

Hearers of the Word

BY RAYMUND SCHWAGER, S.J.

As part of his transcendental analysis, Karl Rahner describes the person as a "hearer of the word." What he means by this "definition" is that the person, because of the spiritual structure of being, is open to the Absolute and that each individual action of human knowing and willing takes place within an infinite horizon. As a result of this self-transcendence toward the Absolute, human beings are also capable of receiving a "message" from the Absolute. Humans are hearers of a possible word¹ and, by virtue of our spiritual nature, we must also carefully ask whether in the course of history a word has not actually been addressed to us.²

Following the Jewish and Christian conviction that God has spoken in truth and revealed himself in words, Rahner sees "hearer of the word" not merely as a formal description of human nature, but also as an indicator of the deepest and most existential reality of that nature. Human beings are, therefore, fully human when they hear God's self-revealing word. What belongs to the formal nature of humanity also becomes, in hearing, the most concrete content of human life.

But now we have to ask if what is said about humanity from a philosophical and theological perspective can also be more closely illustrated and described from the empirical side. For Karl Rahner this question was significant, as his theology was strongly influenced by the dynamics of retreats, in which hearing the word of God is practiced systematically.³ He analyzed the characteristic of the poetic word in detail⁴ as well as words fundamental to humanity (for example, "heart").⁵ As a result of these inquiries, he was able to show that humanity is deeply rooted in words, but he did not examine whether the empirical sciences could also have provided a starting point for his philosophy and theology.

Nevertheless, this very question has become urgent today. On the one hand, the transcendental-philosophical considerations that Rahner examined are not accessible to most people, and they provide few concrete clues on how one could gradually practice hearing. On the other hand, an empirical anthropology centered on hearing (and speaking) is now available,

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20 *Richard Lennan.*

and it includes a precise method for practice. This anthropology has been developed in many concrete individual steps by Alfred A. Tomatis, who, as a result of his decade-long medical research, has come to an insight that in its central points is strongly reminiscent of Rahner's "hearer of the word." At the same time, but from a completely new perspective, Tomatis also provides a positive appraisal of the church's long-established liturgical and pastoral practice.

Evolution and Hearing

Tomatis arranges his anthropological knowledge in the comprehensive framework of evolution theory, so he deals with the meaning of hearing not as the result of a theoretical prejudgment, but through concrete demonstration. Even in the most primitive animals, he notes, there are already indications of the development of the ear and simultaneously many other functions of a living organism (orientation in space, preservation of balance, control of bodily movements, and so on).

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According to Tomatis it is no accident that all these functions in higher life forms take place through the inner ear (the labyrinth): they belong together and form "facets of a process which one can describe as a dialogue."⁶ For specifically human communication, the body's upright position plays a particular role, since human beings are "called to hear and to speak."⁷ The high point of development was reached when the ear and articulated speech came together.⁸

Tomatis emphasizes that hearing is far more than a passive reception: it includes the multiple forms of active processing, checking, and feedback. Above all, with its extraordinarily complex organization, the inner ear serves to process and decode the sounds that come from without (rhythm, highs and lows, the accompanying over- and undertones, and the like). The human ear first learned to process rhythm (dance) and then to decode music; analysis of articulated speech came only at the end of development. Articulated speech is an

that he can discern in this context that the picture someone has of their body, like the capacity of the skin, is closely connected with the ear and particularly with the "snail" ("cochlea") in the inner ear, which works in resonance with the whole body. At the same time, the skin acts as a constant monitor and contributes significantly to promoting and controlling hearing.²⁰ The ear functions like an antenna that can hear sound both in the world and in the depths of one's own body.²¹ Only when both elements work in harmony does genuine hearing take place, and this harmony occurs only where the fundamental human relations are in tune and the hearer lives at peace with his or her own body.

Accordingly, conceptual communication is only one aspect of verbal communication. The greater part of communication takes place via the overtone, affectivity, and bodily image, which accompany speech and express themselves especially in timbre.²² Speakers do not only agitate their vocal chords; they set their whole bodies in motion, and the motion of certain parts of the body accompanying speech can come strongly into the foreground. Vibrations transmit themselves to the hearers, who are also involved with their whole

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bodies.²³ Through their voices, speakers can submerge hearers in a pleasant and satisfying bath of sound, or they can incite, strangle, strain, and damage—or simply weary—their hearers' bodies.

