

Responsive Life and Speaking To the Other. A Phenomenological Interpretation of Book One of Augustine’s *Confessions*

1. Introductory Methodological Considerations

As O’Donnell has underlined, there is no comparable text in the history of early Christianity that starts out as Augustine’s text does (O’Donnell 1992/2, 8), for the *Confessions* neither begins with dedications or with prefaces, nor does the text begin with an introduction (if the opening prayer is not taken to be an exchange for an introduction. And still further, the text is written neither as a dialogue nor as a theoretical pamphlet; instead, Augustine immediately “jumps” into his topic by doing something unique: the first sentence is directly addressed to God, which is to say, to the ultimate *other* of himself. The following reflections will lay out the beginning part of the text in a “phenomenological” and “hermeneutical” manner, insofar as my reading of Augustine’s text is based on the question of how we should understand the general experience that underlies the text. To be sure, the methodological point of view that the following essay presupposes requires initial explanations:

Augustine’s *Confessions* has turned out to be a popular source for contemporary considerations of European philosophers, such as those of Heidegger, Derrida, Ricœur, and Lyotard. There are primarily three reasons for this rediscovery of Augustine: [1] the “existential” dimension of Augustine’s *Confessions*, [2] the “narrative” perspective that the text opens up, as well as [3] the phenomenon of time, all of which are central for 20th Century European philosophy. Especially Heidegger took Augustine to be one of the most important figures in his

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attempt to overthrow Husserlian phenomenology; he lectured extensively on Augustine,¹ and the influence of Augustinian considerations on *Being and Time* is well documented.² As a consequence of Heidegger’s initial recovery of Augustine’s philosophy for phenomenology and hermeneutics, Paul Ricœur dealt with Augustine’s *Confessions* in his *Time and Narrative*,³ and, finally, Derrida’s reflections have led to a vigorous debate on the relation between phenomenology and religion, due in part to the central work of Jean-Luc Marion.⁴ The overall focus of this contemporary interest in Augustine can be seen in the project of developing a non-Cartesian, and, hence, non-Husserlian framework of phenomenological and hermeneutical thinking.

Since the interpretation presented in this essay is done from a contemporary framework - though it does *not* take itself to be “postmodern” - the interpretation is certainly philologically “restricted.” For example, the essay neither seeks to do full justice to the Biblical perspective nor

¹ See especially Heidegger 1920/21, 115-252; for the context of Heidegger’s lectures see the historical explanations in Gander 2002.

² Heidegger’s reception of Augustine is filtered through his battle with Protestantism and Catholicism. Indeed, the German philosophical tradition, as initiated by Kant, Fichte and Hegel, is heavily influenced by the Protestant theological tradition. In this vein, John van Buren has intensively dealt with Heidegger’s hermeneutics of facticity and with his phenomenology of Christianity before *Being and Time*. Heidegger took over from Luther the move against a *theologia gloriae*, favoring instead in his early writings, a *theologia crucis* in connection with an ontology of subjective life (van Buren 1994, 149-202). Put briefly, against the theoretical burden of classical Greek metaphysics, Heidegger tried to uncover “categories” of life and subjectivity, out of which philosophical abstractions emerge. Van Buren goes so far as to claim that “Heidegger saw himself at this time as a kind of philosophical Luther of Western metaphysics” (van Buren 1994, 167). The most visible part of this tradition is the central position of the concept of conscience in *Being and Time*. For Heidegger’s early references to the Christian concept of conscience, see van Buren 1994, 182-189. It is in this context that Heidegger discovers Augustine’s *Confessions* as a source for existential considerations and as a source for considerations about the structure of human life and the care of the self. In addition, Heidegger not only takes over from Augustine the self-referential structure of care and self-questioning, but also parts of Augustine’s analysis of sensuality. Finally, certain categories, such as “idle talk” and “curiosity” in *Being and Time* are Augustinian (see Heidegger 1927, §§35-38).

³ See Ricœur 1983, 5-30. Curiously, though Ricœur develops a narrative account of human life and human self-appropriation, he only deals with Augustine’s reflections on time, as they appear in book 11.

⁴ Whereas Derrida’s approach to Augustine seems to be rather biographical, Marion has dealt with Augustine in connection with Descartes (see Marion 1986, §11). For this “historicist refashionings of Augustine” see Hankey 1999; for central connections between Heidegger, Augustine, and Derrida, see Caputo’s contribution in Caputo/Scanlon 2005 and Caputo 1999. Caputo deals especially with Heidegger’s transformation of Augustine’s self-questioning into an existential struggle of the self with its own being (=what it is); see Caputo 1999, 205-207, the point of which is overlooked by Capelle in his contribution on Heidegger and Augustine in Caputo/Scanlon 2005.

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to the Ancient perspective, both of which underlie the *Confessions*. Instead, what should be demonstrated through the following considerations about Book I of Augustine’s *Confessions* is that the Ancient perspective and the contemporary framework can be brought into a fruitful dialogue if one takes them to be a *dialogue* between contemporary questions and Ancient responses. What Gadamer in *Truth and Method* has introduced as “hermeneutics,” referring back to Heidegger’s “readings” of various texts of the philosophical tradition, is the thesis that the interpretation of historical texts (and any other process of understanding the other) can be reconstructed as an exchange and dialogue between question and response, the process of which should lead to an “overlapping consensus,” within which the contemporary reader learns to correct and change his or her own restricted and limited perspective *through* the responses of the historical author. This process is determined by the fact that we are neither able to (simply) overstep our own contemporary framework of understanding nor the foreign horizon that the historical text offers *in contrast to* the contemporary reader’s horizon of understanding. Historical understanding is moving in this “between” when taken to be a movement between response and question.⁵ As Gadamer states, “the standpoint that is beyond any standpoint, a standpoint from which we could conceive its true identity, is a pure illusion” (Gadamer 1960, 376). Consequently, understanding is a dialectical process *between* the text and the reader, the experience of which changes both the text and the reader, and which Gadamer calls “hermeneutic experience.”

