

Augustine as Improvisational Theologian: The Musical Nature of Augustine's Thought

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the nature of Augustine's theological thinking. My thesis is that Augustine is an "improvisational theologian," meaning his theology begins from the place that an improvisational musician's thinking does: attunement. In order to prove this thesis, I have three sections. The first is an analysis of the type of thinking that takes place in improvisational music, showing how it is predicated upon an idea of attunement. Second, I explore the improvisational nature of Augustine's thought by seeing how attunement is also at work in his thinking. In order to do this, I show how he develops a musical worldview in *De Musica* and how this guides his subsequent thinking in *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessions*. I conclude by briefly pointing to different contemporary theological issues that this reading of Augustine can enrich.

Keywords

Attunement, Augustine, hermeneutics, improvisation, method

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the thought of St. Augustine, the famous Bishop of Hippo. This is not to say that Augustine was forgotten at any point, but that contemporary, Western theology is quite enamored with the thought of the bishop.¹ Within this current retrieval, however, there is a consistent attempt to systematize the thought of Augustine.² The problem is that Augustine's

¹ Michel René Barnes shows the prevalence of this retrieval in contemporary Trinitarian theology in his "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), 237–250. There is also the continued prevalence of books published on various aspects of Augustine's thought.

² There are numerous examples of this in contemporary theology. In relation to his doctrine of the Trinity, see the misreadings given by Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperOne, 1993); and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). See also the way that *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* [eds. Eleonore Stump and

thought is not systematic; rather, Augustine writes in an “occasional” manner whose main goal is to offer reflections or thoughts on a topic of concern to him at a given point and time. He is not building a theological system and, many times, his writings can be read as opposing each other. Needed, then, is way of reading and thinking with Augustine that pays attention to the tensions at work in his thought while also showing the unity at work within his corpus.

Recently, there have been attempts to show the historical development of Augustine’s thought with the goal being to show the unified nature of his thought. One example is by Carol Harrison, entitled *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*.³ Harrison counters the often accepted notion that there is an Augustinian “turn” while he is writing the *Confessions*—and, thus, reflecting on his conversion—that differentiates the texts before this from those after. Her intent is to show that the themes Augustine deals with prior to and within the *Confessions* are quite similar in nature. She argues that there is a natural development to his thought in that he deals with the same topics but uses them differently in different situations, whether arguing against the Donatists, Manicheans, and Pelagians or writing sermons for the benefit of his congregation. There is, for Harrison, historical continuity to his thought. Lewis Ayres makes a similar argument in *Augustine and the Trinity*.⁴ He argues for the continuity in Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity from his early years as a Christian to his later writings. Ayres’ text shows that while Augustine’s understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity grew more nuanced over time, he still dealt with many of the same themes and concerns. Ayres, then, shows the historical continuity of Augustine’s thought, not by placing Augustine within a presupposed paradigm but by following the way that Augustine picks up themes and phrases, drops others and continues to have a similar set of concerns.

The work of Harrison and Ayres offer a historical foundation for seeing the continuity of Augustine’s thought. However, what is lacking explicitly in their texts (and others’ that make a somewhat similar argument) is an elucidation of the theological continuity within Augustine’s thought. The following paper is an attempt to give a tentative theological coherence to the thought and study of Augustine.

Norman Kretzmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001)] is divided by topic in Augustine’s thought, with the goal of elucidating what Augustine said on a given topic. Oftentimes the only way to give such a systematic reading is to deal with only one text or only a few texts from the same historical period. The result is a reading of Augustine that ignores the disparate and occasional nature of his writing.

³ Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴ Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (New York: Cambridge, University Press, 2010).

One of the main problems when analyzing Augustine is the disparate nature of much of his thought as his texts often find themselves in contradiction with his other texts. I make an argument for the fact that the coherence at work in the Augustinian corpus is the way he is concerned with the relationship between humanity and the divine. In my estimation, this is a central aspect to the vast majority of Augustine's writings. My argument will consist of analyzing the way that Augustine describes this relationship through the idea of attunement, showing how his conception of the divine-human relationship is that of each being attuned to the other. The result is an understanding of Augustine that ultimately gives theological coherence to the Augustinian corpus.

My conclusion is that Augustine is an "improvisational theologian." I make such a claim based upon the shared ways of thinking that occur in theology and improvisational forms of music. Centrally, both are concerned with attunement. The thinking that takes place in both disciplines depends on being tuned in to a multiplicity of different phenomena, but this tuning in has a profound effect on how the discourse of each proceeds. My argument, then, will proceed as follows: first, I will show how attunement is at the heart of improvisation and how this affects the thinking taking place by improvisers; second, I will turn to the texts of St. Augustine and show how this improvisational thinking of attunement works in his theology; third, I will briefly conclude by pointing to a few different areas where this kind of theological thinking may have the greatest impact.

A. Improvisation as Attunement

Let us begin with the kind of thinking occurring in improvisation. The basis for improvisational thinking is attunement. Attunement, at its most elementary, refers to being in tune with an/other, tuning into something or someone else. In what follows, I offer a brief articulation of the nature of attunement through an exposition of its use in improvisational music. This, then, sets the groundwork for the way that we can begin examining Augustine as an improvisational theologian.

