The Trinity and The Target

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*“For after all what is man in nature? A nothing [the vanishingly small] in relation to infinity, all in relation to nothing, a central point between nothing and all and infinitely far from understanding either. The ends of things and their beginnings are impregnably concealed from him in an impenetrable secret. He is equally incapable of seeing the nothingness out of which he was drawn and the infinite in which he is engulfed.”*

*― Blaise Pascal, Pensées, 72.*

Saint Augustine famously disliked theatre. Or perhaps it's better to say that Augustine liked it too much and that it became an obsession or a problem for him, as he admits in his Confessions. However, when writing about the problem of theatre, he doesn't place the blame first and foremost on himself but rather on the fundamental nature of theatre, which he feels exacerbates or even creates previously unfelt emotions that only serve to complicate one’s life. He writes, “Why is it that in the theater people are willing to suffer distress when watching sad and tragic events that they nonetheless have no desire to endure themselves? Yet they are willing to suffer distress from watching such events, and the pain itself is their pleasure. What is this but a remarkable madness?”[[1]](#footnote-1) While there certainly a sort of wasteful indulgence in a fictional circumstance that Saint Augustine finds distasteful, he finds the type of enjoyment experienced in tragic performances to be deeply problematic because emotion moves in two ways at once: feeling empathetic sadness for characters and feeling a kind of elation in witnessing as a spectator. Ultimately, one is swept away by the drama, but it fails to alleviate the actual cause of distress in one's life.

Interestingly, this critique of Augustine describes well what many would consider to be a primary goal of theatre. Tragic plays, in particular, are designed to elicit catharsis—a profound emotional release brought about by the dramatic action. Theatre invites the audience into a world that closely resembles their own yet remains meaningfully distinct, offering just enough distance to process the reality of life. While this distance is an essential aspect of performance, few actors or theatre practitioners would agree that it serves merely as entertainment or pure amusement. The goal is not to distract from real life or escape reality but rather to delve deeper into it, providing a moment of communal reflection, as an external observer, upon the pressing realities of human existence.

Declan Donnellan, a world-renowned theatre director, explores this topic toward the end of his book about acting technique, *The Actor and the Target*. He argues that the aesthetics of theatre are not about numbing reality but confronting it, contrasting aesthetics with anesthetics—forces that dull sensation and disconnect us from the world. The modern world, Donnellan suggests, is saturated by and very good at making anesthetics that tamper with our imagination, severing us from reality instead of connecting us to it. Theatre, however, serves as a powerful antidote to this trend, stripping away the power of anesthetics to reveal true life. As Donnellan observes, one of the key purposes of theatre is to present characters and situations where “the anaesthetic does not work so well.” His exploration here is unique and powerfully tied to the thrust of his book, drawing on the Greek root of the word, he writes that “aesthetic comes from the Greek root meaning ‘things as we see them’” and suggests we could simply translate ‘aesthetic’ as “targets.” Conversely, he proposes that “anaesthetic can therefore be construed as: ‘without targets.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this paper, I offer a reading of Book 11 of Augustine’s *De Trinitate[[3]](#footnote-3)* to explore his understanding of sensation. My goal is to better grasp the relationship between sensation and aesthetics, particularly in relation to Augustine’s pursuit of ultimate truth, here, Trinitarian truth. To frame my thinking, I have placed Augustine’s thinking in conversation with Declan Donnellan’s *The Actor and the Target*. Although this may initially seem like an unusual proposal, I am not alone in noting the theological—and indeed Trinitarian—implications of Donnellan’s writing.[[4]](#footnote-4) Donnellan writes impressively about the dynamics of seeing, perception, and sensation from the vantage point of dramaturgical exploration and acting technique. His analysis, particularly those related to what he terms the "uncomfortable choices" and the "rules of the target," offer a practical counterbalance to the philosophical ascent toward the wisdom of God that Augustine attempts in *De Trinitate* and elsewhere. By examining Augustine’s view of sensation alongside Donnellan’s dramaturgical approach, I aim to uncover new resonances between these two frameworks. How might Donnellan’s practical exploration of sensation shape our understanding of the philosophical theology of Augustine? Drawing on both historical secondary sources and contemporary analyses, this paper seeks to illuminate the intersections between Augustine’s thought and theatrical practice, offering a new lens through which to engage with Augustine’s understanding of sensory experience. Ultimately, I will argue that the type of ascent Saint Augustine attempts serves only as a mental exercise. While capable of helping one to sharpen the mind and open attention towards God, it is not capable of actually delivering one to the God their mind seeks ascent toward. However, Saint Augustine is profoundly aware of this, as Gerald P. Boersma argues in his paper on Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos 41*.[[5]](#footnote-5) At the end of the day, it seems that what is needed is the descent of the infinite wisdom of God into the material reality of this world so that we might finally know God. In other words, the incarnation of the second person of the trinity flattens any hierarchy of sensation, reason, and wisdom. If anything, then, our pursuit of God and the desire for the wisdom of God sharpens one’s mind in preparation for a type of sensory engagement with God, which, for Augustine, is the end goal and ultimate aim of life.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Augustine’s understanding of sensation, which he explores through visual perception, is structured around three essential components: the capacity for vision, the attention of the mind, and the object seen.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is deeply resonant with Donnellan’s idea, as he separates acting into the capacity for vision, the imagination of the actor, and what he calls “the target.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In any case, I think these two would mostly agree on the fundamental requirements for sensation to occur, although the direction of their analyses is opposite. For Augustine, the movement of his insights about sensation is ever upward—toward the mind’s attention, and beyond it to a discussion of memory.[[9]](#footnote-9) This mirrors his discourse throughout *De Trinitate*, which consistently moves upward toward God, who is the very height of reason–wisdom, or reason perfected. In contrast, Donnellan’s movement is in precisely the other direction. For the actor, the usefulness and energy lie in focusing on the object or target. A retreat up into one’s head as an actor is disastrous and dangerous, with the potential to kill the life of a performance. Actors live by staying in the moment, which is directed toward perceiving in as much detail as is useful of the life of the world around them.[[10]](#footnote-10)

