

Introduction

Under the heading *Theories of Vision: Augustine of Hippo and the Augustinian Tradition* an international meeting was held between the 14th and 15th November 2019 in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto. The main purpose of this meeting was to contribute for a deeper knowledge of the theories of perception in the work of Augustine of Hippo as well as to better understand their influence on the subsequent theories developed in the Middle Ages.

Augustine's conception of the process of knowing both material objects and intelligible forms is principally rooted on two strands: the theories of cognition developed in late antiquity and the principles of Christian metaphysics on the nature of man and his ultimate end. Concerning the former, Augustine's interlocutors are mainly Porphyry and Plotinus, while for the latter his source of inspiration is fundamentally the biblical text and the writings of the Christian authors who preceded him. Augustine's philosophical and theological thought develops throughout his life in multiple directions, being often guided, especially after his episcopal ordination, by questions related to his duties at the head of the Christian community of Hippo.

Thus, it is possible to find in Augustine's work explanations of human perception discussed on strictly philosophical ground, as in the writings of his youth, alongside explanations in which his philosophical conceptions are clearly put to the test when used at the service of major theological issues. An example of his first elaboration on theories of cognition is found in the epistolary exchange with Nebridius on the perception of corporeal objects by the human spirit. As for the possibility of applying these theories of perception to theological questions, Augustine's difficulties in solving the problem on the basis of philosophical categories are evident in the writings resulting from the debates, held between the years 408 and 412-13, on the possibility of seeing God by means of the corporeal eyes. Among the most interesting developments of Augustine's theory of vision is his

long analysis of Saint Paul's ecstatic experience, reported in 1 *Cor*, 12, 2-4, and commented on by Augustine in Book XII of his *Literal Commentary on the Book of Genesis*.

In the texts above mentioned, Augustine gradually builds up his theory of the perception of material objects and immaterial realities. In the first case, that of his epistolary exchange with Nebridius, he will defend a conception close to the Neoplatonic theories of perception based on the superiority of the soul regarding the body. In the second case, known by scholars as 'the vision of God dossier', he proposes a hierarchical conception of the perceptive and intellectual functions of the human soul, still of Neoplatonic matrix, which he will make compatible with a creationist conception of man. From this perspective, the ontological category of relation takes priority in explaining man's dependence on God. This dependence, in the case of the knowledge of intelligible forms, leads to the formulation of Augustine's doctrine of illumination. Grasped in *De magistro*, confirmed in *De libero arbitrio*, and consolidated in *De trinitate*, this theory explains the origin of true knowledge. Augustine's paradigm of human perception of the intelligible according to which divine mind ultimately guarantees the truth of human knowledge, remained unquestionable in medieval theories of cognition. In the Scholastic period, authors of the Franciscan school adopted it unconditionally and it can be found, directly or indirectly, even in the theories of philosophers who closely followed the Aristotelian tradition, as is the case of Thomas Aquinas.

This volume publishes the papers presented at the *Theories of Vision* meeting.

Emmanuel Bermon focuses on the epistolary exchange between Nebridius and Augustine, particularly on *Letter 7*. In this letter, Augustine discusses with Nebridius the question whether it is possible to imagine objects that have never been seen. Bermon shows how Augustine is against the possibility, put forward by Nebridius, that imagination is an *a priori* faculty. As Bermon explains, in the reply to Nebridius in *Letter 7* we find one of Augustine's most extensive analyses of the nature of imagination and of its functions in the process of human cognition of the material world. In the wake of Plotinus, Augustine will argue that imagination is a faculty of receiving impressions. Its activity depends, therefore, on the type of impressions it receives – either seen, imagined, or thought. According to Augustine, therefore, imagination is not a self-induced faculty since its activity is totally dependent on the mechanisms of vision, fantasy, and reasoning.

Giovanni Catapano, in his article, analyses Augustine's *Letter 147* to Pauline, also known as the treatise *De videndo deo*. Catapano explains the genesis of this

treatise, integrating it into the wider debate which Augustine held at the time on the problem of the possibility of seeing God with the eyes of corporeal body. Focusing mainly on the distinction between seeing and believing, Catapano shows the heuristic function of this distinction in the main argument of the treatise - the impossibility of seeing God with the eyes of the body and the exhortation to purity of spirit to reach Him.

