


## Inheriting Wittgenstein's Augustine: A Grammatical Investigation of the Incarnation

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### Abstract

Through an examination of Augustine's understanding of language and an exegesis of key passages in *De trinitate*, this article expounds and critiques Augustine's theology of the Incarnation. It attends to the distinctions Augustine draws between the two *verba*—the *verbum mentis* and the *verbum vocis*—and asks if conceiving of language differently might better account for the Incarnation of the Word in terms of *De trinitate*'s focus on substantial and relational predication. The author maintains that Augustine's impulse to interpret the Incarnation linguistically is the right one, but argues that drawing upon the resources of a Wittgensteinian approach to language sits more soundly with the rest of the grammar of Christian theology. Deploying the work of Wittgenstein's inheritors, especially Stanley Cavell and Stephen Mulhall, this article shows that while critique is in order, the final result is something broadly in line with Augustine's own best impulses concerning language as found in *De dialectica* and *De doctrina christiana*.

This article is about how to understand the event of the Incarnation as an occurrence inside and outside of timespace, and how our thoughts and fantasies about language influence the ways we think about this. What it won't do is work through the implications of this event: theories of atonement, the doctrine of reconciliation, or the relationship between justification and sanctification. What is said here can be helpfully extended in all of these directions, and I'll gesture—when appropriate—to some of those avenues. The immediate purpose of the following treatment, however, is to get clear on some of the difficulties attendant to our ways with words about the Word becoming flesh. Which is to say, the aim is to clarify how the grammar of the Incarnation should govern Christian theological speech about the incarnate Word. I'll do this by first examining Augustine's understanding of language—specifically as it relates to the *verbum mentis* and the *verbum vocis* (the word of the mind and the word of the voice or spoken word)—and how this is bound up with his theology

of the Incarnation. This will involve close attention to some of the problems that arise when the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ are mapped closely onto these two notions of “word” and the accompanying theory of linguistic reference. Retaining Augustine’s inclination to reflect on the relationship between human language and the Incarnation of the Word, I’ll suggest an approach to language that borrows and expands on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his inheritors. If this succeeds, it should overcome some of the difficulties an Augustinian theory of language might prompt, while affirming his best insights into language and the doctrine of the Incarnation.

### *Theories of Linguistic Reference*

Augustine is attracted to the possibility of securing the meaning of language. Because of this, he attaches the conventional usages of signs to a referent that is more purely a word and so capable of supplying meaning independent of the use of vocalized words in language. My contention is that this is a deeply human fantasy, but one that goes against Augustine’s own best inclinations about language. The implications of this fantasy of sublime or absolute meaning play out in problematic ways in Augustine’s theology. In particular, I’ll argue that this misunderstanding of how language works leads to problems in Augustine’s theology of the Incarnation. When Augustine approaches language in terms of *verbum mentis* or *verbum cordis*—word of the mind or word of the heart—he attempts to ground the facts of language outside of all natural languages.<sup>1</sup> Crucial to my critique of his position is understanding why Augustine is tempted to think this way about language. Why, that is, is he so concerned to secure the meaning of language outside of language?

In examining his reasons for doing this, some of the weaknesses of a purely descriptivist approach to language emerge. Taking seriously Augustine’s (and our) reasons for looking to secure meaning outside of language itself provides an entry point into a Christian theological treatment of linguistic meaning. Augustine’s inclination to search for meaning beyond language is a natural outgrowth of the realization that linguistic usage is conventional. As Stanley Cavell notes, language and linguistic community is always precarious.<sup>2</sup> Many of Augustine’s works note exactly this feature of our language. In *De doctrina christiana*, for example, in expounding his theory of

<sup>1</sup> Augustine uses *verbum cordis*, *verbum mentis*, and *verbum verum* interchangeably in these discussions to refer to the pre-linguistic word that secures the meaning of the *verbum vocis* in any natural language.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 178.

signification he says: "All of these significations move men's minds in accordance with the consent of their societies, and because this consent varies, they move them differently, nor do men agree upon them because of an innate value, *but they have a value because they are agreed upon.*"<sup>3</sup> This is, however, only one (or one side) of Augustine's approach to language. Robert Markus sees a division between the conventional "sign-theories" and Augustine's theory of the "word." The former provides an explanation of meaning in terms of the hearer (how a word bears meaning to one who receives it) while the latter approaches meaning from the perspective of the speaker (how the one transmitting a word goes about meaning it, i.e., accomplishing expression).<sup>4</sup> Markus locates the need for these two, mutually supportive—but not overlapping—theories of language, "one for the *verbum vocis*, approaching it from the hearer's side, and one for the *verbum mentis*, approaching it from the speaker's and thinker's side," in the "bifurcation of the two *verba.*"<sup>5</sup> But Augustine cannot—as Markus suggests might be possible—collapse these two theories, and understanding why not is crucial to coming to terms with his trinitarian theology and his theology of the Incarnation.

