

Augustine on the beatific vision as *ubique totus*

Gerald P. Boersma

Ave Maria University, 5050 Ave Maria Blvd, Ave Maria, FL 34142

gerald.boersma@avemaria.edu

Abstract

A constant in Augustine's long literary career is his understanding of God's presence as *ubique totus*, or 'whole and everywhere'. I will first consider how Augustine came to perceive of the divine presence in this life (here I will look especially at the *Confessions*); second, how he theologically articulates the nature of the divine presence (here I will draw on *Ep.* 187), and, finally, how he understands the divine presence in the life to come (and here I will focus on the conclusion of the *City of God*). I suggest that a fundamental *continuity* obtains between how Augustine understands seeing God in this life and the next and that this continuity is predicated on his conception of the divine presence as *ubique totus*.

Keywords: Augustine, beatific vision, divine presence, eschatology

Addressing his congregation in Hippo, Augustine urged, 'Our whole business in this life is to restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen.'¹ Indeed, one may well claim (without much exaggeration) that 'seeing God' forms the 'whole business' of Augustine's theology as well. 'Seeing God' is the theological cipher through which Augustine develops his theology of the incarnation and his valuation of the sacraments. In the *Confessions* and *De Trinitate* Augustine invites his readers to consider the relation between 'sight', 'faith' and 'knowledge'. This language ('sight', 'faith' and 'knowledge') suggests a degree of both continuity and discontinuity between the finite vision of God received in faith – ecclesially mediated through scripture and the sacraments – and the eschatological beatific vision. The vision of God is the consummation of Augustine's great work, the *City of God*; indeed, the entire argument of this book leads up to the conclusion of the saints' beatific vision of God. In this essay I explore how Augustine understands the character of the seeing that constitutes the beatific vision in the final coda of the *City of God*. What does it mean to *see* the divine presence?

A constant in Augustine's long literary career is his understanding of God's presence as *ubique totus*, or 'whole and everywhere'. I want to tease

¹ Sermon 88.5.5 (PL 38 542): *Tota igitur opera nostra, fratres, in hac vita est, sanare oculum cordis, unde videatur Deus.*

out the dynamic of what Augustine means by seeing God as *ubique totus*. I will first consider how Augustine came to perceive of the divine presence in this life (here I will look especially at the *Confessions*); second, how he theologically articulates the nature of the divine presence (here I will draw on Ep. 187); and, finally, how he understands the divine presence in the life to come (and here I will focus on the conclusion of the *City of God*). I suggest that a fundamental continuity obtains between how Augustine understands seeing God in this life and the next and that this continuity is predicated on his conception of the divine presence as *ubique totus*.

A striking element in Augustine's handling of the beatific vision is his strong insistence that the resurrected body will be markedly different from our current body. Contemporary theology about the eschaton – the new heavens and the new earth – tends to emphasise the continuity of our current state of embodiment with that of the resurrected body. In part, this emphasis stems from a desire to affirm the goodness of creation, of materiality, of human flesh, emotions and sexuality, all of which will be redeemed and restored to their full integrity.² In contrast, Augustine tends to emphasise the discontinuity between our current material constitution and the resurrected body. His sustained emphasis at the conclusion to the *City of God* is 'to express the difference between this life and the life to come'.³ This sentiment is amplified in two letters (Ep. 147 and 148) devoted to the topic of the beatific vision.⁴ In letter 148 Augustine underscores that there will be 'so great a change of this body when it is made a spiritual body'.⁵ He continues to explain that nearly all continuity is eviscerated: 'These bodies will be something far different and will not be themselves. They will be something else.'⁶ Why this emphasis on the difference and discontinuity between the earthly body and the resurrected body? The short answer is that the discontinuity is predicated on the fact that the saints will see God 'face to face' and that such a vision requires a decidedly new way of being. What kind of eyes can see God? Augustine

² Cf. Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 140–80; Paul Griffiths, *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2014); J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014); N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper, 2008).

³ Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 585): *quantum ab illa quae futura est distet haec uita*.

⁴ I have used the translation of Augustine's letters by Roland J. Teske in the *Works of St. Augustine, Letters*, 4 vols., WSA II/1–4 (New York: New City Press, 2001–5).

⁵ Ep. 148.2 (PL 33 623): *si tantam quisquam mutationem huius corporis futuram putat, cum ex animali fuerit spiritale*.

⁶ Ep. 148.3 (PL 33 623): *longe aliud erunt haec corpora, et non erunt ipsa*.

writes, 'For they will either be the eyes of this body, and they will not see him, or they will not be the eyes of this body if they do see him, because by such a great transformation they will be the eyes of a far different body'.⁷ The eyes of the resurrected body will 'see' in way analogous to (but far beyond) how our minds 'see' in this life, explains Augustine.⁸

Much of contemporary theology wants to highlight the continuity between our current existence and the new heaven and the new earth so as to affirm the created goodness of the material order as well as all that accompanies human embodiment. In contrast, Augustine's eschatology begins not with the restored creation, the resurrected body or even the heavenly vision of God; instead, Augustine's point of departure is the object of the eschatological vision, namely God himself. In the short letter, Ep. 148, Augustine repeats seven times that the divine presence is *ubique totus* – wholly everywhere.⁹ The divine presence, he insists, is not a partitive

⁷ Ep. 148.3 (PL 33 623): *Aut enim istius erunt, et non videbunt: aut non erunt istius, si videbunt; quoniam tanta commutatione longe alterius corporis erunt.*

