

# SILENCE

• William L. Brownsberger •

“Presence in silence betokens disponibility.  
. . . Selfishness centers on the scattered-out  
self (in the Augustinian sense).”

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*A “recollected” spirit always feels, thinks, wills,  
acts in the presence of itself and of God, always  
moving from its interiority while remaining  
there in its entire exterior life.<sup>1</sup>*

There is little attention given to the significance of silence today. Whether we should see this fact more as stemming from or as contributing to a lack of the experience of silence is difficult to judge. In either case, the disregard of silence is a problem that affects persons in themselves and in their relationships with others in a profound way. The claim that this is a problem clearly requires some justification today since silence is now the outsider. Silences are usually seen at present in a poor light: they represent discomfiture,

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<sup>1</sup>“Uno spirito ‘raccolto’ sente, pensa, vuole, agisce sempre in presenza di se stesso e di Dio, sempre muovendo dalla sua interiorità e permanendovi anche in tutta la vita esteriore” (Michele Federico Sciacca, *Come si vince a Waterloo*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. [Milan: Casa Editrice Dott. Carlo Marzorati, 1963], 167; here and throughout the present text, translations from Italian works are my own unless otherwise indicated). A beautiful meditation on recollection is found on 167–71. Cf. Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Godman (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 62: “The man whose nature is still possessed by silence moves out from the silence into the outside world. The silence is central in the man.”

deep-seated anger, defeated concession, being at a loss.<sup>2</sup> Where silences are valued, they are often such in a merely negative way, as the absence of and rest from burdensome activity or impinging noise.

Few people are truly open to silence; many avoid it by turning on a radio in the car or a television at home. By filling silence, persons abdicate from a sort of activity that is fundamental to personality. Activity, in the free movement of thought or in a purposeful progression of thought, is forfeited by noise and chatter, which give way to an unhealthy passivity. The person in noise puts himself outside of himself, or he allows others to remove him from himself, in a false ecstasy. To be truly outside of himself—that is, to be himself—the person cannot be outside himself in that which is alien to him. Recollection in silence, the state of the person's being most with himself, is an indispensable condition for his being with the Other that is closer to him than he is to himself.<sup>3</sup>

When the mind is habituated to noise, it creates this for itself even in the absence of sound by chattering to itself, whether verbally or imaginatively. As the imagination recreates visual images intensely or repeatedly impressed on the eyes when the eyes are closed, so also does it produce distraction and dissonance for the mind at home in the elsewhere of the audible and inaudible hum. A mind that lives elsewhere and otherwise is seldom itself and encounters itself unexpectedly, sporadically, and with a hard shock.

In this article I seek to present silence in a positive light. Silence is not an empty space to be filled but is full of meaning for him who has ears to hear it. The person draws himself toward silence by collecting himself—his faculty, attentions, and intentions—and yet it is silence itself, with its Word beyond all human significance, that finally draws the person. When the person refrains from the distraction of chatter and the fabrication of (often banal) meaning, it is in the abyss to which he has entrusted himself that he finds himself. This person lives no longer outside himself on the unstable

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<sup>2</sup>For other negative connotations of silence, see Jean-Luc Egger, “‘Ganz und gar gegenwärtig’: Forma e silenzio nel pensiero di Max Picard,” *Sapienza* 52, no. 2 (1999): 143–96, 143–44. In the same vein, see also Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Toward a Theological Ethics of Communication*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 215.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, 3, 6, 11.

foundation of insignificant meaning but in recollection, with its unitive, luminescent silence.

A description of the silence of a recollected person requires giving specific consideration to the phenomena involved as component parts of a whole picture. Accordingly, I will discuss the relevant aspects of this in a thematic progression. Beginning with the means for placing oneself in silence, I first look at the notion of recollection, which was given classical expression in the spiritual theology of sixteenth-century Spain. In a second part of this essay, I consider the noise and chatter of the self and of the world, since recollection itself is more distinctly understood in consideration of that which it must overcome. In looking at recollection thus from both sides—in itself and from the perspective of its opposite—we are in a better position to move into the heart of silence. The proper treatment of this subject begins and ends with the Word; our starting point here is the silence of Jesus recorded in the Gospels and the point of arrival is the sense in which silence is conducive to a relationship with Christ. Between departure from and return to the christological center of silence, it will, I hope, be worthwhile to reflect briefly on the relationship of speech to the finite world and on silence as organically structured toward a transcendence of limitation.

The parameters of the present discussion require this thematic, rather than historical, approach to the question of silence. Therefore, thinkers of the past will be ranged alongside more contemporary philosophers with the assumption that, since both groups are addressing fundamentally the same question, the answers proffered may be admitted without undue hesitation to a common conversation. If I am correct that silence and recollection are profitably described over against their opposites, then it should not surprise us to find that persons in previous epochs who deepen for us an understanding of silence have done so above the noise of their own times. Still, we should not lose sight of the particular relevance, mentioned above, that this question has taken on in the present. One hardly needs to mention that contemporary life is at a saturation point in terms of noise and banal verbiage. Virtually unlimited examples could bear out this obvious claim.

Finally, since the Person of Christ is the beginning and end of this deliberation, we will find that nothing final can be said on this subject apart from Christian faith. To say that silence has a meaning is to say that, in it, there is a meeting. The fulfillment of silence is only realized in Jesus Christ. Accordingly, the ideas advanced here,

which perhaps give a natural or phenomenological impression, should be understood under the sign of their completion in Christ.