To come back to what was called above the “phenomenological” point of view, in the case of this essay the question is taken from a contemporary perspective on the experience of

⁵ See Gadamer 1960, 362-380. According to Gadamer, historical knowledge and the process of understanding the other (in this case the text) is based on the *priority* of the question, the answer to which is the text. Accordingly, understanding is based on a movement between the question that the text tries to respond to *and* the question(s) that the reader has when trying to understand an “alien” text (Gadamer 1960, 374).

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otherness in connection with questions within the philosophy of language (Buber, Levinas, Derrida, Peperzak, speech act theory). Accordingly, the following interpretation of Augustine’s *Confessions* has to show how the aforementioned contemporary questions resonate in the historical text, though they were not Augustine’s *explicit* questions. In addition, the hermeneutical attempt to overlap these horizons in historical understanding is based on the thesis that philosophical discourses of all times implicitly address structures of human experience that are universal, though the perspectives *on* those structures change over time. For example, in his *Confessions* Augustine addresses experiences such as death, language, and the experience of the other. From a phenomenological and hermeneutical point of view, these underlying *universal* experiences of human reality are called “phenomena.” As Heidegger works out in his Marburg and Freiburg lectures, as well as in *Being and Time*, certain phenomena structure human reality, which ultimately can be brought to light *through* a careful interpretation of the non-contemporary author, even if these interpretations turn out not be “correct” in a philological sense. “Correctness” and “appropriateness,” one might claim (along with Heidegger), is a standard that comes *with* the interpretation of the phenomena in question. What is at stake in an interpretation – what is interpreted in an interpretation – must reveal itself *throughout* the process of exchanging one’s own perspective with the perspective of the text. Consequently, the “correctness” of an interpretation cannot be applied as a measurement from the outside, and it is hoped that the following essay ultimately turns out to be “correct” and “appropriate” when taken as the attempt to reveal the human issues in question that underlie Augustine’s thought, although they are – and must be – addressed from a specific perspective.

Accordingly, the interpretation presented in this essay shows that the beginning of the *Confessions* deals with a general human component in a very specific way, namely, in a mode

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that is ruled by the question and experience of otherness. This mode will be uncovered through a careful analysis, which follows what Heidegger called in his early lectures “factual life.” Rather than focusing on the propositional and epistemological “content” of an experience, this perspective is concerned with the question of *how* an experience is enacted, or, to use the German word here, how experiences are “actualized” [*vollzogen*].⁶ Accordingly, the reflections presented in this essay will focus on the experience of the other and on the otherness that *guides* the first part of Book I, and as such, this paper will not consider other aspects of the concept of otherness, such as the experience of death and the otherness of the tempted body. In sum, the assumption is that the general human question that Augustine’s text answers is the question of otherness.

Augustine’s opening paragraph contains several moments towards which we will turn our attention: [1] that these “reflections” come in the form of an address to an/the other, [2] that they are carried out by focusing on the performative dimension of language, and [3] that Augustine’s opening considerations introduce the self and human life as a *response to* the other. In other words, something is called into its presence, and the future of what will be said is dependent on from where it came.⁷

Consequently, the first part of the following considerations deals with the *performative dimension* of Book I of the *Confessions*, whereas the second part deals with the resulting *responsive dimension* of the text. Note that the question of performance found in Book XI

⁶ For an introduction of this term, see Heidegger 2004, 7. Heidegger uses the term “enactment tendency” [*Vollzugssinn*] for a transformed analysis of what Husserl called, in his *Logical Investigations* the “quality” of an act. However, whereas Husserl analysed acts only in their epistemological manner, which includes belief, imagination, recollection, etc, Heidegger investigates “how” one can perform one’s life, which, he claims, must be conceived as being prior to a Husserlian notion of intentionality. The “how” that is at stake in the first book of Augustine’s *Confessions* is the tendency towards the other.

⁷ I am indebted to what Adriaan Peperzak has written recently: “before I can ask ‘what should I do?’ or ‘how should I live?’, I have already been addressed by a voice that positions me as a respondent. Its summons makes me a ‘you’ before I can establish myself as an ‘I’” (Peperzak 2004, 54). I will come back to this point.

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highlights the contrast between God’s word and human words. However, the considerations presented in this essay will be limited to the problem of otherness, as introduced in Book I, and to the “life” that “answers” to otherness.