⁸ A parallel discussion is found in Augustine's description of three types of vision outlined in *De Genesi ad litteram* 12. Here Augustine carefully parses the different senses in which we use the word 'to see'. First, we 'see' a physical object with the eyes – a human body, a tree or the sun. Second, we 'see' this object in our mind. In this case, an immaterial likeness of the physical object is made present to the soul, perhaps as a memory or as the figment of our imagination. Finally, the mind 'sees' realities that have no image either material or immaterial. This last category includes things such as the human soul, virtues and even God. All three senses of 'seeing' may simultaneously be at play, explains Augustine. For example, in Christ's injunction, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:31), Augustine notes that one first 'sees' the actual letters on the page of scripture. Next, the spirit 'sees' the neighbour. Finally, the mind 'sees' love abstracted from any material or immaterial image. Augustine calls these three visions bodily (*corporale*), spiritual (*spiritalis*) and intellectual (*intellectuale*). Cf. *Gen. ad lit.* 12.6.15–12.7.16.

The highest form of seeing ('intellectual') is not a vision grasped by any image, and yet it remains sight. At this apogee of human vision, suggests Augustine, we can at last begin to approach an understanding of what it will be to 'see' God. Although this sight is reserved for the eschaton, we do, in our state of epistemic poverty, have an analogue for how we shall see God. The human capacity to abstract to an 'intellectual' vision is, already in this life, a sign (*signum*) pointing to the eternal and perfected *visio dei* to come. Augustine suggests that when Paul was taken away from the body (with either his spirit leaving the body as when one dies or by being completely alienated from the senses of the flesh) he experienced this third, 'intellectual' vision of God. For this reason the Apostle called it the 'third heaven' (2 Cor 12:2). Cf. *Gen. ad lit.* 12.28.56.

⁹ James O'Donnell offers an extensive list of Augustine's use of the phrase *ubique totus* throughout his corpus as a means of articulating the divine presence. O'Donnell, *Confessions: Commentary on Books 1–7* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 22–3.

presence.¹⁰ At the outset of the letter he writes that God ought ‘not to be thought to be bodily and visible in a stretch or area of space’.¹¹ Of course, he adds, this is the only way in which our eyes can now see anything. God is ‘whole everywhere’ (*ubique totum*) and not ‘divisibly in areas of space (*per localia spatia divisibilem*)’.¹² So, why does Augustine emphasise the discontinuity between our current vision and the vision of God to come? He says, ‘[I find it] far more tolerable to add something to a body than to take something away from God’.¹³ This is a telling line. If the resurrected eyes will see the immortal and invisible God (cf. 1 Tim 6: 16) they would require dramatic transformation, for otherwise they ‘will by no means see an incorporeal substance that is whole everywhere (*ubique totam*)’.¹⁴

Divine presence as *ubique totus* in the *Confessions*

Readers of the *Confessions* know the long and arduous route Augustine traversed searching to understand and articulate the nature of divine presence.¹⁵ Indeed, it is possible to read this autobiography as the confession of a long and painful, but prayerful, purification of this search. The *Confessions* are bookended by a discussion of the nature of divine presence. Calling upon the Lord at the outset of the *Confessions* Augustine inquires,

How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord? Surely when I call on him, I am calling on him to come into me. But what place (*quis locus*) is there in me where my God can enter into me? ‘God made heaven and earth’ (Gen 1:1). Where may he come to me? Lord my God, is there any room in me which can contain you? ... Do heaven and earth contain you because you have filled them? Or do you fill them and overflow them because they do not contain you? Where do you put the overflow of yourself after heaven and earth are filled? ... In filling all things, you fill them all with the whole of yourself. Is it that because all things cannot contain the whole of you (*omnia*), they contain part of you, and that all

¹⁰ In a classic article, Stanislaus Grabowski comments, ‘Predicated of creatures, material or spiritual, presence is a quality, a positive attribute, a certain perfection. When it is asserted of the Supreme Being, the limitations and imperfections proper to presence in created beings must be removed from it.’ ‘St. Augustine and the Presence of God’, *Theological Studies* 13 (1952): 340.

¹¹ Ep. 148.1 (PL 33 622): *ne scilicet Deus ipse corporeus esse credatur, et in loci spatio intervalloque visibilis*.

¹² Ep. 148.1 (PL 33 622).

¹³ Ep. 148.2 (PL 33 623): *longe tolerabilius est corpori aliquid arrogare, quam Deo derogare*.

¹⁴ Ep. 148.3 (PL 33 623): *substantiam incorporealem et ubique totam nullo modo videbit*.

¹⁵ I use the translation of the *Confessions* by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

things contain the same part of you simultaneously (*eandem partem simul omnia capiunt*)? Or does each part contain a different part of you, the larger containing the greater part the lesser part the smaller? Does that imply that there is some part of you which is greater, another part smaller?¹⁶

The profusion of sputtering questions regarding divine presence situated within a catena of Psalm quotes finds a degree of resolution in the formula *ubique totus*. Augustine writes, ‘Or is the whole of you everywhere (*ubique totus*), yet without anything that contains you entire?’¹⁷ Augustine suggests that, yes, as obscure and mysterious as the formula *ubique totus* sounds, it contains the answer to the question of divine presence.¹⁸ The rest of the *Confessions* tracks the circuitous route Augustine took to arrive at this conclusion.

