

Divine Incorporeality in Augustine's *Tractatus in Iohannem*

ABSTRACT

Augustine's *Tractates on the Gospel of John* have seldom received focused attention in the literature, though they harbour a repository of theological content. One of the major themes occasioned by Augustine's reading of John is that of incorporeality, which as Augustine relates in *Confessiones* 7, was a concept which played a major role in his conversion. In this article I examine the understanding of incorporeality that Augustine presents in conversation with the Gospel of John. This theological concept also carries certain implications for human being and knowing in the world, which I also elucidate on the basis of Augustine's exegesis.

KEY WORDS: Augustine, history of exegesis, incorporeality, Gospel of John; inner vision; transcendence.

RESUMEN

El *Tratado sobre el Evangelio de Juan*, obra de Agustín, rara vez ha recibido atención en la literatura, a pesar de que alberga un depósito de contenido teológico. Uno de los temas más importantes que aparece en la lectura que Agustín hace de Juan es el de la incorporeidad que, como Agustín indica en *Confesiones*, 7, fue un concepto que desempeñó un papel importante en su conversión. En este artículo examino el significado de incorporeidad que Agustín presenta en diálogo con el Evangelio de Juan. Este concepto teológico conlleva, además, ciertas implicaciones para el ser humano y para el conocimiento del mundo, que yo también dilucido sobre la base de la exégesis de Agustín.

1. AUGUSTIN PRÉDICATEUR

In *conf.* 7,¹ Augustine recounts how he gradually came to disabuse himself of his erstwhile tendency to conceive of God in corporeal and material terms. This was a major step in his intellectual development. Needless to say, this theme figures prominently in other works, such as in his critical commentary on Genesis, *De Genesi ad litteram*. Augustine locates scriptural bases for God's incorporeality especially in the Prologue of John. Thus one might wonder whether and to what extent the discussion of such a theme appears elsewhere in Augustine's corpus, and if so, what light might be shed on his understanding of this concept when presented in a different setting or context.

Prima facie, one might think that Augustine would have avoided such an esoteric topic in his homilies. However, scholars specialising in Augustine's pastoral works have argued otherwise. Augustine did not see a clear division between the pastoral and the theoretical. Surely, there were differences in method and emphasis, but the underlying content was the same. As C. Mohrmann explains,

[...] si nous posons la question de savoir quel est le contenu concret de ses sermons, quels sont les sujets qu'il traite, il faut répondre que sa prédication est inspirée et nourrie par toute son activité littéraire: tout ce que saint Augustin a traité dans ses travaux revient pratiquement dans sa prédication. Même les questions théologiques les plus difficiles et les plus abstraites, comme sa théologie trinitaire, sont discutées dans ses sermons. Pendant toute sa vie sa prédication reflète son activité de théologien et d'écrivain. Il est totalement dépourvu de cet orgueil du savant qui considère sa science comme si difficile et si profon-

1 For critical Latin editions of Augustine's works, and the *Tractatus* in particular, see the *Patrologiae Latinae* series, number 35, available at http://www.augustinus.it/latino/pl_35.htm or the Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, available digitally through the Library of Latin Texts, maintained by Brepols.

For contemporary English translations of the *Tractatus*, kindly see the following: St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 11-27*, Rettig, J. (trans.) (The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 79) Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988; St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 28-54*, Rettig, J. (trans.) (The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 88) Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993; and St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 55-111*, Rettig, J. (trans.) (The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 90) Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994.

de qu'il ne veut pas en parler aux gens simples. C'est un fait remarquable que ce prédicateur qui s'efforce de parler une langue simple et compréhensible, qui fait des concessions à ses auditeurs en ce qui concerne la forme extérieure de sa prédication, ne leur relâche rien quand il s'agit de la doctrine. La prédication augustinienne revêt un caractère nettement théologique et spéculatif. Il donne dans ses sermons la plénitude de ses connaissances théologiques et de ses expériences spirituelles.²

Thus there is no reason to suppose that Augustine would have intentionally omitted or avoided discussing certain theological topics in his sermons which he would discuss at length in other works.³

Furthermore, the tractates, in addition to being homilies, were seen as a pre-eminent form of preaching. Scholars such as M. Pontet and D. Milewski have argued that a tractate should be understood not as a 'mere' sermon but as a specialised form of pastoral-exegetical preaching.⁴ In any case, most scholars would agree that Augustine's *tractatus* did serve a pastoral-exegetical purpose.⁵ Moreover, because of the precise text which is treated, themes of light, vision, and incorporeality would undoubtedly figure prominently in Augustine's treatment of the text of John. It is also perhaps worth mentioning that Augustine's

2 C. Mohrmann, *Saint Augustin prédicateur*, in Mohrmann, Ch., *Études sur le Latin des Chrétiens*, Vol. 1, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura (Roma 1958) 391-402; here 402. For more on Augustine *qua* preacher, see, e.g.: Anthony Dupont, *Gratia in Augustine's Sermones ad populum during the Pelagian Controversy: Do Different Contexts Furnish Different Insights?* Brill's Series in Church History 59 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

3 For more information concerning the historical situation and the dating of the *Tractatus*, kindly see Marie-François Berrouard, *Introduction aux homélies de saint Augustin sur l'évangile de saint Jean*, Collection des études augustinienes, Série Antiquité 170 (Paris: Études augustinienes, 2004) 79-102, 177-200.