Still on the subject of the vision of God, Paula Oliveira e Silva analyses Book XII of the *Literal Commentary on the Book of Genesis* aiming at showing the relevance of this text to the development and further consolidation of Augustine's position on the vision of God. Oliveira e Silva defends that, in the exegesis of 1 *Cor*, 12, 2-4, elaborated in Book XII Augustine finds the biblical argument that in *Sermo* 477 he mentioned as required to support the thesis according to which God will be seen with the eyes of the body. Oliveira e Silva shows that in the same Book XII Augustine also identifies a philosophical premise to argue for the participation of corporeal body in the vision of God. She therefore states that in Book XII Augustine overcomes the epistemological obstacles mentioned in *Sermo* 477 to argue for the participation of the body in the vision of God *in patria* and concludes that Book XII of *De genesi ad litteram* constitutes an important turning point in Augustine's establishment of his final doctrine on this matter.

Lydia Schumacher analyses some aspects of the nature of the human soul as stated in the works of philosophers and theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and shows how the ancient theories, either of Aristotelian matrix or of Augustinian affiliation, were transformed by the Arabic interpretations of Aristotle. Schumacher highlights the importance of Avicenna's *De anima* in this process of transformation, and the influence of this work on the 12th-13th century doctrines on human cognition. As Schumacher shows, especially in the case of authors of the early Franciscan school, there is a confluence of both Avicennian and Augustinian interpretations on the faculties of the soul and their function in the cognitive process, which decisively shaped the interpretation of the Franciscan tradition on these questions.

Georgina Rabassó, in turn, focuses her analysis on figurative representations, abundant in the work of Hildegard of Bingen and, in particular, in the *Liber diuinorum operum*. Rabassó shows how the visual representations of time and eternity, present in the works of Hildegard's, are in line with Augustine of Hippo's statements about time that can be found especially in the paradigmatic Book XI of the *Confessions*. According to Rabassó, Hildegard makes use of geometric resources - lines, circles, polygons, and other figures - to didactically illustrate the

relationship between time and eternity, categories that express in a particular way the attributes of God and the created world, the difference but yet the communion between creator and creatures.

Finally, still on the influence of Augustine's theories of vision, Yael Barash analyses what she considers a paradox common to both Augustine of Hippo and Hildegard of Bingen. This paradox consists in the fact that on the one hand they both value the nature of the material world as the work of God and as a way for human beings to grasp His nature whereas, on the other hand, they both state that sensitive knowledge is limited concerning human cognition of God's nature. To Yael, the Eucharistic phenomenon, specific to Christian belief, manifests this paradox to an utmost level. Yael thus analyzes this paradox by focusing on Hildegard's vision of Eucharist as described in *Scivias*.

The international meeting *Theories of Vision: Augustine of Hippo and the Augustinian Tradition*, whose results are published here, was organized by the thematic line Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy (Gabinete de Filosofia Medieval) of the Instituto de Filosofia da Universidade do Porto in the context of the research project *From Data to Wisdom. Philosophizing Data Visualizations in the Middle Ages and Early Modernity (13th-17th Century)*, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (Ref. POCI-01-0145-FEDER-029717 — PI José Higuera Rubio — coPI José Meirinhos). The project's main goal is the treatment of image diagrams that were used to promote the transmission of knowledge in the context of the teaching of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* arts during the Middle Ages. Among the objectives of the project is the study of cognitive processes related to imagination, in which human cognition of the material world, either empirical or scientific, underlies. The articles gathered in this volume analyze some features of cognitive processes present in works of Augustine of Hippo and developed during the Middle Ages. These processes underpin the models of figurative representation of God and the world, produced for the teaching of arts and sciences in the medieval institutions of learning. The results of research published here aim to clarify the theoretical foundations of the visual representations of the world, visible and invisible, and thus constitute a contribution to the research work carried out within the project *From Data to Wisdom*.

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