1. Speaking To and the Category of the Other

We would do well to outline first the elements that are present in the *Confessions’s* first Book. We are immediately aware, from the first sentence of the *Confessions*, that Augustine opens up in a very specific way: he speaks *to* God. “Yet allow me to speak” (1.6.7)⁸ says Augustine at the beginning of the second section of the first Book - a way of speaking that differentiates the divine order of eternity from the human order of cognition, time and beginning.⁹ What is striking here is the central role of speaking, especially since we can see that Augustine’s mode of speaking is very special, inasmuch as this mode introduces itself mainly in the form of *speaking to*.¹⁰ As we know, the rules for the different moments of speech acts of *speaking to* and *speaking*

⁸ I.6.7: *sed tamen sine me loqui apud misericordiam tuam, me terram et cinerem sine tamen loqui. quoniam ecce misericordia tua est, non homo, inrisor meus, cui loquor. et tu fortasse inrides me, sed conversus misereberis mei. quid enim est quod volo dicere, domine, nisi quia nescio unde venerim huc, in istam dico vitam mortalem an mortem vitalem? nescio. et susceperunt me consolationes miserationum tuarum, sicut audivi a parentibus carnis meae, ex quo et in qua me formasti in tempore: non enim ego memini. exceperunt ergo me consolationes lactis humani, nec mater mea vel nutrices meae sibi ubera implebant, sed tu mihi per eas dabas alimentum infantiae secundum institutionem tuam et divitias usque ad fundum rerum dispositas. tu etiam mihi dabas nolle amplius quam dabas, et nutrientibus me dare mihi velle quod eis dabas: dare enim mihi per ordinatum affectum volebant quo abundabant ex te. nam bonum erat eis bonum meum ex eis, quod ex eis non sed per eas erat. ex te quippe bona omnia, deus, et ex deo meo salus mihi universa. quod animadverti postmodum, clamante te mihi per haec ipsa quae tribuis intus et foris. nam tunc sugere noram et adquiescere delectationibus, flere autem offensiones carnis meae, nihil amplius.*

⁹ The first reflection that Augustine offers after his initial reflections on the ontological distinction between humans and God in general is about the beginning of his life and the origin of himself. This indicates that he switches to the order of cognition, which can only be accomplished through speaking (*logos*). This, of course, mirrors Augustine’s conviction that everything was made by God’s *word*. Philosophical reflection, in other words, tries to understand discursively what God created in a non-discursive act. However, the act character of *logos* and speech remains intact on the human level. According to Gadamer, this performative element and the theory of the *verbum* leads to a hermeneutic conception of the process of concept formation that takes place in dialogue. On this point see Gadamer 1960, 418-427.

¹⁰ Speaking is not only important in connection with the *logos*, it also has to do with the teleological development of human life and its divisions. *Infantia* is the stage before speech, *pueritia* is the stage of learning to speak, *adulescentia* is the stage of the teenager, and *iuventus* is the stage of youth.

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about are very different. Whereas the second moment of the speech act is built into a propositional content, that is to say, into something *about which* one speaks, the moment of speaking to does not seem to have a propositional content, given that the person to whom one speaks is not identical to the propositional content of the speech. Indeed, speaking about something not only has a definite content, but it can be reconstructed and understood as a representational relation between what is said and what is the case. Since speaking has propositional content it can be objectified and expressed in words. When someone address one’s speech *to* someone one speaks about something that can be captured in propositional forms. However, the one to whom one addresses one’s speech should not be identified with the propositional content, for the *other* is not to be identified with the “aboutness” of the speech. Put simply, the category of the other to whom one speaks does not appear in the form of a representational or propositional content. Indeed, it does not seem possible to represent the other in the act of *speaking about*, since the other is not a fact *in* the world; rather, he/she is the *addressee*. In this case, the addressee would lose his/her status *as* the other if the speaker would be able to represent him/her in any form. The other, hence, must escape the attempt to *picture* her. Again, the other is not a fact *in* this world. The other is not a thing, not sensual, and not a thought.

What then, is the other?¹¹ Within the contemporary perspective of thinking about the status of what it means to address one’s speaking to the other, philosophers such as Buber and Levinas, have developed a powerful way of understanding this phenomenon, especially since they significantly depart from purely epistemological questions. For example, as Martin Buber

¹¹ Of course, this juncture of my interpretation is ambiguous, for I do not distinguish at this point between the other as a person and the other as God. What I try to introduce here is, rather, the general sense of what remains foreign to the concept of intentionality and constative speech acts.

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has written: “When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things” (Buber 1923, 59). What Buber has in mind, is the difference between the “aboutness” of addressing the other and the nature of the addressed other that, according to Buber, escapes any “aboutness.” The other neither is something *within* one’s experience, such as a table or a tree, nor is the other’s nature comparable to those entities. Being the other, in other words, is based on an *absolute* distinction. Otherness must mean an *epistemological* distinction between the subject and what this subject experiences, as well as an *ontological* distinction between the subject and what remains other to the subject. In what follows, these distinctions will be clarified.

As is well known, being directed towards something is a feature of intentional acts. Thus, we could, in this context, claim that Augustine’s speech is *directed to* the other (even if Augustine’s speech does not speak to a human other). Here, we should acknowledge that an intentional relation is always composed of three aspects: [1] it is a mental act (*noesis*, for example, believing, perceiving, imagining), [2] it is an act that has a quality (for example, doubting, questioning, etc), and [3] it is an act in which something is intended in an intention (*noema*, the intended).¹² However, in the case of the other, we are forced to leave the intentional level, inasmuch as the intentional relation is a relation that is directed towards *something*. However, the other is not just *some-thing*; rather, phenomenologically conceived, we must claim that the other is the *other of intentionality* and therefore should not be confused with “aboutness.” The other, especially if we talk about the absolute other, which/who is “God,” is not

¹² At this point I follow Husserl’s early theory of intentionality, as it is presented first in his *Logical Investigations*, and then in *Ideas I*.

