Maynooth Philosophical Papers
OnlineFirst: August 28, 2020
DOI: 10.5840/mpp20208249

THE CREATIVE WORD: REFLECTIONS ON THE AUGUSTINIAN *EPISTEME*

Philipp W. Rosemann

Abstract. Book XI of his *Confessions* contains Augustine's celebrated 'treatise' on time. In reality, however, the 'treatise' is no such thing, but rather an integral part of a discussion of God's creation through the Word: if God creates by speaking, as Scripture affirms, then how can God speak, given the fact that he must be thought not to be subject to time? What is a timeless word? While these are the questions that Augustine explicitly addresses in Book XI, there is something very important that he does not justify at all: namely, the possibility of speaking the world into existence. My paper investigates the *episteme* within which such a claim can make sense. How must one conceive of the relationship between the world and words to be able to assume that the latter can 'make' the former?

Augustine's *Confessions* are an *opus sui generis* that confounds the modern reader's expectations. Much of the work reads like a spiritual autobiography, although this autobiography is presented in the form of a prayer. The autobiography does, as one would expect, allow the reader to gain insight into important stages and episodes in Augustine's life, but it also contains long discussions of topics like the nature of evil, friendship, sin, and time. The prayer, for its part, has a pleading, restless, and insistent character that is far from conveying settled religious certainty. The final four books, while continuing in the prayerful tone, are not autobiographical at all, being devoted to an analysis of memory, on the one hand (Book X), and to an exegesis of the opening verses of Genesis, on the other (Books XI–XIII). This apparent break has raised questions about the coherence of the *Confessions*. Furthermore, throughout the work, Augustine appears to have trouble distinguishing between his own words and quotations, some classical, but most of them scriptural. In our modern editions, these quotations are marked as such, but this was not the case in the first manuscripts. Plagiarism!

The striking otherness of the literary form of the *Confessions* alerts the reader to the need of reconstituting his or her interpretative horizon. To do justice to the *Confessions*, we need to imagine a piece of writing which transgresses the limits of many of our interpretative categories, which is at once autobiography, prayer, philosophical and theological treatise, and scriptural exegesis. We

ISSN 2009-7743

need to imagine a work which views its own words as received, so that its task is not originality, but the grateful returning of a gift to its giver.

At the larger structural and literary levels the strangeness of the *Confessions* is fairly obvious. It can be more difficult to appreciate the challenging difference of Augustine's *magnum opus* once one focuses upon individual 'treatises', thoughts, and arguments. The treatment of time in Book XI is a good example. The philosophical arguments that Augustine advances appear familiar enough to be appreciated as contributions to the contemporary debate regarding the nature of time. It is relatively easy to abstract from the context of the discussion—namely, Augustine's exegesis of the Six Days of creation as narrated by Genesis. Yet the context makes all the difference in the interpretation of Augustine's arguments. In particular, it is instructive to pay close attention both to the questions which Augustine asks, and to those which he passes over. He does ask how God's creative act should be conceived in relation to time, and ends up spending Book XI on elucidating this problem. But this is not the first question that arises about creation. The first question is this: 'How did you make heaven and earth, and what machine (*machina*) did you use for so vast an operation?' (XI.v.7).[1] Augustine quickly clarifies that God must not be thought along the lines of a craftsman who chooses to impose form upon an already existing object, possessing the mental and physical capacity, perhaps even the tools, to realize this plan. Such a craftsman transforms one object into another rather than creating anything, properly speaking. If this is not how God creates, then how must we conceive of the creative act? Augustine's answer comes in the form of a quotation from the Psalms: 'Therefore you spoke and they were made, and in your word you made them' (XI.v.7).[2] The next paragraph immediately takes the obvious question, 'But how did you speak?' in the direction of juxtaposing God's timeless speech with speech in time (XI.vi.8). The philosophy and theology of time then occupy Augustine until the end of Book XI.

1. I am quoting the translation by Henry Chadwick: Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For the Latin text, I am following the edition by James J. O'Donnell: Augustine, *Confessions*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). The Latin text will be cited when it is important to a proper understanding of Augustine's terminology.
2. 'Ergo dixisti et facta sunt atque in verbo tuo fecisti ea' echoes Ps. 32:9, 'quoniam ipse dixit, et facta sunt'. Of course, the idea also occurs in Genesis, as in the famous line, 'And God said: Be light made. And light was made' (Gen. 1:3; Douay-Rheims). Chadwick, by the way, translates *in verbo tuo fecisti ea* as 'by your word you made them', a choice that is difficult to justify.

I.
The Question Not Asked

The question that Augustine does not ask, and therefore does not answer, is what it means to create by speaking, by uttering a creative word: 'Therefore you spoke and they were made, and in your word you made them'. Surely, the modern reader must find such a notion baffling—nothing more, perhaps, than the product of a pre-scientific, superstitious mind, and hence to be discounted. Augustine, by contrast—and, one assumes, his readers—must have seen the notion as sufficiently obvious not to warrant further discussion.

The heuristic value of such a striking contrast between a text which has come down to us from a different time or culture and its later or foreign readers is that it draws attention to the different horizons to which the two belong. In Heideggerian parlance, when we attend to that which, in the 'saying' of a text, remains unsaid (*das im Sagen Ungesagte*), we learn about assumptions so fundamental that they either did not need to be made explicit, or indeed could not be made explicit.[3] These assumptions form the soil in which the thought under investigation was able to grow. More technically, the assumptions belong to an unquestioned, *a priori* framework that made it possible to think certain thoughts. Foucault termed this framework an '*episteme*': not knowledge, but the deep structure of knowledge which renders the latter possible in the first place.[4]

After this methodological digression, we are in the position to ask a precise question about Book XI of the *Confessions*: what conception of the word lies behind the idea that it is possible to create—to make things rather than merely transforming them—by speaking? How must one conceive of the word to be able to take it for granted that it has the power to create?[5]

