

“This Voice Has Come for Your Sake”

Seeing and Hearing in John’s Gospel

ABSTRACT

The gospel of John confronts the problems of human finitude and separation from God and others. Its theological innovations push at the boundaries of time and space, invoking the senses as vehicles for healing separation. The act of hearing is particularly significant and draws on biblical and rabbinic concepts. Perception, couched in the sense organs, is the source of understanding God. Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson consider the role of sense-perception in understanding the self in relation. Transhumanism promotes the extension of sense-capabilities of hearing and seeing. Enhancement of the senses allows greater capacity for the self to develop, reduces alienation, and provides the possibility, in secular terms, of what John promised in religious terms, “more abundant life” (John 10:10).

KEYWORDS

Gospel of John, voice, hearing, senses, incarnation, Deleuze, Bergson, transhumanism, disability, enhancement

BIOGRAPHY

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More than any other gospel author, John engages the problem of being human – subject to physical limitations and a short lifespan and marked by separateness. A sense of human longing haunts John’s gospel, longing for loved ones, for community, for knowledge of God. We hear a longing for those who leave us that echoes the feeling of a child left by its parent. Jesus predicting his death says, “Little children ... where I am going, you cannot come” (13:33; see also 7:33–34, NRSV used throughout). At the Last Supper Peter protests, “Lord, why can I not follow you now?” (13:37). Similarly, Thomas says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (14:5). Jesus recognises their feeling of abandonment, as he promises, “I will not leave you orphaned” (14:18).

Jesus himself weeps at the grave of Lazarus and looks for his friend, saying, “where have you laid him?” (11:34–35). In the same way, Mary Magdalene runs frantically and then cries alone near Jesus’ empty tomb, “they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (20:13). I recall the anguish of people searching for their missing relatives after 9/11, echoing the same painful question, “Where is my loved one now?”

John articulates the longing to feel at home in one’s world and at ease in community. Despite Jesus’ coming into the world, the world does not know him (1:10), nor will it welcome his disciples, as he warns them, “If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you” (15:18). John’s gospel exhibits a sense of alienation that pits heaven against the world, a place of darkness, sin, and ignorance that is ruled by Satan. Jesus fears his followers will be adrift and vulnerable after his death, in the world but not of it, so prays to the Father to keep them from the evil one (17:11–15). Relations with the local Jewish community are at an impasse such that John sees himself and fellow believers as no longer welcome there.¹ Notably, the individuals with whom Jesus successfully interacts and who understand his identity are models of difference, people marginalised by their ethnicity, gender, and disability—the Samaritan woman, Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the man blind from birth.

Finally, the gospel bespeaks the longing to know and understand God, but no one has ever seen God (1:18), no one comes to the Father except by the Son (14:6). No one has seen the Father or heard his voice (6:46), except the one from God. Not everyone can hear God’s voice (5:37; 8:47; 12:29) or see him (5:37) or his works (10:25). God does not listen to sinners (9:31). Some cannot know God (7:28; 8:19). The overall effect of these statements is that, minus intervention by the Son, a veil exists between the ordinary human and God.

Yet the gospel raises the hope “that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10). Craig Koester shows that John addresses the fundamental problems of separation that flow from being human, experiencing the limits of our finite bodies. He

1 The debate over *birkat ha minim* continues. Three references to being put out of the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2) suggest some kind of alienation. See the classic article by Reuven Kimelman, Kimelman 1981, and a more recent revival of the idea by Joel Marcus, Marcus 2009.

observes that every symbol for Jesus relates to a corresponding human problem. If Jesus is the light of the world, people are blind or in darkness. If he gives living water, people must be thirsty. If people are separate from God, he is the Way.²

John offers three innovative theological responses to humanity's problems that push at the normal boundaries of physical bodies in time and space. First, in the incarnation, Jesus, the vehicle for knowledge of God, takes on a human body. Second, John's "realised eschatology" sees the community as already living in the new, glorious reality, while simultaneously looking towards the future for final redemption. Third, the gospel promises that after Jesus returns to heaven, the Paraclete, or Advocate, will come, remaining with the community as the continuing non-corporeal presence of Jesus.