For improvisation, attunement is built into the very fabric of the practice of music. This is seen specifically in the threefold relation of music, especially Western music: this relation is between a tradition/composer/ piece, the performer(s) and audience. All of these must have attunement to an/other in order to accomplish the task of playing music. When we take the position of a musical performer when thinking this through, we see that the first place of attunement is to the tradition that one finds oneself within; I focus here on jazz. The attunement to a tradition occurs through being brought up in

a certain tradition and community, taught the methods and ways of thinking of said community.⁵ The musician, then, begins to learn the composers and pieces of music that are part of this tradition.⁶ One becomes attuned to not only how the tradition and community work, but how that then gets worked out by a composer in a piece of music. By learning to dwell in the world of the composer and the piece, the musician must learn to be attuned to them, understanding the rhythm, movement and groove of the piece through the way the composer has composed.⁷

The musician, then, can take this understanding of the tradition, composer and piece of music to a group of musicians. The musicians begin to play the piece, developing a conversation or musical dialogue together where they musically “discuss” the piece by proposing different variations on themes or lines, different timbre or rhythms, changing the piece.⁸ The musician must also be attuned to the group that she plays with, understanding the ways of thinking and interpreting that they incorporate into their playing and the way that they improvise upon a piece. As each musician plays the piece within the context of the group, there is room for different ideas and variations to be proposed and heard and to either be rejected or embraced. One thinks here of a piano player who may try to change the bass line, slightly adjusting the rhythm. The rhythm section, then, must either embrace or reject this, with the bass player and drummer reorienting around the pianist or reestablishing the rhythmic nature that they desire.⁹ The interaction of players around the piece of music, though, results in an attunement. And, as each of these players become familiar with the others, the deeper the attunement to each other. It is in this relationship of attunement to each other that improvisation is able to occur.¹⁰

The dialogue that develops from these players allows them to take their interpretation public, playing for a group of listeners. The goal of improvisation is to open up new ways of thinking about a piece in a new context, not losing contact with the piece but allowing it to be heard anew.¹¹ Thus, attunement of the musician playing the piece is

⁵ See how this is described in Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 22–37.

⁶ One thinks here of the number of “jazz standards” that a musician may learn to play which teaches the ways that jazz music works.

⁷ Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue* . . . , 32; 105–7; and 148.

⁸ See Ingird Monson, *Saying Something*

⁹ I remember listening to the jam band Phish and hearing the drummer propose a different rhythm with the rest of the band rejecting this, which lead him to have to readjust and “catch up” with the rest of the group.

¹⁰ Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

not only to the other musicians, but also to the audience who is meant to hear the music. In order to understand how the piece may be heard anew, the musician must be attuned with the audience for which he plays. If the audience is well versed in jazz, then the musical dialogue might be able to incorporate or allude to various “standards” that the trained ear may hear. Similarly, if there is a social situation of unrest (i.e., during the 1960’s), the music may reflect this to the audience. The importance is that the musician be tuned into the audience in order to allow the music to be heard differently.

As we have seen, then, there is a multiplicity of attunement that occurs which results in a musical dialogue between the musician, the piece of music and composer, the tradition they find themselves within, other musicians and an audience. This dialogue is built upon knowing and interacting with the tradition and each other, which opens the possibility of dialoguing musically.¹² This occurs not only between the musicians, but even with the composer and the musicians that the piece is written for, as the composer has in mind a way that the piece should be played and a group that should play it. The dialogue also includes the audience, especially if the audience is knowledgeable of the tradition that is being played. The audience expects certain things to happen in a performance, from kinds of pitch and timbre, to the key of a song, to the length of improvisations. The dialogue includes all involved in the musical process.

Improvisational music is about using the dialogue to transform the music, breaking the form of the music so that it can become heard anew in a different context. Walter Bishop, Jr., in a conversation with Paul Berliner, notes that improvisation is concerned with innovation, saying that the improviser creates “[one’s own] sound and [one] has a good sense of the history of the music” and now has the ability to “think of where the music hasn’t gone and where it can go . . . ”¹³ Improvisation is an innovation, then, predicated upon the ability to transform music. This notion of transformation is central to the outcome of the attunement of the musician. In the understanding of Bruce Ellis Benson, this comes about for two reasons. First, the composer, in writing a piece of music, necessarily allows for the piece to be recontextualized.¹⁴ The piece is never again under the strict control of the composer, but must now be interpreted by someone to be performed, which leads to the destabilization of the music in jazz, doing away with a set center, but allowing the music to be “played.” This leads to the second reason. In order for the piece of music to

¹² *Ibid.*, 142. See also Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz . . .*, 349–52.

¹³ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz . . .*, 120. Lee Konitz uses a similar typology, except he talks of moving from interpretation to embellishment to improvisation. See Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz . . .*, 67–71.