Initially, Augustine was a materialist; in *Confessions* 3 he describes his inability to imagine anything not made up of atoms: ‘I was seeing only with the eye of the flesh ... I was unaware of the existence of another reality, that which truly is’.¹⁹ Eventually, Platonist writings presented Augustine with a profound breakthrough. Platonism proposes that immaterial reality is more ‘real’, ‘substantial’ and ‘enduring’ than material objects we see with our physical eyes. In his early years, of which we read in the first books of the *Confessions*, this was not yet on Augustine’s horizon. He was still intractably stuck in the intellectually shallow waters of Democritus’ materialism: ‘I had not realised that God is Spirit (John 4:24), not a figure whose limbs have length and breadth and who has a mass.’²⁰ In book 3 Augustine recounts his inability to comprehend God as ‘everywhere and whole’ (*tota ubique*).²¹ Augustine’s problem, he recalls, was the inability to conceive of vision beyond physical sight: ‘How could I see this when for me “to see” meant a physical act of looking with the eyes and forming an image in the mind?’²² As a result, ‘when I thought of you, my mental image was not of anything solid and firm; it was not you but a vain phantom. My error was my god.’²³

¹⁶ Conf. 1.2.2–1.3.3 (CCSL 27 1–2).

¹⁷ Conf. 1.3.3 (CCSL 27 2): *an ubique totus es et res nulla te totum capit?*

¹⁸ Augustine inherits the phrase *ubique totus* from the Latin tradition. Cf. Arnobius, *Adv. nationes* 6.4; Hilary, *Trin.* 2.6; Jerome, *In Eph.* 1.2. However, Grabowski rightly points out that in Augustine’s theology the phrase has a more ‘technical ring’. Grabowski, ‘St. Augustine and the Presence of God’, p. 345.

¹⁹ Conf. 3.6.11–3.7.12 (CCSL 27 32–3).

²⁰ Conf. 3.7.12 (CCSL 27 32–3).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.: *quod unde viderem, cuius videre usque ad corpus erat oculis, et animo usque ad phantasma?*

²³ Conf. 4.7.12 (CCSL 27 46).

At the age of 20, Augustine read Aristotle's *Categories*, which he describes as 'an extremely clear statement about substances'.²⁴ He learned the nine 'accidental' categories of a substance: quality, quantity, relation, etc. The problem, explains Augustine, is that he also attempted to grasp the divine substance under such 'categories': 'I tried to conceive you also, my God, wonderfully simple and immutable (*mirabiliter simplicem atque incommutabilem*) as if you too were a subject of which magnitude and beauty are attributes.'²⁵ Much later, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine writes,

Thus we should understand God, if we can and so far as we can, to be good without quality, great without quantity, creative without need or necessity, presiding without position, holding all things together without possessions, wholly everywhere (*ubique totum*) without place, everlasting without time, without any change in himself making changeable things, and undergoing nothing. Whoever thinks of God like that may not yet be able to discover altogether what he is (*quid sit*), but is at least piously on his guard against thinking about him anything that he is not.²⁶

Here we sense the strong apophatic strain that comes to the fore in Augustine's mature theology. The divine substance is not something known or knowable to humans, and certainly not under the auspices of 'categories'.²⁷

As he entered his thirties Augustine had come to realise that that which is incorruptible is to be preferred to that which is corruptible;²⁸ but he was, by his own admission, ripe picking for the Manichaeans with their suave materialist metaphysic: 'I thought it shameful to believe you to have the shape of the human figure, and to be limited by the bodily lines of our limbs.

²⁴ Conf. 4.16.28 (CCSL 27 54).

²⁵ Conf. 4.16.29 (CCSL 27 54).

²⁶ Trin. 5.1.2 (CCSL 50 207): *ut sic intellegamus deum si possumus, quantum possumus, sine qualitate bonum, sine quantitate magnum, sine indigentia creatorem, sine situ praesentem, sine habitu omnia continentem, sine loco ubique totum, sine tempore sempiternum, sine ulla sui mutatione mutabilia facientem nihilque patientem. Quisquis deum ita cogitat etsi nondum potest omni modo inuenire quid sit, pie tamen cauet quantum potest aliquid de illo sentire quod non sit.*

²⁷ It is telling that in the above quotation (Trin. 5.1.2), each positive descriptor (proper to the *via postiva*) is affirmed, while immediately the finite connotations of the word are denied: good without quality; great without quantity, creative without need; presiding without position, etc. On this side of the eschaton, even the description of God's presence as *ubique totus* offers little positive content. Instead, how we would logically imagine 'wholly everywhere' – its positive content – is denied: Augustine is quick to point out that 'wholly everywhere' is said 'without place'. The truthful articulation of God's presence as *ubique totus* does not grasp the divine *quid sit*.

²⁸ Conf. 7.1.1 (CCSL 27 92).

When I wanted to think of my God, I knew of no way of doing so except as a physical mass. Nor did I think anything existed which is not material. That was the principal and almost sole cause of my inevitable error.’²⁹ Augustine was enticed by the supposed sophistication of the Manichaeans. They mercilessly mocked what they saw as the hopeless anthropomorphisms of the scriptures.³⁰ What on earth did it mean to be created in the ‘image of God’? Does God have a pretty face? Hands, arms, fingernails and hair? Their loud mockery simply expressed out loud the profound discomfort Augustine had with his Manichaean, material conceptions of God: ‘Although you were not in the shape of the human body, I nevertheless felt forced to imagine something physical occupying space diffused ... in the world.’³¹ The chief error of the Manichaeans, Augustine contends, was the inability to understand the divine presence as *ubique totus*: ‘They evidently do not know that you are everywhere (*ubique*). No space circumscribes you. You alone are always present (*praesens*) even to those who have taken themselves far from you.’³² Augustine describes the idolatrous, immanent character of his theology at this time, which was insufficiently attentive to divine transcendence: ‘I visualised you, Lord surrounding it on all sides and permeating it, but infinite in all directions, as if there were a sea everywhere (*ubique*) and stretching through immense distances, a single sea which had within it a large but finite sponge; and the sponge was in every part filled from the immense sea.’³³ The analogy limps precisely in its materialism (i.e. the idea that God’s presence is like water suffusing a sponge), and it is this materialism that Augustine later came to see as problematic, both in the Manichaeans and in his own youthful understanding of God.

