

Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

Mental Ascent in St. Augustine's *De quantitate animae*

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St. Augustine's Stages of Mental Ascent in *De quantitate animae* 33

Level	Latin	Meaning	Cassian
1	<i>animatio</i>	Life processes	
2	<i>sensus</i>	Sensation	
3	<i>ars</i>	Memory, reasoning, craft	
4	<i>virtus</i>	Moral virtue	Purification
5	<i>tranquillitas</i>	Tranquility	Purification
6	<i>ingressio</i>	Approach	Illumination
7	<i>contemplatio</i>	Contemplation	Unification

THROUGHOUT his works St. Augustine presents descriptions of the ascent of the mind through fixed levels or stages (Van Fleteren, 2009). These are of interest not only because of their influence on later Christian contemplative thought, especially in the Middle Ages (for example, in the [Victorines](#) and [St. Bonaventure](#)), but also for their possible practical relevance today as aids for mindfulness and contemplation.

His earlier writings especially show the influence of Plotinus' *Enneads* and possibly a lost work of Porphyry, *De regressu animae* (*On the Return of the Soul*). An important example is Chapter 33 of *De quantitate animae* (*On the Greatness of the Soul*). In this work, purporting to describe a dialogue Augustine had with his friend, Evodius, several questions about the 'magnitude' of the soul are considered. Magnitude is understood in two senses: (1) in regard to extension in space and time, and (2) concerning the soul's power and capacity. Chapter 33 — the work's centerpiece — proposes a seven-fold categorization of the soul's powers, which can also be interpreted as a scheme for ascent to contemplation, the highest activity of the mind.

The first level, *animatio* (animation) corresponds to simple vegetative and regulatory processes — which plants also possess. Next are *sensus* (sensation) and *ars* (arts); *ars* is construed very broadly and encompasses directed thought, planning, and constructive activity. Animals also, Augustine notes,

possess these two powers. It is the last four levels, however, that are of most interest.

In the fourth stage, *virtus* (moral virtue), the soul turns its interest away from vain and empty worldly concerns, realizing that its true treasure and source of happiness is itself. It therefore sets out with a fervent desire for self-purification.

As a result, the soul reaches the fifth level, *tranquillitas* (tranquility). Tranquility is indispensable for the mind of the eye to see clearly, so that the soul may advance further.

Once tranquility is attained, the soul must now exert itself to advance towards higher cognitions. That is, an act of will is required. This is the stage of *ingressio*, or approach.

Finally, the seventh level, *contemplatio* (contemplation) is reached.

Relative to the traditional three stages of Western mysticism — as, for example, found in the writings of St. John Cassian — *virtus* and *tranquillitas* roughly correspond to purification, *ingressio* to illumination, and *contemplatio* to union.

Augustine allows that contemplation has varying degrees. The pinnacle is an ultimate mystical experience of union with God, such as “great and peerless souls” reach; for example, Porphyry reports that Plotinus attained this four times. At this point in his life, young Augustine was very intent on achieving this ultimate experience. However I believe his system might be applied to daily experience as we continually struggle to rise from our usual vain preoccupations with transient, delusory, worldly concerns to *spiritual mindedness*. In a more secular sense, we can interpret this as an ascent from what the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow called ‘deficiency cognition’ to ‘Being cognition’, from distraction to mindfulness, or from various forms of folly to right cognition.

Note: The translation here is that of Colleran (1950).



CHAPTER 33. *The seven levels of the soul's greatness.*

The Fourth Level of the Soul (*virtus*)*

73. Take hold now and swing yourself onto the fourth level, which goodness and all true worth call their home. Here it is that the soul ventures to take precedence not only over its own body, acting some part in the universe, but even over the whole body of the universe itself. The goods of the world it does not account its own, and comparing them with its own power and beauty, it keeps aloof from them and despises them. Hence, the more the soul turns to itself for its own pleasure, the more does it withdraw from sordid things and cleanse itself and make itself immaculately clean through and through. It steels itself against every effort to lure it away from its purpose and resolve. It shows high consideration for human society and desires nothing to happen to another which it does not wish to happen to itself. It submits to the authority and the bidding of wise men and is convinced that through them God speaks to itself. Yet, this performance of the soul, noble as it is, still requires strenuous effort and the annoyances and allurements of this world engage it in a mighty struggle, bitterly contested. [...]**

Yet, so great is the soul that it can do even this, by the help, of course, of the goodness of the supreme and true God — that goodness which sustains and rules the universe, that goodness by which it has been brought about not only that all things exist, but that they exist in such a way that they cannot be

any better than they are. It is to this divine goodness that the soul most dutifully and confidently commits itself for help and success in the difficult task of self-purification.

