

AUGUSTINE'S THEORY OF SENSE KNOWLEDGE

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Augustine was a truly remarkable man. He marks almost as great a period in the history of philosophy as in theology. He belongs to no one group or religious organization. Rather, he is the heritage of Western thought as a whole. Protestants and Catholics have long studied this great saint's teaching. B. B. Warfield once said of Augustine:

It was with him that the immediate assurance of consciousness first took its place as the source and warrant of truth. No doubt there had been a long preparation for the revolution which was wrought . . . but the whole preceding development will not account for the act of genius by which he actually shifted the basis of philosophy, and in so doing became "the true teacher of the middle ages," no doubt, but above and beyond that "one of the founders of modern thought." He may himself be said to have come out of Plato, or Plotinus; but in even a truer sense out of him came Descartes and his successors.¹

Yet Augustine's theology/philosophy had its problems. The theory of sensation in Augustine has been called one of the weakest elements in his entire philosophy because of the greatly active role that is given to the soul. Augustine came forward as a rationalist (1) in the sense that rationalism describes those thinkers who believed that "reason" is the prime source of knowledge, and (2) in opposition to sensationalism and empiricism. The latter think that our knowledge is derived exclusively from sensation or experience.²

In Augustine it is the soul that is the life-giving principle of the body. The soul is able to affect the body but the body is never able to affect the soul. Augustine regards sensation as a case of the soul's making use of its body. Sensation is always a property of the soul, never of the body. The soul feels through the body; the body does not feel.³

Augustine was very comprehensive in his philosophy. There is evidence that he was acquainted with all the more important ancient philosophies. He mentions, for example, those of the Ionic and Eleatic schools (*De Civitate Dei* 18.2). He knew Aristotle, although he did not regard him as highly as he did Plato. (All that Augustine ever read of the works of Aristotle was the *Categories*—a very simple eight-page treatise.)

The source of the problem in Augustine's theory of sense knowledge is his active theory of sensation, the view that in sensation the soul acts instead of being acted upon. Sensation is regarded as an awareness on the part of the soul of a

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¹B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1970) 135.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

³*De Gen. Ad Lit.* 13.24. See also R. H. Nash, *The Light of the Mind* (Lexington, Kent.: University of Kentucky Press, 1969) 40.

physical change in the sense organ. If the sense organ "sees" an object separated from it by some distance, then the soul must perceive at the point where the sense organ sees.⁴

Certainly, it perceives where it sees, because to see is to perceive; and it perceives where it hears, because to hear is to perceive. Therefore, its life either extends that far, and by this fact it exists there, too, or its perception extends beyond its range or life, or its life is found even where it does not also exist.⁵

Thus Augustine defines sensation as the soul's not being unaware of the body's experience (*De Quantitate Animae* 23.45). The formula is negative and indicates the soul's total superiority over the body.⁶ Augustine's teaching unquestionably flows from Plotinus, who presents sensation as a consciousness of bodily affections. To Augustine, sensation is a bodily experience that does not escape the soul's awareness (*De Quantitate Animae* 25.48). The senses rule man's life in his infancy and early boyhood, but only misery and evil result if they are not subjected to the control of reason as soon as possible (*De Gen. C. Man.* 1.20.31).⁷

It is always important to see Augustine's teaching in light of the influence Greek philosophers may have had on him. This is most important in relation to his theory of sensation. Augustine's views may seem odd or false to the mind that is unacquainted with his time and the effect of its philosophy upon him. When Augustine's doctrine is looked at in relation to those of Plotinus, who was philosophically against Aristotelian, Stoic and Epicurean epistemologies, it becomes more intelligible. Both Augustine and Plotinus were "driven" to many of their conclusions about the nature of sensation by their views about man's soul and body. Plotinus rejected materialistic theories of the soul and also the view that the soul is the form of the body. For Plotinus the soul is a substance that exists in its own right. It can exist independently of the body. Sensation depends on the soul's working in harmony with the body. "The Soul, in the feeling, may be compared to the workman in such operations as boring or weaving, the body to the tool employed."⁸

Both Plotinus and Porphyry explained the presence of the incorporeal by an inclination of the first to the last. Augustine accepts this explanation. He believes that the soul is present to the body by a kind of incorporeal impulse or vital attention which is shown in the actions of the body (*De Gen. Ad Lit.* 8.21.42).⁹ Augustine agreed with Plato and Plotinus when they said the senses alone cannot supply knowledge. Augustine wrote that the Platonists "are beyond all comparison with those who taught that the criterion of truth is in the bodily senses, and who

⁴Nash, *Light*, 51.

⁵*Epist.* 137.2.6.

⁶E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1960) 84.

⁷Sister M. A. I. Gannon, "Theory of Sensation in Plotinus and St. Augustine" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Saint Louis University, 1952) 164.

