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Whether Augustine's Name Should Be Pronounced AW-gus-teen or aw-GUS-tin?¹

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Objection 1. It would seem that it should be pronounced AW-gus-teen. For, as The Philosopher (Garry DeWeese) says, “we do not say aw-GUST, but AW-gust.”

Objection 2. Further, The People (in Florida) call their city St. AW-gus-teen, and they should know.

Objection 3. Further, The Prophet (Bob Dylan) pronounces it St. AW-gus-teen, and he should know.

Objection 4. Further, according to The Philosopher (DeWeese), those who pronounce it aw-GUS-tin are effete, pretentious Anglophiliacs.

On the contrary, the *Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* gives a single recommended pronunciation, aw-GUS-tin.

I answer that, we must distinguish between necessary and fitting (*conveniens*) pronunciations. In some cases grammatical rules dictate the proper pronunciation of a word. In other cases, differing pronunciations may be equally permissible, strictly speaking, while one pronunciation is more fitting. The latter obtains concerning the pronunciation of Augustine's name. Both AW-gus-teen and aw-GUS-tin are permissible pronunciations, but aw-GUS-tin is more fitting. The reasons are clear.

First, concerning the permissibility of either pronunciation, it must be noted that in both cases one is dealing with an English derivation of a Latin name. Properly speaking, Augustine's name is Aurelius Augustinus. Because it is a Latin name, the proper pronunciation is clear: ow-goost-EE-nus. Some among the ignorant have claimed that AW-gus-teen is obviously correct be-

ABSTRACT: The pronunciation of Augustine's name is a matter of some dispute, between those (including most British scholars) who pronounce it aw-GUS-tin, and those who pronounce it AW-gus-teen. This essay argues for the former as the preferred pronunciation. It is (humorously) modeled on the technical argumentative model of the medieval disputation, which is known best by philosophers in the form of Thomas Aquinas's masterwork, *Summa Theologiae*.

1. In the spirit of the medieval *disputatio*.

cause it corresponds to the Latin name. But this is manifestly false. It is true that it shares the long vowel sound in the third syllable, but this is merely a *per accidens* similarity. The *per se* distinction between the two pronunciations concerns, not how the various vowels are to be pronounced, but rather *which syllable is to be accented*—as is clear from The Philosopher’s own argument in objection 1.²

Now it should be obvious that, having only three syllables, *neither* disputed English pronunciation follows the Latin accent (*viz.*, on the third of four syllables), and that, therefore, neither option can be said to correspond to the Latin name in any strict sense. In sum, this dispute concerns an anglicized word that does not, in either pronunciation, strictly follow the determinative Latin accent of its root. As there are no further English pronunciation rules to determine the question, we must say that both pronunciations fall into the category of grammatical permission rather than obligation. Hence, the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* lists both as recognized pronunciations.

Second, however, while consideration of the Latin original of Augustine’s name does not determine a single, grammatically obligatory English pronunciation, it does suggest that aw-GUS-tin is the more fitting or appropriate pronunciation. This is because the latter most closely preserves the distinctive placement of the accent in the original. As we have seen, Augustine’s Latin name is properly pronounced ow-goost-EE-nus, with the accent on the penultimate syllable. The pronunciation of aw-GUS-tin preserves that accent pattern: when the final syllable is dropped from the Latin name in forming the anglicized name, aw-GUS-tin retains the accent on the penult rather than wrenchingly shifting it to the antepenult, as in the case of AW-gus-teen. In this way aw-GUS-tin is closer to the original pronunciation pattern, and it thus constitutes a more natural and appropriate pronunciation. For this reason, the *Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary*, recognized universally as authoritative in things most fine and fitting, lists aw-GUS-tin as the single recommended pronunciation.

Now, it should be remembered that the issue here is one of grammar, and not one of eternal happiness. It is possible for one to be mistaken in this matter and still to lead a flourishing, albeit less perfectly flourishing, life. Unfortunately some demand slavish conformity to AW-gus-teen as if it were obligatory, and thus “tie up heavy loads and put them upon men’s shoulders” (Matt. 23:4). By contrast, we who seek “the more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31) of pronunciation are yet able to welcome into our midst those who choose the other path, while, of course, not affirming their choice as equally appropriate. Indeed, some of those who persist in and even insist upon pronouncing Augustine’s name as AW-gus-teen are our friends. Yet,

2. Note, moreover, that neither option shares the Latin pronunciation of the vowels in the first two syllables.

as The Other Philosopher (Aristotle) has said, “for though we love both the truth and our friends, reverence is due to the truth first.”³

To the objections:

Ad 1. This is an irrelevant and specious objection. The reason we do not say aw-GUST, but AW-gust, is, of course, that ‘August’ is a two-syllable word, and so the accent properly falls on the penult. But what is at issue in this dispute is the pronunciation of a three-syllable word. Indeed, are we to believe that, following the logic of this objection, The Philosopher would speak of Augustus (as in Caesar) as AW-gus-tus, rather than as aw-GUS-tus?

Ad 2. It is unreasonable to appeal in such important matters to the authority of people who cannot even figure out how to vote.

Ad 3. The Prophet has strong *prima facie* authority in most matters. However, St. Augustine and Latin pronunciation are not within The Prophet’s areas of specific expertise (as is, for example, playing the harmonica). It is most likely that in this case, as is his custom, he has simply adopted a vulgar pronunciation in order to affect a kind of populist artistic identification with the plebian crowd (cf. his use of phrases like, “I never knowed”).

Ad 4. We are deeply hurt by the *ad hominem* charge that people who pronounce it aw-GUS-tin are effete, pretentious Anglophiliacs. Seeking always to embody the spirit of magnanimity,⁴ we ourselves would not stoop to the level of such slander, invective, and personal attacks in dealing with the kind of low-class, know-nothing jerks that would say things like this.

In sum, as it has been wisely said: in Florida it’s AW-gus-teen, but in heaven it’s aw-GUS-tin. And we should certainly not confuse the two places.

3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1096a17–18.

4. For a comparison of Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s views on magnanimity, see my “What it Takes to Be Great: Aristotle and Aquinas on Magnanimity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998): 415–44.