### 1. *Recollection*

Recollection is a drawing of the person together in focus on God. To the degree that God is not thematically present as the object of this focus and does not present determined perceptions, recollection is a stillness in the open and undetermined. The recollected mind does not go out in the production of thoughts to fill up that which is lacking in its experience, but of its nature it gives way to silence. It is expectant without anxiety and is the plenitude and focus of power in its dependence. Recollection is not simply concentration, in the ordinary sense of the word, although it is in some respect active and bears the characteristics of concentration.<sup>4</sup> Concentration centers on a theme and sets its own purpose. The silence of recollection sublates concentration to expectation.

For the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, Francisco de Osuna, recollection is not principally for the sake of quiet and internal order but rather points the person beyond himself. Cultivation of this practice is the basis of an attentiveness.<sup>5</sup> The practice

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<sup>4</sup>See Laura Calvert, "The Exercise of Recollection According to Osuna," *Journal of Religious Studies* 15, nos. 1–2 (1989): 52–69; 52, where Osuna's recollection is "a specific mode of contemplation in which every thought that can be encompassed in language is dismissed. The forces of the soul, emotive and intellectual, are 'collected' and concentrated into one focus." Cf. Saturnino López Santidrián, S.J., "La Nozione di raccoglimento in Osuna," in *L'Antropologia dei maestri spirituali: Simposio organizzato dall'Istituto di Spiritualità dell'Università Gregoriana, Roma, 28 aprile–1 maggio 1989*, ed. L'Istituto di Spiritualità dell'Università Gregoriana (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 1991), 200. Commenting on texts from Osuna's *3 Abecedario* and *5 Abecedario*, he says: "Recollection, according to whether it is understood as a disposition or as an act, is called 'general' or 'special.' General recollection is a continual vigilance to maintain a calm and free heart. Special recollection is a particular act or exercise, in an out-of-the-way place and at specific times, which, after having reduced disturbances to unity, reaches by desire a union with God without intermediaries."

<sup>5</sup>"He must . . . abstain from thought, for as Saint Paul states, if he who trains for a fight must abstain from everything, how much more necessary it is for him whose battle is with himself to forsake all thought that could inebriate the heart and rob his prudence and interior attentiveness" (Francisco de Osuna, *The Third Spiritual*

transforms the person to be capable of focusing on God.<sup>6</sup> Recollection, like silence as we will see, is not essentially a negative term (freedom from dispersion). It is a full concentration of power in reference or disposition to God. Osuna describes recollection in view of its goal:

[T]he purpose of this exercise is to gather together and collect that which is dispersed . . . [T]oday when we refer to someone as recollected, or one who is quiet and tranquil, we mean little more than that he is withdrawn, removed, pure in conversation. Although that is very good, it is not sufficient to warrant the term recollection, which in its truest and oldest meaning expresses a state similar to that suggested by the word union . . .<sup>7</sup>

Freedom from slavery to sin and distraction are not insignificant, but it is in the heart of recollection that this freedom finds its truest purpose.<sup>8</sup> It is not the human person who finally assigns this purpose to his self-collection, nor does he bring it to fruition. Although the exercise of recollection is cultivated as an activity, in its fullness it entails passivity with respect to God; it is God who brings recollection and silence to completion.<sup>9</sup>

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*Alphabet*, trans. Mary E. Giles, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* [New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1981], 165).

<sup>6</sup>The transformative power of the practice of recollection for Osuna cannot be overestimated. He says: “How marvelous it is to see how just two days of practice in recollection can change the person who only yesterday was dissolute, his body running rampant, his feet itching to travel, hands swift to the sword, his restless head peering from side to side, entire body moving so vigorously it found no rest at all, now sitting down, now standing up; he looked up to calculate the time, ponder the weather; first he was here, then over there; but now he is calmed, tempered, corrected through his devotion, and it is all to the praise of God” (Osuna, *Spiritual Alphabet*, 172).

<sup>7</sup>Osuna, *Spiritual Alphabet*, 169.

<sup>8</sup>Recollection, then, necessarily includes—but is not defined by—the removal of dissipation. “[Recollection] gathers together the exterior person within himself; clearly we are to some degree composed of as many pieces as our concerns, and they are brambles that prick the poor person, like the lamb, until he bleeds” (Osuna, *Spiritual Alphabet*, 170).

<sup>9</sup>See López Santidrián, “Raccoglimento in Osuna,” especially 208–10, which describe Osuna’s three modes of silence (the silences of imagination and of reason and the unitive silence of intellect); these correspond to the return to oneself, the entrance into oneself, and the being elevated above oneself.

One of the features of recollection most pertinent to the present discussion is that it forestalls a transference of vigor and élan to the periphery of the person. One has a tendency to fidget (in a very broad sense) when one is particularly alert. The vigor of alertness is diffused in minor distractions and disturbances. This energy can be the source of discomfiture; fidgeting intervenes to bleed off its pressure on the person. This takes the forms of anxiety, preoccupation, and fixation. The siphoning off of one's strength is harder to detect when it closely parodies true devotion, but even in worship words may take their speaker out in many directions.<sup>10</sup> Fidgeting here may surface as contrived effusions (*effundere*) of emotion and baroque accretions in pious practices.<sup>11</sup> This does not mean in the least that devotional piety is fundamentally misguided or that affectivity plays no legitimate role in worship. However, piety can, in a corruption of good practice, serve as the outlet for diffusing energy in the sense described. Naturally, many other behaviors also play the same, deleterious part by diverting that energy toward lesser things which could be used in reference to God. To borrow an image from Osuna, it is in closing off the pipes that transport water (love) out of the soul in loving objects of sense, that the water (love) in the soul is forced to rise.<sup>12</sup>

Piety and religious activity are unusually susceptible to a kind of spiritual abuse in that they are naturally and ordinarily pregnant with meaning. Activity and false piety, by which term I do not

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, 2, 1, 1.