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an *object* of intentional perception.¹³ The other can neither be seen nor touched, he/she can not be imagined, nor is he/she something that can be discovered “inside” or as something “mental,” since the other is addressed *as* what is other. Otherness in this sense escapes every intentionality. This problem becomes consequently expressed on the level of language and speaking as the distinction between constative and performative acts. Constative acts are acts that state something “about ‘p’,” whereas performative acts “do” something. For example, the language that one uses when christening a boat, does not state anything *about* the boat or *about* the act of christening; rather, the content of christening is *identical with* performing the christening. Other examples are welcoming sentences, promises and acts of forgiving. Internally, on the level of each speech act the difference between “constative” and “performative” is played out as the difference between locutionary and illocutionary acts: whereas the locutionary act *says something*, the illocutionary act expresses the fact that we *act by saying something*. Due to the latter, speech acts have, from the beginning, a social and pragmatic component by means of which speaking can never be fully private; rather, speaking becomes an activity directed towards the other, while not representationally capturing the other. Instead of operating with the distinction between constative and performative, we could also operate with Levinas’ distinction between *saying* and *said*. What is said is everything that can be objectified in speech, whereas the *saying* can not be objectified, as it is already presupposed for the said and can as such only be revealed through phenomenological analysis.¹⁴

¹³ As Buber puts it: “I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something. The life of a human being does not consist merely of all this and its like. All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It. But the realm of You has another basis.” (Buber 1923, 54)

¹⁴ As Peperzak has put it, “the Other, the Self, and Speaking, however, cannot enter the realm of the Sayable because in their vulnerability and humility they are too originary for a thetic thought that would try to thematize them” (Peperzak 1993, 29).

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Addressing the other, if taken in its performative dimension, primarily does not say anything; rather, addressing *calls for* the other, it *hopes for* the other and it *asks for* the presence of the other. Accordingly, in order to understand the performative level of speaking we must introduce another logic. “*Magnus es, domine*,” “Great are you, O Lord!” Augustine’s words not only set the tone of his upcoming reflections on his life and what constitutes the human self, they also – right from the beginning – make clear that everything that follows is a reflection on what human beings are and on what they are not. Though the statement is about the greatness of God and hence is not without any propositional content, the primary use of the sentence is based on the *distinction* between what can be expressed in propositional terms and what escapes this content. The performative act, accordingly, should be understood as the *establishment* of that distinction. Put differently, the distinction is not itself the propositional content, but is *evoked* through the *act* of speaking.

Here, Augustine’s considerations imply that this distinction cannot be rendered visible by simple constative speech; instead, what is at stake must be revealed *by the act of speaking* itself.¹⁵ Augustine is radical: instead of *telling* us that the other, here God, cannot become a case of propositional knowledge, he speaks to Him. This insight is of central importance: only *by* speaking to the other, what this speech is about, namely the otherness, can that which escapes objectification be revealed and discovered. The problem of intentionality and otherness comes most visibly to the forefront when Augustine states: “Must we know you before we can call upon you? Anyone who invokes what is still unknown may be making a mistake” (1.1.1.).¹⁶ The

¹⁵ In addition, Wittgenstein was certainly impressed with Augustine’s reflections on time in book XI, especially since Augustine’s reflections are based on the question of how we use the word “time.” On this point see Flasch 1993, 330-334, who claims that Augustine argues on purely linguistic grounds against the claim that there was time before God created time.

¹⁶ For the Latin text see footnote 8.

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performative act at the beginning of Book I pushes Augustine into the problem of knowledge and otherness (which shows how sensitive the rhetorician was of the composition of the first paragraph), and as a consequence a moment of faith is introduced; for if the other is not a moment of knowledge then we can only *believe* in her (we will come back to this point a little later in this section). Whereas every knowledge that can be expressed in a propositional way is fundamentally fallible and is open to mistakes and errors, faith presents the possibility for human beings to say something “about” something that is not a propositional and intentional content, and, accordingly, faith can be revealed through the performative moment of language. The sentence “I believe in you!” is not *about* one’s belief; rather, the sentence is the “doing” and the confirmation of this belief. Seen from this point of view, it becomes clearer why Augustine does not say “God is great.” Instead, he says “Great are you, O Lord.” This consideration leads us into further considerations about the general role of language at the beginning of the text.¹⁷

2. Language

Speech act theory has shown that utterances can only be understood because they are based on an underlying illocutionary act, which gives language – above everything else – a performative dimension. Illocutions, as was introduced above, do something by saying something. This performative dimension, since it is based on claims that are connected with the propositional content of the utterance, is as such dialogical. A claim about the truth, truthfulness or normative correctness of something that is being said can only be addressed to someone else. In this way, performances are, as performances, public. In addition, we can only speak *about* something

¹⁷ I understand the beginning of the *Confessions* to be an attempt to offer what Peperzak calls “Facing” (Peperzak 2004, 124).

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because something is already *spoken out*,¹⁸ *spoken to*, and *spoken with* someone. The underlying dialogical dimension, within which, as Gadamer has reminded us, language comes to being (although not carried out in Augustine’s text as a dialogue), is *verbal*. It requires a formation of what is thought of through a process of speaking. However, we should first take notice of the form in which the performative dimension is introduced: “Great are you, oh Lord!” has several components: [1] with this expression one speaks to the *other*, [2] the sentence expresses the *greatness* of the other, as well as [3] it does so by *praising* the other.