4 Douglas Milewski, 'Augustine's 124 Tractates on the Gospel of John: The *status quaestionis* and the state of neglect,' *Augustinian Studies* 33:1 (2002) 61-77, here 62-5; Maurice Pontet, *L'exégèse de saint Augustin prédicateur* (Paris: Aubier, 1946) 217-18. Milewski points to the following passage to substantiate his claim: *Debet igitur divinarum Scripturarum tractator et doctor, defensor rectae fidei ac debellator erroris, et bona docere et mala dedocere atque in hoc opere sermonis conciliare aversos, remissos erigere, nescientibus quid agatur quid expectare debeant intimare. doctr. chr. 4.4.6.*

5 In later centuries, the term has survived, though assuming a meaning of a treatise focused on a particular question of philosophical import. Consider for example Spinoza's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and Wittgenstein's renowned 1921 work of the same title.

Io. eu. tr., or at least the *content* thereof, has been largely neglected in the scholarship, even to this day.⁶ This is surprising in several ways, not least of all since Augustine finds ample material for thinking about God's transcendence in the Gospel of John.

This paper is intended to complement and further the research done by figures such as Mohrmann on the theological content of Augustine's homiletic corpus. Motivated by concerns pertaining both to the sources and to critical scholarship, I propose to examine Augustine's understanding of divine incorporeality in *Io. eu. tr.*, discussing a range of tractates in which this theme not only appears but is considered at length. In particular I shall be focusing on the following tractates: 18-21; 34; 41; 52-53, which belong to the first part of the *Tractatus*, and 68, 96, and 111, respectively, all of the which belong to the latter part. With the exception of tractates 20-22, which Berrouard dates to winter 419-420,⁷ tractates 17-54 were part of the group delivered as homilies, likely in 414.⁸ Tractates 55-124 compose the second part of the corpus of the *Tractatus*, which are distinguished by being dictated rather than preached, and this according to her beginning in 419.

The common element to all of the tractates discussed below, aside from the obvious, is that in these, Augustine appeals to Mt 5, 8 (*beatimundocorde, quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt*). It appears that Augustine sees this passage from Matthew as particularly enlightening and relevant concerning several themes which John raises in his own way. The selection of Augustine's

6 There are notable exceptions, as well as works which have documented this lack of scholarship. See, e.g.: Hugh Pope, 'St. Augustine's «Tractatus in Joannem»: A Neglected Classic,' *American Ecclesiastical Review* 49 (1913) 161-72; Gottlieb Söhngen, «Wissenschaft und Weisheit im augustini-schen Gedankengefüge. Eine Begriffstafel,' in *Die Einheit in der Theologie* (Munich, 1952) 101-6; Riccardo Ferri, *Gesù e la verità* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2007); Evan Kuehn, 'The Johannine Logic of Augustine's Trinity: A Dogmatic Sketch,' *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 572-94; Angus Paddison, 'Engaging scripture: incarnation and the Gospel of John,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60:2 (2007) 144-60; H. A. G. Houghton, *Augustine's Text of John* (Oxford: University Press, 2008); Gerd van Riel, 'La sagesse chez Augustin: de la philosophie à l'Écriture,' in *Augustin philosophe et prédicateur. Hommage à Goulven Madec*, I. Bochet, éd., Actes du colloque international organisé à Paris les 8 et 9 septembre 2011 (Paris, 2012) 389-405.

7 Berrouard, *Introduction*, 102.

8 Berrouard, *Introduction*, 99.

use of Mt 5, 8 as a focal point not only serves the purpose of providing a manageable selection of tractates with which to work, but it also provides a thematic focal point, as human intellectual vision is the other side of the coin of divine incorporeality. In other words, it provides Augustine with material for thinking about how God can be 'seen.'

In what follows, I shall first briefly give some context to the discussion of God's immateriality, beginning with *conf.* 7. This will allow us to see the logic at work in Augustine's thought, the questions he raises, and why he sees them as particularly compelling. With this complete, the stage will be set for a more focused treatment of this theme in the tractates specifically. I begin with Augustine's explanation of God's incorporeality and the implications it has for human knowledge of the divine. Thus the logical outcome of a consideration of divine immateriality is a consideration of human sense perception. Augustine's discussion of God's divine substance is inseparable from that of the human heart, intellectual vision, and the inner senses. This is also the context in which Augustine 'cross-references' certain key biblical passages, such as Mt 5, 8, according to which the pure of heart will 'see' God. Thus there is not only an emphasis for Augustine on some other 'type' of perception, but also on the (means of) purification for that vision, which for Augustine is only accomplished through divine activity and the inculcation of the theological virtues. We shall see how Augustine, beginning from theological and exegetical commitments, thinks through a serious intellectual problem which compelled him in his earlier, pre-Milanese conversion days, and how he treats of this same theme in contexts of a pastoral and spiritual nature.

2. AUGUSTINE'S UNDERSTANDING OF INCORPOREALITY

The very opening passages of the Augustine's monumental commentary on John deal with the theme of God's incorporeality and infinite difference from his creation. Augustine's exegesis of the first verse of the gospel is focused on what is implied by the *principium*, as well as how John would have been able to write something so soaring and sublime. In order to reach these heights, John must have transcended all of created reality, else he would not have been able to speak of the 'time' beyond time, the absolute principle beyond human comprehen-

sion.⁹ This is a point to which we shall return in due course, as Augustine uses John as a model for human transcendence.