<sup>11</sup>There is an effusion that returns to its source and another that drags something of the source away. Cf. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 40: "Far from negating speech, silence is its source. And what arises and springs from this source never exhausts it or drains it dry. Living speech—just as there is living water—does not forget the origin, which loses itself and gives itself away in its affirmation. Only the silences that have become hardened and dead, the petrified silences of resentment and fear, must be 'broken' by speech, which delivers what they had been holding prisoner in secret. As for open silences, they are illumined by the speech that they were already promising, just as, once the speech has been uttered, it will be able to gather itself within them so as to continue to ripen."

<sup>12</sup>The image is recalled by Laura Calvert, "Exercise of Recollection," 57–58 in reference to Osuna, *3 Abecedario*. Cf. López Santidrián, "Raccoglimento in Osuna," 209.

intend to suggest Pharisaism, are perhaps among the principal manifestations of the subtle inclination to create meaning where it is not. A person often attaches great importance in the moment to concerns and activities that, in hindsight, appear to have commanded much more attention than was deserved. He raises actions to the level of dramatic importance that he wishes they had. In this he ignores the real importance of things, which is in their charity (the little things done with great love of Mother Teresa); the field of redemption is certainly one of small things for most people most of the time. We must be frank that the dramatic content of human action is often nearly void. Yet, this acknowledgment is in some sense the very condition for charity. Humble recognition of the paucity of an action's palpable importance places the action on its true center. Anything that an enterprise has in one's mind in excess of its true significance is something additional to the action as it is enabled and sustained by grace. The enervating fiction here is the action's false autonomy from God. Refusing to inflate the importance of an action leaves the person in the relative emptiness of his experience where he refuses to draw life from anything or anyone but God. It is remaining in this meaninglessness—where the person refuses to manufacture meaning and importance—that provides the space for sense and significance to appear. As Christian existentialists have intimated, without the frustrating, desperate question of existence, in which the person lets be the nothingness around him, its answer is unintelligible. The *todo* is in the *nada*.

The lack of recollection, correspondingly, is to be found perhaps most commonly in the *homo faber*. The fact that activity can serve as a mere outlet of one's energy does not threaten the value of real work. Indeed, rightly understood this observation safeguards the worker from being alienated from the product of his labor. Obviously there is a way in which a person's product returns to him and builds up his personality.<sup>13</sup> This is edifying work; virtues

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<sup>13</sup>This point is widely emphasized today; see, for example, *Gaudium et spes*, 35 (which is quoted by *Laborem exercens*, 26): "Human activity proceeds from man: it is also ordered to him. When he works, not only does he transform matter and society, but he fulfills himself. He learns, he develops his faculties, and he emerges from and transcends himself." The text is quoted from *Gaudium et spes*, trans. Ronan Lennon, O.Carm., et al., in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Collegeville, Ind.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 934.

are not formed without acts. There is, however, a tendency for the person to “lose himself” in his work, that is, merely to extrovert himself in an activity that takes him away from himself and returns nothing real to him. In this case work stands in lieu of action that is truly and properly creative. This work diminishes the person as something external is created; in good activity the person creates himself along with his creation—his product is really the by-product of his self-creation. The person works in a self-alienating way when he is too lazy to use his energy for anything else. In terms of religious life, action without contemplation is dangerous for this reason. Activity is most itself in being rooted in recollection. Where activity is not fixed in recollection it quickly becomes mired in the world. Recollection taps the person’s activities in the world, and with these the person himself, into the wellspring of their meaning.

## 2. Chatter

Chatter detains the person in the antechamber of being; the person complicit in his own frustration will not enter the house for love of his chattel.<sup>14</sup> He is a lover of sounds and beautiful sights for whom the beautiful itself can hold no real appeal.<sup>15</sup> For Jean-Louis Chrétien, silence is laden with meaning. The only meaningful word is that born of silence. Words foreign to the clarity of silence draw away from the real.

Speech takes risks because it is always the *unheard-of* that it wants to say, when it really wants to say something. The silence within events is what we want to bring into speech. In this way, the voice blazes for itself a trail that was not marked out in advance, a trail that it can in no way follow. It can be strong only in its weakness. Its sole authority lies in being venturesome, and so its trembling must always bear the hallmark of the silence from which it emerges: sometimes it is a toneless voice that alone can

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<sup>14</sup>Mt 22:1–14; Lk 14:15–24. Cf. Picard, *Silence*, 199: “[T]he noise of radio destroys man. Man who should confront objects concretely is deprived of the power of present concrete experience. This is what makes the man who lives in this world of radio so bad-tempered, so ill at ease: everything is thrown at him by the radio but nothing is really there at all. Everything slips away from him.”

