

Augustine on Language¹

I. – INTRODUCTION : AUGUSTINIAN DIFFIDENCE

Although Augustine wrote quite frequently on language, scholars have tended to use his writings on the subject as the means to reconstruct no-longer-extant Stoic theories of grammar². I do not wish to take issue with that endeavor ; rather, I will highlight the extent to which Augustine integrated his theory of language with his epistemological and ontological thought. Augustine considered words, the basic components of human language, to be objects of sense-perception, and as such they have a specific place in Augustinian metaphysics, and it is a lowly one. By following this simple suggestion to its conclusion--and a brief map to my argument follows--we can see that Augustine's frequent expressions of authorial diffidence are not merely rhetorical tropes but also statements of philosophical principle, and that when he urges that he has said nothing meaningful in words about God, he means it.

In his early treatise on language, the *de magistro*, Augustine set forth a theory of language based on signs, and he criticized language as a means for teaching on the basis of its ambiguity. The linguistics adopted in that dialogue are directly relevant to the methods of reading used in the *de civitate dei*. My conviction on this issue arises from a series of interconnected observations. Augustine did not develop a critical theory in the modern sense; rather, his

1. I would like to thank Prof. Sabine MacCormack of the University of Michigan for reading several drafts of this paper. Prof. Ann Hanson, also of the University of Michigan, read a final draft on short notice and saved me from several errors. Prof. James O'Donnell's new commentary on the *Confessions* (Oxford, 1992) arrived after this paper had been completed, and I was able to consult it only briefly in making revisions. He does not comment extensively on the issues raised in this essay.

2. See B. DARRELL JACKSON, «The theory of signs in St. Augustine's *de doctrina Christiana*», *REAug* 15 (1969) 9-49, and R. MARKUS, «St. Augustine on Signs», *Phronesis* 2 (1957) 60-83.

comments on reading in the *de civitate dei* concentrate on language as a carrier of meaning, as a system of signification, very much in harmony with the thought of the early dialogue. According to Augustine's theory, a text is simply the written representation of speech, and a word, whether written or spoken, merely signifies something else, something real. Furthermore, the reality which lies behind the signs, whether the object of sense-perception or intellection, is alone the proper subject of true knowledge³.

To understand a text, therefore, one had to know the objects of which the words within the text were the signs ; when an author writes about his own thoughts, it is necessary to know the intent of the author⁴. Augustine does allow for authors who deliberately introduce complexity into their writing⁵ ; primarily, however, texts become difficult to interpret when their subject matter brings out the inherent weaknesses of discursive speech. Since the qualities of language as a system of signification directly affect the ability of an author to express, and the reader to grasp, any particular idea, Augustine had to address two different issues in his work on language. He could largely abandon such time-worn issues as the relationship between name and object--whether names exist by nature or convention, although he does comment on it⁶. Instead, he needed to explain the particular qualities of speech which made it such an imperfect tool for describing abstract ideas and the divine. This effort led Augustine to consider the mechanics whereby man transforms ideas in the mind into perceptible utterances, and whereby that utterance is received by another's senses, yet impacts his mind. By his way of thinking, then, in order to explain the use of signs he needed to outline the relationship between the senses and the mind.

3. On Augustine's theory of signs, see C. MAYER, «Prinzipien der Hermeneutik Augustinus und daraus sich ergebende Probleme», *Forum Katholische Theologie* 1 (1985) 197-211 and C. KIRWAN, *Augustine*, (London: Routledge, 1989), esp. chapter III.

4. On authorial intent, see *de doctrina christiana* 2.5.6 : *Quam [scripturam divinam] legentes nihil aliud appetunt quam cogitationes voluntatemque illorum a quibus conscripta est invenire et per illas voluntatem dei, secundum quam tales homines locutos credimus*. See also *de utilitate credendi* v.11, *Conf.* 12.18.27 and 12.23.32 ; *de doctrina christiana* 1.36.41-37.41. Augustine uses a variety of words to describe intent : *cogitatio*, *intentio*, *voluntas*, *sentire*. The terminology used is somewhat imprecise. The semantic field covered by these Latin words does not map neatly onto that of the English 'intent'. Of course, similar difficulties in translation were a matter of great concern to Augustine. See *de civ. dei* 5.19 (on *tyrannus*), 10.1 (on *latreia*, *religio*, *cultus*, *eusebeia*, and *pietas*), 14.9 (on *apatheia* and *impassabilitas*) ; *de doctrina christiana* 2.11.16 (on *raca* and *hosanna*), 2.12.18-13.19 ; *de trin.* 15.8.14-9.15.

5. See esp. *Conf.* 12.31.42 : *per quem (Moses) deus unus sacras litteras vera et diversa visuris multorum sensibus temperavit. ego certe, quod intrepidus de meo corde pronuntio, si ad culmen auctoritatis aliquid scriberem, sic mallet scribere, ut, quod veri quisque de his rebus capere posset, mea verba resonarent, quam ut unam veram sententiam ad hoc apertius ponerem, ut excluderem ceteras, quarum falsitas me non posset offendere*.

6. See *de doctrina christiana* 2.24.37, 2.25.38-39, 2.40.60, 3.14.22, *Conf.* 1.8.13, *de trin.* 13.1.4.

The *de magistro* ultimately does not affirm the power of language. Instead, the long discussion of signs is simply part of a demonstration of the incapacity of language to serve as a tool for teaching, where teaching, as Augustine construes it, encompasses practically all communication (*de magistro* 1.1 ; *de doctrina christiana* 1.2.2). If language cannot teach, its importance must be secondary to that which can. Thus, the *de magistro* ultimately closes with a description of the presence to the mind of Christ, the one true teacher⁷. Such a reading of the dialogue is confirmed by the very brief report given to it in the *Retractationes*⁸.

He thus creates a philosophy of language which explains, rather than asserts, the privileged status of Christian scripture. Since the ontological gap between divine matters--the highest form of reality--and human speech is so great, any human utterance on so elevated a subject must be inscrutable : the more comprehensible the text, the greater its misrepresentation of divine reality must be. Texts about the true divinity alone have justification for their obscurity, and they alone warrant, and indeed require, the application of a scriptural hermeneutics.

For Augustine, therefore, we can see that the existence of signs, and especially their arbitrary nature, are not nearly as important as the cause for their existence⁹. In following this chain of causation, Augustine connected two important problems : the inability of human language adequately to express thoughts on complex, abstract issues, and the parallel inability of the human mind to think clearly about God. In other words, human thoughts are tied up in fleshy things : *hoc modo ex familiaritate carnis opinantur* (*Conf.* 12.27.37). It would be intolerable for these same inabilities to affect Adam before the Fall, the angels, or the blessed after the resurrection. These impediments to human understanding, and therefore the existence of discursive language, thus relate directly to sin, and to the condition and structure of the human soul.

Augustine had therefore linked the process by which we find meaning in a text to his own theories about the workings of the senses, the memory, and the intellect. Augustine's textbook on the reading of scripture concentrates on the interpretation of signs ; his work on the Trinity, too, discusses signs, but in the context of epistemology; and his treatise on language, the *de dialectica*,

7. *de magistro* 11.38 ; see also *de doctrina christiana* 2.12.17. Within his 'sight of the mind' metaphor, Augustine describes this presence of God to the mind as the light which allows the mind to see ; see, for example, *Solil.* 1.6.12, *Conf.* 12.18.27, *de Genesi ad litteram* 12.31.59. This metaphor is creatively explored by G. O'DALY, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, (London: Duckworth, 1987) 204-207.

8. *Retr.* 1.xi : *Per idem tempus scripsi librum, cuius est titulus de magistro. In quo disputatur et quaeritur et invenitur magistrum non esse, qui docet hominem scientiam, nisi deum, secundum illud etiam quod in evangelio scriptum est: unus est magister vester Christus.* See also *de doctrina christiana* 2.12.17. On the *de magistro*, see G. MADEC, «Analyse du *de magistro*», *RÉAug* 21 (1975) 63-71.

9. A rule stressed by Augustine. See *de magistro* 9.26 : *non tamen falsum est omne, quod propter aliud est, vilius esse quam id, propter quod est.*

describes the relationship between mind and body¹⁰. Yet one cannot analyze Augustine's thought on knowledge and the human mind without also understanding his writings on God ; after all, his own efforts to understand memory and the intellect in the *Confessions* led him to tackle God and time, and his efforts to understand the trinity led him back to the human soul.

Obviously, all of these concerns must intersect when one confronts the text of *Genesis*: Was there time before God created heaven and earth ? What is this Word that John speaks of ? What does it mean that God created man in his image ? How did Adam communicate with God, and how did this means of communication change after the Fall ? Augustine's thoughts on all these disparate issues--history, time, creation, knowledge, sense-perception, signs, language, and God--are connected, and the terminology and concepts which he uses in discussing them are the same (see note 43). Augustine thought that we use language because our souls cannot communicate with each other directly, because they are trapped in physical bodies. Language, like our bodies, is trapped and operates in time, and is thus largely subject to the limitations of the physical world. At the same time, language consists of signs which can cause the mind to think about things other than the sign itself ; hence they are also the means by which we can begin to transcend those same limitations¹¹.

The essay presented here, therefore, makes its case by tracing connections. Augustine, one might say, had a philosophy of everything ; it is largely coherent, though not always persuasive, and it is comprehensive. Augustine did not shy away from its consequences. He certainly recognized the power of language as a persuasive force, yet his preoccupations with its inadequacies gave him grave doubts about his own philosophical projects, both literary and personal.

Justification for this present enquiry, which gives primacy to his thought on language, is provided by his own writings. Obviously, if Augustine felt that his own literary projects were in danger of misinterpretation because, despite his best efforts to the contrary, his words could not help but fundamentally misrepresent his thoughts, then an understanding of the theoretical basis for this fear becomes a necessary prolegomena to a proper appreciation of his philosophy. Augustine himself provides ample evidence for just such a concern :

de utilitate credendi x.23 : You will say in good conscience that you have not lied, and you will assert this with all the words at your command, but they are only words. For you, being a man, cannot so reveal the hidden places of your mind to another man, that you may be known to the depths of your soul.

de trin. 15.7.13 : That these things are done in our mind, or by it, we know, and we are very certain of it. However, the more that we desire to find out how these things are done, the more our speech fails us, and our intention itself does not

10. On this work, see H.-I. MARROU, *St. Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, (BEFAR 145) Paris, 1938, p. 576-578. The text is cited from the edition of J. Pinborg (Dordrecht and Boston: D. Reidel, 1975).

11. Perceptively noted also by P. RICOEUR, *Time and Narrative*, (trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer ; The University of Chicago Press, 1984) vol. 1, page 7.

endure, with the result that our understanding, to say nothing of our tongue, fails to reach some level of clarity¹².

Of course, previous writers had expressed concern that their writings could be misinterpreted, and previous readers had suggested that the impossibility of questioning an author dramatically reduced the value of any written text¹³. Augustine, however, thought the gap between saying and meaning inherent in the structure of discursive language, and therefore insurmountable. To be sure, Augustine had theological reasons for denying any human capacity to know God. Yet these theological issues should not, and indeed can not, be considered independently of his critique of human language. Indeed, Augustine rigorously considered the implications of his theological presumptions for his own epistemological and linguistic thought; while this essay concerns itself most directly with the latter, a very basic examination of some broader issues will be necessary to set the stage. In the end, Augustine himself confesses that he has allowed one of his favorite metaphors to determine, and ultimately to undermine, his pursuit of the truth¹⁴.

