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## AUGUSTINE ON DIVINE IDEAS AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRITERIA

**Summary:** To what extent, if at all, can we say that the bishop of Hippo thought that the eternal rules function as truth-criteria for empirical knowledge? In the first part of this paper the author tries to show that the position according to which Augustine's theory of illumination provides a theory of knowledge that accounts even for sense-perception is extreme and based in part on a flawed interpretation of the texts; hence it is impossible to regard Augustine's eternal rules as truth-criteria in the true sense of the term. On the other hand, the aim of the second section is to argue that certain pragmatic traits can indeed be found in Augustine's "epistemology". He rejects dogmatism on moral grounds and states that it is the duty of the Christian philosopher to extend his researches to the sphere of empirical knowledge. The eternal rules, it can be said, serve as points of reference for a form of probabilism.

**Key words:** Augustine, Bubacz, Confessions, criterion of truth, epistemology, scepticism, theory of knowledge.

In a number of passages Augustine unequivocally states that it is through the light of divine wisdom, with the help of eternal and immutable intellectual rules, that human reason performs its task of judging (*iudicat*) sense-impressions, recollections based on sense-perception, and concepts formed by the imagination.<sup>1</sup> These eternal rules are for him identical with the divine ideas (*species*): the forms (*rationes*) that served as patterns for God's creation of the world, and are the constituent elements of His wisdom, i.e., His actual substance.<sup>2</sup> Augustine's approach to the divine forms remains largely inside the conceptual framework of mathematics, to the point where he can risk the hypothesis that perhaps even Wisdom itself is nothing other than number.<sup>3</sup> One question, however, still arises: to what extent, if at all, can we say that the sage of Thagaste thought that the eternal rules function as truth-criteria for empirical knowledge? Most scholars deny that Augustine attributed any great importance to

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., *lib. arb.* 2.3,9ff.; *vera rel.* 29,53ff; *ep.* 147. 16,39. As far as intellectual concepts are concerned, Augustine does not allow for any possibility of error; hence he is not speaking of judgement in the strict sense, but rather the their separation from images connected to the body (*discernere, diudicare*). Spiritual substances like God and the soul are able to attain knowledge first and foremost by a process of gradual abstraction from everything that is *not-spirit*. (not-God?) ( *trin.* VIII.2,3. *trin.* I.1,5. Cf. VERBEKE 1962; VAN BAVEL 1993

<sup>2</sup> *lib. arb.* 3. 5. 13.; *div. qu.* 46. 2.; *Gn.litt.* 1. 10. 20; 1.18. 36.; 5. 12. 28; 5. 13. 29.; *trin.* 4. 10. 11.)

<sup>3</sup> *lib. arb.* 2. 11. 32.

empirical knowledge. The most radical critic of this consensus is Bruce Bubacz, who acknowledges in the bishop of Hippo first of all the epistemologist of genius whose theory of illumination provides a theory of knowledge that accounts even for sense-perception.<sup>4</sup> In the first part of this paper I will try to show that this position is extreme and based in part on a flawed interpretation of the texts; hence it is impossible to regard Augustine's eternal rules as truth-criteria in the true sense of the term. In the second section I will argue that certain pragmatic traits can indeed be found in Augustine's "epistemology". He rejects dogmatism on moral grounds and states that it is the duty of the Christian philosopher to extend his researches to the sphere of empirical knowledge. The eternal rules, it can be said, serve as points of reference for a form of probabilism.

## 1

Bubacz cites the following text as proof that Augustine had a constructive epistemology (*De Trinitate* 9. 6. 10)<sup>5</sup>:

*Unde etiam phantasias rerum corporalium per corporis sensus haustas et quodam modo infusas memoriae ex quibus etiam ea quae non visa sunt ficto phantasmate cogitantur, sive aliter quam sunt, sive fortuito sicuti sunt, aliis omnino regulis supra mentem nostram incommutabiliter manentibus, vel approbare apud nosmetipsos vel improbare convincimur, cum recte aliquid approbamus aut improbamus. Nam et cum recolo Carthaginis moenia quae vidi et cum fingo Alexandriae quae non vidi, easdemque imaginarias formas quasdam quibusdam praeferens rationabiliter praefero, viget et claret desuper iudicium veritatis, ac sui iuris incorruptissimis regulis firmum est; et si corporalium imaginum quasi quodam nubilo subtexitur, non tamen involvitur atque confunditur.*

