

# BETWEEN PREDICATION AND SILENCE: AUGUSTINE ON HOW (NOT) TO SPEAK OF GOD

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*We are involved in heaven knows what kind of battle of words* (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.6.6).

One must be impressed by the almost paradoxical fact that, undergirding the verbosity of the Augustinian corpus, there is a deep and persistent concern regarding the insufficiency of language. We find Augustine the theologian lamenting the impossibility of the theologian's task: 'Have I said anything, solemnly uttered anything that is worthy of God? On the contrary, all I feel I have done is to wish to say something; but if I have said anything, it is not what I wished to say.'<sup>1</sup> But we also hear the same concern from Augustine the preacher and pastor: 'Stretch your minds, please,' he asks his congregation, 'help my poverty of language' (Sermon 119.3). Thus this 'battle of words' (DC 1.6.6) does not attend only theological or philosophical discourse, but even the nontheoretical discourse of the preacher – the *predicator*. For both, it is difficult to 'find the words' which could properly or adequately express their referent. Here, we must note, it is a matter of *how* one speaks, a matter of speaking properly. And as Derrida observes, 'The "how" always conceals a "why", and the "it is necessary" ("*il faut*") bears the multiple meanings of "should", "ought" and "must".'<sup>2</sup> The imperative to speak 'well', to speak 'properly', is at root an *ethical* imperative, even a categorical imperative. Far from a 'counsel of prudence' in which it is in my best interest to follow its rule, this methodological imperative is a command which issues from the referent, a demand by the phenomenon for respect. And so we are challenged to do justice with words.

What is the source or origin of this inability of language and insufficiency of words, particularly for Augustine? It is located, I would suggest, in what might be described as a formal problematic of *incommensurability*, crystallized in two instances of 'transcendence'. First, there is an incommensurability between 'signs' – most often 'words' – and 'things'; most simply, words are *not* things (DM 10.31–33);

things are other-wise than lingual and thus characterized by a certain excess *vis-à-vis* language. This lack of identity is unbridgeable and cannot be collapsed, and so the word can never *present* the thing – cannot grasp or comprehend the thing; it can only function as a ‘pointer’.<sup>3</sup> And here the paradigmatic example is *God*: whatever I say about God is inadequate, Augustine says, because no words are worthy of God’s infinity: ‘It is not easy, after all, to find any name that will really fit such transcendent majesty’ (DC 1.5.5; cf. 1.6.6, C 1.4.4). This is what we might refer to as an objective or *exterior* transcendence – the transcendence of a thing or object outside of and beyond myself. The metaphor employed here is usually one of ‘height’.

There is also a second kind of incommensurability: the transcendence of the self. For Augustine, I cannot comprehend myself; I transcend my own comprehension. ‘I find my own self hard to grasp’, he says (C 10.16.25) because of the very *infinity* of *memoria*. Here the metaphor is one of ‘depth’, delving into the caverns of the mind, plunging into the abyss of consciousness. And it is because of this inner transcendence of the self – the incommensurability of my thoughts and the possibility of their articulation – that Augustine is faced with the challenge of how (not) to speak of his own experience. Formally, this interior transcendence is confronted by the same challenge as cases of exterior transcendence, viz., the problem of ‘putting into words’ that which resists conceptualization, even language. I will refer to the first challenge linked to exteriority as a problem of *conceptualization*, and to the second challenge linked to interiority as a matter of *expression*.<sup>4</sup>

But if words in particular, and language in general, are unable to comprehend and express their referent – if it is ‘inexpressible’ – then should we not be silent? ‘This battle of words’, Augustine remarked, ‘should be avoided by keeping silent, rather than resolved by the use of speech’ (DC 1.6.6). But then should not Augustine have remained silent? If no words could be found which were worthy of God, should not Augustine have been lost for words? And if so, why and how could he say *so much*?

The injunction of silence, however, is not Augustine’s final thought on the matter; indeed, upon the heels of the passage just quoted, he adds a most significant, ‘And yet ...’ Given the impossibility of finding words which could adequately describe that which exceeds them (e.g., God), it would seem that silence is the only ‘just’ response. ‘*And yet,*’ Augustine carefully notes, ‘while nothing really worthy of God can be said about him, he has accepted the homage of human voices, and has wished us to rejoice in praising [*laude*] him with our words’ (DC 1.6.6). My task in this article is to consider Augustine’s method in the employment of language as a kind of ‘third way’ between the violence of kataphatics and the silence of apophatics. This third way is an *incarnational* account of language which grapples with the methodological question of how (not) to speak of that which exceeds conceptualization and expression.

In particular, here I will take up what I have described as the problem of ‘conceptualization’: how (not) to speak of that which is (objectively) transcendent, particularly God. For Augustine, neither the theological positivism of kataphatics, nor the silence of apophatics, does justice to the transcendence of God. Rather, his strategy in response to this challenge of conceptualization is to opt for employing language in the mode of ‘praise’, or what I will describe as his ‘laudatory strategy’. After sketching the formal contours of the problematics of conceptualization in Augustine’s account of language, I will briefly sketch his development of the notion of ‘reference’. This is in fact located in his discussion of sin and the distinction between ‘use’ (*uti*) and ‘enjoyment’ (*frui*); from this we learn that the world – and words – are intended to function as ‘pointers’, referring to that which lies beyond. In this sense, all the world is (or *ought* to be) an ‘icon’, and so too are (*should*) words. This will then form the basis for Augustine’s account of language as ‘incarnational’ (best seen in his sermons), which in turn sets the stage for ‘praise’ as a means of speaking about God.

#### I. WORDS AND THINGS: THE INCOMMENSURABILITY OF *SIGNA* AND *RES*

As transcendent, God is wholly other – the very paradigm of alterity. And as such, we are faced with the challenge of how it will be possible to speak of that which is wholly other, which is other-wise than language and conceptual thought. Indeed, the *Confessions* open with just such a problem, first in terms of knowledge, which leads to the matter of language: How can I know God to praise him? And then, how can we praise (*laudare*) God adequately with human words?<sup>5</sup> But while Augustine opens with attention to the inadequacy of language, nevertheless, he tells us, there is a God-given impetus or desire to praise the Creator: ‘these humans, due part of your creation as they are, still do long to praise you. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you’ (C 1.1.1 Boulding). Thus the self is confronted by a double-bind – confronted with both the impetus to, and impossibility of, praising God.<sup>6</sup> In attempting to describe God in 1.4.4, Augustine ends with the same tension: ‘But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you because though loquacious with verbosity, they have nothing to say.’ Here we find Augustine torn between kataphatics and apophatics, between a positivist theology which could claim to capture the essence of God in concepts, and a negative theology which, in face of the difficulty, remains silent. Augustine, however, is looking for a third way: ‘Have mercy so that I may find words’, he prays (C 1.5.5).