Before I begin, two methodological points. Scholarly debates thrive on jargon¹⁵. Augustine was deeply aware of the inadequacies of the Latin language--and the superiority of the Greek--in its possession of the proper terminology to discuss issues of worship and philosophy¹⁶. Given his

12. With *de utilitate credendi* x.23 compare *de magistro* 13.42-43; *de utilitate credendi* v.11; *Conf.* 10.3.3, 12.5.5, 12.23.32; *de doctrina christiana* 2.13.19, 2.38.56, 3.2.2, 3.2.5, 3.3.6-7, 4.10.24; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 118.18.3; *de civ. dei* 19.7; *de trin.* 15.25.45. With *de trin.* 15.7.13 compare *de doctrina christiana* 1.6.6 (*Quod autem a me dictum est, si ineffabile esset, dictum non esset.*); *Conf.* 11.8.10 (*utcumque video, sed quomodo id eloquar nescio*), 11.14.17 (a similar contrast between the weakness of human intelligence, and the greater weakness of human speech), 13.11.12; *de civ. dei* 22.29; *de trin.* 1.1.2-3, 15.5.8, 15.27.50.

13. In its most famous expression, see Plato *Protagoras* 347e, where he adopts a model of reading in which the meaning of a text is identified and coextensive with the author's intent. On Augustine and authorial intent, see note 4. According to him, the very nature of the production of Scripture makes it impossible to know, or even to understand, the intent of its "author". That many interpretations were therefore possible only confirmed its privileged status. See *Conf.* 12, 10.10, 12.18.27, and 12.31.42 (quoted in note 5); *de civ. dei* 11.19, 18.42-44, 20.17, 20.21, 20.29; *de doctrina christiana* 2.5.6, 2.6.7-8, 3.27.38, 4.6.9; *Ep.* 55.xi.21; and *de trin.* 15.25.45.

14. *de trin.* 14.6.8 (discussed in Section VIII). See also *Conf.* 12.5.5, *de trin.* 15.10.18, and *de Genesi ad litteram* 12.4.15, 12.11.22.

15. See the caution offered by R. Markus in his chapters on Augustine (21 through 27) in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 366.

16. On the superiority of the Greek term *latreia*, see *de civ. dei* 10.1; in addition to the texts on translation cited in note 4, see *de utilitate credendi* iii.5. For the invention of new terms to facilitate discussion, see *de magistro* 4.8: *placetne appellemus significabilia ea, quae signis significari possunt et signa non sunt, sicut ea, quae videri possunt, visibilia nominamus, ut de his deinceps commodius disseramus*. See also *de Genesi ad litteram* 12.7.16: *Tertium [genus visionum] vero intellectuale, ab intellectu, quia mentale, a mente,*

preoccupation with the precision of his own definitions¹⁷, we should be careful about imposing our own¹⁸. A professional orator in antiquity understood the difference between words used in their everyday meaning and in their technical application, but he could be sloppy, and he had a precedent in Scripture.

Retr. I.xiii.5 : When I said, “There is a great difference between knowledge maintained by the trustworthy reasoning of the mind, which we say we know, and belief in what has been usefully handed down to posterity either by report or in writing” (*de utilitate credendi* xi.25), and a little later, “Our knowledge we owe to reason, our beliefs to authority” (*ibid*), I should not be taken to mean that we shrink from saying that we know what we believe on the testimony of suitable witnesses. When we speak properly (*proprie*), we say that we know only that thing which we grasp with the steadfast reasoning of our minds. But when we are using words as they are used in ordinary speech (*verbis consuetudini aptioribus*), as indeed divine Scripture uses them, we do not hesitate to say that we ‘know’ what we perceive with the bodily senses, or believe on the testimony of witnesses worthy of trust ; and at the same time we also understand the difference between the two¹⁹.

Augustine will vigorously maintain this distinction between knowledge and belief throughout his career²⁰. In fact, in the passage in the *Retractationes* cited above, Augustine distinguishes between knowing (*scire*) and believing (*credere*) ; in the original passage in the *de utilitate credendi*, the contrast is between believing and understanding (*intellegere*). In the absence of a word for the act of intellection, Augustine here adopts *firma ratio mentis*²¹.

Second, for the purposes of this essay I quote from Augustine’s works largely without regard for chronology. Augustine had at times considered the nature of language in Heaven (see at note 53), whether it had a capacity to signify that was greater or utterly different in kind. As his thought on these

ipsa vocabuli novitate nimis absurdum est, ut dicamus.

17. *de dialectica* V.12-16 : *haec autem omnia quae definita sunt, utrum recte definita sint, et utrum hactenus verba definitionis aliis definitionibus prosequenda fuerint, ille indicabit locus in quo definiendi disciplina tractatur.*

18. On the other hand, one should keep in mind Augustine’s own declaration about his writings at *Conf.* 12.31.42, quoted in note 5.

19. On the *consuetudo locutionis humanae*, see, in the *de civ. dei* alone, 9.5, 10.15, 11.8, 15.6, 15.25, 16.5-6, 16.29, 17.5-7, and 22.2. Elsewhere, see *Conf.* 12.27.37.

20. See *de utilitate credendi* ix.22 and xi.25 ; *de civ. dei* 11.3, 11.7-8, 15.25, 16.5, 22.29 ; *de magistro* xi.37 ; *Solil.* 1.3.8 ; *de quantitate animae* 29.57 ; *enarrationes in Psalmos* 118.18.3 ; *de trin.* 1.1.3, 11.8.14, and 14.6.8. As usual, he can be sloppy : see *de civ. dei* 21.7. He also frequently insists that he wants to avoid the appearance of arguing about words ; see, for example, *de quantitate animae* 6.10 (*voca quidquid vis : non enim mihi de nominibus laborandum est, cum res aperta sit.*) ; *de trin.* 15.15.25 (*ne de controversia vocabuli laborare videamur*) ; *de civ. dei* 9.19 (*ne de verbis etiam non certare videamur*) and *de civ. dei* 9.4.

21. On the above passage, see the article by M. BURNYEAT, «Wittgenstein and Augustine’s *de magistro*», *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary volume LXI (1987) 1-24. On *scire* and *intellegere*, see *Conf.* 1.1, on the interpretation of which I am inclined to agree with O’Donnell ad loc.

issues developed, the Fall began to take on a greater significance in his conception of the origins of human speech (Section V)²²; for related reasons he began to have serious misgivings about his previous stance on the origin and pre-existence of the soul²³. Despite these changes in Augustine's thought, the basic framework of his understanding and, most importantly, the terminology with which he describes it, remain largely the same throughout his life²⁴. In this essay, for the sake of efficiency, I hold myself carefully within the limits of the present enquiry, but the cognitive difficulties which I highlight and which Augustine acknowledged early and late in life (Sections VII and VIII) are signs both of the continuity of his doubt about the possibility of secure knowledge concerning the soul, and of the honesty with which he owned up to that doubt.

I begin by describing the hierarchy of matter outlined by Augustine in a variety of his works, and the consequences of this ontology for, and its relationship with, human understanding. This leads to a more direct consideration of the handicaps to human understanding and their origins. The epistemological thought which lies behind these writings is brought into sharp relief by contrasting it with Augustine's comments on God's knowledge, vision, and language. Having thus created a context for considering Augustine's criticisms of language, I will show in greater detail how his linguistic theory and his philosophy are related.

II. – AUGUSTINE'S ONTOLOGY, AND THE PLACE OF LANGUAGE WITHIN IT

The ancient world never escaped the shadow of Platonic epistemology; Augustine himself, apparently feeling little pressure from his religion to shun this pagan heritage²⁵, adopts and adapts wholeheartedly many of the basic structures of this system.

Conf. 12.13.16 : My provisional interpretation of that is that 'heaven' means 'heaven of heaven', the intellectual, non-physical heaven where the intelligence's knowing is a matter of simultaneity--not in part, not through an enigma, not through a mirror, but complete, in total openness, face to face. This knowing is not of one thing at one time and of another thing at another moment (*non modo hoc,*

22. On the chronology of this process, I am somewhat reluctant to endorse the precision which O'Connell espouses, while applauding the high level of scholarship which his work has aroused. See O'CONNELL in *Augustinian Studies* 4 (1973) 1-32, *REAug* 28 (1982) 239-252 and *REAug* 30 (1984) 84-99, with G. Madec's edition of the *de libero arbitrio* and his comments in *REAug* 21 (1975) 394 and O'Daly (op. cit note 7) 15-20.

23. E. CLARK's *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton, 1992) 227-243 seems to me rightly and creatively to highlight Augustine's doubt on these issues.

24. A defense of this position probably ought to have preceded the present study, but is in any event in preparation and will appear separately.

25. See *contra Academicos* 3.17.37 and *de doctrina christiana* 2.40.60.

modo illud), but is concurrent without any temporal successiveness (*sine ulla vicissitudine temporum*)²⁶.

Only at the end of his life does Augustine explicitly criticize his union of the Gospels with Platonic teachings, but his criticism falls mainly on his acceptance of Platonic *anamnesis*, and even here his criticism must be taken with a grain of salt. In fact, separating the strands of Platonic *anamnesis* from the genuinely Augustinian concepts in his writings on *memoria* would be impossible, and probably pointless²⁷.

At its most basic level, Augustine's inheritance consists of adapting Plato's theory of forms into a world of abstract truths; these are, needless to say, incorporeal and eternal, and can be contrasted with the physical world which we perceive through our senses : *intelligibilia* vs. *sensibilia*.

de magistro 12.39 : But if, on the one hand, we use the light and our senses in order to perceive colors and the other things which we sense through our bodies, namely both the elements of this world and these same bodies with which we perceive--for the senses are the interpreters which the mind uses to recognize such things; and, on the other hand, we consult with our reason the interior truth in order to perceive those things which are understood ; what answer can be given to the question 'What does anyone teach us with words, beyond the sound which strikes our ears ?' For everything which we perceive, we perceive either through the senses of our body or with our mind ; the former we call *sensibilia*, the latter *intelligibilia*, or, to speak according to the habit of our Christian authors, the former we call *caralia*, the latter *spiritualia*²⁸.

Augustine maps this hierarchy onto a parallel hierarchy of knowledge and perception. These two systems operate in tandem to define each other ; and the

26. See also *de trin.* 15.25.45, *de civ. dei* 8.5, 22.29 and *Retract.* 1.3.2. For translations from the *Confessiones* I have at times adapted the excellent new version by H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

27. I am not persuaded that Augustine ever abandoned his former allegiance to *anamnesis*. I don't think he could. See *de trin.* 15.21.40 : *Cogitando enim quod verum invenerimus, hoc maxime intellegere dicimur et hoc quidem in memoria rursus relinquimus. Sed illa est abstrusior profunditas nostrae memoriae ubi hoc etiam primum cum cogitarem invenimus et gignitur intimum verbum quod nullius linguae sit tamquam scientia de scientia et visio de visione et intelligentia quae apparet in cogitatione de intelligentia quae in memoria iam fuerat sed latebat, quamquam et ipsa cogitatio quandam suam memoriam nisi haberet, non reverteretur ad ea quae in memoria reliquerat cum alia cogitaret.* See in addition those texts where Augustine describes how we make comparative judgments : we do so, he writes, because the 'idea' of beauty exists in our mind in a more perfect form (*de civ. dei* 8.5-6), or because some conception of sanctity or wisdom was already impressed in our mind (*de libero arbitrio* 2.9.26). For the use of similar terminology, see *Conf.* 10.6.9, 11.3.5 ; *de civ. dei* 11.27 ; *de Genesi ad litteram* 12.24.51 ; *de trin.* 8.3.4, 10.5.7, 11.3.6, 14.15.21, and 15.27.49. On the other hand, even in his early works one can identify passages where the existence of such *notiones impressae* is not assumed ; see *de utilitate credendi* xiii.28 : How can fools, who have no conception of wisdom, identify a wise man to teach them?

28. For further definitions of these terms, see also *de dialectica* V.1-12, *de doctrina christiana* 1.2.2, and *de civ. dei* 8.6 : *Sensibilia dicamus, quae visu tactuque corporis sentiri queunt; intelligibilia, quae conspectu mentis intellegi.*

entire theory obviously has its crux in the human being, which alone shares in both worlds.