In my opinion, the form of "acceptance" (*approbare*) or "rejection" (*improbare*) that our text proposes does not in fact involve a qualification of truth or falsity. This is clear from examples cited in the following paragraph (9. 6. 11), where Augustine mentions, first of all, a person who is said to have suffered excruciating tortures in order to bear witness to his faith; upon meeting him we discover, however, that certain other actions of his reveal that the real motivation for his heroism was not

<sup>4</sup> BUBACZ 1980; 1981; 1982. O'DALY (100ff.), much more cautious, emphasizes the gap in Augustine between metaphysical and empirical knowledge, and quite correctly remarks that the sage of Thagaste never developed an epistemological account of the way we compare sense-data, memories, and ideas of the imagination with the divine ideas. At the same time he notes "*the Ideas are the guarantors of the correctness of our perceptions*" (100–101) and, appealing to *Soliloquia* 1. 15. 27, he attributes to the philosopher the notion that every true empirical statement is true to the extent that it partakes of the truth (102). Augustine, however, does not here connect the truth of any single statement, that is to say its coherence to reality, with the extent to which it partakes of the truth; rather he says that an object of perception, insofar as it really and truly exists, partakes of the truth. He does not in fact tell us just in what sense we can call the ideas a criterion.

<sup>5</sup> See BUBACZ 1981, 93ff.

true faith. At such a juncture our judgement of the person in question is altered, but this does not change the form of unshakeable and constant truth (*forma inconcussae et stabilis veritatis*), or – which is essentially one and the same thing – the form of immutable justice (*incommutabilis iustitia*), a single bit: the latter, of course, in the new situation will prescribe a different behavioural norm. The “form of truth” does not have any part to play in our empirically-based change of mind – our recognition that the actions of the person in question are not in fact above criticism – but rather in the moral condemnation which replaces our earlier approbation. The second example cited is that of a beautifully curved bow that the author saw in Carthage. He emphasizes the difference between his obscure and confused recollection of the bow and that certain image, difficult to define, that he perceives in his mind (*quod mente conspicio*). The quality of the workmanship pleases on the basis of the latter (*secundum quod opus illud placet*), but he also says that he would be able to correct the recollection on this same basis if he should find something in it not to his liking (*unde si displiceret, corrigerem*). The judgement in this case is aesthetic, but the essence of the aesthetic for Augustine is to be found in the mathematical-geometric aspect of the divine forms.

After these preliminaries, it seems highly probable that the example of the walls of Carthage and Alexandria was never intended as proof that, while the image in my mind of the former, being the remembered image of a thing I once perceived directly, is true, the latter, being a synthetic image composed of many others compiled in the imagination, is false, and that this “preferential judgement” is guaranteed by the eternal rules. Augustine simply wanted to provide an example of each category, of remembered and imagined images respectively, and the preferential judgement is to be understood as applying *within each category respectively*. This is clear from his remark that we prefer *one or the other of these same imagined forms* (*easdemque imaginarias formas quasdam quibusdam praeferens*).

Our text therefore leads us to interpret *iudicium veritatis* as regards the objects of the external world not as a touchstone *by which* we can judge truth (*genitivus obiectivus*), but rather a touchstone provided or denoted *by* truth (*genitivus subiectivus* and/or *explicativus*).

In *Confessiones* 6,10 we find that Augustine attributes first of all an ontological and aesthetic significance to the eternal forms. The passage forms part of Augustine’s meditations on the way in which the things of the perceptible world allude in some negative way to God and, in doing so, praise Him and teach us to love Him. Each thing, however perfect or imperfect, through its external appearance or beauty (*species*) betrays – or in Augustine’s words, declares (*loqui*) – that it is *not* God: in doing so it glorifies His absolute perfection. The soul, the speaking subjectivity, here inquires of the things of the empirical world which of them it loves when it loves God. The question is the striving, the *attention* (*intentio*) of the Augustinian “I”; the answer is the *species* of each of the phenomena (*Interrogatio mea intentio mea, et responsio eorum species eorum*). And so we arrive at the passage that, if we follow Bubacz’s interpretation, is supposed to raise the question of how it is that the same external world can appear differently to different observing subjectivities<sup>6</sup>:

<sup>6</sup>See BUBACZ 1980.