For Augustine, this threefold structure of seeing becomes particularly significant as he tries to establish the threefold nature of God. He extends this Trinitarian framework toward memory, suggesting that memory stores "little trinities" that can be accessed and recalled at various times.[[11]](#footnote-11) In doing so, he inches upward toward the God he seeks. But for Donnellan, the benefit of the connection between memory and sense moves in the opposite direction. He asks us to imagine a situation in which someone is asked what they would like to do for their birthday next year or what they did last year, and he notes something curious: the eyes flicker around in search of the memory of last year or in search of a vision of something that hasn’t even happened yet. It is as if the memory itself exists in real space, being searched for or “discovered” and brought into focus.[[12]](#footnote-12) To be fair, while Augustine doesn’t literally speak of eyes moving, he similarly refers to the "gaze of thought," which can "turn" to focus on various things that come before it. He also points out how our mind can imagine things not yet experienced but existing only in thought.[[13]](#footnote-13) Nevertheless, in Augustine’s work, the actual object often receives little attention, instead our focus tends toward ascension beyond material reality to contemplate inner truth. However, Donnellan offers a crucial insight by emphasizing the importance of the "targets" in external reality, from which all energy is derived in the act of seeing, and he encourages the actor to stay there, rather than turn inward.

For Augustine, the threefold nature of reality is essential, especially in his effort to reveal the one God who is also three. The tripartite nature of every act of seeing—comprising the object, the ability to see, and the attention of the mind—forms a central metaphor in his work.[[14]](#footnote-14) Each of these components is vital for sensation to occur. Without the object or the ability to see, there is no way for anything to come into the mind’s attention. Similarly, without the mind’s attention, even the most acute vision will fail to focus on anything, and even a person with perfect vision cannot see what is not present. Thus, all three elements are necessary for the act of seeing.

As Augustine spends considerable time discussing the necessity of each component of seeing, he concludes with a reflection on desire and the attention of the mind. He recounts the story of the Patriarch Jacob, who was able to alter the appearance of the goats by showing them multicolored branches. The goats’ intense desire—or their sensory response to the multicolored sticks—led to their offspring bearing coats of various colors.[[15]](#footnote-15) This example underscores the idea that there is a certain energy in the object seen that is connected to will or desire. While for both Augustine and Donnellan, the object plays a crucial role in activating and directing attention, and in this way, both the object and desire contribute to the energy of sensation, but Augustine sees a real danger in this, which could lead to disordered desire. However, I would like to suggest that the essential nature of the three components ends up challenging his project of ascent. If there is a trinity in which each component is necessary, why is one end better than the other? They are each absolutely crucial to an act of seeing. And, of course, to think about the Trinity as a hierarchical structure that can and should be climbed is something that most Trinitarian theologians would want to avoid.