At the cathedral in Milan, Augustine heard Bishop Ambrose preach, and he came to realise that the mockery of the Manichaeans missed its mark: the *imago dei* does not mean God has a body: ‘I had been barking for years not against the Catholic faith but against mental figments of physical images.’³⁴ Ambrose taught that God’s presence is both wholly immanent and wholly transcendent: ‘You who are most high and most near, most secret and most present (*praesentissime*), have no bodily members, some larger, other smaller,

²⁹ Conf. 5.10.19 (CCSL 27 68).

³⁰ Cf. Conf. 5.10.19 (CCSL 27 68).

³¹ Conf. 7.1.1 (CCSL 27 92): *corporeum tamen aliquid cogitare cogerer per spatia locorum siue infusum mundo*.

³² Conf. 5.2.2 (CCSL 27 57): *videlicet nesciunt, quod ubique sis, quem nullus circuminscribit locus, et solus es praesens etiam his, qui longe fiunt a te*.

³³ Conf. 7.5.7 (CCSL 27 96).

³⁴ Conf. 6.3.4 (CCSL 27 76): *tamen gaudens erubui non me tot annos aduersus catholicam fidem, sed contra carnalium cogitationum figmenta latrasse*.

but are everywhere a whole (*ubique totus*) and never limited in space.’³⁵ Ambrose gave Augustine a theological grammar with which to articulate the divine presence as *ubique totus*. At the same time, his reading of the so-called ‘books of the Platonists’ (the famous *libri platonicorum*) gave him a metaphysic to articulate the ‘real distinction’ between participated Being and contingent participating being as well as the ‘presence’ of eternal Being pervading all things.³⁶

Divine presence as *ubique totus* in Ep. 187

The locus classicus for Augustine’s mature exposition of the nature of divine presence is found in Ep. 187; this letter was intended as a book, which Augustine titled *The Presence of God*.³⁷ Augustine writes in response to a request from the Roman prefect, Claudius Postumus Dardanus, to explain how one can best understand Christ’s words spoken from the cross to the believing thief, ‘Today you will be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:43). The challenge latent in the question is that Christ was not to go to paradise that day; rather, his soul was to go to the underworld and his body to lie in the tomb. Augustine suggests that rightly distinguishing Christ’s divinity from his humanity solves this exegetical puzzle: ‘Today you will be with me in

³⁵ Conf. 6.3.4 (CCSL 27 76): *tu enim, altissime et proxime, secretissime et praesentissime, cui membra non sunt alia maiora et alia minora, sed ubique totus es et nusquam locorum es*. Augustine’s Christian articulation of the divine presence as *ubique totus* finds its most clear parallel in Ambrose’s *De fide* 1.16.106: *complens omnia, nusquam ipse confusus, penetrans omnia, nusquam ipse penetrandus, ubique totus eodemque tempore vel in caelo, vel in terris, vel in novissimo maris praesens*.

³⁶ Perhaps the most obvious parallel is Plotinus, En. 6.4–5, the two treatises both titled, ‘On the Presence of Being One and the Same, Everywhere as a Whole.’ The Plotinian metaphysic informing Augustine’s understanding of *ubique totus* is addressed by Olivier du Roy, who writes, ‘Chez Augustin en tout cas, ce thème est certainement d’origine plotinienne et provient sans doute de Enn. 6.4–5. . . . Ce thème n’apparaît donc qu’en 388, au moment du séjour d’Augustin à Rome.’ *L’Intelligence de la foi en la Trinité selon saint Augustin: Genèse de sa théologie trinitaire jusqu’en 391* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1966), p. 470. Cf. Robert. J. O’Connell, ‘Ennead VI, 4 and 5 in the Works of St. Augustine’, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 9 (1963), pp. 1–39. The quest to conceive of the divine presence as *ubique totus* is presented in narrative form in the *Confessions* but appears frequently elsewhere in Augustine’s corpus. In Ep. 147 he writes, ‘For nowhere is he not present. He fills the heavens and the earth and is not enclosed in small places or spread out in large ones but is whole everywhere (*ubique totus*) and contained by no place. One who understands this with a penetrating mind sees God, even when he is thought not to be there.’ *nusquam enim absens est qui coelum et terram implet; nec spatiis includitur parvis, magnisve diffunditur, sed ubique totus est, et nullo continetur loco. Hoc qui excedente mente intellegit, videt Deum, et cum absens putatur*. Ep. 147.29 (PL 33 609).