It's tempting to want to locate the source of Augustine's thoughts about the Incarnation in his theory of language, or vice versa to neatly lay out a theory of language with its roots in what he has to say about the Word becoming flesh. It is likelier, however, that these two facets of Augustine's thought are mutually and inextricably implicated in one another. Anything said about one is bound to impact the other in significant ways. So, while an historical investigation of the roots and dependencies of Augustine's two theories of language may be helpful, it's more important, for an inquiry into his theology of the Incarnation and difficulties with it, to be clear about the things that he does say about language and its relation to the Word becoming flesh.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 2.24.37. Emphasis mine. In *De dialectica*, Augustine also says "Discerning the origin of words is like the interpretation of dreams; it is a matter of each man's ingenuity" (6). That is, hunting down a word's origin does not get you closer to a determinate meaning that stands apart from its use in language. The inability to identify a stable origin capable of disclosing a word's definitive meaning is directly linked to Augustine's understanding of the conventionality of language. Performing an etymological excavation of a word unpacks the resonances available based on the word's functional or structural similarities to other words within a shared, common language. It's something to do—a matter of curiosity or indifference, he'll say—but not an exercise that finally settles the question of meaning.

<sup>4</sup> R. A. Markus, 'St. Augustine on Signs', *Phronesis* 2, no. 1 (1957), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> I've already mentioned Markus' article on this topic, but two others that provide some of the historical background for Augustine's approach to language are Tarmo Toom, 'I Was a Boy with Power to Talk' (*Conf.* 1.8.13): Augustine and Ancient Theories of Language

*Augustine's Theology of the Incarnation*

The first question to ask, then, is—What seems to be the problem? What is Augustine's account of the Incarnation and where do the difficulties lie? In giving reasons for the Incarnation in *De trinitate*, Augustine first distinguishes between the Son's being born of the Father in eternity and his being sent by the Father to be known in time.<sup>7</sup> This division into *processio* and *missio*, respectively, allows him to make a first cut between the relations of the Trinity *ad intra* (the *processiones*) and those *ad extra* relations (the *missiones*) that are part of the economy of salvation. His specification of the *missio* of the second person of the Trinity to mean "that he is known by somebody in time" is then further subdivided into the sending whereby "he is perceived by the mind" and the sending "when the Son of God was manifested in the flesh."<sup>8</sup> Both of these involve knowing the second person of the Trinity in time, but only when the Son is "manifested in the flesh" is he known by the physical senses. It is in this sense that we speak of the second person of the Trinity becoming incarnate.

The Incarnation is a distinct kind of sending because it results in a single person who is both a human and the Word of God. This marks the Incarnation out as different from the kinds of cognitive interaction with the Son that might be had either immediately by the mind (say, for instance, Christ the teacher in *De magistro*) or through prophetic foreknowledge presented by the angels.<sup>9</sup> It also differs from all preceding and subsequent theophanies, not just in degree but in kind. Augustine gives the Holy Spirit descending like a dove at the baptism of Jesus and the tongues of fire alighting on the Apostles on Pentecost as examples. On these events, Augustine comments, "I dare not say that no such things had happened before, since these visible manifestations were not coupled with him into one person, like the flesh which the Word became."<sup>10</sup> The Incarnation is a unique event joining together the Word of God with a human body and soul, and is in an altogether different category than the New Testament and Old Testament accounts of God becoming perceptibly manifest. To the examples of the dove and the tongues of fire, Augustine also adds the voice from heaven heard at Jesus' baptism. We might further include Moses' encounter with the burning bush (Ex 3:2), the

Acquisition', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2.2, Fall (2009); and Rowan Williams, 'Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*', *Journal of Literature & Theology* 3, no. 2 (1989).

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. 1/5, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 4.28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

pillars of cloud and fire (Ex 13:21f), and even the tables of stone written by the finger of God (Ex 31:18). While all of these events are perceptible manifestations of God, none of them are, according to Augustine, the kind of thing that occurs when the Word becomes flesh: “For surely no one wishes to say that whatever creature it is that produced the Father’s voice is the Father, or that whatever creature it is that manifested the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove or in fiery tongues is the Holy Spirit, in the same way as the man who was made of the virgin is the Son of God.”<sup>11</sup> At issue here is our ability to say Jesus of Nazareth is the second person of the Trinity. In none of the other cases where creaturely manifestations of God occur is the aim becoming one person but rather “producing the symbolic effect as God judged opportune.”<sup>12</sup>

So, we have established what is distinct about the Incarnation as a perceptible revelation of God. It has to do with our ability to identify the Word with the man, to say that Jesus is the Son of God. Some of the particulars of this identification are worked out in more detail late in *De trinitate*, and are intimately connected to his conception of language. Operating from the perspective of what Markus calls his theory of the word, Augustine explains linguistic reference in terms of a pre-linguistic “word” that preexists and is what is meant by utterances or thoughts in any natural language. As he explains:

When we utter something true, that is when we utter what we know, a word is necessarily born from the knowledge which we hold in the memory, a word which is absolutely the same kind of thing as the knowledge it is born from. It is the thought formed from the thing we know that is the word which we utter in the heart, a word that is neither Greek nor Latin nor any other language; but when it is necessary to convey the knowledge in the language of those we are speaking to, some sign is adopted to signify the word.<sup>13</sup>

Attending to this pre-linguistic word enables us to know something about the Word of God. Augustine’s linguistic treatment of the Incarnation—in the terms of his theories of sign and word—hinges upon this comparison.