Augustine has therefore set himself two problems : first, to understand the difference between intellection and sense-perception. Since the issues and presumptions surrounding the nature of the divine form the top of his ontological pyramid, he must establish the priority of the intelligible world in a way which situates it between the divine and the carnal. The most important quality separating divine from human, and intelligence from sense-perception, is the relation of each to the two most basic measures of the physical world : space and time. Simply put, God operates independent of space and time, while all physical things, which includes all signs, exist and are defined by their place in space and time.

de quantitate animae 32.68 : Everything that the senses perceive is contained in space and time, or, rather, the senses perceive what time and space contain ; that which we perceive with our eyes is divided by space; that which we perceive with our ears is divided by time²⁹.

Human beings exist largely as physical entities ; while they can conceive thoughts from immortal truths, the thoughts themselves are fleeting.

These issues come to the fore in a crucial passage from Book 12 of the *de Trinitate*, in which the oppositions discussed above (*intelligibilia* vs. *sensibilia*, knowing vs. perceiving, eternity vs. space/time) all play a role. Augustine distinguishes between an utterance of knowledge (*scientia*) and an utterance of wisdom (*sapientia*), and to the latter category belong eternal things. Their eternity, furthermore, is such that they are neither created nor destroyed, without any changibleness of times (*sine ulla mutabilitate temporum*) ; they are *intelligibilia* and present only to the gaze of the mind, and as such they are not bodies fixed in space (*non tamquam in spatiis locorum fixa*). Visible and tangible things (*visibilia vel contactabilia [=sensibilia]*), on the other hand, are present to the senses of the body. Apart from the *sensibilia* which are fixed in space there exist intelligible and incorporeal reasons (*rationes*), and these are independent of the passage of time (*sine temporali transitu*)--they are *intelligibiles, non sensibiles*. "Only a few succeed in arriving at these things with the gaze of their mind, and when their gaze does arrive--insofar as it is even possible to do so, the one who arrives does not abide among these eternal things ; on the contrary, it is repulsed by the rebounding, as it were, of the gaze itself, and thus a transitory thought is formed of a thing that is not transitory (*fit rei non transitoriae transitoria cogitatio*)³⁰".

The second problem arising from Augustine's parallel hierarchies of *intelligibilia* and *sensibilia*, knowledge and perception, was to formulate his results in human language. Since he has begun with the premise that the

29. *de quantitate animae* 32.68 : *Cum autem locus et tempus sit, quibus omnia quae sentiuntur occupantur, vel potius quae occupant, quod oculis sentimus per locum, quod auribus per tempus dividitur.*

30. *de trin.* 12.14.23. For translations from the *de trinitate*, I have occasionally adapted the version of S. MacKenna in the *Fathers of the Church* series (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press).

sensible world is in some way inferior to the intelligible, as human understanding is vastly inferior to the divine, and since words in any form are objects of sense-perception, words must be not only mere signs of *intelligibilia*, but inadequate signs ; they are not simply different from their antecedents, they are inferior to them. As Augustine argues, if an image (*imago*) matches perfectly that of which it is an image, then it is made equal to it (*coaequatur*) and is not the object of its own image. Such a perfect image possesses great beauty on account of its harmony (*congruentia*), equality (*aequalitas*), and because of the lack of difference, disproportion, and dissimilarity (*nulla in re dissidens et nullo modo inaequalis et nulla ex parte dissimilis*) ; such an image is not to be called an image (*imago*), but a 'form' (*species*) (see *de Trin.* 6.10.11 and 15.22.43). *Species*, 'form' is also the name he gives to the Platonic 'idea' of beauty which must exist in the mind in order for the mind to make value judgments on beauty in the physical world :

de civ. dei 8.6 : For there is no kind of physical beauty, either in a stationary object--for instance, a shape--or in a moving one--like a melody--over which the mind does not exercise judgment. This could not be the case, if there were not in the mind this more perfect image of beauty, without the burden of mass, without the sound of a voice, without extent in space or time³¹.

His conception of the nature of this *species* matches identically the qualities which he attributes to 'utterances of wisdom' in *de trin.* 12.14.23 ; they are distinguished by their independence from the physical world, from the perception of the senses. As we will see in the closing section, signs operate completely differently³².

For the purpose of this paper, it is not necessary to explore the intricacies of Augustine's hierarchies of matter and knowledge to any great extent; a simple set of examples from his writings will suffice. To begin with, Augustine notes that man shares sense-perception with the beasts, while God has endowed man alone with a rational soul³³.

This premise imposes a hierarchy on knowledge : animals do not have knowledge ; they seek their food and pleasure through force of habit (*vis consuetudinis*). Knowledge must be the result of intellection, which power God gave to the rational soul, that is, to man alone (*de quantitate animae* 29.56-57 ; 30.58).

Augustine's strict insistence on knowledge as the result of reasoning matches his strict separation of knowledge and belief, though, as noted, he will sometimes use the terminology catachrestically; this insistence is further

31. *de civ. dei* 8.6 : *Nulla est enim pulchritudo corporalis sive in statu corporis, sicut est figura, sive in motu, sicut est cantilena, de qua non animus iudicet. Quod profecto non posset, nisi melior in illo esset haec species [sc. pulchritudinis], sine tumore molis, sine strepitu vocis, sine spatio vel loci vel temporis.*

32. On the contrast between principles in the mind and their representation in human language, see *Conf.* 10.12.19.

33. *de quantitate animae* 28.54 ; cf. *de civ. dei* 22.1. Of course, exhortations to the life of the mind by means of comparisons with the beasts were as old as philosophy : Plato *Rep.* 586A. Augustine had no doubt read Sallust on the subject, *Cat.* 1.

reinforced by his distrust of sense-perception as a means of gathering information.

de civ. dei 11.26 : For we exist, we know that we exist, and we are glad of this existence and of this knowledge. In those three things there is no falsehood to trouble us with its similarity to the truth. For we do not apprehend those truths as we do the things which are outside of us, by some sense of the body--as, for example, we perceive colour by sight, sound by hearing, odor by the sense of smell, flavors by the taste, and hardness and softness by the touch. We even turn over in our thoughts images of these *sensibilia*, very much like them and yet incorporeal ; we hold these images in our memory ; and through those images we are aroused to desire those things they represent. But it is entirely certain that I exist, that I know it, and that I am glad of it, without any imaginary and deceptive fantasies³⁴.

This distrust of the senses has obvious consequences for all forms of human communication, though full exploration of this issue will be postponed for now³⁵.

Before considering the capabilities of human understanding and its limitations, I quote a number of passages in which Augustine discusses the characteristics of *sensibilia* and *intelligibilia*, because, as we have seen, these terms not only describe categories of object but also boundaries of knowledge.

de civ. dei 10.15 : The person of God himself became visible, not, however, through his own substance, which always remains invisible to corruptible eyes, but through some created thing in subjection to the Creator; in this way he also spoke in syllables, in the passing moments of time, in the words of human language. However, God in his own nature neither begins nor ceases to speak ; he speaks not temporally but eternally ; not corporally but spiritually; not to the senses, but to the understanding.

de utilitate credendi 1.1 : Truth (reality) is far removed from the minds of vain men who, having progressed and fallen too far among physical concerns, think there is nothing beyond what they perceive by the senses, these five well known messengers of the body³⁶.

The characteristics of the set of *sensibilia* hardly require explanation beyond that which has already been given. However, since our ultimate goal is a better understanding of Augustine's theory of language, it behooves us to demonstrate conclusively that words are *sensibilia*. Here I am concerned only with words as signifiers, and not with broader issues such as tense systems, *etc.*; these will be discussed later. Note that in the second passage Augustine stresses not only that signs belong to the physical world, but that they are somehow inferior to the things which they represent.

de magistro 4.8, 9.26 : Aug : What about written words ? Are they words, or are they not better understood as signs of words, as a word is something which is brought forth by an articulate sound with some significance ? Moreover, a sound

34. Cf. *de trin.* 15.21. On these passages see O'DALY (*op. cit.* note 7) p. 169-171. In addition to the passages cited by O'Daly, see *de Genesi ad litteram* 12.4.15, 12.7.16.

35. *de utilitate credendi* v.11 and x.23 ; *de magistro* 13.42-43.

36. See also *Conf.* 10.6.9, 10.10.17, 10.12.19, and *de trin.* 15.12.21.

can be perceived by no other sense than hearing. When a word is written, a sign is given to the eyes whereby something that properly belongs to the ears is brought to mind.... Aug : If these things are true--and you know them to be so--then you can see how much less words are to valued than the things on account of which we use words.

de trin. 15.11.20 : Hence the word which sounds without is a sign of the word that shines within, to which the name of word more properly belongs. For that which is produced by the mouth of the flesh is the sound of the word, and is itself also called the word, because that inner word assumed it in order that it might appear outwardly³⁷. (Trans. MacKenna)

Ultimately, some of the factors which render sense-perception inferior to intellection are similar in kind to those which incapacitate human intellection to start with. In other words, the proliferation of signs has its origin in the same event which bound us to this world of flesh. Our familiarity with fleshy things makes metaphors which use the physical world as their source of imagery particularly good pedagogical tools; but the inferiority of fleshy things also renders these same metaphors inherently insufficient for their task. Thus Augustine writes about the mind as if it functioned in a parallel fashion to the body, with its own senses of vision, hearing, and so on. For instance, at *de trin.* 12.14.23 (see at note 30; see also Section VIII), Augustine must describe the present of *intelligibilia* to the sight of the mind on analogy with corporeal sight (*sic intelligibilia ... ista ... visibilia*). This proves remarkably useful within the context of his treatment of time : true knowledge becomes the result of an instantaneous act of 'sight' on the part of the understanding (*Conf* 12.13.16 : *caelum intellectuale, ubi est intellectus nosse simul*, see also *de trin.* 15.7.13). On the other hand, the metaphor collapses when Augustine considers the workings of his own investigation : if the mind 'sees' as an eye sees, how can a mind see itself ? It is a question for which Augustine has no answer.

III. — THE CONNECTION BETWEEN METAPHYSICS AND PEDAGOGY

The preceding section has shown that Augustine thought there to exist a fundamental distinction between the words of men and the realities which they were intended to represent; the existence of this gap urges us to examine Augustine's view of man's ability to understand these realities. In doing so, the fundamental problems which cripple human language will also surface, for, as is obvious, our words, as signs of the thoughts in the mind, share the handicaps

37. *de trin.* 15.11.20 : *Proinde verbum quod foris sonat signum est verbi quod intus lucet cui magis verbi competit nomen. Nam illud quod profertur carnis ore vox verbi est, verbumque et ipsum dicitur propter illud a quo ut foris appareret assumptum est.* See also *de trin.* 10.1.2, *de dialectica* V and *de doctrina christiana* 2.3.4 : *Sed innumerabilis multitudo signorum quibus suas cogitationes homines exserunt, in verbis constituta est. Nam illa signa omnia quorum genera breviter attigi, potui verbis enuntiare, verba vero illis signis nullo modo possem.*

of our intellection. At this point, I intend merely to confront these problems in so far as they affect our minds, with brief looks ahead ; the complexities await further treatment at the end of this paper. I begin by focusing on Augustine's recognition that man is tied to his fleshly existence ; second, I examine Augustine's exploitation of this recognition to simplify the process of learning about the trinity ; and third, I trace the connections between his justification of this exploitation and the issues raised in Section II.

First of all, man, as Augustine knew and insisted, is a creature of flesh. The senses of the body, used to perceive physical things, bound us with the other animals of this world ; like them, man used his senses--as much from force of habit as reason--to seek after food and pleasure (*de quantitate animae* 28.54). The processes of intellection are superior, and for that reason much more complicated. In seeking to understand the Trinity, Augustine urges us to examine the trinities within ourselves. The task is not a simple one :

de trin. 1.1.3 : Accordingly, it is difficult to look upon and to comprehend fully the substance of God, which makes changeable things without any change in itself, and creates temporal things without any temporal movement of its own. Therefore the purification of our soul is necessary, as a result of which it may be able to see that ineffable thing in an ineffable manner. Since we do not as yet enjoy this capability, we are strengthened by faith and are led along more accessible roads, in order that we may gain the proficiency and skill to grasp that truth.

