



Interior intimo meo: Rowan Williams on the Self

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Abstract

In this essay we discuss Williams's notion of the self as a social mediation. The argument is made that from early on Williams was influenced by different streams of thought that directed him to analogous conclusions regarding language and personhood. I will show that through internalizing of Augustine, Wittgensteinian philosophy and certain strands of Eastern Orthodox thought, Williams came to an understanding of language that was grounded in the particulars of human interaction, one that is finally kenotic since the *imago dei* is reflective of the *imago trinitatis*. It is within this context that one should place Williams own relationally-centred, non-egocentric construal of human personhood that finds its centre in the dynamic exteriority of love.

Key words

Rowan Williams, the Self, Augustine, Wittgenstein, Lossky

1. Introduction

Selfhood has provided us with an historical orientation, insofar as identity affirms a consistency within the impermanence of moments. In order to engage meaningfully with the world, there is a presumption, however opaque and nebulous, of a basic unity; otherwise, it would be difficult to understand continuity between one moment and the next. How could we develop an intelligible account of contexts, or even communicate or without any latent sense of stability? Is it even possible to imagine a self that merely consisted of atomised junctures, apart from an over-arching intelligibility? One doubts whether some configuration of this sort is avoidable. But even if one concedes this point, this does not resolve the question of *how* one is to conceptualize this unity. One would admit that the 'shape' this unity takes would be negotiable: do we situate 'selfhood'

within the bare fact of material continuation, or does it pertain to something deeper, like in the idea of the soul? Or does the very idea of having a ‘self’ implicate us in spiritual illusion (as the Buddhist might ask), or is it simply a misleading dogma of ‘folk psychology’ (as some materialist philosophers are wont to imply)? These provocations are all queries which would require detailed responses of their own, and as such cannot be attempted here – even though the substance of the essay will demonstrate the affinities of this author. Nevertheless, it does appear that the problem of unity or a nascent consistency is crucial for sensibility and understanding, because without this assumption, it would appear that we are abandoned to a sheer occasionalism of moments, the logical outcome of which could be schizophrenic fragmentation.¹ As a result, we would be denied a narrative coherency.

These are cursory interventions, certainly, but this much appears feasible: without a nascent consistency of self– a subject that ‘counts as one’ (Badiou)² – the idea of a sensible world, a world that makes *sense*, remains questionable.³ However, it should also be said, that this account would be incomplete if it did not register its aporias. How is one to conceptualize this unity? Do we register it through a return to antique philosophies of ‘substance’, the Christian idea of the soul, or Descartes’s *Cogito ergo sum*? Furthermore, regarding the proposal of a reflective ‘unity’ of the self, it could be reasonably queried whether such assumptions already say too much. Is this not a rather exclusionary paradigm? What about those individuals who lack an aptitude for synthesis? Are they denied selfhood? And beyond these objections, one should note that they are compounded by other intellectual trends too. In continental thought, as even a cursory

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- 1 See Thomas Fuchs, “Fragmented Selves: Temporality and Identity in Borderline Personality Disorder,” *Psychopathology* 40 (2007): 379–387; Fuchs, “Existential Vulnerability: Toward a Psychopathology of Limit Situations,” *Psychopathology* 46 (2013): 301–308.
 - 2 Alain Badiou, “On a Finally Objectless Subject,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 24–32.
 - 3 On the history of the term ‘sense’, see see Fabienne Brugère, “Common Sense”; Barbara Cassin, Sandra Laugier, Alain de Libera, Irène Rosier-Catach and Giacinta Spinosa, “Sense / Meaning”; Alain De Libera, “Sensus Communis,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 152–154; 949–967; 967–968 resp.

investigation would demonstrate, anti-Cartesianism has gained ascension; the caesura between *the known self* and *the knowing self*, between *the subject* and *subjectivity*, has been widened – *Je est un autre*, the *I is an other*.⁴ Today, we are more sensitised to the non-coincidence of ‘the I’ and its experience of the world, to what Sylviane Agacinski described as ‘the originary lag of consciousness behind existence’, ‘the thing behind which my consciousness cannot go or situate itself in order to assure its return’, a reflex which serves as ‘a resistance to the subject’s purely theoretical gaze’.⁵ On top of this, thinkers such as Foucault⁶ and Lacan⁷ have alerted us to the predominance of self-fabrication and malleability. In this trajectory, the self is ultimately a fiction, and within this pressure, it is Descartes who is the proverbial whipping-boy. There will be those who protest against *simpliste* genealogies of this sort, claiming that Descartes is not responsible for those receptions that transgress his intentions (e.g. Jean-Luc Marion, Alain de Libera, etc.). Nevertheless, many would say that we cannot accomplish a return to innocence. The acid of scepticism has left its mark. And additionally, especially after the demise of colonialism, one cannot avoid recognizing that the Westernized, North Atlantic subject is no longer at the centre, and, as we are coming to realize (despite its pretensions), it never really was.⁸ These, and many other questions, suggest that matters of the self are pretty complex.

With this context at hand, my rather meagre task is to expound one theology of selfhood that that appears to be conscious of these tensions, namely Rowan Williams. On the one hand, Williams reads selfhood as a mediated, relational and time-bound identity, which speaks to our finitude as created

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- 4 Arthur Rimbaud, “To Georges Izambard,” in *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1976), 113.
 - 5 Sylviane Agacinski, “Another Experience of the Question, or Experiencing the Question Other-Wise,” *Who Comes After the Subject*, 12.
 - 6 Michel Foucault “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Goodman, Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16–49.
 - 7 Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London & New York: Routledge, 1977), 323–360.
 - 8 Cf. D.A. Masolo, “Western and African Communitarianism: A Comparison,” in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Niredu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 483–498.

beings and can be read here as a postmodern repetition of Augustine's *distentio animi*. But on the other, Williams does not advocate absolute fragmentation (à la Jean-Luc Nancy)⁹; rather, he reads contingency as an indication of *createdness*, in the sense that we are, at our origin, not self-actualizing but receptive beings. I will argue that already in his scholarly juvenilia that Williams, despite being formed by distinct intellectual habits and trends, nonetheless arrived at comparable resolutions on the nature of the self, of language and of human community. I would argue that it is through his appropriation of Augustinianism, Wittgensteinian philosophies of language, and an Eastern Orthodox 'personalism' that Williams came to an understanding of human identity that was *relational* and *kenotic*, since the *imago dei* is reflective of the *imago trinitatis* – that self-giving and self-renouncing movement of divine and eternal charity. It is within this context that we should place Williams's own relationally-centred, non-egocentric account of personhood, as this finds its centre in the dynamic exteriority of love, an incarnational account that refuses any dualism between inside and outside, mind and materiality, self-love and redistributive justice.

A further contextual placing is important. It should be indicated that our argument is framed, broadly-speaking, as a response to Charles Marsh.¹⁰ His argument, overall, is that Williams's postmodern and Wittgensteinian approach to selfhood, at the end, dissolves the self. In his reading, since Williams's account gives too much weight to the social-fabrication, it ultimately implies an eviscerating mode of self-alienation. Such a move can only be rectified, in his estimate, by having a more trinitarian focus (which he resources from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Jüngel). It almost goes without saying that I consider this to be a misreading of Williams. In my opinion, it appears that the imbalance in Marsh's criticisms stems from a lack of engagement with Williams's Patristic scholarship (particularly

9 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 189–207.