Augustine sees an integral link between the opening verses of Genesis and John; the latter is meant to continue the message of the former. The principle of creation, which has always interfaced with reality and has been tacitly present within it, then enters it in a striking way: the very unknowable, unspeakable, infinite Word assumes flesh, adopts human nature, and pitches his tent in our midst. Augustine sees John's gospel as attempting to square a circle, to get two parallel lines to intersect; that which is extended neither in space nor in time, whose very essence is just to be beyond all material categories or mental conceptualisation, enters time and space and becomes visible, tangible, sensible to the bodily senses. A major theme of Augustine's commentary on John, if not his theology as a whole, is to reconcile these two apparently mutually exclusive claims, namely that God is incorporeal on the one hand, and the Incarnation, the divine entrance into corporeal creation, on the other.

To provide some further context, one can consider *conf.* 7, in which Augustine recounts his earlier intellectual development. Influenced by the Platonists, the young Augustine began slowly but surely to think about God as divested of material categories. The *libri Platoniorum* provided Augustine with the conceptual resources which ultimately led him to realise the error of his erstwhile conceptualisation of the divine. The initial temptation had been to think of God as some 'type' of thing within the universe, contained by and within creation. Augustine began to move away from this simplistic vision of God, yet even still, his thought was vitiated by material categories, as he conceived of God as infinitely or indefinitely extended in space, yet still as some sort of physical, corporeal substance nonetheless. Augustine sees his great intellectual breakthrough as his disavowal of all corporeal images as associated with God. Once he had done this, Augustine had leaped the initial and most daunting hurdle to coming to knowledge of wisdom.¹⁰

⁹ *Si autem per Verbum factasunt, non potuit Iohannis corpervenire ad id quod ait: In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum, nisi transcendisset omnia quae sunt facta per Verbum. Io. eu. tr. 1.7.*

¹⁰ See *Conf.* 7.1; 23.

We see such a theme prominently featured in Augustine's *Io. eu. tr.* 34, in which he puts it to use for polemical and theological purposes. Herein Augustine treats of Christ's description of himself as the light of the world, the *lux mundi*. The former takes this occasion to inveigh against those who interpret Christ's words in a corporeal, physical sense, such as the Manichees (*Manichaei solem istum oculis carnis visibilem expositum et publicum non tantum hominibus, sed etiam pecoribus ad videndum, Christum Dominum esse putaverunt*).¹¹ Augustine stresses that the light of Christ is a qualitatively different light (*Non arbitremur Dominum Iesum Christum hunc esse solem quem videmus oriri ab oriente, occidere in occidente*) and that it does not move from place to place like corporeal things do, for as incorporeal it does not admit of the possibility of motion (*qui certa de loco in locum motione commigrat: non est hoc Dominus Christus*).¹² Unlike the light of the sun which is common to all of corporeal creation, only those with intellectual vision can perceive the divine light, and by doing so they can participate in his light (*huius lucis participes fiant*).¹³ Augustine quotes Jn 1, 3, emphasising that Christ's light is the source of all light, and indeed, of all creation itself; he is not made but is rather the one through whom the sun was made.¹⁴

Augustine suggests that Christ, who is the unfailing light of wisdom (*lumen sapientiae*), calls us to turn from the eyes of the flesh (*oculos carnis*) to those of the heart (*cordis*).¹⁵ As the light of the world, Christ illumines the blind, which is to say that he brings knowledge and illumination to those in the darkness of sin and ignorance.¹⁶ What may sound like poetic or pious rhetoric is actually grounded in a highly sophisticated metaphysical account of reality. In order to understand what Augustine has in mind, let us continue this enquiry, moving from God's divine light to a deeper understanding of his incorporeality.

¹¹ *Io. eu. tr.* 34.2.

¹² *Io. eu. tr.* 34.2.

¹³ *Io. eu. tr.* 34.2.

¹⁴ *Io. eu. tr.* 34.2. Nonetheless, a certain analogy between physical and incorporeal light can be made. Augustine describes the Trinity in terms analogous to the sun and the light it emits. Just as one cannot coherently and logically separate the sun, the light it generates, and likewise the heat contained within that light, thus also for the persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Io. eu. tr.* 20.13.

¹⁵ *Io. eu. tr.* 34.5.

¹⁶ *Io. eu. tr.* 34.9.

3. GOD'S INCORPOREALITY

Augustine pursues a similar theme in another tractate, number 96. This tractate is preached on Jn 16, 12-13, according to which the Holy Spirit will guide one into the truth, the truth for which one is not yet prepared. One perceives a different type of light and sound (*spiritalem lucem spiritalemque vocem*) by an interior sort of perception (*interiore conspectu et auditu*). Augustine stresses the incorporeal nature of this communication by stating that it is not perceptible to the bodily senses (*non aliquo signo corporalibus oculis apparente, nec aliquo sono corporalibus auribus instrepente*). Such perception is facilitated by one's reception of *caritas* in one's heart from the Holy Spirit. Moreover, those who are bound to the world of sense, whom Augustine describes as *carnales homines*, are not able to perceive or bear the afore mentioned spiritual light or voice (*ferre non possunt*).

ut spiritu ferentes et spiritalia diligentes, spiritalem lucem spiritalem que uocem, quam carnales homines ferre non possunt, non aliquo signo corporalibus oculis apparente, nec aliquo sono corporalibus auribus instrepente, sed interiore conspectu et auditu nosse possitis.¹⁷