³⁷ Cf. *Retrac.* 2.49.

paradise' is best understood as spoken by Christ's divine nature, which as God is 'always everywhere' (*ubique semper est*).³⁸

While one must affirm that God is everywhere, explains Augustine, one must resist 'carnal thinking': 'We do not suppose that God is spread out through all things (*ubique diffuses*) as if by special magnitude in the same way that the earth, or a liquid, or air, or this light is spread out. For every magnitude of this sort is smaller in part than in its whole.'³⁹ A recurrent theme in Ep. 187, which maps neatly onto the same concern presented narratively in the *Confessions*, is Augustine's adamant rejection of material picture-thinking when conceiving of the nature of the divine presence. This is crystallised in the definition of divine presence that he advances:

Yet he is not spread out in space like a mass such that in half of the body of the world there is half of him and half of him in the other half, being in that way whole in the whole. Rather, he is whole in the heavens alone and whole on the earth alone and whole in the heavens and in the earth, contained in no place, but whole everywhere in himself (*in seipso ubique totus*).⁴⁰

Any material analogies regarding divine presence – such as a liquid or as light – are radically deficient in that they are by definition partitive. Augustine wants to draw his reader to a perception of spiritual substances. As such, he uses analogies of human wisdom, immortality and health, which to varying degrees exist in the whole of the body. These examples are successful precisely in that they are not partitive. After all, there is not greater wisdom, immortality or health in a large man than in a small man. Likewise, these qualities pervade the whole person and are as complete in one part as they are in the whole.⁴¹

Nevertheless, even these analogies still limp when trying to conceive of the nature of the divine presence. Human wisdom, immortality and health are qualities. But when God says, 'I fill heaven and earth' (Jer 23:24), he does not fill them as a quality: 'God is spread out through all things not such that he is a quality of the world but such that

³⁸ Ep. 187.7 (PL 33 835).

³⁹ Ep. 187.11 (PL 33 836): *Quamquam et in eo ipso quod dicitur Deus ubique diffusus, carnali resistendum est cogitationi, et mens a corporis sensibus avocanda, ne quasi spatiosa magnitudine opinemur Deum per cuncta diffundi, sicut humus, aut humor, aut aer, aut lux ista diffunditur (omnis enim huiusmodi magnitudo minor est in sui parte quam in toto).*

⁴⁰ Ep. 187.14 (PL 33 837): *Non tamen per spatia locorum, quasi mole diffusa, ita ut in dimidio mundi corpore sit dimidius, et in alio dimidio dimidius, atque ita per totum totus; sed in solo coelo totus, et in sola terra totus, et in coelo et in terra totus, et nullo contentus loco, sed in seipso ubique totus.*

⁴¹ Ep. 187.12 (PL 33 836).

he is the substance that creates the world.’⁴² This statement expresses the heartbeat of Augustine’s understanding of God’s presence, which is simply another way of speaking of divine providence: the Creator not only fashions his creatures, but is at every moment holding them in being, continually communicating his own presence to them. As such, a recognition of divine immanence forms the substructure to Augustine’s theology of divine presence. At the same time, Augustine’s doctrine of creation also entails an affirmation of divine transcendence. God is not a part of his creation. Grabowski writes, ‘Though He is immanent in all creatures, the simplicity, spirituality, and immutability of His nature require that He be transcendent to them.’⁴³ Augustine’s doctrine of divine presence, then, affirms at once God’s profound immanence and his radical transcendence. (In the cadence of the *Confessions*, God’s presence is *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*.⁴⁴)

In Ep. 187 Augustine advances a further distinction regarding divine presence. While God’s presence is in *seipso ubique totus*, he does not dwell in every creature to the same degree: ‘Hence we must say that God is everywhere by the presence of his divinity (*per divinitatis praesentiam*) but not everywhere through the indwelling (*habitationis*) of his grace.’⁴⁵ Even among those in whom he dwells by grace, he does so to varying degrees. As such, Elisha asked for a double portion of the Spirit that was in Elijah. Sanctity comes in varying degrees because God dwells more and less abundantly in different people. Inasmuch as God communicates his presence to his creatures he is everywhere (or, put negatively, he is absent from nothing), and he never communicates only a part of himself. Nevertheless, the divine presence is not always received by creatures, just as light cannot be received by a blind man.⁴⁶

Augustine explains that for this reason the divine presence is not only whole and everywhere, but is so ‘in himself (in *seipso*)’.⁴⁷ While his creatures receive him in limited and varying degrees, God remains whole in himself.⁴⁸ Augustine writes, ‘But just as he is not absent from one in whom he does not dwell, and he is present as a whole although that person does not have him,

⁴² Ep. 187.14 (PL 33 837): *Sed sic est Deus per cuncta diffusus, ut non sit qualitas mundi; sed substantia creatrix mundi.*

⁴³ Grabowski, ‘St. Augustine and the Presence of God’, p. 348.

⁴⁴ Conf. 3.6.11 (CCSL 27 33).

⁴⁵ Ep. 187.16 (PL 33 838): *Unde fatendum est ubique esse Deum per divinitatis praesentiam, sed non ubique per habitationis gratiam.*

⁴⁶ Ep. 187.17 (PL 33 838).

⁴⁷ Ep. 187.14 (PL 33 837).

⁴⁸ Ep. 187.18 (PL 33 838).

so he is present as a whole to one in whom he dwells though that person does not receive him wholly.⁴⁹ The distinction Augustine develops between God's presence, which is 'whole everywhere in himself', and the manner in which he dwells within his creatures is subtle but deeply significant. As a variation on the example of the inability of the blind to receive light, Augustine explains how sound is received only poorly by those hard of hearing and not received at all by the deaf, while nevertheless the same sound is emitted. He continues,

How much more excellently is God, an incorporeal and immutably living nature, who cannot be extended and divided like a sound over stretches of time and who does not need an airy space in which to make himself present to others but, remaining in himself in his eternal stability, able to be present to all things in his totality and to individual things in his totality. And yet those in whom he dwells possess him in accordance with their different capacities.⁵⁰

Ep. 187 fills out what is entailed by Augustine's understanding of the divine presence as *ubique totus* as first developed at length in the *Confessions*. As in his early autobiography, Augustine is at pains to insist that the divine presence is not material or partitive; nor is it a quality. Rather, God's presence is the source and sustenance of life for his creatures to whom he is at once profoundly immanent and radically transcendent. Ep. 187 adds a further distinction between God's ubiquitous presence (*praesentiam*) and the mode in which he 'dwells' (*habitationis*) by grace. While God's presence is always 'whole everywhere', it can be received in its fullness only by God himself (*in seipso*); by contrast, in creatures God 'dwells' in varying degrees according to the grace they have to receive his presence.