⁸Plotinus, *Ennead* 4.3.26, tr. S. Mackenna, in *Plotinus on the Nature of the Soul* (London: Medici Society, 1924). See also Nash, *Light*, 40.

⁹Gannon, "Theory," 149.

would have us believe that all knowledge is to be measured and ruled by such doubtful and deceitful testimony." ¹⁰ Here Augustine's criticism is directed at those who thought that the notion needed for the unification of knowledge was derivable from sensation—i. e., the Epicureans and Stoics.

Augustine rejects the idea that in sensation the soul passively receives images from the outer world through the use of the senses. He follows Plotinus in thinking that the soul's job in sensation is active. Both the images associated with particular sensations and the ideas relating to them are brought into being by the activity of the soul. "When we see a body and its image begins to exist in our soul, it is not the body that impresses the image in our soul. It is the soul itself that produces it with wonderful swiftness within itself." ¹¹

The fact that man can produce *scientia* from sensation accounts for numerous passages where Augustine asserts the importance of sensation. In the *De Trinitate* (15.12.21) he admits that the senses of people have added much to our knowledge. We cannot doubt the truth of what we have learned by the bodily senses and the things in them that are known to us. ¹² The senses can contribute to knowledge, but it is only to true intellectual knowledge that we must and should turn. Wise men believe in the testimony of the intellect much more than in that of the senses. Bodily vision is greatly inferior to intellectual vision. ¹³

Since he rejected Manichean materialism and emphasized the spiritual nature of the soul, it was very unlikely that Augustine would advance a passive theory of sense knowledge in relating the soul to the body. ¹⁴ There is no doubt about the spirituality of the soul, but Augustine is not clear on the questions of the origin of the soul and the nature of its union with the body. Augustine in *De Gen. Ad Lit.* (8.21.42) says that the soul is not present in the body in a local manner as water is in a sponge. The best analogy he used was close to one used by Plotinus—i. e., the mixture of soul and body is somewhat like the mixture of light and air in which soul and body retains its integrity. ¹⁵

Because of the body's corruptible state it sometimes makes the operation of the soul harder. External bodies may also cause the soul's operation to be more difficult. When the soul meets this opposition it must exercise greater attention than just being the "life-giving" principle, and it becomes aware of this change in its activity. This extra attention results in pain in a case in which the soul opposes a disagreeable condition. On the other hand, when the soul has unusual facility in acting it is aware of pleasure. Other conditions that attract it result in such sensations as thirst, hunger or sickness. ¹⁶

Even though the soul can perceive beyond the body, it seems to exist only

¹⁰*De Civ. Dei* 8.7.

¹¹*De Gen. Ad Lit.* 13.16.33.

¹²Nash, *Light*, 42.

¹³*De Gen. Ad Lit.* 12.24.51.

¹⁴Nash, *Light*, 46.

¹⁵*Epist.* 137.2.8. See also Gannon, "Theory," 148.

¹⁶*De Musica* 6.5.9.

within the body. In *Epistle 137* Augustine considers three possible answers for the problem of sight at a distance: (1) He asks if seeing is not a faculty of perception, even though sight seems the most prominent of the senses. It is not clear what he means. He considers the denial that seeing is a faculty of perception even though sight is most prominent. (2) He asks if the soul has sense perception beyond the range of its life. It seems to see things contained in places outside its own flesh. This seems to be an allusion to the ray theory of light. (3) He says perhaps the soul lives in heaven because it sees what is in heaven, and there can be no sense process where there is no life. This seems to at least posit the possibility that the soul is not confined to the body.¹⁷

The distinction between what enters the mind by way of the senses and what is present always in the soul is made in the *De Magistro* (11.38). Augustine now rejects the Platonic theory of reminiscence and believes all learning is achieved by means of the consideration of the truth one finds within and above his own mind.¹⁸ Gilson felt, in at least his early life, that Augustine accepted the Platonic doctrine, properly understood, of reminiscence.¹⁹ In the *De Quantitate Animae* Evodius asks how sensation can be explained if the soul is not extended throughout the body. Because Augustine is concerned with denying corporeal quantity to the soul, he reasserts his belief that the soul is not extended in matter. But the two analogies he uses are not satisfactory and show that he has not yet clearly grasped an explanation of the soul's presence to the body. He also admits the possible nature of the theory of the corporeality of the soul by discussing the activity of a worm which, when cut, still manifested life in each part. Even when he is unable to give an adequate explanation to the question, Augustine emphatically affirms his belief in the soul's spirituality.²⁰

In order to cover all the types of activity proper to it, *sensus* is finally defined as "a passion of the body which does not through itself escape the notice of the soul."²¹ In *De Quantitate Animae* there are a number of psychological definitions in relation to the soul and sensation. The most famous is the statement that soul, or mind, is "a certain substance, participating in reason, adapted to the ruling of the body."²² In relation to these definitions in an early work (*De Ordine* 2.11.34) Augustine gives some principles that govern his theory in later works: (1) *Sensus* and cognition are two different operations; (2) it is the soul that senses (*De Ordine* 2.2.6); (3) number is found in all things but only reason is able to recognize it (*De Ordine* 2.19.49).²³

The obvious conclusion from what Augustine says in reference to sensation is

¹⁷Nash, *Light*, 49.

