

CHAPTER 10

The Nobility of Sight in the Confessions

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The upward movement in us is vain (and less than vain) if it does not come from a downward movement.

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

One could fruitfully develop a rich theology of the spiritual senses from Augustine's autobiography. The author of the *Confessions* accounts for his conversion as the awakening and burgeoning of the spiritual senses, that is, their attention, receptivity, and attunement to spiritual reality. At the outset of the *Confessions*, Augustine prays: "Speak that I might hear. Lord, the ears of my heart are before you. Open them and say to my soul, *I am your salvation*. Let me run toward this voice and seize hold of you. Do not hide your face from me: let me die so that I may see it."¹ One might plausibly read the entire narrative of the *Confessions* as the gradual illumination of the protagonist's interior eyes and the unstopping of the ears of his heart.² Perhaps nowhere in the *Confessions* is the significance of spiritual sensation as heightened and its effects as electric as in the mystical experiences of Milan and Ostia. This chapter analyzes the spiritual senses of sight, hearing, and touch in these two iconic scenes.

The two descriptions of mystical ecstasy of Milan and Ostia share a Neoplatonic cadence as well as a structure of ascent.³ But there is a

¹ *conf.* 1.5.5, trans. emended. I use the Boulding (2002) translation, although I frequently make emendations to this, which I note

² David Chidester (1992: 74) structures his reading of the *Confessions* along these lines: "In the course of his autobiography, Augustine traced the healing of this spiritual deafness and blindness as the fundamental precondition for his conversion. The narrative path to the word and light of God led through a process of healing the eyes and ears of the soul."

³ I refer to Augustine's descriptions of "mystical ecstasy"; however, both words are disputed. First, whether the experiences of Milan and Ostia are, in fact, "mystical" is itself a contested question. Phillip Cary disputes the use of the term. According to Cary (2000), Augustine is describing an intellectual realization or insight that dawns on him, not a supernatural experience. Second, it has been pointed out that Augustine never himself claims to have experienced "*ecstasis*" nor does the word appear in the *Confessions*. (For Augustine's discussion of *ecstasis* see *Gn. litt.* 12.2.4.) Although I follow the convention of using the term "mystical ecstasy" to refer to the experiences of *conf.* 7 and

qualitative difference between the two.⁴ The faith that Augustine confesses to share with Monnica in Book 9 infuses a deep and abiding eschatological hope into the ascent narrative of *conf.* 9.10. While both ascents are fleeting, short-lived experiences, that of Ostia is described as a foretaste of heaven, to which Augustine and Monnica remain bound (*religatas*) in hope, even after the conclusion of the experience. They experience the *regio ubertatis indeficientis*: the “land of never-failing plenty where you pasture Israel for ever with the food of truth” (*conf.* 9.10.24). After this experience they retain the “first fruits of the Spirit.” After the experience in Milan, by contrast, Augustine crashes down into the *regio dissimilitudinis*: the “land of unlikeness.” However, the most striking difference between the description of Milan and Ostia is that in the latter experience, Augustine substitutes the language of vision (in Milan) for that of touch and hearing (in Ostia). My effort in this chapter is to account for this fact. Why, after the vision of Milan, does Augustine substitute what he elsewhere calls the “most excellent of the senses” – the sense most akin to the contemplation of unchanging truth – for touch and hearing, senses that are inescapably mired in what is mutable and transient?⁵

To account for this philosophically anomalous reversal, we need to attend to what sight delivers to Augustine in *conf.* 7, but also to how sight fails. I argue that by supplanting the spiritual sense of sight in Milan with that of hearing and touch at Ostia, Augustine offers a subtle criticism of the priority of spiritual vision in this life. I suggest there is a criticism in the *Confessions* of the attempt to see immutable being apart from the modality of becoming according to which it gives itself. Vision is particularly identified with a Platonic notion of *theoria* and its concomitant account of ascent, a spirituality Augustine understands to have an acute susceptibility to pride. The attempt in *conf.* 7 to see “being itself,” beyond the temporal and spatial modes of hearing and touch, is abortive. The turn to the spiritual sense of hearing and touch after the unsustained vision at Milan serves to underscore Augustine’s insistence on the necessity of accepting the humility of an embodied, material economy of grace. In short, the vision of Milan serves to underscore the necessity of an

9, my argument does not hinge on the precision of this designation, nor is it essential to my account whether or not Augustine himself is aptly designated a “mystic.”

⁴ O’Donnell (1992: 2.124, emphasis in original) notes that despite “*all the structural parallels*, the substance of the event was different for its Christianization; indeed, the parallels have the effect of calling attention to the differences.”