---

3. Heidegger invokes the notion of *das im Sagen Ungesagte* at the very beginning of his reading of Plato's Cave: *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, 4th ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1997), p. 5. For an excellent interpretation, see Josef Pieper, *Philosophia negativa. Zwei Versuche über Thomas von Aquin*, Hochland-Bücherei (Munich: Kösel, 1953), pp. 13–15.
4. Foucault introduces the notion of *episteme*, or 'historical *a priori*', in the introduction to *The Order of Things*.
5. I am not aware of literature on Augustine which addresses this precise question. The scholarship that I have found useful in preparing this article deals mostly with aspects of Augustine's language, or his philosophy/theology of language. Let me mention, in particular, the following items: Kurt Smolak, 'Sic itaque audiar! Zum Phänomen "Sprache" in Augustins Confessiones', *Augustinus*, 39 (1994), 509–17; Gérald Antoni, *La prière chez saint Augustin. D'une philosophie du langage à la théologie du Verbe*, Philologie et Mercure (Paris: Vrin, 1997); Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Saint Augustin et les actes de parole*, Épiméthee (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002); Josiane Rieu, 'Le temps de la parole dans *Les Confessions* de saint Augustin', *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 79:4 (2005), 525–41; Philippe Hoffmann, 'Temps et éternité dans le livre XI des *Confessions*: Augustin, Plotin, Porphyre et saint Paul', *Revue*

II.
World as Word

We conceive of language as 'communication', that is, the linguistic transmission from one person to another of information about the world, including the speaker's own feelings, desires, and thoughts. Non-linguistic communication occurs in the animal world as well as in the properly human realm; thus, for example, a honeybee is able to 'communicate the location of an especially rich food source to its hivemates'.[6] Linguists see language as a particularly sophisticated system of communication which includes features such as unbounded scope (there are no limits to the expression of novel ideas in new ways), stimulus freedom (the human response to situations is not determined by internal or external stimuli), and contextual appropriateness (language is able to be adapted to novel situations).[7] Furthermore, the vast majority of linguistic signs are arbitrary, in the sense that they do not exhibit a necessary or natural connection with their referent. Thus, a dog can be called *dog*, *Hund*, *chien*, or *perro*—none of these words is closer to the reality of dog than any other.[8] In such a linguistic system, meaning arises from the combination of discrete elements, phonemes, into progressively larger units: morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and texts. The reason why *hog* and *dog* have different referents is not that these words are intrinsically tied to different animals, but that /h/ and /d/ are discrete phonemes in contemporary English. It is not impossible to imagine an evolution in the English language, or one of its dialects, in which the word *hog* could come to designate a member of the canine species. (Just as *to lay* has come to designate what used to be designated by *to lie*, in the sense of 'to be or remain in a flat position'.)

Much of this characterization of the contemporary conception of language would not have been unintelligible to Augustine, who, in the tradition of Stoic philosophy of language, was capable of producing linguistic analyses of considerable sophistication.[9] His dialogue *De magistro*, for example, contains a detailed discussion of metalanguage—that is, the self-referential use of language,

---

d'études augustiniennes et patristiques, 63 (2017), 31–79 (with excellent bibliography in the footnotes).

6. Adrian Akmajian, Richard A. Demers, and Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1979), p. 9. The book, currently in its sixth edition, is one of the most popular contemporary introductions for college use.
7. See ibid., p. 63.
8. See ibid., p. 53.
9. For an overview, with a particular emphasis upon Augustine's Stoic sources, see Gerard Watson, 'St Augustine's Theory of Language', *The Maynooth Review*, 6:2 (1982), 4–20.

as in '*Dog* has three letters'—at a very high level.[10] Yet there is a further dimension to Augustine's understanding of language—or, let us rather say, of the word—which places him in a totally different universe than that where modern linguistics resides.

In Augustine's world, it is not only humans who speak. Things—inanimate beings—are depicted as possessing the same ability: 'The created order speaks to all' (*immo vero omnibus loquitur*; X.vi.10). Then why is it that many do not hear what it has to say? 'It does not speak to everyone in the same way' (*non omnibus eadem loquitur*; ibid.). For, creation will speak only if it is asked the right questions. Humans, as opposed to animals, are in a position to ask such questions, but not all do. A certain mindset is required, a certain capacity to discern: 'created things do not answer those who question them if the power to judge is lost' (*nec respondent ista interrogantibus nisi iudicantibus*; ibid.). The discernment at issue here is the ability to see God in the created order; one could perhaps say, to read the created order like a text revealing its author. Quoting Paul, Augustine explains: 'human beings can put a question so that "the invisible things of God are understood and seen through the things that are made"' (*homines autem possunt interrogare, ut invisibilia dei per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciant*; ibid.).[11]

It would be easy to object at this point that, obviously, Augustine is using highly metaphorical language. Only a madman would assume the possibility of a dialogue between a human being and, say, the sun. The following interaction must belong to the realm of the fable: 'I asked the mass of the sun about my God, and it replied to me: "It is not I, but he made me"' (X.vi.9).[12] We will be able to respond to this objection soon, but first we must pursue our investigation a step further. What does Augustine have in mind when he mentions the ability to 'judge' as a precondition for properly interpreting what nature has to say? In response to this question, we need to consider the second half of an earlier quotation: 'The created order speaks to all', Augustine writes, and he continues: 'but it is understood by those who hear its outward voice and compare it with the truth within themselves' (*sed illi intellegunt qui eius vocem acceptam foris intus cum veritate conferunt*; X.vi.10).

---

10. I devoted some pages to the *De magistro* in a book co-authored with the linguist Werner Welte, *Alltagssprachliche Metakommunikation im Englischen und Deutschen* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1990), pp. 13–17. Also see my essay, '*Li* or *ly*, Marker of Metalanguage in Scholastic Latin', in *Tolle lege: Essays on Augustine and on Medieval Philosophy in Honor of Roland J. Teske, SJ*, ed. by Richard C. Taylor, David Twetten, and Michael Wreen, Marquette Studies in Philosophy, 73 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011), pp. 335–52.
11. Cf. Rom. 1:20: 'invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur'.
12. 'Mass of the sun' is *mundi molem* in the Latin text. This is better translated as 'mass of the earth'.