Tomatis understands the human ear as more than an organ of orientation and control. The timbre of speech plays an important role in transmitting affectivity. But the ear has another function that is also very important, indeed decisive: it collects energy. Tomatis distinguishes between two forms of energy: "One takes care of the maintenance of the neurovegetative systems and relies significantly on the metabolism. The other feeds the dynamics of the body and of thought, which are not to be separated."²⁴ The brain needs not only sugar and oxygen but also other nutrition, namely stimulants. By means of a continual reception of sense stimuli, the ear collects energy in order to provide dynamism for the body and to raise its tone.²⁵ The higher overtones are particularly dynamic. People who hear fully are more adept at self-control; they have less need to struggle against spontaneous impulses, and they can better achieve the integration of their whole lives.

Being Selective

The human ear does not hear all levels of loudness equally well, but it is particularly well adapted to



receive sounds between 800 and 3,000–4,000 cycles per second.²⁶ It perceives higher or deeper sounds somewhat less well. But there is more than just this selectivity that applies to all people in general; each of us also has our own particular "ear." Tomatis has undertaken extensive research in this regard²⁷ and established that there is, for example, a "musical ear." Between 800 and 3,000 cycles per second, someone with a musical ear hears the higher tone somewhat better than the lower one, although even higher tones still are perceived less well.²⁸ In addition to a "musical ear," there are particular "ears" for every language.²⁹ To speak a foreign language well, it is not enough to know the appropriate vocabulary and grammar; the ear must be taught to hear in a new way. Only when that happens can the student acquire the timbre of the foreign language and also be able to speak it easily.

The ear's selectivity depends—apart from one's mother language—particularly on individual experiences. The ear can open or close itself and can have a receptive or rejecting attitude to tones of a particular height or depth. Especially strong traumatic experiences can easily lead to a collapse at 4,000 cycles.³⁰ The ear can also close itself to particular people or absolutely refuse to hear. According to Tomatis, partial or even total deafness very often has psychic causes. These

arise mainly from the destruction of interpersonal relationships. Because the whole body hears, any faulty hearing can be destructive for the body and even contribute to paralysis. For this reason, Tomatis has sought to develop ways to repair damaged hearing in order to lead hearers to new energy and so to cure them spiritually and also partially bodily.³¹

The selectivity of the ear is also very important for another reason. The tones between 125 and 1,000 cycles correspond particularly to what occurs in the body and the subconscious. In the range between 1,000 and 3,000 cycles, articulated speech, logic, the conscious ego, and everyday communication take place. Intuition, ideals, and the expectations of the hearer are included in the classification between 3,000 and 8,000 cycles. All these diverse elements, along with the right and left side (and therefore the father and mother aspects), play a role and show up in one way or another in the hearing curve of every single person.

The "Sound of Life" or the "Hearing of the Hearer"

Each person must learn to hear really and fully. Tomatis distinguishes between "hearing" ("*entendre*") and "listening" ("*écouter*").³² An ear that merely hears can certainly receive sound, but in so doing, it is not really awakened. The hearer reacts in a dull way: part of his/her body and psyche are not involved; they may even actively resist. The voice is not "set on fire" and particularly lacks the animating overtones. The nervous system and the cerebral cortex receive only a little dynamic energy, and the hearers will not feel themselves invited to communication. To overcome this unpleasant condition, the ear needs careful education and practice: the ear must learn actively to meet tones.

Listening is not only important for immediate communication and living dialogue. Tomatis repeatedly emphasizes that human beings are so constructed, and our listening has as its aim, to communicate *with the whole cosmos*. This notion is more than an attractive picture for Tomatis. Only the ear that understands and is eager to listen to the universe receives the fullness of dynamic energy. Only in this way is consciousness fully awakened, and only in this way is it possible for hearers to integrate the vague depths of their own bodily being and their affective ties, that is, to gain both distance and freedom in regard to them.

It is as if the ear that opens itself to listen sets itself alight. Such listening begins with the "sound of life."³³ Such an ear receives a rare gift: simultaneously to hear itself live and vibrate.³⁴ It begins to hear a very fine and very high buzz, which has a similar tone to the chirp made by a great many cicadas on a warm summer night. The sound of life has nothing to do with the functioning of bodily organs, because its very fine and regular rhythm stands out from the others (blood circulation, heartbeat, breath, digestion). It also does not disturb communication with other people, but like

a primeval song, it forms a constant background. It draws back, however, as soon as a person becomes involved in everyday affairs, and it threatens to be lost entirely if someone is overburdened from tensions, problems, and conflicts.³⁵