The beatific vision as *ubique totus* (*De civitate Dei* 22.29)

Augustine's arduous personal purgation of material conceptions of divine presence, recounted in the *Confessions*, sets him up for his speculative and doctrinal writings on what it means to see God in the hereafter: the seeing that will constitute the beatific vision. I turn now to the last book of what Augustine calls his *magnum opus et arduum*, the *City of God*. In chapter 29 of book

⁴⁹ Ep. 187.18 (PL 33 839): *Sicut autem nec ab illo abest, in quo non habitat, et totus adest, quamvis eum ille non habeat; ita et illi in quo habitat, totus est praesens, quamvis eum non ex toto capiat.*

⁵⁰ Ep. 187.19 (PL 33 839): *quanto excellentius Deus natura incorporea et immutabiliter viva, qui non sicut sonus per moras temporum tendi et dividi potest, nec spatio aereo tamquam loco suo indiget, ubi praesentibus praesto sit, sed aeterna stabilitate in seipso manens, totus adesse rebus omnibus potest, et singulis totus, quamvis in quibus habitat, habeant eum pro suae capacitatis diversitate.*

22 Augustine inquires with what kind of vision the saints will behold God in the life to come.⁵¹ As in Ep. 147 and 148, he emphasises the ‘otherness’ of the vision of God. How different and discontinuous will that vision be compared to the vision we now have. Vision in this life is, by definition, partitive and divisible. By contrast, the Apostle Paul describes the future vision as ‘beyond all understanding’ (Phil 4:7), because, of course, ‘eye has not seen’. Augustine provides very little positive content to the nature of the beatific vision; what he can affirm is that this vision will be completely other than our vision now. While scripture affirms that the saints will see God in the resurrected body, it is not clear that they will see through the eyes of the body, explains Augustine.⁵² Will the eyes of the resurrected body see God in

⁵¹ I have used the translation of the *City of God* by Henry Bettenson (repr.; New York: Penguin, 2004).

⁵² The axial text for Augustine’s conception of the resurrected body is 1 Cor 15:50 (‘Flesh and blood will not inherit the Kingdom of God’). In Augustine’s earlier writings he took this passage literally, insisting that the resurrected body will not be constituted by ‘flesh and blood’. Cf. *De fide et symbolo* 10.24 [393]; *De agone christiano* 32.34 [397]. However, in his mature corpus, Augustine understands Paul’s reference to ‘flesh and blood’ to refer to the ‘works’ of the flesh, that is, to the body’s concupiscence. The resurrected body, by contrast, will be perfectly subject to the spirit. Cf. *Retract.* 1.16 and 2.29 [426/27]; *Enchir.* 23.91 [423/24]; *Civ.* 13.20; 22.21 [426]; *Serm.* 242.8.11 [405/10]. See also Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), p. 143.

While Augustine’s mature writings take Paul’s ‘spiritual body’ to mean its moral orientation, he does emphatically insist that the resurrected ‘spiritual body’ will be a body of *flesh and blood*; it will have corporeal existence: ‘The spiritual body will be subject to the Spirit; but it will be flesh not spirit.’ *Civ.* 22.21. See also *Gen. Lit.* 7.7.18: ‘Our spiritual body [1 Cor. 15] is called “spiritual” because it will be subject to the Spirit, vivified by the Spirit alone. But it will still have a corporeal substance’. Cf. Paula Fredriksen, ‘Vile Bodies: Paul and Augustine on the Resurrection of the Flesh’, in Mark Burrows and Paul Rorem (eds), *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 85.

Fredriksen’s description of Second Temple Jewish conceptions of the resurrection of the body apply equal well to those of Augustine and to the political themes operative in the *City of God*: ‘The person is identified not with the soul, but with the soul and body taken together. This anthropology is dichotomous but not dualist. And the insistence on terrestrial redemption, the insistence that the quality of physical existence, but not the fundamental fact of physical existence itself, would be changed, serves to affirm Creation. Further, while individuals rise and are judged as individuals, the fundamental metaphors are social – eating together, worshipping together, living at peace with one another. Finally, given the idiom of the Babylonian Captivity, in which much of this construct is expressed, Jewish restoration theology is, at least implicitly but often explicitly, political. The image of eschatological society serves as a counterpoint to and commentary on current unrighteous kingdoms that will be displaced by the Kingdom of God.’ Fredriksen, ‘Vile Bodies’, p. 80.

the same way we now see the world around us – the sun, moon, stars and sea? This is ‘no easy question’, responds Augustine.⁵³

Perhaps, suggests Augustine, instead of a physical vision seen through the eyes of the body, this sight will be similar to the sight of the Old Testament prophet Elisha, who could see the duplicitous action of his servant Gehazi, who illegitimately received payment for a miracle wrought through the prophet Elisha. While the servant’s wicked action was not carried out directly before the eyes of the prophet, the Septuagint translation of this narrative reads that the prophet Elisha told his servant, ‘Did not my heart go with you?’ And Jerome’s translation from the Hebrew text reads, ‘Was not my heart there present (in praesenti erat)?’⁵⁴ Augustine explains, ‘It was therefore in his heart that the prophet saw’.⁵⁵ Thus, there is a perpetual seeing with ‘the heart’, ‘mind’ or ‘spirit,’ which is proper to beatitude.⁵⁶ Augustine grounds this conviction in Matthew 5:8 (‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’), a text that holds a central place in his theology of the vision of God. Thus, even if the saints were to close their eyes, they would still behold God with the eyes of the heart.