⁵ In *trin.* Augustine maintains that of all the senses, sight is “the most excellent,” as having the greatest affinity to spiritual vision (*trin.* 11.1.1).

Incarnational dispensation extended into the sacramental life of the Church. The experience of Ostia ratifies this truth. The critique of vision affirms that, for Augustine, time and space are the modalities in which, at least in this life, grace is communicated.

To make good on the claim that in the *Confessions* Augustine gives priority to the spiritual senses of hearing and touch to apprehend God in this life, I proceed in four parts. (1) I draw on the work of Hans Jonas, who offers one of the most significant contributions to twentieth-century philosophy of sense perception. He contrasts the sense of sight to that of touch and hearing. I use Jonas's taxonomy to consider the phenomenology of the spiritual senses in the *Confessions*. (2) In *conf.* 7, Augustine uses the language of spiritual sight to express his mystical experience at Milan. With the aid of divine illumination Augustine comes to "see" the truth of the divine substance. Nevertheless, the vision of Milan is short-lived; Augustine is left dissatisfied, underscoring the penultimate character of Book 7 and the inability of sight to deliver, at least in this life, an enduring vision of God. (3) In *conf.* 9 Augustine affirms the primacy of spiritual touch and hearing. Conversing with his mother, Monnica, Augustine hears God speaking first through all creation and then interiorly, to his inner ears. (4) Finally, I argue that the critique of sight in the *Confessions* is expressive of Augustine's mature theology of the vision of God, which is increasingly critical of Platonic *theoria* and its attempt to ascend to a vision of the divine apart from the temporal and material modality of grace. While Augustine shares with his Platonic philosophic inheritance a commitment to the ultimate (eschatological) priority of sight among the spiritual senses, the *Confessions* creates room for touch and hearing as the *means* of arriving at this vision.

10.1 The Nobility of Sight

In an influential 1954 essay, "The Nobility of Sight," the German-American philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993) argues that sight is "the most excellent of the senses."⁶ The privileged status classical philosophy affords the metaphor of sight as opposed to the other senses is warranted, he argues, contrasting sight to hearing and touch. That which sight grasps

⁶ Jonas 1966: 135. Jonas's study on the phenomenology of sight is part of a broader interest in sense perception that swept over twentieth-century philosophy. This "phenomenological turn" originates in Edmund Husserl's revolutionary call for philosophy to return to an investigation of the "things themselves." See especially Husserl 1989. See also Polanyi 1958, Merleau-Ponty 1962 and 1964, Ricœur 1992, and Derrida 2005.

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is the presence of the reality whole and simultaneous. This is not the case for touch and hearing. Touch does not grasp the whole simultaneously, but only that part with which it makes contact. Hearing always keeps its distance, remaining one step removed from the reality it announces. Sound merely *indicates* the presence of that from which it remains distinct. Sound has a “representative function”: “What the sound immediately discloses is not an object but a dynamical event at the locus of the object, and thereby mediately the state the object is in at the moment of that occurrence” (Jonas 1966: 137). (For example, footsteps indicate to me a passing person, but the footsteps *are* not that person.) Unlike the object of sound, which is derivative, the object of sight does not *cause* the sight but *is* that sight. Also, hearing can only be passive in the presence of what is heard. I have less choice with respect to the sound that intrudes; I am not in control but exposed. “All the initiative,” explains Jonas, is “left to the outer world, the contingency aspect of hearing is entirely one-sided.”⁷ The intensity of the sound necessarily serves as a register of whether and what I will hear. By contrast, my eyes are in control; in the presence of the object in view I can choose to engage or close my eyes.

Sight is the most “noble” sense in that it alone offers “simultaneity in the presentation of a manifold”; that is to say, sight grasps everything in its range of vision *at once*: “A view comprehends many things juxtaposed, as co-existent parts of one field of vision. It does so in an instant: as in a flash one glance, an opening of the eyes, discloses a world of co-present qualities spread out in space, ranged in depth continuing into infinite distance” (Jonas 1966: 136). In this respect, sight is the only sense that leans toward the eternal (or it is, in any case, most removed from the temporal) because it grasps all in an “enduring present” (Jonas 1966: 152).

The “nobility of sight,” for Jonas, lies principally in its ability to deliver the “enduring present.” Sight hereby leans into the eternal, while all other senses remain time-bound. The other senses are wholly reliant on memory, the *sine qua non* through which they piece together discrete elements of sense data, creating an artificial whole of what is always, in fact, sequential. Other senses are by definition time-bound and require the work of memory to construct them into an intelligible unity.⁸ When I listen to

⁷ Jonas 1966: 137: “He cannot let his ears wander, as his eyes do, over a field of possible percepts, already present as a material for his attention, and focus them on the object chosen, but he has simply to wait for a sound to strike them: he has no choice in the matter.”