The Fifth Level of the Soul (*tranquillitas*)

74. When this has been accomplished, that is, when the soul will be free from all corruption and purified of all its stains, then at last it possesses itself in utter joy and has no fears whatever for itself nor any anxiety for any reason. This, then, is the fifth level. For it is one thing to achieve purity, another to be in possession of it; and the activity by which the soul restores its sullied state to purity and that by which it does not suffer itself to be defiled again are two entirely different things. On this level it conceives in every way how great it is in every respect; and when it has understood that, then with unbounded and wondrous confidence it advances toward God, that is, to the immediate contemplation of truth; and it attains that supreme and transcendent reward for which it has worked so hard.

The Sixth Level of the Soul (*ingressio*)

75. Now, this activity, namely, the ardent desire to understand truth and perfection, is the soul's highest vision: it possesses none more perfect, none more noble, none more proper. This, therefore, will be the sixth level of activity. For it is one thing to clear the eye of the soul so that it will not look without purpose and without reason and see what is wrong; it is something else to protect and strengthen the health of the eye; and it is something else again, to direct your gaze calmly and squarely to what is to be seen. Those who wish to do this before they are cleansed and healed recoil so in the presence of that light of truth or that they may think there is in it not only no goodness, but even great evil; indeed, they may decide it does not deserve the name of truth, and with an amount of zest and enthusiasm that is to be pitied, they curse the remedy offered and run back into the darkness engulfing them and which alone their diseased condition suffers them to face. Hence, the divinely inspired prophet says most appositely: *Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a right spirit within my bowels.* [Psalms 51: 10] The spirit is "right," I believe, if it sees to it that the soul cannot lose its way and go astray in its quest for truth. This spirit is not really "renewed" in anyone unless his heart is first made clean, that is to say, unless he first controls his thoughts and drains off from them all the dregs of attachment to corruptible things.

The Seventh Level of the Soul (*contemplatio*)

76. Now at last we are in the very vision and contemplation of truth, which is the seventh and last level of the soul; and here we no longer have a level but in reality a home at which one arrives via those levels. What shall I say are the delights, what the enjoyment, of the supreme and true Goodness, what the everlasting peace it breathes upon us? Great and peerless souls — and we believe that they have actually seen and are still seeing these things, have told us this so far as they deemed it should be spoken of. This would I tell you now: if we hold most faithfully to the course which God enjoins on us and which we have undertaken to follow, we shall come by God's power and wisdom to that supreme Cause or that supreme Author or supreme Principle of all things, or whatever other more appropriate appellation there may be for so great a reality.

And when we understand that, we shall see truly how all things under the sun are the vanity of the vain. For "vanity" is deceit; and "the vain" are to be understood as persons who are deceived, or persons who deceive, or both. Further, one may discern how great a difference there is between these and the things that truly exist; and yet, since all the other things have also been created and have God as their Maker, they are wonderful and beautiful when considered by themselves, although in comparison with the things that truly exist, they are as nothing. [...] Furthermore, in the contemplation of truth, no matter what degree of contemplation you reach, the delight is so great, there is such purity, such innocence, a

conviction in all things that is so absolute, that one could think he really knew nothing when aforesaid he fancied he had knowledge. And that the soul may not be impeded from giving full allegiance to the fullness of truth, death — meaning complete escape and acquittal from this body — which previously was feared, is now desired as the greatest boon.

* We omit here his discussion of *animatio*, *sensus* and *ars*, which are not directly related to contemplation.

** In the omitted material St. Augustine describes how at this stage an exaggerated fear of death may arise as a person, increasingly aware of faults, fears condemnation by God. This concern seems rather foreign to the thought of Plotinus and Porphyry.



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