10 Charles Marsh, "In Defense of a Self: The Theological Search for a Postmodern Identity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 3 (2002): 253–282. The influence of Marsh's reading of Williams can also be seen in Michael Northcott, "Who Am I? Human Identity and the Spiritual Disciplines in the Witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Who am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology through his Poetry*, ed. Bernd Wannewetsch (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 11–29.

on Augustine), and the logic that underwrites it (one which Williams endorses). Marsh's summary of Williams's understanding of the self relies largely (though not exclusively) on two papers¹¹ that are heavily indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein and his apparent scanty account of subjectivity¹²—if one follows the deeper trajectory of Marsh's argument. But what is immediately apparent is that there is a significant paucity in Marsh's selection of texts. Where are his references to Williams's respected forays on Augustine, particularly as these relate to questions of selfhood? There are none cited as far as I can tell. Additionally surprising is that Marsh fails to account for the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy (Lossky, Bulgakov, etc.) on Williams's writings, especially as this relates to its distinction between 'the person' and 'the individual'.¹³ Therefore, in this essay it is some of these writings that will be given extra weight since they point to the deeper Augustinian logic of Williams's reflections on the self.¹⁴

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- 11 I am referring to Rowan Williams, "The Suspicion of Suspicion," in ed. Mike Higton, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 186–202 and Rowan Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading of New Testament Ethics," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 239–264. The first essay was published earlier in a collection entitled *The Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy & Theology*, ed. Richard H. Bell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 36–53.
- 12 A critique of the anti-subjectivist reading of Wittgenstein can be found in Søren Overgaard, "Exposing the Conjuring Trick: Wittgenstein on Subjectivity," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3 (2004): 263–286.
- 13 For reflections on this, see Vladimir Lossky, "The Theological Notion of the Human Person," in *In the Image and Likeness of God* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press: New York, 1974), 111–123. Also see the schematic but excellent treatment of the theological concept of 'person' in Hans Urs Von Balthasar, "On the Concept of Person," *Communio* 13, no. 1 (1986): 18–26 and Joseph Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," *Communio* 17, no. 3 (1990): 439–454. Also compare these with the stimulating essay by Emmanuel Housset regarding the Christian 'invention' of 'the person' within the writings of Augustine. He makes an argument that is very congenial to the presentation here presupposed, namely, that a return to Augustine presents an archaeology of 'the person' that is different to post-Cartesian modernity, one that rejects a self-constituting personhood in favour of a model of relationality and incarnational love that is created through a participation in the life of the trinity. See Emmanuel Housset, « L'invention de la personne par saint Augustin et la métaphysique contemporaine, » *Quaestio: Journal of the History of Metaphysics* 6 (2006): 463–482.
- 14 To be sure, other writings penned after the article in question will not be neglected, but since Marsh's presentation of the earlier material is problematic, in this author's reading, it is only fair that I focus on writings that would have been available to Marsh at the time he penned the essay, in order to show that resources were available that could have provided more balanced expositions.

2. The Self as *Sign*

In the aftermath of Charles Taylor's influential genealogy,¹⁵ there has been a vigorous debate amongst theologians and intellectual historians as to whether the Bishop of Hippo anticipates the 'Cartesian project'¹⁶ or out-

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- 15 For his interpretation of Augustine, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 127–142. However, John Milbank has revealed that Taylor (in conversation) has shifted his interpretation of Augustine to one that is more in line with the one offered by Williams, Milbank and Michael Hanby. See John Milbank, "From Sovereignty to Gift: Augustine's Critique of Interiority," *Polygraph* 19–20 (2008), 198n.57. For a critique of Taylor's interpretation of Descartes, see Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 55–74. Seigel does seem, however, to take over rather uncritically Taylor's earlier interpretation of Augustine.
- 16 By 'the Cartesian project', I am referring to Descartes's argument that our knowledge of the world is grounded within the *a priori* certainty of the cogito, and am not involving myself in the debate on Descartes's purported 'dualism' or whether he invents the modern subject (which has produced a significant amount of literature and critique). At least since Heidegger, the novelty of Descartes' 'turn to the self' has been emphasised. However, there is evidence to suggest that Heidegger himself misinterpreted Descartes by inserting a linguistic distinction between the ego and the subject by reading Descartes' *qui* (Who is the self?) as a *quid* (What is the self?). This tendency itself is part of a more general tradition of mistranslating Descartes. For documentation, see Vincent Carraud, « Qui est le moi? » *Les Études philosophiques* 88, no. 1 (2009): 63–83. Regarding the 'novelty' of Descartes, Jacob Schmutz has shown that Descartes by no means inaugurated the 'turn to the self' but was rather representative of a certain Aristotelian and post-Scotist tradition of establishing certainty through the *ego sum*. For his argument, see Jacob Schmutz, « L'existence de l'ego comme premier principe métaphysique avant Descartes, » in, *Généalogies du Sujet: De Saint Anselme à Malebranche*, ed. Olivier Boulnois. Bibliothèque Histoire de la Philosophie (Paris: Vrin, 2007), pp. 215–268. For more on Descartes dependence on scholastic and nominalist thought, see Gerhard Krieger, 'Metaphysik und konstruierende Vernunft: Zum Verhältnis von Spätscholastik und Cartesischem cogito'. *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 7 (2002): 47–79; Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 170–206 and Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012), 399–403. For Heidegger's own constructive account of subjectivity, see Jean-François Courtine, "Voice of Conscience and Call of Being," in *Who Comes after the Subject*, 79–93. Also compare the excellent article by Alain de Libera, "When Did the Modern Subject Emerge?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (2008): 181–220. Libera argues that the 'modern subject' – here understood as an attribute of mental acts – is not traceable to Descartes (as argued by Heidegger) but rather extends through Leibniz, Hobbes and the medieval theologian Peter Olivi. Moreover, Libera argues (203–205) that Augustine's Perichoretic model of the self is not equatable to the Aristotelian *ὑποκειμενον* according to which attributes are predicated of the subject, because the trinitarian image of soul – being, understanding, and will – rejects that you can predicate attributes to the subject as a separate substance. To use one of Libera's examples, 'goodness' cannot be a predicate of 'God' in the Aristotelian sense

thinks it in advance.¹⁷ Does Augustine constitute ‘the event’ of which Western subjectivity is the ‘generic procedure’ (to quote Badiou once more)?¹⁸ Is Descartes authorised by the Latin Father, or does he constitute a rupture? This debate will certainly continue, and our task here is not to resolve it, but rather to reproduce one particular reading of this debate. What is important to emphasize is that Rowan Williams’s exegesis is an attempt to show that rather than articulating an absolutized subjectivity, the Augustinian *ego* is constituted within an unending relationality and ontological peregrination, and so is not enclosed within a solipsistic reflexivity.¹⁹ On this reading, the Augustinian ‘subject’ is not self-centred nor self-constituted, but rather endlessly suspended, wandering and enigmatic.²⁰ It is a selfhood created,

because then this would imply denying the simplicity of God: God is non-composite, nor does God consist of separate substances, nor can his attributes be considered as distinguishable from God’s own act of being.

