

DID THE LATIN AGE REALLY BEGIN WITH AUGUSTINE?

28

Christopher S. Morrissey


Redeemer Pacific College, Langley, B.C., Canada

Augustine's proposal for the definition of the sign as a general notion encompassing both nature and culture may be taken, as it has been taken in the work of John Deely, as marking the beginning of a distinct Latin development of semiotic consciousness. For in the *De Dialectica*, Augustine writes that the sign is "anything which shows itself first to the sense and then indicates something beyond itself to the mind" (Deely 2001: 221 n.28): *signum est quod et se ipsum sensui et praeter se aliquid animo ostendit*. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, he writes that "a sign is something that, beyond the impression it makes on sense, makes something else enter into cognition" (Deely 2004: 100): *signum est quod praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus facit aliquid aliud in cognitionem venire* (Deely 2004: 123 n.25).

But Augustine, who wrote in Latin, seems to have adopted this very notion of the sign from Origen, who wrote in Greek. Augustine had a prolonged, special interest in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Recently, Paula Fredriksen has rigorously detailed how Augustine's thinking on this Epistle was pivotal for his intellectual development, a topic about which she has been thinking since the beginning of her scholarly career. Although Origen's Greek survives only in fragments, we do have Rufinus's Latin translation of his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. In it, we find striking formulations regarding the sign, which show a Hellenistic concern for interpretive allegory: i.e., biblical theology that *philosophically* interprets Scripture (Fredriksen 2008).

Origen's formulations regarding the sign assert that with it we move from a literal, sense-based understanding to an intellectual, allegorical one. Further, Augustine's struggle was with this very same problem: viz., how is the literal related to the spiritual? the historical to the allegorical? or the culture-bound to nature (that more prior level of being)? Most notably, Origen writes (in Rufinus's translation of his Greek)—in a formulation which Augustine seems to faithfully echo—*Signum namque dicitur, cum per hoc, quod videtur, aliud aliquid indicatur* (Heither 1992: 184): "something is called a sign when, through that which appears, something else is indicated".¹ Therefore, let us consider the nature of this very

¹ Scheck 2001: 249. Cf. Daly 1984: 101: "something is called a sign when, through something that is visible, something else is meant".

28. “Did the Latin Age Begin with Augustine?”  Christopher S. Morrissey

interesting echo, by way of a scholastic disputation:

Whether the Latin Age Really Began with Augustine?

Objection 1. It would seem that the Latin Age began with Augustine. Augustine’s proposal for a definition of the sign as something bridging both nature and culture apparently has no parallel in the ancient world (Deely 2001: 214-224), because the ancient notion of a “sign” (*semeion*) is not a general notion but rather of something that belongs only to a specific class of natural events; or (as Aristotle put it), “anything such that when it is another thing is, or when it has come into being the other has come into being before or after, is a sign of the other’s being or having come into being” (Deely 2004: 76). No thinker in antiquity treats the sub-species of signs known as *langue* (i.e., language as a whole) specifically as a subclass of signs in general; instead, natural events and *parole* (i.e., the words of language) are conceived of separately, as though of opposites, *physis* (nature) versus *nomos* (convention): “natural events to which signifying is something added versus linguistic events to which signifying is the main point”; natural events “are what they are regardless of our correct or incorrect interpretation of them”, whereas properly speaking (i.e., “in the accent of the Latins”) linguistic events “are signs *per se*” due to “our original stipulation of what it is they are to ‘stand for’” (Deely 2004: 77).

Objection 2. When the New Testament speaks in Greek of a “sign of contradiction” (Luke 2:34),² the phrase must be understood as a subjective genitive, and not as an objective genitive. That is, the contradiction belongs to language, not to the sign that is being spoken against (which is non-linguistic). In other words, the contradiction is nominal, pertaining to words, and not to things. It is anachronistic to think otherwise than that “there is no general concept of sign to be found in Greek philosophy” because it can conceive only of “very specific forms of sign, particularly ones associated with divination, both in the invidious sense of prophetic and religious divination and in the more positive scientific sense of prognostications in matters of medicine and meteorology” (Deely 2004: 95). Therefore there is no bridge between convention and nature being assumed in the New Testament phrase, because this would be to postulate an anachronistic mindset to the author.