This inward truth, too, speaks, as we learn in Book XI, albeit not in any natural language: 'Within me, within the lodging of my thinking, there would speak a truth which is neither Hebrew nor Greek nor Latin nor any barbarian tongue and which uses neither mouth nor tongue as instruments and utters no audible syllables' (XI.iii.5). What Augustine is describing here is not a Chomskyian deep structure; it is God's own voice. Again, however, this voice will speak only if it is asked by a suitably disposed questioner: 'you my God I ask. "Spare my sins"' (ibid.).[13] To those who approach the Lord with a humble heart, he will speak in the depths of the mind to provide it with its basic parameters for the judgement of truth, as well as summoning it to its ultimate goal.[14]

We find, then, that human language is suspended, as it were, between two other languages. One could call one of them, the language of things, 'infra-linguistic'. Thus, the created order speaks to us, but its cosmic language comprises no words. It is a system of signs that points to the Creator.[15] God's voice, on other hand, is supra-linguistic, transcending the different natural languages.

We note the circular relationship among the three languages. Human language—such as the language Augustine employs in the *Confessions*—articulates the logic of the created order, praising the Creator who stands behind this order. It is capable of doing so, however, only on the condition of opening itself to God's word, which speaks in the human mind. In the light of this truth, the created order reveals not only its own intelligibility but, simultaneously, it points to its Maker. Human language is always already a response to a Word preceding it. Augustine dwells on this structure (which is the structure of grace) from the very first page of the *Confessions*. The opening paragraph of Book XI reiterates the theme: 'the long story I have told to the best of my ability and will responds to your prior will that I should make confession to you, my Lord God' (*narravi tibi multa, quae potui et quae volui, quoniam tu prior voluisti ut confiterer tibi, domino deo meo*; XI.i.1).

For the question addressed in this essay—how the word must be conceived such that it becomes possible to ascribe to it a creative power, in a metaphysical sense—the crucial insight gained from the reflections in this section is this:

13. The quotation is a possible reference to Job 14:16, although O'Donnell remarks that the *Vetus Latina* version which Augustine was using is quite far removed from the wording given here.
14. It is noteworthy that in Book X, where Augustine focuses upon the role of memory in the quest for happiness, he emphasizes how the memory of happiness that drives us transcends natural languages: 'My question is whether the happy life is in the memory. [. . .] When a Greek hears the Latin term, it gives him no pleasure when he does not understand what has been said. But we are given pleasure, as he would be too if he heard this expressed in Greek. The thing itself is neither Greek nor Latin' (X.xx.29).
15. Augustine develops the concept of the created order as a system in signs in Book I of *De doctrina christiana*, with its distinction of things to be 'enjoyed' (*frui*) and those that should be 'used' (*uti*) as signs pointing the way to the former.

Augustine does not make a binary distinction between world and word. For him, words do not merely communicate information about a reality that is itself of a totally different nature, standing over against the realm of language as intrinsically unrelated to it. Rather, the world itself has the character of word: it is 'prose', to cite a Foucauldian phrase.[16] This means that, in order to think the possibility of a creative word, it is not necessary to imagine a μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος, as Aristotle might have put it: a boundary violation in which one moves from one kind of area into a totally different one. Perhaps, for Augustine, there can be such a thing as a creative word because that which the word creates is itself, precisely, word.

And there is another binary distinction which is not operative in the *Confessions*, namely, the distinction between theory and practice, metaphysics and ethics. For us (post-) moderns, a so-called objective truth can be established and grasped by any person of sufficient intelligence, independently of the individual's moral standing or state of grace. Not so for Augustine: the power of judgement is given only to those who seek it, accepting it as a gift from God to whom it must rightfully be returned in the form of prayer—indeed, in the form of a life rightly lived. In this respect, the Christian Augustine stands in the pre-Christian tradition which regarded philosophy as a way of life, not as an intellectual game or a source of income. Remarkably, this tradition is not dead even in our own day.[17]

III.
God as Word

As we have just seen, God makes his voice heard inwardly; it serves as an inner lodestar to those who are disposed to receive. We must now take this idea a step further, following Augustine's lead. God does not speak accidentally, as though he sometimes spoke and at other times did not, or as though there were an aspect of God that spoke and another that remained silent. This is because, for Augustine as for every orthodox Christian thinker, the second person of the Trinity is Word. God's speaking therefore seems to possess at least two dimensions, which we can in a provisional manner qualify as 'inner' and 'outer': God

16. To be more precise, the phrase seems to have been coined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who used it in notes that were published posthumously: *La prose du monde*, ed. by Claude Lefort, Collection Tel, 218 (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). Foucault entitled the first chapter of *The Order of Things*, a chapter devoted to the *episteme* of the Renaissance, 'The Prose of the World'. I have studied Foucault's chapter from a medievalist perspective in *Understanding Scholastic Thought with Foucault*, The New Middle Ages (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), chap. 4, esp. pp. 103–11.

17. The classic book on this subject is Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

the Father utters himself in the Son, his Word; then the Word speaks in the minds of men, 'outside' of God. There is also the creative Word, by which God makes the physical universe 'external' to him. These distinctions quickly reveal themselves as insufficient, however. The dimensions just distinguished turn out to be inextricably connected.