And so, we might here ask: how do we praise? Apparently, we cannot praise anything in this world through mere constative speech acts, since a constative speech act objectifies what it speaks about. When one says “The tree is 1000 years old,” one certainly does not praise the tree, or a property of the tree, such as its age; rather, one expresses something that is the case in the objective world. In order to praise the age of the tree one has to change the mode of one’s speaking, such that one emphasizes that which one addresses, by attending to the other *to which* or *to whom* one speaks. “Great are you, nature!” is an example of a speech act that expresses something that goes beyond the mere world of what is the case, since what is praiseworthy must be *evoked* through my act of praising. What is praised in a praise does not exist beyond the level of language, the content *only* comes into being *through* language and through *the act* of speaking. Performance means precisely this, namely that something comes into being through the performance. A theater play does not exist beyond the play, and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony does not exist on paper; rather, the symphony is what it is *when* it is performed. What is performed in a play shows itself only when the play is performed. In other words, the

¹⁸ “Spoken out” does not mean aloud, but it means a general articulation of something. As Heidegger reveals in *Being and Time*, what is understood in an act of understanding comes *by means of the act* to articulation and to intelligibility. The transparency of what is understood in an act of understanding is its articulation. On this point, see Heidegger 1927, §§32-34

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performative and verbal dimension exist absolutely prior to anything else that we can say about such sentences, and it is precisely this feature of speaking about which Augustine is worried when he asks himself if something can be called for if it is not known prior to the act of calling for it.¹⁹

The primacy of the performative that led us to the category of the other and the category of the speaking to, has a rhetorical background that is of importance for the context of the considerations considered in this paper.²⁰ According to Augustine, God has created the world in an act of speaking, the temporal problem of which he discusses in Book XI. “Your creative act is in no way different from your speaking,” as Augustine claims (11.7.9). Here, the *ars* and *techne* dimensions of the creative act becomes combined with a very powerful idea of language. The divine possibility to make and form the world out of the *logos* and within the divine word is mirrored in the human possibility to *make* truth in the temporal unfolding of the speech act. In addition, we would do well not to lose sight that Augustine started out as a rhetorician, and that he is one of few thinkers who were in command of *all* dimensions of language and speaking.²¹ Considering this, we should at least note the important role that praise had in Ancient rhetoric, alongside celebration, funeral and politics. The power of speech and language, seen from the point of rhetoric, has a *shared* dimension, given that the primary sense of being an eloquent

¹⁹ This thesis would lead us to further consequences, such as the following: if it is the case that every utterance has a performative dimension, then ultimately *language as such* depends on a dialogical dimension, as Gadamer claims in *Truth and Method* (see, especially, Gadamer 1960, 346-362).

²⁰ The rhetorical background in the *Confessions* is most prominent in book X; for the connection between grammar and rhetoric, see Chin 2002.

²¹ This does not lead, according to the early Middle Age paradigm, to a reflection on the role of language within the process of knowledge and cognition, for, as Flasch claims, Augustine’s theory of knowledge is based on the assumption that we have essential insights *without* any reference to language. Truth can be grasped without signs, that is to say, it can be intuited without mediation “with instant certainty” (11.3.5.), *statim*. Due to their sensual and empirical nature, signs belong to the external reality, whereas truth, according to Augustine, belongs to the “interior” being. *Intellegere* is an extension of “the inner ear” (11.6.8.) with which we hearken to the “inner” word. On this point, see Flasch 1993, 311.

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speaker is *not*, in the first place, to strategically persuade and manipulate others (this is, as Gadamer has several times pointed out, a modern idea); rather, the eloquent speaker is able to *gather together* individuals and to unite them by revealing and laying bare for everyone *what* the speaker is speaking about and what is at stake. This feature of speaking as gathering together is implicitly connected to the topic of recollection and memory in Book X, since the possibility of language to be a public phenomenon and to push us beyond our interior world receives in this gathering together a *memorial* function; for that about which we speak in the (public) usage of language is what we share and therefore collect in front of us. Put differently, language, in the form of speaking, since it lets *us* see something, *reminds* us of something; the act of speaking puts something in front of us and lets something be seen. Indeed, language, in the performative sense, makes visible and renders possible what we share, even if we disagree about something. For that about which we disagree must appear and it must be shared. The good rhetorician, hence, can also be someone who unites everyone by pointing out and rendering visible that about which all participants disagree. Now, *what* we share and what is “laid bare” (*De Doctrina Christiana*, IV.12.28) through speech is that which is *already* in place when we begin to speak. Only the sharing itself comes to the forefront in speaking, but about what we speak is already in place when we begin to speak – in this specific sense the “about” is in the past, because of its alreadyness, and therefore it can also be addressed as *memory*. The good speaker shows what we share, and what we might have forgotten, but what is nevertheless collectively tied together. Accordingly, it is not only the public character of the speaker itself that is at stake, rather, it is the publicity of *what* is talked about that is at the center of rhetoric. Augustine’s command of language and the sense of praising that is central for the opening paragraph allows him to make *public* what is at stake in his reflections. The function of praise is memorial, since Augustine

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reminds us of something that constitutes (according to his theory) all of us, namely the difference between humans and God. What is at stake is not the presence of God; rather, it is the presence of God in his absence. Only something that *is not* present, that is other than self, must be called upon in order to “lift up” the soul, as Augustine says, “before he [the speaker] even opens his mouth and says a word” (*De Doctrina Christiana*, IV.15.32).