⁸ Jonas 1966: 136: “All other senses construct their perceptual ‘unities of a manifold’ out of a temporal sequence of sensations which are in themselves time-bound and nonspatial. Their synthesis therefore, ever unfinished and dependent on memory, must move along with the actual progress

the “whole” of a Bach concerto, I am, in fact, synthesizing discrete temporal experiences of sound through the power of memory.⁹ Sound, maintains Jonas, “has no other dimensions than that of time.”¹⁰

Touch, too, exhibits a “process character,” remaining ineluctably sequential. Touch does not grasp the whole simultaneously but only that part with which it makes contact. Touch is “the most compound of the senses,” in that it requires a subsequent intellectual ordering of discrete touch experiences to render an ordered whole (Jonas 1966: 140). It delivers the whole (the shape or form of an object) only through a series of distinct, atomic sensations, which requires memory to correlate into an intelligible whole.¹¹ However, unlike sound, touch generates not a temporal but a spatial entity. Through mental synthesis – which is a process distinct from the operation of the sense – sound reveals a “time-object” and touch a “space-object” (Jonas 1966: 141). Jonas concludes:

Thus in their very constitution, a synthesis on the part of the percipient is involved, extending over the time-span of the series and, by a short-term retention, unifying its elements into one impression. Touch and hearing agree in this respect: that their primary objects, the qualities sensed, have process character. (Jonas 1966: 140)

Sight is much different. Sight presents reality as if “at rest”: “simultaneously present as a whole.”¹²

The valence of the metaphor of sight for classical philosophy now comes to the fore. Touch and hearing relate to “event and not to existence, to becoming and not to being” (Jonas 1966: 139). Eternity, as the constant presencing of immutable being, is anticipated by sight: “[Sight] introduces the beholder to a whole time-dimension otherwise not disclosed to him,

of the sensations, each of which fills the now of the sense from moment to moment with its own fugitive quality. Any present quality is just a point of passage in the transition from the preceding to the subsequent one, none is closed in itself, and only one is there at a time.”

⁹ Jonas 1966: 138: “The present one must disappear for the next one to appear, the synthesis itself is a temporal process achieved with the help of memory.”

¹⁰ Jonas 1966. Music reveals this principle with particular clarity: “Melody not only is generated by sequence, it *is* a sequence. The time-measure is an essential aspect in the content of the sound-experience” (Jonas 1966: 142, emphasis in original). Admittedly there are blind spots in Jonas’s account. Listening to a Bach concerto is inherently discursive; however, hearing a musical chord (that constitutes part of the concerto) would not seem discursive, but simultaneous.

¹¹ Jonas 1966: 140, emphasis in original: “*Shape* is not an original datum of touch, but a construct which emerges additively from a serial multiplicity of single or continuously bending touch sensations.”

¹² Jonas 1966: 136. Again, one might object that Jonas’s taxonomy is too ironclad: While most visual experiences are simultaneous (such as seeing Michelangelo’s *Pietà*) some might be considered discursive, such as reading a novel.

namely, the present as something more than the point-experience of the passing now" (Jonas 1966: 134). In contrast, touch and hearing are unable to deliver reality at once and as a whole; they are expressions of the stream of sequential temporality of which they are a part: "In neither case is there a static present; to put it in Platonic terms, they are senses not of being but of becoming" (Jonas 1966: 144). Jonas develops this uniquely Platonic aspect that belongs to sight:

Indeed only the simultaneity of sight, with its extended "present" of enduring objects, allows the distinction between change and the unchanging and therefore between becoming and being. All the other senses operate by registering change and cannot make that distinction. Only sight therefore provides the sensual basis on which the mind may conceive the idea of the eternal, that which never changes and is always present. The very contrast between eternity and temporality rests upon an idealization of "present" experienced visually as the holder of stable contents as against the fleeting succession of nonvisual sensation. In the visual presence of objects the beholder may come to rest and possess an extended now.¹³

Only the sense of sight provides the metaphysical staging capable of distinguishing between immutable Being and that which is contingent and temporal. Vision emerges as the philosophic sense *par excellence*.¹⁴ An organic analogy obtains between the manner in which physical sight grasps all things in its ken in one instantaneous moment of vision and how *theoria* sees being, not as it presents itself to the other senses on the flickering screen of becoming, but as it exists "in itself": stably, immutably, eternally present.

