

Augustine vs Plotinus

The Uniqueness of the Vision at Ostia

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Every reader creates a personal version of what is read....This is often the very opposite of what might at first blush be expected: but on consideration it is exactly the way in which a writer of genius should — we perhaps suddenly realise — respond. It is, in short, creative rather than passively parallel, and a matter of unobtrusive decisive omissions followed by the flow of new matter, of demarcation rather than of imitation.

Gard 1992, 27

1. INTRODUCTION

Although there are disagreements about the details, commentators seem to agree that Augustine had various mystical experiences of a roughly Plotinian sort before his conversion to Christianity, and that his vision at Ostia was the same sort of experience, although considerably changed by his Christianity. Mandouze, for example, says that “there was no difference in nature at all” between the Milan ascent of 7.17.23 and the Ostia ascent of 9.10.24-25.¹ And although O’Donnell rejects this position as “extreme” and dismisses Mandouze’s arguments for it as “wrongheaded,”² his own account is not, in the end, so different. The ascent at Ostia, he says, “was better than what [Augustine] had found through the Platonic books: not different, not uniquely better, not a denial of the excellence of Platonic mysticism, but better. This is high flattery for Platonism, combined with a final regretful suspension of allegiance and transfer of that allegiance to Christianity.”³

For my own part, I can’t say that I would be terribly flattered if I were Plotinus. Augustine takes great care to describe the vision at Ostia in such a way as to deflate the pretensions of the Platonists; his aim is precisely to effect “a denial of the excellence of Platonic

¹ Mandouze 1968, 697.

² O’Donnell 1992, 3:124.

³ O’Donnell 1992, 3:128.

mysticism,” and I find no regret in his “transfer of allegiance.” I would go further, in fact, and insist that Augustine recounts only one mystical experience in the *Confessions*: the vision at Ostia. To insist on describing his reflections at Milan as “ascents,” with all the overtones of Plotinian mysticism conjured up by that word, is to be false to the way in which Augustine describes what happened in Milan, false to his sober estimate of the limitations of Platonic philosophy, false to his very different description of the vision at Ostia, and false, above all, to his beliefs about the indispensable importance of Christ as Mediator. To state my thesis boldly: in Milan Augustine was doing natural theology; at Ostia he was hanging out with Jesus.

2. THE CONTEXT OF THE MILAN “ASCENT”

Although commentators have largely overlooked the fact, Augustine plays fair with us from the outset. He warns us that the story of his reflections in Milan will be the story of a failure, not of a success:

And first, because you desired to show me how you resist the proud but give grace to the humble, and how much your mercy has been shown to men by the path of humility, because your Word was made flesh and dwelt among men, you procured for me . . . certain books of the Platonists.⁴ (7.9.13)

God resists the proud: and what is the characteristic moral failure of the “mere” Platonists, if not pride? God gives grace to the humble, where humility shines forth above all in the Incarnation: and what is the characteristic intellectual failure of the “mere” Platonists, if not their blindness to the God-Man? After he has learned everything he can from the Platonists, he is still proud, and still ignorant of the Incarnation. So of course God resists him; his reflections in Milan leave him feeling empty, hungry, and vaguely wistful. Perhaps O’Donnell is right to insist that the “ascent” of 7.17.23 was “successful—on Plotinian terms as Augustine understood them”⁵; but if so, we are bound to believe that Augustine regarded Plotinian success as being an elaborate and impressive form of failure.

There are a number of reasons why commentators overlook Augustine’s caveat. In

⁴ Translations throughout the paper are my own. I have followed O’Donnell’s text.

⁵ O’Donnell 1992, 2:435, emphasis in original.

O'Donnell's case (which I choose as the most useful for structuring my own argument), I suspect it comes from an over-enthusiasm for the three-temptations structure he so brilliantly exploits in his commentary. The narrative books of the *Confessions*, he explains, are structured according to the three temptations of 1 John 2:16. In the story of his moral decay, Augustine falls first into the lust of the flesh (*concupiscentia carnis*, Book 2), next into undisciplined curiosity or "lust of the eyes" (*concupiscentia oculorum*, Book 3), and finally into secular ambition (*ambitio saeculi*, Book 4). Mirroring this moral degeneration in the first half of the narrative books is a moral regeneration in the second half, where Augustine overcomes the three temptations in reverse order.