- 17 A sample of this debate can be seen in the following: Edward Booth, O.P., *Saint Augustine and the Western Tradition of Self-Knowing* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1986); Susan Mennel, “Augustine’s “I”: The “Knowing Subject” and the Self,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no.3 (1994): 291–324; John Milbank, “Sacred Triads: Augustine and the Indo-European Soul,” *Modern Theology* 13, no. 4 (1997): 451–475; Wayne Hankey, “Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine: Problems for a Postmodern Retrieval,” *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 4 (1999): 83–123; Hankey, “Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes: More than a Source of the Self,” *Augustinian Studies* 32, no. 1 (2001): 65–88; Hankey, “Knowing as we are Known’ in Confessions 10 and Other Philosophical, Augustinian and Christian Obedience to the Delphic *Gnothi Seauton* from Socrates to Modernity,” *Augustinian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2003): 23–48; Michael Hanby, “Desire: Augustine beyond Western Subjectivity,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 108–126; John Peter Kenney, “Augustine’s Inner Self,” *Augustinian Studies* 33, no.1 (2002): 79–90; Michael Hanby, “Augustine and Descartes: An Overlooked Chapter in the Story of Modern Origins,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 4 (2003): 455–482; Roland Kany, *Augustins Trinitätsdenken: Bilanz, Kritik und Weiterführung der Modernen Forschung. Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum* 22 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 240–246; Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 56–100; Joseph Rivera, “Figuring the Porous Self: St. Augustine and the Phenomenology of Temporality,” *Modern Theology* 29, no.1 (2013): 83–103. This is list certainly not exhaustive.
- 18 Badiou, ‘On a Finally Objectless Subject’, 25–26.
- 19 Williams’s account has much in common with Cavadini’s criticisms regarding the reification of ‘the Self’ within Augustinian scholarship and translation. See John C. Cavadini, “The Darkest Enigma: Reconsidering the Self in Augustine’s thought,” *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 119–132.
- 20 See the description of Goulven Madec: ‘L’âme humaine – le moi, le sujet, comme on voudra – est située entre Dieu au-dessus, qui est l’éternel, l’être, l’un, et le monde sensible au-dessous, qui est le temporel, le devenir, le multiple. Quand elle se détourne

ruptured and re-formed through the divine address, and asymptotically enticed by the God who is both *interior intimo meo* and *superior summo meo* (Conf. III.6.11).²¹ Within this schema, Augustinian self-knowledge is a manifestation of *sapientia*, of '[a] conscious life whose consciousness of itself exists only in a manifold interrelation of loving acts'.²² *Sapientia* (or *philosophia*) concerns the prayerful knowledge of self within God,²³ a move which already distinguishes Augustine from the modern enterprise of guaranteeing self-certainty within the *cogito* alone. For Augustine, the *imago dei*, and its tripartite structure of *memoria-intellectus-voluntas*, is of necessity tied to our ability to know, to love and to be moved towards God, and is not limited to self-relation. That we reflect the image of God is intrinsic to our createdness as finite beings, and our reflection of the trinity is revealed when all the faculties of the soul are aligned to God as their true object.²⁴ This is a constitutes an element of humanity's deifying progression towards the *visio dei*, a movement which is itself predicated on God's eternal movement towards God in the perichoresis of Father, Son, and Spirit.

In his essay 'Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De doctrina*', Williams expounds Augustine's distinction between *frui* and *uti*

de Dieu, par orgueil, par volonté de puissance et d'autonomie, par désir de se soustraire à l'allégeance divine, d'être *in sua potestate*, elle ne demeure pas en elle-même où elle n'a pas son centre de gravité, elle chute en-dessous d'ellemême: elle est alors désaxée, désorientée, déséquilibrée, désemparée. Et elle se lance dans une quête absurde de l'être dans ce qui n'est que devenir, changeant, multiple. D'où la dispersion, l'éparpillement, le délabrement, la perte d'identité, l'aliénation. Je n'insiste pas sur ces accents qu'on aurait qualifiés naguère d'existentialistes; il est aisé de les observer à chaque page des confessions du passé' in Goulven Madec, « « *In te supra me* » Le sujet dans les Confessions de saint Augustin, » *Revue de l'Institut catholique de Paris* 28 (1988): 49

- 21 The translation used in this essay is Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 22 Rowan Williams, "Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on *De trinitate*," in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T J van Bavel*, vol. 1, eds. Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigts and J van Houtem (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 331.
- 23 On *philosophia* (and *sapientia*) in Augustine, see Roland J. Teske, S. J., "Augustine as Philosopher: The Birth of Christian Metaphysics," in *To Know God and the Soul: Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Washington, D. C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 3–25.
- 24 See D. Juvenal Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas' Teaching* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 13–35.

(enjoyment and use) in conjunction with *res* and *signum* (thing and sign).²⁵ We can approach any particular *res* in two distinct ways: either we treat it as an end in itself, or as a sign towards something else. For Augustine, since God is supremely *res*, the context in which all things are to be meaningfully placed, created reality exists as a *signum* of the divine reality, specifically as it is moved by *dilectio* towards God. For Augustine, since God is the *telos* of human enjoyment, created reality can only be ‘used’ towards that end, since it is only God who exists for himself. As Williams notes, such language is easily open to misinterpretation, since – as post-Kantians – we are suspicious of categorizing people as ‘means’ rather than ‘ends, or anything that smacks of instrumentalisation. According to Williams, however, this would be a misreading of the Bishop of Hippo, because his deployment of *uti* insists, on the contrary, that we are finally directed towards God and not finite aims. Since the triune God remains the eschatological object of desire, human beings should not be treated as an ‘end’ to desire – in the sense of completion and satisfaction – but rather as *signum*, opaquely indicating the beatific source of our attraction. Thus he says

“The language of *uti* is designed to warn against an attitude towards any finite person or object that terminates their meaning in their capacity to satisfy my desire that treats them as the end of desire, conceiving my meaning in terms of them and theirs in terms of me.”²⁶

25 Rowan Williams, “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De doctrina*,” *Journal of Literature & Theology* 3, no. 2 (1989): 138–150. Williams’s insights are taken forward in Susannah Ticciati, “The Human Being as Sign in Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 55, no.1 (2013): 20–32. On the lexicography of *signum* in Augustine’s corpus, and its usage in his theory of language more generally, see R. A. Markus, “St. Augustine on Signs,” *Phronesis* 2, no. 1 (1957): 60–83. For a reading of the *de doctrina Christiana* that substantially coheres with Williams’s, see Mark D. Jordan, “Words and Word: Incarnation and Signification in Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*,” *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 177–196. This distinction could also be clarified in Heideggerian terms: *uti* is comparable to *Zuhandenheit* [ready-to-hand] – that which is given for use (e.g. signs, things, human beings, etc.) – while *frui* concerns *Vorhandenheit* [present-at-hand] – that which is simply given (e.g. God, desire, joy, etc.). I have taken this analogy from Manuela Brito Martins, *L’herméneutique originaire d’Augustin en relation avec une ré-appropriation heideggerienne*. Mediaevalia: Textos e Estudos 13/14 (Porto: Fundação Eng. António de Almeida, 1998), 131.