¹⁴ Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue . . .*, 79.

be recontextualized, the performer must perform the piece in a new place, interpreting it in a different way. This necessitates a decision on the part of the performer. No longer can a performer simply repeat the notes on the sheet of paper, but must interpret them and, in so doing, she necessarily rethinks the way the music is heard.¹⁵ In jazz, the result is an unstructuring of the piece, where one may pick up one line or one chord and reorient the entire piece around this single fragment, transforming the very way that the piece can be thought and heard. Now, this may not be a complete transformation of the piece, but it is still an innovative interpretation as it rethinks the piece in a new place and time, recontextualizing the piece. This transforms the piece, rethinking not only the possibilities but also the form of the music.

As we see, then, improvisation offers a place to see the type of thinking that occurs due to attunement. Improvisational thinking is the type of thinking that is trying to be tuned in to multiple discourses, people, and traditions, trying to incorporate all of these into a way of thinking that can transform the text or tradition that one is working from. Attunement functions as the basis for this kind of thinking and it also acts as the impetus for improvising. Improvisational thinking, then, consists of being attuned to a tradition, the group of people one is in dialogue with and the audience one is “playing” for. And, attunement to these means that improvisation is concerned with innovation and transformation of a tradition to be heard differently, which continues to perpetuate the tradition.

The proposal for thinking has certain resonances with the “illative sense” of John Henry Newman, as it was expounded upon and interpreted by Aidan Nichols.¹⁶ As Nichols interprets him, Newman’s illative approach to theology brings together disposition, evidence, and reason into an interrelation that allows him to make an argument that God exists.¹⁷ Newman attempts to do justice to the entire texture of human existence through his elucidation of “implicit” and “explicit reason.” Implicit reason refers to a person’s initial experience and disposition while explicit reason is the development of the second order discourse that reflects upon implicit reason.¹⁸ The illative sense, then, brings together a large amount of quantitative evidence, none of which by itself is able to be a proof for God. However, in bringing all this evidence together, there are indicators that point to the existence of God and, thus, there is a “qualitative change” to the evidence. The evidence, when brought together, points

¹⁵ Ibid., 71 and 111.

¹⁶ See Aidan Nichols, O.P., *A Grammar of Consent: The Existence of God in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 19–38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹⁸ Ibid., 23–4.

to the existence of God.¹⁹ Nichols says, “The illative sense actualizes our capacity to uncover, by a searching and subtle attention to experience in its complexity, the sacramental transference of the world to God.”²⁰

While I find the proposal offered by Nichols to be quite illuminating and in close resonance to mine, there is a difference between our approaches. Nichols’ reading of Newman is meant to be an argument for the existence of God. He argues later that through Newman’s illative sense we are able to rely upon the “testimony” and “witness” of others to their experience of God and the transcendent. For him, this legitimates the argument from authority.²¹ My argument, on the other hand, is not for the existence of God. My argument assumes the existence of God. This assumption allows me to explore the way in which a theologian becomes tuned-in to the reality that is God. In doing this, I explore the way that the theologian/ believer cultivates a disposition (which I term attunement) that allows her to think God in concert with the Christian tradition(s), one’s own experience, reason, and one’s place in her own world. Nichols misses the aspect of thinking in light of one’s world, although he does acknowledge Newman’s reliance upon his own personal history.²² However, I want to explore the way we are shaped by a variety of factors that then in turn allow us to shape them theologically. This is why I turn to improvisational music as an isomorphic correlate, as I believe that it shares its way of thinking with theology.²³

B. Setting the Beat: An Examination of *De Musica*

I now turn to the work of Augustine, showing how the type of thinking that is used in improvisation is also used in his thought. Specifically, I work with three texts of Augustine to show the improvisational nature of his theological thinking. First, I turn to *De Musica*, showing that Augustine builds a foundation of attunement through a listening to the movement of God in creation. Second, I examine *De Doctrina Christiana*, explicating how the attunement brought forth in *De Musica* is used to build a hermeneutic of love. Lastly of Augustine, I turn to *Confessions* to show the occasional,

¹⁹ Ibid., 33–34.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 36.

²² Ibid., 19.

²³ This argument is developed more fully in Nathan Crawford, “Theology as Improvisation: Seeking the Unstructured Form of Theology with David Tracy,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (August 2010), 300–12; and Nathan Crawford, *Theology as Improvisation: A Study in the Musical Nature of Theological Thinking* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013).

improvisational nature of Augustine's theological thinking through his "playing on" a line from Genesis.