The Word is the Father's self-utterance, his Son. This personal Word coexists with the Father in all eternity. The Word is not an empty shell, however, for 'by it all things are uttered eternally' (*eo sempiterne dicuntur omnia*; XI.vii.9). The Word, God's Son, carries the cosmos within him: 'In this Beginning, God, you made heaven and earth, in your Word, in your Son, in your wisdom, in your truth speaking in a wonderful way (*miro modo*) and making in a wonderful way' (XI.ix.11). Yet the cosmos is not eternal: both as a totality and in its individual parts, it has a beginning and an end. How, then, can the Father utter an eternal Word that engenders finite beings? 'In some degree I see it', ponders Augustine, '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 moment when, in the eternal reason where nothing begins or ends, it is known that it is right for it to begin and end' (*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*; XI.viii.10). This is certainly a paradoxical thought, difficult to express: just as we previously encountered words without syllables that belong to no natural language, so we must now reckon with change which at some level—God's level—is no change. Beginning and end are sublated in eternity. Furthermore, these two challenging ideas are connected, in that the strange 'supra-linguistic' language is God's voice speaking in us while the 'change that is no change' occurs in the Word. We shall have to investigate further.[18]

But our understanding of the dimensions of the Word is not yet complete. The Word whom the Father utters eternally also speaks in time, and this not only in us but also in the gospels, which transmit the words of the incarnate Son:

> This reason is your Word, which is also the Beginning in that it also speaks to us. Thus in the gospel the Word speaks through the flesh, and this sounded externally (*foris*) in human ears, so that it could be believed and sought inwardly (*intus*), found in the eternal truth where the Master who alone is good (Matt. 19:16) teaches all his disciples. There, Lord, I hear your voice speaking to me, for one who teaches us speaks to us, but one who does not teach us, even though he may speak, does not speak to us (*etiam si loquitur, non nobis loquitur*). What is our teacher except the reliable truth? (XI.viii.10)

This text presents the words of the gospels as related to man's inner truth in just the same way in which judgement of material creation was found to be possible only in the light of God's voice speaking in us. This makes sense: just as

18. In section IV below.

for someone who has not opened him- or herself to God's grace, the voice of the material universe remains unintelligible, so for the non-believer the words of the gospels do not hold a divine message but represent, at most, an interesting phenomenon in the history of religion. To put this in the paradoxical terms that Augustine the rhetor so enjoys: the gospels still *speak* even when they are considered nothing more than a piece of writing of historical interest; but, not teaching anything, they do not speak *to us*, in an existential sense. Again, they teach us only when read in the light of God's eternal truth.

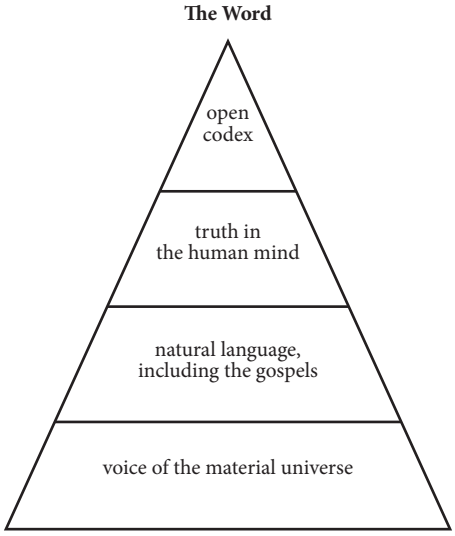
We are now in a position to add a fourth, and even fifth, type of language to the three levels previously distinguished, when we described the natural languages with which we are familiar as 'suspended' between an infra-linguistic and a supra-linguistic level of words. For, God does not merely reveal himself to the human mind as an inner voice but he is, personally, Word. In Book XIII Augustine imagines God as a codex which is open to the angels yet remains obscure to mere humans. The angels stand outside the hermeneutic circle in which the Word and the words of the created order become legible only in each other's light. The angels 'have no need to look up to this firmament and to read so as to know your Word. They ever "see your face" (Matt. 18:10) and there, without syllables requiring time to pronounce, they read what your eternal will intends' (XIII.xv.18).

Earlier in this essay, we asked whether Augustine's attribution of language to the cosmos must not be considered metaphorical. At this point, it should have become clear that we are dealing with much more than a metaphor. Augustine does not think the language-character of the different levels of the cosmos from the point of view of a human paradigm; rather, the paradigm which serves as point of reference is the Word himself, who in his 'enigmatic obscurity' (XIII.xv.18, quoting 1 Cor. 13:12) is strictly ineffable. By comparison with God's eternal creative word, the human word is a mere shadow, and this applies a fortiori to the utterances of the sub-human material universe. Augustine's approach is diametrically opposite to the point of view adopted in modern linguistics, which endeavours to conceive of human language as a particularly advanced form of animal communication. This type of explanation 'from below' is typical of the social sciences, as they attempt to explain the human being in terms of empirically verifiable structures of society, economic exchange, or political power. At the same time, as Foucault has shown, the social sciences labour under the modern assumption of a transcendental subject, that is, a human subject who is constitutive of the fundamental structures within which the empirical world can be known. This leads to the conundrum of an 'empirico-transcendental doublet', a hermeneutic circle in which a transcendentally constitutive subject is subjected to, or reduced to, analysis in terms of its empirical conditions. For Foucault, this contradiction constitutes the crux of contemporary thought.[19]

19. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, [no translator given] (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 318.

Augustine's hermeneutic circle is different. In the Augustinian *episteme*, the 'lower' is explained in terms of the 'higher', which in turn is approached in terms of the 'lower'. Human language is only an imperfect mirror of the eternal and ineffable Word, whom however—if we want to say anything at all—we must describe in human terms. Or must we? In Augustine's understanding, the language of Scripture is not merely human: it is the language God has given to us to speak about him, with the goal to realize that he is ineffable.[20]

Before moving on, it may be useful to recapitwulate the main fruits of our discussion in a diagram:



The pyramidal shape of the diagram will receive further elucidation later on. For the time being, let us say that it tries to convey the hierarchy which obtains among the levels of language, from the Word in which all is created to the multiplicity of the material universe.

