

Augustine's « Visio Intellectus » and Perceptual Error

Any well-drawn epistemology has to come to grips with error sooner or later¹⁾. St. Augustine attempts a well-drawn epistemology, but there is something peculiar about his analysis of perceptual error. On one hand it looks as though the five “well-known messengers of the body” — the senses — are passive faculties and, thus, are not the sources of error (for they are not engaged in active judgment). On the other hand, the active faculty which judges — *visio intellectus* — seems to be incorrigible²⁾ and, thus, cannot be the source of error. Since this eliminates two obvious candidates it is difficult to determine what Augustine thinks the source of perceptual error is. My central purpose in this paper is to trace Augustine's analysis of error and to argue that, contrary to the generally accepted view, Augustine must have thought that *visio intellectus* is the source of error.

Augustine's Analysis of Error : Augustine's most mature discussion of error is found in *De Genesi ad Litteram* Book XII.

However, the soul is deceived by the similarities of things, not through any fault of things, but through fault of the soul's supposition when, because of a deficiency of the intellect, it takes things which are similar (i.e., it so takes things which are similar to *other* things). The soul is deceived in bodily vision when it supposes that what actually arises only in the bodily senses arises in things themselves, or when it supposes one thing to be some (other) thing which is of similar color, or which sounds or tastes or feels similar, or when the soul, having been disturbed by sudden and unanticipated bodily sights, supposes that it is dreaming or supposes that it is affected by a spiritual vision in another way³⁾.

¹⁾ One important element in Augustine's positive account of perception is memory. I discuss error in memory in “Augustine's Theory of Factual Memory” forthcoming in *Augustinian Studies*.

²⁾ See, for example, Vernon Bourke, *Augustine's Quest of Wisdom*, Bruce Publishing Company (Milwaukee, 1945) p. 244.

³⁾ *De Genesi ad Litteram*, XII, 25, 52.

Augustine begins his discussion of error with a general statement of what he takes error to be. Mistaken belief seems to be exclusively the fault of the believer, rather than the fault of whatever the objects of belief are. Augustine anticipates Descartes in maintaining that we are not deceived by objects when we err but, rather, that we are deceived in our judgment of objects in that we judge in terms of a standard of which we have inadequate knowledge. We judge inadequately when we take one object to be another object because of a similarity between the two. The simple formula for error, on Augustine's account, is : Taking one thing for another ⁴).

Augustine considers specific conditions that would serve to generate error in judgment based upon the testimony of the senses) His examples will be familiar to contemporary readers. There are stationary objects which appear to move when viewed from moving vehicles and oars in water which appear to be bent. According to Augustine we make such errors in judgment because we suppose that the things we are seeing have all of the qualities that they *seem* to have. For example, a bent oar is *similar* to an oar in water.

There is a second source of error in such judgments that is, again, familiar to contemporary readers. In this second case I suppose that I am seeing one object when, in fact, I am seeing a different object, not because the object seen lacks a property which I think it has, but because it has a property which is similar to a property that a different object has. Identifying the properties leads me to suppose that the *object* is something other than it is. Again, Augustine's examples are familiar : Thinking that a pot of wax is a pot of beans ; Hearing the rumble of a cart and supposing it to be thunder. This kind of error highlights Augustine's assertion that the perceiver is the sole source of error ⁵).

Augustine's third source of error is not commonly discussed by modern writers. In this case I see something that is so strange that

⁴) Presumably, the similarity in terms of which the error is made may be a real or an imagined one. However, if it is only an imagined similarity it looks as though error may be explained in terms of a further error — mistakenly thinking that there is a similarity between two objects when there is none.

⁵) In his earliest discussion of error, in *Contra Academicos* and in *Soliloquia*, Augustine's analysis depended upon false objects as the source of mistaken. He soon came to recognize the difficulties of this view, particularly as an analysis of perceptual error. (For example, it seems clear that when I see a false object I am seeing something and I am attributing correct properties to that thing.)

I suppose I am dreaming or hallucinating. We are more accustomed to dealing with the problem just the other way around. — as when I dream and suppose that I am awake. However, although the contemporary epistemologist may be concerned with Macbeth's dagger, which is seen even though it is not there, Augustine is concerned with Siegmund's sword, which is not seen even though it is there.

Augustine's analysis of hallucinations and dreams centers on *visio spiritualis* rather than *visio corporis*. Again, we see that error is the taking of one thing for another, but this time it is taking an image of an object to be an object. "Bodies themselves are not in the mind at all when we conceive them, but only their likenesses; thus when we take the latter for the former we err. ..." ⁶) "In animal vision, that is, among the likenesses which the mind sees, the mind is deceived when it judges those things seen in this way to be bodies themselves. ..." ⁷)

Augustine's Problem: But this is where the problem for our understanding of Augustine arises, for we may wonder just what it is that errs in these latter kinds of error. Since error is explained in terms of some inadequacy on the part of the perceiver, the source of error in corporeal matters (taken very broadly so as to include supposing that a dream demon is a real demon, for example) ought to be bodily sight, animal vision or intellectual vision. One or some combination of these would be the likely candidate for the source of error in perception because one or a combination of these is the source of veridical experience.