But for Augustine, the alterity of God is, in a sense, a limit case of the general problem of the incommensurability between words and signs (*verba, signa*) and things (*res*) unpacked in *De Magistro* and *De Doctrina Christiana*.

### 1. *Words, Signs, and Things: Indications in Augustine*

At the beginning of the early dialogue *De Magistro*, Augustine states that the goal of speaking is either to ‘teach’ or to ‘learn’<sup>7</sup> (DM 1.1). In fact, he goes on to suggest, we might reduce all speaking to *teaching*, for even the asking of a question in order to learn is in fact a kind of teaching: teaching the other what it is that I want to know (DM 1.1). This coincides with Augustine’s brief account of language in *Confessions* I, where signs are an external means of expressing an internal desire or thought (C 1.6.10; 1.8.13). Teaching here must be taken in its broadest sense of *communicating*, and not restricted to a narrow pedagogical notion.

To this Adeodatus offers a counter-example: *prayer*. In prayer, do we teach (the omniscient) God something? In Augustine’s reply, we find an important distinction between an *interior* language (praying ‘in closed chambers’ – in the ‘inner recesses of the mind’) which remains closed off from the sensibility of *exterior* language or *signs*, which is characteristic of ‘speaking’. ‘Anyone who speaks gives an external sign of his will by means of an articulated sound’ (DM 1.2). In other words, speaking is always exterior, implicated in the use of signs. Therefore, really there is ‘no need for speaking when we pray’ (DM 1.2), for to God the abyss of human consciousness lies open (C 10.1.2). But why, then, does Christ teach the disciples to pray with specific words?, Adeodatus asks. The intention of that instruction, Augustine argues, is not to teach words, but rather the *things themselves* ‘by means of the words’ (DM 1.2). This raises the question, pursued in the remainder of the dialogue, concerning the relationship between words and the experience of the things themselves.

In Book I of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine provides a schematic analysis of the relationship between ‘signs’ and ‘things’, since ‘all teaching is either about things or signs’: *things*, strictly speaking, ‘are those that are not mentioned in order to signify something’, but rather are ends in themselves (DC 1.2.2). *Signs*, then, are those things ‘which are used in order to signify something else. Thus every sign is also a thing, because if it is not a thing at all then it is simply nothing. But not every single thing is also a sign’ (DC 1.2.2).

Words, then, are signs (DM 2.3),<sup>8</sup> but, Augustine asks, ‘can a sign be a sign if it doesn’t signify *anything*?’ Does the word ‘nothing’ signify *something*, and if not, can it be a sign? Here Augustine quickly gets to the matter of the relationship between *signa* (*verbum*) and *res*: quoting a

line of verse from Virgil, he requests of Adeodatus to indicate the *res* which each *verbum* signifies. He is first held up by ‘nothing’, then the preposition ‘from’, at which point Augustine complains that Adeodatus is merely explaining words by means of words: ‘you have explained signs by means of signs ... I would like you to *show* me the very things of which these words are the signs, if you can’ (DM 2.4). Adeodatus’s reply is pointed: first, we are in discussion, so the medium is precisely words; second, Augustine is also asking about things by means of words (DM 3.5). If he is going to require Adeodatus to point out the things without the use of signs, he requires the same of Augustine, viz., that he raise the question without using signs.

If we ask what the word ‘wall’ signifies, however, could not Adeodatus simply point with his finger toward the wall behind him? Would this not answer the question without using words? It would be non-verbal, but it would remain a sign; that is, words are only one kind of sign; gestures are another. People who are deaf, for instance, teach not by speaking but by gesturing, including non-corporeal things (DM 3.5). Therefore, to answer the question ‘what does “wall” signify?’ with a gesture is still to indicate the thing to which a (verbal) sign refers by means of a (non-verbal) sign. Augustine wants to know whether it is possible to exhibit the thing *without signifying* (DM 3.6). Adeodatus initially thinks that this is impossible: ‘I see nothing ... that can be shown without signs’ (DM 3.6). However, what if one should ask what ‘walking’ signifies, and another were simply to get up and pace the floor? ‘Wouldn’t you be using the thing itself to teach me, rather than using words or any other signs?’ Would this not be teaching by means of the thing itself? Yes, Augustine replies, but what if one did not know the *meaning* (definition) of the word (DM 3.6)? Then the simple demonstration would be insufficient. Thus Adeodatus’s initial conclusion seems revalidated: nothing is shown *without* signs (DM 3.6). However, still seeking the possibility of knowledge without signs (DM 4.7), Augustine introduces a further distinction.

## 2. *The (In)completion of the Sign*

Signs can be distinguished in two ways: (1) signs which signify other signs (taken up in DM 4.7–6.18) and (2) signs which indicate things (*res*) which are not themselves signs. The latter can be further subdivided between (a) those which are self-exhibiting, as ‘walking’ above (DM 10.29–32) and (b) signs which point to things, or what Peter King describes as ‘instrumentals’ (10.33–13.46). Spoken words are not the only signs; we must also include gestures, and written words (DM 4.7–8) – these make up category (1), signs which signify other signs rather than things. Most important for our concern, however, is his discussion of the second division of signs. Here Augustine considers

(a) signs which are self-signifying, like walking above, and (b) signs which function as ‘instrumentals’ or pointers.

At this juncture (the dialogue has become a monologue) Augustine comes to two, apparently contradictory conclusions: (A) ‘nothing is taught *without* signs’ (DM 10.31) because, as the dialogue up to this point has demonstrated, there is no access apart from signs. All speaking (and therefore teaching) is caught up within a system of signification. For instance, should someone ask me what ‘walking’ is, I could simply stand and pace back and forth. But only within a system of signifiers (not necessarily lingual) would the student learn that my activity is walking, and that I am not simply stalling to come up with an answer.<sup>9</sup>

But Augustine later affirms that (B) ‘nothing is learned *through* signs’ (DM 10.33). As he remarks, ‘When a sign is given to me, it can teach me nothing if it finds me ignorant of the thing of which it is the sign; but if I’m not ignorant, what do I learn through the sign?’ (10.33). The sign is not perceived *as* a sign until the thing which it signifies is known; or in other words, knowledge (experience) of the thing precedes knowledge of the sign (10.34). Thus, I learn nothing (new) from the sign (10.34). Words do not teach; they only ‘remind us to *look* for things’ (11.36), functioning as *pointers*. Augustine uses the example of reading the story in the book of Daniel of the three youths whose *sarabarae* were not burned in the fiery furnace. Here, the word ‘sarabarae’ can teach me nothing, unless I know the thing to which it refers. Should someone point out a visitor for me, and exclaim, ‘Look: *sarabarae!*’ I wouldn’t learn the thing I was ignorant of by the words that he has spoken, but by looking at it. This is the way it came to pass that I know and grasp what meaning the name has. When I learned the thing itself, I trusted my eyes, not the words of another – though perhaps I trusted the words to direct my attention’ (10.35). Indeed *sarabarae* is only a sound until it is constituted *as* a sign when that which is signified is known: ‘Before I made this discovery, the word was a mere sound to me; but I learned that it was a sign when I found out of what thing it is the sign – and, as I said, I learned this not by anything that signifies but by its appearance. Therefore, a sign is learned when the thing is known, rather than the thing being learned when the sign is given’ (10.33).

