

Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

Richard of Saint-Victor: On the Movements of Contemplation

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IN A SUSTAINED analogy, Richard of Saint-Victor (1110–1173) likens contemplation to the movements of a bird (he doesn't say what kind; a hummingbird fits the image well, but they only exist in the Western Hemisphere). He evidently attached some importance to this analogy, and we might assume it's something he developed from his own contemplation of natural phenomena.

An interesting detail his rather unexpected mention of major and minor premises (parts of a logical syllogism) — illustrating the integral nature of Victorine philosophy, artfully combining what today we might call left-brain and right-brain functions, i.e., logical analysis with creative intuition.

While I personally found this description of the phenomenology of contemplation fascinating, I hesitated to post it, thinking others might find it less interesting. But yesterday a bird seemed to deliberately hover a few feet in front of my face, which I took it as sufficiently like an oracle to proceed.



Richard of Saint-Victor. *The Mystical Ark* (Benjamin Major) 1.5

That the mode of contemplation operates in many ways

While the penetrating ray of contemplation is always suspended near something because of greatness of wonder, [*admirationis magnitudine*], it operates neither always nor uniformly in the same mode. For that vivacity of intelligence in the soul of a contemplative (1) at one time goes out and returns with marvelous quickness, (2) at another time bends itself, as it were, into a circle, and (3) yet at another time gathers itself together in one place and fixes itself, as it were, motionless.

We see this pattern daily in the birds of the sky. You may see some raising themselves high, others plunging low — and often repeating their ascent and descent. Some turn to the side, now to the right, now to the left, or moving ahead a little, or advancing almost not at all, again repeating their movements with great constancy.

Others thrust ahead in great haste. But then, with equal rapidity, return to the rear, and repeating this for some time.

Others move in a circle many times, one time a little wider, another time slightly smaller, always returning to the same place.

Others suspend themselves for a long time in the same place with rapidly vibrating wings, fix themselves motionless and cling to the same place. It's as though they wish to exclaim, "It is good for us to be here" (Matt. 17:4).

Similarly the flight of our contemplation is varied in many ways and of varying modes.

At one time it rises from the lower to the higher; at another it falls from the higher to the lower. By the quickness of its consideration it moves at one time from the part to the whole; at another time from the whole to the part.

And at one time it draws the argument for that which it ought to know from a major premise; at another from a minor premise. At one moment it turns aside into this part, at another moment into the opposite part; it elicits an idea of contraries from knowledge of contraries, and usually varies the performance of its reasoning according to the differing mode of opposites.

At some time it runs forward and quickly runs back when it discerns the quality or mode of anything whatsoever, either from the effects or from the causes and whatever has preceded or followed.

But sometimes our speculation is led as it were in a circle, when some things are considered that are in common with many things or when, for the determination of any one thing whatsoever, a reason is drawn and assigned now to similar things, now to things having similar essences or accidents.

The fixed focus of our consideration is placed in one place, immobile, when the attention of the contemplative gladly remains with the being of any thing whatsoever in order to observe and marvel at its proper nature.

Perhaps we shall more fitly say that to rise and fall, to go and return, to turn aside now here, now there, to continue at one time in a circle, and finally to cling together in unity: this is nothing other than by means of the greatest quickness to pass, in the mind, now from the lowest things to the highest, or from the highest to the lowest; now from the oldest things to the newest or from the newest to the oldest; at one time from unequal to equal kinds of merits and rewards; at another time, to consider with diligent examination the circumstance and connection of everything whatsoever; and finally, at some time, satisfying the soul with the rareness of some speculation and wonder at the rareness. See, as we have said above, how the activity of our contemplation is always suspended and is drawn forth according to some thing, while the soul of the contemplative gladly remains in the manifestation of its joy and is always eager either to return into itself frequently or to continue immobile in the same place for a long time.

Listen—concerning that mode of contemplation which is accustomed to go forward and back in a certain manner: “The living creatures will go and return in the likeness of flashing lightning” (Ezek. 1:14). [JU: referring to the Chariot Vision of Ezekiel and the four ‘living creatures’]

The one who moves upward and downward, as it were, is described by the Psalmist in a few words: “They rise all the way to the heavens and they fall all the way into the abyss” (Ps. 106:26).

With respect to that mode of contemplation which, for instance, is led in a circle, you are admonished by the prophetic voice where it is said: “Lift up your eyes in a circle and see” (Isa. 60:4).

The ray of contemplation is fixed motionless in one place, for example, when anyone experiences in himself Habakkuk in that place: “Sun and moon stood still in their dwelling place” (Hab. 3:11).

It remains for us to see how many kinds of contemplation there are.

Source: Zinn, Grover A. (tr.). *Richard of St. Victor: The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark and Book Three of The Trinity*. Paulist Press, 1979; pp. 158ff (edited and paraphrased).

Readings

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Written by John Uebersax

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