Objection 3. In his examples, Origen writes of divination as do the ancients before the Latin Age; that is, he writes of divination’s signs

² Scheck 2001: 249: “a sign that will be spoken against”; Heither 1992: 184: *signum cui contradicetur*.

as of a class separately, as though of opposites, to the class of natural events. Origen, with the Greeks, thinks that *semeia* ("signs") are either divine, i.e., "from outside the human realm", or "are from nature", because they are "either in the manifestations of the gods or in the manifestations of the physical surroundings"; inside "the human realm are found not signs but symbols (*sumbola*) and, what is after all but a subclass of symbols, names (*onomata*), the elements in general of linguistic communication" (Deely 2004: 121 n.16). Therefore Origen does not bridge the realms of nature and culture as Augustine does with his later proposal for the definition of the sign.

Objection 4. Origen survives only in the Latin translation of Rufinus, so that even if we were to find Augustine's understanding of sign indebted to Origen's biblical exegesis, we must still claim that understanding of sign as proper to the Latin Age, since it is not preserved among Greek thought but rather recognized as significant only amidst the linguistic consciousness of the Latin community of inquirers. As Eco et. al have established (1986: 65), only the Latin Age of semiotic consciousness moves beyond "the ancient dichotomy between the inferential relations linking natural signs to the things of which they are signs and the relations of equivalence linking linguistic terms to the concept(s) on the basis of which something 'is'—singly or plurally—designated" (quoted at Deely 2004: 77).

On the contrary, Augustine (354-430) indeed writes in Book II of *On Christian Doctrine* that *signum est quod praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus facit aliquid aliud in cognitionem venire*, just as Origen (185-254) wrote that *signum namque dicitur, cum per hoc, quod videtur, aliud aliquid indicatur*. This is because Augustine, like Origen, saw that it is written in Romans 4:11, "he received the sign of circumcision as a seal on the righteousness through faith": *signum accepit circumcisionis, signaculum iustitiae fidei*.³ Therefore, in interpreting this passage, both

³ Romans 4: 9-12 (NAB): "[9] Does this blessedness [*beatitudo*: i.e., evidence of divine favor] apply only to the circumcised, or to the uncircumcised as well? Now we assert that 'faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.' [10] Under what circumstances was it credited? Was he circumcised or not? He was not circumcised, but uncircumcised. [11] And *he received the sign of circumcision as a seal on the righteousness received through faith* while he was uncircumcised. Thus he was to be the father of all the uncircumcised who believe, so that to them (also) righteousness might be credited, [12] as well as the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised, but also follow the path of faith that our father Abraham walked while still uncircumcised. [13] It was not through the law that the promise was made to Abraham and his descendants that he would inherit the world, but through the righteousness that comes from faith. [14] For if those who adhere to the law are the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void."

28. "Did the Latin Age Begin with Augustine?" ❀ Christopher S. Morrissey

Augustine and Origen had achieved a semiotic consciousness transcending the ancient dichotomy of nature and culture, as their definitions of sign indicate. Because, as Poinsett writes, a sign precisely speaking "exercises the office of representing another besides itself": *praecise exercet officium repraesentandi aliud a se* (Deely 2004: 103 and 125 n.37).

I answer that, signifying is not something added *per accidens* to the examples treated by Origen. Signifying *per se* is rather the main point, as in a linguistic event, in the examples treated by Origen (Cf. Deely 2004: 77). Both nature and culture are wedded and bridged in Origen's examples illustrating his definition of sign:

For something is called a sign when, through that which appears, something else is indicated. For example the Lord says in the Gospel, "This generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so also for three days and three nights the Son of Man must be in the heart of the earth." This, then, is the sign: where Jonah was seen, Christ was recognized. Similarly it is said about the Lord himself in the Gospel, "Behold, he is destined for the falling and the rising of many, and to be a sign that will be spoken against." For the sign under which Christ had come was spoken against because one thing was seen in him, and something else was recognized. Flesh was perceived, and God was believed.

(6) In this way then Abraham too received a sign. And that it *was* a sign, it says in what follows, "circumcision," a circumcision which was the "Seal of the faith which he had" before he was circumcised. [Paul] has done well, then, in calling circumcision a sign for Abraham, because one thing was seen in it and another thing was recognized. And he shows that even then that fleshly circumcision was a sign of spiritual circumcision which is received not in the flesh but in the heart. (Scheck 2001: 2001: 249)

Therefore, *pace* Deely (2001), *pace* Manetti (1993), and *pace* Eco et al. (1986), the general doctrine of the sign as a notion bridging nature and culture arrives with scriptural interpretation when scriptural interpre-