This is because the sign is *insufficient*, or *structurally inadequate*; in other words, the sign and the thing are radically incommensurate. This means that there is a structural incompleteness to the word, such that it must be accompanied by the experience of the thing itself, and sound is only constituted as a sign when the thing is known:

From words, then, we learn only words – rather, the sound and noise of the words. If things that aren’t signs can’t be words, then although I have already heard a word, I don’t know that it is a word until I know that it signifies. Therefore, the knowledge of words is *made complete* once the things are known (DM 11.36, emphasis added).

Here we are confronted with something of a restaging of the ‘Learner’s Paradox’ in the *Meno*: on the one hand, nothing is learned without signs; on the other hand, nothing is learned by means of signs. I would suggest that Augustine does not necessarily want one of these statements to trump the other; rather, their genius is found in holding them together in paradoxical tension.<sup>10</sup> What we learn from Augustine’s analysis is that words, in so far as they are signs, are both *necessary* (‘nothing is learned without signs’) and *insufficient* or *inadequate* (‘nothing is learned by means of signs’). Words cannot present things; when the word is given to me by another, the thing to which it refers is not made present to me.<sup>11</sup> However, the word *does* ‘point’ or ‘indicate’ the thing itself, directs me to experience it for myself. In this sense, we can say both that ‘we learn nothing without signs’ (since they point/indicate things) and that ‘we learn nothing with signs’ (since the signs themselves are not the thing and require experience of the thing itself).

So while signs are structurally inadequate, they are nevertheless able to ‘point’ to things, direct our attention and *refer* us to the thing itself. This movement of reference marks the *completion* of the sign; and yet, the word, when constituted as a sign, still retains a kind of *insufficiency* or *structural inadequacy* such that its very constitution is to refer beyond itself. Thus I suggest we refer to this as the *(in)completion* of the sign: the very structure of the sign is to point beyond itself, referring to that which exceeds it. As such, it is incomplete; however, its function is completed in so far as one is directed to then experience the thing itself. Structurally, the sign *refers* beyond itself, refers to that which transcends it, and therefore the sign can (or at least *should*) never constitute an end in itself. This notion of *reference* is important for Augustine’s understanding of language and in the following section, I will take up a closer analysis.

## II. USE, ENJOYMENT, AND REFERENCE: AUGUSTINE’S PHENOMENOLOGY OF IDOLATRY

Perhaps unexpectedly, it is Augustine’s discussion of *sin* which is instructional for understanding his theory of reference. Reference is that structure of the sign which indicates its incompleteness: the sign is only a sign in so far as it is *constituted as* a sign, and thereby understood to refer beyond itself to the thing. Thus words function properly when they point us beyond themselves. In an analogous way, for Augustine, the ‘world’ is to be constituted as a sign – or more particularly, a *sacramentum* – which points beyond itself; that is its proper use and function. In this section, I will briefly sketch Augustine’s phenomenological account of sin as a failure of reference and thus fundamentally ‘idolatry’.<sup>12</sup>

I will then turn to draw on this in a way which will illuminate his understanding of the proper function of signs.

### *1. Intentionality, Constitution and a Phenomenology of Sin*

For Augustine, there is an almost phenomenological sense in which we ‘constitute’ things *as* something. In particular, we constitute things either as something to be ‘used’ (*uti*) or something to be ‘enjoyed’ (*frui*): those things which are used are precisely a means to an end which is to be enjoyed. Thus he remarks that the subject plays a role in this constitution:

We ourselves, however, both enjoy and use things, and find ourselves in the middle, in a position to *choose* which to do. So if we wish to enjoy things that are meant to be used, we are impeding our own progress, and sometimes are also deflected from our course, because we are thereby delayed in obtaining what we should be enjoying, or turned back from it altogether, blocked by our love for inferior things (DC 1.3.3, emphasis added).

While a certain design inheres in things as the imprint of their Creator, it is fundamentally the human self which constitutes things *as* either things to be used or enjoyed, ultimately by what we choose to *love*, since enjoyment ‘consists in clinging to something lovingly for its own sake’ (DC 1.4.4). Thus, what we enjoy for its own sake, as an end in itself, is loved. However, there is a ‘right order of love’ (DC 1.27.28) which ought to be observed: to enjoy things which ought to be used is to contravene this order. What, then, is to be enjoyed? ‘The things therefore that are to be enjoyed are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in fact the Trinity, one supreme thing, and one which is shared in common by all who enjoy it’ (DC 1.5.5). To enjoy ‘the world’, then, represents a *misuse* or ‘abuse’ (DC 1.4.4), a substituting of the creature for the Creator (DC 1.12.12).

By describing this misuse as a substitution of the creature for the Creator, Augustine evokes a metaphor which sees enjoying the world as a kind of intentional *idolatry* (cf. Romans 1:18–20). ‘Let it be clearly understood’, Augustine earlier remarked, ‘that there could have been no error in religion had not the soul worshipped in place of its God either a soul or a body or some phantasm of its own’ (VR 10.18). The ‘world’, that which is to be used, is intended to ‘refer’ (DC 1.4.4) or point the soul to that which is to be enjoyed, God. Thus, the world is to be constituted as a sign (both *signum* and *sacramentum*) which points to the Creator as the origin of life and meaning for the self. Rather than becoming absorbed in the world and its pleasures (cf. C. 10.27.38–10.36.59), the self is to constitute the world as a sign:

When something that is loved, after all, is available to you, delight is also bound to accompany it; but if you *pass through this and refer it* to that end where you are to

remain permanently, you are really using it, and are said by a figure of speech, and not in the proper sense of the word, to enjoy it. If, however, you cling to it and remain fixed in it, placing in it the end of all your joys, then you can be said really and truly to enjoy it. But this should not be done except with that Divine Trinity (DC 1.33.37, emphasis added).