With this reading in mind, we expect Book 7 to narrate an intellectual accomplishment in which the undisciplined curiosity of Book 3—where Augustine's restless questioning led him to the Manichees—is overcome. To some extent, that is precisely what we find. By the end of Book 7 the three questions of Book 3 have been given satisfactory answers; Augustine has taken full advantage of the intellectual resources provided by the Platonists. Nonetheless, we can't really say that he has overcome *concupiscentia oculorum*. And we surely shouldn't be expecting him to—in Book 6, after all, he doesn't actually overcome *ambitio saeculi*. He becomes disillusioned, to be sure; but he doesn't actually quit his job until Book 9. No sin is fully overcome until his conversion.

So on a properly nuanced account of the structure of the narrative books, we should look in Book 7 for an intellectual accomplishment that is *merely* an intellectual accomplishment, not a moral one. Moral regeneration comes through faith in the Incarnate Word; it is the fruit of a humble heart, not of an exalted mind. The Platonists will exalt his mind; but God, who resists the proud, will throw him right back down. No sooner has he reached this intellectual height than he is pulled back down by his own weight—'weight' being a standard Augustinian conceit for the will. Intellectual achievement is barren without the humble will that alone invites divine grace.

3. THE STARTING-POINTS AND DESTINATIONS OF THE TWO ASCENTS

Let us look closely at the details of the two experiences.⁶ In both 7.17.23 and 9.10.24 the experience is provoked by a question. But how different the questions are! In Milan Augustine asks how he makes certain intellectual judgments, and he discovers the intellectual standard by which he makes them:

For in asking how I came to appraise the beauty of bodies, whether heavenly or earthly, and what was wholly present to me when I passed judgment on mutable things and said: "This is as it ought to be; that is not" —in asking, that is, how I came to make such judgments when I did make them, I discovered the unchangeable and true eternity of Truth above my changeable mind. (7.17.23)

Here, as throughout Book 7, the emphasis is on the immutability of the Truth that Augustine discovers above his mind. Perhaps because the immutability of Truth makes it seem alien to our changeable minds, Augustine seems to have no sense of how Truth might be related to his mind other than as providing a standard for judgment. He finds, in fact, that he is exiled from Truth in "the land of unlikeness," and he hears Truth speaking to him "from on high" and "from far away."

When he comes to the end of the Milan "ascent," he reaches "that which is." Note that what he finds is abstract and impersonal. This is not the "I am who am" of Exodus, but the "that which is" of the Platonists. There is a jarring, almost comical shift in language in the words that conclude this section:

You called from far away, "Indeed, I am who am." And I heard, as one hears in the heart, and there was no longer any room for me to doubt; I could more easily have doubted that I was alive than I could doubt the existence of that Truth which is perceived to be understood through the things that have been made. (7.10.16)

The God of Moses calls out to him, but he hears only the bloodless, featureless God of the philosophers.

⁶ Agreeing as I do with Du Roy's view that 7.17.23 merely redescribes the experience of 7.10.16, I do not scruple to jump back and forth between the two passages in making my case for the difference between what happened at Milan and what happened at Ostia. My case is complicated somewhat if you take 7.10.16 to narrate an unsuccessful Plotinian "ascent" and 7.17.23 a successful one, but not much: the essential point—that Augustine regards the vision at Ostia as utterly different from anything he could have got from the Platonists—remains unaffected.

Both the starting-point and the destination of the Ostia experience could hardly be more different. Consider the question that provokes the vision at Ostia:

In the presence of that Truth, which you yourself are, we were asking each other what the eternal life of your saints would be like, that life which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man. (9.10.23)

The emphasis in the discussion that follows is again on the immutability of Truth—not, however, as an alien standard of intellectual judgment set over against our changeable minds, but as a place of rest. Eternity is our home, Truth our food, Wisdom our life.

And we entered into our minds and passed beyond them so as to reach that land of never-failing plenty where you feed Israel for ever with the food of Truth, where life is that Wisdom through whom all these things were made. (9.10.24)

Thus at the end he arrives at the eternal food that satisfies, the heavenly banquet of which the Eucharist—which as a baptized Christian Augustine now shares—is a foretaste and a pledge. The “ascent” at Milan, by contrast, left him hungry; being as yet unconverted, he could not eat that food:

I lacked the power to fix my gaze there. My weakness was rebuffed, and I returned to my accustomed ways, taking nothing back with me but a loving memory and the desire for a food that I had smelled but could not yet eat. And I was seeking some way of gathering a strength that would fit me to enjoy you, but I was not to find it until I embraced the Mediator of God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who is God above all, blessed for ever, calling out and saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” and mingling with flesh the food that I was too weak to eat. (7.17.23-18.24)

