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Abbreviations

an. quant.	*De animae quantitate*
c. Jul.	*Contra Julianum*
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina
ciu. Dei	*Du civitate Dei*
conf.	*Confessiones*
contra acad.	*Contra academicos*
de or.	*De oratore*
en. Ps.	*Enarrationes in Psalmos*
Enn.	*Enneades*
ep.	*Epistulae*
Gn. litt.	*De Genesi ad litteram*
Io. eu. tr.	*Iohannis Euangelium tractatus, In*
leg. Man	*Pro lege Manilia* or *De imperio Cn. Pompeii*
lib. arb.	*De libero arbitrio*
nat. b.	*De natura boni*
OSHT	Oxford Studies in Historical Theology
rep.	*De republica*
retr.	*Retractationes*
s.	*Sermones*
sol.	*Soliloquia*
trin.	*De trinitate*
Tusc.	*Tusculanae Quaestiones*
uera rel.	*De uera religione*
WOSA	Works of Saint Augustine

BOOK 7

The Liminality of Vision

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A theology of the spiritual senses and their operations is a rich vein running through Augustine's writings. Just as the *homo exterior* is equipped with diverse senses that enable him to discern sensible reality, so the *homo interior* is furnished with interior senses to perceive God and his presence in the world. However, it quickly becomes evident that, for Augustine, interior sight predominates among the spiritual senses. Augustine readily avails himself of language such as *acies mentis*, *aspectus*, *oculus cordis*, *oculus mentis, uisio*, etc. to describe this interior vision of the heart.

Sight has a particularly pronounced place in *Confessions* 7. This essay will ask what sight delivers to Augustine in that book, but also how sight fails. I will argue that in book 7 the liminality of Augustine's state of conversion is expressed in the language of unconsummated vision. I will demonstrate that the overwhelming question of that book, namely, how to understand the nature of the divine substance, is described as a deficient quest to see. With the aid of divine illumination through the mystical vision(s) at Milan, Augustine does receive intellectual clarity about the divine substance. As such, the ecstasy of book 7 highlights the restored sense of spiritual sight. Nevertheless, the vision of Milan is short-lived; Augustine is left dissatisfied, underscoring the liminal character of book 7 and the inability of sight to deliver, at least in this life, a vision of God.

Of all the senses, maintains Augustine in his *De Trinitate* (*trin.*), sight is "the most excellent" as having the greatest affinity to spiritual vision.[1] Corpo-

1. *trin.* 11.1.1.

real and spiritual sight are superior to all other senses on account of their unitive power. In *Soliloquies* 1.6.12–7.13, Augustine offers an analogy between the operation of physical vision, which requires the illumination of the sun in order for the eyes to see, and the operation of interior vision, which requires divine light for reason's gaze to understand. The close relation that he posits between physical sight and interior vision is unsurprising given classical understandings of the operation of sight. As Margaret Miles explains,

> For the classical people who originated the metaphor, sight was an accurate and fruitful metaphor for knowledge because they relied on the physics of vision, subscribed to by Plato and many others, that a ray of light, energized and projected by the mind toward an object, actually touches its object, thereby connecting viewer and object. By the vehicle of the visual ray, the object is not only "touched" by the viewer, but also the object is "printed" on the soul of the viewer. The ray theory of vision specifically insisted on the connection and essential continuity of viewer and object in the act of vision.[2]

Undoubtedly, Augustine's use of the language of sight as a controlling metaphor to express the relation between God and the soul draws on the broader Platonic worldview he inhabits. One immediately perceives the valence ancient ophthalmology has to Augustine as the conceptual infrastructure of his spirituality. First, the will and desire of the viewer must be engaged. Vision, for Augustine, is not a passive exercise. And, second, vision results in a union between the viewer and the object beheld.

The necessary intention, direction, and weight (*pondus*) of vision, in Augustine's understanding, suggest a triangular relation between vision, knowledge, and love. The mind, for Augustine, "joins itself to these images with such extravagant love that it even comes to think itself something of the same sort. . . . It gets conformed to them."[3] The soul, we might say, is molded and formed according to the image to which it looks with affection. Or, in the words of Plotinus, "We are what we desire and look at."[4] Finally, vision is the crowning spiritual sense because, already now, it proleptically leans into the eschatological union between God and the soul that obtains in the beatific vision.

2. Margaret Miles, "Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine's '*De trinitate*' and '*Confessions*,'" *The Journal of Religion* 63 (1983): 125–142, at 127.

3. *trin.* 10.6.8.

4. *Enn.* 4.3.8.

1. The Liminality of *Confessions* 7

After the profusion of sputtering questions about the nature of divine presence in the opening paragraphs of the *Confessions*, Augustine advances a definition of God's simultaneous, total, and immaterial presence with the formula *ubique totus*. In many ways, the rest of the *Confessions* tells the story of the circuitous route Augustine took to find the intelligibility of this definition. His time as a student in Carthage, his early encounter with Cicero's *Hortensius*, reading Aristotle's *Categories*, becoming trapped in the Manichean quagmire, and hearing Ambrose preach, all lead up to the dramatic encounter with the "books of the Platonists" in Milan. There, as described in book 7, vision finds its paradigmatic expression, culminating in an enraptured mystical experience. In one flash of light (an *ictus*), Augustine sees all things in light of immutable being and "rests" (if but for a moment) in the sight of the simultaneous, eternal presence of being itself.[5] This divine reality, which is *ubique totus*, is the ground in which all contingent being has its intelligibly and existence.