¹⁸Gannon, "Theory," 168.

¹⁹Gilson, *Christian*, 71.

²⁰*De Quant. An.* 30.59; 32.1068; 32.65-67. See also Gannon, "Theory," 156.

²¹Gannon, "Theory," 157. See also V. J. Bourke, *Augustine's Quest of Wisdom* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1945) 103.

²²Bourke, *Quest*, 103.

²³Gannon, "Theory," 153.

that the soul is in no way subjected as matter to a bodily agency. Augustine is forced by a priori principles—i. e., his Platonic philosophy—to adopt an “active” theory of sensation.²⁴ He summarizes his theory:

Briefly, it seems to me that the soul, when it is sensing in the body, does not passively undergo anything from the body, but the soul pays more attention to the passions of the body and these activities, which may be easy because of their agreement with the body, or different because of their disagreement, do not escape the soul: and this is the complete explanation of sensation.²⁵

Thus the body and soul are not as separated as some have said, for the soul acts through the body.

Augustine divides vision or perception into three levels: corporeal, spiritual and intellectual. Although he does not seem to think that corporeal vision or sense perception or spiritual vision could be separated in man, his explanation of how this is possible is not clear. It is not simply man's body that senses, but man's soul that senses through his body.²⁶ He does give a theory similar to Plato's theory of the relation of the four elements to sensation: Air pertains to the ears, fire to the eyes, and water to smell and taste; earth is the element that is suited to the sense of touch. Yet this does not seem to affect Augustine's overall view that the soul is the agent of sensation.²⁷

In *De Gen. Ad Lit.* Augustine gives a detailed description of the three kinds of vision. The soul makes its own sensations, in terms of sense imagery within itself, by its own power. Again, it is impossible for him to think of any theory where the body acts on the soul. This kind of theory would make the soul inferior to the body. So what really happens when a man fears is that the soul feels the fear and makes bodily effects of strong emotion. Therefore when the body is fearing it is really the soul that makes the body grow pale, etc. Thus he thinks that there is a great amount of evidence that the soul dominates the body.²⁸ Book Six of *De Musica* says the same thing in relation to hearing. Hearing depends on something being produced in the soul by the body. His disciple then asks, “If hearing is not the result of the body's producing something in the soul, what is it?” Augustine says simply that whatever hearing is, we must not subordinate the soul to the body. Augustine's argument as it stands is inadequate, for he never seems to examine the assumption that influence can come only from a higher to a lower level. Yet maybe Augustine himself was not totally happy with his answer to this question, for he says:

If, because of the infirmity of either or both of us, the result (of our investigation into the nature of sensation) should be less than we wish, either we ourselves shall investigate it at another time when we are less agitated, or we shall leave it to more

²⁴Bourke, *Quest*, 111.

²⁵*De Musica* 6.5.10. Cf. Bourke, *Quest*, 111.

²⁶*De Gen. Ad Lit.* 12.24.51. Cf. Nash, *Light*, 39.

²⁷*De Gen. Ad Lit.* 3.4.6-7; 3.5.7. Cf. Bourke, *Quest*, 229.

²⁸Bourke, *Quest*, 244.

intelligent people to examine, or, unworried, we shall leave it unsolved.²⁹

A complete study of the objects of sensation show the fact that Augustine firmly believed in the objective nature of sensation. Augustine is always aware that he is dealing with a real world outside of himself. He realizes that the objects of sensation are not of the same nature as the senses or the sensor.³⁰ In *De Quantitate Animae* he takes the brute animals as the point of departure for the discussion of the distinction between sensation and knowledge. He says that the brute animals do not possess knowledge and reason even though they possess sensation. So Augustine concludes that man possesses a mental sight as the direct consequence of what the mind is able to do.³¹

It is very clear throughout his work that Augustine is maintaining a well-defined distinction between the origins of the knowledge that comes through sensory images and the higher knowledge that comes through an immediate vision of the truth eternal within the soul.³² It is this intellectual knowledge that rises to God, not the knowledge of the senses. Again and again Augustine returns to the understanding of man that is consequent on the rise to God. The brute animals possess sensation, which is one kind of knowledge, and man possesses a higher kind of knowledge that distinguishes man alone.³³ Even when the soul comes to know external bodies through the images, this knowledge is not entirely of extramental origin. The soul in forming these sense images makes them in itself. They thus have something of its own substance.³⁴ Sensation is a manifestation of the life of the soul. But because the objects of sensation are changeable they are not worthy of the full attention of a soul which has the ability to "see" immutable and eternal truth.³⁵