The images of homecoming and banqueting that crown the Ostia narrative emphasize another important divergence from the Milan experience. These are images of fellowship and community. We are no longer dealing with “the flight of the alone to the Alone”⁷; here is an ascent of the together to the Together. At Milan Augustine begins in solitude, gets just close enough to Truth that he can hear it calling to him “from afar,” and quickly falls back into solitude. At Ostia, however, when he sets out he is *already* “in the presence of the Truth,” not to mention the presence of his mother. Moreover, Monnica is no mere adjunct to the experience; nor do Augustine and Monnica have independent experiences while (coincidentally but

⁷*Enneads* 6.9.11.

irrelevantly) side by side. It is a shared experience arising out of their conversation about the life of their heavenly homeland. Together they “come to a great city that has expected [their] return for years.”⁸ And at the center of the vision is not some abstract truth, imperturbably Alone, but a Master of the Revels, who is the life of the party precisely because it was through him that all these things were made.

4. SIGHT VS HEARING, KNOWLEDGE VS FAITH

O'Donnell has drawn our attention to an important difference in the language used to report the two experiences. Vision is the predominant image in Milan, but hearing is predominant at Ostia.⁹ Now vision means understanding and hearing means faith; for “faith comes by hearing,” knowledge by sight. But vision also means lust of the eyes. In Book 3, where Augustine describes his encounter with the *Hortensius* and his subsequent reading of Scripture, the repeated use of words associated with vision suggests that Augustine's reading of Scripture failed because it was tainted by *concupiscentia oculorum*.¹⁰ We have to wonder whether the same is true in Book 7. This is, after all, not merely the Book of intellectual accomplishment, and thus of “vision” in the best sense. It is also the Book in which intellectual accomplishment is shown to be impotent apart from faith in the Mediator:

But then, having read those books of the Platonists, which enjoined me to seek after incorporeal truth, I beheld your invisible attributes understood through what has been made. But because of the darkness of my mind I was not allowed to contemplate what I had grasped. I was certain that you exist and are infinite, but not by being dispersed through places, whether finite or infinite; that you truly exist, you who are always the same, never differing or changing in any part or by any motion; that all other things are from you – as the mere fact that they *are* at all proves most unmistakably. I was indeed certain of all this, but I was too weak to enjoy you. (7.20.26)

⁸Auden 1945, 466. A number of writers have commented on the way in which Augustine in the *Confessions* links his sinfulness with alienation from human community and his moral regeneration with his restoration to a proper relationship not only with God but with his fellow human beings. See in particular Crosson 1999.

⁹O'Donnell 1992, 3:128, 133.

¹⁰O'Donnell 1992, 2:170.

Augustine's vision is still a matter of lust of the eyes, of vain curiosity driven by the pride that God resists. And as always when Augustine is puffed up with his latest "discovery," he babbles on about it endlessly.¹¹ After the passage just cited, he immediately continues:

I went on prattling as if I knew what I was talking about; but unless I were to seek your way in Christ our Savior, I would not be deeply informed but deathly ill. For I had already begun to wish to appear wise. I was full of my punishment, but I did not weep—no, I was puffed up with knowledge. (7.20.26)

Note: "I was puffed up with knowledge." Augustine does not for a moment deny that he had actually attained some knowledge. But what he had sought in pride filled him with still greater pride. His disease was of the will, not the intellect; and his cure likewise must be a moral, not an intellectual transformation:

For where was that charity building on the foundation of humility that is Christ Jesus? And when would those books have taught it to me? (7.20.26)

The Milan vision, then, is an uneasy mixture of intellectual success and moral failure.

The moral success must come in an altogether different way. It must be, as I have already suggested, a matter of will rather than intellect, faith rather than knowledge, hearing the Word rather than seeing the Truth, forging a personal relationship rather than discovering an impersonal standard of judgment. Hence, in contrast to 7.10.16-20.26, we find no active form of '*video*' except in one quotation from Scripture. The imagery is all of hearing—and, significantly, of silence. If only we could silence the clamor of all changeable things, we could "lift up our ears" to hear that Word that sounds eternally, without beginning or end, which remains endlessly fresh and makes all things new. Augustine's babbling is finally stilled, replaced by the divine eloquence of Scripture. One must be silent to hear the Word—as Augustine should have learned from Ambrose long ago; but the lesson was long in sinking in. Notice that at Milan the only Scriptural language is imposed on the experience later, as commentary; at Ostia, the Scriptural language is what motivates the experience in the first place and is the language of the experience itself.¹²

¹¹On this see O'Donnell 1992, 2:473.