10.2 The Vision of *Confessions* 7

I would like to apply this taxonomy, which distinguishes touch and hearing from sight, to the *Confessions*. In the very center of the work, we

¹³ Jonas 1966: 144–145. An additional unique characteristic of sight that Jonas identifies is that it does not have finality. Before us we see an open-ended indefinite horizon: "This indefinite 'and so on' with which the visual perception is imbued, an ever-ready potential for realization, and especially the 'and so on' in depth, is the birthplace of the idea of *infinity*, to which no other sense could supply the experiential basis" (Jonas 1966: 150, emphasis in original).

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt (1978: 303) remarks: "Metaphors drawn from hearing are very rare in the history of philosophy, the most notable modern exception being the late writings of Heidegger, where the thinking ego 'hears' the call of Being. Medieval efforts to reconcile biblical teaching with Greek philosophy testify to a complete victory of intuition or contemplation over every form of audition, and this victory was, as it were, foreshadowed by the early attempt of Philo of Alexandria to attune his Jewish creed to his Platonizing philosophy." My contention in this chapter is that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation (particularly as here considered by Augustine) destabilizes Arendt's contention.

read of the momentous occasion on which Augustine reads certain “books of the Platonists” and ascends to a mystical vision of being itself. His vision consists of a transcendent and intense light. The light strikes him with a blow or flash (*ictus*) and in that instant he catches sight of being that is stable, immutable, and eternally present. In this light, he comes to see the distinction between immutable being and his own mutable being: “What I saw is being, and that I who saw am not yet being” (*conf.* 7.10.16; trans. altered). Augustine’s ecstatic experience(s) in Milan map well onto the phenomenology of sight laid out by Hans Jonas. Sight, Augustine realizes in his mystical experiences, makes judgments about contingent, mutable being because the mind’s eye refers to that which is unchanging. In this transcendent immaterial light, it knows the unchanging to be superior to that which changes. Augustine recalls: “And then my mind attained to *That Which Is*, in the flash of one tremulous glance” (*conf.* 7.7.23).

The verbs that express the action of Book 7 relate principally to vision.¹⁵ (The first-person singular, *vidi*, appears six times in the book.) The struggle to discern the nature of the divine substance and the origins of evil as well as his subsequent mystical vision, which serves to resolve this intellectual challenge, are expressed with the language of sight. 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. 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 (*reverberasti*). Nevertheless, the experiences of Book 7 offer a substantive cognitive payoff. Augustine becomes intellectually certain (*certus*) of the faith he received from Monnica 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, Monnica. As such, the narrative of the *Confessions* presents the vision of Milan as *penultimate* rather than ultimate.

In *conf.* 7.10.16 Augustine relates the first of two descriptions of the ecstatic experience:

¹⁵ Much of the subsequent section on vision in *conf.* 7 draws explicitly from Boersma 2022.

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With the vision of my spirit (*oculo animae*), such as it was, I saw (*vidi*) 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. (*conf.* 7.10.16)

We have here a vivid description of an experience of interior vision occasioned by the impress of a transcendent spiritual light. The vision brings Augustine to a vivid realization about the distinction between God's immutable being and creaturely contingent being. 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*. Augustine highlights the radical dependence of finite being and knowing on the immutable Being and Truth of God: "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" (*conf.* 7.10.16). 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 the 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*).¹⁶ John Kenney (2012: 289) 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 cognition." *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 one contrasting existential nakedness and abject ontological poverty.

¹⁶ The phrase "trembling with love" (*contremui amore*) is redolent of Plotinus (*enn.* 1.6.7) and Ambrose (*De Isaac* 8.78).

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While the first half of Book 7 portrays Augustine straining (*intendere*) to keep his mind's eye (*acies mentis*) on a resolution to the questions about the nature of the divine substance and the origins of evil (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 (*reverberasti*); his mind's eye is still weak and sick (*infirmitas aspectus*), unable to keep his vision fixed.¹⁷ When Augustine's vision ceases, he falls back into his ordinary way of being and finds himself in the *regio dissimilitudinis*.¹⁸

Augustine's ecstatic vision reveals that the only reality that exists of itself, in a noncontingent 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.¹⁹ Creatures do not have being in the fullest (immutable) sense.²⁰ Augustine articulates this newfound understanding with the language of sight: "Contemplating (*inspexi*) other things below you, I saw (*vidi*) 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" (*conf.* 7.11.17). Again, Augustine uses the decisive term *videre* for his newfound understanding: "I saw (*vidi*), 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" (*conf.* 7.12.18). God's healing touch has restored *sanitas*, healing his inner vision:

¹⁷ Olivier du Roy (1966: 77) writes, "Cet éblouissement [*reverberasti*] 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."