To express his relatively sophisticated theology, the author takes a route through the body and the senses. Despite the gospel's reputation as "the spiritual gospel"³ and its undeniable cosmic dualism that denigrates this world, matter, and flesh (1:13), it is sensuous, materialist, and body-oriented. The incarnation, usually expressed along the lines "the Word (Logos) became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14), is more literally translated as "the Logos became flesh and pitched a tent among us". The word "dwelt" or "tented among us" (*eskēnōsen hēmin*) is an obvious reference to the tent, or tabernacle in the Hebrew Bible, the portable sanctuary that Israel carried through the desert after the Exodus. As it was the physical manifestation of God's presence with the people in exile, so John implies that Jesus is the physical presence of that same God who lives among his followers.

The gospel invokes all the senses, both metaphorically and literally.⁴ Martha fears the smell of death at Lazarus' tomb (11:39), but later the aroma of perfume fills the air when her sister Mary anoints Jesus' feet (12:3). Jesus heals by spitting, kneading mud, and daubing it on the blind man's eyes (9:6). He invites Thomas to touch his wounds in order to believe it is he (20:27), but shakes off Mary Magdalene in the garden, saying, "do not hold on to me" (20:17). Jesus insists that only the one who feeds on his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life and shares his being (6:53–58). Three times John uses the word *trōgein*, "feed on", a word that originally applied to animals eating plants, meaning "to gnaw, nibble, or munch". Robert Kysar expresses the startling nature of John's assumption that "the ultimate reality of the Universe – God – is to be experienced through a grasp of the mundane sensory experiences of life".⁵

The most frequent sense reference is to sight, a virtual equivalent to understanding in John. Forms of the verbs "to see" appear roughly one hundred times in the

2 Koester 2006, 408.

3 Clement of Alexandria is cited by Eusebius as defending the gospel's place in the canon, "John, perceiving the external facts had been made plain in the gospel, being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual gospel" (Ecclesiastical History 6.14.5–7).

4 See Lee 2010. Dorothy Lee argues that the sense imagery flows from the importance of the incarnation and functions to aid human imagination.

5 Kysar 2007, 105–106.

gospel. In about half the cases, they mean “to see with the eyes”, and in half they mean “to know” or “to understand”, while in six places they mean both kinds of seeing. Jesus is called a “light” eleven times in the gospel. Hating evil and doing good equals coming to the light (3:20–21). Many statements show Jesus as the mirror of the Father; seeing him is seeing the Father (5:19, 6:40; 14:7; 14:9). Knowing the Father comes from seeing Jesus: “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (14:7) and, to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). Belief in the resurrection is the result of seeing. The Beloved Disciple sees the empty tomb and believes (20:8). Mary Magdalene and other disciples express their belief as “we have seen the Lord” (20:18, 25).

The symbols of light and darkness pervade stories that are juxtaposed in chapters one and four. Nicodemus, the Jewish teacher, comes to Jesus by night, but fails to understand. The Samaritan woman, by contrast, meets him in broad daylight and comes to understand him in stages, beginning with “I see that you are a prophet” (4:19). Potent symbolism appears in the story of the healing of the blind man, which plays on images of real and metaphorical blindness. Jesus’ claim “I am the light of the world” (9:5) introduces the story. The verb “to see” in the sense of “to know” appears seven times in this story (e.g. “we know that this is our son” [9:20] or “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” [9:25]). As Jesus heals the man blind from birth, the man grows in knowledge of Jesus’ identity, proclaiming him a prophet, his healer, the one whom God listens to, then, finally, the Son of Man. The Pharisees/Jews, by contrast, sink lower in understanding as the story progresses. Jesus proclaims, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who do see may become blind” (9:39). The Pharisees ask if they are blind and the punchline of the story is “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘we see,’ your sin remains” (9:41).