The world, then, functioning as a sign, is to be constituted as an *icon* which deflects the intentional aim or ‘love’ of the self to the Creator as that which is to be enjoyed. The fallen or sinful self, by enjoying the world rather than using it, constitutes the world as an *idol* which ‘absorbs’ its love and concern, going against the ‘right *order* of love’. The first, authentic love is *caritas*; the second, idolatrous, inauthentic love is described as both *cupiditas* and *concupiscentia*:

What I mean by *charity* or love is any urge of the spirit to find joy in God for his own sake, and in oneself and one’s neighbor for God’s sake; by *cupidity* or greed [is intended] any impulse of the spirit to find joy in oneself and one’s neighbour, and in any kind of bodily thing at all, not for God’s sake (DC 3.10.16).

It is ‘not that the creature is not to be loved’, Augustine cautions, ‘but if that love is related to the Creator it will no longer be covetousness but charity. It is only covetousness when the creature is loved on its own account. In this case it does not help you in your use of it, but corrupts you in your enjoyment of it.’<sup>13</sup> To love the world is to plunge into idolatry, enjoying the world rather than using it; in contrast, to use the world as something which points beyond itself to the origin of meaning and the end of happiness, is at the same time to constitute the world as an icon which refers the intentional aim to the Creator.

## 2. *Idols, Icons, and the Incarnation*

We see, then, that the world or thing can be constituted as either an ‘idol’, in which the intentional aim (love) is absorbed and the world is enjoyed as an end in itself, substituting for God; or, the world can be constituted as an ‘icon’ which refers beyond itself, pointing to that which is transcendent and inviting one to complete the sign with the experience of the thing itself (God). The conceptual idol represents a kind of semiotic sin, a failure of reference which is a failure to recognize the (in)completion of the sign, but rather treats it as an end in itself. On the other hand, an icon, as a sign, shares the same structure of incompleteness described above; and this structural incompleteness is precisely that which marks the structure of reference. It is precisely when the sign (world or word) is taken to be complete in and of itself that we fall into idolatry, since we fail to be referred beyond it. The idol represents the forgetting of transcendence, the reduction to immanence, and the denial of alterity; the icon represents respect for transcendence, the rapture of immanence, and reference to an alterity.

And if things can be so constituted, then *words*, as ‘things’ (DC 1.2.2), can also be constituted and employed as either idols or icons. Words, when constituted as iconic signs, are thus understood as structurally incomplete and therefore referring beyond themselves. Thus, they function as ‘pointers’ to transcendence from a sphere of immanence. It is in this sense, then, that Augustine unpacks his *incarnational* understanding of language. The Incarnation is precisely an immanent sign of transcendence – God appearing in the flesh. Thus it is a structure of both presence and absence: present in the flesh, and yet referring beyond, the Incarnation – as the *signum exemplum* – retains the structural incompleteness of the sign which is constitutive of language, for to constitute the God-man as only man is to idolize the body, failing to constitute it as a manifestation of the divine. Divinity, while it cannot be reduced to this body, is nevertheless in-fleshed in it and thus signalling beyond itself. This is why the God-man is a *mediator* between divinity and humanity, finitude and the Infinite. This is also why, for Augustine, all signs function as mediators: they are precisely that which both appear and at the same time maintain that which they refer to in their transcendence. By referring or pointing to that which is other than itself, signs make knowledge of transcendence possible.

Thus, when unpacking the meaning of John 1:1 for his congregation, Augustine the *predicator* draws on an analysis of the operation of language in order to illuminate the Johannine notion of ‘the Word’:

I’m driving at something about the Word; and perhaps a human word can do something similar. Although it’s no match at all, very very different, in no way comparable, still it can suggest to you a certain similarity. Here you are then, here’s the word which I now am speaking to you; I had it first in my mind. It went out to you, and didn’t go away from me. It began to be in you, because it wasn’t in you before. It stayed with me, when it went out to you. So just as my word was presented to your perception, and didn’t depart from my mind, so that Word was presented to our perception, and didn’t depart from his Father. My word was with me, and went out into the sound of my voice; the Word of God was with the Father, and went out into the flesh (Sermon 119.7).

Note the multi-levelled consideration of dis/analogy at work here: in order to show the way in which God is manifest in the Incarnation, which itself functions on the basis of analogy or ‘participation’,<sup>14</sup> Augustine employs the second analogy of language. And just as there is a radical incommensurability between the finite and the Infinite (between God’s transcendence and our ‘perception’) – a difference ‘bridged’ in the Incarnation – so it is the same principle that makes the second analogy (with language) possible. Though ‘the Word’ and human words are ‘very very different, in no way comparable’, nevertheless the analogy *is* possible. It is possible to *say something*. The difference is not *so* different that nothing can be said. Thus Augustine’s account here would be close to what Anthony Godzieba describes as a classically ‘dialectical’

understanding of the character of God: ‘transcendent yet immanent, mysterious yet available, absent yet present’.<sup>15</sup> Which is also why Augustine’s account of how (not) to speak of God is contrary to nominalism whose insistence upon God’s utter transcendence puts God ‘beyond reach’ and thus ‘extrinsic to human experience’.<sup>16</sup>

Consider the ‘logic’ of incarnation which Augustine unpacks here in Sermon 119: in my speaking to you,<sup>17</sup> a ‘word’ is presented in the sound of the *verbum* I utter. The original thought (‘word’) as present in my mind is inaccessible to you, *transcendent vis-à-vis* your consciousness; or, in other words, if we could push a different metaphor, the thought was *absent* from you. However, when I express this thought in an articulated sound, the word (thought) becomes *present* to you, though not in its fullness, or not in a manner identical to that in which it resided ‘in me’. Furthermore, in its *exitus* – its ‘going out’ – it did not depart from me; in being made present to you, it did not become absent from me. ‘It has reached you,’ he tells his congregation, ‘and has not been separated from me. Before I spoke, I had it, and you did not have it; I have spoken, and you have begun to have it, and I have lost nothing. Why, isn’t my word marvellous! So what must the Word of God be?’ (Sermon 120.3)

But if the logic of incarnation is fundamentally a means of dealing with incommensurability, where is the incommensurability in this analogy? It is found in the relation between the minds of the speaker and listener. In a way not unlike Husserl’s account of one’s consciousness being essentially inaccessible to another, for Augustine my ‘thoughts’ are absent to the other, just as the other’s thoughts are absent from me. The other’s thoughts (consciousness) cannot be made present to me, nor can my thoughts be experienced by the other. But this is precisely where Augustine’s incarnational account of language indicates the possibility of overcoming this incommensurability without erasing it. For in my words, I am able to bridge this chasm and make ‘present’ (in a weaker sense of ‘appresentation’) my thoughts to another in a way which makes connection possible, but at the same time preserves the difference.