3. Responsiveness

The view from inside, as indicated several times, is marked by a radical separation of the reflective and narrative account of the life from whom this life is “motivated” *and* to whom it is directed. The other who is addressed in the *Confessions* becomes its *telos* within the journey of the soul, as it is displayed in the reflections of the whole text. God or truth, to which the opening lines respond, becomes established as the goal of what Augustine is looking for by the simple introduction of “the Thou,” which is totally other because of its escaping and non-intentional character. Between these two poles, on the one hand, is the pre-established truth, while on the other hand there is the desired realization and reaching of truth. “We humans,” as the *Confessions*’ opening lines state, “who are due part of your creation, long to praise you – we who carry our mortality about with us” (1.1.1).²² Here, then, life as the longing and desiring towards what is other to and *not* this life becomes what life in itself is: a limitation through mortality. Both birth and death, the beginning and end of life, are constituted as the poles of life, since they mark the *impossibility* of life to fully realize itself. Truth remains outside of life (though Augustine tries to find truth *inside* of himself in book X), and is established as the objective moment outside of all selfhood, though this “outside” “arouses” a longing towards life in and *as* human life. In other words, human life is defined by this tension between limitation and desire.

²² For the Latin text see footnote 8.

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Before we come back to the interrelation between life and truth that makes *desire* and life’s “unquietness” possible (1.1.1), we shall briefly point out the threefold structure of the responsiveness that Augustine introduces in Book I. Specifically, if we take into account that the opening paragraph is already addressed to the other and to what escapes our control, we can view this relation as a reaction, an answer, and a *response*. Every address and every performative speech act, because they are a form of speaking to the other, are already responses; responses to something outside of the speech event, as something that called the speech *into* its active mode. The other, in Augustine’s world “God,” calls the speaker and the agent into speech and motivates the opening lines. But what is it exactly that speaking and life are answering to? There are three aspects that we should consider. The first moment is, as we already mentioned, *truth*; the second moment is *faith*; and the third moment is *justice*. By means of this threefold cord, human life receives its structure. Life, its coherence, as well as the attempt to understand life, in other words, can be traced back to these three sources: truth, faith, and justice, to which we shall now turn our attention.

a. The response to truth

The first of the aforementioned sources is readily transparent, especially since the Neoplatonic background of the *Confessions* should compel the reader to make this connection. We do not want to go into detail here since it is not necessary for the purpose of the interpretive goal of this essay. Rather, it seems to be satisfactory (for our purposes) to recall that Augustine’s reading of the One and Plato’s Good becomes transformed into a notion of God, towards which life is moving in order to realize the unquietness of human life until “it rests” (1.1.1). In God, seen as truth and peace, the human heart finds its final fulfillment. Here, it is important to note that what Augustine intends to *answer to* and to *respond to* in his text is truth itself. In this connection,

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Augustine reinterprets his first attempts at conversion as a weakness of his will, commenting in the following way: “I was convinced by the truth and had no answer” (8.5.12). By speaking to God, Augustine addresses what he conceives as “truth” for his life. Accordingly, the concept of truth that he establishes is not merely theoretical, as this conception also involves an ethical and practical determination of truth, conceived as the truth of one’s life and the truth of what it means to be human. *Confessio*, among other possibilities, means an “acknowledgment of truth” as well as a “testimony” and “proof.”²³ If we take this context of what “confession” means into account it becomes apparent how anti-epistemological the categories are that Augustine uses in his reflections. Augustine not only has a theoretical concept of truth in mind, but also a practical and existential conception. What is at stake in the *Confessions* is not only a declaration of the truth in the form of arguing for a position; rather, what is central is the idea that *by declaring* the truth one “does the truth.” Truth, accordingly, has four levels that can be differentiated from each other: [1] truth as the narrated truth, [2] the truth of narration, [3] the truth of life, and [4] truth as source of [1-3]. At the beginning of the *Confessions*, notion [4] is the most important one, for with [4] Augustine tries to establish a motive for all offered levels. What is addressed and what is referenced in the Thou is an a priori dimension that calls life (=3), the narrated life (=1), and the narration (=2) into its being.²⁴ According to Augustine, truth is the condition of both the possibility of the ontological dimension and the epistemological dimension. We *respond* to this dimension in our lives, and accordingly, due to our finitude, we are forced to give an account of our lives and to *justify* and “praise” (1.1.1) our lives through narration. In the attempt to

²³ For this perspective, which is quite unusual, see Siebach 1995, 93. Siebach claims that Augustine’s use of the words goes back to Plato’s *Gorgias*, in which Socrates defines *confessio* (Greek: *homologeîn*) as the “response to an *elenchos*” (Siebach 1995, 95). Although Siebach notices that Augustine’s narrative is ordered in a way that mirrors the divine order of the cosmos, he does not realize the *performative* dimension, the point of which I try to establish in my considerations.

²⁴ For a similar interpretation, see Gander 1999, 335. Gander claims that Augustine’s interpretation of the self-relation is limited because the truth about himself as what and who he is comes from an external source.