In the *Confessions*, Augustine devotes many chapters to a treatment of the dangers of the delight of the flesh arising from forms, sounds, tastes, odors and touches. He fears these sense pleasures and warns man against becoming entangled in the enticements of the flesh. Similarly the *Confessions* also point out the danger that may arise from illicit curiosity about things known through the senses. This curiosity comes when the soul seeks knowledge of the thing as an end rather than as a means to higher knowledge.³⁶

It then becomes the opinion of many who have studied Augustine that his theory of sensation as a purely psychic activity is unsatisfactory. As Bourke says: "The persistent use of the negative formula (*non latere*) indicates Augustine's

²⁹*De Musica* 6.5.8. Cf. Nash, *Light*, 45. Here Nash says that it may be true that an inferior or lower cannot act on the higher when the higher is God, but it does not follow so clearly in the case of man's soul.

³⁰Gannon, "Theory," 166.

³¹E. Kevane, *Augustine the Educator* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1964) 153. Cf. Nash, *Light*, 41.

³²Bourke, *Quest*, 211.

³³Kevane, *Augustine*, 154.

³⁴Bourke, *Quest*, 212.

³⁵*De Lib. Arb.* 2.12.34. Cf. Gannon, "Theory," 167.

³⁶*Confessiones* 10.30-34, 35-55.

inability to say positively just what sensation is. . . . Sensation, then, remains a sore point in the Augustinian theory of knowledge."³⁷ Gannon adds that Augustine could not explain how man's soul actually perceives sense objects.³⁸ Later Augustinians went to the extreme and asserted that there is no direct relation between the soul and sensible objects. The objects that the soul senses are then its own creations. Apparently Augustine did not want to go that far, but his view contains principles that lead logically to such a conclusion.

In summary it may be noted that most of the principles that are to epitomize Augustine's later teaching on this matter can be put into five general headings: (1) *The nature of the world*. The universe is created according to a certain rule of order and unity. The superiors in this world rightly rule the inferiors, and a disruption of the order is an evil. (2) *Sensus*. Because the body cannot affect the soul, the activity of the soul is the real cause of sensation in the presence of a passion of the body. Vivifying and ordering the body is the lowest type of activity for the soul. A higher activity of the soul occurs when it acts in the interest of the body because of an awareness of the passions of the body. (3) *Objects of sense experience*. Augustine does not doubt the reality of the external object or the reality of the sense world. He also believes that the sense is really affected by the external object. (4) *Judgments involved in sense experience*. The awareness of the soul seems to be involved in three general types of judgments. The sense judges the suitability of its proper object. The eye judges the light or color that strikes it. This judgment is concerned with the wellbeing of the body. A second judgment of sense is due to a natural power that the animal possesses by means of which it judges of the harmony of sights or sounds according to a kind of bond of order. The third judgment is based on certain eternal rules or numbers within the soul. (5) *The danger of using means as ends*. Man is in constant danger of turning the means at his disposal into ends because he is free to determine the use that he will make of his powers and because of the strong attraction that sensible things exercise on him. For this reason he is warned to flee from or escape material, sensible things that may put roadblocks in the way of his search for his proper good.³⁹

Beside the difficulties mentioned in this article there are at least three other important problems that relate to Augustine's theory of sense knowledge: (1) Augustine so emphasizes the role of primary (divine) causality that the function of secondary (creaturely) causes is underestimated. The way to glorify God is not to reduce creatures to a state of near nothingness—to deny them even secondary causality. (2) The problem of the origin of truth in man's intellect is also serious for Augustine. The intellect, because it is mutable, is incapable of knowing eternal and necessary truths without divine illumination. Knowledge of truth is not possible without the illumination of the divine ideas. Even the moral virtues become divine and are implanted by grace. Man requires not only an intellectual illumination but a moral one as well. God becomes the very life of the soul itself. God orders the soul from within. (3) Thus in Augustine's philosophy creatures can do nothing—unless they are directly moved to action by God. Allowing

³⁷Bourke, *Quest*, 112.

³⁸Sister M. A. I. Gannon, "The Active Theory of Sensation in St. Augustine," *The New Scholasticism* 30 (April 1956) 167 ff. Cf. also Nash, *Light*, 58-59.

³⁹Gannon, "Theory," 172-175.

true freedom to creatures is not for Augustine the proper way to glorify God. Man by original sin is so debilitated that he cannot even be capable of eminent *libertas*. Man is not even capable of the liberty that seeks the love of God rather than that of the world.