<sup>15</sup>Plato, *The Republic*, 5, 480.

express the unheard-of. The distress inherent to airport novels and hit songs lies precisely in the fact that, by providing simple-hearted people with formulae of pure convention and worn-out, devalued expressions with which to express their joys and their pains, they deprive them of access to speech, they forbid its stammerings, and they thus deprive men of their own existence. There is something really vampiric about this. An arrogant vulgarity flourishes at the expense of all who listen to it. Then there is nothing left between the nakedness of the unsayable and the off-the-peg formulae that are all ready to wear, in which nobody speaks and nothing is said.<sup>16</sup>

Chatter redounds to the chatterer as, in the classical understanding of virtue, habits take their species from, and are formed by, acts. If chatter is a symptom of emptiness, it is also its cause.<sup>17</sup> The meaninglessness of words spoken in vain introduces vanity to their speaker.<sup>18</sup> Empty words create a hollowness in him in which they can sound and echo. Chatter is also a luxuriant indigence; it wraps a person in a chintz blanket against the chill of his soul.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Chrétien, *Ark of Speech*, 13. See also 42: “The speech of chatter, the speech that speaks for the mere sake of speaking, is completely different: it gives us no silence to hear, nor does it give to silence anything that speech might have illumined. It is no longer speech, being foreign to silence and not even suspecting its existence. When language is thought of on the model of physical transmission, with its ‘emitters’ and ‘receivers,’ silence is merely background noise; it has disappeared and, with it, human speech . . . . The disappearance of silence devastates speech and turns it into a desert . . . . Chatter lives off the absence of events but also for that absence: it tries to saturate with noise the calm space in which events might be produced.”

<sup>17</sup>Sciacca, *Waterloo*, 115: “Habitual chatter is a portent of the habit of not thinking, of interior emptiness, of superficiality and a lack of responsibility.”

<sup>18</sup>For Picard, chatter draws persons into emptiness. He says: “It is no longer the object that makes the noise around it, as in former times, but the noise is now primary, it *seeks out* an object . . . . It is true that people still talk about this or that particular literary or political object today, but they are only signposts within the noise, merely the places where the objects are taken up into the general noise and where man follows after them, in order to disappear with them in the noise” (Picard, *Silence*, 185).

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Merton’s insight here is especially relevant to contemporary life: “Those who love their own noise are impatient of everything else . . . . They bore through silent nature in every direction with their machines, for fear that the calm world might accuse them of their own emptiness” (Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* [Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1967], 192). Cf. Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, in which the protagonist tries to outrun “the malaise.” Cf. also Karl

Thomas Merton has seen this very clearly:

Those who do not know there is another life after this one, or who cannot bring themselves to live in time as if they were meant to spend their eternity in God, resist the fruitful silence of their own being by continual noise. Even when their own tongues are still, their minds chatter without end and without meaning, or they plunge themselves into the protective noise of machines, traffic, or radios. When their own noise is momentarily exhausted, they rest in the noise of other men.<sup>20</sup>

The space of silence is wholly unlike the emptiness of chatter. The jejune density of chatter and the ponderous openness of silence pass each other traveling in opposite directions. The reward and condition of recollection is the mortification of chatter and fidgeting in the joy of tranquility.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Silence

The Christian practice of silence must be rooted in some respect in the life of Christ himself if it is to be meaningful or even in some way normative.<sup>22</sup> Although this seems quite straightforward, we cannot point to a single episode in Jesus' life that provides a pattern for all Christian silence. This is to ask for too much and for nothing necessary. Nevertheless, certain Gospel narrations illuminate aspects of a silence modeled on that of Christ. Key among these is Christ's silence before Pilate.

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Rahner, S.J., *Encounters with Silence*, trans. James M. Demske, S.J. (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), 23–25.

<sup>20</sup>Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 195.

<sup>21</sup>Seneca, in holding up a pagan ideal, adumbrates the Christian notion of peace of soul. See Lucius Anneaus Seneca, *Moral Essays*, trans. John W. Basore, vol. 2, The Loeb Classical Library, 214, 215: "What we are seeking . . . is how the mind may always pursue a steady and favorable course, may be well-disposed toward itself, and may view its condition with joy, and suffer no interruption of this joy, but may abide in a peaceful state, being never uplifted nor ever cast down. This will be 'tranquility.'"

<sup>22</sup>Perhaps Mt 12:36, which censures every idle word we speak (πάν ῥήμα ἄργον), can be interpreted as enjoining a spirit of silence.

### 3.1 The silence of Christ

In several places the Gospels record the silence of Jesus before Pilate, Herod, and the High Priest.<sup>23</sup> John Chrysostom, in true Antiochene style, offers an explanation of Christ's silence that demurs from the mystical.<sup>24</sup> Asking why Christ did not defend himself by making the heavenly character of his kingdom clear, he says:

Because having the proofs from His acts, of His power, His meekness, His gentleness, beyond number, they were willfully blind, and dealt unfairly, and the tribunal was corrupt. For these reasons then He replies to nothing, but holds His peace, yet answering briefly (so as not to get the reputation of arrogance from continual silence) when the high priest adjured Him, when the governor asked, but in reply to their accusations He no longer says anything; for He was not now likely to persuade them.

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<sup>23</sup>Mt 26:62–63, 27:12, 14; Mk 14:60–61, 15:5; Jn 19:9; Lk 23:9. Another example of Christ's silence could have been chosen here. Jean-Louis Chrétien brings to mind Christ's silence in his infancy: "The *Verbum infans* is Speech that does not speak, that cannot speak, Speech deprived of speech. In coming to reveal himself to us, the Word began by becoming silent" (Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis [New York: Fordham University Press, 2003], 44). Several examples of Christ's silence are also brilliantly developed in the last chapter of Sciacca, *Waterloo*, "I silenzi di Cristo."