Augustine initially decides not to consider evidence procured by the senses, and excludes as well the trinity of our senses in favor of the trinities within the mind itself.

de trin. 10.10.14 : But since we are investigating the nature of the mind, let us not take into consideration any knowledge that is obtained from without through the senses of the body, and consider more attentively the principle which we have laid down : that every mind knows and is certain concerning itself³⁸.

After further consideration, Augustine decides for pedagogical reasons to proceed slowly, from the things which men are more familiar with.

de trin. 10.12.19 : Should we now, therefore, exert ourselves to the utmost of our mental powers, and ascend to the supreme and highest essence of which the human mind is an imperfect image, but yet an image ? Or should these same three things be manifested still more clearly in the soul, through those things which we comprehend outwardly through the senses of the body, wherein the knowledge of corporeal things is impressed in time ? ... (*de trin.* 11.1.1) Let us, therefore, seek for some image of the Trinity in that which is decaying, insofar as we can, and even if this is not a more precise image, it may perhaps be easier to discern ; for it would in vain be called man if it did not bear at least some resemblance to the inner man. And by the very order of our condition, whereby we are made mortal and carnal, we apply ourselves more easily and, so to speak, more familiarly with visible than with intelligible things, because the former are external and the latter internal, and because we perceive the former through the senses of the body, and the latter through the mind³⁹.

38. See also *Conf.* 13.11.12.

39. *de trin.* 10.12.19 : *Iamne igitur ascendendum est qualibuscumque intentionis viribus ad illam summum et altissimam essentiam cuius impar imago est humana mens sed tamen*

Augustine decides that his readers may apply themselves more readily to that image of the trinity which exists in man's sense-perception. This is an inferior image, but man, he concludes, understands corporeal things more easily. The primary advantage attributed to the trinity of sense-perception is that the senses operate in time (*de quantitate animae* 32.68), and man has difficulty conceptualizing time, let alone those things which operate outside it. Augustine also links this inability to conceptualize immortality directly to the condition of man's soul, "whereby we are made mortal and carnal".

Conf. 11.14.17 : What is time ? Who can explain this easily and briefly ? Who can comprehend this so as to articulate it in words, or even in thought⁴⁰ ?

After Augustine has explained the operation of the trinity in our sense perception (*de trin.* 11.2.2), he then describes the process whereby the sight of an external object causes an image to arise in our mind, and to be stored in our memory (*de trin.* 11.2.3-3.6). In doing so, he discusses the origin of the gaze--that it proceeds from our body at the behest of our mind (*de trin.* 11.2.2), but he also decides that, properly speaking, the image formed in the memory is begat by the object (*de trin.* 11.2.3). He then treats the trinity which is formed in our mind when we think about something we had previously seen ; that is to say, when we look upon an image in our memory with the gaze of our mind.

de trin. 11.7.11 : For the gaze of the mind, which is formed from the memory when we think of something in the process of remembering, does not proceed from that *species* which we have seen and remembered, since we could not have remembered those things unless we had seen them. But the gaze of the mind, which is informed by recollection, existed also before we had seen the body which we remember--how much more so before we had committed it to memory ? Hence, although the form, which arises in the gaze of one remembering, arises from that which is in the memory, yet the gaze itself does not arise from thence, but existed before it. But it follows from this, that if the one is not a true parent, then the other is not a true offspring. Nevertheless, both that quasi-parent as well as that quasi-offspring suggest something from which we gain greater skill and certainty in the study of inner and truer things⁴¹. (Trans. MacKenna)

imago? An adhuc eadem tria distinctius declaranda sunt in anima per illa quae extrinsecus sensu corporis capimus ubi temporaliter imprimitur rerum corporearum notitia? ... (de trin. 11.1.1) *In hoc ergo qui corrumpitur quaeramus quemadmodum possumus quandam trinitatis effigiem, et si non expressiorem tamen fortassis ad dinoscendum faciliorem. Neque enim frustra et iste homo dicitur nisi quia inest ei nonnulla interioris similitudo, et illo ipso ordine conditionis nostrae quo mortales atque carnales effecti sumus facilius et quasi familiarius visibilia quam intellegibilia pertractamus cum ista sint exterius, ill interiorius, et ista sensu corporis sentiamus, illa mente intellegamus...* See also *Conf.* 10.6.9 and *Ep.* 55.11.21.

40. See also *Conf.* 11.8.10.

41. *de trin.* 11.7.11 : *Acies quippe animi quae formatur ex memoria cum recordando aliquid cogitamus non ex ea specie procedit quam meminimus visam quandoquidem eorum miminisse non possemus nisi vidissemus; acies autem animi quae reminiscendo formatur erat etiam priusquam corpus quod meminimus videremus. Quanto magis priusquam id memoriae mandaremus. Quamquam itaque forma quae fit in acie recordantis ex ea fiat quae inest memoria, ipsa tamen acies non inde exstitit, sed erat ante ista. Consequens est autem ut si non est illa vera parens, nec ista vera sit proles. Sed et illa quasi parens et ista quasi proles aliquid insinuant unde interiora atque veriora exercitatus certiusque videantur.*

The trinity which is formed from the gaze of the mind upon the memory is truer, because it lies more inward (*Conf.* 10.6.9). One of the reasons it is superior relates directly to time ; in the trinity of the mind, Augustine argues, the temporal relationships are no longer as simple to discern as they were in the original act of sight. This concern with time is manifested in the issue of procession, that is, in the relationship between parent and offspring, with respect to which the hierarchy within the highest Trinity will only become clear to man after the Resurrection (*de trin.* 15.25.45 ; cf. *Conf.* 12.13.16 at note 26). While Augustine argues that the examination of interior things (ie. things not related to senses) yields a better image with respect to time, already in this second stage the ability of Augustine's language to express the concepts has begun to break down (*quasi parens, quasi proles*). Just as men are bound to their senses, and thus to time and space, their language is similarly tied up in the flesh of this world.

Ultimately, Augustine decides that none of these images will suffice because the constituent elements of these trinities exist as entities trapped in time ; a better image can be found in the trinity formed by the contemplation of *intelligibilia*.

de trin. 14.3.6 : Therefore, neither will the latter trinity, which is not now, be the image of God, nor is the former trinity the image of God, which then will not be ; but that image of the Creator, that has been implanted immortally in its own immortality, must be found in the soul of man, that is, in the reasonable or intellectual soul⁴².

Augustine then proceeds to consider the trinity formed in our mind when we think about eternal truths, when we create "utterances of wisdom". Once again, he imagines the process as directly parallel to the one in our senses. However, our gaze does not abide amongst these things, but bounces off ; our thought is thus transitory. Our attention thus cannot be focused eternally on any single object--our minds cannot overcome time (*de trin.* 12.14.23 ; see note 30) ; similarly, we cannot focus the gaze of our mind on more than one object at once--our minds cannot overcome space.

de trin. 11.8.12 : But since the eye of the mind cannot behold everything together which the memory retains with a single glance, the trinities of thought are constantly changing ; while some are coming, others are going, and so that trinity becomes innumerable more numerous ; yet it is not infinite if it does not go beyond the number of things hidden in the memory.

When Augustine has described the trinity formed by the contemplation of true knowledge, he then reminds us that even this word is a poor image : "Such then, is our word in which we indeed find a likeness, be it what it may, but, insofar as we are able, we shall point out how great an unlikeness there also is, and let us not be sluggish in perceiving this" (*de trin.* 15.14.24).

In fact, when he engages in a lengthy criticism of this last trinity, he concentrates most heavily on the transitory nature of human thought. Although

42. *de trin.* 14.3.6 : *Nec illa igitur trinitas quae nunc non est imago dei erit, nec ista imago dei est quae tunc non erit, sed ea est invenienda in anima hominis, id est rationali sive intellectuali, imago creatoris quae immortaliter immortalitati eius est insita.*

our minds know that they live and will always possess that knowledge, we as humans are incapable of thinking about that knowledge eternally, and therefore the trinity formed by the contemplation of that knowledge is itself transitory. In the rhetorical climax of the passage, Augustine refers to the Vergilian motion of our minds (*volubili motione*), yet acknowledges the difference between the *verbum* which results from the contemplation of *intellebilia* and the *verba* of speech : *Et tunc fit verum verbum quando illud quod nos dixi volubili motione iactare ad id quod scimus pervenit atque inde formatur eius omnimodam similitudinem capiens ut quomodo res quaeque scitur sic etiam cogitur, id est sine voce, sine cogitatione vocis quae profecto alicuius linguae est sic in corde dicatur (de trin. 15.15.25).*

It is precisely in our relationship to time that we separate from God, and that our understanding fails us. It is possible, Augustine argues, for man to know certain eternal truths ; alas, man cannot think about all these truths at the same time and forever. He describes the act of “knowing” (*scire*) on analogy with speaking ; thus to think about some piece of knowledge (*cogitare scientiam*) produces a *verbum*⁴³. Augustine also discusses the possibility of talking in human language about these eternal truths; the difficulties which confront that endeavor will be taken up later on (see *Conf.* 12.27.37 below and *de trin.* 15.16.25 at note 48). It is sufficient at this point to note that human language also fails when confronted by time : it is hard enough to understand unchanging eternity ; it is harder still to write about it.

de trin. 15.7.13 : What man, therefore, can comprehend that wisdom by which God knows all things, and in such a way that what are called past things are not past for Him, nor does He await the coming of what are called future things as though they were absent, but both past and future things are all present together with present things ? He does not think of things individually and pass in thinking from one item to another, but everything is present to His gaze at the same time : what man, I say, comprehends that wisdom and the like prudence and the like knowledge, since we do not understand even our own wisdom ? For we can perceive in some way or other those things which are present either to our senses or to our understanding, but we know those which are absent and yet had been present through our memory, insofar as we have not forgotten them. We do not conjecture the past from the future, but the future from the past, yet not with a sure knowledge (*non tamen firma cognitione*).

Conf. 11.8.10 : I see to some extent (an understanding of God’s unchanging eternity), but I do not know how to express it.

As Augustine had precedent in Scripture for his catachrestic use of *scire* (*Retr.* I.xiii.5), so Scripture also provided a model for him when he wrote about the human mind, especially in its role as an image of the Trinity. He

43. The vocabulary used in *de trin.* 15.15.25 to describe the ‘formable’ word is the same as that used to describe the formable, yet formless mass out of which God created the world at *Conf.* 12.3.3. Augustine envisions God’s speech as operating in a parallel fashion to human thought--thus the act of creation becomes a grand act of *cogitatio*, and all of creation and history an utterance of God. See *de trin.* 6.10.12 ; *de spiritu et littera* 12.19, and especially *Conf.* 11.7.9. I intend to pursue this line of thought in an as-yet unwritten paper.

located his model primarily in those passages which describe ‘actions’ of God in terms borrowed from everyday speech.

de trin. 1.1.2 : Consequently, in order that the human mind may be cleansed from errors of this kind, Sacred Scripture, adapting itself to the little ones, has employed words from every class of objects in order that our intellect, as though strengthened by them, might rise as it were gradually to divine and sublime things. For when it spoke of God, it made use even of words taken from material objects (*verbis ex rebus corporalibus sumptis*), as when it said, “Protect me under the shadow of thy wings” (Ps. 16.8)... Indeed, divine Scripture rarely mentions the things that are properly ascribed to God and which are not found in any creature...

Not everyone understood the meaning of Scripture as well as Augustine did. He himself knew well that the use of such language could backfire : this use of ordinary vocabulary could lead people to believe that God operates in time as people do.