¹⁸ It has been frequently noted that the phrase *regio dissimilitudinis* derives from Plotinus (*en.* 1.8.13.16–17) and Plato before him (*States.* 273d6–e1), but it is likely also informed by the story of the Prodigal who finds himself *in regionem longinquam et ibi dissipavit substantiam suam* (Lk. 15:13). See Ferrari 1977 and O'Connell 1994a: 69–94.

¹⁹ 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 (2010: 203) remarks, "Immutability is the true mark of divine existence and that which marks God as the source and end of all that exists."

²⁰ 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 (2016: 367) 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."

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[You] . . . closed my eyes to the sight of vain things (*ne viderent vanitatem*) so that I could absent me from myself awhile, and my unwholesome madness was lulled to sleep, then I awoke in you and saw you to be infinite (*vidi te infinitum*); but in a different sense, and that vision (*visus*) in no way derived from the flesh.²¹ (*conf.* 7.14.20)

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

I turned my gaze (*respexi*) to other things and saw (*vidi*) 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*). (*conf.* 7.15.21)

The participatory metaphysic that constitutes the drumbeat of his ecstatic experience equally offers 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 *conf.* 7.9.15 to describe the metaphysical import of the *libri platoniorum*) is 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 *conf.* 7.10.16 involves the divine gift of spiritual vision, so that Augustine sees this reality for himself.

Conf. 7.17.23 contains the second description of mystical ascent in Book 7. In many ways the second ascent mirrors the first.²² Augustine describes the soul's reasoning power of judgment as a type of interior vision.²³ Further, the power of reason points beyond itself. While reasoning is itself mutable, it stretches "upward to the source of its own intelligence" (*conf.* 7.17.23), namely, the unchanging light which 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. (*conf.* 7.17.23)

²¹ Robert O'Connell (1963) has made much of these lines, suggesting that behind them lies the influence of Plotinus's twin treatises on the omnipresence of being (*enm.* 6.4–5).

²² Some interpret the second experience (*conf.* 7.17.23) as an elaboration on the first experience (*conf.* 7.10.16). For example, du Roy (1966: 85) 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."

²³ Cf. Lonergan 1992, chap. 9.

The power of human reason and judgment – the soul's insight – is itself flooded by light.²⁴ Augustine describes the ascent as a movement 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 Augustine to a confirmation of the metaphysical truths discovered in the wake of the experience of *conf.* 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 (*infirmirate*) 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. (*conf.* 7.17.23)

The similarities with the first account of ascent (*conf.* 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.²⁵ Again, he is awed and terrified. But once again he is beaten back (*repercussa* here and *reverberasti* in *conf.* 7.10.16). In both cases, he attributes the failure to sustain the vision to *infirmirates*.

Conf. 7 affirms Jonas's contention that sight is the most philosophical of the senses – that most suited to the contemplation of being itself. Augustine's own ecstatic experiences lead him to recognize the distinction between God's eternal, simple being and his own creaturely contingent being. This insight is expressed through the language of vision. But of course, the mystical experiences of *conf.* 7 do not have the last word. Hearing and touch predominate in Augustine's account of what he and his mother experience at Ostia in *conf.* 9.

²⁴ An analogous passage is *trin.* 8.4.9, in which Augustine considers what we love when we love a "just man." What the mind sees and is drawn toward in the just man is "the inner truth present to the mind (*veritas est interior praesens animo*) which is capable of beholding it." Not all are capable of such 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.

²⁵ 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. *conf.* 7.1.1; 7.17.23; 9.8.18. Andrew Louth (2007: 137) 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."

10.3 Touch and Hearing in *Confessions* 9

Sound pervades Book 9; oral and aural references are ubiquitous – speaking, singing, conversing, hearing, and listening permeate the book. While Book 7 focuses on the spiritual sense of sight (the mind's eye) where God is seen, Book 9 focuses on the spiritual sense of hearing (the inner ear) in which God's Word resounds with effective power. The priority of sound in Book 9 comes to the fore in the discussion of (1) Augustine's teaching, (2) the recurrent theme of song, and (3) the aural experience with Monnica at Ostia.