<sup>24</sup>For contrast, note the beautiful interpretation of Origen: "Now, Jesus did not speak all the words that he possessed while he was teaching in the treasury, but as many as the treasury could contain . . . [A]lthough he spoke so many words in the treasury and taught in the temple, Jesus was not arrested by anyone, for even his words were stronger than those wishing to arrest him. And as long as he speaks, none of those plotting against him will arrest him, but if he is silent then he is seized. This is why he is silent when he is examined by Pilate and beaten, since he willed to suffer on behalf of the world. For, if he had spoken, he could no longer have been crucified from weakness, since there is no weakness in the words that the Word speaks" (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Books 13–32*, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993], Book 19, 59–61; 182). Aquinas, possibly following Origen, gives the same reason: "[Q]uando docebat, nemo apprehendit eum, quia sermones eius fortiores erant his qui eum capere volebant: quando vero voluit crucifigi, tacuit" (*Super Io.*, cap. 8, l. 2). Cf. *Super Io.*, cap. 19, l. 1 and *Super Mt.* (*Reportatio Leodegarii Bissuntini*), cap. 26, l. 7.

After explaining Christ's silence as prophetic fulfillment as the lamb, Chrysostom also offers that "He knew that Pilate was asking pointless questions."<sup>25</sup>

While Chrysostom seems to have passed over the scenes of Christ's silence with a very ordinary explanation, that a defense would have been useless, his insight is in reality fundamental. On its basis we see that Christ does not answer his accusers because he would not be reduced to the level of their game.<sup>26</sup> They are not his judges.<sup>27</sup> He would not participate in the sham justification of his condemnation or delay those who conspire against him.<sup>28</sup> There was for him no sense in cloaking evil in the dressing of words or in buying time against the hour that had arrived; he came to look evil in the face, to bring it to the light that he is.<sup>29</sup> He exposes evil in its nakedness and shame. Silence, whether concerning evil or good, senselessness or meaning, is for confrontation. Before developing this explicitly—but as a means toward this—we must begin to look at the obstacle to confrontation that words often (but not necessarily) provide.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2 Speech and the finite

Speech is usually directed laterally. It is not that it is necessarily or intrinsically foreign to a vertical orientation; indeed,

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<sup>25</sup>John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist: Homilies 48–88*, trans. Sr. Thomas Aquinas Goggin, S.C.H., vol. 41, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1960), Homily 86 on Matthew, 420–21.

<sup>26</sup>On a related point, see Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, 117, where Muers interprets Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thought to indicate that Christ experiences the temptation to distort and ignore that which exceeds and counters a purely human account of things. She writes: "The stark alternatives put forward in [Bonhoeffer's] *Christology* introduction—'Either man must die or he kills Jesus'—draw attention to the violence of the human *logos* that reduces the person—here the person of Christ—to a mute object of enquiry." Following this line of thought it becomes clear that the living Word was already silenced, and so condemned to death, by his judges.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Jn 16:8–11, 1 Pt 2:23, Is 49:4, Is 50:8–9.

<sup>28</sup>Jn 13:27.

<sup>29</sup>See, for example, Jn 1:5, 12:46; 1 Jn 2:8; Eph 5:8–13.

<sup>30</sup>It scarcely needs mentioning that the point in these reflections is not to scorn the spoken word as such.

prayer is vertical speech. Most often, though, by words a speaker is “putting something *across*.” In this case he does not usually speak from the highest part of himself nor is he disposed to receive from above.<sup>31</sup>

Lateral speech issues from the person—either from the center of the person, as in a word that is “from the heart,” or, in the case of certain automatic responses, from more peripheral levels of the person, as in a remark that is “off the cuff.” As coming from the person—as something thrown by (cf. παραβάλλω, παραβολή)—the word (*parole, parola, parable, palavra*), when it is unduly loosed from its source, detracts (by distracting) from the center of the person. The person’s attention, with the attention of his interlocutors, is subject in conversation to the risk of becoming fixed in the periphery of the product, in the words produced, and so remaining locked out from the innermost profundity of the person to which words were never commensurate. This is felt in the perception of the risk of cheapening one’s sentiments by vocalization (which is sometimes the reason we are loath to speak about intimate things) or in that of the inadequacy of words in (poetic) expression.<sup>32</sup> The centrifugal force of words—whether by speech we derail others or ourselves—is a tremendous liability to an intimate-or-nothing relationship.<sup>33</sup> Even in vertical speech, the petitioner can truncate his own meaning for himself by forcing it into words.<sup>34</sup> Speech abused can set up an obstacle to communion

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<sup>31</sup>See Jas 1:17, Jn 3:3, etc.

<sup>32</sup>See Egger, “‘Ganz und gar gegenwärtig’: Forma e silenzio nel pensiero di Max Picard,” 147, which characterizes the silence of mystics as that of him who has more to say than language allows, “il silenzio pieno di chi ha troppo da dire rispetto alle possibilità del linguaggio ordinario . . .”

<sup>33</sup>Very much along these lines, Muers, in dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, indicates that an interlocutor with God should in some way take an apophatic stance and, along with this, accept liability to the openness of a wordless, undetermined (at least from the human side) relationship. She writes: “[P]ractices of silence in worship call further into question the idea that the ‘ultimate,’ God’s ‘givenness,’ and its realization in the world, can be described best or only in terms of a *word* spoken—and raise the question of whether both the being-in-relation of God and the being-in-relation of human persons may exceed what can be spoken or signified” (Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 151).

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Rom 8:26. Cf. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, no. 33 (New York:

between persons in other ways as well, but before taking up this theme again, we must consolidate what has just been said of abusive speech by way of turning to its opposite.

