerless handmaid should not escape modern critique. As stated above, Cusa occasionally addressed specific sections of his sermons to the unlearned and the laity. In a sermon preached in Brixen on 20 July 1455 (Sermon 196), Cusa used the nature of faith to instruct the laity that they must blindly obey their priest as they would Christ.<sup>130</sup> For unless they believed that the priest was the representative of Christ, they would never obtain absolution. The laity must obey their priests “as a mule obeys a master.”<sup>131</sup> Therefore, as this section has attempted to demonstrate, the mirror of Augustine helps change our optics

<sup>122</sup> Sermon 258 (h xix, 377–89) DS 20–32.

<sup>123</sup> Sermon 258, 4 (h xix, 379) DS 21.

<sup>124</sup> Sermon 258, 7 (h xix, 380) DS 22.

<sup>125</sup> Sermon 158, 11 (h xix, 383) DS 24.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, Sermon 135, DS 121; Sermon 254, DS 324.

<sup>128</sup> Sermon 275 (h xix, 238–40) DS 178–88.

<sup>129</sup> Sermon 275, 2 (h xix, 238) DS 178. Cusa refers elsewhere to “internal attestations” of faith (see, for instance, Sermon 186, 3–18 [h xviii, 332–38] DS 212–18).

<sup>130</sup> Sermon 196 (h xviii, 408–18) DS 352–66.

<sup>131</sup> Sermon 196, 12 (h xviii, 415) DS 359.



and we notice that, even for Cusa, there could be a fine line between the darkness of faith as an optics of comfort and the darkness of faith as an optics of coercion.

## ■ Conclusion

I have used Cusa as a mirror to read Augustine and, in turn, used that reading of Augustine as a mirror to reread Cusa. Cusa's Augustine, like Dionysius, insisted that one best knows and encounters God through a knowledge of one's ignorance of the true depth of things. Cusa creatively adapted Augustine's teaching on *docta ignorantia* toward theological methodology as a whole, due to the Neoplatonic priority of the unity and transcendence of ultimate reality. Cusa's Augustine helps us, in turn, recover the importance of learned ignorance in Augustine's own writings. In order to show the textual depths from which Cusa drew, I offered a reading of learned ignorance in Augustine's early writings, in the *Confessions*, and in his later anti-Pelagian writings. Learned ignorance played an important function throughout all of these writings, but it did so in different ways. The consistent use of the practice, though, evidences the importance of learned ignorance in Augustine's pursuit of wisdom, while the shifting contours of learned ignorance throughout his writings suggests that learned ignorance increasingly looked like the theological virtue of faith, which in turn looked like humility. To claim to know the ways of God in relation to salvation and damnation risked repeating the original sin of Adam, namely, pride. On the other hand, to believe what one did not fully understand was to practice humility.

In turn, Augustine helps us see how Cusa often represented learned ignorance in his sermons as the humility of faith. Thus, the metaphysical notion of Infinity and the Christian story of the fall (pride) and redemption (humility/faith) worked in tandem. Learned ignorance was necessary because there was no comparative relationship between the finite and the Infinite; but what this looked like for the average person who may have listened to Cusa's sermons was a simple trust in the word of God through the priest, not necessarily contemplative practices like negative theology. In this regard, Cusa, like Augustine, could teach that the best way to know ultimacy was through humble submission to the authority of the divine Word. Thus, faith becomes a kind of negative theology in which the auricular negates reason ("the darkness of faith").

The imagery of two facing mirrors conjures a Cusan analogy of infinity. The mirror as literary metaphor depicts the complexity of doing theology in an apophatic mode. One sets out to talk about something that by definition exceeds description. The imagery also depicts the situated perspective of the onlooker and, thus, the seemingly endless interpretive possibilities when two writers are placed in conversation. I see Cusa and Augustine as two literary mirrors at the beginning and end of the European Middle Ages whose varying formulations of learned ignorance in the pursuit of wisdom help capture the complexity and danger inherent in theology.