Tomatis explains this "noise of life" physiologically in terms of the capacity of the hearing cells, because of their fine hairs, to perceive even the most delicate movement—namely, Brown's molecular movement.³⁶ When the ear is able to register even the most delicate movement, it succeeds in merging its deepest possibilities in that it turns back on itself.³⁷ By means of the molecular movement of the inner ear fluid, the ear can simultaneously hear itself and set up a circulation whereby the sender and receiver coincide.³⁸

This last point gives rise to a question: Does a person communicate in their own ear about the universe and molecular movement only with themselves? This question cannot be answered definitively from empirical science. It is significant, however, that up to this point empirical methods are to the fore. Tomatis adopts the words of the Bible—"In the beginning was the word"—as his leitmotiv,³⁹ but he uses it only as an image in his scientific work. Yet through his work, he has come to an unequivocal Christian faith.

On a purely empirical level, for instance, he first came to the conclusion that Gregorian chant could educate the ear, as he understands it, in a particular way. This singing, according to Tomatis, has a particular anthropological and spiritual meaning.⁴⁰ He was finally convinced that the ultimate and true listening consists in listening to the word of God in prayer.⁴¹ As a result of his research, Tomatis also regards the Hebrew language as having a particular quality. No people took such care about listening as the people of Israel.⁴² This passage from Isaiah (50:4-5, NRSV) illustrates the point:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.
Morning by morning [God] wakens—
wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.

A Disciple's Ear

In order to hear properly, the ears of disciples must be newly opened every day by God. When this happens, the tongues of listening disciples are also changed. Their word can now encourage others, strengthen them, and give them new energy. At the same time, listening makes disciples (servants of God) capable of a new attitude. They no longer respond instinctively to violence, but they find a new approach: "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting" (Isaiah 50:6).

Perfect hearing exceeds human strengths. Only one person heard anew perfectly every day, strengthened others with his word, and finally did not respond to violence with violence: Jesus Christ. According to Tomatis, Christ was the eternal word and the Son of the Father because he was the perfect listener.⁴³

Through use of an empirical method Tomatis came to an anthropology, and ultimately even a Christology, similar to those that Karl Rahner had already developed: the person is fully a person when they listen to the absolute word, and the person who has done so in an unsurpassable way is Jesus Christ.

The empirical method brings with it many suggestions for praxis. For instance, it points to the major significance of liturgical singing. It makes clear that the communication of concepts is only a partial aspect of the event of proclamation. Proclaimers speak with their whole psyche and their whole body. When these contradict the proclaimer's conceptual expression, then subliminal blockages are necessarily set in place. When proclaimers are also good listeners, then they can also communicate energy, which can be a sign of grace to those who are listening to them. Alfred Tomatis's anthropology contains the seeds for a complete program for liturgy and pastoral work and also for the formation of men and women working in the church.

Notes

1. "But man is spirit (a characterization which stamps his whole being as man) and thus has an ear that is open to any word whatsoever that may proceed from the mouth of the Eternal." Karl Rahner, S.J., *Hearers of the Word*, trans. M. Richards (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 68.

2. "Man is the one who listens in his history for the word of the free God." *Ibid.* 162.

3. See K. Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis: Die Anthropologie von K. Rahner* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 5.

4. Karl Rahner, "Poetry and the Christian" in *Theological Investigations IV*, trans. K. Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: The Seabury Press, 1974) 357-67.

5. Karl Rahner, "'Behold This Heart!': Preliminaries to a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart" in *Theological Investigations III*, trans. K.-H. and B. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: The Seabury Press, 1974) 321-30.

6. A. A. Tomatis, *Der Klang des Lebens: Vorgeburtliche Kommunikation—die Anfänge der seelischen Entwicklung*, trans. H. Kober. Introduced and adapted by S. Manassi (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1987) 103. French original: *La nuit utérine* (Paris: Stock, 1981).

7. "Called to hear and to speak, both of which in their complete form are not possible without the vertical, man must constantly develop an upright position." *Ibid.* 109.

8. "The major function of the ear . . . is to absorb language with a particular interest. The ear tastes language, appreciates it, decants its substantive marrow, integrates it, and stores it in the mind's reservoirs. Once the ear served to guard against danger or search out prey; it has since become our enigmatic opening onto the world of sound, bearer of our human communication." A. A. Tomatis, *L'Oreille et le langage* (Paris:

du Seuil, 1963) 65. English translation of this and subsequent quotations from Tomatis before Note 33 are by the editor.

