

Light and Illumination in Augustine: Revisiting an Old Theme

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Though a Westerner, Augustine gave great importance to light and illumination: the theme of light recurs some one thousand nine hundred times in his work and illumination one thousand and five times. He deals with them in almost all his works, and especially in his great works: *Confessions*, *De Trinitate*, *De Genesi ad litteram*, *De Civitate Dei*, in his *Sermons* and his *Letters*, in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and in his *Commentary of John's Gospel*, but Augustine does not invariably choose the Greek framework of vision, but balances it with the Hebraic view of hearing. What does he intend by this? As a Mediterranean, Augustine paid attention to the brightness of the light; as a manichaeon, he was attentive to light. But he does not remain here and denies any kind of pantheism, which made the soul as a part of divine light. More radically, he had an experience of light during his conversion and met the root of light, who is Christ. Even if he did not immediately understand, he intuitively perceived the unique nature of this light and, to emphasize its difference, he uses a new word, that of *reverberatio* to point out how much he was grasped by this light, he was illuminated by the source of light. In fact, does he not convey his Christology, his soteriology and even his mysticism through the themes of light and illumination, thus inverting the manichaeon point of view? It appears as early as his commentary of the second verse of Psalm twenty six, which is the maxim of Oxford University: *Deus illuminatio mea*. Augustine points out that God himself illuminates and saves¹ us, that our relationship to God is basic and that it has to do with the continual creation to salvation.

Light and intellectual illumination

However, Augustinian scholars had not always underbred things in this way: they have tended to treat light and illumination from a gnoseological point of view, as we can see in *Recherches augustiniennes* II and in the thesis by Dominique Doucet on *La problématique de la lumière*.² It is true that Augustine

¹ *Sermon 2 on Psalm 26*.

² Paris, 1982. See also: W. Beierwaltes, art. Erleuchtung: *Historisches Wörterbuch für Philosophie* 2 (1972) 712-7; B. S. Bubacz, Augustine's illumination theory and epistemic structuring:

develops a theory of knowing, that he deals with intellectual illumination, that he is influenced by Plato, who in *Republic*, identifies the sun with the Good and sees in it the very principle of knowing, through the famous symbol of line, whose echo is the myth of the cave, where the way of knowledge is identified with the coming into the light, to the gradual ascent until the moment when the prisoner sees the truth through the sun that allows him to know the sensible world and introduces him to the intelligible world. So, Augustine unfolds his theory of knowledge.

But, Augustine is certainly also influenced³ by the Neoplatonists who wrote the famous *Libri Platoniorum*. Among those Neoplatonists, Augustine seems to be strongly influenced by Plotinus who interprets Plato to work out a theory of knowledge from the light (*Ennead* V 3.8), and who, on the other hand, identifies light with the One, the sun with the Noûs and the moon with the soul (*Enn.* V 6.4). However, even though Augustine gives great importance to the illumination in his theory of knowledge, he does not introduce a hierarchy, as in Plotinus, and with regard to the question of creation he substitutes the Plotinian emanation by the *Fiat lux* of *Genesis*. Following the Church Fathers, he suggests a different interpretation of the sun, identifying it with Christ, as in *John's Gospel*. He intends to deal with creation and the new creation through the notions of light and illumination.

Augustine, too, unfolds a new theory of knowledge⁴, in works such as *De magistro* and Book XI of *trin*. In fact, he is seeking for truth, and he is one of the first to give a theory of perception on this basis.⁵ He distinguishes between the thing perceived, the sense of vision and the intention of the will (*Tr.* XI 2). Probably, he takes again the Platonic theory of knowledge, but does not go, like Descartes, as far as dioptric, but he doesn't stop at this knowledge, coming from the spirit's light. During his debate with Faustus, he explains that there is a higher light: the intellectual light, that is God himself: 'This light is not yet the very Light that is God, because the one is creature, and the other the Creator, the one is the work, the other the worker' (*c. Faust.* XX 7). God is really the 'sun of the minds'.⁶

When Augustine became a pastor, he had to give an account of that very light that is God, from the Scripture in contrast to the roman worship of *Sol*

Augustinian Studies 11 (1980) 35-48; R.H. Nash, *The light of the mind: S. Augustine's theory of knowledge* (Lexington, 1969); *id.* art. Illumination divine: *Encyclopédie S. Augustin* (Paris, 2005), 725-8.

³ See R.H. Nash, Some philosophic sources of Augustine's illumination theory: *Augustinian Studies* 2 (1971) 47-66.

⁴ F. Körner, Abstraktion oder Illumination? Das ontologische Problem der augustiniischen Sinneserkenntnis: *Recherches Augustiniennes* 2 (1962) 81-109.

⁵ See G. Madec, La lumière intérieure de la Vérité, *BA* 6 (1976), 543-5, 543.