I begin with *De Musica*. The first task for understanding *De Musica* is to examine how Augustine views music. For Augustine, music is the science of rhythm and measure, or what he calls "mensuration."²⁴ Mensuration deals with "moving well."²⁵ Thus, music is the science of the rhythm of movement; it deals with how one understands the rhythm of things, not only sounds (or what we commonly deem music). The way that one knows that something has rhythm or that it moves well is because nature gives all people a sense of hearing that allows them to hear the music in all things.²⁶ This sense of hearing that allows one to hear the rhythm of all things is formed through two things: memory and imitation. The memory allows one to remember what one heard or how something was played and if it was done well. Memory allows for certain connections to be made. It is how music is developed in the soul. Imitation, on the other hand, is developed primarily in the body through the memory of the soul. The musician, in remembering, then imitates what was heard before and tries to duplicate it, perhaps expounding upon it. Subsequently, the musician develops the sense of hearing by explicitly recalling the memories of mensuration and trying to imitate these and so forms the self in such a way as to be a person of the rhythm of the world.²⁷

In developing this musical sense one can begin to hear the rhythm and harmony of all things. For example, Augustine points to the number three. For him, this number is a great example of perfect harmony in that it is the sum of the first two numbers while also being the next number after the first two. It places itself in the rhythm of the world, existing immediately in line after one and two. It does not break the harmony of these numbers, but is the sum of them and so stands as perfectly harmonic. For Augustine, there is an ordering by proportion which gives this number its great rhythm and

²⁴ Augustine, *On Music*, trans. Robert Catesby Taliaferro, in *Writings of St. Augustine Volume 2 The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 4* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1947), I.3.4. All references to *De Musica* are to the book, chapter, and paragraph number in this translation. For the importance of *De Musica*, see Erica T. Hermanowicz, "Book Six of Augustine's *De Musica* and the Episcopal Embassies of 408," *Augustinian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004), 174. For the importance the text plays in later Christian theology, especially the Middle Ages, see Nancy Phillips and Michel Hugo, "Le *De Musica* de saint Augustin et l'organisation de la durée musicale du 9th au 12th siècles," *Reserches Augustiniennes* 20 (1985), 117–31. On the importance of *De Musica* to the formation of Augustine, see David C. Alexander, "The Biographical Significance of Augustine's *De Musica*," *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997), 3–10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I.2.3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I.5.10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I.4.8.

harmony.²⁸ Augustine concludes that music leaves a trace in both the physical world and in the soul in its giving of proportion to things. This ordering conjures a feeling in people and it is this feeling that points to the trace of music, giving the sense of rhythm. It is the musician who develops this sense that taps into the great rhythm and harmony of the world.²⁹

In Book VI of *De Musica*, Augustine shows that the goal of this treatise is to come to God.³⁰ In order to show why this is, he turns to the inherent rhythm and harmony of the relationship between body, soul and God. He says that the body and soul exist in a mutual harmony and rhythm, otherwise the body and soul would affect each other in negative ways. Similarly, the soul must exist in a proper harmony with God, finding the rhythm of God in the world so as to exist properly. And, for Augustine, when the soul is rightly turned to God and tuned into God, this makes the life of the body easier as it exists in its proper place.³¹ For Augustine, then, the proper place that one stands so as to be in harmony with God is in the in-between, in a mediating place between God and the world. This standing in the in-between comes when we no longer take delight in the things of the world, but see that we delight in the things of the world because they contain the trace of the rhythm of God.³² We come to recognize this trace of God in all things by being attuned to God through loving God, which comes about when we take delight in God. As we take more delight in God, we love God more and become more attuned to God, which allows us to hear more of the rhythm of God in the world and so on and so on. Thus, attunement to God comes through loving God.³³ This attunement to God allows the soul to “soar” to God which results in a transformation of the soul to one that plays the music of God and hears the music of God in all things.³⁴

Within this discussion of *De Musica*, we have seen that Augustine sees the world as essentially ordered, but not in a geometrical way. Rather, Augustine views the world as ordered in a mutual harmony and rhythm by God, who leaves a trace of the “Divine Music” in all

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I.12.23. In other texts, Augustine points to the perfectly harmonic nature of the number six as well: see, St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, in St. Augustine, *On Genesis*, The Works of Saint Augustine for the 21st Century I/13, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. and ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2002), IV.2–14. Reference here is to book and paragraph number as used in this edition.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I.13.28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, VI.1.1. Alexander believes that *De Musica* VI is the first place where Augustine develops a framework for the Christian religious life: see Alexander, “The Biographical Significance of Augustine’s *De Musica*,” 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, VI.5.9–14.

³² *Ibid.*, VI.11.29. See also Rowan Williams, “Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation,” *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, VI.14.53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, VI.15.50.

things. For Augustine, then, it is necessary to be attuned to God in order to hear this music, but once attuned to God, this music comes out more prominently and beautifully than before.

However, as we shall see in *De Doctrina Christiana* and *The Confessions*, the attunement to the music of God does not result in a systematic treatise. Rather, he works within theological forms that allow the Divine to irrupt and come to the fore, breaking the bounds that a systematic theology sets upon thinking God. In listening to God's music in creation, we realize the incomprehensible and ineffable nature of God, that God's music is always beyond the human and, thus, must always stay out of the clutches of human thinking. It is a music that is never "got", but that opens the theologian to multiple ways of thinking while showing there is no one way of thinking. Thus, there arises a necessity to use a variety of forms to think about God, depending upon circumstances and the topic at hand. Thus, as we will see, theology becomes an improvisation, building upon the harmony and rhythm of God ringing throughout creation, using a multiplicity of genres and forms to respond to the different lines of God's song the theologian catches and how these lines ask to be played in differing situations. It is this that disallows Augustine from constructing a systematic theology, instead turning to a theology that arises from and responds to an event or situation.