Conf. 12.27.37 : When they read or hear these texts, some people think of God as if he were a human being or a power immanent in a vast mass which, by some new and sudden decision external to itself, as if located in remote places, made heaven and earth, two huge bodies, one high, the other low, containing everything. When they hear ‘God said, let there be that, and that is made’, they think of words with beginnings and endings (*verba coepta et finita*), making a sound in time and passing away. They suppose that after the words have ceased, at once there exists that which was commanded to exist, and have other similar notions which they hold because of their familiarity with the fleshly order of things. In such people who are still infants without higher insight, faith is built up in a healthy way, while in their state of weakness they are carried along as if at their mother’s breast by an utterly simple kind of language. (Trans. Chadwick)

IV. – GOD’S IMMORTALITY, AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR AUGUSTINE’S PHILOSOPHY⁴⁴

Augustine fully understood that the verb system of ordinary speech presumes that the subject is acting in some way upon the object, but he was convinced that such language, and the understanding of time which it assumed, were entirely inappropriate to God’s true nature⁴⁵. He also realized that an action, a change, is taking place within some object whenever God is described as taking an action. He therefore urged the interpretation that actions of God described in Scripture are merely an attempt to show that such action is taking place, and that these descriptions were not intended to imply that any change or movement was taking place in His divine substance. For Augustine, God’s immortality implies complete and utter stability, without any change or action

44. The standard modern work is E.P. MEIJERING, *Augustin über Schöpfung, Ewigkeit, und Zeit. Das elfte Buch des Bekenntnisse* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979). Still very interesting is J. Guitton, *Le Temps et l’éternité chez Plotin et Saint-Augustin* (Paris: 3rd. ed. 1959).

45. Augustine also had fundamental doubts about the ability of our verb system, as he understood it, to represent time even with respect to human actions. More on this below.

or variation of any kind. But the difficulty was that any scripture which wrote on that basis would have been without drama--it would not have terrified the proud, or nourished the intelligent (*de civ. dei* 15.25)⁴⁶. His ideas regarding what God's immortality is had consequences for his portrayal of the language and thought of God, and for the capacities of man before the Fall. A brief consideration of his writings on the subject helps to explicate his thoughts on the intellectual capacity of man and the origins of language.

Augustine thought long and hard about the theoretical qualities of God's immortality ; he began with the story of creation in *Genesis*, and came to the conclusion that true immortality must also imply eternal permanence in all things, for that which changes must, in part, come to an end. In addition, it would be intolerable for God to be trapped in time, to operate in time, as man does. Augustine therefore contrasts God with man largely in His independence from the strictures of time and space (*de civ. dei* 10.15 and 11.21) ; man's failure in treating of this subject is simultaneously cognitive and linguistic (*Conf.* 11.14.17 ; *de trin.* 1.1.3 and 15.7.13).

Conf. 11.7.9 : You call us, therefore, to understand the Word, God who is with you God. That word is spoken eternally, and by it all things are uttered eternally (*quod sempiternae dicitur et eo sempiternae dicuntur omnia*). It is not the case that what was being said comes to an end, and something else is then said, so that everything is uttered in a succession with a conclusion, but everything is said in the simultaneity of eternity. Otherwise time and change would already exist, and there would not be a true eternity and true immortality (*alioquin iam tempus et mutatio et non vera aeternitas nec vera immortalitas*).

Conf. 11.8.10 : Why, I ask, Lord my God ? In some degree I see it, but how to express it I do not know, unless to say that everything which begins to be and ceases to be begins and ends its existence at that very moment when, in the eternal reason where nothing begins or ends, it is known that it is right for it to begin and end. This reason is your Word, which is also the Beginning in that it also speaks to us⁴⁷.

Similarly, God's knowledge and will must never change, because of his eternal permanence, and because Augustine would not have God's foreknowledge be anything less than perfect.

The nature of God's permanence presents problems for the human author, much as the description of the trinity within the mind did (*de trin.* 11.7.11). For instance, Augustine thinks that the tenses used in prophetic language are a consequence of God's perfect prescience :

de civ. dei 17.18 : There, in the usual manner, prophecies of the future are put into the mouth of the Mediator himself, in the form of a narrative of past events, because

46. See the texts listed in note 19. On the later history of accommodation, see A. FUNKENSTEIN, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (Princeton, 1986), esp. pp. 10-12 and 256-261.

47. *Conf.* 11.8.10 : *Cur, quaso, domine deus meus ? utcumque video, sed quomodo id eloquar nescio, nisi quia omne, quod esse incipit et esse desinit, tunc esse incipit et tunc desinit, quando debuisse incipere vel desinere in aeterna ratione cognoscitur, ubi nec incipit aliquid nec desinit. ipsum est verbum tuum, quod et principium est, quia et loquitur nobis.* See also *Conf.* 11.13.16, 12.15.18, *enarrationes in Psalmos* 101.2.10.

coming events had already, in a sense, happened, in the predestination and foreknowledge of God.

As so often (eg. *utcumque* in *Conf.* 11.8.10 at note 47), Augustine expresses some concern that the language he uses does not adequately represent the following aspect of the relationship between historical events and his own conception of divinity--that even those events which have not yet taken place have already happened in the foreknowledge of God. The language available to Augustine constrains him to describe God's knowledge as 'fore'knowledge, but the prefix takes its meaning from an understanding of time which is foreign to God ; Augustine may well have sensed that some would find an inconsistency between this doctrine and his own insistence on free will. Augustine no doubt felt that this seeming inconsistency could be explained by properly describing the perfect knowledge of God, which exists always in a present of eternal simultaneity. It is with respect to the unchanging nature of this knowledge that the metaphor invented by Virgil to describe human thought--that of 'turning something over in one's mind--suffices for human thought, and Augustine uses it himself (*de civ. dei* 11.26), but it will not suffice for God, unless, that is, we speak catachrestically, as Scripture does.

de trin. 15.16.25 : Wherefore He is so called the Word of God as not to be called the thought of God, lest it be believed that there is, as it were, something revolving in God that now receives and now recovers a form in order to be a word, and that it can lose this form, and in some manner revolve formlessly. That distinguished master of speech knew both the meaning of words and the power of thought, who said in a poem, "He revolves within himself the changing fortunes of war" (*Aen.* 10.159-160), that is, he thinks. This Son of God, therefore, is not called the thought of God, but the Word of God. For when our thought arrives at that which we know and is formed therefrom, it is our true word. And, hence, the Word of God ought to be understood without any thought on the part of God, in order that it may be understood to be a simple form, having nothing formable that can also be unformed. The Sacred Scriptures, it is true, also speak about the thoughts of God, but do so according to that manner of speech in which they also speak about the forgetfulness of God, and certainly such expressions do not apply in the strict sense to God⁴⁸.

Virgil, Augustine argues, understood well the nature of thought--that it involves some motion within the mind, and thus his metaphor applies to human thought very well⁴⁹. God's thought, on the other hand, involves no motion,

48. *de trin.* 15.16.25 : *Quapropter ita dicitur illud dei verbum ut dei cogitatio non dicatur ne aliquid esse quasi volubile credatur in deo, quod nunc accipiat, nunc recipiat formam ut verbum sit eamque possit amittere atque informiter quodam modo volutari. Bene quippe noverat verba et vim cogitationis inspexerat locutor egregius qui dixit in carmine: secumque volutat // eventus belli varios; id est, cogitat. Non ergo ille dei filius cogitatio dei sed verbum dei dicitur. Cogitatio quippe nostra perveniens ad id quod scimus atque inde formata verbum nostrum verum est. Et ideo verbum dei sine cogitatione dei debet intellegi ut forma ipsa simplex intellegatur, non aliquid habens formabile quod esse etiam possit informe. Dicuntur quidem etiam in scripturis sanctis cogitationes dei sed eo locutionis modo quo ibi et oblivio dei dicitur, quae utique ad proprietatem in deo nulla est.*

49. On the "motion" of the mind and the measurement of time, see RICOEUR (*op. cit.* note 11) pages 13-16 and chapter 6 in O'DALY (*op. cit.* note 7). Both draw extensively on the

because he knows and he wills everything at once and forever, and therefore his Son is not a thought, created by mental motion, but a word, created by his eternal, unchanging thought and thus coeternal with himself (*de trin.* 15.15.25 and 15.21.40).

de trin. 15.14.24 : But that word of ours, which has neither sound nor thought of sound, is the word of that thing which we inwardly speak by seeing it, and, therefore, it belongs to no language; hence, in this enigma there is a likeness, be it what it may, to that Word of God which is also God, since it is also so born from our knowledge as that Word was also born from the knowledge of the Father⁵⁰.

V. – GOD’S COMMUNICATION WITH MAN ; ORIGINAL SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE SOUL AND FOR LANGUAGE

Augustine understood that this conception of God’s immortal nature affected His means of communication. Signs, as *sensibilia*, operate in time and space, and God does not. Nevertheless, in Scripture God communicates with men and with angels, and Scripture, of necessity, presents him doing so in human terms. Needless to say, God appears to these two groups in entirely different ways. Once again, we can begin at the beginning, with *Genesis*:

de civ. dei 11.8 : When ‘God rested on the seventh day from all his works and sanctified that day’, this is not to be understood in some childish way (*pueriliter*), as if God had toiled at his work, seeing that ‘he spoke and they were made’ by a word which was intelligible and eternal, not vocal and temporal (*intelligibili et sempiterno, non sonabili et temporali*).

God’s speech in the act of creation thus in no way resembles human speech. In fact, God has no need of human speech to understand what we will, because he can read our thoughts.

Epistulae 130.10.20, 11.21 : In general, this business (prayer) is transacted more by sighs than by speech, more by tears than by utterance. For He sets our tears in His sight and our groaning is not hid from Him who created all things by His word and who does not look for human words... Words, then, are necessary for us so that we may be roused and take note of what we are asking, but we are not to believe that the Lord has need of them, either to be informed or to be influenced⁵¹.

Moreover, the words which we use when we pray, including the formulas taught to us by Christ, are merely signs to remind us, not God, of the realities of our relationship with him.

commentary of E.P. MEIJERING (*op. cit.* note 44).

50. *de trin.* 15.14.24 : *Verbum autem nostrum, illud quod non habet sonum neque cogitationem soni, sed eius rei quam videndo intus dicimus, et ideo nullius linguae est atque inde utcumque simile est in hoc aenigmate illi verbo dei quod etiam deus est quoniam sic et hoc de nostra nascitur quemadmodum et illud de scientia patris natum est.*

51. See also *de trin.* 15.10.18.

de civ. dei 10.19 : But they do not realize that these visible sacrifices are the signs of those invisible, greater and better sacrifices, just as spoken words are the signs of things. Therefore, when we pray and praise him, we direct significant utterances (*significantes voces*) to him, to whom we offer in our hearts the realities which we signify with our words (*cui res ipsas in corde quas significamus offerimus*) : thus we should realize that, in sacrificing, we should not offer visible sacrifices to anyone else other than to Him, whose invisible sacrifice we ought to be in our hearts⁵².

It is, of course, possible for God or angels to communicate directly with men, and even for them to appear to mortal sight, but they must do so through “something subordinate”.

de civ. dei 16.6 : God does not speak to the angels in the same way as we speak to one another, or to God, or to the angels, or as the angels speak to us or as God speaks to us through the angels, but in his own ineffable manner. But his speech is explained to us in our fashion. God’s speech, to be sure, is on a higher plane ; it precedes his action as the changeless reason of the action itself; and his speaking has no sound, no transitory noise ; it has a power that persists for eternity and operates in time. It is with this speech that he addresses the holy angels, whereas he speaks to us, who are situated far off, in a different way. And yet, when we also grasp something of this kind of speech with our inward ears, we come close to the angels.

de civ. dei 16.29 : God appeared to Abraham by the Oak of Mamre in the shape of three men who, without doubt, were angels ... It is, of course, within the capacity of divine and invisible power, of incorporeal and immutable nature, to appear even to mortal sight, without any change in itself, not appearing in its own being, but by means of something subordinate to itself ; and what is not subordinate to it⁵³ ?