The seven miracles of Jesus in John are called not miracles, but “signs” to provoke belief.⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, signs and wonders are God’s manifestations of God’s power. The gospel makes clear that seeing signs reveals Jesus’ identity as the man from God and brings viewers to belief. After the changing of the water to wine at Cana, it reports, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (2:11). When Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus is dead, he adds, “for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe” (11:15), namely as a result of seeing Jesus’ forthcoming miracle of raising Lazarus back to life. The editor mentions other signs not written in the gospel,⁷ but “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

6 Chapter twenty-one is considered a later addition to the gospel, but it contains a sign in 21:14.

7 The possibility of a “signs source”, a collection of Jesus’ miracles known to the author, was first articulated by Rudolf Bultmann and developed by Robert Fortna and others, but it has not produced consensus.

But all is not simple with signs. First, they are not always effective, because some people who have seen many of Jesus' signs do not believe in him (12:37). Furthermore, another strain in the gospel prefers faith that does not come from seeing signs: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29). John knows such dramatic miracles do bring people to faith, but such signs-based faith is temporary and inadequate, a "beginner's faith", Kysar suggests, like training wheels on a bicycle.⁸ Koester goes further, saying John thinks signs-faith is not true faith at all.⁹ In either case, the final editor seems to prefer those who believe without signs, which naturally would include his own community, living at the end of the first century and not eyewitnesses to Jesus' life.

John shows no such ambivalence about the sense of hearing. Hearing, like seeing, is a symbol for understanding and recognition, but the author never suggests believers should "grow out of it". One probable reason is that hearing is a more traditional metaphor, with deep roots in the Hebrew Bible. At Sinai, Israel heard the voice of God and agreed, "We will do and hear" (Exod. 24:7; author's translation). God says he will come to Moses in thick cloud (obscuring vision) "that the people may hear when I speak with you, and so trust you ever after" (Exod. 19:9). Israel's fundamental statement of identity is Deuteronomy 6:4, the *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone."¹⁰ Later, the rabbis develop the idea of the *bat kol*, literally "the daughter of the voice", God's voice which comes out of heaven to speak to people.¹¹ Similarly, the *memra* (lit. "word" in Aramaic) represents God through speech in the Targumim, the earliest translations and commentaries on the Bible, and in rabbinic and apocryphal works. Along with the more capacious idea of the *Schehina*, God's emanation that appears in biblical, rabbinic, and mystical literature, these evocations of God's voice reassure believers of access and communication with God even after the end of revelation and prophecy.

The second, perhaps more important reason that John does not discount the sense of hearing, is that it is precisely the way that his community comes to faith. Living sixty to seventy years after Jesus, they are not eyewitnesses to his ministry. Hearing the words and deeds of Jesus proclaimed by teachers is how they "see" Jesus and God. Their guarantor is the eyewitness called the Beloved Disciple, now dead, whose testimony is the bedrock of the gospel. The Beloved Disciple saw the signs, but the community hears the report of the signs. Were hearing an unreliable medium, their basis for belief would be threatened.

8 Kysar 2007, 99.

9 Koester 2003, 139.

10 Note also that Israel's status as chosen is contingent on seeing and hearing, Exod. 19:4-5, "you have seen what I did to the Egyptians ... if you obey [lit. really hear] my voice ... you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples". Failing to hear God's voice and obey the commandments brings down curses in Deut. 28:15. In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a woman who calls out to hearers.

11 See b.Yoma 9b, which says that after the death of the last prophet, God communicated through a *bat kol*.

The gospel begins with the image of Jesus as the hypostasised Word or Logos in chapter one. John the Baptist is “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (1:23), announcing the coming Messiah. The Baptist later compares himself to the best man at a wedding, who stands aside and rejoices to hear the voice of the bridegroom (3:29). Numerous examples in John show “hearing the voice” or “hearing the word” as equivalent to true knowledge of Jesus and God. While some cannot hear his voice (5:37), for those who can hear, coming to faith via hearing is authentic faith.

