

Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

St. Augustine and Intellectual Vision

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Gerard Seghers (attr). The Four Doctors of the Western Church, Saint Augustine of Hippo

ST. AUGUSTINE, in several works, but most famously in Book 12 of *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* (*De Gen ad lit*), developed a typology of 'vision' that became very influential throughout the Middle Ages, and which still merits our interest today. His main concern is not vision *per se*, but rather to use vision as a metaphor for knowing or cognition, and especially mental insight and knowledge of divine things. His basic scheme is a tripartite division:

Corporeal vision. The lowest form of vision is ordinary seeing by means of the eye, or bodily vision (*visio corporalis*). By this vision we see objects in the material world.

Spiritual vision. Above this is the mental vision by which we see images in the mind, either as memories of past sense experience, or products of the imagination. This he calls spiritual vision (*visio spiritualis*) — but this term requires an explanation. This vision is not spiritual in the sense that we understand that word today. Rather, the connection with 'spirit' derives from ancient theories of perception, wherein it was believed that sense experience involved stimulation of a semi-material fluid (*pneuma*) that permeated the body. Therefore a more apt term might be *imaginative vision*.

Intellectual vision. This all leads up to what really interests Augustine: the highest level of vision, which he calls intellectual vision (*visio intellectualis*). Unlike the other two forms of vision, intellectual vision sees things that have no connection with physical objects or their images. It includes what a Platonist or Neoplatonist might call the 'intellection of Forms' (*noesis*): for example, by intellectual vision we can 'see' that bisecting a triangle always produces two triangles, and that 5 is greater than 4. But for Augustine, intellectual vision is much more than Platonic or Plotinian *noesis*, and includes a wider range of cognitive activity, including what today we would call insight or (some kinds of) intuition.

Intellectual vision is, in fact, a pivotal concept in Augustine's philosophy. It plays an important role for him in contemplative ascent to God, in the relationship of Jesus Christ to the individual soul, and in understanding what faith means. Hence he takes care to supply examples so readers can understand intellectual vision and observe it at work in their own minds. It probably wouldn't be an exaggeration to suggest that Augustine's notion of intellectual vision is critical to understanding his important role not only in Christian philosophy, but in the history of human consciousness.

In *De Gen ad lit* 12 Augustine supplies many examples of intellectual vision. These include the ability to see and understand virtues (12.24.50; 12.31.59), truth (12.26.54), love and (within limits) God (12.28.56; 12.31.59). He also suggests that it's by means of intellectual vision that we can recognize allegorical meanings of Scripture, and distinguish valid from spurious spiritual visions and understand the meanings of the latter.

De videndo Deo

We also learn more about intellectual vision in a book-length letter Augustine wrote to Paulina, known as *On seeing God* (*De videndo Deo*). He is trying to help Paulina understand what it means to 'see God,' with particular reference to certain verses of Scripture, such as Matthew 5:8 (*Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.*) More specifically, he wishes to help her see God herself.

The letter reveals in a most remarkable way his humanism and pastoral concern. Having 'seen' God himself, he has an intense, earnest desire to help others do the same. (This humanistic and personal view of Augustine stands in contrast with the common modern perception of him shaped by later appropriation and narrow interpretation of his teachings by later Scholastic and academic theologians.)

His concern is to show that God is seen by intellectual, not bodily vision. But first he must help Paulina understand what intellectual vision is, or, rather, to witness its operation in her own mind. For this purpose in chapters 38 to 41 he employs a novel and effective device: he has her reflect on her inner response to the various arguments and propositions advanced in his letter up to this point. He asks her to review his preceding discussion, noting which points ones she's found credible and which she's doubted; and then to notice the inner 'vision' by which she recognizes her varying degrees of belief:

But examine in this whole discussion of ours what you have seen, what you have believed, what you still do not know, either because I have not spoken of it, or you have not understood, or you have not judged it credible. Among the points which you have seen to be true, distinguish further *how* you saw them: whether it was by recalling that you had seen them through the body, such as heavenly or earthly bodies, or whether you never perceived them by corporeal sight, but, by looking upon them with your mind only, observed that they are true and certain, such as your own will, about which I believe you when you speak, for it is true I cannot see it myself as it is seen by you. And when you have distinguished between these two, notice, too, how you make your distinction. (*De videndo Deo* 38; italics added)

Whether we believe or doubt, we see that we do so. We also see that we find some sources more credible than others. Paulina does not place equal credence in the opinions of Augustine and Ambrose. And she instinctively believes Scripture even more:

Note this, therefore, after you have carefully and faithfully examined and distinguished what you see; in making your distinction assess the actual weight of evidence on what you believe in this whole speech which I have been making to you, since I began to speak to you in this letter, and in it note to what extent you lend your faith to what you do not see. You do not put the same faith in me as you do in Ambrose ... ; or if you do think that we are both to be weighed in the same balance, of course you will not compare us in any way with the Gospel, or put our writings on the same footing with the canonical Scriptures. ...