If God is to appear in a form which is perceptible to our bodily senses, then it must be through something inferior, as *sensibilia* are inferior to *intelligibilia*. In the same way, there is the slightest chance that we might hear something of that elevated speech (*aliquid talis locutionis*) with our inward ears (*interioribus auribus*), in other words, with our intelligence⁵⁴. Of course, it is not necessary for God to speak to us with *sonantia verba*.

de musica 6.13.41 : But the proud soul desires to operate on (other rational souls) ; and insofar as every soul is better than every body, so far does the action on them seem more excellent than that on bodies. But God alone can operate on rational souls, not through a body, but through Himself. But such is that state of sin that souls are allowed to act upon souls, moving them by signifying through one or the

52. See also *de doctrina christiana* 3.5.9, 3.8.12-9.13 ; *de magistro* 1.2 ; *Conf.* 13.23.34 and 13.24.36.

53. *de civ. dei* 16.29 : *Item Deus apparuit Abrahae ad quercum Mambræ in tribus viris, quos dubitandum non est angelos fuisse ; ... Est quidem divinae potestatis et invisibilis, incorporalis inmutabilisque naturae, sine ulla sui mutatione etiam mortalibus aspectibus apparere, non per id quod est, sed per aliquid quod sibi subditum est; quid autem illi subditum non est?*

54. For instance, the “truth” speaks to Augustine’s “inward ear” at *Conf.* 12.15.18.

other body, or by natural signs such as a look or nod, or by conventional signs such as words⁵⁵.

Augustine represents God's communication with angels using entirely different imagery. For them, God resembles a book, where the words exist forever, a book which is never shut, so that all its words are visible at once. Since Augustine also imagines sight to be instantaneous, he can contrast the 'reading' of God's will with 'syllables' of time.

Conf. 13.15.18 : They ever 'see your face' and there, without syllables requiring time to pronounce, they read what you eternal will intends. They read, they choose, they love. They ever read, and what they read never passes away. By choosing and loving, they read the immutability of your design. Their codex is never closed, nor is their book ever folded shut. For you yourself are a book to them and you are 'for eternity'⁵⁶.

It should be noted that man once was, and will again be, able to see God as openly as the angels do; hence the use of *videre* and *contemplare* in *de trin.* 15.25.45 and *de civ. dei* 22.1.

de civ. dei 22.29 : For such reasons it is possible, indeed, it is most probable, that we shall then see the physical bodies of the new heaven and the new earth in such a fashion that as to observe God in utter clarity and distinctness, seeing him present everywhere and governing the whole material scheme of things by means of the bodies we shall then inhabit and the bodies we shall see wherever we turn our eyes. It will not be as it is now, when the invisible realities of God are apprehended and observed through the material things of his creation, and are partially apprehended by means of a puzzling reflection in a mirror...⁵⁷

Augustine therefore extrapolates the pre-existing connection between sin and our fleshly existence to explain our inability to understand God ; he has also connected the condition of our soul with the nature of our communications--all communication between human souls must exist through the mediation of physical objects. Only God can bypass this hurdle and speak directly to our minds.

The connection between sin and the existence and complexity of human language can be taken still further. That sin is responsible for the condition of our souls, whereby the image of the Trinity in human souls is not perfect, is made explicit in the *de Trinitate*.

de trin. 14.16.22 : But by committing sin the soul has lost justice and the holiness of truth, and thus this image has become disfigured and discolored; but it receives what it had once had when it is reformed and renewed.

55. See also *de civ. dei* 19.15.

56. *Conf.* 13.15.18 : *Vident enim faciem tuam semper et ibi legunt sine syllabis temporum, quid velit aeterna voluntas tua. legunt, eligunt et diligunt ; semper legunt et numquam praeterit quod legunt. eligendo enim et diligendo legunt ipsam incommutabilitatem consilii tui. non clauditur codex eorum nec plicatur liber eorum. quia tu ipse illis hoc es et es in aeternum.*

57. See also *de trin.* 14.19.25 : *Imago vero quae renovatur in spiritu mentis in agnitione dei non exterius sed interius de die in diem, ipsa perficietur visione quae tunc erit post iudicium facie ad faciem, nunc autem proficit per speculum in aenigmate.*

Similarly, God begat his Word precisely because, at this time, we are not intended to see him face to face, but rather “through a mirror in an enigma”.

de trin. 15.21.40 : I have indeed exerted myself as much as I could to make God the Father and God the Son known to us, that is, God the Begetter, who in some way has uttered everything that He has in His substance in His Word, co-eternal with Himself, and his Word, God Himself, who likewise has nothing more nor less in His substance than what was in Him, who did not beget the Word falsely but truly, not for the purpose now of seeing them face to face, but rather of seeing them through this likeness in an enigma, in the memory and understanding of our own mind, by means of conjectures, however tenuous they might be, attributing to the memory everything that we know, even if we do not think of it, and to the understanding the formation of thought by its own special type of thinking⁵⁸.

Furthermore, just as we lost our former ability to look upon God and understand him through that act of sight, our ability to perceive and understand each other has been blocked by the same sin which bound us to this life of flesh. Hence arose the necessity to communicate through signs:

Conf. 13.23.34 : These signs come from the mouth and sound forth so that people may respond ‘Amen’. The reason why all these utterances have to be physically spoken is the abyss of the world and the blindness of the flesh which cannot discern thoughts, so that it is necessary to make audible sounds⁵⁹.

Man himself increased the inadequacy of such signs by the behavior which led up to the confusion of languages that followed the construction of the tower of Babel (*Genesis* 11). There exist now a multiplicity of such signs, and many languages, increasing still further the chance that men will not be able to communicate with each other.

Conf. 13.20.27 : There are things of which the knowledge is fixed and determined without evolving with the generations, such as the lights of wisdom and knowledge. But while the truths of these things remain the same, their embodiments in the physical realm are both many and varied. These physical things have been produced to meet the needs of people estranged from your eternal truth, but only in your gospel ; for they were the product of the very waters whose morbid bitterness was the reason why, through your word, those signs emerged⁶⁰.

58. *de trin.* 15.21.40 : *Sane deum patrem et deum filium, id est deum genitorem qui omnia quae substantialiter habet in coaeterno sibi verbo suo dixit quodam modo, et ipsum verbum eius deum qui nec plus nec minus aliquid habet etiam ipse substantialiter quam quod est in illo qui verbum non medaciter sed veraciter genuit, quemadmodum potui, non ut illud iam facie ad faciem, sed per hanc similitudinem in aenigmate quantulumcumque coniciendo videretur in memoria et intellegentia mentis nostrae significare curavi, memoriae tribuens omne quod scimus etiamsi non inde cogitemus, intellegentiae vero proprio modo quandam cogitationis informationem.* See also *de civ. dei* 12.16.

59. See also *de musica* 6.13.41. P. BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 261 and Darrell Jackson (note 2) both cite the *de Genesi contra Manichaeos* (though different passages) for confirmation that the Fall led to the development of human language. See also J. FYLER, «St. Augustine, Genesis, and the origin of language», pp. 69-78 in *Saint Augustine and his influence in the Middle Ages* (Sewanee: The Press of the University of the South, 1988).

60. *Conf.* 13.20.27 : *quarum enim rerum notitiae sunt solidae et terminatae sine*

We should also recall that this inability to discern and communicate thoughts makes it impossible, according to Augustine, for men to know each other truly or to teach each other anything important.

de utilitate credendi x.23 : You will say in good conscience that you have not lied, and you will assert this with all the words at your command, but they are only words. For you, being a man, cannot so reveal the hidden places of your mind to another man, that you may be known to the depths of your soul⁶¹.

VI. – WORDS AS “SOMETHING SUBORDINATE”

At this point, we can turn back to language, and to the gap between saying and meaning with which we began. As we have seen (see note 32), Augustine believes that ideas, abstract concepts, have an existence as *res* independent of their instantiation through signs (eg. *de quantitate animae* 6.10 ; *Conf.* 10.12.19, 11.3.5, 13.10.27; *de trin.* 12.14.23). Naturally, not all of these *intelligibilia* present equal challenges to the human author. Augustine would no doubt himself assert that he has captured the essence of the three types of questions in his verbal formulation (*Conf.* 10.10.17), but that he certainly has not expressed or described the form of ‘Beauty’ when he speaks the words *species pulchritudinis* (*de civ. dei* 8.6) ; similarly, the word *Deus* captures none of His essence, but causes us to reflect upon His immortal nature (*de doctrina christiana* 1.6.6). It remains to describe this gap in terms drawn from Augustine’s writings on language.

In the *de dialectica*, Augustine develops a vocabulary to describe the process by which ideas in the mind are manifested through signs.

de dialectica v.50-58 : Whatever the mind, rather than the ear, realizes from a spoken word, which is then held within the mind itself, is called a *dicibile*. When a word is spoken, not for its own sake but for the sake of the thing which it signifies, it is called a *dictio*. Moreover, the thing itself, which is not yet a word nor yet realized as a word in the mind, whether or not it has a word by which it can be signified, can be called nothing other than a *res*, at least in proper speech. Therefore these things are subject to these four categories : word (*verbum*), idea (*dicibile*), meaningful utterance (*dictio*), thing (*res*).

What I call a word, both is a word and signifies a word. What I have called an idea (*dicibile*), is a word; however, it does not signify a word, but that which is understood from the word and contained in the mind. What I have called a meaningful utterance (*dictio*) is a word, but of the sort by which two things are signified simultaneously : the word itself, and that which comes to be in the mind

incrementis generationum tamquam lumina sapientiae et scientiae, earundem rerum sunt operationes corporales multae ac variae... necessitates alienarum ab aeternitate veritatis tuae populorum produxerunt haec, sed in evangelio tuo, quoniam ipsae aquae ista eiecerunt, quarum amarus languor fuit causa, ut in tuo verbo ista procederent. See also de civ. dei 19.7, Conf. 10.12.19 and 13.24.36.

61. See also *de magistro* 10.33, 11.36, and *Conf.* 11.3.5.

because of the word. That which I have called a thing (*res*) is a word which, with the exception of these other three (which are spoken), signifies whatever remains.

In the context of the *de Trinitate*, he simply uses the word *verbum*, but he applies this label to concepts which in the earlier treatise he would have called *verba*, *dicibiles*, *dictiones*, and *res* (eg. *de trin.* 15.11.20). It is therefore important to understand in reading Book 15 of the *de trinitate* that in both works he envisions the utterance of an idea as a process of many stages, in which the idea itself undergoes a series of changes ; these instantiations differ from each other sufficiently to warrant a separate label for each stage.

This much is also clear from the text of the *de trinitate* itself. The act of thinking about “what we know” results in a “word”, and the production of this *verbum* parallels the production of a spoken utterance :

de trin. 15.27.50 : Yet this very light reveals to you those three things in you, and in them you recognize the image of that highest Trinity itself, which you are as yet unable to contemplate with your eyes fixed steadily upon it. It also reveals to you that there is a true word in you when it is begotten from your knowledge, that is, when we say what we know; that, although we do not utter or even think of this word as a sound that is significant in the language of any people (*etsi nullius gentis lingua significantem vocem vel proferamus vel cogitemus*), yet our thought is formed from that which we know; and that there is in the gaze of the thinker an image of the thought very similar to that which the memory contained (*sitque in acie cogitantis imago simillima cognitionis eius quam memoria continebat*), namely, by the will or love as a third joining these two together, as it were, the parent and the offspring (*velut parentem ac prolem*).

The act of thinking about something, in this case, the most elevated and pure sort of knowledge, results in a *verbum*. This word is clearly not the same thing as the knowledge itself ; Augustine uses the terms ‘parent’ and ‘offspring’ once again. Nevertheless, this *verbum* born of true knowledge resembles most closely the *res* of the *de dialectica*, insofar as it is not yet conceived of in human language, even in one’s thoughts.

Augustine does not forget in this last book that he must maintain his hierarchy of matter, and therefore also his hierarchy of knowledge:

de trin. 15.12.22 : The human mind, therefore, knows all these things which it has acquired through itself, through the senses of its body, and through the testimonies of others, and keeps them in the storehouse of its memory ; and from them a true word is begotten when we say what we know, but a word which is anterior to every sound and to every thought of sound. For then the word is most like the thing that is known, and from which its image is also begotten, since the sight of thought arises from the sight of knowledge. This is the word that belongs to no language, the true word about a true thing, having nothing from itself, but everything from that knowledge from which it was born⁶².