26 “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De doctrina*”, 140. One can illustrate this perspective by referring to Beatrice and Dante in *Purgatorio* XXXI.22–24 where

Williams would therefore say that to treat created beings merely as an ‘end’ to desire would be to capitulate either to idolatry or instrumentalisation, since it is only when desires are orientated to the transcendent Good that our inter-worldly relations can be more justly ordered and healed. It would imply a failure to love and treat other human beings *humanly* – not as the completion of my desire, but rather as traces of the divine (cf. *Conf.* IV.7.12). In a more recent essay, Williams has spoken of how ‘our great temptation is ‘inhuman’ love, loving the finite for what it cannot be, loving people or things for the magical symbiotic relation they have to my sense of myself, my security and self-identity’.²⁷ According to Williams (and Augustine), by refusing to treat the other as an end to our desire, we also thereby resist entrapping others in private fantasies of wish-fulfilment. Adopting the language of Jean-Luc Nancy,²⁸ one could say that Augustine’s point concerns the difference between ‘enjoyment’ [*la jouissance*] and ‘joy’ [*la joie*]. While ‘enjoyment’ implies an enclosure within the functionalities of the ego, ‘joy’ speaks to the sublime openness of being, its radiance and its gesture towards a *beginning*. For Augustine then, as Williams argues, created reality is a movement of semiosis whereby all objects we name are ‘capable of opening out beyond themselves’ and refuse ‘to stay still under our attempts to comprehend or systematize or ... idolize.’²⁹ Our attempts at naming are, according to Williams, a part of the restlessness of desire that will not settle on any finite object so that every *signum* can be supplemented, displaced or re-contextualized by different signs, leading us ultimately towards God.

Beatrice states that it was ‘your desire for me ... / which was ... leading you to love the Good / beyond which we cannot aspire to reach’. The translation is Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012).

- 27 Rowan Williams, “A Question to Myself: Time and Self-Awareness,” in the *Confessions* in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 6.
- 28 Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” in Jean-Francois Courtine et al, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 33.
- 29 “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De doctrina*,” 141. The influence of Derrida on Williams at this point has been shown by Jeffrey McCurry. On this, see Jeffrey McCurry, “Towards a Poetics of Theological Creativity: Rowan Williams Reads Augustine’s *De doctrina* after Derrida,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 3 (2007): 415–433.

Elsewhere, Williams writes that Augustine articulates ‘the impossibility of stating any theory of the self as a determinate object’ because Augustine rejects ‘the idea that we could observe the self or mind in a neutral way’. Since ‘what we see when we look at ourselves is desire’, ‘we are to know and love ourselves as questing, as seeking to love with something of God’s freedom (in the sense of a love not glued to any object of satisfaction).’³⁰ Against the stream of interpretation that sees Augustine as reflecting a proto-Cartesian perspective, Williams writes (in another essay) that Augustine sought ‘to ‘demythologise’ the solitary ego by establishing the life of the mind firmly in relation to God’, a God understood as ‘self-gift, as movement to otherness and distance in self-impacting love.’³¹ The self, as *imago dei*, is placed within this trinitarian unity of *ek-static* relation, and constituted by a ‘radical incompleteness and other-directedness’,³² an openness which can never be finalized in any determinate object in the world, since every finite and desired object can only ever be *signum*. Such an object can only be the triune God, for this is what Augustine’s means by *sapientia*, that the mind be able ‘to see itself sustained and embraced by this self-communicating action of God.’³³ Therefore, one can see that Augustinian reflexivity resists suasions to self-enclosure within the ego by instead placing the mind within the *epektasis* and *ekstasis* of desire, the *abyssus abyssum invocat*, the active movement of the soul towards God in its continuing self-displacement. Such incompleteness is liable to attenuate any fixed notion of self, rendering it fragmentary and dispersed – hence the *distentio animi*. But one should immediately add that the wounding and fracturing of the self is not the whole story: within the growth of the soul, there is a rhythm of *distentio* and *intentio* which governs the pilgrim’s

30 Rowan Williams, “The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De trinitate*”, in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, eds. Joseph T. Lienhard, Earl C. Muller and Roland J. Teske. Collectanea Augustiniana (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 131.

31 Rowan Williams, “Sapientia and the Trinity,” 331. Williams considers the trinity itself to involve a movement of desirous relation within the immanent relations of triune being, which is the ontological foundation of our own created longing for God. For this, see Rowan Williams, “The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure,” *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 115–135.

32 Williams, “The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De trinitate*,” 127.

33 Williams, “Sapientia and the Trinity,” 320.

ascent towards God, a restlessness that agitates us towards rest in the presence of God (*Conf.* I.1.1).³⁴

So since we cannot speak of the soul as ‘a non-temporal thing’, we have to say that it is in ‘some sense *made*, by the infinitely painstaking attention to the contingent strangeness of remembered experience in conscious reference to God’.³⁵ *Memoria* is not static but is transformed within time by the recalling of the divine presence; precisely because we are not God, and therefore are temporal beings, our integrity cannot be achieved apart from what Williams elsewhere calls *dispossession*: an acknowledgement that our true identity is ungraspable, incomplete, and therefore reliant on the grace of God.³⁶ Yet, for Augustine, the kenotic unhanding of the self is always contextualized by resurrection, by the plenitude of the *memoria dei*. This implies that despite the fragmentary nature of the soul, the *distentio animi*, there is still the hope that God ‘can make a story, a continuous reality, out of the chaos of unhappiness, ‘homeless’ wandering, hurt and sin’.³⁷ Or to quote the Augustine’s address (regarding his misspent youth): ‘You gathered me from the state of disintegration in which I had been fruitlessly divided’ (*Conf.* II.1.1).

It is because of such texts that I remain perplexed by Marsh’s critique of Williams.³⁸ As we have shown, Augustine’s concept of the self is predicated on *sapientia*, that is, a knowledge of self within the movements of desire and love, within a relationality whose paradigm is the trinity of God.

34 ‘Dans son analyse du temps, il en dégage les implications. Après avoir rappelé que le temps est un élément créé, qu’il se définit comme une *distentio*, comme un éparpillement, Augustin explique que l’être humain n’est pas nécessairement victime du temps, qu’il n’en reste pas à la dispersion, mais que, par sa conscience, il peut, au contraire, transformer le négatif en positif, la *distentio* en *intentio*, le passé en présent du passé et le futur en présent du futur, laissant ainsi émerger l’éternité à l’intérieur même du temps, constituant déjà le sujet dans le présent du présent et s’unifiant par là’, in Marie-Anne Vannier, « La constitution du sujet Augustin dans les *Confessions*, » *Revue des sciences religieuses* 76, no. 3 (2002): 309

35 Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (rev. ed., London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 71.

36 See Rowan Williams, “Theological Integrity,” in *On Christian Theology*, 3–15. However, it is a term present throughout his later oeuvre – especially in his writings on Hegel.

37 *The Wound of Knowledge*, 72.