But, of course, this is not the whole story. The experiences described in book 7 are abortive. The mind's eye does not continue to "rest" in immutable being. The ascent is short-lived. Augustine crashes down, unable to sustain the vision of being itself. He is rebuffed (*reuerberasti*). Nevertheless, the experiences of book 7 offer substantive cognitive payoff. Augustine becomes intellectually certain (*certus*) of the faith he received from Monica and Ambrose, and his quest to understand the nature of the divine substance and the origins of evil finds a degree of resolution. At this point, we still await the momentous moral conversation of book 8 and Augustine's entry into the sacramental life of the Catholic Church in book 9, such that the apogee of his autobiography occurs at Ostia with his mother, Monica. As such, the narrative of *Confessions* presents the vision of Milan as *penultimate* rather than ultimate. *Confessions* 7 has a liminal place in Augustine's conversion.

Liminality, a word derived from the Latin word *limen* meaning "a threshold," marks the theological aura of book 7;[6] this sense of "being-in-between"

5. Augustine presents this moment of ecstasy with the word *ictus* (a blow or strike). He uses *ictus* elsewhere either to describe a sudden blow or a mystical experience that feels like a sudden blow. Cf. *Confessions* 7.1.1;7.17.23; 9.8.18. Andrew Louth writes, "This ecstasy is sudden and fleeting, and draws out the whole force of the soul (*toto ictu cordis*) with, it would seem, a certain violence." *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137.

6. Liminality is a significant field in social anthropology. The French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) first developed the idea in *Les Rites de passage* (1909). For Van Gennep, liminality describes the middle stage of a communal rite of passage in which a

two worlds characterizes the book. Augustine is on the cusp of a major moral conversion and stands on the threshold of sacramental participation in the life of the Catholic Church. He compares his intellectual anguish to birth pangs.[7] Although Augustine believes, he wants to see for himself with interior clarity that which he believes. James O'Donnell captures Augustine's state of liminality:

> Augustine was always a master of capturing in his words what many of his readers have had trouble retaining or expressing, the tension of the middle time between redemption and resurrection, between conversion and beatific vision. The middle time is the time of paradox, and many of the perplexities to which Augustine gives voice, and to which he does not give satisfactory monovalent solutions . . . are themselves reflections of this time of paradox in which Augustine saw himself living.[8]

In book 7, Augustine sees, but in a manner that is incomplete and unsustained. The perspective of faith governs his outlook, but it is a faith that, by his own admission, is as yet unformed. His vision needs to be healed and strengthened, and that is the journey of book 7. The lifelong quest to discern the nature of the divine substance and presence comes to a head in this book. Augustine has the "textbook" answer to this theological challenge. The confluence of his philosophic readings, Ambrose's preaching, and the faith in which he grew up provide the contours to the answer. And yet, Augustine remains unsatisfied with this resolution. He wants to be more certain. (The word *certus* appears seven times in this book.) We could say he wants to see for himself.

The verbs that express the action of book 7 relate principally to vision. (The first person singular, *uidi*, appears six times in the book). The struggle to discern the nature of the divine substance as well as his subsequent mystical vision, which serves to resolve this intellectual challenge, are expressed with the language of sight. A triadic structure resounds throughout the book: (1)

person transitions from one identity, phase of life, or community to enter a new way of life. Liminality expresses this "betwixt and between" stage of transition, in which a person stands on the threshold between two worlds. According to Van Gennep, this state is marked by ambiguity and disorientation. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (New York: Routledge, 2013; originally published 1960). The British anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983) popularized the term liminality in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

7. Cf. *conf.* 7.7.8: "What agonizing birth-pangs [*tormenta parturientis*] tore my heart, what groans [*gemitus*] it uttered, O my God! . . . I labored hard in my silent search."

8. Cf. James O'Donnell, *Confessions: Commentary on Books 8-13* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 391–92.

Augustine "strains" (*intendere*) to see an answer to the mystery;[9] (2) he struggles to keep the "gaze of his mind" (*aciem mentis*) fixed and fails to perceive the reality in question; and, (3) with divine illumination, he comes at last to see the intelligibility of that which he already confesses.

2. The Quest to See the Divine Substance

The bedrock of Augustine's confession of the supreme, sole, and true God (*summum et solum et uerum deum*) is that God is immutable (*incommutabilis*). From the marrow of his bones Augustine believes God to be *incorruptibilis*, *inuiolabilis*, and *incommutabilis* (7.1.1). At this time, these alpha privatives serve principally to evince the apophatic character of his confession:

> I did not understand why or how this could be, I saw [*uidebam*] quite plainly and with full conviction that anything perishable is inferior to what is imperishable, and I unhesitatingly recognized the inviolable higher than anything subject to violation, and what is constant and unchanging better than what can be changed (7.1.1).

Book 7 charts Augustine's growth in coming to see these realities for himself, and this involves cultivating a new way of seeing—an interior vision of that which he confesses.[10]

Augustine's use of the metaphor of vision for grasping the divine substance is ironic: (physical) vision is precisely the problem in his failure to understand (intellectually).[11] Augustine needs first to purge *material* conceptions of sight. The realities he seeks to apprehend are not seen by corporeal eyes or imagined

9. Forms of the verb *intendere* (hold out, stretch, strain, exert) appear five times in book 7. The sense of the word is a straining to see or an exertion of one's visual attention. Augustine uses *intendere* to express the spiritual activity of *attention* whereby the eyes of the heart fix their gaze on the object of desire. Jean Rohmer notes, "L'intentionnalité est donc un acte spirituel qui remonte les avenues des sens et se projette au dehors, soudant un processus matériel qu'elle informe à l'object même d'où il procède." Jean Rohmer, "L'Intentionnalité des sensations chez saint Augustin," *Augustinus Magister* 1 (1954): 491–498, at 496. Simone Weil famously remarks, "Prayer consists of attention." *Waiting for God* (New York: Putnam, 1951), 105.