Furthermore, when this knowledge is of the most elevated and permanent sort, the trinity formed in the act of intellection, whose result is this *res-*

62. *de trin.* 15.12.22 : ...*Tunc enim est verbum simillimum rei notae, de qua gignitur et imago eius quoniam de visione scientiae visio cogitationis exoritur, quod est verbum linguae nullius, verbum verum de re vera, nihil de suo habens sed totum de illa scientia de qua nascitur.*

verbum, resembles the true Trinity best, when compared to all the other trinities in the human mind.

de trin. 15.23.43 : For although the memory of man, and particularly that which beasts do not have, namely, that in which intelligible things are so contained that they do not come into it through the senses of the body, has, in proportion to its own small measure in this image of the Trinity, a likeness, incomparably unequal, of course, but yet a likeness of whatever kind it may be to the Father ; and similarly, although the understanding of man, which is formed from the memory by the attention of thought, when that which is known is spoken--it is a word of the heart and belongs to no language--has in its great unlikeness some likeness to the Son; and although the love of man which proceeds from knowledge and combines the memory and the understanding, as though common to the parent and the offspring--whence it is understood to be neither the parent nor the offspring--has in this image some likeness, although very unequal, to the Holy Spirit, yet we do not find that, as in this image of the Trinity, these three are not the one man, but belong to the one man, so in the highest Trinity itself, whose image this is, are those three of one God, but they are the one God, and there are three Persons, not one.

As noted above, the trinities within the mind come to resemble the highest Trinity more and more, especially as the 'processional' relationships become harder and harder to distinguish (*de trin.* 11.7.11 and 15.25.45). It is precisely this word which cannot be expressed in any language.

de trin. 15.11.20 : We must, therefore, come to that word of man, to the word of a living being endowed with reason, to the word of the image of God, not born of God but made by God ; this word cannot be uttered in sound nor thought in the likeness of sound (*quod neque prolativum est in sono neque cogitativum in similitudine soni*), such as must be done with the word of any language; it precedes all the signs by which it is signified, and is begotten by the knowledge which remains in the mind when this same knowledge is spoken inwardly, just as it is. For the sight of thought is very similar to the sight of knowledge (*Simillima est enim visio cogitationis visioni scientiae*). For, when it is spoken through a sound or through some bodily sign, it is spoken not just as it is, but as it can be seen or heard through the body. When, therefore, that which is in the knowledge is in the word, then it is a true word, and the truth which is expected from man, so that what is in the knowledge is also in the word.

Augustine does not assert that even this word is identical to the knowledge from which it is born, though at this stage it is "most similar to the thing known" (*simillimum rei notae*). The process of thinking about something introduces a difference, and the images formed from these truths are not equal to the truths themselves (see *de trin.* 6.10.11 and 15.22.43).

de trin. 15.27.50 : He, who is able, sees and discerns that the will indeed proceeds from thought (for no one wills anything of which he is wholly ignorant as to what it is, or of what kind it is), but that it is also not an image of thought ; and that, accordingly, a certain difference is insinuated in this intelligible thing between the birth and the procession, since to see something in thought is not the same as to desire it, or even to enjoy it with the will⁶³.

63. *de trin.* 15.27.50 : *Quam quidem voluntatem de cognitione procedere (nemo enim vult quod omnino quid vel quale sit nescit), non tamen esse cognitionis imaginem, et ideo quandam in hac re intellegibili nativitatis et processionis insinuari distantiam quoniam non*

How much greater, then, must be the difference between the image of this truth in our thought, and the expression of that image in a word ! Here we may borrow the terms Augustine uses to describe God's speech to men : as God shows himself to the corporeal sight of men 'through something subordinate' (*de civ. dei* 16.29), which was not of the same essence as himself, so the process of thinking about true knowledge and producing an utterance--even one anterior to every sound and all thought of sound--results in something both dissimilar and subordinate.

de civ. dei 10.13 : Just as the uttered sound, which makes audible the thought that has its existence in the silence of understanding, is not the same as that thought, so the visible form in which God, who exists in his invisible substance, became visible was not identical with God himself⁶⁴.

VII. – OUR COGNITIVE AND LINGUISTIC FAILURE WHEN CONFRONTED BY DEATH

I have already considered Augustine's concern for time in a variety of contexts ; I have also noted Augustine's concern for terminology, especially in the use of Greek terms in worship where no Latin word is available (see notes 4 and 16). Having now described the reasoning which underlies his fear of the inadequacy of language, especially with regard to theological issues, I turn next to three passages in which Augustine confronts particular problems in the grammar and vocabulary of his own language.

In the same book of the *Confessions* in which he confronts the nature of God's immortality, Augustine tries to understand the tense system of Latin and the understanding of time which lies behind it. He draws his conclusions while desiring to think from a human perspective, as one thinking about his past and predicting the future through expectations based on knowledge of past events (*Conf.* 10.8.14). Because humans operate and think in time, and because time marches ever forward, the past cannot be recovered, cannot be seen or touched through sense perception : we cannot know history ; we can only believe it (*de civ. dei* 11.3 ; *de utilitate credendi* xi.25).

Conf. 11.20.26 : What is by now evident and clear is that neither future nor past exists, and it is inexact language to speak of three times--past, present, and future. Perhaps it would be exact to say : there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things to come. In the soul there are these three aspects of time, and I do not see them anywhere else : a present memory of past events, a present awareness of present things, and a present expectation of things to come.

hoc est cogitatione conspiciere quod appetere vel etiam perfrui voluntate, cernit discernitque qui potest.

64. *de civ. dei* 10.13 : *Sicut enim sonus, quo auditur sententia in silentio intelligentiae constituta, non est hoc quod ipsa; ita et species, qua visus est Deus, in natura invisibili constitutus, non erat quod ipse.*

His thought on the subject is quite sophisticated and flexible. For men, yesterday no longer exists except as a memory, and that memory has its existence solely in the present. Similarly, he argues that the word ‘future’ is misleading because it presumes a future exists for man to know, which he cannot; man has expectations in the present about future events, expectations based on data from the past⁶⁵. He even recognizes the difference between predicting events based on conjectures and acting out a sequence of repeated actions. This latter type of ‘future event’ we can see ‘more clearly and more certainly’ (*de trin.* 15.7.13); examples are the rising of the sun (*Conf.* 11.18.24) and the singing of a song :

Conf. 11.31.41 : A person singing or hearing a song he knows well suffers a distension or stretching in feeling and in sense-perception from the expectation of future sounds and the memory of past sound.

Augustine later returns to discuss this same failure of language with a specific example. Just as humans inaccurately think about past, present, and future, while in reality the present is but a fleeting moment which nevertheless defines its own past and future (see *Conf.* 11.13.16), so humans speak of dying, when in reality death is instantaneous, and it is really proper only to speak of ‘before death’ and ‘after death’ (*de civ. dei* 13.11). This failure to understand death is simultaneously cognitive and linguistic.

de civ. dei 13.11 : Hence I find it significant and appropriate, even if it did not happen through human industry but, perchance, through divine decision, that the grammarians have not been able to decline the Latin verb *moritur* by the same rule as other verbs of this type. For from *oritur* comes the past tense *ortus est*, and all similar verbs are declined in the perfect with the perfect participle. But if we ask the perfect of *moritur*, the invariable answer is *mortuus est*, [which is an adjective]... The adjective *mortuus* is used instead of a perfect participle so as to give a declension to something which cannot be declined.

(I used ‘decline’ to translate *declinare*, where ‘conjugate’ would more correct, because Augustine makes a variety of puns on the Latin verb, which can mean both ‘conjugate’ as well as ‘decline’, as in ‘avoid’). Augustine recognizes that one can say, in Latin, “he is dying” but not “he has died” ; one can only say “he is dead”. In any event, Augustine argues that death is no more easily understood than avoided, or described.

de civ. dei 13.11 : Would that we had ensured, by acting rightly in paradise, that there was really no death ! But as it is, death is not only a reality, but so troublesome a reality that it cannot be explained by any verbal formula, nor escaped by any scheme⁶⁶.

Finally, we have already examined passages in which Augustine acknowledges that the vocabulary of his language does not describe divine

65. *de trin.* 15.7.13 : *Non ex futuris praeterita sed futura ex praeteritis non tamen firma cognitione conicimus.*

66. *de civ. dei* 13.11 : *Atque utinam in paradiso bene vivendo egissemus, ut re vera nulla mors esset. Nunc autem non solum est, verum etiam tam molesta est, ut nec ulla explicari locutione possit nec ulla ratione vitari.*

matters very well, but at least once he does so by criticizing the labels with which we normally classify words, and even the categories themselves.

de trin. 15.5.8 : Hence, if we say : “He is eternal, immortal, incorruptible, unchangeable, living, wise, powerful, beautiful, just, good, blessed, and spirit”, only the last of these designations seems to signify substance, but the rest to signify qualities of this substance; but it is not so in that ineffable and simple nature. For whatever seems to be said there according to qualities must be understood according to substance or essence⁶⁷.

Augustine refers to ‘substance’ and ‘qualities’, that is, to nouns and adjectives. In fact, he argues, all of these modifiers--adjectives--must be understood as substantives, ie. nouns ; all of these qualities must be understood (*intellegendum est*) as substances⁶⁸.

VIII. – THE FAILURE OF THE INNER/OUTER BODY METAPHOR

Augustine, as we have seen, divided the realm of his experience between a world of *sensibilia* and a world of *intelligibilia*, and he discussed the qualities of those two categories in some detail. In explicating Augustine on the Trinity, I tried to highlight his pedagogical reasons for moving from “material signs to the spiritual realities which they represent”. It is obvious from the characteristics which he attributes to these categories that there can be no item simultaneously in both worlds, and therefore that the adoption of these definitions created a gap between the realm of the mind and the physical world. The mind affects the outside world through its control of the physical body, and it gathers information from that world through the senses, “those five well-known messengers of the body⁶⁹”.

It was relatively easy for Augustine to describe and discuss the operation of the senses. If, as previously, we follow Augustine from the world of the senses to the intellect as it reviews the information gathered by the senses, we can see that he needs to create, or adopt, a vocabulary which would allow him to

67. *de trin.* 15.5.8 : *Proinde si dicamus: ‘aeternus, immortalis, incorruptibilis, immutabilis, vivus, sapiens, potens, speciosus, iustus, bonus, beatus, spiritus,’ horum omnium novissimum quod posui quasi tantummodo videtur significare substantiam, cetera vero huius substantiae qualitates ; sed non ita est in illa ineffabili simplicique natura. Quidquid enim secundum qualitates illic dici videtur secundum substantiam vel essentiam est intellegendum.*

68. *Intellegere* is the all-purpose word of choice for Augustine when he talks about the interpretation of Scripture. See, for instance, *de civ. dei* 15.2 : *Haec forma intellegendi de apostolica auctoritate descendens locum nobis aperit, quem ad modum scripturas duorum testamentorum, veteris et novi, accipere debeamus.*

69. *de utilitate credendi* 1.1 ; see also *de trin.* 15.27.49 : *[Mens] cui tamquam in loco superiore et interiore honorabiliter praesidenti iudicanda omnia nuntiant etiam corporis sensus...*

discuss the operations of the mind within a non-physical world. At this secondary stage, the task was simple enough; for Augustine found within his own memory 'images' of things previously perceived through sense-perception, and he found that he could experience again, within the confines of his memory, all those sensations which he had initially felt through his body.

Conf. 10.8.12-13 : I come to the fields and vast palaces of memory, where are the storehouses of innumerable images of all kinds of objects brought in by sense-perception... The objects themselves do not enter, but the images of the perceived objects are available to the thought recalling them. But who can say how images are created, even though it may be clear by which senses they are grasped and stored within. For even when I am in darkness and silence, in my memory I can produce colors at will, and distinguish between white and black and between whatever other colors I wish...

The precision with which he was able to recreate past experiences led him to believe that the mind functioned exactly as the body did, with its own complete set of senses. For instance, after the passage just quoted, he goes on to list images drawn from the five senses which he finds in his memory.

Conf. 10.6.8 : Yet there is a light I love ... and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God--a light, voice, odor, food, embrace of my inner man, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food which no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God.