IV.
Word and Time

One of the recurrent ways in which the *Confessions* attempt to capture the difference among the levels of language is through time. Thus, we found Augustine addressing the paradox of an eternal Word timelessly uttering a cosmos which is composed of things/words that are subject to time, beginning to be and ceasing to be. Yet, if Augustine distinguishes types of language in terms of time, conversely language is the paradigm that he employs to represent the nature of

20. Kurt Smolak brings this structure out beautifully in his essay, 'Sic itaque audiar!', cited in note 5 above.

time.[21] In particular, Augustine is fond of contemplating how time is measured through syllables long and short: 'we measure poems by the number of lines, lines by the number of feet, feet by the number of syllables, and long vowels by short' (XI.xxvi.33). But there is a problem: simply pronouncing a 'short' line slowly can transform it into a 'long' one! Therefore, Augustine concludes, while the rhythm of words is invaluable to represent time, its seat is the mind itself, which does the measuring. Here, Augustine introduces his famous notion of time as a 'distension' of the mind: 'That is why I have come to think that time is simply a distension. But of what is it a distension? I do not know, but it would be surprising if it is not that of the mind itself' (*inde mihi visum est nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem; sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi*; XI.xxvi.33). The mind is the condition for the possibility of the three dimensions of time, as without its ability to remember the past (*memoria*) and expect the future (*expectatio*), we would live in an ephemeral present.[22] This is why, for the author of the *Confessions*, talk of 'three times' is inexact, unless one understands them to be 'a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things to come' (*praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris*; XI.xx.26). Without the human mind's ability to retain and to expect, what would the past be? What the future? Only the present moment would have existence—and an extremely fleeting, precarious one at that.

There is considerable discussion in the scholarly literature as to whether Augustine's conception of time is 'subjective'. In the light of the passage we just discussed, as well as several others, such a conclusion seems difficult to avoid. But there are problems. One is textual, since Augustine explicitly attributes the creation of time to God himself: 'You are the originator and creator of all ages (*omnium saeculorum auctor et conditor*). What times (*tempora*) existed which were not brought into being by you? [. . .] Since, therefore, you are the cause of all times (*operator omnium temporum*) [. . .]' (XI.xiii.15). A second difficulty of the 'extreme subjectivation' of time is that each of us would end up living in a private and individual temporality.[23] This does not seem to be the case, however: time is a 'space' that we share in common.

These difficulties are not insurmountable, and the *Confessions* themselves hold the clue on how to do so. In the context of the discussion of time, the term

21. Philippe Hoffmann speaks of 'le theme du langage humain régi par la *succession*, qui devient ensuite un paradigme pour l'analyse du temps' ('Temps et éternité', cited in n. 5 above), p. 66.
22. The Kantian allusion is deliberate since Kant too regards time as a human framework rather than as an attribute of the 'things themselves'. See the brief remarks in Pierre Lachièze-Rey, 'Saint Augustin précurseur de Kant dans la théorie de la perception', in *Augustinus Magister. Congrès international augustinien, Paris 21–24 septembre 1954*, 3 vols. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1954), vol. 1, pp. 425–28.
23. I am summarizing Philippe Hoffmann's argument here. He speaks of a 'subjectivation extrême du temps' in 'Temps et éternité', p. 59.

'distension' (*distentio*) possesses a technical meaning, designating the three acts of the mind which 'stretch out' time into its three dimensions: memory, expectation, and attention to the present (*attentio*). In other contexts in the *Confessions*, such a movement of expansion is synonymous with dispersal and, therefore, sin. Thus, in the opening paragraph of Book II Augustine prays in the following terms: 'The recalling of my wicked ways is bitter in my memory, but I do it so that you may be sweet to me, a sweetness touched by no deception, a sweetness serene and content. You gathered me together (*conligens me*) from the state of disintegration (*a dispersione*) in which I had been fruitlessly divided (*discissus sum*). I turned from unity in you to be lost in multiplicity' (II.i.1). Here, Augustine juxtaposes the peace and rest found in God with the restless quest for satisfaction and meaning in created things. Turning from God to the 'many' possible sources of temptation is tantamount to sin. In Book XI, Augustine formulates the same idea using the very term 'distension': '"Because your mercy is more than lives' (Ps. 62:4), see how my life is a distension (*distentio*) in several directions' (XI.xxix.39). It is hard to imagine that Augustine, the brilliant master of Latin composition, would have reused the term 'distension' unadvisedly in this moral sense, right after employing it to describe the time-stretching acts of the mind. It is equally unlikely that Augustine was not aware of the use of *distentio* in Ecclesiastes: 'And I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to understand the distraction (*distentionem*) that is upon earth' (Eccles. 8:16; Douay-Rheims).[24] He wants to make a point, and the point is to connect the three dimensions of time with dispersal and sin. This point is completely compatible with Augustine's statement that God is the creator of time: God creates time, through the time-generating acts of the mind, as a punishment for sin.[25] Sin is dispersal, which manifests itself ontologically as the propensity of the fallen mind to generate a particular sort of time.[26]

If this interpretation holds true, then the overcoming of sin must be centrally concerned with time—and, perhaps, with words as the paradigm of time. This idea is best explored through a close reading of a beautiful, and crucial,

24. The reference to Ecclesiastes is in O'Donnell's commentary on XI.xxix.39.
25. In Book IV (xi.17), Augustine speaks of the 'punishment' (*poena*) of the soul which consists in the inability of its senses to grasp the whole. If only it were able to hear all the syllables of a sentence together, rather than having to wait for the speaker to spell out the sentence syllable by syllable!
26. Norbert Fischer denies that Augustine makes a connection between sin and time: 'Since Augustine does not assume that the soul has "temporalized" (*"verzeitlicht"*) itself through the fall from a better condition, its goal is not a 'de-temporalization' in the sense of a return to the One'; Fischer, '"Distentio animi". Ein Symbol der Entflüchtigung des Zeitlichen', in *Die Confessiones des Augustinus von Hippo. Einführung und Interpretationen zu den dreizehn Büchern*, ed. by Norbert Fischer and Cornelius Mayer, Forschungen zur europäischen Geistesgeschichte, 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1998), pp. 489–547 (quote on p. 512). Fischer wishes to 'rescue the extramental being of the temporal' (p. 522), but his attempts remain unconvincing.

passage of Book XI.[27] In the process, we will also be able to respond to the second objection to the 'subjective' interpretation of time (to the effect that, on this interpretation, time comes to be fragmented individually).