38 For his specific critiques, see Marsh, in “Defense of the Self,” 262–274.

Such clarifications already address accusations of a paucity of trinitarian focus in Williams's dilations on selfhood. But what we have said also counters his claim that Williams dissolves the self's coherency within the exteriorities of surface and sociality. Even though the self is a fragmented *signum* for Williams's Augustine, this kenotic rupturing is not absolute but finds 'eschatological amelioration' within the *memoria* of God.³⁹ What this means is that an affirmation of Williams's Wittgensteinian leanings, which will be discussed shortly, should not distract us from the more basic Augustinian assumptions that guide his reflections. Williams's critique of spiritual and psychoanalytic attempts to find an 'authentic self' that exists beyond entanglement should be understood within this paradigm. Moreover, such relatedness is ineradicably material and bodily, requiring a treatment of Williams's account of the embodied self as well.

3. The Self as Surface

One of Williams's emphases has been the 'the inescapable significance of time as a correlate of bodiliness' which is part of that 'return to 'surfaces' or appearances' – or what we could more generally call materiality. This (as he says) should become 'conscious of the irreducible elements of history and contingency in the formation of knowledge and religious faith'.⁴⁰ Williams writes that 'the body is never helpfully described as an object like other material objects, since by 'that curious material transaction called language, we continue to recognize that the oddity of this material reality that is *my* body is an oddity shared by other materially recognizable bodies'.⁴¹ For Williams, following the Thomistic tradition, 'the body is the soul – that is, the body does not become intelligent, purposeful, endowed with feeling and so on because something is added to it. This is what the body is – a *meaning* portion of matter'.⁴² Active here is Williams's more general plea

39 Brett Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 128.

40 Rowan Williams, "Author's Introduction," in *Wrestling with Angels*, xvi.

41 Williams, "On Being a Human Body," *Sewanee Theological Review* 42, no. 4 (1998), 406.

42 *Ibid.*, 406. Cf. also Rowan Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to Christopher Stead*, eds. Lionel R. Wickham and Catherine P. Bammel (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1993), 227–246 for a discussion on the relation between reason, animality, embodiment and the passions.

that we cannot separate intelligence from physicality without provoking a mind-world dualism.⁴³ He understands the physical body as ‘site’ of interaction with the world, that it is ‘necessarily intelligent’, though not in a reductive sense whereby ‘intelligence’ is understood as simply computable information. Rather, we should understand the body, in space and time, as that which interacts with the world in a myriad of interconnections, relationships that are ‘not easily reducible to function because it seems to work with ‘information’ of a less determinate character, less capable of being rendered in items of information’.⁴⁴ The body we inhabit is the place where we make ourselves available to and addressable by others, capable of language and communication. Such alerts us to the finitude we inhabit because ‘what we are *are* our limits, that we are here not there, now not then, took this decision, not that, to bring us here and now.’⁴⁵ And it is precisely here – in our vulnerability – that we are opened to ‘the being-at-hand of love’⁴⁶ (to adapt a Heideggerian expression). Spiritually, this means that ‘the self’ which ‘God deals with is not some mysterious inner core, but my body’ which is ‘where we learn and where we speak and share’ because if ‘we cannot love our mortal vulnerability, our own frail flesh, we shall love nothing and nobody’.⁴⁷ According to Williams, the only way we can interact lovingly is through an attention to our bodiliness, with all its hindrances and fragilities since this is the matrix where we learn what it means to be ‘spiritual’.⁴⁸ He says that ‘we encounter God truly only when we accept our mortal fragility for what it is, do not seek to escape it, but put our trust in a God who speaks and relates to us through flesh’.⁴⁹ In other words, we should not look to some inner part of ourselves (soul, intellect,

43 Cf. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

44 “On Being a Human Body,” 405.

45 “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 186.

46 “On Being a Human Body,” 408.

47 Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley, 1995), 35.

48 For the relation between spirituality and createdness in Williams’s thought, see Byron Smith, “The Humanity of Godliness: Spirituality and Creatureliness in Rowan Williams,” in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2009), 115–140.

49 Rowan Williams, “Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation,” *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994): 18.

will) that is more ‘godlike’ and therefore more capable of communion with God since these are ‘as much creaturely as the body and the passions, and so as much in need of transformation’.⁵⁰ This means that we should not desire a ‘spirituality’ that seeks a ‘Gnostic’ escape from the body and language: ‘fleshly life is not a burden to be borne, nor a prison to be escaped from, but a task to be perfected in grace.’⁵¹ It is precisely within the life of the body that we learn and are transformed, where we come to ‘the recognition of the holy within the contingent order’ even though – and here Williams adopts a tragic tone – it is ‘always undercut by the disruptive, discontinuous elements in a narrative which is inescapably one of exile and alienation, loss and death.’⁵² In an essay on the theme of temptation, Williams says that to live within time means that we are subject to things beyond our control: ‘to live in the material and temporal world is to be vulnerable to the impact of unstable circumstances’, but ‘it is how we deal with those circumstances that will bring to light who and what we actually are’, since ‘what Christ delivers us from is not bodily circumstance, contingency, or instability ... but from the habits of mind and heart that that make of this environment only a theatre for our private obsessions to be staged and our lust for control to be exercised’.⁵³ The emphasis here on bodiliness and time is predicated on the goodness of creation, but it has a further basis in the incarnation: ‘[t]he embrace of our creatureliness, and resistance to all that draws us away from the recognition from the centrality of time – these are consequences of the act of the incarnation.’⁵⁴ He goes on to say that ‘By the incarnation, God binds us to the temporal world as always and inescapably our starting point and dispossesses us of the illusion that there is a point

50 Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 61.

51 *Ibid.*, 21.

52 Rowan Williams, “Troubled Breasts: The Holy Body in Hagiography,” in *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium, and the Christian Orient*, eds. Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 77.

53 Rowan Williams, “‘Tempted as we are’: Christology and the Analysis of the Passions,” in *Studia Patristica XLIV*, eds. J. Baun, A. Cameron, M. Edward and M. Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 400–401.

54 Rowan Williams, “Augustine’s Christology: Its Spirituality and Rhetoric,” in *In the Shadow of the Incarnation: Essays on Jesus Christ in the Early Church in Honour of Brian E. Daley, S.J.*, ed. Peter W. Martens (Indiana, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 177.

within the temporal world where we can settle. Every point in the temporal order becomes a point of departure'.⁵⁵

The emphasis on temporality touches on another Augustinian motif, namely, that selfhood is a processional discovery within *memoria*: '[t]he self *is* ... what the past is doing now, it is the process in which a particular set of 'given' events and processes and options crystalizes now in a new set of particular options, responses and determinations, providing a resource of given past-ness out of which the next decision and action can flow.'⁵⁶ 'Memory affirms that the present situation has a context; it, like the self, is part of a continuity, it is 'made' and so it is not immutable'.⁵⁷ This does not mean the self is merely constructed by us. As he says elsewhere, 'Identity is ultimately in the hand of God; but this does not mean that it is a non-temporal thing. It is to be found and in some sense *made*, by the infinitely painstaking attention to the contingent strangeness of remembered experience in conscious reference to God which makes up most of this extraordinary work'.⁵⁸

From the above, we can see that Williams's language of 'surface' is entangled with materiality, time and bodiliness, and should *not* be interpreted as a synonym for 'depthless'. To quote the poet and classicist Anne Carson, for Williams 'the body is always deep' but that it is precisely 'deepest at its surface'.⁵⁹ The self that is considered as a 'surface' implies that there is no 'hidden' self that exists apart from relation, time and bodiliness. The 'romantic notion' of the self – that modern obsession with 'authenticity' – remains an abstraction for Williams, and even has certain affinities with Gnostic thinking.⁶⁰ This does not however does not imply that that

55 Ibid 179. The last phrase is taken from Michel De Certeau.

56 Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), 23.