10. Cf. O'Donnell, *Augustine*, 396.

11. The language of vision is an inescapable (and usually unreflective) metaphor for most discussion of understanding. One could give many examples of phrases such as "shedding light on the matter" or "I *see* what you are saying," which prioritize terminology of sight for understanding. Augustine notes this linguistic admission regarding the primacy of sight in Confessions 10.35.54. An excellent analysis of this is Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010). Cf. Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1993), 58–59.

with the mind. In the very first paragraph of book 7, Augustine programmatically lays out the challenge of sight that animates the book:

> By now my misspent, impious, adolescence was dead, and I was entering the period of youth [*iuuentutem*], but as I advanced in age I sank ignobly into foolishness, for I was unable to grasp the idea [*cogitare*] of substance except as something we can see with our bodily eyes [*quale per hos oculos uideri solet*]. I was no longer representing [*cogitabam*] you to myself in the shape of a human body, O God, for since beginning to acquire some inkling of philosophy I always shunned this illusion, and now I was rejoicing to find a differing view in the belief of our spiritual mother, your Catholic Church. Yet no alternative way of thinking [*cogitarem*] about you had occurred to me; and here was I, a mere human, and a sinful one at that, striving to comprehend [*cogitare*] you, the supreme, sole, true God (7.1.1).

Augustine weaves together language of cognition and vision. Although this is unsurprising and even natural, it also exposes precisely the problem of book 7, namely, an idolatrous immanence that attempts to grasp the divine substance according to categories of human perception and intellection.

At the outset of the book, we find Augustine frustrated, as he is continually batting away "phantom shapes [*phantasmata*] that thronged my imagination." He is intellectually convinced that God is not a body, but he has no other way of conceiving God. Materialist conceptions of God swarm about him like flies; no sooner has he swatted one away than another lands on him:

> I strove with this single weapon to beat way from the gaze of my mind [*acie mentis*] the cloud of filth that hovered around, but hardly had I got rid of it than in another twinkling of an eye [*ictu oculi*] it was back again, clotted together [*conglobata*], invading and clogging my vison [*aspectum*] (7.1.1).

Augustine's attempts to see spiritual reality aright are continually hampered, as he sees only with the eyes of the flesh. His interior vision (*acies mentis*) is dim; he cannot positively make out what he knows to be true about divine realities (7.1.1).[12] He lapses into corporeal (*corporeus*) conceptions of

12. The *acies mentis* refers to the highest type of vision, the gaze of the mind, which is at work when the soul sees immaterial truth. Corresponding terms that Augustine uses include *oculus mentis*, *acies animi*, *acies cordis*, and *intellectus*. Classical sources with which Augustine was likely familiar include Plato (rep. 7.533d), Cicero (*de or.* 2.160; *Tusc.* 1.73; *leg. Man.* 4.368), and Plotinus (*Enn.* 1.6.7–9). For Augustine, the soul's vision can be trained (*exercitatio animae*) to cultivate the ability of this spiritual faculty to see divine realities (cf. *an. quant.* 30.61; 33.76). Augustine speaks personally about seeing eternal truth through the *acies mentis* in his ecstatic experiences at Milan (*conf.* 7.10.16–7.17.23) and Ostia (*conf.* 9.10.23–26). It is a term that Augustine continues to use in his mature writings. The soul that has purified

the divine substance, imagining it to be a presence "spread out in space" (*per spatia locorum*), either "infused in the world" (*infusum mundo*) or diffused in the infinity of space beyond the world. Yet he knows that such lapses into material-picture-thinking about the divine presence conflict with his philosophic certainty that God is immutable. However, at this point in his life, Augustine admits, he could perceive immutability only as the *negation* of anything contained in space—as an absolute nothingness (*prorsus nihil*).

A positive articulation of the divine substance predicated on an interior vision of God belongs to the pure of heart. Now, Augustine describes himself at this stage as "gross of heart" (*incrassatus corde*; 7.1.2).[13] He is unaware even of himself, because material conceptions "clotted together" (*conglobata*) obstruct his spiritual vision. He writes,

> For as my eyes were accustomed to roam among material forms, so did my mind among the images of them, yet I could not see that this very act of perception [*intentionem*], whereby I formed those images, was different from them in kind. Yet my mind would never have been able to form them unless it was itself a reality and a great one (7.1.2).

Existentially, rich knowledge of the divine presence and his own self—to know God and the soul—was, as yet, beyond Augustine. The sad irony, he later realizes, is that the very mechanics of vision whereby he can focus his sight (*intentionem*) to conjure up images in his mind should have disclosed the reality of an immaterial substance (i.e., the soul) necessary to see anything at all. "If we would only look carefully at the very mind we are using to imagine material things," remarks Phillip Cary regarding this passage, "we would have the clue to what is not itself a material thing, something that is not spread out in space but is not just nothing either. It is indeed something very great, but not large in

the *acies mentis*, maintains Augustine in *De Trinitate*, can behold God through faith in this life and directly in the life to come (*trin.* 15.21–23). Cf. Frederick van Fleteren, "acies mentis," in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Denys Turner writes, "Where time intersects with eternity, the mind's most intimate interiority is also its 'highest' point, a point which Augustine calls the *acies mentis*, the 'cutting edge' of the mind, the place 'in' it which overlaps with the eternal Light it is in. It is the point at which the mind can most truly contemplate the Trinity and in which the Trinity dwells by participating image." *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99.