Human and divine speech play a significant role in Book 9 (see Courcelle 1952). Ironically, Augustine twice mentions that he is unable to speak. He resigns his teaching position in Milan on account of a lung sickness that renders him unable to speak with any power or length. His career as rhetor is over: "You detached my tongue from that bond whence you had already delivered my heart" (*conf.* 9.4.7). Augustine exchanges his bombastic and prideful profession of selling empty words (as he derisively describes it) for humble submission to the Eternal Word (cf. *conf.* 4.2.2, 8.5.10). In the *otium* of Cassiciacum, he is learning not so much to speak as to listen. But old habits die hard. Soon he is at it again, lecturing the *discipuli* at Cassiciacum. At this point, he suffers an excruciating toothache. The pain was so severe, recalls Augustine, "that I could not speak" (*non valerem loqui; conf.* 9.4.12). Once again, Augustine is hindered from relying on his own words; he comes to realize his need first to become "more proficient in the word of the Lord (*exercitator in dominico eloquio*)."²⁶

If Augustine struggles to speak in Book 9, he certainly sings with gusto. He arrives at Cassiciacum singing the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 119–133 (*cantantibus canticum graduum; conf.* 9.1.2). He lives fervently with the Psalms:

How loudly I cried (*voces*) out to you, my God, as I read the Psalms of David, songs full of faith, outburst of devotion (*sonos pietatis*) . . . How loudly I began to cry out (*voces*) to you in those psalms, how I was inflamed by them with love for you and fired to recite them to the whole world. (*conf.* 9.4.8)

²⁶ *conf.* 9.5.13. Monnica's speech is also held out as exemplary. Prudent use of words marks the *vita* of Monnica (*conf.* 9.8.17–9.22). She neither quarrels with her husband nor gossips with her friends. Her advice to other women is to control their tongues in the presence of their husbands. Her wise words win over both her husband and her mother-in-law; her words heal, reconciling quarreling people and making peace.

Psalm 4 is quoted in its entirety and each verse expounded in light of God's grace seen in Augustine's life. Augustine wishes the Manichaeans could hear him singing the fourth psalm: "I could wish that they had been somewhere nearby, without my knowing it, and had gazed upon my face and listened to my voice (*audirent voces*) as I read the fourth psalm in that place of peace" (*conf.* 9.4.8). And again, "Loud and strong (*graviter ac fortiter*) I bewailed many an episode among my painful memories. Oh that they could have heard (*audissent*) me" (*conf.* 9.4.9). The Psalmist *calls* upon God who *hears* (Ps. 4:2), an experience Augustine takes as his own. The psalms give voice to Augustine's most intimate feelings: "I trembled as I heard (*audivi et contremui*) these words" (*conf.* 9.4.9).

After his baptism, Augustine finds inexpressible delight in the beauty of the liturgy: "How intensely was I moved by the lovely harmonies of your singing Church (*suave sonantis ecclesiae tuae*)! Those voices flooded my ears (*auribus*), and the truth was distilled into my heart" (*conf.* 9.6.14). In the cathedral of Milan the liturgy was sung with passion and fervor in the style of the eastern churches.²⁷ Augustine participates actively: "How copiously I wept at your hymns and canticles (*hymnis et canticis*)" (*conf.* 9.6.14).

The mystical experience at Ostia (*conf.* 9.10.23–25) takes place in the context of a conversation (*conloquebamur*) between Augustine and his mother about the life of the saints to come (*conf.* 9.10.23). It is this joint colloquy (*sermo*) that leads to the experience of ascent (*conf.* 9.10.24). As at Milan, the ascent at Ostia proceeds "up" beyond corporeal delights – "the pleasures of the body's sense" – in order to attain "*That Which is (idipsum)*."²⁸ The ascent corresponds in a number of ways to that of Milan. (1) It proceeds by way of interiority: "we mounted by inward thought (*interius*)."²⁹ (2) It ascends by way of contemplating creaturely existence (*mirando opera tua*) (in both cases Rom. 1:20 seems to be evoked). (3) Finally, transcending even their own mind (*mentes nostras*), Augustine and Monnica touch eternal Wisdom.

Of course, there are also seismic differences between the mystical experience at Milan and that of Ostia.²⁹ And among the most interesting is the substitution of sight at Milan for the language of word, sound, and hearing

²⁷ *conf.* 9.7.15. This liturgical development was at Ambrose's behest. When the Empress Justina had surrounded the cathedral with her troops in an attempt to seize the church for the Arians, Ambrose sequestered himself and his flock within and, to keep from exhaustion and depression, they sang hymns and psalms according to the custom of the Eastern churches: *conf.* 9.7.15.

²⁸ *conf.* 9.10.24: *erigentes nos ardentiore affectu in idipsum*.