57 Ibid., 24.

58 Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 71. Also see the elegant exposition given by James Wetzel in "The Force of Memory: Reflections on the Interrupted Self," *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 147–159.

59 Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 97.

60 Cf. Rowan Williams, "'Know Thyself': What Kind of an Injunction?" in *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, ed. Michael McGhee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 211–227. This statement however should be qualified by the fact that German Romanticism, for instance, could express similar ideas regarding 'the self' or

interiority is collapsed into pure exteriority (as Marsh seems to argue),⁶¹ but rather that there is no selfhood that is unrelated, closed or complete in itself. Admittedly, Williams does talk about the ‘nothingness’ of the *persona* (under the influence of Thomas Merton), but this language is used precisely to describe the ‘illusory’ self that is a product of distorted and sinful limitation, while the ‘true’ self lies within the mystery of God (cf. Col. 3:3).⁶² Such should not be used to read Williams as saying that selfhood is ‘exhausted’ within interpersonal communication, since there does seem to be, for him, a remainder of non-communicable reflexivity that cannot simply be transmitted to other (finite) agents. However, the nature of such reflexivity is negotiated precisely *within* the various claims that language imposes. The ‘gaps’ and ‘silences’ that hold the self are framed by the music of human signs.

4. The Self as *Social*

As we have seen in Williams’s reception of Augustine, the self is constituted by interaction, the ends of which cannot ever be fully comprehended or accounted. Such un-restrictedness of relation (as Williams argues) cannot be understood apart from the triune God, who is a never-ending movement of relatedness, difference, and self-knowing. Such a theological rationale lays the ground for Williams’s Wittgensteinian idea that selfhood is a product of social negotiation. But combined with these post-Wittgenstein notions of language, one cannot neglect that Williams is also

‘the I’ (e.g. Friedrich Schlegel); this could provide fruitful comparison with Williams’s own concerns for placing ‘reflectivity’ within the context of an ever-thickening ‘relationality’. For a short exposition on Schlegel’s idea of the self, see Walter Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1996), 126–135.

61 For example, see the sermon entitled “Being Alone,” in Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 121–126. Such a perspective is echoed in Williams’s more recent work when he says that the idea of ‘selfhood’ or ‘the soul’ is probably expressed most ‘seriously’ when we pay attention to the ‘breakdown of communication’ that can happen between speakers in which ‘Pinterest gaps’ gesture towards ‘the unrepeatable perspective on things that every speaker embodies and every other speaker needs in order to speak and live as a subject,’ in Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 183.

62 See Rowan Williams, “‘Bread in the Wilderness’: The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov [1976],” in *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2011), 21–39.

influenced from early on by the Eastern Orthodoxy's distinction between of 'the person' and 'the individual'. To give clarity to our discussion, it might be worthwhile briefly tracing the genealogy of these two influences in Williams's thought.

Already from his teenage years in Swansea,⁶³ Williams was influenced by the philosophy of the language associated with the later Wittgenstein, as this pertained to his rejection of 'private language'. One of the reasons for this was geographical since Swansea University was one of the centres for the religious interpretation of Wittgenstein, particularly associated with figures like Rush Rhees (the executor of Wittgenstein's literary estate) and D.Z. Phillips (both were a part of the so-called Swansea school of philosophy).⁶⁴ As a result, Williams had a good dose of Wittgensteinian philosophy even before he began his tertiary education at Cambridge.⁶⁵ Such philosophy sought to return thinking back to the operations of language in its actual functioning amidst the particularities of discourse. Since there is no language which is formed apart from engagement and conversation there can be no language that it is purely my own, one which allows unmediated self-expression apart from sociality and construction. Williams once remarked that 'What fascinated me in Wittgenstein was, if you like, the refusal to go behind appearances. Language is language, not an inept substitute for something better. We understand who we are by looking at how our language works'.⁶⁶ Rather than discovering the essentially 'human' in some hidden interiority, Williams follows Wittgenstein by returning to 'surfaces', to the body, to the realm of material availability (as mentioned in the previous section). He writes in an essay on Wittgenstein: 'Understanding, explaining, interpreting are not efforts of the individual

63 For biographical details of this period, see Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop* (rev. ed., London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), 23–46.

64 For more on the Swansea School, see Mario van de Ruhr, "Rhees, Wittgenstein, and the Swansea School," in *Sense and Reality: Essays from Swansea*, ed. John Edelman (Heusenstamm: Ontos Verlag, 2009), pp. 219–235.

65 On this see Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London and New York: T & T Clark), 13–20.

66 This interview is to be found in Rupert Shortt, *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), 1–23. The quote is found on 16.

to penetrate a surface: they are *social* proposals for common reading and common, or at least continuous, activity'.⁶⁷

But Wittgensteinian philosophy was not the sole influence on his understanding of human interdependence. Williams also had a strong interest in Eastern Orthodoxy, and particularly its Russian embodiment.⁶⁸ One of the things that were impressed on him from his studies on Orthodox theology was the idea that human beings exist as persons-in-communion.⁶⁹ One can see this, for instance, in the Russian Orthodox terminology of *sobornost*, a word roughly equivalent to 'togetherness', 'communion', or 'catholic'.⁷⁰ It was his in-depth study of Vladimir Lossky (the subject of his doctoral dissertation⁷¹) that Williams really became immersed in the thought-world of Orthodoxy. It was through Lossky that Williams came to emphasise the idea of the *imago dei* in its connection to the mystery of the trinity, the *imago trinitatis*, especially as regards its apophatic traits. For Lossky, in the trinity there is no 'individual will' but rather a movement of kenotic self-displacement for the sake of the other: as he says, 'the person expresses itself most truly in that it renounces to exist for itself.'⁷² As *imago dei*, we truly reflect this image when we manifest this interrelatedness within our own self-divestment and self-reception. Furthermore, since we exist as beings who reflect the mystery of divine personhood, there is an unfathomable richness that characterizes every human person.⁷³ This means that in our interactions with one another, there always remains something that cannot be circumscribed, something in the human person

67 Williams, "The Suspicion of Suspicion," 190.

68 He even considered joining the Orthodox Church, but dismissed the idea quite quickly. On this see Short, *Rowan's Rule*, pp. 65–81.

69 Cf. Rowan Williams, "The Theology of Personhood: A Study of the Thought of Christos Yannaras," *Sobornost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 6, no.6 (1972): 415–430.

70 The term 'sobornost' was made popular by A.S. Khomyakov, and stems from the Old Slavonic translation of the Nicene Creed. See Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister MicGrath (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 120.

71 Rowan Williams, *The Theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique* (Ph.D. dissertation: Oxford, 1975).

72 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 144.

73 On this point, see Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 16–20.

that resists complete expression because it reflects within created time the infinity of the self-giving, triune God. Speaking in an interview regarding his earlier scholarship, Williams endorsed the importance of Lossky for his own theology into the present:

“The theme that came to the forefront in reading Lossky was his increasing concern with the ineffability of the human person. To sum up his position, talking about the person is as difficult as talking about God. If you want to talk about human beings in the image of God, it may be in that difficulty and elusiveness that the centrally human is to be located, not in any quality that we and God have in common ... I found that — and still find it — extremely interesting.”