It is in this way that language functions like the Incarnation of the God-man: when the ‘Word became flesh’ (Jn 1:14), the transcendent God descended into the realm of immanence (finitude), but without thereby denying or giving up his transcendence. Here we see a consistent theme of ‘descent’ or even *con*-descent in Augustine’s incarnational reflections. God’s transcendence is inaccessible to us, but the way in which this is remedied is precisely by God’s humiliation and descent to the order of the (fallen) creature. It is God who moves towards finitude, rather than lifting up (as an operation of *Aufhebung*) the finite. David Meconi argues that this is one of the moments where Augustine departs from the Platonism of Plotinus by thinking of ‘participation’ as a *downward* movement, which is also precisely why, when commenting on the

'books of the Platonists' and the thought of the Incarnation, he emphasizes: 'that these books do not have' (C 7.9.14). Why is the thought of incarnation absent from Platonism? Because to think its possibility, one would have to reverse the movement of Platonic 'participation', imagining a *descent* of the eternal to the temporal, of the intelligible to the sensible.<sup>18</sup> 'With this new ability to imagine an underived, immutable essence participating in the imperfect, mutable contingents of this fallen world,' Meconi comments, 'Augustine is now able to speak of the perfect's participating in the imperfect: that-which-is taking part in that which-is-not.'<sup>19</sup> Such a downward movement of the divine is able to bridge the chasm between humanity and God in the paradox of Christ – and 'no Platonist could ever hold that the Forms actually condescend to participate in this world of mutable particulars, an insight which prepares the way for Augustine's full acceptance of Christ's dual nature'.<sup>20</sup> Thus the movement which grapples with the 'chasm' or incommensurability is a downward movement on the part of the transcendent, a condescension on the part of the divine to the strictures of finitude: 'The food which I was too weak to accept he mingled with flesh, in that "The Word was made flesh", so that our infant condition might come to such milk from your wisdom by which you created all things' (C 7.18.24). The result of this condescension is that we see 'divinity become weak by his sharing in our "coat of skin"' (C 7.18.24), and yet it remains *divinity* that we 'see'.

It seems to me that this notion of 'condescension' or downward participation also marks a fundamental difference between Jean-Luc Marion<sup>21</sup> and Augustine: for Marion, in conceptual determinations of God in which God must appear within the horizons of the finite ego, God (the Infinite) is reduced to the concept (the finite) – which is precisely the problem, on his account, since the Infinite God would thus be reduced to the measure of the finite constituting ego, undoing God's transcendence. I am not so sure that this is a 'problem' for God, however, and it is precisely Augustine's incarnational account which suggests this. What I am suggesting, following Augustine, is that God plays the game by these rules – which ultimately, as Creator of finitude,<sup>22</sup> he is responsible for. That is to say, God's incarnational appearance is precisely a condescension to the conditions of finite, created perceivers. How could God appear otherwise? The Incarnation signals a connection with transcendence that does not violate or reduce such transcendence, but neither does it leave it in a realm of utter alterity without appearance.<sup>23</sup>

And the sign, as incarnational, is able to refer to transcendence in a fundamentally *nonviolent* manner. For Levinas and Marion, the problem with phenomenological conceptualization is that it reduces the other to the same, it effects a violation of the other, a fundamental *violence*: it reduces transcendence to immanence. By thinking of signs as instances of incarnation, Augustine is able to understand language *not* as

essentially violent, but rather as that which grants access to things, but at the same time leaves them in their transcendence. Here we find the analogy with the Incarnation of God in Christ: the God-man, though present in the flesh (sphere of immanence) did not cease to be God (sphere of transcendence). The incarnation of transcendence ‘in flesh’ does not undo its transcendence; the *signum* does not deny the *mysterium*, but rather points to it. This is seen clearly in *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.12.13:

How did she [wisdom] come, if not by the Word becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us? It is something like when we talk; in order for what we have in mind to reach the minds of our hearers through their ears of flesh, the word which we have in our thoughts becomes a sound, and is called speech. *And yet* this does *not* mean that our thought is turned into that sound, but while remaining undiminished in itself, it takes on the form of a spoken utterance by which to insert itself into their ears, without bearing the stigma of any change in itself.

The Word, in appearing in flesh, is not reduced to corporeal reality, and yet it is able *to appear*. In the word, the referent is not reduced to the sign, but nevertheless the thing is indicated by the sign. We learn nothing by means of signs; we learn nothing without signs.

### III. HOW (NOT) TO SPEAK OF GOD: THE ICON OF PRAISE

What would this incarnational account of language entail, then, with respect to speaking of God – transcendence *par excellence*? How does an incarnational account of language do justice to the alterity of God? For as Augustine reminds his congregation, God is the very paradigm of alterity which resists comprehension and conceptualization:

But you are quite unable to imagine or think of such a thing. And such ignorance is more religious and devout than any presumption of knowledge. After all, we are talking about God. It says, *and the Word was God* (Jn 1:1). We are talking about God; so why be surprised if you cannot grasp it? I mean, if you can grasp it, it isn't God. Let us rather make a devout confession of ignorance, instead of a brash profession of knowledge. Certainly it is great bliss to have a little touch or taste of God with the mind; but to completely grasp him, to comprehend him, is altogether impossible (Sermon 117.5).

Nevertheless, as he emphasizes, God ‘has accepted the homage of human voices’ (DC 1.6.6). But for Augustine, this ‘praising him with human words’ is an order of discourse which is more *affective* than cognitive. ‘That in fact is what is meant by calling him God’, he remarks. ‘Not, of course, that with the sound made by these two syllables [*Deus*] any knowledge of him is achieved; but still, all those who know Latin are moved, when this sound reaches their ears, to reflecting upon some most exalted and immortal nature’ (DC 1.6.6, trans. modified). The point of speaking is not for the provision of cognitive data, but to

move the listener to reflection and experience of the thing itself, viz., an experience of God.

When it is a matter of speaking well of God, we are again confronted by this fundamental challenge: for ‘what, after all, could be greater than God himself? Does that mean that we cannot learn about him?’ (DC 4.19.38). As he indicated earlier (DC 1.6.6), the answer in the face of this challenge is not *silence* but *praise*:

But when God is being praised [*laudatur*], either in himself or in his works, what a vast prospect of beautiful and glowing language will occur to the speaker, in order to praise as best he can the one whom nobody can praise as befits him, [but whom] nobody fails to praise somehow or other [*qui potest quantum potest laudare, quem nemo conuenienter laudat, nemo quomodocumque non laudat*] (DC 4.19.38, trans. modified)!

Thus, it is possible to speak about God, but in the mode of *praise*, as a non-objectifying, non-positivistic mode of conceptualization which does not reduce God to a concept, but rather employs language in such a way that respects God’s transcendence and *refers* the listener to experience the thing itself. Praise capitalizes on the (in)completion of the sign, such that the language of the preacher (*predicator*!) functions in a way to direct the listener beyond the words offered to an experience of the thing itself. The words offered by the *predicator* are no longer representations or predications, but rather iconic pointers which deflect the gaze beyond themselves. But nevertheless, the ‘referent’ (in this case God) does ‘appear’, in a sense, in the saying (not in *what* is said but *how* it is said). In this way Augustine provides an account of language – and theological method – which avoids the violence of positivist kataphatics and the silence of apophatics, charting a ‘third’ way which enables one to speak.