In John’s distinctive realised eschatology, hearing confers life in the present and the future: “anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but *has passed* from death to life ... the hour is coming and *is now* here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God” (5:24–25). In an extended metaphor of the sheep passing through the door of the sheepfold, the sheep know the shepherd because they know his voice, and he calls them by name (10:26–28).

When Jesus asks the Father to glorify his own name, the Father’s voice from heaven booms out, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd hears it, and some say it thundered, perhaps reminiscent of God’s voice at Sinai. Jesus says to them “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out” (12:30–31). So in the imminent cosmic crisis, the Voice is God’s way of identifying his own. Right before his death, Jesus says to Pilate, “everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37).

By contrast, in an increasingly acrimonious exchange with Jews (who had believed in him) (8:31–47), Jesus tells them they cannot “know”, that is, understand, what he says because they cannot hear his words (v. 43) because they do not belong to God: “Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God” (v. 47).

Seeing and hearing can act in concert (12:44–50; 19:35), as in the crucial scene where Mary Magdalene meets Jesus in the garden after the resurrection (20:11–18). Although Peter and the Beloved Disciple saw the empty tomb and the discarded burial cloths, the first to actually meet the risen Jesus is Mary Magdalene. After Peter and the Beloved Disciple see the empty tomb, they depart, while she stays and using multiple senses, sees, hears, and, extrapolating from verse seventeen, seemingly touches the risen Jesus. She has remained, crying in the garden and telling angels at the tomb, “they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him”. She turns around and seeing Jesus does not recognise him, literally, “she turned around and saw (*theōrei*) Jesus standing there, but did not know (*ēdei*, from the verb *eidō*, “to see”) that it was Jesus” (20:14). She saw, but she did not see. He speaks, saying, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” She still does not recognise him, thinks he is the gardener, and asks if he knows where Jesus’ body is. Only when he says her name, “Mary” (*Mariam*), does she recognise him. It is as if by speaking her name, he opens her eyes, as he opened the eyes of the blind man to see

his true identity. She calls him “My rabbi” and must have embraced him, because he says, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Many have tried to explain this odd statement, but Raymond Brown is right, I think, in saying that the point is that the relationship to the earthly, bodily Jesus is over.¹² They cannot simply go back to the way things were.

Mary’s recognition comes by a combination of seeing, hearing, and touching. Another, parallel encounter appears a few verses later, when Jesus appears to the disciples in hiding (20:19–21). He speaks to them, then shows them his wounds. Only when they have both heard and seen do the disciples get it: “Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” Interestingly, Thomas, who is not there with them, demands to see and touch Jesus: “unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (20:25). But he is chided for his demand when, eight days later, Jesus seems to dare him, saying, “put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (20:27). Thomas never does so, and as with Mary Magdalene, knowing Jesus by touch is problematic.

This chapter, which most agree is the final chapter from the evangelist, embraces all the normal ambivalence about knowing by way of the senses. There is running, crying, seeing, hearing, embracing, resisting embrace, fear, doubt, and joy. It begins in literal, predawn darkness, as a grieving Mary Magdalene approaches. It moves towards real and figurative light, as the day ends with all but Thomas believing because they have seen the Lord. Finally Jesus confers the Spirit on the disciples by “breathing on them”, a physical act that echoes the God who breathed life into Adam in Genesis. Sense experience allows us to apprehend truth and know the other, but it is imperfect. The characters show a range of human emotions, frustration at bodily limits, the partial and gradual quality of knowing the other, and the impossibility of holding on to the other.

Yet the text promises knowledge that reaches beyond the finite self and softens boundaries based in time, space, difference, and identity. The Father and Son are bound up with one another, folding in believers. Jesus prays that those who believe in him “may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (17:20–23). The Paraclete is the bodiless extension of Jesus that accompanies the community after his departure. Realised eschatology claims that believers live in two kinds of time and already live in a rarefied state, taking part in eternal life (16:21–23; 17:21–23).