¹²This account of the Ostia vision provides a sharp contrast not only with the Milan ascent as it is narrated in *Confessions* 7 but with the ascents prescribed in *De quantitate animae* and *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*,

5. KNOWLEDGE VS LOVE, INTELLECT VS HEART

The faith that comes by hearing depends crucially on the will: the will must be humble to encounter the divine humility of the Incarnation, and through that encounter the will is cleansed of its sin. Now recall the structural principle I discussed earlier: the three temptations of 1 John 2:16. These sins are a devilish counterfeit of the Trinity. *Ambitio saeculi* (the subject of Books 4 and 6) distorts God the Father as Power; *concupiscentia oculorum* (Books 3 and 7) distorts God the Son as Wisdom; *concupiscentia carnis* (Books 2 and 8) distorts God the Holy Spirit as Love. This structure undergirds a confluence of themes and images that serve to differentiate the two experiences all the more sharply. Book 7 is the Book of God the Son. Augustine discovers the discarnate Word as timeless, immaterial Truth, but not the Incarnate Word as friend, food, and fatherland. Why not? Because his will, his love, has not yet been transformed by the Holy Spirit, active through faith, which comes by hearing. That encounter of course comes only in Book 8.

In the absence of the Holy Spirit—God as Love—there is, not surprisingly, very little affective engagement in the Book 7 “ascent.” What love there is comes in not as cause but as effect. It comes first at the top of the “ascent,” as Augustine is falling back from the heights; and it is, moreover, painfully unrequited. Thus in 7.10.16:

You beat back the weakness of my gaze, beaming upon me with intensity, and I trembled with love and horror.

And in 7.17.23:

I lacked the power to fix my gaze there. My weakness was rebuffed, and I returned to my accustomed ways, taking nothing back with me but a loving memory and the desire for a food that I had smelled but could not yet eat.

both dated around 388, about ten years earlier than the *Confessions*. As Martha Nussbaum notes, “Even the receptivity of faith—not mentioned at all in *De quantitate animae*—figures in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* only as the early precondition for the beginning of intellectual activity, in stage one. One intellect takes over, it no longer plays a role” (Nussbaum 1999, 86, n. 10). So the emphasis on hearing and faith in *Confessions* 9 has to be taken as a repudiation not only of the sheer intellectualism of the Plotinian ascent of Milan, before his conversion, but also of his own uncritical appropriation of neo-Platonism earlier in his career as a Christian.

This is not the active love of charity but a feeble and inert wistfulness. Augustine does say “I was amazed that I now loved you,” but the stress goes not on ‘loved’ but on ‘you’: I was amazed that what I loved was you, not some phantasm in your stead. It is not the love, such as it was, that amazed Augustine; it was the wonderful relief of finally getting his natural theology right.

At Ostia, love is not a tenuous, inert, and half-frightening effect of the intellectual ascent. It is the impetus for the ascent, which is no longer intellectual at its core. The first stage of the Milan experience is reached when “I saw with the eye of my mind” (7.10.16); whereas the vision at Ostia began as “we were panting with the mouth of our heart after the heavenly streams of your fount” (9.10.23). ‘Heart’ (*cor*) for Augustine means the whole person, with the emphasis on the conative, affective side, since it is that “side” of us that is truly “the indivisible, authentic centre of human life”¹³—for Augustine, after all, we are what we love. The vocabulary of love permeates the ascent: *carnalium sensuum delectatio, prae illius vitae iucunditate, erigentes nos ardentiore affectu*, to stick with just one sentence. And at the peak of the ascent, *atingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis*.

One is reminded, of course, of a similar phrase from the height of the Milan ascent: *pervenit ad id quod est in ictu trepidantis aspectus* (7.17.23); and that in turn evokes Paul’s description of the general resurrection, which will happen *in ictu oculi* (1 Corinthians 15:52). Augustine’s transformation of the image is masterful. For Paul, “*in ictu oculi*” is just a vivid way of expressing swiftness.¹⁴ “*In ictu trepidantis aspectus*” hints not only at the instantaneous nature of his intellectual grasp—for although coming-to-know takes time, knowing is, in its way, timeless; it is our nearest approach in this life to the eternity of Truth itself—but also at its

¹³ O’Donnell 1992, 2:13.