What I want to suggest, with (but perhaps beyond) Augustine, is that *praise* constitutes a mode of non-objectifying, non-predicative discourse about that which is transcendent, or at least incommensurate with the order of predication. In other words, it offers a way of speaking of the incommensurable, rather than consigning us to silence. It provides a way to avoid (not) speaking, for in praise we stave off both the violence of predication and the silence of apophatics. This is why I think an Augustinian account is fundamentally *enabling* in the face of both the ‘rationalizing tendency of modernity and ontotheology’ and also the ‘*no, not, never*’ of ‘dogmatic postmodern philosophy of religion’.<sup>24</sup> However, to assert that ‘praise’ is a non-objectifying mode of speaking is not without challenge; in order to defend it, I will need to situate this claim within the context of Derrida’s critique of ‘praise’ and Marion’s response – and then attempt to inhabit a space between them.

### 1. *Praise as Predication: Derrida's Critique*

While I have located the laudatory strategy of 'praise' (*laudare*) in Augustine, it can be found both earlier and later. The notion was brought into contemporary discussions by Marion's account of *hymnein* in the work of Dionysius, which he suggests constitutes a non-objectifying saying which is no longer 'speaking' in a predicative sense – which in fact tends toward 'prayer' (*euche*).<sup>25</sup> In *God Without Being*, Marion emphasizes that Dionysius's 'naming' of God as first 'Good' is not meant to constitute *the* 'proper name' of God; rather, 'in the apprehension of goodness the dimension is cleared where the very possibility of a categorical statement concerning God ceases to be valid, and where the reversal of denomination<sup>26</sup> into praise becomes inevitable'.<sup>27</sup> It is praise which displaces conceptual idols, a praise that 'feeds on the impossibility or, better, the impropriety of the category' (GWB 76). Praise is otherwise than predication because it does not attempt to capture God in the idol of conceptual determination, but rather functions as an iconic reference. Predication eliminates distance/difference, whereas praise opens that space. 'In other terms,' Thomas Carlson comments, 'one might say that the difference between praise and predication in Marion marks a distinction – much like Levinas's between the saying and the said – between a pure signifying or endless reference, on the one hand, and a determinate meaning or referent on the other. The naming of God in praise would signify endlessly toward God without securing (predicatively) any final meaning for God.'<sup>28</sup> Therefore, with respect to God, 'predication must yield to praise' (GWB 106), for 'only then can discourse be reborn' (GWB 107).<sup>29</sup>

But if praise still says something *about* God, though not conceptually or ontotheologically, does it not therefore remain predicative (and therefore violent)? Does not praise continue to *determine* God, even if not conceptually? And does not this determination still constitute a kind of violence, a reduction of God to the determination of the one who praises? These are the questions posed to Marion by Derrida, who argues that 'the encomium [praise], although it is not a simple attributive speech, nevertheless preserves an irreducible relationship to the attribution. No doubt, as Urs von Balthasar rightly says, "Where God and the divine are concerned, the word *hymnein* almost replaces the word 'to say'." Almost, in fact, but not entirely' (HAS 111). Praise 'almost' replaces speaking, but in so far as in praise one still qualifies God and thus determines the other, praise remains within the horizon of attribution, even if it has stepped outside of the horizon of conceptual (metaphysical) determination. In so far as praise still says something *about* the divine, it continues to objectify its referent in the very *naming* (HAS 111).

For if the encomium or the celebration of God indeed does not have the same rule of predication as every other proposition, even if the 'truth' to which it lays claim is the higher truth of a hyperessentially, it celebrates and names what 'is' such as it

'is', beyond Being. Even if it is not a predicative affirmation of the current type, the encomium preserves the style and the structure of a predicative affirmation. It says something about someone. [Praise] entails a predicative aim, however foreign it may be to 'normal' ontological predication (HAS 137).

Predication, Derrida argues, has a certain 'style' and 'structure', both of which are retained in the economy (is it?) of encomium. However, what exactly this 'structure' is, Derrida does not specify, except to suggest that every speaking *about* someone is predicative (HAS 137). (We will need to interrogate this thesis momentarily, unpacking the logic of predication or determination.) Given this link between praise and predication (as opposed to their distinction emphasized by Marion), Derrida suggests that only *prayer* proceeds non-predicatively, and thus he distinguishes between prayer and praise (HAS 136 n16). For while praise still says something *about* someone, '[t]his is not the case of the prayer that apostrophizes, addresses itself to the other and remains, in this pure [!] movement, absolutely pre-predicative' (HAS 137). 'Pure' prayer is undetermined because it does not speak *about*, but speaks *to*; rather than predication, it is an address (HAS 110).

But does not the address require an addressee? While the missive may be lost in the postal system,<sup>30</sup> does not even the mode of address require, at the very least, an intentional aim? Or, to repeat a Husserlian maxim differently: is not every address an address *to*, even if the addressee is indeterminate? While we might say, as Derrida would like, that the addressee is undetermined, is not the mode of address still a form of intentionality? Prayer, then, does not reverse the intentional direction, but rather maintains the priority of the subject. In Derrida's 'pure prayer' we still see a subject addressing the Other (what he does not know), rather than an Other addressing me. Would that not mean that prayer, as praise, also retains the structure of attribution? If so, then the question is whether there can be a mode of determination or attribution which is non-violent and non-objectifying; in other words, we will need to question whether determination *per se* is inherently violent.

Further, we must question whether prayer can be 'pure' (HAS 110, 137). Does this not indicate in Derrida a latent desire for purity akin to his desire for a 'religion without religion', a form without content, a pure structure? And is that not strictly impossible, from a deconstructive standpoint? Isn't that asking for a little too much, getting a little greedy with one's prayers? Having taken up a critique of this thematics of purity elsewhere, I will not repeat it here.<sup>31</sup> 'If prayer were absolutely pure appeal,' Carlson comments, 'it could "occur" only once; it would prove singular, unique – to the point of resisting all repetition, which would reduce the singularity of the appeal to the iterability of a name, a common name, or even a concept, transmissible by tradition.'<sup>32</sup> – And more than this: for could it even be said *once*? Wouldn't its very articulation in language – its being said – betray its singularity, placing it within the

traffic of a necessarily public language that is not singular but general? Its expression in language, which is common and public, would always already disrupt the singularity of the prayer, with the result that the only prayer that would be 'pure' would be one 'unsaid'.<sup>33</sup> In any case, if such a pure prayer is impossible, what would this mean for 'impure' prayer? Unfortunately, Derrida does not specify just what it would be which would taint prayer. Would an unpure prayer be a prayer which is *determined* in some way, addressed to someone *in particular*? It seems that this is Derrida's intention (HAS 110); but this raises another concern: if 'pure' (i.e., purely formal) prayer is impossible (just as a purely formal religion is impossible),<sup>34</sup> then does that mean that all prayer is also predicative and objectifying, insofar as it is determined? If that were the case, then it would seem that indeed there would be no way to speak of transcendence; we would be consigned to silence, for any speaking would always already be a form of predication, and hence objectification, and hence violence. For if even prayer is predicative, what more (or less) could be said?