Here we see both themes and even terminology which strikingly parallel Augustine's more 'philosophical' discussion in *Conf.* 7. God is incorporeal, and admits of no sensible properties which we experience with the bodily sense:

credidistis de natura Dei non corporea, nec loco aliquoinclusa, nec per infinita spatial locorum quasi mole distenta, sed ubique tota et perfecta et infinita, sine nitoribus colorum, sine figuris linea mentorum, sine notis litterarum, sine series yllabarum.¹⁸

Therefore, it is by the mind that we perceive him (*ipsa mente conspicere ualeatis*).¹⁹ It is this incorporeal character of God, his radical difference from all of creation, that is one of the things that we 'cannot bear now.' This is one of the things which Christ withheld from his disciples for a time, but also sent the Holy Spirit so that he would guide them to some knowledge of this ineffable truth.²⁰ One can grasp this truth of

¹⁷ *Io. eu. tr.* 96.4.

¹⁸ *Io. eu. tr.* 96.4.

¹⁹ *Io. eu. tr.* 96.4.

²⁰ *Io. eu. tr.* 96.4.

Christ as (incorporeal) light if one sees interiorly (*si intus videtis*).²¹

What would 'seeing interiorly' entail? For Augustine, this means disabusing oneself of the *consuetudo carnalis*. As he writes elsewhere in the *Tractatus*,

abscedat ab animo omnis imaginum corporalium cogitatio: quid quid menti occurrerit longum, latum, crassum, qualibet luce corpore acoloratum, per quaelibet locorum spatia vel finita, vel infinita diffusum, ab his omnibus, quantum potest, aciem suae contemplationis vel intentionis avertat²²

For Augustine, we occupy a middle ontological stage between the beasts below and the angels above: *vita hominum media est inter angelorum et pecorum*.²³ This state is dynamic, since we have the freedom to choose that with which we shall associate ourselves, and whether we will become more like earth or more like heaven; we can move down or up.²⁴ By associating with corporeal entities and desires, we descend, whereas when we associate ourselves with non-carnal things, we associate with God.²⁵ Augustine warns that the images generated within our minds based on the corporeal world of the senses can deceive us.²⁶ If we think according to carnal habit, then we will not be able to 'touch' God. There is a great gulf between the body and the soul, Augustine says, and even more so between the soul and God.²⁷ One must therefore surpass one's body and then one's soul in order to arrive at God. One's very self must be transcended.

Augustine traces a path of ascent from corporeal things to celestial if mutable bodies. Though these are superior to terrestrial things, they are still immutable and indeed seen by the (corporeal) eye of both man and beast alike. The upward path of transcendence continues, but Augustine clarifies that the vehicle and means of one's journey is mental and intellectual. Augustine reflects on the powers of the mind, averring that they surpass even the brilliance of celestial bodies. Yet even the mind

21 *Io. eu. tr.* 34.6.

22 *Io. eu. tr.* 111.2.

23 *Io. eu. tr.* 18.7.

24 *Io. eu. tr.* 18.7.

25 *Io. eu. tr.* 20.11.

26 *Io. eu. tr.* 20.11.

27 *Io. eu. tr.* 20.11.

itself must be transcended, as it is also mutable. Indeed, in addition to corporeal things which are visible, even invisible yet mutable things such as the soul must be surpassed, so that the unchangeable God can be reached. Mutability, in contrast to immutability, becomes the distinguishing mark between God and all of his creation.²⁸ This is not empty rhetoric in Augustine's mind, as he sees John as an example of this very ascent. According to Augustine, John the Evangelist transcended the world of corporeal things, and even of incorporeal creation (*transcendit omnes spiritus qui non videntur*). By the power of reason he transcended his own mind as well (*mentem suam ipsa ratione animi sui*), at which point he saw (*vidit*) the uncreated *principium* at the foundation of all things, and was thus able to utter those immortal words, *In principio erat Verbum*.²⁹

4. INNER SENSES

Let us continue to examine Augustine's understanding of inner senses as presented in the tractates. As in other locations, such as his *conf.*, Augustine emphasises the importance of interiority, of returning into oneself. The heart is a central point of the human person, a sort of command centre, as it were. The heart oversees the operation of the various senses which each have their own function and object.³⁰ That is not so for the heart, to which all of the senses report. The heart is the central point at which the reports of the senses converge.

Vide quemadmodum omnes corporis sensus cordi intro nuntiant quid senserint foris: vide quam multos ministros habet unus interior imperator, et quid apud se etiam sine his ministris agat. [...] Renuntiant oculi cordi alba et nigra; renuntiant aures eidem: cordi canora et dissona; renuntiant nares eidem: cordi odora et putentia; renuntiant gustus eidem: cordi amara et dulcia; renuntiant tactus eidem: cordi lenia et aspera

Whilst in the body, we have different faculties of perception which sense different objects and in different ways, our inner sense is unified: *Ostende mihi oculos, aures, nares cordis tui. Diversa sunt quae ad cor tuum referuntur, et diversa ibi membra non inveniuntur*. In the body, we hear in one way and see in

²⁸ *Io. eu. tr.* 20.12.

²⁹ *Io. eu. tr.* 20.13.