### 3.3 Silence as transcendent

To be related to the Ineffable implies silence.<sup>35</sup> There is no genuine relation to the source of all speech that is not characterized, somehow fundamentally, by silence.<sup>36</sup> If being for persons is or entails being in relation, then the existence of human persons is in this sense being as silent, since the relation to God is the person's most fundamental relation. To stray from this mode of being is to stray from oneself. To leave silence is to attempt to find oneself *inter aliena*. This is not, of course, to say that one must be always and physically silent.

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Fordham University Press, 2004), 10: “[T]here is a respondent to beauty more intimate to ourselves than what we take ourselves to be.”

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Hab 2:20, Zeph 1:7, Zech 2:17, which enjoin silence before God. Cf. also Israel Knohl, “Between Voice and Silence: The Relationship Between Prayer and Temple Cult,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 1 (1996): 17–30, which defends the interesting claim that priestly worship in the Solomonic and Second Temples was strictly silent. Peter Wick, “There Was Silence in Heaven (Revelation 8:1): An Annotation to Israel Knohl’s ‘Between Voice and Silence,’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 3 (1998): 512–14, employs this claim to explain the silence in Rev 8:1. Cf. Dauenhauer’s discussion of liturgical silence in Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance*, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1980), 18–19.

<sup>36</sup>Classical Spanish mysticism was not the first to prioritize this type of prayer. John Cassian seeks to explain “that fiery and, indeed, more properly speaking, wordless prayer which is known and experienced by very few. This transcends all human understanding and is distinguished not . . . by a sound of the voice or a movement of the tongue or a pronunciation of words. Rather, the mind is aware of it when it is illuminated by an infusion of heavenly light from it, and not by narrow human words, and once the understanding has been suspended it gushes forth as from a most abundant fountain and speaks ineffably to God, producing more in that very brief moment than the self-conscious mind is able to articulate easily or to reflect upon” (John Cassian, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P., The Works of the Fathers in Translation, 57 [New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997], Ninth Conference, c. 25, 345–46).

Silence is not the mere lack of speech.<sup>37</sup> It is more than a mere stilling of the chatter and purely human words that often tend to take the person away from himself and from other persons.<sup>38</sup> It is not even merely a negation of the negation of the “we” or a house empty and swept; it is rather a house full of light. It is a modality of our being present to God in which he can be intensely present to us as he is, for he is not best found, as the Carmelites teach, in the costume of our own production.

In terms of God’s presence to us, we do not need to go all the way down the road of sidelining “crystallized” revelation or dogmatic statements, which—all in very different ways and degrees—is perhaps begun in Schleiermacher,<sup>39</sup> Bergson, and Unamuno<sup>40</sup> and popularized in Buber<sup>41</sup> to acknowledge that

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<sup>37</sup>Many authors have drawn my attention to this. See, for example, Chrétien, *Ark of Speech*, 39: “[O]ne completely misunderstands the phenomenon of silence and its meaning if one defines it as a mere absence of sound . . . . Silence is not a complete absence of sound, as darkness is a complete absence of light . . . . For light does not come from darkness, and in no way derives from it: darkness is merely its absence, whereas speech is born from silence” (cf. 26–27). Cf. Chrétien, *Call and Response*, “[P]assing from a silent presence to a presence that addresses itself to us and communicates is phenomenologically different from the passage from darkness to light. Darkness is not a light that keeps itself from shining the way silence is the silence of a voice, the act, for a voice, of keeping silent by containing itself” (61). Sciacca says: “There are no silences without meaning; that which is without meaning is ‘mute,’ not silent” (Sciacca, *Waterloo*, 90). Cf. 183, where silence is not muteness; only the former is communicative.

<sup>38</sup>Max Picard’s insight here is that speech increasingly falls short of being a truly human, communicative activity. “Nobody listens to him as he speaks, for listening is only possible when there is silence in man: listening and silence belong together. Instead of truly speaking to others today we are all waiting merely to unload on to others the words that have collected inside us. Speech has become a purely animal, excretive function” (Picard, *Silence*, 177).

<sup>39</sup>Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 251–52, who quotes J. Dillenberger and C. Welch, *Protestant Christianity, Interpreted Through Its Development* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 186, 188. Fortman refers the reader to the appendix on the Trinity in Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith*, in which this idea plays an important role. See also William J. Hill, O.P., *The Three-Personed God: The Trinity in the Mystery of Salvation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 88.

<sup>40</sup>See for example, Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1935), 238: “A doctrine which is but a doctrine has a poor chance indeed of giving birth to the

Revelation in words cannot be God's most revealing word about himself. This should not disconcert us. The triumph of the Word is in the failure of words as such to render him plain. Were matters otherwise, the Word itself would be restricted, pinned to finite words that—as finite—tend to exhaust themselves and the realities they signify.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, that which keeps the biblical word aglow is its lack of self-sufficiency—its ironic understatement in finite appearance. The signified surpasses the saying. The wealthiest word is *eo ipso* the most indigent.

Similarly, in silent prayer the one praying more readily transcends the finite and, so, himself. This is the condition for his finding himself. The difference is at once evident between this and the type of prayer where at bottom the petitioner is really in a sensationalized dialogue with himself. Against this cynical notion of prayer, which critics have put forward, we may say that the one truly praying is restless in one sense precisely because he cannot determine the divine—God is not of one's own production, even mentally, and so is outside of one's control. Articulated thought typically tends to

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glowing enthusiasm, the illumination, the faith that moves mountains. But grant this fierce glow, and the molten matter will easily run into the mould of a doctrine, or even become that doctrine as it solidifies. We represent religion, then, as the crystallization, brought about by a scientific process of cooling, of what mysticism had poured, while hot, into the soul of man. Through religion all men get a little of what a few privileged souls possessed in full." See also Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fitch (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1926), 90. Michele Federico Sciacca, *Philosophical Trends in the Contemporary World*, trans. Attilio Salerno (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), has been an indispensable guide here; see especially 36 and 48, note 9.