The gap between these two theories noted by Markus encourages us to think first of an interior word, a wordless word, which we can compare to the Word in the prologue of John’s Gospel, about whom we can say, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1 RSV).<sup>14</sup> This pre-linguistic word can be communicated to others only by means of a

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

conventional sign, by which he means in this case a spoken word.<sup>15</sup> As he explains elsewhere, for humans these signs have the purpose of “conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood.”<sup>16</sup> Transitioning to the theory of signification—the hearer-side—the sign of the inner word is spoken in a natural language, which is meant to produce the same pre-linguistic word in the hearer. Augustine goes so far as to say that only this inner word, the *verbum cordis*, can properly be called “word.”<sup>17</sup> This process, the generation of the inner word and that word’s subsequent signification in spoken language, provides a way to think first of the Word in the beginning but then also of the Word as it becomes flesh. Signification in a natural language is a means by which to contemplate the Incarnation.<sup>18</sup>

The tension in applying to the Incarnation what is said here in terms of the sign-theory and word-theory should already be apparent. If, on the one hand, what is distinct about the Incarnation is precisely the *identity* of man and God in the one divine-human person Jesus, then the *difference* between the discarnate Word and the incarnate Word should immediately seem problematic. There are at least two possible ways of reading Augustine’s explanation of the Incarnation in these terms. One is to explain the gap Markus notes between these two theories as indicating a similar gap between a discarnate Word which then comes to be an incarnate Word. On this reading, we should take the emphasis of Augustine’s remarks to lie on his instruction that in order to contemplate the likeness to the Word of God in ourselves, it is necessary to go beyond the spoken word—the word of natural languages—so that we “come to that word of man through whose likeness of a sort the Word of God may somehow or other be seen in an enigma.”<sup>19</sup> That is to say, Augustine’s approach as described here sees the aim of the comparison to language to provide a means to contemplate the discarnate *Logos*, a means by which to ascend to the proper object of our contemplation, best conceived as something apart from the Incarnation.

Another way to read these remarks is to emphasize what occasions the reflection. In this instance, what spurs Augustine to search for the inner, pre-linguistic word is a theoretical, proto-Chalcedonian point about the two natures of the divine-human person Jesus Christ. Prior

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.2.3.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 15.20.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. “But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us,” (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.13.12).

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 15.20.

to his advice about arriving at a likeness of the Word of God, he states: "And just as our word becomes sound without being changed into sound, so the Word of God became flesh, but it is unthinkable that it should have been changed into flesh."<sup>20</sup> The unlikeness he points to between the incarnate and discarnate Word provides a way to separate the human and divine natures conceptually, such that Augustine can say, "It is by assuming it, not by being consumed into it, that both our word becomes sound and that Word became flesh."<sup>21</sup> What we do not need to take this to be offering is a complete, systematic account of the relation between the human body and soul of Jesus of Nazareth and the divinity of the second person of the Trinity. In this context, the analogy is being deployed simply to avoid the mistake of saying that by becoming incarnate the Word of God is changed into (as opposed to united with) a human being.

One problem with Augustine's theory of language, however, is that it lends itself to the first kind of reading, which emphasized the gap between the incarnate and discarnate Word. The division this introduces in language often carries over into our thoughts about God, sometimes in ways less beneficial than avoiding monophysitism. This appears to be true not only of Augustine's readers but also of Augustine himself. We can see how this plays out by turning from the linguistic analogy to his treatment of the question of relational predication of God. In the fifth book of *De trinitate*, Augustine delineates possible ways of speaking about God and settles on the division into substantial and relational predication. What can be said about divinity with reference to itself is a substantial predicate, and whatever can be said with reference to another is a relational predicate.<sup>22</sup> What he rules out is accidental predication because this would necessarily introduce change into God. Since "there is nothing in him that can be changed or lost," accidental predicates cannot be applied to God.<sup>23</sup> Another way of putting this is to say, God is whatever God has. This leaves us with two ways of referring to God, and explicitly rules one out.

What can be said of God relationally applies, for Augustine, to the intra and extra-trinitarian relations.<sup>24</sup> Further specification is required, however, to apply the concept of relational speech about God to

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. This same distinction animates Tertullian's discussion of the Incarnation in *De carne christi*, 15. A striking parallel is also present in Ambrose's *De incarnationis dominicae sacramento*, 6.50, where he refutes the notion of the body of Jesus Christ being coeternal with the Word of God. His refutation, however, like Augustine's here, is made in response to the idea that the Word of God is changed into the flesh of Jesus Christ. Augustine's comparisons to language are meant to push back against this same confusion.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 5.9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 5.5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 5.12.

creation. This is because it would appear that relational speech about God and creation necessarily introduces change. Augustine gives an example from the Psalms, “‘Lord,’ says the psalm, ‘you have become our refuge.’ (Ps 90:1). God is called our refuge by way of relationship; the name has reference to us.”<sup>25</sup> Augustine is quick to explain that what seems to describe a change in God—once God was not our refuge and then later became it—actually describes a change that takes place in creatures. As he explains, “We were worse before we took refuge in him, and we become better by taking refuge in him. But in him, no change at all.”<sup>26</sup> The other example he uses is of a coin, when it is called “the price of something.”<sup>27</sup> While the identification of the coin with the price of an object doesn’t change the nature of the coin, calling it such does identify a relationship between the two. This relationship could be modified were the price of the object to be higher or lower. The relationship that exists between the coin and the object would no longer be the same, but the coin’s value would not be said to change. This is the way to understand, Augustine proposes, the relations which may be predicated of God with respect to creation. God remains eternally unchanged, while creatures’ relationships to God can and do change.