The passage opens thus:

> Suppose I am about to recite a psalm which I know. Before I begin, my expectation (*expectatio*) is directed towards the whole (*in totum*). But when I have begun, the verses from it which I take into the past become the object of my memory (*memoria*). The life of this act of mine is stretched (*distenditur*) in two ways, into my memory because of the words I have already said and into my expectation because of those which I am about to say. But my attention is on what is present: by that the future is transferred to become the past. As the action advances further and further, the shorter the expectation and the longer the memory, until all expectation is consumed, the entire action is finished, and it has passed into the memory. What occurs in the psalm as a whole occurs in its particular pieces and its individual syllables. The same is true of a longer action in which perhaps the psalm is a part. It is also valid of the entire life of an individual person, where all actions are parts of a whole, and of the total history of the 'sons of men' (*in toto saeculo filiorum hominum*) (Ps. 30:20) where all human lives are but parts (XI.xxviii.38).

First remark: this excerpt offers further validation for our interpretation according to which Augustine thinks world as word: all the world's a psalm, one could say in a slight adaptation of Shakespeare. To us, its human readers, the world is a psalm which needs to be spelt out, syllable by syllable, even if we are able to catch a glimpse of it as a whole. To God, the psalm is always entirely present: 'A person singing or listening to a song he knows well suffers a distension or stretching in feeling and in sense-perception (*variatur affectus sensusque distenditur*) from the expectation of future sounds and the memory of past sound. With you it is otherwise' (XI.xxxi.41). For God, the total history of the sons of men is not something he has to go through life by life, moment for moment. What is more, God has shared his view of the whole with us, if only we are willing and able to read what he has written—namely, texts like the psalms.

Each human life is a psalm, a story, that is made up of many words and syllables. Is there not much truth in this way of looking at reality, even now and quite independently of what Augustine believed? A life is a story; in order to make sense of who we are, we tell our story to ourselves, to friends and loved ones. The beginning of a friendship is often marked by the sharing of stories. A

27. The importance of the passage has not escaped scholarly attention. Augustine experts such as Goulven Madec have commented on its significance (for references, see Hoffmann, 'Temps et éternité', p. 66 n. 141), as have philosophers such as Paul Ricœur (ibid.) and literary scholars (in *Memory and the Narrative Imperative: The Weave of Life-Writing* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], the late James Olney took the 'psalm' passage as his point of departure for analysing the autobiographical genre).

friendship, a relationship, can be viewed as the intersection of two stories. In a close relationship over many years, these stories may even merge. Sometimes, another person's story becomes so much part of our own that, if we lose the person, we will have to reinvent our own story, slowly and painfully. Sometimes such a story never regains its wholeness.[28]

Note that, even though each individual story is part of the 'total history of the "sons of men"', therefore forming part of a larger whole, each particular story has a rhythm of its own. The time of my life is not the time of your life, such that, in a significant sense, we live in different times. The criticism of Augustine's 'subjective' conception of time, or of interpretations which insist on its 'subjective' character, is thoroughly misguided. It assumes that the most fundamental and natural time is the time of the modern chronometer. But that objectified and reified time is derivative; it is not lived time at all. To understand this point, just consider that what for a Christian person (believing or cultural) is the year 2019 after the birth of Christ, for an observant Jew is the year 5779 after the creation of the world. For a Muslim, we live in the year 1440 after the hijra. These different dates are a result of the fact that the Christian, the Jew, and the Muslim each has a different memory and a different future—and therefore a different present.

Digression: A Multiplicity of Times

Augustine explicitly contrasts only two 'times', human and divine (of course, it is more correct to say that God's eternal simultaneity is no time at all). He does not comment on the time which characterizes the non-rational created order, of which we already know that it too speaks. It is not difficult to fill the gap. Animals, plants, and even more so inanimate beings lack the human mind with its ability to distend time into three dimensions. They therefore exist from moment to moment, without past or future. For this idea to make sense, we have to assume degrees: surely, a dog, for example, has less—much less—of a past and a future than a human being, but its temporality will be more distended than that of a fly, or indeed that of a rock. Perhaps the soulless rock, lacking not only memory and expectation, but even attention, has no time at all. One might wonder whether such timelessness makes the rock similar to God, who is also free of all distension, but this conclusion is of course incorrect. The difference is that God lacks distension because all of creation is totally unified in his Word (the Word he utters therefore carries an infinite meaning). The rock has no distension since it lacks the inner 'space' of awareness.

Here is a paradox: *distentio* goes hand in hand with its opposite, *cogitatio*. The human mind gains knowledge of the reality that it has distended in time by 'gather[ing] together (*conligere*) ideas which the memory contains in a dispersed and disordered way (*passim atque indisposite*)' (X.vi.18). Thinking is bringing together ideas from their dispersed state (*ex quadam dispersione conligenda*) in order to establish connections, order, and unity (ibid.). According to Augustine,

28. On the narrative structure of consciousness, see Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), esp. pp. 197–200 ('The Narrative Structure of Self-Representation'). Also helpful: Richard Kearney, *On Stories*, Thinking in Action (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. chap. 1: 'Where Do Stories Come From?' (pp. 3–14).

the very etymology of the Latin term for 'thinking', *cogitare*, confirms this conception: as a contraction of *con-agitare*, *cogitare* literally means 'to move or to drive together'.[29]

Back to our rock: with its inability to stretch itself out to a past or future, and to be aware even of a present, it is also incapable of placing itself in any order or whole. It cannot 'cogitate', or gather together, anything at all.[30] This means that it is utterly dispersed. In our pyramid presented at the end of section III, the rock belongs to the bottom level of the material universe, which is the most dispersed. Above the material universe, we find the two human levels, composed of natural language, which distends, and the inner truth, in light of which we cogitate—that is, gather together. The angels read God without syllables, seeing the Truth all at once but not coinciding with it. The Word is unity without any dispersal or distension.