Nova Vulgata: [9] *Beatitudo ergo haec in circumcissione an etiam in praeputio? Dicimus enim: 'Reputata est Abrahae fides ad iustitiam'. [10] Quomodo ergo reputata est? In circumcissione an in praeputio? Non in circumcissione sed in praeputio: [11] et signum accepit circumcissionis, signaculum iustitiae fidei, quae fuit in praeputio, ut esset pater omnium credentium per praeputium, ut reputetur illis iustitia, [12] et pater circumcissionis his non tantum, qui ex circumcissione sunt, sed et qui sectantur vestigia eius, quae fuit in praeputio, fidei patris nostri Abrahae. [13] Non enim per legem promissio Abrahae aut semini eius, ut heres esset mundi, sed per iustitiam fidei; [14] si enim qui ex lege heredes sunt, exinanita est fides, et abolita est promissio.*

tation first wrestles with the problem of *the incarnate Word*: viz., the *nomos* that has become *physis*. Such interpretation is a step beyond Hellenistic allegorizing; better, it is an extension of it, in light of the Incarnation. In other words, the Latin Age began neither with Augustine, nor Origen, but with the advent of the Christ, who gave the impetus to Christian biblical theology and its peculiarly *incarnational* understanding of allegory. And it is this incarnational understanding that is defended and classically formulated in Augustine's summary of the tradition he inherited—"an anti-Manichaean, pro-Jewish affirmation of both spirit and flesh" (as I have elsewhere characterized it, on the basis of Fredriksen's research).⁴

Discernible within Origen's biblical exegesis is a bridging of nature and culture; that is, of nature understood by means of inferential rela-

⁴ My review of Fredriksen 2008 in Morrissey 2009 discusses how Romans was pivotal for Augustine's intellectual development. Likewise, Origen is concerned, as is Augustine with his many commentaries on Romans, with the problem of allegory and the non-literal interpretation of scripture: viz., what is the connection of such meaning with the letter, i.e., the literal signification of the text?

As John Deely has observed, "*Literally' means no more than this: that a given assemblage of characters through some original stipulations cemented by custom have come to have the force of standing for some definite object or objects rather than others within the framework of conventions constitutive of linguistic usage within a given historical community. In short, 'literal meaning' is a stipulated meaning, virtual or actual, that has achieved social success, the best mark of which in present times is entry within a dictionary*" (Deely 2006: 47).

Thus: "*'Literal' and 'metaphorical,' therefore, are not adversative but contrastive terms, the former emphasizing the attempt to critically control language, especially (but not only) in relation to the extralinguistic aspects of objectivity for which we seek to give an intellectual interpretation and understanding in terms of causes, the latter emphasizing the atmosphere of anthroposemiosis (its 'signosphere') upon which the intellectual manipulation of symbols constantly depends for whatever partial success it achieves and which guarantees that the imagery and customs attaching to a public deployment of discourse will never and can never be one hundred percent the same for any two linguistic animals (for within anthroposemiosis there is always the individual semiosis here and now).*" (Deely 2006: 50–51)

Therefore: "*Those who do not understand the nature of logic as an anthroposemiosis sometimes see logic and metaphor as opposed. But in fact metaphor is the permanent possibility of expanding the field within which logic works, and sometimes even of restructuring that field in order to make advances in knowledge possible, or alternative understandings open to consideration. Logic is the field of deduction above all, but in its abductive phase logic depends especially upon metaphor; and metaphor within language is the permanent possibility of suggesting new ideas even within the garden of conventional understandings.*" (Deely 2006: 51)

28. "Did the Latin Age Begin with Augustine?" ❀ Christopher S. Morrissey

tions, and of culture understood as any relations of equivalence between linguistic terms ("outer words") and concepts ("inner words"). *The incarnation thinks being and thought together*, not as a dichotomy.

Consider Origen's three examples: First, the disgorgement of Jonah from the whale is a natural sign (belonging to *signa naturalia*), because it signifies that Jonah is indigestible (the cause for which disgorgement is the effect). The resurrection of Christ, however, is not a natural sign (belonging instead to *signa data*), because resurrection from the dead is not a natural phenomenon.