### *Difficulties with Augustine’s Theology of the Incarnation*

But, there’s a problem here, or at least there might be if we’re committed to the linguistic analogy of the Incarnation as signifying not only a distinction of the divine and human natures, but also a distinction between the discarnate and incarnate Word. If the latter obtains, we’re tempted to say that the words of John’s Gospel, “*et Verbum caro factum est*” (John 1:14 Vulg) signify the same thing as Augustine’s example in the Psalm. Tantalizingly, the Latin text of Psalm 89 (90), quoted as an example of how to think relationally, utilizes the same verb as Jerome’s rendering of the prologue of John. Augustine’s citation reads, along with the Vulgate, “*Domine refugium factus es nobis*” (Ps 89:1 Vulg).<sup>28</sup> This is problematic because we’re led to treat God becoming my refuge and the Word of God becoming flesh as the same kind of thing. While we can affirm the example of the coin and the price of an object for creaturely change with respect to God, it’s not clear that we’d want to say the same thing about the created body and soul of Jesus and the Word of God.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 5.17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, ed. W. J. Mountain, vol. 1, 2 vols., *CCSL 50* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 5.17.



Why should applying the relational model of predication as described in the examples of the coin and Psalm 90 strike us a problematic when applied to the Incarnation? Because in the final estimation, the coin and the object it purchases have nothing to do with one another. The coin could be different and thus not be the price of the thing, or the price could be different and not be the value of the coin. And here it's possible to see how the gap in Augustine's linguistic theory of the Incarnation, if deployed to describe the relation between a discarnate Word and an incarnate Word, might lead us to just this conclusion about Jesus Christ. That is, if the gap can not only describe the necessary distinction between the two natures of Jesus Christ, but also be used to explain the Incarnation in terms of the relation of those two natures, we're led to an unhappy conclusion. If this is the case, the Incarnation is solely a matter of changing created human nature with respect to God. If the Incarnation is merely a way of speaking about changes in human nature with respect to God, then there's nothing to make the Incarnation even conditionally necessary with respect to the particular human being Jesus of Nazareth born of the Virgin Mary. Augustine is clear, however, that what we want to say about the Incarnation "is that the very Word of God was made flesh, that is, was made man, without however being turned into or changed into that which he was made . . . and that this whole can be called God because it is God and man because it is man."<sup>29</sup> We want to say that God becomes flesh in such a way that Jesus of Nazareth *is* God, and it is not clear that we can mean this if we affirm the same kind of relation existing between Jesus and the Word as between the price of an object and a coin.

The relationship between God and a creature in the other instances explicitly described by Augustine—the voice from heaven and the Spirit's descent as a dove—fit more readily into this model. Both use created means to bring about a change in relationship of those hearing or seeing the events (or those reading about them at a remove) that changes the orientation of the creature to God. Augustine rejects these, however, as ways of describing the kind of thing that happens in the Incarnation.<sup>30</sup> The rejection hinges explicitly on human nature and the Word of God being united in a single person, Jesus of Nazareth. A most elegant affirmation of this same point is found in another of Augustine's works, where he explains that a believer will find himself in Jesus if he

believes and confesses in him a true human nature, that is, our nature, though raised up to the only Son of God by God the Word, who assumes it in a singular manner, so that he who assumed it and what

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4.31.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.30.

he assumed is one person of the Trinity. For, when the man was assumed, a quaternity was not produced, but there remained a trinity, since that assumption ineffably produced the truth of one person in God and man.<sup>31</sup>

Here again we find an emphasis on the identity of Jesus and the Word of God. If we want to affirm this using Augustine's strong trinitarian language, it's clear that we must reject any model of the Incarnation that would account for the relational predication of the Word of God to Jesus of Nazareth by creaturely change alone. It's necessary to say that *refugium factus es* and *caro factum est* are not describing the same kind of relation between God and a creature.

At the same time, it's clear that we cannot introduce accidental change into God, as this mode of predication was correctly ruled out by Augustine as a category mistake. God cannot change because for God to be and to have are the same thing. But this would also include the relations God has, excluding those which refer to change in created things.<sup>32</sup> We're left, then, with the intra-trinitarian relations, exactly where Augustine locates the incarnate One when he says, "he who assumed it and what he assumed is one person of the Trinity."<sup>33</sup> The relation God has to Jesus of Nazareth is part of who God is. This is not to say that the divine and human natures are in any way confused, but that the particular relation between the divine nature in the second person of the Trinity and the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth obtains eternally. To do otherwise is to introduce change into God by saying there was a Trinity of discarnate persons, one of whom began to be incarnate. Or it requires locating the change entirely on the creaturely side, in which case it's not clear how one can go on to say the Word of God is united with Jesus in such a way that he is a single person of the Trinity.

A better way to go is to remove change from the equation altogether. The relation between the second person of the Trinity and Jesus of Nazareth is a real relation between God and a creature, but without change. If this proposal is right, we can only say the Word became flesh, and mean it in a way consonant with the rest of Christian theological grammar, if God has eternally been flesh. Interestingly, we can only introduce real becoming into God if he has always been that which he becomes. In time, the human relationship to God is said to change, creature to God, but the God to whom they are related in new ways has always already been related to them in the person of Jesus Christ.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, 'The Gift of Perseverance', in *Selected Writings on Grace and Pelagianism*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2011), 24.67.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 5.17.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, 'The Gift of Perseverance', 24.67.