Therefore, you yield faith to these words [of Ambrose and myself] in one way, but to the divine words in quite a different way. Perhaps some little doubt has crept into your mind about us; that we may be somewhat less than clear about some of the divine words, and that they are interpreted by us, not as they were said, but as we imagine them. ... About the divine Scriptures, however, even when they are not clearly understood, you have no doubt that they are to be believed. But you surely observe and see this weighing of belief or non-belief, and the difficulty of knowing, and the storms of doubt, and the devout faith which is owed to the divine utterances; all these you see in your mind as they are, and you do not doubt in the least that they are in your mind in this way, either as I said them, or, preferably, as you knew them yourself. *Therefore, you see your faith, you see your doubt, you see your desire and will to learn, and when you are led by divine authority to believe what you do not see, you see at once that you believe these things; you analyze and distinguish all this.* (*Ibid.* 39f.; italics added)

Importantly, he is not equating intellectual vision with her actual beliefs or doubts, but rather with her ability to perceive differences in her degrees of belief. He then has her note the difference between this faculty and corporeal vision.

Of course, you will not make any sort of comparison between your bodily eyes and these eyes of your heart, with which you perceive that all this is true and certain, with which you observe and distinguish what is invisibly present to you. (*Ibid.* 41)

Augustine is turning what might otherwise be an abstruse and sterile technical discussion about ‘seeing’ God into a spiritual exercise and practical demonstration. He is helping Paulina integrate her intellectual vision more fully into her rational consciousness. Before, she, like all of us, engaged in intellectual vision, but somewhat subliminally, as something not fully in awareness. But by drawing her attention to it, the faculty now becomes more consciously accessible and more acute, even enlarged. By this means she will be able to eventually exercise it in subtle perceptions of God’s presence and activity in her mind.

As we investigate the meaning of intellectual vision — and especially by observing our own mental operations — it gradually becomes clear that this is no mere abstract epistemological category, but an entire dimension or plane of psychological experience. We begin to appreciate the reality, vastness and importance of an entire inner reality, a realm perhaps as vast as the entire universe of sense experience.

Yet despite its importance, intellectual vision operates for most people only subliminally, in the sub- or pre-conscious mind. We constantly apply these subtle mental operations of inner vision, discernment and judgment and could not adaptively function otherwise. But by becoming more conscious of them, we may better integrate this dimension of our being into our rational mental life and social activity, so that both our outer and inner life becomes more holy, virtuous and spiritually authentic

Richard of Saint-Victor

Augustine’s concept of intellectual vision became a staple of medieval Latin Christian thought, and is especially prominent in the writings of Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor, 12th century writers. To give but one example, Richard’s *Adnotationes mysticae in Psalmos 143* distinguishes several distinct aspects of discretion [*discretio*]:

- (1) *diiudicatio* is the right judgment that directs virtues toward their ends; it is the light that leads us to truth (*lucerna cordis iudicium discretionis*);
- (2) *deliberatio* makes the distinction between what should and should not be done in a specific situation, taking into account the particular circumstances;
- (3) *dispositio* considers the proper ordering of means for attaining an end;
- (4) *dispensatio* distinguishes what’s appropriate and inappropriate, and reexamines a first judgment when required;
- (5) *moderatio* determines the right measure of the action.

Considering that discretion is only one part of intellectual vision, we can begin to get an idea of the complexity and richness of our subtle mental life.

By the end of the 12th century, the Augustinian tradition had achieved a remarkable synthesis of rationalism and mysticism (and also, though we have not discussed this aspect here, charity as an organizing principle of social life). This progress halted as Scholasticism and rationalistic dogmatism became a dominating force in the 13th century and beyond, even to present times. As the rational separated itself from the mystical element of Christianity, so the mystical separated itself from the rational: Pseudo-Dionysian and 'apophatic' mysticism submerged the intellectual mystical tradition of Augustine. This split between rationalism and mysticism remains today. Augustinian intellectual mysticism may potentially supply a more integral form of Christianity for present times.

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