Nevertheless, writes Augustine, the question still stands ‘whether [the saints] will also see by means of the bodily eyes when they have them open’.⁵⁷ This would seem to be the case if ‘those physical eyes also will have their own function’.⁵⁸ But if this is so, Augustine speculates, they would have to be ‘possessed of a very different power’ so as to see ‘that immaterial nature’. They are, after all, able to see the divine nature that is ‘not confined to any space but is everywhere in its wholeness (*ubique tota*)’.⁵⁹ Although God says, ‘I fill heaven and earth’ (Jer 23:24), explains Augustine (echoing the opening of the *Confessions*), this does not mean ‘he has part of himself in heaven and part on earth. He is wholly heaven, wholly in

⁵³ The direct contemplative vision of God as the beatitude of the saints is frequently attested to in Augustine’s writings. Cf. *En. Ps.* 26.2.9; 43.5; *Serm.* 362.29.30–30.31; *Ep.* 130.14.27.

⁵⁴ *Civ.* 22.29 (CCSL 48 858). As an aside, this is another wonderful example of the serious manner in which Augustine engaged with textual criticism. We can imagine Augustine the scripture scholar at his worktable, with various codices and manuscripts piled high, weighing the merits of divergent readings, comparing the *vetus Latina* with Jerome’s translation of the Hebrew text and the Septuagint.

⁵⁵ *Civ.* 22.29 (CCSL 48 858): *Corde suo ergo se dixit hoc uidisse propheta.*

⁵⁶ In *Civ.* 22.29 Augustine uses both *cor* and *spiritus* to describe ‘inner’ vision.

⁵⁷ *Civ.* 22.29 (CCSL 48 859).

⁵⁸ *Civ.* 22.29 (CCSL 48 859): *Habebunt tamen etiam illi oculi corporei officium suum et in loco suo erunt, uteturque illis spiritus per spiritale corpus.*

⁵⁹ *Civ.* 22.29 (CCSL 48 859): *Longe itaque alterius erunt potentiae, si per eos uidebitur incorporea illa natura, quae non continetur loco, sed ubique tota est.*

earth and that not at different times but simultaneously; and this cannot be true of a material substance.’⁶⁰ Affirmations of the divine presence as *ubique totus* should immediately be apophatically recalibrated: the divine presence is not partitive, temporal or material. We must remember that Augustine is holding this proposition regarding the resurrected bodily eyes seeing God as a speculative hypothesis. Certainly, the saints will see God with the eyes of the heart or the eyes of the mind, but whether they will also see with the physical eyes of the resurrected body is less clear to Augustine at this point. Augustine is simply weighing the merits of both positions.

On the one hand, the proposition of a physical vision of God seems implausible. When Paul speaks of seeing God ‘face to face’ (1 Cor 13:12), this does not ‘compel us to believe that we shall see God by means of this corporeal face, with its corporeal eyes’.⁶¹ Rather, this text refers to the face of the ‘inner man’, of which Paul elsewhere writes, ‘But we, gazing at the glory of the Lord with face unveiled, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory’ (2 Cor 3:18). If now we perceive God in faith, which is a matter of the heart and of the mind and not of the physical body, it follows, suggests Augustine, that resurrected vision will be intensification or sharpening of that inner vision.⁶²

On the other hand, God could certainly fashion the resurrected body so that it will be able physically to see spiritual reality. It is human reasoning that strictly partitions the intelligible from the material so that the realm of the spirit is only perceived by the mind and the realm of matter seen only by the physical eyes. But this dichotomy does not account for the fact that God, who is spirit, sees and knows his material creatures.⁶³ How might the saints’ resurrected physical eyes see the immaterial God *ubique totus*? We must completely reimagine this sight: ‘The power of those eyes will be extraordinary in its potency’.⁶⁴ Not a keener eyesight (like an eagle), suggests Augustine, but a thoroughly different vision – the ability to see the immaterial. And so, whether physical eyes will be able to see spiritual realities is unclear to Augustine: ‘And yet we do not know what new qualities the spiritual body will have, for we are speaking of something beyond our

⁶⁰ Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 859): *Non enim quia dicimus Deum et in caelo esse et in terra (ipse quippe ait per prophetam: Caelum et terram ego impleo), aliam partem dicturi sumus eum in caelo habere et in terra aliam; sed totus in caelo est, totus in terra, non alternis temporibus, sed utrumque simul, quod nulla natura corporalis potest.*

⁶¹ Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 860): *non cogit ut Deum per hanc faciem corpoream, ubi sunt oculi corporales.*

⁶² Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 860).

⁶³ Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 860–1).