*Christian Theological Speech about the Incarnate Lord*

Our way of speaking about the incarnate Lord as identical with the second person of the Trinity is a crucially important theological point. If we are to take Augustine's conceptual apparatus of substantial and relational predication on board as a proper way of discussing the Trinity *ad intra* and *ad extra*, then it's clear that we must also be prepared to say that the Word's becoming flesh is an atemporal fact about God. It then governs the possible outcomes of relational speech about God—that is, how we can go on speaking about Jesus as God. This grammatical point leads us directly into an approach to language that might be useful in overcoming the perceived gap between the discarnate and incarnate Word. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, proposes, "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is," to which he adds the laconic parenthetical "(Theology as grammar)." <sup>34</sup> I take the point here to be that the patterns and flow of human language around an object—how we speak about the object in relation to other objects and to itself—are the best and only indicators of what an object is. James Conant puts this same point another way in discussing the meaning of words: "What your words say depends upon what they are *doing* – how they are at work – in a context of use." <sup>35</sup> The question to ask is how Christians speak about God incarnate in the divine-human person, Jesus Christ. One way of considering this question has been explored above, by examining Augustine's thoughts concerning how God relates to creation, and why it's important to affirm a difference between what he says about all of creation that is not God and the part of creation who *is* God, Jesus. What follows, then, is an attempt to attend to what is actually said about this one real relation between life of the Trinity and the cosmos. Using the tools of Wittgenstein's grammatical approach, we might then be able to uncover a theology of language that can account for both the difference between divine and human nature, while also adhering to the identity of the single person who has (and therefore is) both of them.

The first place to look for how the Church speaks about Jesus Christ is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol, which says in the second article: "*Credimus . . . in unum dominum Iesum Christum filium dei unigenitum ex patre natum ante omnia saecula, deum ex deo, lumen ex lumine, deum verum ex deo vero, natum non factum, omousion patri, hoc est eiusdem cum patre substantiae, per quem*

<sup>34</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §373.

<sup>35</sup> James Conant, 'Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use', *Philosophical Investigations* 21, no. 3 (1998).

*omnia facta sunt.*"<sup>36</sup> The last phrase quoted is itself scriptural, drawn directly from the prologue of John, "*Omnia per ipsum facta sunt*" (Jn 1:3 Vulg). What is delightful here is the explicit identification of this list of predicates not with a discarnate Word, but with "one Lord Jesus Christ." The one who is "*natum non factum*" is also the one who "*caro factum est.*" The credal formula affirms both items at once. This fits into a broader pattern in Scripture of speaking in just this way about Jesus. The same point is made, with further specification, in Colossians 1:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col 1:15–20 RSV).

While my Bible unhelpfully footnotes the first verse to explain that this is referring to Jesus' divinity, it is not at all clear that this is how we should take these verses to be presenting what turns out to be a narrative summary of the whole history of the cosmos.<sup>37</sup> The "he" to whom these verses refer is progressively specified as "the first-born of all creation," "the first-born from the dead," the one in whom "all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell" who made "peace by the blood of his cross." Like the Nicene Creed, Colossians is making a point to emphasize the identity of Jesus of Nazareth with the Word of God. In other words, it is consonant with Christian theological grammar to say that Jesus is "the first-born of all creation" and that "in him all things were created." The one referred to here is both a part of creation (which couldn't be said of a discarnate Word) and also is the one through whom and for whom creation comes into existence.

A final scriptural example of Christian theological speech that deploys this same idiom in its talk of Jesus can be found in Hebrews 13. There we read, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8 RSV). This usage links our speech about the incarnate Lord to the theophany to Moses on Mount Horeb in the book of Exodus. There we find a question about God's name,

<sup>36</sup> 'Concilium Constantinopolitanum I', in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner and Giuseppe Alberigo (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 24.

<sup>37</sup> *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*, Second Catholic ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), FN Col 1:15.

to which Moses is given two answers. In Exodus 3:14 God says, "I am who am," and in the following verse he provides a second answer, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations." The passage from Hebrews is a compressed version of both these kinds of naming. The various possibilities of the verb "to be" are encompassed by "yesterday and today and for ever" just as they are in the "I am who am" of Exodus 3:14. Likewise, in addition to God's self-identification as the one who supremely is, we find, "Jesus Christ," to whom has been given "the name which is above every name" (Phil 2:9). Like God's self-identification as the God of Israel in Exodus 3:15, this is his name "for ever." Jesus Christ is therefore marked out again by his identity with God. It's Jesus Christ who is affirmed to be the same yesterday, today, and for ever, not a discarnate Word which can be imagined over and against the incarnate Word found in Jesus.

### *The Grammar of the Incarnation*

These various use cases support the grammatical point made concerning relationality. They point us to the possibility of collapsing the corresponding distinction in our picture of language, the same picture that leads Augustine to posit a gap between the pre-linguistic word and the word spoken in a natural language. Augustine falls victim to what Conant calls "the possibility of imagining that one knows what one's words mean even though no meaning has yet been conferred to them."<sup>38</sup> In Book 5 of *De trinitate*, for example, he begins his discussion of substantial and relational predication with the caveat, "From now on I will be attempting to say things that cannot altogether be said as they are thought by a man."<sup>39</sup> Similarly in a tractate on the Gospel of John he claims, "There is a word in the man himself which remains within; for the sound proceeds from the mouth. There is a word which is spoken in a truly spiritual manner, that which you understand from the sound, not the sound itself."<sup>40</sup> Again, in a work on catechesis,

It is almost always the fact that my speech displeases myself. For I am covetous of something better, the possession of which I frequently enjoy within me before I commence to body it forth in intelligible

<sup>38</sup> Conant, 'Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use', p. 246.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 5.1.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, 'Tractate 1 on the Gospel of St. John', in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John*, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 8.

words: and then when my capacities of expression prove inferior to my inner apprehensions, I grieve over the inability which my tongue has betrayed in answering to my heart.<sup>41</sup>

There is a pervasive sense in Augustine's thoughts on these matters that he finds himself unequal to the task of expressing in words some reality that he should be able to say. This is one of the features of language that Wittgenstein is looking to overcome when he says of grammatical investigation, "The great difficulty here is not to present the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do. As if there really were an object, from which I extract description, which I am not in a position to show to anyone."<sup>42</sup> This is the same difficulty described by Conant as attempting to secure the meaning of one's own words apart from them being spoken, used, in a particular context.