## 2. *Praising Other-wise than Predication: Marion's Response*

But what are we to make of Derrida's logic here, which makes praise and determined prayer simply another mode of predication and hence violence? Does the first (determination) entail the second (objectification, violence)? The question we must address at this point is whether all 'determination' is 'predicative'. Is all saying 'about' a form of predication? What exactly do we (and Derrida) mean by predication? The 'style' and 'structure' of predication for Derrida seems to be simply 'saying something about someone' (HAS 137) such that every description would constitute a determination. But is this the case? And further, is every 'determination' necessarily an instance of 'objectification'?

Marion takes up the gauntlet thrown down by Derrida in his most recent piece, 'In the Name'. Here, Marion sets out to demonstrate that praise is not another subtle form of predication or attribution. Rather, 'praise' constitutes a 'third way' which steps outside of the binary logic of affirmation (kataphasis) and negation (apophasis), and thus also steps outside of the order of predication.

The third way is played out beyond the oppositions between affirmation and negation, synthesis and separation, in short, the true and the false. Strictly speaking, if thesis and negation have it in common to speak the truth (and spurn the false), the way which transcends them should also transcend the true and the false. The third way would transgress nothing less than the two truth values, between which the entire logic of metaphysics is carried out. If the third way is no longer about saying the true or the false, if it is precisely a matter of its not saying them, one can no longer claim [as Derrida does] that it means to affirm a predicate of a subject, not even beneath the absurd dissimulation of a negation, nor that it has the least bit of interest in doing so. The third way does not hide an affirmation beneath a negation.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than a procedure of ‘naming’ (*nom-ing*), it is a matter of ‘denominating’ God, a mode of speaking ‘which denies all relevance to predication’.<sup>36</sup> It is not a new language, nor a new lexicon, but rather a new ‘pragmatic’ *function* of language which simply ‘refers’ to the ‘unattainable yet inescapable interlocutor beyond every name and every denegation of names’. Constituting a reference without sense, the denomination is left incomplete, without end, so that denomination is a ‘referring to Him who is no longer touched by nomination’.<sup>37</sup> I have tried to locate a similar account of iconic reference in Augustine (see II above): for Augustine, the sign is to function as a pointer which refers us beyond itself to that which exceeds it. In ‘praise’, we find a saying which does not grasp or encompass the transcendent, but rather refers to it – determinately, yes, but not definitively (if I could be permitted that distinction). In other words, praise is quasi-predicative and quasi-determinative: it says something about someone, but without prescription or de-finition. In ‘praise’, I do not claim to grasp God in a concept, but rather to ascribe beauty, majesty, justice to him in words that are insufficient but necessary.

In order to reply to Derrida’s criticism, we need to unpack the logics of predication and objectification. What constitutes the ‘violence’ of predication is not mere determination, but rather the *how* of speaking wherein a final meaning is secured and defined – where reference is halted. It seems to me that Levinas’s discussion here is paradigmatic: the ethical problem with ‘theory’, or simply ‘knowledge’, in the Western tradition (or at least in modernity),<sup>38</sup> is that it always already designates *comprehension*, such that the relation between knower and known is one of totalization wherein the ‘object’, as objectified, is deprived of its alterity.<sup>39</sup> However, ‘this mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, [...] a concept’ (TI 42). As such, knowing, as comprehending, becomes a matter of *grasping*: ‘To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity’ (TI 44). And it is this denial of alterity *in the concept* which produces domination, tyranny, violence (TI 46–47).

But Levinas himself suggests a *different* knowing, a non-objectifying, non-violent ‘relation’ with the other which is nevertheless a contact. For ‘knowledge’ could also designate ‘a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the unknown being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation’ (TI 42). Here we would have a knowledge *which is not comprehension* – the possibility of a knowing which does not attempt to encompass and grasp. And this is precisely the order of ‘knowing’ we find in Augustine’s laudatory strategy of praise, which denies any ability to grasp God, but does not deny that we might ‘touch’ him (Sermon 117.3). Thus, we find the possibility of a speaking (about God – or any

incommensurate) which is a saying of something about someone, but nevertheless is not conceptual, and therefore not objectifying, and therefore not violent. Indeed, must not *Totality and Infinity* itself be an example of just such a speaking?

It would seem, then, that we can subvert Derrida's thesis regarding praise as predication in one of two ways: either (1) by denying that all forms of 'saying something about someone' are forms of predication, or (2) by denying that all forms of predication are objectifying and violent. My strategy would be the second: I would agree with Derrida that every 'saying something about someone' is predicative *in a sense* and therefore constitutes a 'determination' – 'formally' or 'structurally' we might say. However, not every predication or determination is necessarily an 'objectification'. And in so far as the violence of the concept is precisely the violence of objectifying that which is transcendent or incommensurate by means of conceptual description, our (ethical/methodological) concern is really with objectification and not predication *per se*. 'Violent' or 'objectifying' predication is the halting of reference, the security of a meaning, and the adequation of the concept and object. But praise is characterized by *incompletion*, reference without end, and a fundamental *inadequation*. The intentional aim is not halted in praise, but only deflected, without consummation or completion. *And yet*, one is able to speak of transcendence, since the transcendent God 'has accepted the homage of human voices, and has wished us to rejoice in praising him with our words' (DC 1.6.6). But praise in no wise claims to comprehend such transcendence, which is why Augustine consistently distinguishes between 'knowledge' and 'comprehension'.<sup>40</sup>

In the laudatory strategy of praise, one speaks well of God, with/out determination, such that the one who praises can still ask: 'What do I love when I love my God' (C 10.7.11; cf. 10.6.8)? That is why praise does not deny undecidability, but rather recognizes such as the condition of possibility for praise – which is, in the end, an operation of faith.<sup>41</sup>

#### Notes

1 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity [De Doctrina Christiana]*, 1.6.6. Trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., The Works of Saint Augustine I/11 (New York: New City Press, 1996). Henceforth abbreviated in the text as DC.

2 Jacques Derrida, 'How To Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. Ken Frieden in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 85. Henceforth abbreviated in the text as HAS.