³⁰ In this respect, see *lib. arb.* 2.

another, whereas in the heart, hearing and seeing are not divisible: *In carne tua alibi audis, alibi vides: in cordetuoibiaudis, ubivides*. Augustine makes a similar point in *De trinitate*, in which he writes that when it comes to the inner senses, there is no separation between seeing and hearing, as there is with respect to our physical senses.³¹ Returning to the original point which occasioned this extended reflection on the senses, Augustine uses this as a basis for explaining how the Word can be said to 'see' the Father doing certain things. In other words, if those who are made in the *image* of God perceive by the heart in ways which are not bound to the corporeal, then *a fortiori* so too can the original, the Son, and indeed, even more so (*Si hoc imago, quanto potentius ille cuius imago? Ergo et audit Filius, et videt Filius, et ipsa visio et auditio Filius*).³²

The heart, in addition to supervising the function of the senses, also has operations of its own which do not rely on the senses and perceive objects apart from any corporeal determination: *renuntiat et sibi ipsum coriusta et iniusta. Cor tuum et videt et audit, et caetera sensibilia diiudicat; et quo non aspirant corporis sensus, iusta et iniusta, mala et bona discernit*. The return to oneself, in this case, to one's heart, is contrasted with exterior ways, which entail a wandering from God and truth (*Redite ad cor: quid itis a vobis, et peritis ex vobis? quid itis solitudinis vias? Erratis vagando; redite*). This point is made clear when Augustine asks where one should go: *redite. Quo? Ad Dominum*. The inward turn, the movement to one's heart, is at the same time a movement to God. Moreover, Augustine establishes an integral link between knowledge of God and knowledge of oneself, and it is this link which is at the heart of his admonition that one should return to oneself: *primo redi ad cor tuum, exsul a te vagaris foris; teipsum non nosti, et quaeris a quo factus es!* The return to the heart also requires a separation from corporeal things (*Redi, redi ad cor, tollete a corpore; and dimitte et corpus tuum, redi ad cortuum*).³³

31 *trin.* 15.18. For more on Augustine's discussion of inner senses, see Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L'appelle et la réponse* (Paris 1992) 45-9, 63.

32 *Io. eu. tr.* 18.10.

33 For more on the theme of interiority in Augustine, see, e.g.: Charles T. Mathewes, 'Augustinian Anthropology: *Interior intimomeo*,' *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 27:2 (Summer 1999) 195-221; Kim Sang Ong-Van-Cung, 'Le moi et l'interiorité chez Augustin et Descartes,' *Chora: Journal of Ancient and Medieval Studies* 9/10 (2011-2012) 321-38; David Peddle, 'Re-Sourcing

Augustine suggests that in the heart we also have eyes and ears of a certain sort (*In corpore tuo inveniebas alibi oculos, alibi aures: in corde tuo numquid hoc invenis? An in corde tuo non habes aures?*): *De quibus ergo Dominus dicebat: Qui habet aures audiendi, audiat? An in corde non habes oculos? Unde dicit Apostolus: Illuminatos oculos cordis vestri.* We possess within ourselves, indeed, within our hearts, the faculties whereby we can perceive and know God. Only within ourselves can we begin to know God, and Augustine states that it is because that is where his image is impressed: *Redi ad cor; vide ibi quid sentias forte de Deo, quia ibi est imago Dei.* Our interiority and our exploration of our hearts is always already defined and conditioned within a context of the divine presence within (*In interiore homine habitat Christus, in interiore homine renouaris ad imaginem Dei, in imagine sua cognosce auctorem eius*).³⁴

Inward movement for Augustine is always *upward* movement. We must raise our hearts (*sursum cor*) above terrestrial things in order to see God. Moreover, we must also resist the temptation to compare the visible things we are accustomed to seeing by the bodily eye to invisible things, trying to map our material categories onto the immaterial God: *oculum tuum, cui carnaliter inhaerens, visibilia invisibilibus comparas. Talia enim de Deo cogitas, qualia his oculis videre consuesti. Si autem istis oculis videri posset Deus, non diceret: Beati mundo corde, quia ipsi Deum videbunt* [Mt 5:8].³⁵ However, if we are able to raise our minds above and beyond these categories, to transcend our carnal habit, we have some hope of acquiring that eye required for seeing God, a type of vision which we are still striving to possess (*nondum habes oculum cordis ad videndum Deum*).³⁶ Augustine emphasises, however, that the mere possession of this other sort of eye is not sufficient for seeing God. These eyes must be clean, for only the clean of heart can see God. In this respect, Augustine states that one must transcend oneself in order to see God.³⁷

Charles Taylor's Augustine,' *Augustinian Studies* 32:2 (2001) 207-17; Thomas Harmon, 'Reconsidering Charles Taylor's Augustine,' *Pro Ecclesia* 20:2 (2011) 185-209; Emmanuel Housset, 'L'invention de la personne par saint Augustin et la métaphysique contemporaine,' *Quaestio* 6 (2006) 463-82.

³⁴ *Io. eu. tr.* 18.10.

³⁵ *Io. eu. tr.* 18.6.

³⁶ *Io. eu. tr.* 18.6.