This is Augustine's fantasy about language, which we might say comes under the sign of absence, loss, and nostalgia. And to embrace it as the model for language is to introduce a gap between thought and word that cannot be bridged. It's not only to introduce a difference between the human and divine natures, but also to risk their separation in the very person of Jesus Christ, whom Augustine has identified with the second person of the Trinity. This habit of thought, of dividing intelligible word from spoken word shows itself in Augustine's tractates on the Gospel of John. In the first tractate he says, "Let him not leave Christ born through the flesh till he arrive at Christ born of the Father alone, the God-Word with God, through whom all things were made."<sup>43</sup> Again, in the second tractate he explains this further:

Therefore, my brethren, I would desire to have impressed this upon your hearts: if you wish to live in a pious and Christian manner, cling to Christ according to that which he became for us, that you may arrive at Him according to that which is, and according to that which was. He approached, that for us He might become this; because He became that for us, on which the weak may be borne, and cross the sea of this world and reach their native country; where there will be no need of a ship, for no sea is crossed. It is better then not to see with the mind that which is, and yet not to depart from the cross of Christ, than to see it with the mind, and despise the cross of Christ. It is good beyond this, and best of all, if it be possible, that we both see whither we ought to go, and hold fast that which carries us as we go.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, 'On the Catechising of the Uninstructed', in *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 2.3.

<sup>42</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §374.

<sup>43</sup> Augustine, 'Tractate 1', 18.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, 'Tractate 2', 3.

Neither of these formulations comes on the heels of a proto-Chalcedonian concern for keeping the two natures of Jesus Christ conceptually distinct. Rather, each seems to be advocating a kind of ascent, whereby the purpose of the incarnate Word is expended once Christians “reach their native country; where there will be no need of a ship.” This is a far cry from Augustine’s suggestions in *De dono perseverentiae* and *De trinitate*, where the Word and the flesh are united in a way that results in a single person with two natures who just is the second person of the Trinity.

We also know that the distinctions he deploys in this manner are intimately connected to his word-theory or speaker-side picture of language, as he spends a great deal of time in the first tractate providing an explanation of the *verbum cordis* and its relationship to the Word of God.<sup>45</sup> So while it’s true that this approach to language can be employed to make a proper distinction between the natures, it’s also true that the intellectual habit that desires to separate the pre-linguistic and linguistic word can introduce a division precisely where there ought not to be one. It ought not to be there according to Augustine’s own best intuitions about the Trinity, and even more determinatively, according to Christian scriptural and liturgical speech about Jesus Christ. It remains, then, to consider whether an approach to language that manages neither to collapse distinctions where we should find them nor to introduce them where we shouldn’t could help us to think more clearly about what we mean when we say, *Verbum caro factum est*. If we can do so in a way that also accounts for Augustine’s fantasies about language, that is, why he might desire to think this way about the linguistic enterprise, all the better.

Concerning this last point first, we must acknowledge that he’s right to feel that language is inadequate to its object. But we must be clear on the source of the inadequacy. Rather than identifying a flaw within language, a better approach is to recognize the inadequacy within human creatures themselves. Our linguistic failings are not failures of language, but failures of humanity. These failures are attributable to, are a product of, Original Sin. Viewed in this way, we can see language for what it is, an activity engaged in by fallen human creatures. This does not mean that language is itself fallen, but that the human creatures who employ it are. In that case, it’s better to say of language, with Wittgenstein, “And how extraordinary that we should be able to do anything at all with the one we have!”<sup>46</sup> What I’ve proposed here is a way of transfiguring the Wittgensteinian insights about language into a Christian idiom. As Stephen Mulhall points out, Wittgenstein’s “aim is to show us that philosophy can

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, ‘Tractate 1’, 8–17.

<sup>46</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §120.

only be an activity—the activity of identifying when and how we succumb to the temptation of thinking that we can somehow reach beyond the limits of language and thought.”<sup>47</sup> What Christians know, however, is that God transcends these limits. We know, at least, that all our speech about God is at best provisional and at worst woefully inadequate to its object. It's our present inability to transcend (not to say go outside) these limits which remains something to be lamented as it is an ineluctable product of human sinfulness.

### *Inside Augustine's Fantasy*

Crucial to the Wittgensteinian approach to language as both Cavell and Mulhall have interpreted it, is the necessity “to articulate the interlocutor's fantasy from the inside.”<sup>48</sup> When we understand Augustine's perspective as a product of conceiving of language under the sign of loss, loss of a capacity humans ought to have to image God, we can affirm that he is right. But we can also affirm that to see this as a limitation of language is a mistake. It is, rather, a limitation of humans, who though created in the image and likeness of God, have failed to image God by failing to be the kinds of creatures we are. Our failures of language are byproducts and casualties of this failing, and because it is taught and learned in a damaged world by damaged people it invariably disappoints. At the same time, however, it shouldn't be overly disappointing. We're led back to the Wittgensteinian aphorism that the thing to do is not to think of language as having limitations, but rather to recognize the limits of language.<sup>49</sup> Wittgenstein (re)discovers human finitude. We might add to that, in the Christian idiom, the damage wrought by sin, with the important caveat that the two should not be conflated.