*Nonne omnibus quibus integer sensus est apparet haec species? Cui non omnibus eadem loquitur? Animalia pusilla et magna vident eam, sed interrogare nequeunt, on enim praeposita est in eis nuntiantibus sensibus iudex ratio. Homines autem possunt interrogare, ut invisibilia Dei per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciant, sed amore subduntur eis et subditi iudicare non possunt. Nec respondent ista interrogantibus nisi iudicantibus, nec vocem acceptam foris intus cum veritate conferunt. Veritas enim dicit mihi, 'non est deus tuus terra et caelum neque omne corpus.' Hoc dicit eorum natura. Viden? Moles est, minor in parte quam in toto. Iam tu melior es, tibi dico, anima, quoniam tu vegetas molem corporis tui praebens ei vitam, quod nullum corpus praestat corpori. Deus autem tuus etiam tibi vitae vita est.*

That the *species* of each created thing does not say the same thing to everyone (*lege*: to every created subjectivity) means only, according to my interpretation, that it does not in every case tell the truth as regards the question “where is God *not*”, “what is He *not*”; and hence, by implication, where and what He *can* be. The phenomena cannot address the animals in this way because they do not have a rational mind, and lovers of the temporal world are excluded as well because they are by their voluntary submission to the empirical world unable to assume a position of judgement. The ordered design of the world truly addresses only those who confront the external voice with the truth within.<sup>7</sup> Thus it is the inner truth, in the true meaning of the word, that speaks. The nature of earth and sky informs the inner man about the ontological status of the body. In this passage, therefore, the criterium is first of all the divine Truth present in the rational mind, and only in a secondary sense the *iudex ratio*; its judgement is related to the structure of the created world and the ontological status of individual created things, and does not establish whether any of their concepts or images is true or false.

This aesthetic and ontological point of view predominates in the discussion that begins at ch. 2.3.9 of the *De libero arbitrio*, according to which the senses pronounce judgement on their objects, the inner sense judges the senses, and reason the inner sense. The tasks of rational consciousness as regards the external world are as follows: 1) it establishes the difference between the body perceived, the perception, and any perceptive capacity not actively employed in perception; 2) it performs the function of defining the difference between the object, the perception, the internal perception, and itself; finally 3) one finds the rather vague task of differentiating the objects of perception “according to their limits” (*ea quae sentiuntur suis finibus discernere*). This makes possible not only that we perceive the objects of perception, but know them (*scientia comprehendere*). But how are we to understand the differentiation of the objects of perception according to their limits? It is clear from the context

<sup>7</sup> The word *species*, therefore, here means not simply “external features”, but “ordered appearance”, “beauty”. cf. *vera rel.* 29. 52–33.61. See p. 10ff. of this paper. cf. the translation of O’DONNEL 1992 : *beauty*; E. Tréhorel and P. G. Bouisson’s translation: *beauté* (BA 14, *Nouvelle série* 159.) See also the textual parallel cited by O’DONNEL 1992 (III.169–170), in which *pulchritudo* and *evidentia* both serve as synonyms for *species*.

that Augustine is thinking of the conscious separation (almost a definition) of the levels of being that play a role in knowledge (perceived physical quality, sense-organ, inner sense, rational mind). Reason can perceive (*videre*) the lower strata of being with the help of a faculty of knowledge subordinate to it; that is to say, that such a faculty can inform (*renuntiare*) the rational mind about them, but only reason itself is able, with the means at its disposal, to separate (*definire*) the strata of being from each other and itself.<sup>8</sup> The discussion continues with the question of how or on what basis the rational mind performs this work of judgement, and arrives at the eternal rules mentioned above, which Augustine here calls the “inner rules of truth” (*interiores regulae veritatis quas communiter cernimus*). With their help we can make judgements about bodies – for instance that X is not as perfectly white or as perfectly square as it ought to be (*minus candidum est quam debuit aut minus quadrum*) – or souls – e.g., that someone is not as suited to a task, or not as friendly or as strong as he should be (*minus aptus est quam debuit aut minus lenis aut minus vehemens*) (2.12.34); in this last sort of judgement the moral state of the judge has an important part to play (*sicut nostrorum morum ratio se tulerit*). Furthermore on this basis we can establish that the incorruptible is superior to the corrupted, the eternal to the temporal, the invulnerable to the vulnerable (2.10. 29).