⁶ R. Jolivet, *Dieu soleil des esprits ou la doctrine augustiniennne de l'illumination* (Paris, 1934).

invictus, and he does this in a magisterial manner in his *Sermons*, in the *Psalms Commentaries* and in his *Commentary on John's Gospel* to invite Christians into the new life in Christ.

The mystical illumination

Augustine did not share the Greek Fathers' view, identifying *phôs* and *Théos*. He did not have S. Benedict's vision of the world in a light's beam (Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* II 35), but his conversion is an experience of light, of creative light, as he says in *Conf.* VII 10,16. This experience has a Neoplatonic framework, but it goes beyond it in understanding of creative light and the relational nature of that light. Furthermore, Augustine develops his account by introducing a new idea, that of *reverberatio*,⁷ that expresses the way in which the creative light comes to him and lifts him up to itself. But, before explaining in *Gn. litt.* and in his *Commentary on John's Gospel*, the nature of that light, which corresponds to that of vision (*Gn. litt.* XII 27,54), Augustine studies the spiritual light and, for him, as for the Neoplatonists, the light is spiritual before being sensible.⁸ As he says in *Letter* 120, §10: 'This light, where we see all of that is not a sun's beam, it is like to no other light that strikes our eyes, but invisibly and unutterably, it shines in an intelligible way and is as real as all we can see with it.'

This light is unique, transcendent, it is God himself, who invites us to take part of his life. Augustine explains this in *civ.* X 1 (BA 34, pp. 423-5), where he says that he 'chose the Platonists, because they recognized that human soul, though immortal and intellectual, cannot be blessed, without taking part in God's light, by whom the soul and the world were made'. Did the Platonists agree with this assertion? They doubtless had a sense of transcendence, but even if they recognized the reality of participation, they never speak of creation in this context, whereas for Augustine, light is created and derives from the source of light, that is the Creator himself.

Moreover, in this passage of *civ.*, Augustine implicitly acknowledges that the soul is created at the image of God. Through Ambrose, he discovered the spiritual nature of God's image (*conf.* VI 3,4) and he expresses it as *modicum lumen*: a little light (*conf.* X 23,33), present in each being, which is another way of speaking of the Interior Master.⁹

Because of his manichaean past, Augustine does not take account of the Pauline opposition between light and darkness. Similarly, he does not comment

⁷ J. Pépin, *Ex platoniorum persona*, Etudes sur les lectures philosophiques de S. Augustin (Amsterdam, 1977), 6f.

⁸ F.J. Thonnard, La notion de lumière en philosophie augustinienne: *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 2 (1962) 125-75, 126.

⁹ D. Doucet, *Le modicum lumen et l'étincelle: Augustiniana* 46 (1996) 45-59.

at any length on the Transfiguration, which was dealt with by manichaeans, but he rather chooses a Johannine point of view.

More fundamentally, he explains that Christ makes known to us the Light, that he is Himself as one of the Trinity, and illuminates us. Augustine writes in *Sermon 78, 2* about the Transfiguration: 'Jesus himself appeared shining as the sun, showing that he is himself "the true light that enlightens all men" (*Jn.* 1:9). What the sun is for the body's eyes, Jesus is for the heart's eyes; the one is for the soul, the other for the body'. Doubtless Augustine is not offering a christological treatise here, but he is laying its foundations.

As for vocabulary, Augustine interchangeably uses: *Lux*, conveying light, and *Lumen*, the means of enlightenment. When he distinguishes them, we understand that '*lux* refers to the source of light or its diffusion, whereas *lumen*, is rather a light, directed towards the one or another thing, that appears thus as mediatory or relational (...). Instead of indicating a clear difference, it rather hints at a distinction, a colouring given by the language itself'.¹⁰ For example, he does not call Christ *lux*, but *lumen de lumine*. Moreover, he distinguishes between a sensible, a spiritual and an intellectual light. Some scholars¹¹ have paid attention to that mystical component of Augustine's thought about illumination, but they have not taken into account the central place of Christ, who is both light and the source of illumination.

Christ, the illuminating Light

It is mainly in his commentary on *John's Gospel* that Augustine develops his thought and explains that Christ is the true light, the light that enlightens every human being, who came into the world, so that he is known as the son of God: '*Illa vita lux est hominum*' (*Io. ev. tr.* 1,18). In a wider sense, he calls him *dies* ('*Quid est dies sine lumen?*' *S.* 189,1).

In his *Commentary on John's Gospel* XXXIV et XXXV, Augustine explains *John* 8:12, where Christ says: 'I am the light of the world'. He conveys the uniqueness of that light (XXXIV 4, BA 73A, p. 125). It is both the creative light, an expression of the Trinity, and the light which has come to us in Christ, who took a *forma servi* to give us the *forma Dei* (*Phil.* 2). It is from this passage that Augustine takes the way and the goal, as he explains in his *Commentary on John's Gospel* 34 (n. 9, p. 139): 'Remaining with the Father, the Son is Truth and Life; by his Incarnation, he becomes the Way'. This theme of native land

¹⁰ D. Doucet, La problématique de la lumière chez S. Augustin: *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 100 (1999) 31-58, 37f.