9. For details of Tomatis's earliest researches, see S. Manassi, "Pädagogik des Horchens: Eine Einführung" in Tomatis, *Klang des Lebens* 9-34, particularly 10ff; German version of Tomatis, *L'Oreille et le langage* (8th ed.) 91-100.

10. Manassi 11. "The voice only reproduces what the ear hears. In other words, a subject can only bring to realization with any certitude what it can control." Tomatis, *L'Oreille et le langage* 104.

11. Tomatis, *Klang des Lebens* 136-39; A. A. Tomatis, *Vers l'écoute humaine* (Paris: ESF, 1974-75) I: 71-120; II: 150-71.

12. Tomatis, *Vers l'écoute* II: 106-18.

13. "When a sound introduces itself into the external auditory canal, the internal ear decides to go meet it and to receive it. For the sound to enter, the labyrinth opens its door. Some milliseconds later, the external ear does the same thing and modifies the tension of the eardrum so that the sound may be received in a conscious way—so that it may be received as if it had to be permitted entry into this fabulous labyrinth." Tomatis with L. Sellin, *Neuf mois au Paradis: Histoires de la vie prénatale* (Paris: Ergo Press, 1989) 114.

14. In the presence of loud tones, for example, the tension of the ear drum will be lowered, so that it is more difficult for the vibration to be transmitted. At the same time, the pressure on the inner ear will be raised in order to stabilize the turbulence in its fluid.

15. Tomatis, *L'Oreille et le langage* 129-38; *Vers l'écoute* (11th ed.) I:66-85.

16. From the right ear, the nerve tract goes to the hearing center in the left hemisphere of the brain and from there directly to the speech center in the same hemisphere and then back to the speech organs. From the left ear, information goes first to the hearing center in the right hemisphere of the brain, but because there is no speech center there, it then goes to the left hemisphere and only then to the speech organs. This detour means that processing takes from 0.05 to 0.1 seconds longer; otherwise the information would be partly overloaded by information of a more affective nature from the brain's right hemisphere.

17. When a speaker using a microphone and headphones hears his or her own speech, and when someone switches on an artificial delay, all speakers begin to stutter when the delay reaches 0.15 seconds (see *L'Oreille et le langage* [8th ed.] 139ff). Those who regulate their speech through the left ear are, therefore, significantly more prone to stuttering.

18. Tomatis, *La Libération d'Oedipe ou De la communication intra-utérine au langage humaine* (Paris: Ergo Press, 1975).

19. Tomatis gives an extensive treatment of the neurological dimensions of hearing in *Vers l'écoute humaine* II:49-68; *Klang des Lebens* 140-68.

20. See Tomatis, *Vers l'écoute* II:137ff.

21. "We have been able to observe . . . that the ear is set up like an antenna on a corporal being to which it attends most particularly and onto which it projects itself in its totality. The ear is an antenna with two polarities: it plunges into the exterior world and tends to find itself resonating there on several planes; it vibrates, among other things, to the echoes of the depths of Being in its corporal wrappings." Tomatis, *Vers l'écoute* II:143.

22. See *ibid.* II:80ff.

23. "To speak is to play on the body of another person. You play on the other's ear, certainly, but equally with his or her skin and sensorial receptors." Tomatis with Sellin, *Neuf mois*

au Paradis 197.

24. Tomatis, *Klang des Lebens* 101.

25. See Tomatis, *Vers l'écoute* II:73.

26. "Along with the impedance in the auditory canal, the specific resonance of the tympanic membrane, the selective band of the bone structure and the organ of Corti are other factors that direct hearing to the same 'traveling band' ['bande passante'] situated between 800 and 3,000–4,000 hertz with a peak at 2,000 hertz." Ibid. II:128.

27. The hearing test is important for Tomatis. Candidates or patients are given tones to hear between 150 and 8,000 cycles. Each individual tone begins at a level that is scarcely audible, and the tester notes at what level the ear first begins to receive it. When one groups together the levels at which the candidate begins to hear all tones, it is possible to develop a personal curve for each ear.

28. See *L'Oreille et le langage* 100–2.

29. The hearing curve for German, French, Spanish, English, and Italian can be found in Manassi 16; see also Tomatis, *L'Oreille et le langage* 113–25.

30. In this case, the hearing curve falls sharply from 2,000 to 4,000 cycles and then climbs again.

31. To this end Tomatis has created an "electronic ear," an apparatus composed, in its simplest form, of a microphone, headphones, and an electronic device that can strengthen either the right or left headphone, depending on what one chooses, and can gradually fade out the lower tones and make the higher ones more prominent ("filtered tones"). This allows the speaker, wearing the headphones, to hear his or her own voice better.