If we acknowledge sin's deleterious effects as foundational in Augustine's thought, we can understand that his fantasy concerning linguistic reference stems from a deep uneasiness about the precariousness of all human communication. This sense of the tenuous grip we have on learning, communication, and knowledge are central concerns of his in the final chapter of the early work *De magistro*. As he explains in *De doctrina christiana*, “Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's Private Language: Grammar, Nonsense, and Imagination in Philosophical Investigations*, §§243–315 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §119. Cf. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's Private Language*, p. 8.



who makes the sign.”<sup>50</sup> *De magistro* concerns itself with explaining how this “action of the mind” is brought about so that learning might take place. It is only by an attentiveness to the interior light of truth, the presence of Christ in the mind of the hearer that allows a person to hear and affirm a teaching as true.<sup>51</sup> Recognizing that language appears to be both wholly conventional and also somehow involved in, though not finally determinative of, a mind’s encounter with truth, Augustine sees rightly that the Word of God and human words are connected. Seeing that they must be connected, however, he falls victim to the trap of attempting to establish the connection himself. Grasping that it’s amazing when language succeeds in meaning anything at all, given the darkness and estrangement from truth that follows from sin, he constructs a picture of how it might work. But, as James Wetzel puts it, “[Augustine’s] self-conception . . . remains hostage to a preconception about the work that words ideally do.”<sup>52</sup> This misconception is what leads Wittgenstein to levy his particular critique against Augustine. By understanding how that critique works we’ll be in a better position to provide an alternative account of Word and word.

Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Investigations* with an extended quotation from Augustine’s *Confessiones*, but much seems to hinge on the final phrase of the citation: “by training my mouth in these signs, I then spoke my wishes through them.”<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein frames this as a misunderstanding of the phenomenon of native language acquisition:

Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a foreign country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if he already had a language, only not this one. Or again, as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak. And ‘think’ would here mean something like ‘talk to himself’.<sup>54</sup>

It’s not principally that Wittgenstein takes issue with the idea that the child “learned bit by bit what things the words signified when set and frequently heard in their places in different sentences.”<sup>55</sup> It’s rather

<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.2.3.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, ‘The Teacher’, in *St. Augustine: The Greatness of the Soul and the Teacher*, trans. Joseph M. Colleran, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman Press, 1950), 14.45–46.

<sup>52</sup> James Wetzel, ‘Wittgenstein’s Augustine: The Inauguration of the Later Philosophy’, in *Augustine and Philosophy*, ed. Phillip Cary, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 220.

<sup>53</sup> “*measque jam voluntates, edomito in eis signis ore, per haec enuntiabam*” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §1. Citing Augustine, *Confessiones*, 1.8.13).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, §32.

<sup>55</sup> “*verba in variis sententiis locis suis posita, et crebro audita, quarum rerum signa essent, paulatim coligebam*” (*ibid.*, §1. Citing Augustine, *Confessiones*, 1.8.13).

the idea that Augustine the child had wishes (*voluntates*) that needed expressing and that he was somehow conscious of these desires as desires, before having acquired a language through which to give them expression.

Mulhall's treatment of Wittgenstein's reflections on "private language" are helpful here. Augustine's move is to identify his pre-verbal self as a human capable of thinking and meaning something to himself alone, just not yet able to express this meaning to others. The task is one of establishing a connection between a word and its referent. Wittgenstein's great insight is that this move is a false one, and it comes from imagining that there is a gap to be bridged. Mulhall identifies Wittgenstein's discovery with a reframing of the question, "How do words *refer* to sensations?" as instead, "How does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations?"<sup>56</sup> Language doesn't establish a non-existent connection, instead words displace "natural, non-linguistic, behavioural expressions or manifestations of sensations"—it is not a matter of "attaching a linguistic label to a non-linguistic thing."<sup>57</sup> The relation that exists between natural human expression and sensations—a child's cry of pain and the pain felt by the child, for instance—exists before we get to it. The linguistic term "pain" does not have to establish anything, instead it is "grafted on to" the natural expression of pain.<sup>58</sup> Sticking with the pain example, Mulhall clarifies what he means by grafting, "One might say: his cries must be seen as, acknowledged as, cries of pain by those who make up his social world if he is to receive the gift or graft of the language of pain."<sup>59</sup> This alternative approach, one that seems broadly in agreement with Augustine's own best impulses concerning language—i.e., that it's purely conventional—is a corrective to our desire to fix the meaning of our words by establishing a connection to a referent. It does so precisely by explaining that the connection is already there. What we must learn, what we must be given by those who teach us language, is an induction into a form of life, a life with words. This form of life, like the connection between natural expressions and sensations, always preexists us. So receiving the graft of language is also itself the grafting of an individual human person into and onto a life in community. We might add, for the Christian, part of this picture will be of being grafted into and onto a life that is always already deeply damaged by sin.

But how might this alternative picture of language, one in which there is no gap between the *verbum mentis* and the *verbum vocis* to be

<sup>56</sup> Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's Private Language*, p. 23. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §244.