For him, when we speak about human beings ‘we occupy the same edge of difficulty that we occupy when talking about God. And we face the same danger of falling over into rather banal generalities ... I think Lossky pushes beyond that to say that the personal in us is not an item among others: it is the strangeness and difficulty, the irreducibility, within any relation’.⁷⁴ In other words: Williams, through his studies of Lossky, came to understand the mystery of the *imago dei* to lie precisely in ‘personalism’, namely ‘the personal subject in the context of its relations with other subjects’ as this in turn reflects the *imago trinitatis* as kenotic and self-giving, since according to Lossky ‘the cross reveals personality as ‘kenotic’⁷⁵, and that ‘the renunciation of existing-for-oneself is man’s [sic] most authentically personal act and so also man’s most *Godlike* act.’⁷⁶ As can be seen, the relation between language, sociality, and trinity are entrenched within Williams’s thinking from his earliest writings, and remain important for his later theologizing.⁷⁷ Once again, Marsh’s criticisms appear to miss

74 Todd Breyfogle, “Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams,” *Cross Currents* 45, no.3 (1995): 307–308.

75 Williams, “Lossky, the Via Negativa and the Foundations of Theology,” in *Wrestling with Angels*, 18. This essay is extracted from a chapter in his Ph.D. dissertation.

76 *Ibid.*, 14.

77 We should distinguish such a model from the idea of the ‘social trinity’ (à la Moltmann). In an interview with David Cunningham (“Living the Questions: The Converging Worlds of Rowan Williams,” *Christian Century* 119, no.2 (2002): 26), Williams says that he has been tempted to use the model. He says, “When I first started thinking about it I was very taken with the whole “social Trinity” model—God as, by definition, a

their mark. For Williams, our inherent and inextricable proclivity towards connectedness binds us to the mystery of the triune God, as well as one another, because we cannot interact without language. But to do so means that we recognize our involvement in a continuing process of learning since our language is always limited, curved or distorted by the shape of our perspectives. To quote Wittgenstein: ‘*the limits of my language are the limits of my world*’.⁷⁸

For Williams, the mysteriousness of personhood should *not* be sought in some pre-linguistic core; rather my own identity’s ‘ungraspable’ quality is not ‘an elusive level of interiority, but the unknowable presence of the creator’s absolute affirmation, the mysteriousness of grace, past, present, and future, not of the ‘true self’ as a hidden thing’.⁷⁹ In this context, we should voice again Williams’s ‘suspicion’ regarding ideas of a ‘pure’ self which is immunized and invulnerable to the realm of negotiation and discourse. The idea of an essential private self is ‘a sociohistorical construct’.⁸⁰ In his opinion, the notion of an ‘authentic’ self is linked to the myth of ‘an agent whose motivation is transparent, devoid of self-deception and of socially conditioned role playing’.⁸¹ In order to achieve self-knowledge, ‘I must explain myself if I am to attain what I want, and as I try to bring to speech what is of significance to me in such a way as to make it accessible to another, I discover that I am far from sure what it is that I can say’. In this process, ‘I become difficult to myself, aware of the gap between presentation and whatever else it is that is active in acting’ so that my ‘sense of the ‘hiddenness’ of another self is something I develop in the ordinary difficulty of conversation and negotiation’.⁸² Moreover, ‘[t]he proper logic of this recognition that my self-knowledge emerges from converse and exchange enjoins consistent scepticism about claims to

communion of persons in relation—the Trinity as the perfect social structure, a model society. It seemed a wonderfully apt analogy. But in trying to think through that and to live with it, I find that I’ve got to rein in the urge to use it. The idea of the social Trinity is crying out, “Use me, use me!” And I have to say, “No, no. That’s too easy, too fast.”

78 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (rev. ed. London: Routledge, 1974), 68.

79 ‘The Suspicion of Suspicion’, 193.

80 *Ibid.*, 192.

81 Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading New Testament Ethics,” 239.

82 *Ibid.*, 240.

have arrived at a final transparency to myself’ so that ‘I do not cease to be *vulnerable* to other accounts of myself, to the pressure to revise what I say of myself.’⁸³ In passing, we should note that this is in accord with the Bishop of Hippo who also places a clear centrality on the importance of others for one’s self-knowledge (cf. *Conf.* I.6.10). In another text, Williams says that self-knowledge is ‘a practice of criticism, specifically the way the subject distorts its self-perception into fixity by fixation upon the meeting of needs in the determinate form in which they are mediated to us in the perception of the Other’.⁸⁴ The negotiation of the self’s relation to ‘otherness’ is important for Williams since it is only this way that we can reach maturity and adulthood. Such ‘otherness’, as indicated earlier, is found primordially in our ‘erotic’ affinity towards the divine, that ‘self-relativizing energy that drives us to our proper place in relationship’.⁸⁵ This force cannot settle on any worldly entity, and is continually refracted through our interactions and self-formation as we progress towards maturity:

“The self becomes adult and truthful in being faced with the incurable character of desire: the world is such that no thing will bestow on the self a rounded and finished identity. Thus there is in reality no self ... without the presence of the other. *But* the other must precisely *be* other – not the fulfilment of what I think I want, the answer to my lack.”⁸⁶

Williams situates these reflections on the self and sociality to ecclesiology when he says ‘[t]he self-forgetting of God, God’s putting the divine life ‘at the disposal’ of what is not God, becomes manifest precisely in the

83 Ibid., 241.

84 Williams, “Know Thyself,” 223–224. Williams’s language of ‘the Other’ here is inflected by Lacanian terminology. For Lacan, ‘the Other’ belongs to the inter-subjective realm of the Symbolic which is the realm of discourse into which we are socialized as speaking subjects: ‘Man speaks ... but it is because the symbol has made him man’. This quote is found in Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, in *Écrits*, 72. Nonetheless, Williams is critical of Lacan’s own nihilistic conclusions. For a theological critique of Lacan, see Rowan Williams, “Nature, Passion and Desire: Maximus’ Ontology of Excess,” in *Studia Patristica* LXVIII, ed. M. Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 267–272.

85 “Nature, Passion and Desire,” 267.

86 Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2000), 188.

acknowledged inadequacy, the fractured and failed character, or all Christian rhetoric, whether in word or deed.’

“What in the created order mirrors the giving-away of God is not simply the practice of generosity ... but the practice of penitent irony about the misapprehensions of the life and speech of faith ... we understand the truth of the Christian God in the very apprehension of our own *misapprehensions*, our spiritual conformation to the life of the trinitarian God involves ... a scepticism both relentless and unanxious, about all claims to successful performance in our life and our discourse.”⁸⁷

Williams understands our humanness to be entwined with risk, vulnerability, and failure since ‘we are capable to betraying the reality of what we in fact are, where we in fact stand, of body and speech, of the bonds of sociality that constitute us as human’ which can result in reducing ourselves and others to not to something ‘true and essential’ but something which is in fact ‘the product of certain alienating or fragmenting forces in the social and linguistic world.’⁸⁸ We exist in a world in which we cannot escape the finitude of communication. The fact that language is limited, finite, and vulnerable to untruthfulness means that we have to constantly be vigilant against claims that involve an absolution from the reality of continued discourse and the possibility of renewal. We cannot escape our skins since this is what it means to be *created*. Our limitedness and vulnerability are the source of our dignity, but it is also fountain from which numerous miseries have flowed, because we continue to reject our fragility, clinging to a desire for power and mastery (*libido dominandi*). To live humanly, to love, is to accept our limitations. To quote Ben Myers, for Williams ‘we are most human when we are cracked, when each self bleeds out into the lives of others.’⁸⁹

The political implications of this should not be overlooked. Returning to Augustine, Williams writes that the social order implicit within this politics of self-knowledge is

87 “Interiority and Epiphany,” 257–258.