3 Note that for Augustine, as for Husserl (and unlike Levinas), transcendence is characteristic of all things, though certain 'things' (God, the other person) are uniquely transcendent, in so far as theirs is an 'essential' transcendence which can never be made present, unlike, for instance, the back of the house, which is only 'accidentally' transcendent (see below, § I).

4 I have addressed the second challenge in my 'How (Not) To Tell a Secret: Interiority and the Strategy of "Confession"', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* [forthcoming].

5 *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.1.1, 1.4.4. Henceforth abbreviated in the text as C.

6 'The limitations of human language', James O'Donnell notes, 'are displayed by the paradoxes in which the divine nature compels Augustine to speak. [...] Human words used by humans fail in the presence of the divine, and whatever can be said is only approximation, and most human discourse fails to say anything of God at all, despite endless loquacious efforts.' O'Donnell, 'Augustine's Idea of God', *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), p. 26.

7 *De Magistro* 1.1. I will employ the translation in *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995). Henceforth abbreviated in the text as DM.

8 Strictly speaking, spoken words are signs of things, and written words are signs of signs. Cf. Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, I.i. While gestures are also signs, words are the privileged example in Augustine.

9 With regard to this point, I would suggest that Derrida's 'il n'y a pas de hors texte' is a fine French translation of what Augustine is describing in Latin.

10 I am not so interested in *solving* the paradox as *inhabiting* it and experiencing its tension. Jason Drucker, in 'Teaching as Pointing in "The Teacher"', *Augustinian Studies* 28 (1997), pp. 101–32, attempts to alleviate the paradox by making a distinction between 'teaching' and 'learning'. On this account, the sign does not 'teach' me anything [new], but I can nevertheless 'learn' from it [in so far as it points me to the thing itself]. While I will come to a similar systematic conclusion, I do not see the necessity for making this distinction (which does not seem operative in the text itself).

11 In terms of Husserl's phenomenology, the thing is not 'presented' but rather 'appresented'.

12 I have developed this in more detail in my 'Confessions of an Existentialist: Reading Augustine After Heidegger', *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* [forthcoming].

13 *De Trinitate* 9.13, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., *The Works of St Augustine I/5* (New York: New City Press, 1991).

14 What I mean by this is that, in the Incarnation, God himself employs analogy, makes himself known 'according to the mode of the perceiver', in terms that finite humanity can understand (and in this thought I follow both Aquinas and Kierkegaard). God exploits the 'likeness' in the human being in order to make himself known in the Incarnation.

15 Anthony J. Godzieba, 'Ontotheology to Excess: Imagining God Without Being', *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), p. 3.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

17 I have retained the use of the second person here since it is employed by Augustine in the Sermon itself.

18 It seems to me that currents in British theological discourse that want to appropriate this theme of Platonic 'participation' as central to an Incarnational theology (e.g., Milbank, Ward, Pickstock) fail to appreciate that Augustine's incarnational insight is his most *un*Platonic moment. For a succinct discussion, see their 'Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy', the Introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (New York: Routledge, 1999), esp. pp. 3–4. I will take up this discussion further elsewhere.

19 David Vincent Meconi, S.J., 'The Incarnation and the Role of Participation in St Augustine's *Confessions*', *Augustinian Studies* 29 (1998), p. 68.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

21 If Marion is so close to Levinas, and Levinas is confessedly Platonist, what does this say about Marion's 'Platonism'?

22 Here I would differ from Meconi, or at least Meconi's Augustine: for me, it is not just 'fallen' humanity, but humanity as such – humanity as created and finite – which is incommensurate with the transcendence of God. That 'no one can see God' is not a postlapsarian condition, but constitutive of finitude. And in so far as finitude is inherent in a good creation, the finite conditions of knowing are an aspect of even a 'good' creation. (For a more sustained reflection on finitude as a creational good, see my *The Fall to Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], esp. chapters 5 and 6.)

23 Space does not here permit consideration of the same incarnational logic in *De Trinitate* 15.8–11. A discussion will appear elsewhere.

24 Godzieba, 'Ontotheology to Excess', p. 18.

25 First in *L'Idole et la distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977), pp. 249ff.

26 In *God Without Being*, 'denomination' remains on the side of predication, naming (*nom*-ing) as defining; in the later 'In the Name', however, 'de-nomination' is praise.

27 Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 76. Henceforth abbreviated in the text as *GWB*.

28 Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 201.

29 However, Marion still privileges silence in this context – not the silence of agnosticism (which is yet another idolatry [GWB 107]), of course, but an ‘agapic’ silence, a silence which is silent ‘out of respect’ (107). But does silence respect such transcendence? Is not such a silence still an inversion of predication, and thus maintaining its violence as a horizon?

30 One would need here to consider the errancy (*destinerrance*) of the postal system of language, as Derrida does in *The Post Card*. I have done so in ‘How To Avoid Not Speaking: Attestations’, in *Knowing Other-wise: Philosophy on the Threshold of Spirituality*, ed. James H. Olthuis (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp. 218–28. The ‘errancy’ in this case, however, is due to the postal system, not a lack of determination regarding the address(ee); in other words, errancy is not a matter of intention, but fulfilment.

31 See my ‘Determined Violence: Derrida’s Structural Religion’, *Journal of Religion* 78 (1998), pp. 197–212; and *Fall to Interpretation*, ch. 4.

32 Carlson, *Indiscretion*, p. 219.

33 Derrida, of course, does not have recourse to the ‘closed chambers’ of prayer discussed by Augustine (DM 1.2), since for Derrida there is no interior word which escapes the chain of signification or language. Perhaps the only other possibility for a ‘pure’ prayer would be instances of *glossolalia* – speaking in tongues – a mode of speech which precisely cannot be repeated. For relevant considerations, see Michel de Certeau, ‘Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias’, *Representations* 56 (1996), pp. 29–46; and Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 111–12.

34 See my ‘Determined Violence’, pp. 210–12.

35 Marion, ‘In the Name: How To Avoid Speaking of Negative Theology’, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), section II.

36 *Ibid.* In a response to Marion’s presentation of this paper, Derrida lauded this neologism: ‘denomination works wonderful [*sic*] in French, meaning at the same time to name and unname.’

37 *Ibid.*

38 I think Levinas misses this distinction insofar as he fails to appreciate the medieval attentiveness to the inadequacy of concepts and knowledge itself. For Augustine and Aquinas, ‘to know’ does not necessarily mean ‘to comprehend’.

39 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 42. Henceforth abbreviated in the text as TI. I have discussed this theme further in ‘Alterity, Transcendence, and the Violence of the Concept’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (1998), pp. 369–81.

40 See, for instance, Letter 147, a key text for Aquinas in his discussion of comprehension (*ST Ia*. 12.7).

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