13. Augustine's medical description of *epicardial fat* (*incrassatus corde*) derives from Jesus's explanation of why he speaks in parables (Matt 13:15) and the Apostle Paul's explanation of why many fail to believe (Acts 28:27). Both passages are quotations from Isaiah 6:10 (LXX).

bulk or in physically measurable terms. It is the greatness of our own souls."[14] Again, we see how, for Augustine, knowledge of God and the soul are thoroughly interwoven.

Augustine cannot yet bridge the ontological chasm separating the mutable from the immutable. He wrongly imagines God's presence as "spread through space in every direction," such that "all things were full of you" (7.1.2). With an arresting metaphor, Augustine describes his failure to apprehend God's being, which radically transcends that of his creatures:

> I imagined you, Lord, who are infinite in every possible respect, surrounding and penetrating it in every part, like a sea extending in all directions through immense space, a single unlimited sea which held within itself a sponge as vast as one could image but still finite, and the sponge soaked in every fibre of itself by the boundless sea (7.5.7).

The analogy of God as sea suffusing a sponge limps precisely in its materialism, and it is this materialism that Augustine would later come to see as problematic, both in the Manichaeans and in his own youthful understanding of God. At this stage there is no resolution to Augustine's perplexion. He cannot yet properly see an answer to the problem of the divine substance. He remarks tellingly, "You had not yet illumined my darkness" (*sed nondum inluminaueras tenebras meas*; 7.1.2).

If Augustine confesses the reality of the divine substance as immutable, although struggling to hold this truth before his mind's eye, a parallel situation obtains in his attempt to apprehend the *causa mali*. He is philosophically certain that God is not vulnerable to change, but he struggles, therefore, to perceive how evil comes into existence.

> I strained [*intendebam*] to see for myself the truth of an explanation I heard: that the cause of evil is the free decision of our will, in consequence of which we act wrongly and suffer your righteous judgment; but I could not see it clearly [*liquidam cernere*]. I struggled to raise my mental gaze [*aciem mentis*] from the depths, but sank back again; I strove repeatedly, but again and again sank back. I was as sure of having a will as I was of being alive, and this it was that lifted me into your light [*subleuabat me in lucem tuam*] (7.3.5).

The structure of this struggle is identical to Augustine's description of his struggle to perceive the nature of the divine substance: (1) he "strains"

14. Phillip Cary, "Inner Vision as the Goal of Augustine's Life," in *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, ed. Kim Paffenroth and Robert P. Kennedy (London: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 111.

(*intendere*) to see an answer to the challenge of the origins of evil; (2) he fails to keep the "gaze of his mind" (*aciem mentis*) fixed on the resolution; and (3) it is only with the gift of divine light (*lucem tuam*) that he finds intelligibility to what he already confesses.

As with respect to the challenge of correctly perceiving the divine substance, Augustine is already intellectually convinced of Ambrose's (and the Platonic) teaching regarding evil as privation. Evil has its root not in something positive but in lack of something, namely, a lack of a rightly ordered will. Augustine articulates his search as a quest to see, a "straining" for an interior perception (*creui*) and confirmation of that which he already knows to be true.

3. *Confessions* 7.10.16

A resolution to the theological *aporia* regarding the nature of the divine substance and the origin of evil comes to Augustine through a revelation. At one point, a light dawned on Augustine's intellect, a light that transcended him. As such, *Confessions* seeks to underscore that the new insight into the problems that so vexed him is emphatically a gift. The in-breaking of divine light discloses a new cognitive grasp and a new possibility of intellectual vision. In *Confessions* 7.10.16, Augustine relates the first of two descriptions of the ecstatic experience:

> Warned by these writings that I must return [*redire*] to myself, I entered under your guidance the innermost places of my being [*intraui in intima mea*]; but only because you had become my helper was I able to do so, I entered [*intraui*], then, and with the vision of my spirit [*oculo animae*], such as it was, I saw [*uidi*] the incommutable light [*lucem incommutabilem*] far above my spiritual ken [*supra eundem oculum animae*], transcending my mind [*supra mentem meam*]: not this common light which every carnal eye can see, nor any light of the same order but greater, as though this common light was shining much more powerfully, far more brightly, and so extensively as to fill the universe. The light I saw was not this common light at all, but something different, utterly different, from all these things. Nor was it higher than my mind in the sense that oil floats on water or the sky is above the earth; it was exalted because this very light made me [*ipsa fecit me*], and I was below it because by it I was made (7.10.16).

We have here a vivid description of an experience of interior vision occasioned by the impress of a transcendent spiritual light. Augustine follows a path of spiritual illumination and ascent by the way of interiority proposed by

Plotinus.[15] The site of transcendence to which Augustine is urged to return is *intima mea*.[16] Augustine now sees (*uidi*) immutable light. The preceding extensive quotations from the prologue of John (7.9.13–15) inform us how Augustine wants his readers to think about this light. It is the *lumen uerum* that enlightens every man.[17]

Augustine fuses Plotinian mysticism with Johannine theology to articulate the character of this transcendent light.[18] The immutable light is of an order "wholly other" than all finite existence. Indeed, this light is the cause of all existence, which, Augustine confesses, includes him (*ipsa fecit me*). Augustine's mystical experience reveals that this immutable light is both the epistemological ground in which all things are intelligible and the ontological cause in whom all things have their being. Incidentally, this is, according to Augustine, also the central teaching of both the Johannine prologue and the *libri platonicorum*.

15. Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.9.

16. In *ep.* 10 to Nebridius, Augustine describes this site as the "sanctuary of the mind" where the soul can adore God (*mentis penetralibus adorat Deum*); the place where the mind's eye can behold unchanging truth.

17. A helpful analogue is Augustine's *Homilies on the Gospel John*, in which he compares the healing effect of physical light on the eyes to the healing effect of spiritual light on the eyes of the soul. The spiritual light that restores the eyes of the soul is the eternal Word in whose immutable light we see light (cf. Ps 35:10). *Jo. eu. tr.* 13.5:

> Thus, in seeing this bodily light, these eyes of ours are restored, and a material thing is seen by bodily eyes. Many who remained too long in the darkness find their vision weakened, as if by fasting from light. When the eyes are cheated of their food (of course, they feed on the light), they are tired out by such fasting and weakened, such that they cannot look at the light they are restored by; and if the light is lacking too long, the eyes go out and the sharpness of light, as it were, dies in them. So what follows, then? Because so many eyes feed on this light every day, does it grow any less? The truth is both that they are restored and renewed and that the light remains whole and entire. If God has been able to bestow this benefit of on bodily eyes with bodily light, will he not bestow on the clean of heart that light which is tireless, remains whole, does not fail at all?

It is to this divine light that Augustine prays for illumination at the outset of the *Soliloquies*: "God, intelligible light, in whom and by whom and through whom all things which give off intelligible light have intelligible light." *sol.* 1.1.3.

18. Unfortunately, Cary opposes what Augustine presents as integrated, namely the philosophic insight of the *libri platonicorum* and the truth of Scripture: "What we find in the books of Plotinus is of more direct relevance to the intellectual problems of book 7 than anything in the Scripture passages Augustine quotes. For it was not the doctrine of the Trinity that solved his problems about the nature of God, but the Platonist notions of incorporeality, incorruptibility, unchangeability, and omnipresence, which are worked out by Plotinus with an intellectual depth and poetic beauty that Augustine would never have encountered before." "Inner Vision," 113.

Augustine highlights the radical dependence of finite being and knowing on the immutable Being and Truth of God:

> Anyone who knows truth knows it, and whoever knows it knows eternity. Love knows it [*caritas nouit eam*]. O eternal Truth, true Love, and beloved Eternity [*O aeterna ueritas et uera caritas et cara aeternitas!*], you are my God, and for you I sigh day and night. As I first began to know you you lifted me up [*adsumpsisti me*] and showed me that while that which I might see exists indeed, I was not yet capable of seeing it. Your rays beamed intensely upon me, beating back [*reverberasti*] my feeble gaze [*aspectus*], and I trembled with love and dread. I knew myself to be far away from you in a region of unlikeness [*regione dissimilitudinis*], and I seemed to hear your voice from on high: "I am the food of the mature; grow then, and you will eat me. You will not change me into yourself like bodily food: you will be changed into me" (7.10.16).

The epistemic power of love in this experience is often overlooked. *Caritas nouit eam*. Love is the key that unlocks the door, granting a vision of a reality that had heretofore been denied him. The mystery that love knows is the Holy Trinity. Augustine's phrasing aims to express the circular, interpenetrating dynamism of his Trinitarian vision: *O aeterna ueritas et uera caritas et cara aeternitas!* Note that the noun used for one divine person becomes the adjective to describe the divine person in the next clause. This cascading phraseology in which each clause takes up the preceding one has the rhetorical effect of linguistically enacting Augustine's Trinitarian theology.[19]

Vision in this experience is in the first instance passive. God lifts Augustine up (*adsumpsisti me*) and reveals divine light to his inner eye. In this light he catches sight of divine infinity and immutability and, at the same time, realizes profoundly his own finitude and mutability. He trembles with love and dread (*contremui amore et horrore*).[20] John Kenney captures the emotional force of the passage: "Inner contemplation shocks the soul, first with the force of this recognition of transcendence, then, by the sense of its own ontological poverty and dependence, and finally by the love that has drawn it into this state of deep

19. *Veritas*, *caritas*, and *aeternitas* form a recurring triadic structure in Augustine's Trinitarian theology. Cf. *Gn. litt.* 8.25.47; *trin.* 4.21.30; *ep.* 169.1.4; *ciu. Dei* 11.28. Pierre Blanchard has noted the significance of this triad for Augustine's mysticism in the *Confessions*: "Connaissance religieuse et connaissance mystique chez saint Augustin dans les 'Confessions', Veritas-Caritas-Aeternitas," *Recherches augustiniennes et patristiques* 2 (1962): 311–330.

20. The phrase "trembling with love" (*contremui amore*) is redolent of Plotinus (*Enn.* 1.6.7) and Ambrose (*De Isaac* 8.78).

cognition."[21] *Amor* and *horror* are the emotions the experience evokes: a love of the fullness of Being seen clearly (if briefly) for the first time and terror at one's own contrasting existential nakedness and abject ontological poverty.