³⁷ *Io. eu. tr.* 20.11. For an extended discussion of the 'degrees' of human vision, see Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram* 12, *passim*, in which he

The problem is that we do not see in that way, that is, according to an interior vision. Rather we are so accustomed to our carnal milieu that we treat it like the norm and interpret everything accordingly, as if it must somehow fit within our material categories. The link between the ethical and the epistemic is unshakeable. Augustine describes our inner division as a sort of competition between the flesh and the spirit. Drawing upon Rm 7, Augustine states that there is a certain law at work in his body which is in conflict with that of his mind (*video aliam legem in membris meis, repugnantem legi mentis meae*).³⁸ The flesh (*caro*) militates against the soul, and vice-versa (*concupiscit adversus spiritum, et spiritus adversus carnem*).³⁹ Augustine attributes this state of tension and struggle to our corporeal and finite character, suggesting that perfect freedom, that is, perfect freedom from the habit of the flesh, is only achieved in heaven (*quia nondum aeternitas*).⁴⁰ Again following Rm 7, Augustine makes clear that the law of God is proper to the 'inner man' (*Condelector legi Dei secundum interiorem hominem*), suggesting that the soul must clear from itself all attachment to the flesh if it wishes to delight in the true freedom promised by God to the soul.⁴¹

We see the importance of vision and incorporeality in another context, in particular as it relates to the discernment of true and false Christian doctrine. Though the things of God are mysterious, as Christ himself suggests, that does not mean that

enumerates three particular types of vision, namely corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual. The corporeal pertains to our 'empirical' sight, our dealing with everyday objects. The spiritual type of vision is essentially the memory, the imprint left by sense impressions such that they can be contemplated. This is done by the third and highest type of vision, intellectual vision. This pertains to reason, intellect, and understanding. It allows one to judge the reports of the senses, and also to think in a way which is not attached to the corporeal. Though Augustine speaks of different types of vision, there is an ambiguity especially present in *Gn. litt.* 12, by which I mean to say that rather than seeing intellectual vision as some other faculty of the soul, Augustine is really suggesting that the three aforementioned types of vision, namely corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual, are different facets of one and the same faculty, which in turn puts into question the sharp distinction between the 'empirical' on the one hand the 'immaterial' on the other. But this is a matter for another time.

38 *Io. eu. tr.* 41.10.

39 *Io. eu. tr.* 41.10.

40 *Io. eu. tr.* 41.10.

41 *Io. eu. tr.* 41.10.

anything one pleases can be a secret awaiting the Holy Spirit's guidance and revelation. Augustine warns his listeners to beware of deceptive peddlers of pseudo-doctrine (*ut seductores caveatis impuros et obscoenae turpitudinis sectas*).⁴² Augustine claims that there is a distinction between truths which are difficult to understand on account of our human limitations, and between those which are falsely presented as arcane knowledge: *Alia sunt mala quae portare non potest qualiscumque pudor humanus, et alia sunt bona quae portare non potest paruus sensus humanus*.⁴³ Our meagre human perception (*paruus sensus humanus*) cannot grasp divine things. Indeed, these things are only known by a certain intellectual type of vision, and then only barely and with great difficulty (*vix*) by one which is purified (*illud pura mente vix cernitur*).⁴⁴ Augustine claims that the mark of what is truly divine is its freedom from corporeal categories; the things which are good and true are divested of corporeal elements (*illa remota sunt a corporibus universis*).⁴⁵

But what about God's own admixture with corporeal elements? Can such a sharp division be coherently maintained? According to Augustine, the OT theophanies, such as those vouchsafed to Moses and Isaiah, respectively, were not disclosive of the divine substance as such; the OT fathers did not see God *sicuti est*. Prior to the Incarnation, the Son joined himself to some created thing (*in subiecta sibi creatura*) so that he could be seen by the bodily eye, though not as he is. In the Incarnation, Christ became visible, yet by taking the form of a servant.⁴⁶ Indeed, for Augustine, the invisibility of God paradoxically becomes the mark of his true existence. The pagans proudly show-case their deities, and mockingly ask, *Vbi est Deus tuus?* But Augustine's response is just to boast in the fact that his God is unseen. God is supremely and infinitely strong because he cannot be confined to a particular location, whether spatial or temporal. The pagans see their Gods by their (bodily) eyes. However, Augustine claims that the believer in the true God possesses another sort of vision (*aliosoculos*), which the pagans do not, whereby one can 'see' God.⁴⁷

42 *Io. eu. tr.* 96.5.

43 *Io. eu. tr.* 96.5.

44 *Io. eu. tr.* 96.5.

45 *Io. eu. tr.* 96.5.

46 *Io. eu. tr.* 53.12.

47 *Io. eu. tr.* 20.11.

In eternity, however, we are promised such a vision, according to 1 Jn.⁴⁸ Augustine says that the Son is invisible in his divine nature, as he is equal to the Father. There is an eschatological element to the vision of God, as we only believe in God now, but in eternity we shall see him. Now one can see Christ in his human nature, i.e., in the form of a servant (*formam servi*). Christ accompanies us along the path to vision, leading us by cleansing our hearts so that we can arrive at knowledge of God.⁴⁹ When Christ hides himself, Augustine says, it is from those who deride him. They 'saw' him, yet in another sense they did not see him, because they did not perceive the fact that he was God in the flesh.⁵⁰ Christ will appear as the Son of Man in the final judgement, that is, in the form of a servant, so that both the just and the unjust will be able to see him. For it is not fitting, Augustine avers, that the unjust see Christ in his divine nature, for only the clean of heart see God.⁵¹ But how is one to become clean of heart? The answer to this in particular leads us to Augustine's understanding of the theological virtues vis-à-vis intellectual vision.

5. THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

One's growth in knowledge for Augustine, a process which terminates in perfect and complete knowledge of God in heaven, is initiated, sourced, and sustained by the theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity.⁵² True *conversio* for Augustine consists in renouncing the temporal in favour of the eternal.⁵³ Faith is an essential means of such purification, that is, from the tendency to think in purely worldly, material categories. Augustine understands this purification in both moral and 'epistemic' terms. Faith prepares one for the contemplation of God's *species* (*per [fidem] ad speciem contemplandum paratur*), and not merely

48 *Io. eu. tr.* 53.12.

49 *Io. eu. tr.* 21.15.

50 *Io. eu. tr.* 52.14; cf. *trin.* 1.30.

51 *Io. eu. tr.* 19.16; cf. *trin.* 1.30.

52 *Exercitatio autem animae in fide, in spe et caritate, facit eum idoneum capere quod venturum est.* (s. 4.1.)

53 Thomas Finan, 'St Augustine on the «mira profunditas» of Scripture: Texts and Contexts,' in Finan, T., and Twomey, V. (eds.), *Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers: Letter and Spirit* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1995) 192.

a dark reflection of him.⁵⁴ Here Augustine links Mt 5, 8 with Acts 15, 9: *fide mundat corda eorum*.⁵⁵ By faith we anticipate the sight of God, which we do not yet enjoy.⁵⁶ Quoting 1 Jn 3, 2, Augustine says that when Christ speaks to the Father, he does so in the *species* which we shall perceive in eternity.⁵⁷

The completion of the human search for wisdom and beatitude must await our shedding of *this mortal coil*. Augustine emphasises the provisional character of our knowledge, and that in this life we do not know all truth, but only 'partially,' as Paul says (*scio ex parte*).⁵⁸ Augustine suggests a sense of hermeneutical anticipation as crucial to the Christian life, which follows from the inherently incorporeal character of God. As Augustine writes, *Intendat ergo ambulans in spe, sperans quod nondum tenet, credens quod nondum videt, amans cui nondum haeret*.⁵⁹ This suggests therefore that our knowledge includes an inherently eschatological element; we cannot complete the course of our intellectual education in this current life: *non arbitror in hac vita in cuiusquam mente posse compleri*. Augustine links this to our fleshly, corporeal character, which militates against the soul (*quis enim vivens in hoc corpore quod corrumpitur et aggrauat animam, possit omnem cognoscere veritatem*).⁶⁰ One must disabuse oneself of the habit of the flesh and one's association with the material in order to arrive at some secure knowledge of God. Augustine sees the task of the Holy Spirit as the one completes our quest for knowledge, who guides us into all truth, albeit in eternity.⁶¹ Now we walk by faith, and we do not have a clear vision of God while on earth.⁶² Citing 2 Cor, Augustine links this inability to perceive God's *species* to our corporeality; as long as we are in the body, we walk by faith.⁶³ Augustine writes that we nevertheless continue to seek God, striving by a more capa-

54 *Io. eu. tr.* 68.3.

55 *Io. eu. tr.* 68.3.

56 *Io. eu. tr.* 68.3.

57 *Io. eu. tr.* 111.2.

58 *Io. eu. tr.* 96.4.

59 *s.* 4.1.

60 *Io. eu. tr.* 96.4.

61 *Io. eu. tr.* 96.4.

62 'Augustine says that we can pray to God, even before we have knowledge of God, based on *faith* in God.' Stephen Menn, 'Desire for God,' in *Augustine's Confessions: Philosophy in Autobiography* (Oxford University Press, 2014) 81.

63 *Io. eu. tr.* 34.7.

cious heart to know something of him, nothing of which has eye seen, nor ear heard.⁶⁴ Augustine exhorts his audience to cleanse their hearts through faith (*Mundemus corda per fidem*) in order to be prepared for the a new sort of vision: *ut illi ineffabili, ut ita dicam, invisibili visioni praeparemur*. Augustine punctuates this point by quoting Mt 5, 8, to show the necessity of such a programme, for only the pure of heart will see God.⁶⁵

God can be sought and pondered, but never fully grasped or explained in words. As I see it, Augustine describes the soul's search for God in dialectical and hermeneutical terms, a search which is sustained by faith and hope. One is caught in the tension of anticipation and unknowing, seeking God by some primordial intuition or even from some intimation vouchsafed through revelation. Our very process of reasoning and thinking is hermeneutical: one begins from a fore-understanding of God, perceiving that there is something more to be learned about him. One proceeds to follow this intuition of something *fragwürdig*,⁶⁶ seeking to confirm or challenge one's understanding through continuous enquiry and confrontation with new data.⁶⁷

Augustine holds that the ascent to knowledge and the possession of truth is holistic, implicating the entire person, and indeed, calling one forth to embrace the truth which one seeks. The understanding of divine things requires a firm commitment to the *desire* to know and hold to them (*nondum isto superno desiderio rapitur*). Once we adopt this desire, we can begin to grow in understanding, even if this is always in anticipation of full knowledge.⁶⁸ The possession of the beatific vision involves rejoicing in the Truth.⁶⁹ In this respect, Augustine quotes familiar passages from Paul and John, stating that now we see as if through a looking glass, though in the end we shall see God face to face; we shall see him as he is.⁷⁰ When one follows the truth,

64 *Io. eu. tr.* 34.7.