In the *de Trinitate*, he explains this process more clearly, and he develops more fully the metaphor of "inner vision" which I have mentioned before.

de trin. 11.3.6 : For even when the image (*species*) of the body which was perceived corporally has been taken away, yet a likeness (*similitudo*) of it remains in the memory, to which the will may again turn its gaze (*acies*) in order to be formed by it from within (*intrinsicus*), as the sense was formed by the sensible body that was presented to it from without (*extrinsicus*). And so that trinity arises from the memory, the inner vision (*interna visione*), and the will which unites both. And when these three are drawn together (*coguntur*) into unity, then from that act of combining itself (*ab ipso coactu*), they are called thought (*cogitatio*).

But the place of that bodily image, which was perceived from without (*extrinsicus*), is taken by the memory, retaining the image which the soul absorbs into itself through the bodily sense ; and the vision, which was without (*quae foris erat*) when the sense was formed by a sensible body (*ex corpore sensibili*), is succeeded by a similar vision within (*succedit intus similis visio*), when the gaze of the mind (*acies animi*) is formed from that which the memory retains and absent bodies are conceived ; and the will itself, as it moved the sense to be formed to the body that was presented to it from without (*foris*), and combined both of them when it had been formed, so in the act of remembering it causes the eye of the mind to turn back to the memory, in order that it may be formed by that which the memory retains, and that there may be a similar vision in thought (*fit in cogitatione similis visio*)⁷⁰.

70. The issues raised in this passage are also discussed by Augustine in *de Genesi ad litteram* XII ; on that book (with considerable references to the *de trin.*) see J. PÉPIN, *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 34 (1954) 373-400. I have already eschewed

Obviously, having once adopted the metaphor, Augustine pushes it to the furthest level of detail, weaving his argument back and forth from sense-perception to intellection (*intrinsecus, extrinsecus; intus, foris*). Very early in his career he selects sight as the sense most closely related to the processes of the mind: “reason is the mind’s sight, with which it looks upon the truth by itself, without the interference of the body⁷¹”. This allows him to create an enormous apparatus of metaphorical language with which to discuss the workings of the mind. For instance, having concluded that God must be present to the mind for man to learn anything (*de magistro* 11.38), he later refers with great frequency to God as the ‘light’ of the mind, which illumines those things which he allows us to know and to understand:

de trin. 12.15.24: But we ought rather to believe that the nature of the intellectual mind is so formed as to see those things which, according to the disposition of the Creator, are subjoined to intelligible things in the natural order, in a sort of incorporeal light of its own kind, as the eye of the flesh sees the things that lie about it in this corporeal light, of which light it is made to be receptive and to which it is adapted⁷².

In fact, he envisions the operations of the two to be parallel to such an extent that he frequently refers to the existence of an inner and an outer man (eg. *Conf.* 10.6.9).

As I suggested previously (see end of Section II), this metaphor and its vocabulary hold certain advantages for Augustine with respect to time, for sight is instantaneous and non-sequential in a way that thought can never be (*de trin.* 15.25.45; *de civ. dei* 22.1 and 22.29). The consequences of both these assumptions about time, and the use of this metaphor, are on dramatic display in his discussion of the three types of sight in his major commentary on *Genesis*.

de Genesi ad litteram 12.11.22: When, therefore, one reads the sentence “Love your neighbor as yourself”, he sees (*videre*) the letters physically, he thinks (*cogitare*) about his neighbor spiritually, but he looks (*conspicere*) upon this love intellectually. Furthermore, absent letters can be seen with spiritual sight, and one’s neighbor, when present, can be seen with bodily vision. However, love cannot be seen as a physical substance with the eyes of the body, nor can an image of love’s body be contemplated by spiritual sight; it can be seen and grasped by the mind alone, that is, by the intellect.

comment on the questions Pépin raises concerning the Plotinian antecedents for these passages.

71. *de immortalitate animae* 6.10: *ratio est aspectus animi, quo per seipsum, non per corpus, verum intuetur*. See also *de ordine* 2.3.10: *quam ob rem si menti hoc est intellegere, quod sensui videre...* and *de quantitate animae* 14.23-24: *Incorporalia can be seen by the interiore quidam oculo, id est intellegentia*.

72. *de trin.* 12.15.24: *Sed potius credendum est mentis intellectualis ita conditam esse naturam ut rebus intellegibilibus naturali ordine disponente conditore subiuncta sic ista videat in quadam luce sui generis incorporea quemadmodum oculus carnis videt quae in hac corporea luce circumadiacent, cuius lucis capax eique congruens est creatus*.

See also *de Genesi ad litteram* 12.31.59: God is the light for the soul, for intellectual vision. See also the texts listed in note 7.

The same words are used each time he offers definitions of the three types of sight : corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual (*de Genesi ad litteram* 12.4.15, 12.7.16.) Each type of sight has its own province : *corporalia*, *corporales imagines* (or *similitudines corporum*), and *intellegibilia*; and each is superior to the former : *habent utique ordinem suum, et est aliud alio praecellentius* (*de Genesi ad litteram* 12.24.51). As above (*de trin.* 11.7.11) he suggested that the trinity formed by the thought of remembered *sensibilia* was inferior because it retained, in part, its relationship to time, so here the language used to differentiate the types of sight suggests a temporal hierarchy : remembered objects are cogitated, while ideas are seen. The former is equated with rumination, the latter is instantaneous.

I discussed above a number problems involved in thinking about God and the Trinity, and the advantages of proceeding from *corporalia* to *intellegibilia* to ‘the word which is anterior to every sound and every thought of sound’ (Section III) ; I also discussed Augustine’s belief that God must appear to our corporeal senses through ‘something subordinate’ (Section IV). We have also seen that Scripture’s use of terms appropriate to human beings to discuss God can backfire (*Conf.* 12.27.37). In adopting this metaphor of mental vision, Augustine exposed himself to the same hazards as Scripture : he used language and concepts appropriate to something subordinate to describe, first, man’s soul, and then God himself. In reality, Augustine proved remarkably adept at working through the consequences of his methodology, and he got into trouble only very rarely. I offer two examples.

To begin with, Augustine acknowledged that other metaphors for thought are possible, and indeed sometimes necessary. How can one describe the thoughts of another in a text other than through words ? It evidently sounded as silly to Augustine as it sounds to us to describe someone reading or writing his own thoughts. He therefore accepted that the Biblical phrase ‘they said, thinking’ as equivalent to ‘they thought, saying’ : “[in both places] it is indicated that they speak within themselves and in their hearts” (*de trin.* 15.10.17). He himself described the mind speaking to itself (*Conf.* 12.5.5).

de trin. 15.10.18 : Some thoughts, then, are speeches of the heart... Yet because we speak of thoughts as speeches of the heart, we do not, therefore, mean that they are not at the same time acts of sight, which arise from the sights of knowledge when they are true. For when these take place outwardly through the body, the speech is one thing and sight another thing; but when we think inwardly, then both are one. Thus hearing and sight are two things, differing from each other, in the senses of the body, but in the mind it is not one thing to see and another thing to hear⁷³.

73. *de trin.* 15.10.18 : *Quaedam ergo cogitationes locutiones sunt cordis... Nec tamen quia dicimus locutiones cordis esse cogitationes ideo non sunt etiam visiones exortae de notitiae visionibus quando verae sunt. Foris enim cum per corpus haec fiunt aliud est locutio, aliud visio; intus autem cum cogitamus utrumque unum est. Sicut auditio et visio duo quaedam sunt inter se distantia in sensibus corporis, in animo autem non est aliud atque aliud videre et audire.*

Augustine had begun to discuss the production of the *verbum* which arises from the sight of things which we know, and in that context it was necessary for the reader to understand that this act of mental sight is instantaneous, even though in the previous paragraph, as elsewhere, he had described (and indeed, had to describe) the thoughts themselves as speeches in discursive language within the mind. Here the metaphor of the interior man fails : the act of seeing must, he acknowledges, encompass that of hearing. Furthermore, human language, of any and all nations, because it exists in time, cannot by its very nature represent the concept he wishes us to see.

He had already, in fact, acknowledged another failing in his metaphor. At the beginning of book 14 he tries to understand how the mind can think about itself.

de trin. 14.6.8 : The power of thought (*cogitatio*) is so great that the mind (*mens*) can only place itself in its own sight (*conspectus*) when it thinks about (*cogitare*) itself ; and in this way nothing is in the sight of the mind except when it is thought about, with the result that the mind itself, in which everything which is thought is thought, can only be in its own sight by thinking about itself⁷⁴.

He does so, initially, by using his 'sight of the mind' metaphor, and discovers a problem. If the mind 'thinks' by seeing, then in order to think about itself, it must see itself. Since, as his metaphor assumes, the body and the mind operate in parallel, he feels that he ought to be able to construct an explanation using a description of corporal sight and physical objects. It doesn't work.

de trin. 14.6.8 : Moreover, I cannot discover how the mind is not in its sight when it is not thinking about itself, since it can never be without itself --as if it were one thing and its sight another. Yet it would not be silly to say the same thing about the eye of the body (*oculus corporis*). For the eye is fixed in its own position in the body, but its sight (*aspectus*) is aimed at things which are external to it, and extends even to the stars. Nor is an eye ever in its own sight, insofar as it does not see itself except in a mirror, as I said earlier (10.3.5) ; which is no parallel for the way in which the mind places itself in its own sight by thinking about itself. Certainly, therefore, the mind does not see part of itself by means of another part of itself, when it sees itself by thinking about itself, as we see with some parts of our body, namely the eyes, those other parts which can be within our sight. What could be more absurd to say, or even to think ?

Augustine has to admit that, in fact, his metaphor fails, and it does so because it draws its imagery from the world of the senses, from things subordinate.

de trin. 14.6.8 : When the truth is consulted, it gives none of these answers, since when we think in this way, we but think with the imagined images of physical objects; and it is absolutely certain that the mind is not such to those few minds which can be consulted regarding the truth in this matter.

74. *de trin.* 14.6.8 : *Tanta est tamen cogitationis vis ut nec ipsa mens quodam modo se in conspectu suo ponat nisi quando se cogitat, ac per hoc ita nihil in conspectu mentis est nisi unde cogitatur ut nec ipsa mens qua cogitatur quidquid cogitatur aliter possit esse in conspectu suo nisi se ipsam cogitando.*

When Augustine, towards the end of the work, begins to speak of the most profound regions of memory, in which there exists, “as it were, knowledge of knowledge, vision of vision, and understanding of understanding” (*de trin.* 15.21.40), one might think that he has gotten carried away in a rhetorical flight of fancy and has forgotten his earlier discovery that even vision will not suffice as a metaphor to describe the processes of the mind. Perhaps so. But he does not forget for long. Augustine closes his work, sadly admitting that he has, in fact, said “nothing worthy of the ineffability of that highest Trinity” (*de trin.* 15.27.50). Those who can, he writes, see that a difference is insinuated between knowledge and the thought of knowledge (*de trin.* 15.25.50). To the reader he makes one last address :

de trin. 15.27.50 : You could have seen this, too, although you were unable then, as you are unable now, to unfold with adequate speech what you scarcely saw amid the clouds of corporeal likenesses that do not cease to appear in our human thoughts⁷⁵.

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SUMMARY : Augustine’s linguistics are considered in relation to his epistemological and ontological thought. According to Augustine, human soul communicate using words which, as *sensibilia*, like our bodies, operate in time and space. Our language thus finds its origin in the sin which bound our souls to our bodies ; and thus also our present means of communication stand in direct contrast to those employed by God. Similarly, the nature of human understanding makes metaphors which draw on physical imagery particularly useful pedagogical tools, but as the same time renders texts which use those metaphors inherently inadequate for discussing complex issues. In the final books of the *de Trinitate* Augustine himself recognizes the consequences of this line of thought and acknowledges that he has said “nothing worthy of the ineffability of the highest Trinity” (*de Trin.* 15.27.50).

75. *de trin.* 15.27.50 : *Potuisti et tu quamvis non potueris neque possis explicare sufficienti eloquio quod inter nubila similitudinum corporalium quae cogitationibus humanis occurrere non desinunt vix vidisti.*