Thus, "Jonah emerging" is sign, of the object, "Christ resurrecting" (*ubi Jonas videbatur et Christus intelligebatur*), for which is needed the interpretant, "this generation" (*generatio haec*) (Heither 1992: 184): "where Jonah was seen, Christ was recognized".⁵

Second, the "sign" spoken of in the "sign of contradiction" is a natural sign (belonging to *signa naturalia*), because it is an icon of perception, namely the incarnation of Christ insofar as it may be considered as a non-linguistic event. Speaking against the Incarnation, however, is not a natural sign (belonging instead to *signa data*), because to deny the Incarnation (this is the "contradiction" spoken of in the "sign of contradiction") can only be done by means of an icon of the understanding, viz., a concept.⁶

Thus, the "flesh perceived" (*caro cernebatur*) of the Incarnation (as an icon of perception) is sign of the object, "God believed" (*Deus credebatur*: i.e., as an icon of the understanding), for which is needed the interpretant, "spoken against" (*cui contradicetur*) by many (*multorum*) (Heither 1992: 184).

Thus the circumcision, of Abraham and all of his sons, is sign of the object, "the righteousness of faith" (*iustitiae fidei*), given the interpretant of Israel in the person of Abraham; and yet it is also sign of the object "spiritual circumcision" (*spiritualis circumcisionis*), given the interpretant of the new Israel, the Gentiles.

Reply to Objection 1. The triadic definition of sign used by Origen (which is implicit in his biblical exegesis about the thirdness of the

⁵ Scheck 2001: 249. Cf. Daly 1984: 101-2: "the sign is Jonah, and what is meant is Christ".

⁶ As John Poinsett writes, a sign precisely speaking "exercises the office of representing another besides itself" and thus "the formal sign [the icons of perception and understanding]" has the formal aspect "of a sign simply", whereas signs loosely speaking "as things objectified and first known, lead us to something signified" so that only in this wider usage does one mistakenly think that "a sign is principally found in sensible things" (quoted at Deely 2004: 103), i.e., outside the human realm, "either in the manifestations of the gods or in the manifestations of the physical surroundings" (Deely 2004: 121 n.16).

interpretant which changes from Abraham to the Gentiles) bridges both nature and culture in its indifference. Jonah and the resurrection are not two things linked as though in an inference about natural events. Rather, "their whole importance lies in their being used as signs", to use Markus' phrase (Markus 1957, quoted at Deely 2004: 76).

Reply to Objection 2. It is true that a contradiction in its primary meaning presupposes a linguistic diction (i.e., a saying) to which that contradiction is opposed "contra". But "the falling and the rising" (*in ruinam et in resurrectionem*) in this New Testament text refers to "contradiction" in its derivative meaning, viz., that of an affirmation or negation as having the *extra-linguistic* consequences of a personal reversal of fortune.⁷

Reply to Objection 3. Origen writes not of divination (i.e., allegorical signification) from things *outside* the human realm but rather of *virtual semiosis*, i.e., of a "seal" which later becomes a "sign" in human consciousness:

But in my opinion what he has called a seal ought to be understood in the following way: Something is called a seal when a protective guard is placed upon some object which is to be protected for a time and which no one else is allowed to unseal except the one who impressed it. As the Apostle explains, therefore, through that seal is indicated both the righteousness of faith which Abraham deserved to receive when he was uncircumcised, and also his being the father of many nations. We believe that it is to be unsealed only at the time when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in and all Israel will be saved. For at that time what the Apostle says will come to pass, for Abraham to be the father not only of the Gentiles but also of the circumcision through faith. (Scheck 2001: 249-50)

Origen's exegesis of what the Apostle means by circumcision as a "seal" is a perfect illustration of how (just as in physiosemiosis) there can be observed a "notion of interpretant, as something which need not be mental" (Deely 2004: 124 n.34). Here, the Apostle explains how circumcision came to signify, by a virtual semiosis now made actual by the Incarnation, something that was not originally stipulated in the ritual by those originally performing it.

Reply to Objection 4. Origen thought and wrote in Greek. The fact that his Romans commentary survives only in Latin is incidental and not essential. To hold otherwise would be to make a nominalist argu-

⁷ Moreover, the "of contradiction" of the text is not a genitive noun but a passive voice verb, meaning it is to be understood in English as an objective genitive, and not as a subjective genitive.

28. “Did the Latin Age Begin with Augustine?” ☞ *Christopher S. Morrissey*

ment—something unfitting, unworthy, and most unbecoming of semiotic.

Nevertheless, I would like to conclude my scholastic disputation with these words, which Origen wrote: “If, however, someone wants to point out weaknesses in my interpretation, I beg pardon and readily yield to anyone who is able to discuss and explain these passages better” (Scheck 2001: 252).

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