²⁹ For a detailed comparison of the experiences at Milan and Ostia and a survey of important literature, see Boersma 2016.

at Ostia. At the conclusion of the unsatisfactory experience in Milan, Augustine falls back into the *regio dissimilitudinis*. By contrast, at Ostia Augustine and his mother return “to the noise of articulate speech, where a word has a beginning and end” (*conf.* 9.10.24). The first describes a return to the realm of *space*: Contingent reality is seen as a “region of unlikeness” in comparison to the vision of eternity. The second describes a return to the realm of *time*, which is experienced as a distention.³⁰ Here below, the transience of words and syllables is a testament to the Protean character of time: “How different from your Word, our Lord, who abides in himself, and grows not old, but renews all things” (*conf.* 9.10.24). While the verb *videre* is used six times to describe the experiences at Milan, Augustine does not use this verb even once to describe the experience of Ostia. James O'Donnell (1992: 3.128) rightly notes: “The climactic description at 9.10.25 is of an ‘audition’ rather than a ‘vision.’”

Augustine describes the apogee of their experience:

Then we said, “If the tumult of the flesh fell silent (*sileat*) for someone, and silent (*sileant*) too were the phantasms of earth, sea and air, silent (*sileant*) the heavens, and the very soul silent (*sileat*) to itself, that it might pass beyond itself by not thinking of its own being; if dreams and revelations known through its imagination were silent (*sileant*); if every tongue, and every sign, and whatever is subject to transience were wholly stilled (*sileat*) for him – for if anyone listens (*audiat*), all these things will tell him, ‘We did not make ourselves; he made us who abides for ever’ – and having said this they held their peace (*taceant*) for they pricked their listening ear (*erexerunt aurem*) to him who made them; and then he alone were to speak (*loquatur*), not through things that are made, but of himself, that we might hear his Word (*audiamus verbum*), not through fleshy tongue (*linguam carnis*) nor angel’s voice (*vocem angeli*), nor thundercloud, nor any riddling parable, hear him unmediated (*ipsum sine his audiamus*), whom we love in all these things, hear him without them as now we stretch out and in a flash our thoughts touch (*atingimus*) that eternal Wisdom who abides above all things.” (*conf.* 9.10.25)

In Milan, perceptible things point the mind’s eye (*acies mentis*) beyond themselves to the immaterial God in whom they live, move, and have their being. At that point, material creatures must be removed from the mind in order to see, directly and immediately, and with interior vision, the immaterial and invisible God. Here at Ostia all perceptible things *speak*

³⁰ When considering the problem of time and our distended experience of it, Augustine almost invariably turns to our experience of hearing words and syllables, which sound and then fade away (cf. *conf.* 11.26.33).

to the inner ear, directing them to the Eternal Word who made them and in whom they abide forever.³¹ Here it is external sound that marks creaturely mutability – “whatever is subject to transience (*transeundo*)” – external sound that is distended, punctuated by “a beginning and end.” Creaturely speech must fall silent so that the soul can hear, directly and in an unmediated manner, the silent Word who speaks to the inner ear of the soul.³² At that point, Monnica and Augustine *touch* eternal Wisdom.

10.4 The “Nobility of Sight” in the *Confessions*?

Why does Augustine move from the spiritual sense of seeing in *conf.* 7 to that of hearing (and touch) in *conf.* 9? We might expect the order to be reversed. We might expect Augustine to proceed from the tactile and embodied to the immaterial and intellectual. But Augustine reverses this trajectory. It seems that the *Confessions* rejects the notion that in this life we can have access to immutable being apart from the temporal and material conditions of becoming according to which God gives himself. We have seen how for an important strain of the classical philosophic tradition hearing manifests a “time-object” and touch a “space-object” (Jonas 1966: 141). As such, these senses belong, in a particular way, to the realm of becoming. Sight, by contrast, inclines to a grasp of “being itself.” This distinction is particularly prevalent in the Platonic tradition, which strongly identifies seeing with the grasp of eternal being proper to *theoria*. Essential to the conversation of the *Confessions* is learning to accept

³¹ Augustine frequently contrasts external and internal speech. External speech is referential rather than presentational; words are signs of realities to which they point. Also, external speech is effervescence – its sound passes quickly out of being the moment it ceases to reverberate in the air. By contrast, internal speech possesses an immediacy with truth; internal words put the mind in contact with immaterial reality itself. Also, internal words endure; they are not subject to the distention of time that marks external words. For this reason, God’s communication by internal speech to the mind is more sublime even than his communication in ecstatic visions: “The created spiritual nature, however, if it is perfect and blessed as in the holy angels, insofar as in itself it is just and is wise, is only assisted inwardly and in non-bodily fashion. Inwardly, that is to say, God speaks to it in a wonderful and inexpressible way: neither through writing imposed on bodily materials, nor through words sounding in bodily ears, nor through the likeness of bodies such as are formed in the imagination, as happens in dreams or in a kind of ecstatic state.” Ecstatic visions have a certain externality, explains Augustine. They are proximate to what the mind ascertains through sense perception – indeed, such visions can often be confused with sense reality. By contrast, it is through God’s words communicated interiorly that “the rational and intellectual mind gazes . . . upon unchangeable Truth itself” (*Gn. lit.* 8.25.47).