John invites us to think about the problems of being human. First, he speaks to the problem of human longing and desire to heal separation. Second, he suggests

12 Brown 1970, 1013–1014. See also D’Angelo 1990, who cites a parallel in the Apocalypse of Moses, where Adam is in the process of returning to life and tells Eve, “don’t keep touching me”. D’Angelo suggests a concept in which death is undone by stages and the process of return to physical life is fraught with danger and impurity.

that separation is partly the result of the limitations of being human, subject to death, distance, and difference. All human knowing is partial. Third, he thinks that the bodily experiences via the senses are sources of true knowledge. Last, sensory recognition is dynamic, operating in time and relationship.

John's world is not our world, but John invites us to think about the place of the body, and especially the senses, in expanding human possibility. John exhibits a qualified dualism that maintains flesh and spirit as distinct categories (3:6; 6:3) yet brings them together via perception. Although the pain of separation can only be answered by recognising another, non-corporeal reality, he shows perception and understanding are couched in the sense organs. Bodies of believers are vehicles of perception.

Contemporary philosophers approach these issues with tools of post-Enlightenment philosophy. A well-known essay by Gilles Deleuze, "What Can a Body Do?", restates a question posed by Spinoza that understands the body in terms of its capacities to be affected and to act, not in terms of essences.¹³ John might put it as "what can a body hear or see?" Like John, both philosophers (Spinoza and Deleuze) reject a total mind-body split – what happens in one happens in the other. A body is the sum of its capacities, a combination of affects (perhaps similar to my word "longings") and relations. Objects themselves can create affects and begin the process of relating to the object. In John's gospel, one has to ask, why does not everyone see who Jesus really is, why cannot everyone hear his voice? Nicodemus hears his words but goes away confused. Some of the Jews had technically believed in him but could not stomach his words. So they possess different capacities to be affected. This implies a certain determinism that some simply cannot apprehend the truth because of their limitations. Intention or will cannot solve anything. If our wills dominated, we would all be perfectly thin, fit, and accomplished.

Although Deleuze hardly sees the world as a Johannine dual cosmos, he describes the larger reality as a mix and flow of forces that act on people. People participate in the wash of events, both acted upon and acting, according to their different capacities to receive and respond. Consider the dynamic dance in John's image "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one" (17:20–23).

Deleuze was influenced by Henri Bergson, who probes the relation of body and spirit. His insight suggests that the act of perception is the meeting place of body and spirit (or mind). In *Matter and Memory*, he says, "this book affirms the reality of spirit and the reality of matter, and tries to determine the relation of the one to the other by the study of a definite example, that of memory".¹⁴ For Bergson, perception is the place where body and soul,¹⁵ matter and consciousness, meet. The body

13 Deleuze 1992, 217–234.

14 Bergson 1988, 9.

15 Bergson uses the terms "spirit", "soul", and "mind" somewhat interchangeably. His "l'esprit" is translated as "mind". In the ancient world *pneuma*, *psyche*, and *nous* had more specific meanings.

presents functioning eyes, ears, and all the senses that make perception possible. We understand that seeing and hearing involve physical changes in matter, vibrating eardrums, stimulation of the optic nerve and the like. Yet we have all failed to hear or see something because we are concentrating on something else. Or we can hear without understanding, say a foreign language or a musical instrument from another culture. Within perception there are elements like attention and recognition that are not about matter. So another contribution to perception comes via the mind or spirit, which uses memory to makes sense of images coming in. Bergson notes,

we can understand that spirit can rest upon matter and, consequently, unite with it in the act of pure perception, yet nevertheless be radically distinct from it. It is distinct from matter in that it is, even then, *memory*, that is to say, a synthesis of past and present with a view to the future, in that it contracts the moments of this matter in order to use them and to manifest itself by actions which are the final aim of its union with the body.¹⁶

A recent article on memory by Michael Specter addresses the malleable nature of perception and the role of memory.¹⁷ He notes,

Neurons are programmed by our DNA, and they rarely change. On the other hand, synapses, the small gaps between neurons turn out to be highly mutable. Synaptic networks grow as we learn, often sprouting entirely new branches, based on the way that chemical messengers called neurotransmitters pass between neurons. ‘The growth and maintenance of new synaptic terminals make memory persist’ [Eric] Kandel wrote in his book *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* (2006).