⁶⁴ Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 859): *Vis itaque praepollentior oculorum erit illorum.*

experience.’⁶⁵ Scripture offers little help here, explains Augustine, and so such questions remain ‘beyond our understanding’ (Phil 4:7).⁶⁶ We are left with more questions than answers about the character of the seeing that constitutes the beatific vision.⁶⁷

However, one thing is clear, namely, that God will be seen *ubique totus*. Augustine concludes,

It is possible, it is indeed most probable, that we shall then see the physical bodies of the new heaven and the new earth in such a fashion as to observe God in utter clarity and distinctness, seeing him present everywhere (*ubique praesentem*) and governing the whole material scheme of things by means of the bodies we shall then inhabit and the bodies we shall see wherever we turn our eyes. It will not be as it is now, when the invisible realities of God are apprehended and observed through the material things of his creation, and are partially apprehended by means of a puzzling reflection in a mirror. Rather in that new age the faith, by which we believe, will have a greater reality for us than the appearance of material things which we see with our bodily eyes ... In the future life, wherever we turn the spiritual eyes of our bodies we shall discern, by means of our bodies, the incorporeal God directing the whole universe ... Perhaps God will be known to us and visible to us in the sense that he

⁶⁵ Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 860).

⁶⁶ Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 856).

⁶⁷ In the conclusion to the *City of God*, Augustine allows himself greater speculative licence to entertain the possibility that the eyes of the resurrected body will see God. Earlier, in Ep. 92 [408], he dismissed the idea that humans can physically see the divine essence as *dementia*. This is a position Augustine continued to hold to resolutely, as is clear throughout *De Trinitate*. In Ep. 147 and 148 (413/414), he admits that while some hold to the idea that the eyes of the resurrected body will see the divine substance, he prefers to follow Ambrose in maintaining that the vision of the divine substance is a vision reserved to the heart (cf. Ep. 147.48). Augustine writes, ‘But there are others who have no doubt that God is not a body but think that those who will rise for eternal life will also see God through the body, for they hope that the spiritual body will be such that even what was flesh will become spirit’ (Ep. 147.49). At least this opinion, which is ‘more tolerable, even if it is not true’, does not conceive of God as extending in space; rather, the opinion is predicated on the transformation of human flesh into spiritual body at the resurrection. Nevertheless, in Ep. 147 Augustine warns against transferring ‘from this world to that vision of God, which is promised us in the resurrection, the concupiscence of the eyes’ (Ep. 147.51). Augustine commends the same scepticism in Ep. 162 [414] and Serm. 277.13–19 [413], holding as improbable the hypothesis that the physical resurrected eyes will see the divine essence. Augustine does not deal with this question for the next ten years, and it is interesting that when he does return to it in the final book of *De civitate dei* (426), he seems more open to speculation about the possibility of seeing the divine essence with resurrected eyes.

will be spiritually perceived by each of us in each one of us, perceived in one another, perceived by each in himself; he will be seen in the new heaven and earth, in the whole creation as it then will be; he will be seen in every body by means of bodies, wherever the eyes of the spiritual body are directed with their penetrating gaze.⁶⁸

Here we have Augustine's richly suggestive speculative theology. We do not know how the saints shall see, but the object of their vision will be God *ubique praesens*. Just as we now 'see' life in other people, we then will 'see' God in all things as He will be 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:28).⁶⁹ The whole world will be translucent to the divine presence, bursting and brimming with God Himself. The material world, which we now perceive as concrete and 'real', will then seem like effervescent shadows projected on a cave wall when compared to that richly dense substantial existence glistening with the divine life – 'life piled upon life'.⁷⁰

Augustine posits a great deal of discontinuity between our current, embodied existence and the life of the resurrected body. Augustine often repeats that our current 'seeing' will be quite unlike the seeing of the life to come. But this discontinuity is predicted on a much greater continuity – the continuity of the object seen. God does not change. God always remains in *seipso ubique totus*. In this life and in the life to come, creatures do not exist unless they are called into being and held in being by the divine presence. God is always communicating his being and life to his creatures; he is always present to them with his life and love. In this life, as in the next, God is present *ubique totus*. The major intellectual quest of Augustine's life, as recounted in the *Confessions*, was to discern the nature of divine presence. He came to articulate the character of divine presence as *ubique totus*: God is

⁶⁸ Civ. 22.29 (CCSL 48 861–2): *Quam ob rem fieri potest ualdeque credibile est sic nos uiuimus mundana tunc corpora caeli noui et terrae nouae, ut Deum ubique praesentem et uniuersa etiam corporalia gubernantem per corpora quae gestabimus et quae conspiciemus, quaque uersum oculos duxerimus, clarissima perspicuitate uideamus, non sicut nunc inuisibilia Dei per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur per speculum in aenigmate <et> ex parte, ubi plus in nobis ualet fides, qua credimus, quam rerum corporalium species, quam per oculos cernimus corporales ... ita quaecumque spiritalia illa lumina corporum nostrorum circumferemus, incorporeum Deum omnia regentem etiam per corpora contuebimur ... ita Deus nobis erit notus atque conspicuus, ut uideatur spiritu a singulis nobis in singulis nobis, uideatur ab altero in altero, uideatur in se ipso, uideatur in caelo nouo et terra noua atque in omni, quae tunc fuerit, creatura, uideatur et per corpora in omni corpore, quocumque fuerint spiritalis corporis oculi acie perueniente directi.*

⁶⁹ The final chapter of the *City of God* (22.30) begins by quoting this text.

⁷⁰ Augustine's insistence that God will be seen in and through one another is a resounding endorsement of his earlier principle that in the Heavenly City 'the life of the saints is social' (Civ. 19.5). Here, even the eschatological vision of God is communicated through other creatures.

everywhere present, simultaneously. But this description remains, in this life, apophatic; principally it articulates what the divine presence is *not*: it is not partitive, temporal, material, or a quality. This inchoate vision of God awaits its eschatological fullness when the reconstituted body and resurrected eyes will clearly perceive what is now seen dimly, namely, the divine presence *ubique totus*.