C. Finding the Groove: Rhetoric as Form in *De Doctrina Christiana*

One of the forms that Augustine picks up to use is that of rhetoric. We see this most explicitly in his development of a Christian rhetoric in his text *De Doctrina Christiana*.³⁵ The line of thought from *De Musica* to *De Doctrina Christiana* is natural since both develop a theology of the liberal arts.³⁶ This line of thought allows us to see

³⁵ For a helpful summary on the setting and context of *De Doctrina Christiana*, see Charles Kannengiesser, "Local Setting and Motivation of *De Doctrina Christiana*," in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, Collectanea Augustiniana, eds. Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., Earl C. Muller, S.J., and Roland Teske, S.J. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 331–40. For a summary as to why Augustine wrote *De Doctrina Christiana*, see Charles Kannengiesser, "The Interrupted *De Doctrina Christiana*," in *De Doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, eds. Duane W.H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 3–13.

³⁶ For more on the liberal arts and Augustine, see Virgilio Pacioni, O.S.A., "Liberal Arts," trans. Matthew O'Connell in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 492–94. Also, see Frederick van Fleteren, "St. Augustine, NeoPlatonism, and the Liberal Arts: The Background of *De Doctrina Christiana*," in *De Doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, eds. Duane W.H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 14–23. For the connection of *De Musica* to *De Doctrina*

how Augustine's argument is how to best interpret Scripture and then communicate that interpretation³⁷ relies on a logic of attunement that results in a hermeneutic of love. This hermeneutic of love, though, does not result in a specific way of reading and articulating Scripture, but in a way of life and a rhetoric. The form is not, then, set in stone as much as it is a way of speaking and being in light of one's attunement to God through love.

To begin my reading let me start at the end of the text, in Book IV, where Augustine explicitly makes the move to the form of rhetoric. Here, his concern is not with a right interpretation of Scripture through an explication of correct techniques, but a correct interpretation through a way of life—a life of love. For Augustine, it does not matter how one interprets or the words one uses of God if one's life does not reflect the transformation that has occurred because of one's encounter with God.³⁸ The result is a way of life, a rhetoric that lives in tune with God in such a way that the goal is not to systematize what must be said about God, but one that follows God diligently in such a way as to be open to the music God is playing throughout all of creation. We see that God has first loved us, which opens the theologian to loving God and also extending that love to one's neighbor. This becomes the ultimate hermeneutic by which one not only interprets the Scripture, but also how one lives life.³⁹

The result of this life does not come from a correct ethical system or right articulation of God's laws. Rather, Augustine places prayer at the center of the life that leads to a right rhetoric.⁴⁰ Prayer is not so much a correct belief system as a crying out to God, a way of being open to God in such a way that we can then hear God, not only in the act of prayer, but throughout the music of God played in creation through our attunement to God.⁴¹ Prayer does not set the right form for speaking and thinking of God, but opens the theologian to the movement of God, making sure that the theologian does not place some idol in the place of God. The resulting language used for God is not a systematic treatise. Rather, the rhetoric the theologian must use

Christiana, see Kay Brainerd Slocum, "De Doctrina Christiana and Musical Semiotics in Medieval Culture," in *Reading and Wisdom: The De Doctrina Christiana of Augustine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edward D. English (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 143–52.

³⁷ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/11, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), I.1. All references to *De Doctrina Christiana* will be to this translation and refer to the book and paragraph per this translation.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, IV.59.

³⁹ See, for example, *Ibid.*, I.39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, IV.32.

⁴¹ By being in tune to God like this, we would see what it is to live Paul's admonition to "pray continually."

is that of praise, due to love.⁴² The prayer that attunes the theologian to God results in a theology that praises God when thinking of God. It is a theology that does not seek to determine God, only to follow this God and lead others in the same. It is a theology that seeks to praise God, as well, not only in one's speaking, but also in the life of the theologian through love. This becomes not just the basis for the proper Christian rhetoric, but the rhetoric itself.

In Book I, we see the basis for this rhetoric. However, Book I does not set the content or system for which this rhetoric must speak. Rather, it opens the way in which the theologian can be formed and attuned in such a way as to be able to "speak" a rhetoric like this. Book I shows the impetus for the hermeneutic of love which becomes the basis for Augustine's rhetoric. Again, though, this rhetoric of love does not set the content or systematize the way that theology must be done. Rather, it opens theology up, becoming a (de)centered, unstructured form that learns to hear the music of God and "groove" with this music, eventually learning to improvise with God.