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understand our lives, we are necessarily responding to this principle, whether we acknowledge this or not.

b. The response to faith

At the point of the opening (if we leave rhetorical and strategic considerations aside for a moment) Augustine is not sure about what motivates him to address the text to the other of himself. As we said above, he struggles with the problem of the difference and identity of knowledge and evoking/praising. Are we able to praise what we do not know, or, at least, what we do not know with certainty? The first paragraph introduces the famous “unquiet heart” and the mutability of human life in contrast to the immutability and fixed identity of God. As we know, these first lines introduce the abyss between God and mortals, as they are finite and limited beings, for Augustine is undoubtedly interested in defining the place of humans within the ontological and cosmological order.²⁵ Numerous commentators have pointed out that Augustine defines human existence as the ongoing struggle *with* the ontological difference between humans and God. In other words, what is central to human existence is the question of what human existence is. The Being of existence is, we might say – anticipating a Heideggerian twist – that its Being is an issue *for* existence. “Know thyself” is not only the philosophical task of finding out the nature of the soul and the nature of God (*De Ordine*, II.5.16; see Vaught 2003, 8-15); rather, the soul’s primary determination is to look for itself.²⁶ Life is the ongoing answer

²⁵ For an extensive overview of this topic see Kienzler’s essay in Fischer/Mayer 1998, 61-106, here 61-67; 77-87. Kienzler interprets the beginning paragraph as the introduction of the ontological distinction between God and humans, which, according to Kienzler, does not even allow us to speak of an “I” and “You.” However, I am introducing the distinction between I and Thou, as it was introduced in Jewish philosophy, especially in Buber and in Levinas, which leads us to the *absolute* asymmetry between the one who speaks and what is spoken of (spoken to) in this speaking, although I agree with Kienzler that the beginning is determined by a “call” (Fischer/Mayer 1998, 65).

²⁶ At this point, I finally depart from most commentators of the text, as they claim that the main difference is not rooted in subjectivity, but in the ontological distinction between what is infinite and finite (for this claim see, for

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to itself in the form of care: *quaestio mihi factus sum* (I have become a question to myself). Although “Know thyself” in the *Confessions* is centrally related to Paul, and to a Platonic background (see Hankey 2003, especially 28-35), seen through a Heideggerian “lense,” we should come to the conclusion that the *phenomenon* that the quest for self-knowledge presupposes is [1] the *concern* and *care* for oneself that is presented *by* asking this question, and [2] that Augustine portrays human life as being characterized by this questioning, the manifestation of which is the text of the *Confessions* itself. According to a phenomenological perspective, the “real” phenomenon that Augustine deals with is the experience of *trouble* and existential movement.

Given this moment of questioning and uncertainty, it should be immediately clear what the role of the dialogical character is. The speaker, here Augustine, opens up a dialogue and responds to the call from the other who is *not* present in the moment of the beginning of the dialogue. We should think about this speech situation for a moment: Imagine that we would be observing ourselves speaking to someone who is *not* present in the moment of speaking. Wouldn’t we conclude that we have gone mad and have become insane, and that instead of talking to someone else we are actually talking to ourselves, within our mind and in an imaginative sense? Why would we speak in this case, and how would we give meaning to this “madness” of addressing ourselves to someone whose reality is neither certain nor “real” at all? The answer is simple: we must *already* have faith in what does not present itself to us. The only chance to speak to someone, who – *per definitionem* and as Thou – is beyond any intentional content and beyond any possible representation, is *to believe* in the other’s “reality.” But what is

example, Vaught 2003, 14). However, we must ask what finitude *means*, and the first important point that we have to realize is that the question of what it means to be finite belongs, even according to Augustine, to the essence of finitude. Accordingly, finitude is nothing that we can *add* in the form of a property to the self; rather, the self is nothing else than this process of relating itself to itself in terms of questioning and care.

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even more important is that we are able to reconstruct every speaking to the other as implying a moment of faith.

This is possible when we change the order of the relation to the other, since in other cases we are no longer concerned with the representation of God or with the proof and knowledge of God. Here, the situation for the speaker changes and gets pushed onto a second order level. Instead of worrying about the reality of the other, the believer must *wait*, must *hope*, and can only *expect* or *anticipate* the answer from the other to whom the speech is directed and from where it originates. The problem of the speaker, in other words, is not the existence or the reality of the other (in this case God); rather, the problem is located on a higher level: the response is the *response to the response* of the speaker. Faith, in this way, is second order responsiveness. However, this second order responsiveness is precisely our general situation, when we are in a daily “intersubjective” situation, that is, when we are confronted with another subject. What we are doing when we address the other, that is to say, when we speak about something to someone else who is *as other* absent, requires a certain form of *faith*, especially in connection with the other’s *possible* answer. When someone begins to speak to someone else about something, she always *asks*, she *hopes*, and she even *prays* for the other’s answer. Questioning something necessarily implies a moment of delay and *waiting for*, the consequence of which is the future anticipation of the answer to the question. Every hermeneutic situation, we might say with Collingwood and Gadamer, is based on the dialectic of question and answer (see Gadamer 1960, 370). Augustine hopes for the answer of the other: “Say it so that I can hear it” (1.5.5).²⁷

²⁷ 1.5.5.: *quis mihi dabit adquiescere in te? quis dabit mihi ut venias in cor meum et inebries illud, ut obliviscar mala mea et unum bonum meum amplectar, te? quid mihi es? miserere ut loquar. quid tibi sum ipse, ut amari te iubeas a me et, nisi faciam, irascaris mihi et mineris ingentes miserias? parvane ipsa est si non amem te? ei mihi! dic mihi per miserationes tuas, domine deus meus, quid sis mihi. dic animae meae, `salus tua ego sum': sic*