We now return to our earlier hypothesis that, if the distension of time which occurs in the three acts of the mind is indeed a punishment for sin, then overcoming sin must involve a modified temporality. Augustine does in fact make precisely this point as he continues his reflections from the 'psalm' passage. Leaving behind the multiplicity of worldly temptations to find rest in the unity of God requires, he argues, living time differently so as to be able to experience a foretaste of God's eternal simultaneity even in this life. We already know the sentence that opens Augustine's dense thought: '"Because your mercy is more than lives" (Ps. 62:4), see how my life is a distension in several directions.' He continues:

> 'Your right hand upheld me' (Ps. 17:36; 62:9) in my Lord, the Son of man who is mediator between you the One and us the many, who live in a multiplicity of distractions by many things (*in multis per multa*); so 'I might apprehend him in whom also I am apprehended' (Phil. 3:12–14), and leaving behind the old days I might be gathered to follow the One, 'forgetting the past' and moving not towards those future things that are transitory but to 'the things which are before' me, not stretched out in distraction but extended in reach, not by being pulled apart but by concentration (*praeterita oblitus, non in ea quae futura et transitura sunt, sed in ea quae ante sunt non distentus sed extentus, non secundum distentionem sed secundum intentionem*) (XI.xxix.39).

In these reflections that are inspired by the terminology from a couple of verses in St Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Augustine juxtaposes the three time-stretching acts of the (fallen) mind with different ways of living time which are made possible for those who are 'upheld' by God's grace. Rather than remembering the past, we need to forget it, for in it we dispersed ourselves in temptations and transgressions. We should orient ourselves not towards a future filled with transitory and ephemeral things that have no chance of satisfying us, but towards an eschatological future where God awaits. This future will never be-

29. Augustine is adopting Varro's etymology here, which is not that of the modern dictionaries.

30. This having been said, one has to add that the rock is able to hold itself together materially (it does not disintegrate into its components) and to bring a physical force to bear on its environment (namely, gravity).

come past. Combined, these Christian ways of living the past and the future make a different present possible, one where we live not in distension/distraction (*distentio*) but experience a new intensity and focus (*intentio*).[31]

We now need to investigate the role of words in this conversion of time.

V.
The Performative Word

Back to the beginning: in the opening paragraph of this essay, we reflected upon the *Confessions* as an *opus sui generis* which cuts across conventional literary genres like autobiography, prayer, and philosophical or theological treatise. We remarked, as well, on Augustine's 'plagiarism'; in other words, the fact that the author of the *Confessions* constantly weaves quotations and allusions into his text without 'acknowledging' them. The bulk of these quotations are from Scripture, with the result that, in the *Confessions*, we often hear not Augustine's words, but God's. The objective of this literary device is to enact a hermeneutic circle which returns the author (and his reader) from dispersal in the multiplicity of creation to the One creative Word. For, Augustine regards his own words as spoken in response to a prevenient Word. By conforming his words increasingly to the Word, Augustine aims to bring about a conversion, both his own and his reader's.

This movement of conversion is also reflected in the macro-structure of the *Confessions*, the division of the work into books. Books I through IX tell the story of Augustine's life, but from a perspective after the author's conversion. The result is a reinvention of the past which is more than a forgetting. This is because the forgetting—or, more exactly, the reconceptualization—of Augustine's sinful past goes hand in hand with the discovery of God's providential guidance even in events which, at the time of their occurrence, seemed to belong to the counter-story of evil. Thus, for example, Augustine's teachers compelled him to read books. Their methods, Augustine hints, lacked the sophistication of modern pedagogy, and the teachers employed them not with the good of their students in mind but only to satisfy their own 'appetite for wealth and for glory' (I.xii.19). The young Augustine, in turn, thoroughly hated his studies. Yet God converted sin and evil into good, using the teachers to help lay the foundations for Augustine's life as a rhetor and, later, Christian writer. This divine conver-

31. For insightful commentary on Augustine's exegesis of Philippians 3:12–14 in this passage, one may read Gerard J. P. O'Daly, 'Time as *Distentio* and St. Augustine's Exegesis of *Philippians* 3,12–14', *Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristques*, 23 (1977), 265–71. O'Daly takes the moral and theological dimension of *distentio* as evidence that in *Confessions* XI, Augustine 'cannot be offering a *definition* of time'. Rather he must be 'using the metaphor *distentio* to evoke whatever accompanies or follows upon the cognitive act of measuring time' (p. 265). I have offered my arguments against this interpretation.

sion, however, becomes discernible to Augustine only as he retells the story of his childhood from the perspective of his future hope for unity with the One: it is this projection towards the eschaton which permits him to rewrite, and by rewriting save, his sinful past.[32] Furthermore, in this rewriting Augustine's story gains a coherence—a salvific logic, one might say—of which it was previously devoid: 'You are my eternal Father, but I am scattered in times whose order (*ordinem*) I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts (*tumultuosis varietatibus dilaniantur cogitationes meae*), the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you' (XI.xxix.39).

After Book X, with its analysis of memory, in Books XI through XIII the *Confessions* turn to the opening lines of Genesis. With this turn, Augustine's words of conversion give way to God's words, which now become the primary focus of attention. What matters is no longer Augustine's story in itself, but rather the place which this story occupies in the overall narrative of the 'total history of the "sons of men"'. Genesis, after all, tells God's story of how this history began. Augustine's story at this point flows into God's story, merging into it.