From the beginning of his research, Tomatis found consistently that speech changes very quickly, that it becomes more alive and brighter, and that even bodily functions improve as soon as the speaker hears in a new way. On the basis of this experience, he formulated his second law: "Once the ear is given the possibility of again hearing correctly those frequencies that have not been received well or at all any longer, those frequencies reappear, instantly and unconsciously, in the voice."

The rich experience with the "electronic ear" led Tomatis a step further: to the recognition that even lasting improvements are possible. He expressed the way to these lasting improvements in a third law: "Repeated acoustic stimulation over a particular length of time brings about a definitive change in hearing and consequently phonation."

Thanks to the "electronic ear" the human ear can learn over a period to hear anew and better. As part of this process, Tomatis did not give his candidates only their own voice to hear. Long experience convinced him that music from Mozart and Gregorian choral music have a particular strength for educating the ear. Thanks to his new method, he achieved much success in healing, including some very surprising cases where not only the hearing but also the psyche of the patient was affected, and even bodily healing took place. Today the "electronic ear" is used in more than 150 centers spread over many countries.

32. See *Klang des Lebens* 37ff.

33. "The clear rustle which it (the extremely fine vibration) calls forth is called in certain schools of meditation the 'inaudible tone'; I prefer to call it the 'noise of life' or the 'sound of life.' This noise, which fills all cells with life, lies in the higher range of frequencies—in a climbing curve from 800 to over 8,000 cycles. Here we again come in contact with the phenomenon of sound which I have labeled 'filtered tones'."

Tomatis, *Klang des Lebens* 176; see also *Neuf mois au Paradis* 252ff.

34. "Communication at this level is so differentiated and subtle that one can legitimately claim that the organ hears itself live. That appears to me to be the greatest achievement possible." *Klang des Lebens* 175.

35. "The sound of life is lost as soon as a person has to involve her/himself with the problems of being. The cares, compulsions, moods that arise from the often difficult demands of everyday life warp the capacity to listen. The person who wants to claim back a particular capacity to perceive, a capacity that represents an immediate connection with life, must therefore seek ways to create this process again. This vibration, which sounds like an urgent, harmonious song in the pulsating silence of nature, is more easily perceived in the depths of night." *Klang des Lebens* 177. See also Wisdom 18:14 (RSV): "For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne . . ."

36. "This constant activity can be intercepted, and doing so is one of the tasks that the cilia have—those sensitive hairs of the appropriate receptor cells. Their function can reveal itself in two ways: first, through the analysis of the macroscopic movement of fluid—its speed at a given time—that is, its deceleration or acceleration; second, through the microscopic analysis that Brown's molecular movement registers on the cilia themselves. The organ itself is set in motion and affects the molecules of the surrounding fluid and simultaneously receives information from this fluid. In other words: The Corti cells in the 'snail' of the inner ear and also the related hair cells in the utricle, ampulla, and saccule have a particular sensitivity to act as receptors, and this enables them to perceive the life itself that penetrates them." *Klang des Lebens* 175.

37. *Neuf mois au Paradis* 253.

38. "In a closed circulatory system the cells function simultaneously as sender and receiver." *Klang des Lebens* 175.

39. See *L'Oreille et le langage* 15ff.

40. Tomatis undertook extensive investigations that involved fastening delicate sensors on the skin of speakers and listeners. By this means he achieved some surprising results. One of them was that Gregorian choral music is the only form of singing that sets only the head of the singer in intense motion, while the rest of the body makes only slight noise.

41. "One sees that the true dialogue is one in which someone is in resonance with the Logos. From the instant one is ready to hear, when one is in a posture of hearing, which is a posture of prayer, just as a monk tries to do it, one comes near freedom. At that point, one can enter adoration and contemplation." "Écouter, c'est se convertir," an interview with Tomatis in *Sources Vivres* 30:78–87; quote is on page 84 (*Sources Vivres*, 13, rue des Barres, 75004 Paris). The translation of this excerpt and the two following are by the editor.

42. "I believe that no one has dwelt as long in the dimension of hearing as the Jewish people. Their world was different from the Hellenistic one, for which vision was the preponderant metaphor." Ibid.

43. "Christ is the Word and the perfect Hearer, the one who receives the word of the Father in such a way that he is the only one who can respond to it without deforming that word in any way. I speak to you, and I become you. Isn't that the love of the Father and the Son's response to the Father?" Ibid. 86ff.