In his analysis of Augustine’s expository work on Psalm 41, Gerald P. Boersma envisions Augustine’s interpretation as a recommendation for “a program of rehabilitation” in the practice of seeing God.[[16]](#footnote-16) He notes that Augustine’s ultimate goal is to sharpen what he calls “inner vision.” Augustine uses the figure of the deer as a metaphor for the life of faith, describing the deer as one that longs to see God but cannot truly behold him. The eyes of faith, while striving, see dimly. Although Augustine affirms that we can see evidence of God in the things He has made, we cannot see God Himself in a direct and literal sense.

Boersma explains that the exercises Augustine outlines are intended as “a training in modes of thinking increasingly interior, and increasingly free from images—a gradual intellectual movement from the material to the immaterial.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This *exercitatio* aims to reorder human affections, moving them from finite realities toward God himself, who is hidden. While the external and material beauty of the world provides striking evidence of God, Augustine maintains that this beauty is not God. Contemplation of the material world, therefore, serves as a mere avenue toward a higher-order contemplation needed to apprehend the eternal. This ascent is facilitated by turning attention to things that, though very real, exist outside the material world—such as justice or beauty. Boersma writes, “Contemplating immaterial reality, the deer comes to realize that he is not contemplating an object far removed in some heavenly realm, but a reality that exists in his own soul.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Interestingly, this platonic ascent toward God ultimately underscores the futility of its own project. Seeking God in the outside world proves insufficient, while seeking him solely in the life of the mind also leads nowhere. It is only through the revelation of the Incarnate Christ—God made flesh, knowable and touchable—that meaningful and salvific knowledge of God is made possible.[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, our retreat from the outer world to the inner world, and from there to the infinite majesty of God’s wisdom, ultimately serves to press us back toward reliance on the God who became flesh. This God, made perceptible to us by sense experience, bridges the gap between finite creatures and the eternal Creator. Boersma also identifies another place, apart from the historical Christ, where Augustine suggests we can encounter God: His “tent”, the church. This tent, though transitory, is a place where life is lived, where people sing and make music, and where divine presence is experienced sacramentally.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Augustine’s understanding of Psalm 41 is distinctly christological. The psalmist laments, “Why have you forgotten me?” which he sees as the same as “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” from Psalm 22, uttered from Christ on the cross. Similarly, as the deer in our Psalm laments the unknowability of God, Augustine’s reflections suggest that, while the ascent toward God through an interior life has value as a mental exercise *exercitatio mentis*, it is ultimately Christ’s descent and suffering from the cross that enables humans to perceive and know God.

While Donnellan devotes some of his book to wider dramaturgical theory, at the end of the day, his work is an acting book. It is less about the type of seeing that audience members do when they witness a performance and more about the type of seeing that actors do as part of a performance. Donnellan’s contention is that actors gain the energy they need in order to make the events of a scene happen by looking, by sensing the world of the character, by looking to their scene partner, and by finding the world as it is. By looking around the set, actors find objects and people that need rearranging. The whole thrust of the actor’s work is, at the end of the day, really a process of deeply seeing the world around them and paying attention in such a way that elicits a response naturally, helping them move away from "playing” emotional states into a practice of natural response to stimulus.

Early in his book, Donnellan suggests that his understanding of acting isn’t just a practice we employ in the theatre but is a sort of faculty that we’re born with—a type of attention and way of operating in the world.[[21]](#footnote-21) Donnellan pushes this theory so far that his book becomes much less about the interior life of an actor or cultivating some sort of superhuman capacity to access emotional life. Rather, it is about merely sensing the world around them and trying, as best as possible, to see that world in the same light as the character. The specific aspects of this exterior world that the actor takes in are what Donnellan terms "targets."