88 “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 194.

89 *Christ the Stranger*, 17.

“bound up with the desire for the Good, for *iustitia*: the self in construction is a self whose good is understood in terms of a universally shareable good, and the self is not known adequately without a grasp of the inseparability of its good from the good of all. If there is a ‘secret’ to be uncovered by the search for self-knowledge, it is perhaps this unconscious involvement in desire for the common good; and if there is a ‘politics’ of self-knowledge in Augustine, it lies in the dissolution of any fantasy that the good can be definitively possessed in history by any individual or any determinate group in isolation.”⁹⁰

The paragraph demonstrates that the ‘thick’ notion of personhood expounded in Augustine is entwined – in its ultimate implications – with questions of justice, the distributions of goods and reciprocity, with *caritas* rather than ‘a solipsistic interiority’.⁹¹ Augustine’s vision here, arguably, transcends some of the tensions that we find in philosophical antiquity, particularly in regard to the antinomies expressed between the private and public, between thought and action.⁹² For Williams (and Augustine), a substantive relationality ‘goes all the way down’ so that every individuation happens in the context of mutuality and reciprocal determination – even within God. Such a vision explains why Williams has significant reservations about liberalism, as well as abstract notions of ‘community’.⁹³ Williams’s own preference is for a more engaged notion of

90 “Know Thyself,” 222. Cf. Rowan Williams, “Politics and the Soul: A Reading of *The City of God*,” *Milltown Studies* 19–20 (1987): 55–72. See particularly 69 where he says ‘For Augustine, the problem of the life of the two cities is ... inextricably linked with the fundamental issue of what it is to be a creature animated by desire, whose characteristic marks are lack and hunger, who is made to be *this* kind of creature by a central and unforgettable absence ... On such a basis, there is no possibility of building a theory that would allow final security and ‘finishedness’ to any form of political life. The claims of such a theory would be, ultimately, anti-political because anti-human: ‘denials of death’.

91 “The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De trinitate*,” 125–126.

92 Cf. Milbank, “Sacred Triads,” 462–468.

93 Cf. Rowan Williams, “Beyond Liberalism,” *Political Theology* 3, no.1 (2001): 64–73. This sentiment is echoed in many of Williams more recent writings, especially those to be found in the collection *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), and can be further traced to the influence of Hegel and Gillian Rose in Williams’s more mature writings from the late 1980s onwards.

community and civic democracy, an ‘interactive pluralism’,⁹⁴ which (to use musical metaphor⁹⁵) constitutes a symphonic collaboration that advances towards a totality greater than the sum of its parts.⁹⁶ Williams even speaks about the advent of the common good as being a ‘social miracle’⁹⁷, in which charity arises when the legitimate needs, desires and identities of distinct communities are negotiated and recognised within a more decentralized and less statist political arena via a harmonious blending of difference. This ‘hopeful’ strand in Williams’s thought should not be abstracted, however, from his strong emphasis elsewhere on ‘the tragic’,⁹⁸ and his awareness of the ‘agonistic’ aspects that make up any serious political struggle.⁹⁹

5. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that Williams’s reflections on the self are fundamentally Augustinian and Orthodox in character, and that it is within this context that we should approach his relation to Wittgenstein.¹⁰⁰ The self, from this perspective, can only be known as a self-in-relation, as a dynamic movement between interior reflex and exterior surface, that finds its ontological archetype in the triunity of God. Such a concept of selfhood that is relational and ecstatic should alleviate suspicions that Augustine’s

94 Williams, “Religion, Diversity and Tolerance,” in *Faith in the Public Square*, p. 81. Cf. Mark D. Chapman, “Rowan Williams’s Political Theology: Multiculturalism and Interactive Pluralism,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 9, no.1 (2011): 61–79.

95 I owe this imagery to Mike Higton, who uses it in his discussion of Williams’s political theology. On this, see Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 112–134.

96 Williams’s position has affinities to that of his student John Milbank, as can be seen in his article ‘On Complex Space’ in *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 268–292. For the metaphysical tradition that underlies this understanding of relationality, individuation and politics, see Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy*.

97 *Lost Icons*, 65–115.

98 Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

99 Williams’s perspective here is slanted towards Gillian Rose’s concept of ‘the broken middle’. His reception of her work can be particularly seen in “Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose,” in *Wrestling with Angels*, pp. 53–76, and Williams, “The Sadness of the King”: Gillian Rose, Hegel, and the Pathos of Reason,” *Telos* 173 (Winter 2015): 21–36.

100 Williams does, however, liken Augustine’s account of self-knowledge to Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (‘The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge’, 130–131).

understanding of self is a solitary ego alone in its thoughts, or that the self is dissolved into a sublime annihilation. Moreover, such a reading of selfhood as self-divesting should not be interpreted as ‘masochistic’ or exclusively polarized on *hubris*, as some feminist critiques of Augustine argue. According to this reading, the prevalence of focus on sin as ‘pride’ is traceable to an androcentric perspective which lacks an awareness for multi-dimensional nature of sin, and how the language of ‘humility’ carries with it overtones of repression, especially when heard by women. Williams is aware of the ideological use of humility, but has defended Augustine by saying that the self-critical mode of Augustinian self-knowledge ‘assumes that the most pervasive false construction of the self is an ego around whose specific satisfactions the world is to be structured’.¹⁰¹ This is connected to his assertion that, for the Bishop of Hippo, the eschatological arc of desire refuses the ‘enjoyment’ of any created entity as an end, and so avoids (or militates against) capturing or objectifying living subjects within an exclusively immanent goal. We are called to love humans *humanly*, within all their limitations and idiosyncratic quirks, and not as if they were God. The Augustinian vision at this juncture provides linkages to what Sarah Coakley has more generally fashioned under practices of ‘*unmastery*’.¹⁰² While this is not a panacea for the ills of patriarchy and toxic masculinity, one could admit that its accent on a de-centred, relational and vulnerable interiority appears to be a step in the right direction.¹⁰³

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101 Williams, “Know Thyself,” 224.

102 Sarah Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task,” *Criterion* 47, no.1 (2009): 2–11; Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33–65. See also Jane Duran, “A Feminist Appraisal of Augustine,” *New Blackfriars* 88, no.1018 (2007): 665–677.

103 In the revision of an earlier version of this text, I have been immensely helped by conversations with Ryan Green, especially as these have been systematically outworked in his doctoral dissertation. For more, see Ryan Green, *Kenosis and Ascent: The Trajectory of the Self in the Writings of John Milbank and Rowan Williams* (Ph.D., Charles Sturt University, 2017). However, all errors and opacities are due to me alone.

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