But, one could object, Augustine's conversion is more than the rewriting of his life in the *Confessions*: first, there is the conversion, an episode narrated in Book VIII, and then, subsequently, Augustine rethinks the meaning of his life. His words in the *Confessions* do not perform his conversion, but describe it after the fact. Two points are worth bearing in mind here. First, if we do focus on the conversion as a particular episode in Augustine's life, it is through words that it is brought about: 'Pick up and read, pick up and read' (VIII.xii.29). It is through this chant (*cantus*) from an unidentified voice that Augustine's attention is drawn to the passage from Romans which, with its admonition to leave behind the temptations of the flesh and 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 13:13–14), so cannily applies to his own life. This conversion, even if we just take it as an isolated episode, is a conversion through words to the Word.

Yet—and this is the broader point—a conversion requires more than a moment of inspiration, crucial as this may be (and was, in Augustine's case). It consists in the reorientation of an entire life towards the Word, through an assimilation of the words of Scripture. This is what the *Confessions* paradigmatically enact and effect.

---

32. The Heideggerian allusion seems apropos here, although Heidegger never seems to have fully understood *Confessions* XI. For a brief discussion of how Heidegger's interpretation evolved, see C. Agustín Corti, 'Ewigkeit und Zeit. Die Funktion der Ewigkeit für die Zeitanalyse des elften Buches der *Confessiones* Augustins und ihre Rezeption durch Martin Heidegger', in *Schöpfung, Zeit und Ewigkeit. Augustinus,* Confessiones *11–13*, ed. by Norbert Fischer and Dieter Hattrup (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), pp. 29–49.

Digression: Performative Speech

Augustine assumes the power of words to effect a new reality, but he does not have an explicit theory to justify this assumption, which forms the 'unsaid' centre on which the *Confessions* turn. One may venture the suggestion that words had to lose their connection with the world before their performative power became the object of theorizing. Thus, in the twentieth century the philosopher J. L. Austin published a ground-breaking work whose title promised an explanation of *How To Do Things With Words*.[33] Austin's research led him to realize that the function of sentences goes beyond communicating information which can be classified as true or false. Rather, there are sentences in which saying coincides with doing, so that their utterance 'is the performance of an action'.[34] In these cases, Austin explained, 'to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing, or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it.'[35] Austin termed such sentences 'performative'. Examples he provided included utterances such as 'I do' (spoken in the course of a wedding), 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth', and 'I give and bequeath my watch to my brother'.[36] Austin noticed that performatives are neither true nor false, but have to meet certain 'felicity' or 'happiness conditions' in order to be effective. These conditions include the 'capacity' of the speaker to perform a particular action. To illustrate the idea, Austin imagined himself walking up to a random vessel in the docks, smashing a bottle against its hull, and declaring, 'I name this ship the Mr Stalin.'[37] Would the ship henceforth have to sail under this new name? The answer, of course, is negative. Such a performative would be null and void, because the speaker did not have the capacity—or, one might say, authority—to christen the vessel.

Austin's discovery is intriguing, since it (re-)established that there is no impermeable boundary between speaking and doing, between the realm of language and the world of action. Nevertheless, *How To Do Things With Words* did not claim that words can *make things*, only that they can perform actions. It would be interesting to ponder the applicability of Austin's theory to the scenario which Augustine is considering in Books XI to XIII of the *Confessions*, namely, God's making of things through his creative Word. Austin argues that the effectiveness of a performative speech act is tied to the authority which its speaker exercises over a particular swath of reality. For example, a justice of the peace can (in certain countries) pronounce husband and wife a couple who duly appear before him; a judge is legally able to sentence a defendant appearing before her court; and so forth. What if we imagine a speaker whose authority is totally unlimited, extending to every being in the universe? What kinds of actions would this speaker's word be able to perform?

VI.
Conclusion

This essay set out to answer a question which is obvious to contemporary readers of Book XI of the *Confessions*, but which Augustine fails to take up. We speculated that this lack of attention is not a haphazard oversight but points to assumptions so fundamental that Augustine does not care to spell them out—or that he cannot spell out, as they remain outside his horizon of reflection, form-

33. J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
34. Ibid., p. 6.
35. Ibid., p. 6.
36. Ibid., p. 5.
37. Ibid., p. 23.

ing an 'unsaid' *a priori*. The question at issue is the following: 'What conception of the word lies behind the idea that it is possible to create—to make things rather than merely transforming them—by speaking? How must one conceive of the word to be able to take it for granted that it has the power to create?' At the end of this essay, we are able to formulate an answer.

(1) Augustine does not make a binary distinction between word and world. The world itself—the order of things—possesses a quasi-linguistic character, so much so that it speaks if only one is willing to listen. The world is a system of signs waiting to be deciphered. It points to the Creator.

As a consequence of the word-character of the world, speaking does not have to bridge a gap between words and things. They are connatural, so that there is an immediate harmony.

(2) For Augustine, the paradigm of words is the Word, the second person of the Trinity. This conception is paradoxical, since the Word is ineffable. In its perfection and transcendence, the Word would lie utterly beyond the reach of words—if it had not become flesh, so that it was able to speak in human words. The words of the Word are transmitted to us in the gospels, and in Scripture more generally.

We are evidently dealing with a hermeneutic circle here: words reveal their deepest nature only in the light of the ineffable Word, which in turn has revealed itself in words. There is no possibility of entering the hermeneutic circle without faith, that is, without a grateful response to God's prevenient grace.

(3) Understanding the wor(l)d, then, requires conversion. Augustine makes no radical distinction between theory and practice, instead assuming that the truth is accessible only in an existential quest for salvation.

(4) This quest is a quest for the Word, in the medium of words, and through words. Conversion is a reshaping of the self through the retelling of its story in the light of God's story. Put differently, Augustine effects his reorientation towards the Word by narrating his life from the perspective of a new eschatological future. His words are not only what allows him to glimpse his new self—to discover a divine order in the events of his life—but they are the agent of his conversion, they perform it: Augustine *is* his new story.

National University of Ireland, Maynooth
Maynooth, Co. Kildare