The example for this rhetoric of love is the Incarnation where Jesus Christ, as Wisdom, adopts human form and communicates itself to humanity without losing the essence of God.⁴³ Since God has come into the world through the Incarnation, the world has been "baptized" by God in a way that all things can be heard as playing the music of God. The Incarnation, then, leaves the trace of God in all of creation so that the one attuned rightly to God can hear this trace and use these things as signs that point to God. The Incarnation acts, then, as the nongrounding ground upon which Augustine will build his rhetoric. The Incarnation sets the way in which theology is done, being a mediator and opening others up to God because one has been rightly attuned to God. And, the Incarnation is the reason that one can be attuned to God as it is here that God's ultimate revelation takes place. This attunement to God ultimately occurs through the right ordering of love, loving God above all else and loving all other things because they bring one closer to God.⁴⁴

Thus, love becomes the key to a right interpretation so that only one rightly attuned to God through the Incarnation is able to interpret Scripture correctly. This correct interpretation results in a hermeneutic of love, where all interpretations must point to love of God and love

⁴² Ibid., IV.38. See also William S. Babcock, "Caritas and Signification in *De Doctrina Christiana* 1–3," in *De Doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, eds. Duane W.H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 147–48.

⁴³ Ibid., I.12–13. Daley says that Augustine's theology is Christocentric: see Brian E. Daley, S.J., "Christology," in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 164.

⁴⁴ Ibid., I.34.

of neighbor.⁴⁵ Love, then, is the form for theological thinking within Augustine's rhetoric. This is important because love does not seek to dominate the other, but allow this other to exist and disrupt one's life. It is the love of God that leads to love of neighbor, but the love of neighbor is just as important, opening the theologian to remember all those others who are not accounted for. Augustine's rhetoric of love, then, opens the way for theology to be constantly shifting, rightly attuned to God, but not seeking to dominate this God with some foreign concepts. Rather, love seeks to follow God in God's love for neighbor, to follow God in God's desire for a rightly ordered creation, and to follow God in God's overall movement.

In order to elaborate further, let me indulge in a brief musical metaphor. In this understanding, God becomes the bandleader, setting down the groove upon which the theologian must pick up, and groove along with God. The theologian must put the time in to learn to play with God, conversing with God in a way that one moves and can finally fall into the groove with God. This grooving eventually leads one to not only be open to God, but to learn to improvise with God. When the musical-theologian puts the energy into being able to hear the music of God through the development of a life of love, then one falls into the pocket of God's band, grooving with God to create a new way that this music may be heard, riffing on different ideas, and playing on the fragments God leaves for us to play over.

With this metaphor, we see that *De Doctrina Christiana* is concerned with laying down the foundational attunement to God which will result in the ability to "riff" and "groove" with God in a new key or with a different rhythm. This foundation is love which is a non-constraining structure, allowing for an openness that never closes the music but allows possibilities to constantly build and rebuild so that new interpretations and innovations can be made. The place where we can begin to see Augustine performing these riffs is in his most famous text, *Confessions*.

D. Improvising Freely: The Form of *The Confessions*⁴⁶

Augustine's *Confessions* continues the hermeneutic of love pursued in the form of rhetoric of *De Doctrina Christiana*. However, *The Confessions* does not seek a form of rhetoric, but presses on into

⁴⁵ Ibid., I.39–40.

⁴⁶ St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/1, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997). All references will be to the book and paragraph number of this translation.

the form of the formless.⁴⁷ Here, Augustine tells a story of love—it is the love of God for him and his learning to love God. When he finally learns to love, due to an encounter with God, he then is attuned to God and is able to improvise upon theology, moving into an unstructured form through a meditation upon God’s action in creation. Let us look at how Augustine goes about articulating this in *The Confessions*.

The ground upon which Augustine explicates his thinking in *The Confessions* is the love of God, specifically the love that God has for Augustine. Throughout Augustine’s autobiographical narrative, he learns to see God as an active agent in helping through his different predicaments. He sees God leading him back to God, that with every movement away from God, God is actually bringing Augustine back to God. This ground, then, does not act as a dominating factor, but the beginning of Augustine’s attunement to God. This attunement is the beginning of our ability to groove with God.

Augustine narrates his movement to the place where he actually learns to love God. We see him move from ideology and worldview to ideology and worldview. He goes from astrology to Manicheism to Neo-Platonism and, finally, to being a Christian. Each movement is guided by God and further tunes Augustine into God’s song playing in creation. It is not that any of these are inherently evil, but that they do not catch the whole truth, which only resides in God. Each one moves Augustine closer to the place of the encounter with God, but none ultimately fulfill him until he comes to be a Christian through the encounter with God in the garden through the reading of Paul.⁴⁸ This encounter finally opens Augustine up to the love of God and allows him to embrace this love while also reciprocating the love. The whole confession is a movement to this embrace with God in love. This is what finally fully tunes Augustine into the Triune God.

However, Augustine still goes onto write five more books in *The Confessions*.⁴⁹ The text and narrative, then, are not over. Yet, after Book VIII he makes a fundamental change, no longer articulating his move toward Christianity and the attunement to God in love that comes with this. Rather, now the move is toward a deeper love of God aroused through a meditation upon God’s creation. The result is no longer a theology that systematizes the creation story or draws out

⁴⁷ To say that God is formless is not to imply that God does not exist or that God has no form. Rather, the implication is that any attempt to think God must take into account the infinite number of forms available for doing theology and thinking God. To infer that God is formless is to make the claim that God is pluri-form with no one form dominating.