<sup>41</sup>See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 111–20, and Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God. Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, trans. Norbert Guterman, Maurice Friedman, Eugene Kamenka, and I. M. Lask (New York/Evanston, Ill.: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957), 35–36, 45, and 128.

<sup>42</sup>See Rahner, *Encounters*, 21: "Is Your silence when I pray really a discourse filled with infinite promise, unimaginably more meaningful than any audible word You could speak to the limited understanding of my narrow heart, a word that would itself have to become as small and poor as I am?" Cf. Sciacca, *Waterloo*, 51: "Silence does not have death on its back: it carries on its wings the life of the words of all time." Cf. also Paul S. Russell, "Ephraem the Syrian on the Utility of Language and the Place of Silence," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2000): 21–37, 34, 36–37.

delineate and dominate—it seeks to give a name, as in the biblical understanding of this action. However, this determination stands only as a temptation in the case of God. Silence stretches out toward that which lies beyond finitude and human mastery. It is content with discontent. Words also seek to attain, to arrive, to bring about. This is the root of the perennial temptation to fall into magical attitudes and understandings, which besets the word spoken to God. Silence attains in its seeking and seeks in its attainment.<sup>43</sup> The ἐπέκτασις of silence that belongs to the wayfaring state is based on the model of Christ who, *simul viator et comprehensor*, prayed in the silence of his own company. You would not seek me unless you had already found me.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.4 Silence as personal

Silence allows one to be taken in by the other's word. Words draw others. Without prejudice to the fact that our "drawing" is metaphorical in reference to God, we may say that others enter into the sphere of our determination inasmuch as our words make an impression on them—we inform, we give information—while in silence we are im-pressed and in-formed.

To be not on speaking terms with someone is in reality to not be on (silent) listening terms, first and foremost. It is not to want to undergo determination by the other where the other's determinations are, through a pattern of experience, recognized as deleterious. Only secondarily is this state a not thinking the other to be worth determining.

We like to make up our own minds in our words. Thought, as just mentioned, seeks determination, and we feel ill at ease in indetermination. This discomfiture is the sign of an opening. In all conversation, the other, by our silence, is granted leave to intrude his

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<sup>43</sup>Augustine's thought is central to this formulation. He writes: "[T]hose who drink of you will be made thirsty even by drinking. What does it mean, to be made thirsty by the very act of drinking? It means never to experience satiety" (St. Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 85," in *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 18, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. [New York: New City Press, 2002], 245).

<sup>44</sup>The phrase is found, with an attribution to St. Bernard and Pascal, in Chrétien, *Ark of Speech*, 164.

own impression on our senses, imagination, and mind. This fact accounts in part for our feeling betrayed when offended, while we feel that our confidence has been requited when we are edified. Something is granted to the other, which he either “makes good on” or in respect to which he defaults.

Words, then, can stand as a fence around the self. Words, again, issue from the self and, in the case of true words, they draw back toward the self. They are ex-pressions, however—they are not the self. Sometimes we want others to stop at our words; there are words, for example, designed to “stop someone in his tracks,” that is, to cut off the other’s malicious inroads to the self. Although matters are somewhat different in the case of God, we are even there reluctant to strip ourselves of our verbal insulation. This is the way that we are accustomed to operate and a basic observation in the traditional account of naming God bears repeating in connection with relating to God: we ineluctably transfer from creaturely experience. We seek a covering for ourselves before the gaze of God.<sup>45</sup>

Presence in silence betokens disponibility. At once in this we see fall away the objection that silence is a selfishness, an introversion and enjoyment of the self as such with others’ being cancelled out as a means toward this.<sup>46</sup> Selfishness centers on the scattered-out self (in the Augustinian sense). In selfishness the self does not seek itself in recollection but seeks *for* itself in dispersion. Here the self is not open to the other but acquires others and appropriates and exploits their values for its own enjoyment.

Against our commonplace notions, then, we can suggest that words often serve to break communication and close off the other—even apart from insults and threats—while true communica-

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<sup>45</sup>Gn 3:10. Notable in this connection is the case of Teresa of Avila, who had confined herself strictly to her prescribed prayers (in words). Later she overcame this, considering that it was a temptation.

<sup>46</sup>Chrétien has seen this very well. He says: “To turn inward to our own intimacy to find truth is not to turn to ourselves but to the sun that the divine Word is for minds” (Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 50). Cf. also 67: “The motion to collect oneself inwardly is aimed neither at guarding oneself nor at regarding oneself: inner silence gathers always around the other as its goal; self-concentration never focuses on one’s own center. The Word indeed contains all things and is contained by nothing. It flows to us from inside and out.”

tion and communion can be found without words.<sup>47</sup> Silence is the privileged bearer of meaning. In this vein, Michele Sciacca writes:

There is no communication without silence. A silent fullness is communication that is meaningful. Two persons who speak together can only communicate partially; the word exhausts itself on their lips; they look at each other in silence and they say everything. There is in silence an ability to give ourselves completely, as a victim on the altar; an élan of love that denudes us and lends itself to comprehension. In the solemn moments of life, we communicate only by means of silence; a word disrupts: “Shut up!” “Be quiet!” But silence is so charged with meaning precisely because it cuts off all words, it locks shut our throats; the tension of complete communication takes away our breath. With any word at all, even the most banal or silly, we diffuse the charge: this is the need to open a valve. We were not suffering from a lack of oxygen; we were burning up from too much oxygen.<sup>48</sup>

The meaning that silence bears is in some measure other than that of which words are capable. It lets me speak on behalf of I-know-not-what, the infra-rational or the supernatural with which I am graced.<sup>49</sup> In the absence of precisely this communication, in

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<sup>47</sup>Chrétien, *Hand to Hand*, 152: “That which breaks the voice by interrupting the stream of its words still belongs to it. Such is the case with tears, which speak without naming anything, without saying anything, in the pure effusion of meaning. We are no longer the masters of this meaning; it passes through us to give itself and lose itself.”

<sup>48</sup>Sciacca, *Waterloo*, 57, translation mine. “Non vi è comunicazione senza silenzio. Una pienezza silenziosa è la comunicazione significativa. Due che si parlano possono comunicare solo parzialmente; la parola si esaurisce sulle labbra; si guardano in silenzio e si dicono tutto. Vi è nel silenzio una capacità di dono che ci offre interi come vittima all’altare; uno slancio d’amore che ci denuda e dispone alla comprensione. Nei momenti solenni della vita comunichiamo solo attraverso il silenzio; la parola disturba: ‘Zitto!’. ‘Taci!’. Ma il silenzio così carico di significato, appunto perché mozza tutte le parole, ci serra la gola; la tensione della comunicazione totale ci spezza il fiato. Rompiamo la carica anche con una parola qualsiasi, la più banale o insulsa: è il bisogno di aprire una valvola. Non ci mancava l’ossigeno; ci bruciava il troppo ossigeno” (Sciacca’s text has been quoted as found, including his non-standard accenting).

<sup>49</sup>Henri de Lubac draws attention to the infra-rational in human nature; see, for example, Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Edith M. Riley, et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 334–38. Along these lines of expressing the mystery in the human, cf. Robert E. Wood, “Silence, Being, and

which the person is disclosed to himself, the person becomes increasingly blind to himself; where he cannot see and live himself even in the process of discovering himself, he falls ever farther away from his identity.<sup>50</sup> To exhaust oneself in words, Sciacca urges, is not to be understood any longer. Understanding and being understood, for him, are predicated on a silence that respects the mystery of one's personality.<sup>51</sup> The human person, unlike God, risks banalization and banishment to superficiality by speaking. He must be silent to protect the mystery of an existence that words would turn inside-out

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the Between: Picard, Heidegger and Buber," *Man and World* 27 (1994): 121–34, 131: "Developing the spirit of silence is a concrete entering into the full intentionality of our nature as referred, beyond all filling, to the mystery of wholeness. The spirit of silence holds off the noise of our desires and the chatter of the It-world. The spirit of silence holds open the space for heeding the not-fully-disclosed as it draws near. Our initially empty natural orientation toward the whole is then filled in a way other than either the filling of everyday commonsense or even the filling of an intellectual mastery of portions of the world within and beyond the commonsense world. It is filled by reason of openness to the mystery which we touch in every encounter but can never encompass. It is filled through alertness and appreciation, a thankful thinking perhaps best given expression in the arts. Silence alerts us to the ground of metaphysics but also to the essential insufficiency of any metaphysics for the encompassing mystery that lies at the heart of each thing."

<sup>50</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957), 167: "Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their own lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. When that inner voice is not heard, when man cannot attain to the spiritual peace that comes from being perfectly at one with his own true self, his life is always miserable and exhausting. For he cannot go on happily for long unless he is in contact with the springs of spiritual life which are hidden in the depths of his own soul. If man is constantly exiled from his own home, locked out of his own spiritual solitude, he ceases to be a true person. He no longer lives as a man. He is not even a healthy animal. He becomes a kind of automaton, living without joy because he has lost all spontaneity. He is no longer moved from within, but only from outside himself. He no longer makes decisions for himself, he lets them be made for him. He no longer acts upon the outside world, but lets it act upon him. He is propelled through life by a series of collisions with outside forces. His is no longer the life of a human being, but the existence of a sentient billiard ball, a being without purpose and without any deeply valid response to reality."

<sup>51</sup>See, for example, Sciacca, *Waterloo*, 75: "We understand each other by that which we have not said—and will never be able to say—to each other. If ever we were to say everything to each other—to 'publicize' our being—we would no longer understand each other."

and, in so doing, denature. *Tradurre è tradire*. He would become, not himself, but that alternate who alone is capable of being expressed fully.<sup>52</sup> On the other side of the silent person stands the God who speaks his meaning in love.

The silence of love is marvelous and most admirable and praiseworthy, that silence wherein the understanding is profoundly quieted, receiving the sublimely contenting knowledge of experience. We clearly realize that when lovers are present to each other, they fall silent and the love that unites them supplies the want of words.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Perhaps it is in this sense that Sciacca writes: “Banal is the man who has expressed and communicated himself completely; only he who is empty believes that he has spoken and communicated himself” (Sciacca, *Waterloo*, 62). Also, 98: “There is never one word that sums up our lives; there would not be even if we were to live forever.” In the postscript to Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy*, no. 26 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), Chrétien argues that the person who expresses himself misses out on the excess that he is.

<sup>53</sup>Francisco de Osuna, *Spiritual Alphabet*, 558.