<sup>57</sup> Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's Private Language*, p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

bridged, be deployed to help make sense of the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ? Instead of beginning with the hearer-side of this equation (the relations between hearer and speaker having already been in a certain sense collapsed by a communal picture of linguistic expression) a sketch of a trinitarian theology of language might help us to go on to say what we need to about the Incarnation. We must return, then, to the prologue of John's Gospel, which informs much of Augustine's thought on this topic.

### *An Alternative Linguistic Theology of the Incarnation*

The similarities between the prologue of John's Gospel and the creation account in Genesis 1 should incline us to connect the repeated use of "And God said" (Gn 1:3ff) of the latter with the Word of the former. As Augustine says, "Between the speaking of God and the making of the creature, what was there by which it was made but the Word?"<sup>60</sup> Might it be possible, then, to not only understand Genesis in light of John's gospel, but also to read John in the light of Genesis? That is to say, if the Word who was with God and was God informs our reading of God's speech act in Genesis 1, how might the account of that same speech act help us to read the gospel? Here, I'd like to suggest that "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14 RSV) is the same event, the bringing into being all that is from nothing that occurs with God's first utterance, "Let there be light" (Gn 1:3 RSV). The light that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5) is the incarnate Word of God.

In this reading of the creation narrative, we discover a corollary to human natural expressiveness and linguistic grafting described in Mulhall's interpretation of Wittgenstein. We can use this approach to language to narrate the eternal relation of Word and flesh in the second person of the Trinity and its meaning for the created order. In trinitarian terms, creation is the natural expressiveness of God the Father, by which the Father expresses *ad extra* his intra-trinitarian relations with the Son and the Spirit. Creation expresses the Father's relation of loving generation and spiration that is the Triune life. At the same time, the act of creation is a speech act. The Son who is the Word, in being spoken (Genesis 1:3 and John 1:14), is grafted onto the Father's natural expressiveness in the Incarnation and bears the linguistic meaning (we might say, the grammar of the cosmos) of what the Father creates.<sup>61</sup> This grafting of the Word onto creation in

<sup>60</sup> Augustine, 'Tractate 1,' 11.

<sup>61</sup> Bearing the linguistic meaning of the cosmos shouldn't be understood extrinsically, as though Jesus Christ is a later addition or afterthought. Rather, as the Word eternally

the Incarnation is also the grafting of the incarnate One, and through him the whole of the created cosmos, into the communal life of the three persons by the Holy Spirit—"to reconcile to himself all things" (Col 1:20). Because the three persons are divine, the natural expression, the grafting onto, and the grafting into are a set of eternal relations. There is never a time when God is not expressing himself in creation, because there is no time before God creates it.<sup>62</sup> The act of creation, we can maintain with Augustine, is atemporal.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, there is no time when the Son is not being grafted onto that expression in the Incarnation, or when the Spirit is not grafting the linguistic meaning of the cosmos into the Triune life and that of the Triune life into creation.

This is not to say there is no order to these operations. The relations of the three persons *ad intra* which obtain in eternity are logically (but not temporally) prior to the *ad extra* grafting of the Word onto creation in the Incarnation. Augustine makes a similar point when he says, "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. 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."<sup>64</sup> Now, however, there is no need to posit a gap between the word cognized and the word spoken, or the discarnate Word and the incarnate Word. The eternal speech act of the Father is the speaking of the incarnate Word grafted onto creation by being grafted, "by the power of the Holy Spirit," into the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. This occurs in such a way that we can say with confidence that the two natures coming together, though distinct, do constitute the single person who is Jesus the Christ.<sup>65</sup>

becomes flesh, he gives the cosmos its grammatical criteria, thereby making it something capable of being known at all. On this see Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 65-85, esp. pp. 76-7.

<sup>62</sup> Augustine, 'The Literal Meaning of Genesis', in *On Genesis*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2002), 5.5.12.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 1.9.15-17, 1.17.34, 4.18.33, 4.35.56, 5.6.19, 5.11.27.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11.7.19.

<sup>65</sup> There's more to say here, especially with regard to the glorified and ascended flesh of Jesus, seated at the right hand of the Father. It's my inclination that these reflections on the eternal speech act of the Father, who utters the Word eternally united with human nature in the person of Jesus Christ, comport well with the scriptural accounts of the ascension. On this view, the ascension would be taken as revealing in time the place of the resurrected flesh of Jesus in eternity. Another approach—which indicates the eternal, real relation of God and creature in Jesus Christ, and supports the view above on the ascended flesh—would take a sacramental route and insist upon the true, eucharistic character of the meal on Holy Thursday. That is, it would insist that if anyone can transubstantiate bread

Creation understood in this way, is always an outpouring and return of the divine life through the divine-human person Jesus Christ, whose human body and soul take on new significance as the single point of contact between the *ad intra* and *ad extra* relations of the Trinity. He truly is the one mediator, precisely because his human nature is eternally grafted into the Triune life which is the Word's being grafted onto creation in his person. This reading of John's prologue is not just a way to make sense of Jesus as the Son of God but a way to make sense of God's utterance, which causes creatures to be by way of the Incarnation. It gives new force, and new sense, to Colossians 1:15–17: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

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and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ it's surely Jesus Christ himself. And if this is the case, and the elements so consecrated truly are his flesh and blood, then they surely are his resurrected, ascended, and glorified body and blood, not the body and blood seated among the Apostles at the last supper. If that's the case, Jesus' ascended flesh and the human flesh prior to the resurrection are—at least once—collocated in timespace. This wouldn't be possible unless the ascended flesh were 'already' dwelling in eternity.

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