⁴⁸ See Book VIII.

⁴⁹ For a brief discussion of the unity between Books VII and VIII and Books IX–XIII, see Frederick van Fleteren, “*Confessions*,” in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 230–32.

multiple doctrinal statements. Here, Augustine looks to improvise with God in thinking about creation by playing upon the words “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.” He does not get past this line. The improvisation is a theology that plays on this, opening theological thinking through this meditation into a position to embrace the formlessness of theology.

As was said, the new move that Augustine makes is to meditate upon God and God’s work in creation. This is not meant to be a doctrinal and systematic endeavor but is to arouse Augustine to a deeper love of God.⁵⁰ It is this desire to love God more and follow God in God’s work through this love that opens theology in a way so as to be able to be uncentered and able to move to God. The center no longer becomes a doctrine or system, but a love of God, which moves with God, never closing in around God. The theological end of this love, then, is a form for thinking God that follows God by turning to a noncontraining structure of form.

Augustine moves through a discussion of God’s action in creating all things. Of importance for us, here, is what Augustine says about the process of creation. In creating, Augustine shows how there is a formless void out of which God creates. It is a nothingness, leading him to talk of creation out of nothing. When God creates, God gives form to creatures. The nature of creation is the giving of form by God to the other.⁵¹ However, what we notice in the discussion is that God is always left without a form. God, the one we love and chase, is formless. God exists prior to the formless, but it is out of the space of formlessness and nothingness that God creates. God is not a form. God is incomprehensible, ineffable and infinite. This leads to an understanding that the theologian cannot seek a form of God, but must be attuned to God. This attunement to God allows the theologian to look at all things that have a form and realize that they only have a form because there was One who gave them form. But, even in doing this, we move from a form in the creature to a formlessness in the Creator. The Creator is not bound by a form, but is formless and this formlessness necessitates a theological thinking that gives rise to this (non)reality. The only response is a theology that is based upon love, leading to praise.⁵²

What does a theologian do, then? The theologian responds in love. The improvisation that takes place is to love God and, in so doing, to be attuned to God so that one can follow and move with God. When it comes to being able to interpret, not only creation but even Scripture, the hermeneutic must be that of love. The theologian must

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, XI.1.

⁵¹ See Augustine’s allegorical exposition of the seven days of creation in XIII.13–47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, XIII.48.

be an interpreter who works in charity.⁵³ It is through charity that the theologian can interpret correctly, giving rise to the world that God desires and articulating the response to God that is appropriate. There is no specialized form for doing this, no hermeneutical strategy, no ethical system. Rather, the theologian loves, loves God and neighbor and pursues this love in all ways so as to interpret the way God sees fit.

The end, then, is love. An improvisational theology is one that loves God and follows that love. It opens theological thinking to the love of God in an originary way, giving rise to the multitude of forms that are necessary to think through the idea of God, not that this is ever complete. Rather, by turning to love, we see the unstructured, nonconstraining nature of theology; rather, theology has a disposition of attunement and an object that always exceeds our grasp in God. The connection the theologian can possess is through love, not explicating God, but praising God and opening up the possibilities for which thinking God may or may not work. The only option is to be open and welcoming to God in and through love.

Through the discussion of Augustine we see a rethinking for how theology needs to proceed. The way for theological thinking to take place is not by looking to press God into some system, but to offer a multiplicity of theological forms that all work in concert to point to and reflect God, the one beyond any form. Augustine exemplifies this in his use of a multiplicity of forms, from prayer and sermons to doctrinal treatises and autobiography. All of these forms work together to push his understanding of God and reflect the way that God is revealed in the creation. Augustine, then, improvises by using all of these forms, riffing on whatever line or problem presents itself. The riffing comes from being in the groove of God, or attuned to God, which allows innovation and transformation to take place so that God may be heard anew. Augustine, then, becomes an example of an improvisational theologian who exhibits for us the way that a nonconstraining, unstructured theology may look like.

E. Conclusion

Let me conclude by doing two things. First, let me distinguish the approach I argue for from that of other attempts to provide a framework for thinking theologically, namely the “models” approach. Second, let me make a few comments about what I believe my reading of Augustine opens for thinking theologically with and through Augustine.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, XII.27.

First, my argument is not an endorsement of a “models” approach to theology.⁵⁴ As is implicit in my argument, models are necessary to thinking God due to the incomprehensibility and unspeakability of God. However, in saying this, I am not arguing for the use of any one or set of models. I would argue that models tend to shape the approach to God in their own image, or at least have this tendency.⁵⁵ Rather, my argument implies that the nature of God as incomprehensible and unspeakable means that there must be a multiplicity and plurality of models used in theology. I draw this from Augustine himself, as I make clear in my exposition of both *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessions*. Both of these works show Augustine avoiding the use of any models for thinking God that might try to say too much about God. Instead, in these two texts Augustine pushes into ways of thinking God that are dependent upon the unstructuring of theology by the doctrine of God in a way that leads to thinking God through formlessness. This does not mean that God is without form for Augustine, merely that, as Creator, God is beyond form and, so, takes on an infinite number of forms, none of which actually make a definitive statement about the nature of God.