¹¹ R. Jolivet, *Dieu, soleil des esprits: La doctrine augustiniennne de l'illumination* (Paris, 1934); J. Ooroz Reta, De l'illumination à la déification de l'âme selon S. Augustin: *SP* 27 (1993) 364-82; A. Sage, Dialectique de l'illumination: *Recherches Augustiniennes* II (1963) 111-23.

and way, that we also find in *Sermon Dolbeau 26*, again takes the form of light and illumination. By illuminating us, Christ directs us to the blessed native land.

John the Baptist is one of the first to receive this illumination that is Christ's light: 'He also can be called light, and it 's right that he is called light, but an enlightened light, not the Light that enlightens. Other is, in fact, the Light that illuminates, other the light that is illuminated' (*Io. ev. tr.* 14, 1, p. 717). Augustine paradoxically, uses here the word *lumen* and not *lux* to depict the source of light who is Christ, 'the greater of all the children born of women' (*Matth.* 11:11), John the Baptist, whom he depicts in *Sermon 288* as the voice in relation to the Word, who is Christ, receives the illumination, but he is not himself the root of light. The Light comes from Christ, one does not give to oneself. Augustine says, furthermore, that John the Baptist was himself a lamp (*Io. Ev. Tr.* II 8-9), he also says that he was 'a mountain, himself elevated in order to receive, the first, the sun's beams and to reflect them' (*Io. Ev. Tr.* II 5, BA 71, p. 185). He was a witness to the light, because he himself received light, but he was not the root of light, as Augustine points out in the course of his sermon (n. 7, p. 187): 'By saying that he was illuminated and enlightened, and not the one who illuminates and enlightens, John **made known the one who illuminates, he made known the one who is illuminated**, he made known the one who fills'. Being the friend of God, he directs to God, to the one who is the source of his life (*Io. Ev. Tr.* III 5).

It is the same as with the Apostles whom Augustine depicts as lamps (*lucernae*, *Io. ev. tr.* 33, 3¹²), who receive their light from Christ. In the *Commentary on Psalm 35*, §9, he says that 'Christ threw on the Apostles, as on mountains, the first beams of his light which went down the earthly valleys'. He illuminated them, and, they, in their turn, brought Christ's light.

In *De Genesi ad litteram* 1,4,9, in particular, Augustine considers the beings of light: the angels for whom *conversio and formatio* are one, and he makes them the prototype of mankind. By their conversion, they are illuminated and fixed in their form.

For the human being, it is in a pure heart and in time, that light is received and gives the interior vision of God, as Augustine explains in *Letter 147*. Paulina's question 'to know whether the invisible God can be seen with corporal eyes' (§1) refers to light, to theophany, and implies that leads Augustine to be specific. He explains, that 'we cannot see God either with corporeal eyes (...), or with the eyes of the mind' (§3), but in a pure heart. What is this vision without sight? Augustine does not define what is pure in the heart here, but he refers immediately to the Beatitudes, pointing to that purity of heart that is not so much the result of a personal endeavour than a gift of God, which already allows us to take part of his life; it is an illumination that is given. It is both

¹² M.F. Berrouard, *La lumière et les lampes*: BA 72 (1977) 762f.

the renewal of the image of God through conversion and the gift of this newness that renders man 'able to contemplate God's glory'.¹³ It is an horizon beyond this life, but which becomes by and by real, through the love of God and neighbour. So Augustine looks to the new creation and particularly to the Holy Spirit. Doubtless, he needed time to understand the place of the Holy Spirit, but in his *Commentary on John's Gospel*, he gives Him his full stature. He also stresses that Christ alone is Mediator (I 19). Thus, he reinterprets the theme of the native land and way in *Letter 147*, so that the native land is vision of God and the way is purity of heart, or humility, as he explains in *Sermon Dolbeau 26* (§59). From this theme of native land and way, he studies the light which is God and towards whom Christ leads us, in so far as we accept his design. Thus, it is through the dialectic of *conversio ad Deum* or *aversio a Deo* and the theology of baptism, that Augustine takes account of the illumination, which is given to us (*S. Guelf. 5,2; conf. 13*).

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Light and illumination have a central place in Augustine's work and he uses them as analogies to speak of God and of participation in his life. More radically, he develops here his christology and, from those ideas, illustrates the meaning of creation and *filiatio Dei*, which indicates the theological weight of 'light' and 'illumination' as core themes.

¹³ *Letter 147*, 49.