65 *Io. eu. tr.* 53.12. For more on the cleansing effect of *fides* in Augustine's thought, see Eugene Te Selle, 'Fides,' in Mayer, C. (ed.), *Augustinus-Lexikon II* (Basel: Schwabe, 2002) 1334-1340.

66 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,' in G. L. Ormiston and A. D. Schiffrin (eds.), *The Hermeneutic Tradition from Aristotle to Ricoeur*, Intersections: Philosophy and Critical Theory (State University of New York Press, 1972) 147-58.

67 *Io. eu. tr.* 34.7.

68 *Io. eu. tr.* 18.7.

69 *Io. eu. tr.* 34.9.

70 *Io. eu. tr.* 34.9.

which is Christ, one becomes a child of truth and is 'reborn' in it.⁷¹ True knowledge of God comes as a result of *caritas*, and this must be communicated to our hearts by the Holy Spirit (*Isto enim modo vos docebit Spiritus sanctus omnem veritatem, cum magis magisque diffundet in cordibus vestris caritatem*), a point for which Augustine finds support in various Pauline passages (Eph 4, 23; Rom 12, 2; Eph 3, 17-19).

Augustine writes that the acquisition of charity enables one not only to acquire the perception of truth, but even to deepen one's appreciation of it, since the Holy Spirit will guide one into all truth (*Sed cum diligitur quod ex quantulacumque parte cognoscitur, ipsa efficitur dilectione ut melius et plenius cognoscatur*). In order to know God's truth, our minds must be changed, and indeed renewed (*renovamini ergo spiritu mentis vestrae*), a process which is facilitated by the Holy Spirit. When we are grounded in God's charity (*in caritate radicati et fundati*), one is able to comprehend (*possit comprehendere*) the profundity of the wisdom of God. Augustine's quotation here also suggests the notion of weight, number, and measure which he links with Wisdom (*longitudo, latitudo, altitudo et profundum*). When one is thus imbued with grace and virtue by the Holy Spirit, one is *en route* to knowledge, and indeed, of fulfilment of everything one is and desires, finding rest in God in eternity (*cognoscere etiam supereminentem scientiae caritatem Christi, ut impleamini in omnem plenitudinem Dei*).⁷²

6. CONCLUSION AND ENVOI

I believe that the foregoing study discloses several results, one of which is that it helps to clarify one of the often misunderstood aspects of Augustine's overall theological doctrine. Whilst some may see Augustine as still held captive by his quondam Manichaean sympathies, and in particular the condemnation of the physical and the corporeal, Augustine presents us with a more sophisticated picture, and indeed, one which is profoundly philosophical and moral at the same time. Augustine's warning against getting caught up in worldly things is not escapism or some vain aestheticism, but rather reflects a theo-

⁷¹ *Io. eu. tr.* 52.13.

⁷² *Io. eu. tr.* 96.5.

logical vision about the constitution of the universe and about us in particular as human rational agents within that very universe. Material things are not bad in themselves, but can cause us trouble if we become excessively attached to them. Not only is this a moral problem, but it is above all an epistemic one: If we are so bound by categories of the material, of time and space, height and depth, and such like, we will inevitably fail to know the incorporeal, unchanging Creator at the foundation of all created things. Whereas we in our finite human condition tend to think of our material world as the 'norm' and the 'spiritual' as somehow strange or foreign, Augustine wants us to see it the other way around: God is the eternal Creator, and we are the lesser yet still essentially good result of his creative activity. Augustine wants to drive home to his audience the surprising character of the way in which we see, in which we know, that this takes place in and through time; the genius behind Augustine's thought is in getting what seems trivial or tautological to strike one as profound and shocking.

Furthermore, this study also helps us to see how for Augustine, Scripture sets the agenda for much of his theological discourse. It provides him with the framework, the template, the problems, and the resources for constructive theological thought. We see this in particular with respect to incorporeality and human vision. On the one hand, we take it as axiomatic that God is beyond all material categories. But on the other hand, we have to do justice in some way to passages in which God is described as taking some physical form, or in which we are promised some sensation of God, whether by sight, hearing, or some other type of perception.⁷³ Thus the notion of seeing God becomes a serious issue for Augustine, whether in terms of 'seeing' the Incarnate Christ or 'seeing' God in the beatific vision. Whilst he does not feel warranted in viewing the relevant passages as 'mere' allegory, he nonetheless finds creative ways to interpret these passages in order to form a coherent theological programme. I believe that we see him grappling with these questions especially in the *Tractatus*, in which he is confronted directly with scriptural passages which deal with these very themes. It is also enlightening to see how he appeals to

⁷³ In fact, this occupies Augustine in his *ep.* 147 to Paulinus of Nola, which he describes in *retr.* (2.41) as a book he wrote (*scripsilibrum*), entitled *De videndo Deo*.

other passages (such as Mt 5, 8) in order to substantiate his claims or to provide more perspective. This area might be a place worth exploring further, that is, Augustine's *ad intra* hermeneutic for the Bible, whereby he uses one passage or verse to interpret another, and vice-versa.

What I have wanted to say is that the notion of 'seeing God' is a multifaceted and complex problem for Augustine, a result of his notion of incorporeality, and an issue with which he deals philosophically, theologically, and scripturally, and with respect to many other themes, such as soteriology, eschatology, and Christology. My thought is that in focusing on a work such as the 'neglected classic' of the tractates on John, one can both deepen and broaden one's understanding of Augustine's thought on this and other matters.

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