While not about the practice of acting, Augustine deals at length with his own understanding of sensation, the exterior world, and how that relates to reason and wisdom. Augustine argues that we must rely on how we perceive the world through our senses to make useful analogies. Ultimately, he suggests using the concept of sight to help us form an analogy for the Trinity. While one can sense Augustine's unease with this approach—given his philosophical training—he proceeds with it, writing, “For if it did not bear some resemblance to the inner man, there is no reason why it should even be called man.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Augustine reassures us that our inner capacity for understanding must correspond to the outer, sensory capacity, and we can use analogy to form a clearer picture of the eternal reality of the Trinity. However, he begins by bewailing our reliance on this form of bodily reasoning:

"Yet, as I have said, our familiarity with bodies has become so great, and our thought has projected itself outwardly with so wonderful a proclivity towards these bodies, that when it has been withdrawn from the uncertain realm of bodies and fixes its attention on the much more certain and more stable knowledge of the spirit, it again takes refuge in these bodies and seeks rest there from the place where it drew its weakness."[[23]](#footnote-23)

The incarnational reality of Christ forces Augustine to deal with materiality in a way that he is almost uncomfortable with and would have been laughable to the Epicureans or many other schools of Hellenistic philosophies.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, while he hold sensation in a higher regard than some, Augustine still solidly holds sensation at the bottom of his ways of knowing—sensation needing reason in pursuit wisdom in order to become useful to the pursuit of God and the pursuit of God’s wisdom. The mere fact of the story of Christ challenges Augustine, and throughout *De Trinitate*, we can see him wrestling with this notion of how the experience of the material world is related to the practice of gaining wisdom.

Another fascinating connection arises in Chapter 5, where Augustine discusses the dangers of the mind’s capacity for imagination. His critique here echoes his objections to theatre, which he accuses of having the ability to enlarge or diminish or to change or to arrange sensation, ultimately deceiving the mind. These “phantasies of the imagination” can harm individuals who wallow in them, dominating their thoughts and leading them astray.[[25]](#footnote-25) Yet, there is an interesting resonance here with ideas from Donnellan’s The Actor and the Target. In this acting practice, the “target” always moves an actor outward, steering actors away from dwelling excessively on their internal fantasies. For both Augustine and Donnellan, dwelling inwardly carries risks. For Donnellan, this inward focus can paralyze actors with fear, arresting their creativity and perception. Both figures agree that engagement with the sensible, external world is far preferable to wallowing in interior fantasies. Here, I propose that Donnellan’s so-called “uncomfortable choices,” or principles that guide actors to truly see a target rather than stay in the head, could be valuable resources for theologians engaging with questions of sensation and epistemology. While Augustine is often suspicious of sensation as a source of wisdom, his reasoning repeatedly relies on analogies drawn from sensory, visual reality and material space. Ultimately, Augustine recognizes that God reveals Himself to humanity in space and time through sensible and intelligible means. Despite philosophical training, which tends to distance itself from the material, Augustine cannot escape this fundamental reality. Donnellan’s “uncomfortable choices” could provide a practical framework for focusing on reality without distraction. They challenge Augustine’s suspicion of the senses while aligning with his reliance on sensory metaphors to express complex theological ideas. These principles help actors cultivate presence and engage with their surroundings rather than retreating into abstraction. I will briefly summarize three of them, though all seven merit consideration:

* Concentration or Attention: By choosing concentration, which might initially sound appealing, one places immense pressure on themselves to actively focus, rather than staying present and allowing their focus to be drawn outward—something achievable only by choosing attention.[[26]](#footnote-26)
* Independence or Freedom: By choosing independence, which might seem desirable, one risks becoming unmoved by reality, instead of remaining open to being shaped by it—an openness that comes only by choosing freedom.[[27]](#footnote-27)
* To Show or To See: By choosing show, which might appear worthwhile, one becomes overly concerned with how others perceive or witness their actions, rather than focusing on the reason for those actions—clarity that comes only by choosing see.[[28]](#footnote-28)

These principles could provide Augustine with helpful guidelines for trusting sensation rather than fearing it. In fact, the inward dwelling he critiques may stem more from an overreliance on the will and the mind’s attention, which shuts one off from the external world in favor of the life of the mind. Donnellan’s principles offer an alternative—one that encourages a fuller engagement with reality through the senses.