¹⁴ So Augustine comments in Sermon 362, “What is ‘*ictus oculi*’? It is not the time in which we open our close our eyelids; *ictus* means the sending forth of rays in order to see something. For no sooner do you direct your gaze than the ray that is sent forth reaches to the heavens.” And in Sermon 227, “*Ictus oculi* is not in the opening and closing of the eyelids; for it takes longer to do that than it does to see. You raise your eyelids more slowly than you direct the ray; your ray reaches the heavens faster than your eyelid rises toward the eyebrow. You see, then, what *ictus oculi* is; you see what quickness the Apostle has ascribed to the resurrection.”

transience; Augustine loses the vision in the very next sentence. '*Aspectus*' is not surprising, given all the visual imagery here, but '*trepidantis*' invites a double-take. This is not an effortless blink, but an unsettled and agitated glance. (We should not forget that '*trepido*' implies bustle as well as alarm. Augustine is neither at rest nor at ease yet: *cor nostrum inquietum est...*) How different is "*toto ictu cordis.*" Bustle, fear, transience: all are gone. And it is no longer a matter for the eyes alone, whether the body's or the mind's; here Augustine and Monica summon all the energy of their deepest selves, their *cordes*.

6. CONCLUSION

To take the intellectual accomplishment of Milan to be at all the same sort of thing as the mystical experience at Ostia would manifest the pride that is so typical of the Platonists, the pride that confuses knowledge with love, information with transformation. If we learn anything at all from the end of Book 7 (post-"ascent") and the evaluation of Platonism in *City of God* 8-10, we learn that Platonism cannot save because it does not have Christ. To be sure, all knowledge of intelligible reality depends on the discarnate Word—that's the significance of the theory of illumination. But transformation of the "heart" (a word hardly seen in Book 7 but frequent in Book 9) depends on the *Incarnate* Word. In Book 7 we have the action of the discarnate Word on the mind; in Book 9 we have the action of the Incarnate Word on the heart.

Commentators say blithely that Augustine found in Platonism everything he found in Christianity, except for the Incarnation. But knowledge of the Incarnation is precisely what does all the work, according to Augustine. His complaint is not merely that the Platonists overlooked an important point, even an essential point; it is that they overlooked the one point apart from which all their other insights could not do them any earthly (or heavenly) good:

For you have been made through the Word, but it is incumbent upon you to be remade through the Word; and yet if your belief about the Word is amiss, you cannot be remade through the Word. Although it has fallen to your lot to be made through the Word, so that through him you have been made, it is through yourself that you are unmade. If through yourself you are unmade, he who made you will remake you; if through yourself you have been made worse, he who created you will recreate you. But how will he recreate you through the

Word if your belief about the Word is somehow amiss?¹⁵

Platonist knowledge is impotent—which is why such high-minded Platonists could fall into theurgy, seeking through magical arts to put themselves in touch with a reality that they glimpsed but could not find a way to enter.

So Augustine couldn't have had anything like the Ostia experience in Book 7 because he didn't have the Christology right. What he gets in Milan is the god of the philosophers, and that god is a powerless, bloodless abstraction. Augustine is not brought into relation with anything, because there's nothing to be in relation *to*. After the Christology is righted there's something to be in relation to, but something holding him back from the relationship. At the garden he embraces the relationship. Then, however, the "ascent" becomes superfluous, since you get the relationship sacramentally and morally rather than intellectually and mystically.

This is why, even though the Ostia ascent proves as fleeting as the Milan experience, Augustine does not show himself dissatisfied at the end of Book 9 as he did at the end of Book 7. At both Milan and Ostia Augustine follows a familiar pattern: he ascends in his mind above the realm of change and chance, he reaches the very height of reality, and then he falls back down into his normal state. When this happens at Milan he is left dissatisfied and uneasy, for he has not been able to rest in the enjoyment of that supreme Truth whom he has come to know but not, as yet, to love:

And I was seeking some way of gathering a strength that would fit me to enjoy you, but I was not to find it until I embraced the Mediator of God and man.
(7.20.26)

I was indeed certain of all this, but I was too weak to enjoy you. (Ibid.)

At Ostia, however, he has that enjoyment—not only, or even primarily, in any mystical experience, but in the sacramental life of the church. The Eucharist is theurgy that actually works, because it is not the pride of human beings seeking to raise themselves up to the divine, but the humility of the divine stooping to dwell among human beings.¹⁶

¹⁵ *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus* 1. 12.

¹⁶ I am grateful to participants in the Richard A. Baker Colloquium in Philosophy at the University of Dayton, and in particular to Marcia L. Colish, for their helpful comments.

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