The reason that I do not make an argument for improvisation as a model for theology is because I believe that theology is inherently improvisational. I conclude this because of the centrality of the notion of attunement to the way(s) of thinking in both improvisational forms of music and in theology. In my reading, Augustine is improvising through his use of different forms to think God. He plays with these different forms in order to avoid any discourse of closure in relation to God. Like the improvisational musician, Augustine innovates upon various forms in order to “hear” them in such a way as to hear God through them. I have shown how he does this through the forms of music, rhetoric, and narrative. In his approach, Augustine uses elements of his Christian tradition, scripture, and his own experience, as well as his relation to the broader world to do theology. He improvises with these by “mashing” them together in ways that open up different paths for theology. This way of thinking is the same as that of the musician who takes a piece from a tradition and plays

⁵⁴ Two quite different elucidations of what I call a “models” approach to theology are Sallie McFague, *Models of God*: 1987 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987); and Avery Dulles, S.J., *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

⁵⁵ I think this is especially true in McFague’s *Models of God*. However, Dulles also opens this path, although in a different way, by suggesting that theology is done primarily in the model of the church since it is an ecclesial activity (see Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, 8). I would counter Dulles by asking “which church” is the model for theology? Or, perhaps, which ecclesial tradition? Theology done within the model of the Quaker church will look much different than that done in the model of Roman Catholicism. Since Dulles is a Roman Catholic, his approach to theology tends to take Roman Catholic characteristics.

upon it in order to hear it in new and interesting ways, opened to being performed otherwise.

I argue this conclusion by turning to the way(s) of thinking God that Augustine uses in his three texts *De Musica*, *De Doctrina Christiana*, and *Confessions*. In these texts, Augustine uses different forms—namely music, rhetoric, and narrative/ autobiography—in order to think theologically. His embrace of these different forms leads to the idea that no one form can actually be used to think God but that God, as incomprehensible and unspeakable, is only thought and spoken through a multiplicity of forms. This is true even in his more systematic treatises, like *De Trinitate*. While he is making an argument for a way of thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity, his concern is also with seeing the reader attuned to the Triune God in a way that lets one contemplate God in *sapientia*.⁵⁶ Or, we can see Augustine using disputational forms in his writings against the Manicheans, Arians, Donatists, and Pelagians. Also, we can see how his theology is presented differently in his sermons and homilies. Overall, then, for Augustine all of the forms he uses open different possibilities for thinking God. Thus, thinking God necessitates the use of a multiplicity of ways of thinking in order to do justice to the nature of God as both incomprehensible and unspeakable.

My argument, then, makes two contributions to the theological world. First, it offers improvisation as an analogous way of thinking to theology. My argument that both theology and improvisational music share a way of thinking that unstructures an entity in order to move to the formless opens up various possibilities for theology. As well, this way of thinking proposes a way of dealing with the doctrine of God that gives credence to the incomprehensibility and unspeakability of God while still believing it is necessary to actually say something about God. Stemming from this, my argument opens a way of thinking God as formless which should also be fruitful theologically, especially in relation to God as Creator and in the doctrine of the incarnation.

The second contribution is more immediately substantive. Within this argument, I have proposed a way of giving a coherence to the whole of Augustine's thought. This is the main thrust of this article. The reason I make this argument is due to the difficulty that comes with trying to find a way of organizing and dealing with the whole of the Augustinian corpus. Throughout his writings, there seem to be contradictions as well as other problems to organizing his work. My proposal gives this coherence by arguing that while Augustine does not have a consistent approach to doctrine or the Christian life, his approach is consistently concerned with articulating the attunement

⁵⁶ See Nathan Crawford, "The *Sapiential* Structure of Augustine's *De Trinitate*," *Pro Ecclesia* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2010).

that takes place between God and creation. By placing attunement to God at the center of Augustine's thought we can see that Augustine approaches problems the same way. Thus, when we read his polemical writings, we notice that while he writes for correction of theological wrongs, he also writes to correct a way of thinking that dis-attunes one from God. Similarly, when we read his systematic treatises we find that in the midst of his doctrinal expositions he consistently makes sure that the reader(s) understands that the treatise is also meant to lead to deeper contemplation and attunement to God. The sermons and homilies of Augustine, along with his letters, continually implore the hearer/ reader to grow deeper in the wisdom of God that ultimately brings attunement. This elucidation of Augustine's use of different forms could go on and on. The result is that Augustine uses a multiplicity of forms for thinking God. Central to all of these, though, is the Augustinian concern with being rightly tuned to the Triune God.⁵⁷

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⁵⁷ For further argument on how one becomes attuned theologically, see Nathan Crawford, "The One Who Attunes: Pursuing an Ontology of Attunement over an Ontology of Participation," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2010).