Perceptual capabilities then develop over time, as a result of experience, creating changes in the organism itself, which then affects its response to future events.

Bergson seems to say one can slip from one reality to the other via perception. The error that many make, he says, is looking for that union of body and spirit in space, when we should look for the union in time. Time allows for changes in degrees, development, “growing intensity of life”, “ever-greater latitude of the activity of the living being”, the “independence of the living being in regard to matter”. One can step back from the flow, use the memory to select and organise, and influence the future. He says if you incorrectly think of body and soul in terms of space, “it is like two railway lines that cut each other at a right angle. If one thinks in terms of time, the rails come together in a curve, so that we pass insensibly from the one to the other.”¹⁸

While we cannot ignore the complexity of these issues, nor the gulf that separates an ancient writer from twentieth-century philosophers, Deleuze and Bergson present several ideas that help us think about the gospel. First, the self is a coming together of capacities for understanding. Second, perception is an event that unifies the body and

16 Bergson 1988, 220.

17 Specter 2014.

18 Bergson 1988, 222.

soul. Third, memory is created by events that act upon the self and helps make sense of subsequent events. Fourth, these events take place within a wash of events, so one's capacity to grow in understanding is a function of time. Last, there are no rigid borders between body and soul, between past, present, and future. John also speaks of slipping from the corporeal to the spiritual via perception and memory. No one can see the Father except via the Son. No one has seen God, he tells us over and over, God is not corporeal, not visible to the eye. But, "whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say 'Show us the Father?'" (14:9) and "whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (12:45). So you *have* seen the Father. You have entered into the spiritual by way of your bodily perception of Jesus in the form of flesh. You have slipped across the curved railway line. This creates a permanent effect. Memory further allows the report of these experiences to pass to subsequent generations.

John's three innovative theological ideas assert that body and spirit interact in time and memory. The incarnation concept, for example, asserts that within the flux of the temporally unfolding universe, at one point the same abstract Logos that was present at creation coalesces and takes on human flesh and form. By passing from the non-corporeal to corporeal, he becomes a vehicle for others to experience the non-corporeal, a porous membrane between heaven and earth. Similarly, realised eschatology asks readers to understand themselves as living within two kinds of time, the normal, mundane time that moves in one direction and the eternal, glorified existence beyond regular time. Hearers are to understand that they have *already* passed from death to life. Finally, the idea of the Paraclete, the advocate or counsellor, says that the physical Jesus must go away in order for this spiritual presence to come to the community: "If I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you" (16:7). The corporeal must cede to the incorporeal, but an identity remains, dwelling with the earthly community. These three innovations from John exhibit a nuanced expression of relations between body, spirit, and temporality that moves far beyond earlier gospels.

These thinkers, ancient and modern, articulate the crucial importance of perception in bridging body and spirit and healing the pain of human separation. Today, transhumanism uses the language of biology to talk about extending the body's perceptual possibilities. Enhancement of senses via technology, especially the senses of hearing and speaking, creates new ways to reach beyond the finite self. Disability Studies was a bellwether in recognising the "contingency of the body". Nancy Eiesland showed that for the disabled, technology like wheelchairs or braces was part of the experience of embodiment, allowing a fuller flourishing of the self.¹⁹ Andy Clark says that through incorporation and restructuring, our best tools become us, that the self of embodied agency is a "soft self".²⁰ He notes that we need a fuller under-

19 Eiesland 1994.

20 Clark 2013, 124.

standing of human beings as they take in the world, as adaptable and given to neural plasticity. His example of a person running to catch a fly ball shows that sensing is not a simple interaction but “opening a channel” to the world, where information keeps flowing in and the person keeps adapting to it.²¹

Voice and hearing, so essential to the biblical worldview, are apt symbols of the human condition of contingency. Voice reveals age, illness, and mortality. If one speaks to elderly or sick people on the phone, their voices reveal their condition. A person near death often cannot speak. A large part of our grief at the loss of a loved one is our inability to hear that person’s voice.