St. Augustine approaches sensation with suspicion, placing it at the lowest tier of his epistemological system, beneath reason and wisdom.[[29]](#footnote-29) In one sense, this hierarchy reflects a certain truth: our senses are limited and often fail to reveal God directly. As Augustine himself admits, we do not see God in this life. Yet his own system begins to unravel when confronted with the reality of Christ—the Incarnate Word—through whom God inaugurates tangible ways for us to experience Him. For Augustine, there is no philosophizing or understanding of reality apart from Christ, who mediates divine grace through material and sensory realities: Jesus Himself, the sacraments, and the gathered community of believers. In church spaces we worship, we compose art—art that strives to capture and express an ineffable beauty.[[30]](#footnote-30) Sometimes, God even breaks through mystically, directly reaching us through sensory experience. Sensation does not sit at odds with reason but complements it, offering avenues of divine encounter that reason alone cannot access. In this way, Augustine’s insights on sensation and Donnellan’s dramaturgical principles converge. Both point us to the necessity of seeing—truly seeing—not as an escape into fantasy or imagination but as a grounded engagement with reality. It is through this attentiveness to the material and the sensory that we are opened to grace, discovering God’s presence in the beauty and brokenness of the world around us.

Saint Augustine is famous for placing the beatific vision at the center of his theology—the very vision and sight of God eternally. And as he states elsewhere, there is no philosophizing without Christ. But this incarnational reality has implications not only for how we are to view God but also for how we are to view the world in light of this God who descends down the means of knowledge to be captured by our senses. I would argue that by flattening this epistemological ladder, we are invited to engage deeply with the world around us, giving precedence to the people we see and the world we find. In fact, I believe this is ultimately the logical conclusion of Augustine’s argumentation, which drives one to experience the world as a means of preparation for encountering the God who has been made intelligible by revelation, transformation, and by incarnation. We are invited to see the targets around us, not to intellectualize as a means of moving completely beyond them and turning inward. Here, I think acting technique, and especially Donnellan’s insights, offer insight into the type of vision we can cultivate.Bottom of Form

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1. *Confessions*, 3.2.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While this isn’t a sound etymological argument, it’s interesting in its own right. Declan Donnellan. *The Actor and the Target.* Revised edition. London: Nick Hern Books, 2005. p. 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All quotes from Augustine. *On the Trinity.* Translated by Stephen McKenna. Edited by Gareth B. Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Emily Bryan. “Fantastic Tricks Before High Heaven: Measure for Measure and Performing Triads.” *Religions* 11, no. 2 (2020): 100. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020100>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gerald P. Boersma. “Augustine's Deer Visits the Ophthalmologist: Exercising the Eyes of Faith in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 41.” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 10, no. 2 (2016): 209–225. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Matthew R. Lootens chapter on Augustine from Gavrilyuk, Paul L., and Sarah Coakley, eds. *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *De Trinitate* 11.2.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Declan Donnellan. *The Actor and the Target.* p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Chapter ‘*Knowledge and its Paradoxes’* from Luigi Gioia. The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate. Oxford Theological Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. pp. 190–218. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Declan Donnellan. *The Actor and the Target.* p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *De Trinitate* 11.3.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Donnelan 35-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *De Trinitate* 11.7.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *De Trinitate* 11.1.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *De Trinitate* 11.2.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Boersma. “Augustine's Deer Visits the Ophthalmologist…” p. 210 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Boersma. “Augustine's Deer Visits the Ophthalmologist…” p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Boersma. “Augustine's Deer Visits the Ophthalmologist…” p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Boersma. “Augustine's Deer Visits the Ophthalmologist…” p. 217 "The De trinitate uses the Neoplatonic soteriology of ascent only to impress it into the service of a thoroughgoing critique of its claim to raise the inductee to the contemplation of God, a critique which, more generally becomes a declaration of the futility of any attempt to come to any saving knowledge of God apart from Christ." [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Boersma. “Augustine's Deer Visits the Ophthalmologist…” p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Donnelan 11-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *De Trinitate* 11.5.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *De Trinitate* 1.1.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Long, A. A., and D. N. Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers. Volume 1: Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. pp 72-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *De Trinitate* 11.5.8 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Donnellan, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Donnellan, pp. 40-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Donnellan, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Marianne Djuth. "Veiled and Unveiled Beauty: The Role of the Imagination in Augustine's Esthetics." *Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (March 2007): 77–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Chapter ‘*Knowledge and its Paradoxes’* from Luigi Gioia. The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate. Oxford Theological Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. pp. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)