From Pierre Courcelle onward, much scholarship on book 7 has debated whether or not Augustine's ascent is a "success." Courcelle himself offers a negative verdict, describing it as a failed Plotinian attempt to grasp a vision of the divine. His verdict: "vaines tentatives d'extases plotiniennes."[22] In my view, the question itself of whether the experiences are a "success" or a "failure" fails to do justice to the liminal character of book 7.[23] We can affirm that Augustine had an intellectual breakthrough in which he was given a vision of divine immutability as the ground of all being and knowing; this experience constituted a shocking cognitive *nouum*. In this respect, at least, the ascent was a "success." In his mystical vision he "saw" the resolution to the questions that vexed him. Although the first half of book 7 portrays Augustine straining (*intendere*) to keep his mind's eye (*acies mentis*) on a resolution only to be rebuffed by the lack of divine light, here he sees (albeit briefly). Admittedly, Augustine remains incapable of sustaining the vision. He is thrown back (*reuerberasti*); his mind's eye is still weak and sick (*infirmitas aspectus*), unable to keep his vision fixed.[24] When Augustine's vision ceases, he falls back into his ordinary way of being and finds himself in the *regio dissimilitudinis*.[25] In this sense, the experience was not a "success" but is congruent with his earlier unsuccessful attempts to form an *intellectus fidei* regarding his theological conundrums.

21. John Kenney, "Mystic and Monk: Augustine and the Spiritual Life," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 289.

22. Courcelle, *Recherches*,165. Courcelle continues, "L'experience a donc commencé par une réussite; elle se termine sur un douloureux échec."

23. I share Brian Dobell's critique of Courcelle's evaluation of the ascent at Milan: *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 132–33.

24. Olivier du Roy writes, "Cet éblouissement [*reuerberasti*] semble être une donnée permanente de l'expérience mystique d'Augustin. Chaque récit qu'il a donné d'une expérience analogue et même la simple description de tout essai de fixer le lumière intérieure, se terminent toujours par cet éblouissement qui force le regard à se détourner." *L'Intelligence de la foi en la Trinité selon Saint Augustin: genèse de sa théologie trinitaire jusqu'en 391* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1966), 77.

25. It has been frequently noted that the phrase *regio dissimilitudinis* derives from Plotinus (Enn. 1.8.13) and Plato before him (*Statesman* 273d6–e1), but it is likely also informed by the story of the Prodigal, who finds himself in *regionem longinquam et ibi dissipauit substantiam suam* (Luke 15:13). Cf. Leo Ferrari, "The Theme of the Prodigal Son in Augustine's Confessions," *Recherches augustiniennes et patristiques* 12 (1977): 105–118; Robert O'Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine's Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 69–94.

The cognitive payoff of Augustine's vision was a newfound awareness about the divine substance as immutable, incorruptible, and omnipresent. This is clear in the coda to the experience of *Confessions* 7.10.16: "I said, 'Is truth then a nothing, simply because it is not spread out through space either finite or infinite?' Then from afar you cried to me, 'By no means, for *I am who am*'" (7.10.16). Cary rightly notes that prior to this breakthrough, Augustine "had no ontology to explain how a being or substance can be unchangeable, and therefore his conception of God's incorruptibility was as inadequate and ill-grounded as his conception of God's omnipresence and bodilessness."[26] The ecstatic experience, which gave existential weight to Augustine's encounter with the *platonicorum libri* and the Johannine prologue, led him to see the insufficiency of materialist conceptions of the divine nature.

As Augustine returns to the two issues that so perplexed him—the nature of the divine substance and the questions involved in the problem of evil—he now recognizes them as intertwined. They are, in fact, variant expressions of the same problem. His ecstatic vision reveals that the only reality that exists of itself, in a non-contingent manner, is the divine substance. All mutable being participates in this immutable being through an ordered hierarchy. But mutable being is, precisely as such, liable to corruption. It is created good, but not indefectible.[27] Creatures do not have being in the fullest (immutable) sense.[28] Augustine articulates this newfound understanding with the language of sight:

> Contemplating [*inspexi*] other things below you, I saw [*uidi*] that they do not in the fullest sense exist, nor are they completely non-beings; they are real because they are from you, but unreal inasmuch as they are not what you are. For that alone truly is, which abides unchangingly (7.11.17).

26. Cary, "Inner Vision," 110.

27. Cf. *en.* Ps. 121.5: "For everything that is constantly changing does not truly exist, because it does not abide—not that it is entirely nonexistent, but it does not exist in the highest sense." Commenting on this passage, Lewis Ayres remarks, "Immutably is the true mark of divine existence and that which marks God as the source and end of all that exists." Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 203.

28. Creation does not contain within itself the cause of its existence. To be human is to have a distinct awareness of existing without possessing existence. Joshua Nunziato puts this paradox well: "Creation does not bear within itself the principle of divine creativity. Only God does. And yet God bears creation within himself. Therefore, creation bears within itself nothing but the creativity that bears it. Creation bears the immaterial within its own materiality. And that is what it means to be created." Joshua Nunziato, "Created to Confess: St. Augustine on Being Material," *Modern Theology* 32 (2016): 367.

The participatory metaphysic that constitutes the theological consequence of Augustine's mystical experience discloses a hierarchy of being. God alone has being in the full sense; all others participate in his being to varying degrees.[29] Augustine can now see the created order (cf. Rom. 1:20) within this hierarchical and participatory framework. Evil is unintelligible except as privation of the good: "it can do harm only by diminishing the good" (*nisi bonum minueret, non noceret*; 7.12.18). The quest to discover the origin of evil is itself wrongheaded: "Everything that exists is good then; and so evil, the source of which I was seeking, cannot be a substance" (7.12.18). Evil is secondary, always parasitical to the good. Only the good has reality, ontological density. Again, Augustine uses the decisive term *uidere* for his newfound understanding: "I saw (*uidi*) for it was made clear to me (*manifestatum*), that you have made all good things, and that there are absolutely no substances that you have not made. I saw too that you have not made all things equal" (7.12.18). Creaturely good, that which holds its borrowed being tenuously, is liable to corruption and defection.[30]