Our selfhood is bound to voice. This article began during a period when I was recovering my voice after a long viral illness. My experience had been severely diminished by the weakness of my voice, affecting daily relationships, expression of emotions, participation in my communities, and potentially, my livelihood as a professor. Without my voice I could not be my real self. For good reason the metaphor of “finding one’s voice” appears in feminism, the arts, and psychology, implying an expression of the true and vibrant self.

Enhancement of hearing and speaking can go small, as individuals use constantly improving wireless technology to replace or improve hearing, speech-generating devices to replace voices that have been lost, or amplifiers to improve audibility. All such enhancements require a period of incorporation until, as Clark notes, “our best tools and technologies literally become us”.²² Anyone who sees using progressive lenses can likely remember the first day wearing them, when simply walking down stairs was difficult.

Enhancing the voice can go large via communications technology, and social media can help bridge the gulf of place and time, even language. Consider the little question at top of the computer screen “Want me to translate?” or Skype, which reduces separation by making it possible to see and hear loved ones and enter into their daily lives. When enhancement goes large, social media allows one to hear large numbers of voices and ideas and to present oneself to the world. One can invent oneself on social media, raise money for charity, campaign for a candidate, publish an essay, advertise one’s skills, and more.

Transhumanism looks to enlarge on both scales. This movement to enhance human life via science and technology ranges from improving health, perception, and cognition to uploading the brain of an individual as a way of surviving death and even, according to Ray Kurzweil, resurrecting a loved one.²³ While some, like Hans

21 Clark 2013, 115.

22 Clark 2013, 124.

23 In an interview, Kurzweil predicted that by extracting DNA from his father’s grave, adding memories of him from Kurzweil and others, information one day will be coordinated to reconstruct the man, Kushner 2009, 61.

Moravec,²⁴ have visualised complete freedom from the body, most thinkers seem to be in the camp that individual humans will remain a “mixed reality” of physical body and technological enhancement.

We can easily see the potential ethical problems with enhanced uses of technology to extend human functioning on both small and large scales. Totalitarian regimes might seek to create superhumans. Definitions of “normal” may be too restrictive, as for example, when the use of cochlear implants is understood by some in the deaf community as assuming their culture is deficient. Benefits of enhancement are likely to be distributed unequally. Distortion can be a problem when we “go large” if we consider the de-individuation that occurs and breaks down inhibitions. Efficiency of communication technology means that hate, racism, and anti-Semitism can reach a mass audience.²⁵ Online bullying has driven some to despair. We also face the problem of simple overload, which reduces meaning. Jaron Lanier suggests that “the hive turns against personhood” and “small brains may have saved humanity from an earlier outbreak of meaninglessness”.²⁶

We cannot, however, reject the body-machine future because most of us already *are* a mixed reality of body and technology. Who would give up their eyeglasses or hearing aids? Who would reject a pacemaker that gives many more years of life? Who would (or could) step out of the global network without losing opportunities to know and see others? Eiesland shows that technology allows the disabled more agency and interaction with the world, thus withholding it is unethical. But this truth applies to all of us, because we are all limited by our bodily capacities.

Transhumanists profess a range of worldviews, including atheist, humanist, and religious. The gospel author was profoundly religious, familiar with God’s promises in the Hebrew Bible, which he believed were fulfilled in Jesus. John’s gospel illuminates the role of the senses in answering the human longing to end separation. Body and spirit are part of an open, fluctuating reality, as a certain porousness exists between heaven and earth, present and future, human and divine. His understanding sets the senses to work to expand human possibility. As we continue to enhance our senses via technology, perhaps we will “have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

24 Moravec 1997.

25 See Foxman/Wolf 2013.

26 Lanier 2011, 53; 174.

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