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Consequently, the structure out of which the explicit religious discourse emerges is in place in every speech event. Indeed, in every everyday dialogue, in every speaking of an element of faith, is inscribed the hope for an answer from the other. What is at stake in Augustine’s considerations, hence, is not only the Christian situation; rather, the whole situation can be “existentialized” and thus it can be shown how the *Confessions* emerge out of our hermeneutic situation *in general*. Put simply, what is in play in Augustine’s consideration is the discovery of the hermeneutics of life under a Christian perspective.

c. The response to justice

Answering and responding to someone *binds* the speaker to the one whom she tries to answer. The call from someone else, the words spoken to someone, are experienced by the listener as a moment of being obliged and being forced to react. One has *already* begun to listen to the other *before* one can even begin to reflect on one’s reaction. The other *asks* for a reaction, and even in a situation in which we do not answer the other’s request, the other has already forced us to respond in some way or another. We are, in Levinas’ words, the hostage of the other. This priority of what binds us in speech, and the force of which we can *only* respond to, becomes through our answer transformed into the attempt to be appropriate to the question or to the other. An answer, in other words, always implies the attempt to be *appropriate* to the received question. Even in a situation within which we decide not to answer a question or to react to the other in an explicitly inappropriate way, the idea of a *possible* answer, that is to say, a possible being appropriate to the other, is in place, a priori and with necessity. In other words, the responsiveness of the beginning of Augustine’s *Confessions*, here reconstructed as the situation

dic ut audiam. ecce aures cordis mei ante te, domine. aperi eas et dic animae meae, `salus tua ego sum.' curram post vocem hanc et apprehendam te. noli abscondere a me faciem tuam: moriar, ne moriar, ut eam videam.

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between speaker and Thou, has normative dimensions that can be expressed in the form of “doing justice to the other.” In answering a call, in answering to the other, Augustine tries to be *faithful* to a radical concept of justice and to what articulated (at another point) in the following way: “Then there is justice. Its task is to see that to each is given what belongs to each” (*De Civitate Dei*, 19.4)

The radical idea of the connection between absolute singularity and justice is the third important concept that is present in the opening lines of the *Confessions*.²⁸ Augustine’s account of his life as the attempt to *understand* his life in particular and human life in general is determined by his attempt to *do justice* to the other, that is, to do justice to truth.²⁹ The main rhetorical figure that Augustine uses in order to do this in the *Confessions* is the question. We have revealed one aspect of this questioning so far, namely, the priority and diachronic “non-relation” between speaker and the other. The other aspect is Augustine’s desire to say something reasonable about what the *subject matter* of the text is, namely, human existence and its distinction from God. However, “what,” as Augustine states in Book I, “does anyone who speaks of you really say?” (1.4.4.).³⁰ Given the ontological abyss between humans and God, we might add the following question: how could someone *ever* do justice to what escapes the structure of speaking about it? Doing justice, hence, is an infinite process of saying something to someone

²⁸ This concept, accordingly, radically departs from our usual concept of justice, which include concepts of distributive justice and justice as virtue. It seems to me that the tradition of Jewish philosophy, such as Buber, Levinas, Derrida and Benjamin, offers a rich concept of justice, although it can hardly be combined with the aforementioned concepts.

²⁹ Again, the attempt to do justice to what calls for a response has already affected the speaking self and has opened up a relation between the self and the other. Being affected – on all levels – presupposes a value dimension, for I can only be affected by something that is experienced as a negative or positive quality; for this, see Peperzak 2004, 70-72.

³⁰ 1.4.4.: *numquam inops et gaudes lucris, numquam avarus et usuras exigis, supererogatur tibi ut debeas: et quis habet quicquam non tuum? reddis debita nulli debens, donas debita nihil perdens. et quid diximus, deus meus, vita mea, dulcedo mea sancta, aut quid dicit aliquis cum de te dicit? et vae tacentibus de te, quoniam loquaces muti sunt.*

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whose singularity calls for an answer, but which escapes the finite order of expressions in time. “Justice,” to take up Derrida’s language, “is an experience of the impossible” (Derrida 1990, 244), insofar as answering to the other and answering to a question always opens up an infinite dialogue, precisely because the other always remains the other. Doing justice to what remains other to oneself is impossible, but *that is* justice, since singularity would be destroyed as soon as we *would* do full justice, as soon as we would address the other in an appropriate way. Doing justice to the other would *end* the dialogue, and when a dialogue ends, the status of the other as the Thou disappears. When a question can no longer be raised, answers are no longer given, and the encounter with the other comes to an end. This structure constitutes the *desire* that is introduced by the diachrony between question and answer, as well as between speaker and the one who is addressed in speaking.

Result

We should summarize what we have discovered in this interpretation of the beginning situation of Book I of the *Confessions*. The general hypothesis is that we are confronted with a form of *speaking to* that must be interpreted as a performative act, within which the other should be conceived as what escapes the constative dimension of language. What Augustine tries to establish with his *Confessions* is an *appropriate* answer to what escapes but nonetheless determines his personal speech as well as speech in general (*logos*), and moreover, to what gives Augustine’s reflections on his life their unity and coherency. Human life, in other words, a response to what is experienced in its otherness. This experience is composed out of a triad of justice, truth, and faith.

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