Looking back on the intellectual journey he has traversed, Augustine recalls the idolatrous Manichean conception of divine presence he held prior to his encounter with the Platonic literature: "It had made for itself a god extended through infinite space, all-pervasive [*per infinita spatia locorum*]" (7.14.20). God's healing touch, however, restored *sanitas*, healing his inner vision:

> [You] ... closed my eyes to the sight of vain things [*uiderent uanitatem*] so that I could absent me from myself awhile, and my unwholesome madness

29. In *Confessions* 12.6.6, Augustine also describes the "borrowed" character of created existence, describing it as a "nothing something" (*nihil aliquid*). Even in the creative moment—in the movement from "nothing" to "something"—the "nothing" remains, so to speak, woven into the very DNA of the "something." Jean-Luc Marion eloquently describes this reality: "Nothingness [*Le néant*], in the figure of *de nihilo*, does not hold merely the place of starting point for the created (as that from which it would have exited); it also holds the place of its material (as that of which it will always remain woven). The created does not emerge from nothing except by assuming it again at the heart of its very beingness. It should, then, be said, in a transitive sense, that the created is its nothingness and that it is so because God gives it to it." Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self's Place: The Approach of St. Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 246. Cf. Nunziato, "Created to Confess," 12; Natale Joseph Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 98.

30. The identity of being and goodness as well as the privative character of evil was something Augustine could have read in Plotinus (*Enn.* 3.2.5.25–32). The reference in *ciu.* 10.14 to this text demonstrates that Augustine knew this passage (at least when he wrote *ciu.* 10). However, he could equally have heard these metaphysical truths in Ambrose's preaching in Milan (cf. *De Isaac* 7.60). Other early attestations to Augustine's account of evil as *priuatio boni* include *lib. arb.* 3.13.36 and *nat. b.* 3 and 23.

> was lulled to sleep, then I awoke in you and saw you to be infinite [*uidi te infinitum*]; but in a different sense, and that vision [*uisus*] in no way derived from the flesh (7.14.20).[31]

Having his eyes purged of false phantasms of the divine substance, Augustine was now also able to perceive creaturely existence in a new light:

> I turned my gaze [*respexi*] to other things and saw [*uidi*] that they owe their being to you and that all of them are by you defined, but in a particular sense: not as though contained in a place [*loco*], but because you hold all things in your Truth as though in your hand [*omnitenens manu Veritate*] (7.14.20).

The participatory metaphysic that constitutes the drumbeat of his ecstatic experience equally offered Augustine a new perspective of creaturely being. Creatures are not autonomous. They do not contain within themselves the cause of their existence. The profound truth of Acts 17:28 (quoted in 7.9.15 to describe the metaphysical import of the *libri platonicorum*) was brought home to Augustine with poignant new clarity: creatures live, move, and have their being in and from the hand of eternal Truth (*manu Veritate*). The mystical experience of *Confessions* 7.10.16 involves the divine gift of spiritual vision, so that Augustine sees this reality for himself.

4. *Confessions* 7.17.23

Confessions 7.17.23 contains the second description of mystical ascent in book 7. In many ways the second ascent mirrors the first. In fact, some commentators suggest that the two accounts comprise the same experience related in two ways.[32] However, in the second description, Augustine's ascent is prefaced by the confession that he now loves God's "very self" and not some "figment of imagination" (*phantasma*). The challenge, Augustine admits, is retaining the attention (*intendere*) of his mind's eye (*acies mentis*); to "continue steadily in the enjoyment of my God" (*stabam frui deo meo*). Augustine acknowledges a spiritual tension in that the weight of his love seems to pull in opposing

31. Robert O'Connell has made much of these lines, suggesting that behind them lies the influence of Plotinus's twin treatises on the omnipresence of being (*Ennead* 6.4–5). Robert O'Connell, "Ennead, IV, 4 and 5 in the Works of Saint Augustine," *Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristiques* 9 (1963): 1–39.

32. Some interpret the second experience (*Confessions* 7.17.23) as an elaboration on the first experience (*Confessions* 7.10.16). For example, du Roy remarks, "Ce qui pouvait sembler un nouveau récit de 'tentative d'extase', n'est donc qu'un rappel de sa situation, tout naturellement amené par le contexte. C'est ainsi que compose Augustin." *L'Intelligence de la foi*, 85.

directions. He is both drawn to God's beauty and dragged down by the weight (*pondus*) of his carnal habit. Nevertheless the "memory" (*memoria*) of what he experienced after reading the *libri platonicorum* (*Confessions* 7.10.16) remains with him, leaving him "no doubt whatever whom I ought to cling to" (7.17.23).

The ascent in *Confessions* 7.17.23 is initiated with Augustine contemplating the human act of judgment. The mind judges that mutable things *ought* to be this way or that. This suggests an eternal and immutable principle upon which the mind bases such judgments: "I realized that above my changeable mind soared the real, unchangeable truth, which is eternal" (7.17.23). *Veritatis aeternitas* is the standard of immutable truth, to which the mutable mind adverts when rendering judgement. Augustine writes,

> Thus I pursued my inquiry by stages [*gradatim*], from material things to the soul that perceives them through the body, from there to that inner power [*interiorem vim*] of the soul to which the body's senses report external impressions.... I proceeded further and came to the power of discursive reasoning [*ratiocinantem*], to which the data of our senses are referred for judgment (7.17.23).