³² The theology and cadence of *conf.* 9.10.25 has echoes of Plotinus: “[The soul] is established in quietude. Let not only its encompassing body and the body’s raging sea be quiet, but all its environment: the earth quiet, and the sea and air quiet, and heaven itself at peace” (*enm.* 5.1.2). See also Capánaga 1964.

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with humility the Incarnational and sacramental economy of grace. Touch and hearing are prioritized in this economy. Christ's advent in the flesh – becoming a “time-object” and a “space-object” – and the sacramental economy highlighted in *conf.* 7 invite a subtle rebuke of the detached, philosophic gaze of “being itself.”

In *conf.* 7.10.16, after Augustine finds himself in the *regio dissimilitudinis*, he does not “see” a resolution but *hears* a voice (*audirem vocem*) from on high. The voice offers comfort, holding out the sacramental means of sharing in that which he was too weak (*infirmitas*) to hold before his mind's eye: “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.”³³ It is striking that precisely when the *vision* fails, God comes in sound, giving himself in a dispensation that is tactile, material, and temporal. A similar motif is at play in the experience of *conf.* 7.17.23. After Augustine's dissatisfaction with a vision that fizzles out, comfort is extended in the form of memory and desire for “something of which I had caught the fragrance (*olefacta*), but could not yet feast upon (*comedere*)” (*conf.* 7.17.23). Augustine's hope is gustative and sensible.

In recalling his ascent in Milan, Augustine explains that only after he had embraced the God-man, Jesus Christ, could he “enjoy” God. Successful ascent is predicated on accepting the prior descent of Christ:

He called out (*vocantem*), proclaiming, *I am the Way and Truth, and the Life*, but I had not known him as food (*cibum*) which, though I was not yet strong enough to eat it, he had mingled with our flesh (*miscentem carnī*); for the Word became flesh so that your Wisdom, through whom you created all things, might become for us the milk adapted to our infancy. Not yet was I humble enough to grasp the humble Jesus as my God, nor did I know what his weakness had to teach. (*conf.* 7.18.24; trans. altered)

Grace is extended in fleshly touch (*miscentem carnī*), sound (*vocantem*), and taste (*cibum, lac*). The humility of the Incarnation is the *via* of ascent, and its acceptance requires Augustine to renounce his pride, a pride that the *Confessions* links with the *theoria* of the Platonists. The emphasis in *conf.* 7 lies in the sacramental means whereby Christ comes into distended time and space to feed those who are by grace led to ascend to eternity.

³³ *conf.* 7.10.16. Other significant encounters with divine grace in the *conf.* also come not in the manner of seeing but of hearing. The famous example is, of course, the voice Augustine hears in the Garden of Milan (*conf.* 8.12.29). Chidester (1992: 74) remarks: “The experience of extraordinary voices was a constant theme in . . . the *Confessions*.”

Touch, more than sight, takes me outside of myself. To touch is at the same time to be touched (see Kearney 2021). Touch, at least in this life, involves an *encounter* with another that does not obtain to the same degree with sight. At Ostia, Monnica and Augustine first *hear* God speak to their inner ear and then they *touch* (*atingimus*) Eternal Wisdom. It is this touch that constitutes the summit of the mysticism in the *Confessions*. Precisely at the apogee of the ascent at Ostia, Augustine recalls the material and temporal modality by which God provided for the people of Israel: “We moved up . . . to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed (*pascis*) Israel eternally with truth for food (*pabulo*)” (*conf.* 9.10.24). The unsatisfactory vision of Milan, therefore, leans forward to that of Ostia with its language of hearing and touching.

A mainstay of Augustine’s mature theology is that the *visio dei* is the preserve of the eschaton. God is not seen in this life. Union with God enjoyed by the blessed in glory is had by seeing. Here below, however, that is not the case. For the wayfarer, hearing and touching constitute the basis of the sacramental life that leads to the vision of glory. The *Confessions* underscores this principle. The hope that suffuses the experience of Ostia is a hope sustained by the vision of faith. But the vision of faith is not mediated so much by sight (even the spiritual vision of *theoria*); rather, faith comes through what is heard.

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