Consider each sort of error in bodily sight first. In the bent-oar case what the bodily sight reports to the animal vision is a bent-oar-appearance. It reports a bent-oar-appearance when the oar is bent or (obviously) when the oar only seems to be bent. Animal vision is required to generate an image. However, all that animal vision has to work with *vis a vis* the *content* of the image it generates is what the bodily sight reports. So, when the bodily sight reports a bent-oar-appearance a bent-oar-image is produced. When a cart rumbles past, the bodily hearing reports an uninterpreted rumble-seeming to *visio spiritualis* ⁸). In the animal sight an image of rumbling is

⁶) *De Trinitate* IX, 11, 16.

⁷) *De Gen. ad Lit.* XII, 25, 52.

⁸) One must remember that *visio spiritualis* is not restricted to the treatment of visual sensations for Augustine; it plays a role in the other bodily senses as well.

generated but it is, again, uninterpreted. It is presented to the intellectual vision as rumbling, not as cart-rumbling or thunder-rumbling. The third case (supposing that a genuine experience is a dream) is similar to the first two cases, since a report of the body is again generated into an image in animal vision. Here, however, there is no quality of the image to be mistaken. This example indicates that neither the bodily sight nor animal vision is the source of error. The bodily sight accurately reports the state of the corporeal world. The animal vision accurately represents the report. The mistake is in our judging that this accurate representation of the world is, in fact, an hallucination or a dream. The judging faculty is *visio intellectus*.

The second kind of error discussed above further establishes intellectual vision as the source of error. When I dream or hallucinate, bodily sight plays no role at all. Images are generated in animal vision which are not the result of reports from the bodily senses. These images are taken to be reports about the corporeal world — but they are not so taken by animal vision, since animal vision does not take anything to be anything — they are so taken by *visio intellectus*. It is this highest faculty, then, that *must* be the source of error in judging.

Non-Perceptual Error: It is not only in judging the corporeal world that we make mistakes. We also err when we judge whether an act is just or a thing is beautiful or what the sum of two and two is. Augustine discusses this kind of error as well, error which involves those realities which are *supra mentem*.

... In intellectual vision this [the soul] is not deceived; either it understands and ... [what it understands] is true; or else if ... [what it understands] is not true, it does not understand; thus, it is one thing to err in what the soul sees, and another thing to err because it does not see ⁹).

One way to take this passage is to suppose that intellectual vision is in some sense incorrigible. It cannot be incorrigible when judging corporeal states of affairs since it is the source of mistaken judgments in corporeal matters. Augustine might hold that when *visio intellectus* is attending to its proper objects (eternal truths) it either sees them or it does not see them, understanding when it sees, failing to understand when it fails to see (rather than when it sees poorly).

⁹) *De Gen. ad Lit.* XII, 25, 52.

There is reason to suppose that Augustine was prepared to grant incorrigibility to *visio intellectus* in making some judgments: That I exist, for example, or that I will to be happy. However, incorrigibility for *visio intellectus* would seem to be ruled out by the recognition that intellectual vision is the source of errors in judging the corporeal world and by the recognition that we can be mistaken in what we take to be justice, beauty and so on. These sorts of knowledge claims are independent of experience of the material world. Unfortunately, this raises a problem for Augustine. The analysis thus far, — that we err with *visio intellectus* when we do not see what we think we see — does not tell us *why* we think we see what we think we see.

Augustine suggests a solution to this difficulty in *De Magistro*. He considers the process of learning eternal truths, “Things ... which we perceive through the mind”¹⁰⁾ Such things are inner and their understanding is essentially inner. Thus, the person who learns does so through his own efforts of contemplation, rather than through anything he is told, for he “... knows of that which I speak by means of his own contemplation, not through my words.”¹¹⁾ This analysis is adequate for positive cases, when both teacher and student agree immediately about what an eternal truth is. But what happens when two people disagree about an eternal truth? At least one of them will be wrong, and it is in dealing with this sort of case that we would expect Augustine to come to grips with the problem of error in our knowledge of eternal truths.

Now if it often happens that the person questioned denies something, and is forced by other questions to affirm what he denies, this arises because of a defect in his vision in so far as he cannot consult that light about the whole affair. He is advised to do it part by part when he is questioned by one step after another about those very parts of which the whole consists, which he is unable to see as a whole¹²⁾.

Visio intellectus errs in contemplating eternal truths, then, when it takes a part of the truth to be the whole truth. One need not put too much weight upon the notion of “part of the truth” in order to see Augustine's point. His doctrine of illumination helps us to see that

¹⁰⁾ *De Magistro*, 12, 40.

¹¹⁾ *De Mag.* 12, 40.

¹²⁾ *De Mag.* 12, 40.

the parts of eternal truths that are seen by the erring inner-man are not portions of eternal truth but, rather, are qualities which eternal truths exhibit.

I think that what Augustine intends here can best be understood by considering an analogous case for seeing material objects with the physical sight. A poorly illuminated object will be seen, perhaps, as only an outline. As the illumination either increases in intensity or improves in quality (for example, lighting the front surface of the object rather than the top) more of its qualities become apparent. To return to intellectual vision, the mistake made when we have an incorrect notion of an eternal truth is to suppose that partially apprehending an eternal truth is apprehending a whole eternal truth, and that apprehending an eternal truth wholly is to apprehend all of its properties clearly.

We can see, then, that for Augustine error as well as understanding are essentially inner¹³), that the analysis he offers for error (the taking of one thing for another) applies to all cases, and that the seat of judgment, *visio intellectus*, is the source of error.

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¹³) For a treatment of the inner nature of understanding for Augustine see Bruce Bubacz, "Augustine's Dualism and the Inner Man" forthcoming in *The Modern Schoolman*.