For Augustine, the soul is not static; he intimates that the soul itself is a dynamic entity, intelligible by an upward *motio* that points beyond itself. The *interior uis*, by which the soul receives sense impressions from the body, is an interior force that humans have in common with all sensible creatures endowed with the power of perception. Yet the human soul soars beyond this. His is a reasoning (*ratiocinans*) soul, capable of deliberating and rendering judgment about sense experiences, i.e., "Was this sense experience just, good, noble, etc.?" Augustine describes this reasoning power of judgement as a type of interior vision.[33] Further, the power of reason points beyond itself. Although reasoning is itself mutable, it stretches "upward to the source of its own intelligence" (7.17.23), namely, the unchanging light that enables interior vision to see in the first place:

> It strove to discover what this light was that bedewed it when it cried out unhesitatingly that the Unchangeable is better than anything liable to change; it sought the font whence flowed its concept of the Unchangeable—for unless it had in some fashion recognized Immutability, it could never with such certainty have judged it superior to things that change (7.17.23).

33. Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), chap. 9.

The power of human reason and judgement—the soul's insight—is itself flooded by light.[34] Augustine describes the ascent from the corporeal body with its sense perception to the incorporeal soul that sees and renders judgment on what the bodily senses deliver according to its participation in eternal light. This leads him to a confirmation of the metaphysical truths discovered in the wake of the experience of *Confessions* 7.10.16 regarding God's immutable substance:

> And then my mind attained to *That Which Is*, in the flash of one tremulous glance [*ictu trepidantis aspectus*]. Then indeed did I perceive [*conspexi*] your invisible reality through created things, but to keep my gaze [*aciem*] there was beyond my strength. I was forced back [*repercussa*] through weakness [*infirmitate*] and returned to my familiar surroundings, bearing with me only a loving memory, one that yearned for something of which I had caught the fragrance, but could not yet feast upon (7.17.23).

The similarities with the first account of ascent (7.10.16) are striking—the most conspicuous being the ubiquity of the language of vision to articulate the experience. In a flash of light, Augustine catches sight (*aspectus* in both cases) of immutable being. Again, he is awed and terrified. But once again he is beaten back (*repercussa* here and *reuerberasti* in 7.10.16). In both cases, he attributes the failure to sustain the vision to *infirmitates*. However, two things set this account off from that of 7.10.16. First, here Romans 1:20 features prominently. He now sees creation aright: a participatory ontology frames his thinking. He is able to see all mutable being existing in God (*omnitenens manu Veritate*) and translucent to the divine presence in which it lives, moves, and has its being. Created things are now attestations to God's "invisible reality" (cf. Rom 1:20). Second, memory is mentioned twice in 7.17.23. Memory is, for *Confessions*, the locus of the soul's ascent to God. Augustine now retains a loving memory (*amantem memoriam*), the fragrance (*olefacta*) of his mystical experiences, which inform his thinking on the theologically vexed problems at play in book 7.

34. An analogous passage is trin. 8.4.9, in which Augustine considers with what we love when we love a "just man." What the mind sees and is drawn towards in the just man is "the inner truth present to the mind (*ueritas est interior praesens animo*), which his capable of beholding it." Not all are capable of this vision, maintains Augustine, but those that are, do so "by cleaving to that same form which they behold, in order to be formed by it and become just minds." Augustine proposes a certain conformity of the soul to the eternal realities seen.

5. Conclusion

Confessions 7 has a liminal place in Augustine's autobiography. At this point, Augustine has abandoned the quagmire of pernicious Manichean heresy and has renounced the futility and vanity of careerism (*ambitio saeculi*). From intelligent Christians in Milan (especially Bishop Ambrose), he has gained new appreciation for Scripture and Catholic teaching. Indeed, he has come to confess the faith in which he was raised. Now he now wants to be more certain (*certus*). Intellectually, he wants to see this truth for himself. However, the heart-wrenching moral conversion of book 8 and the joyous entry in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church in book 9 have not yet occurred. In *Confessions* 7, Augustine stands on the threshold; he presents himself as "being-in-between" two worlds. It is perhaps for this reason that sight predominates in *Confessions* 7.

Vision, in Augustine's Platonic worldview, entails, in the first place, union. Sight is a movement of intention, direction, and will (*pondus*) towards the object of affection. What is seen is always seen with affection and what is looked at with love is given birth in the soul in an immaterial form.[35] Augustine's desire to see—his longing for intellectual and spiritual union with truth—suffuses book 7. The persistent place of sight in *Confessions* 7 veraciously captures the liminal character of this book. Augustine wants to see the truth about the nature of the divine substance (as *ubique totus*) and the related challenge concerning the origins of evil. But, try as he might, his vision is stymied. The problem is an inadequate spiritual vision; Augustine is incapable of transcending materialist conceptions of reality. It is only the gift of Augustine's mystical experiences—the in-breaking of divine light—that enables him to see for himself the truth he knows. It is in this light that he comes to see how the divine substance exists as immutable, incorruptible, and omnipresent and how all contingent being participates in this divine substance in an ordered hierarchy. Further, he sees how the human power of reason is an interior vision that judges contingent reality according to its participating in unchanging light. Despite the power of his mystical vision, the penetrating clarity of sight obtained, and a pulsating experience of union with truth, a certain melancholy pervades book 7. The vision is not sustained; Augustine utters a despondent sigh of unfulfilled desire.[36] His vision retains a longing for completion.

35. Cf. *trin.* 9.3–5.

36. Augustine makes much of the verb *suspirare* in *Confessions*. See 6.5.8; 6.10.17; 7.10.16; 9.7.16; 9.10.24; and 9.10.25. See also Courcelle, *Recherches*, 124–25 and O'Donnell, *Augustine*, 130.

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