From this we can draw the following conclusions:

1) Of the normative statements that we reach with the help of the rules, some can be explained from the mathematical nature of the rules themselves, as Augustine remarks not only in this work but in the *De vera religione* as well (see the discussion of the similarity of *numerus* and *sapientia* in *lib. arb.* 2. 11. 30–32). The statement “This is not as white as it should be” is surprisingly empirical, but in fact fits neatly into the sequence. Elsewhere Augustine argues that the soul strives in the course of any kind of perception – and therefore even in cases where mathematical laws apparently have no part to play (e.g., in touch, smell, and taste) – for symmetry (*convenientia*), equality (*aequalitas*) and similarity (*similitudo*).<sup>9</sup>

2) Other judgements are of a moral nature, and these are directly dependent on the moral state of the judge, which is partly a cause, partly a consequence of what we comprehend of the eternal, unchanging rules. These naturally have a moral content as well, since they are constituent elements of the Wisdom of God.

3) The rational mind judges the hierarchy of the soul’s various faculties of knowledge on the basis of the eternal rules and even gives each faculty its respective place in the ontological hierarchy of the cosmos, insofar as it acknowledges the ontological difference that lies, on the one hand, between perception and its object, and, on the other, the mind and the eternal rules. It therefore distinguishes levels or strata of being.<sup>10</sup> This conclusion is substantiated by the fact that the proof of the existence of God in *De libero arbitrio* II begins with the axiom that existence, life,

<sup>8</sup> See 2. 3. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *mus.* 6. 13. 38; 6. 14. 44.

<sup>10</sup> cf. *Ep.* 147. (*De videndo Deo*) 17. 41–18. 45.

and knowledge are three different things.<sup>11</sup> In surveying the faculties of knowledge the speculative mind follows the ladder of being upwards from bottom to top. This means that the knowledge expressed in the eternal rules in fact conveys the true metaphysical structure of the soul and the world.<sup>12</sup> That the differentiation of levels of being has a part to play in the evolution of experiential knowledge (science) has already been suggested by the paraphrased tenet that we not only perceive the objects of perception but make them the objects of our knowledge (*scientia comprehendere*). There is no restriction as to the point of view from which they can be known, so we cannot exclude the possibility that Augustine is discussing some sort of empirical knowledge or science. The possibility of such “scientific knowledge” is deduced by Augustine directly from the statement that the strata of being that play a role in knowledge are distinguishable one from the other (*ea quae sentiuntur suis finibus discernere*). He neglects to tell us what distance may separate the two.<sup>13</sup>

## 2

Even though a number of passages in Augustine – especially in the early works – deny all possibility of knowledge of the external world, categorically rejecting the idea that the criterion of truth has anything to do with empirical knowledge,<sup>14</sup> in others – and moreover in important works of his mature period – we find that the mind is able, with the help of the eternal rules, to systematize perceptual data into a sort of empirical science.

The most unequivocal statement of this sort is to be found in *De Trinitate* 12.2.2:

*Possunt autem et pecora et sentire per corporis sensus extrinsecus corporalia et ea memoriae fixa reminisci atque in eis appetere conducibilia, fugere incommoda, verum ea notare ac non solum naturaliter rapta, sed etiam de industria memoriae commendata retinere et in oblivionem iam iamque labentia recordando atque cogitando rursus imprimere, ut quemadmodum ex eo quod gerit memoria cogitatio formatur, sic et hoc ipsum quod in memoria est cogitatione firmetur: fictas etiam visiones hinc atque hinc recordata quaelibet sumendo et quasi assuendo componere, inspicere, quemadmodum in hoc rerum genere quae verisimilia sunt discernantur a veris, non spiritualibus, sed ipsis corporalibus, haec atque huiusmodi quamvis in sensibilibus atque in eis quae inde animus per sensum corporis traxit agantur atque versentur, non sunt tamen ra-*

<sup>11</sup> Daniel SCHMAL (1997, 74) has proved that the Augustinian *cogito* fits into the threefold metaphysical structure of *being–life–knowledge*, and is in no way the foundation of this structure.

<sup>12</sup> cf. *Gn. ad litt.* 12. 6. 15–31. 59 (on the hierarchy of *visiones*).

<sup>13</sup> I would like to allude shortly to the way that, in my opinion, BUBACZ (1980) appeals without the slightest justification to *mag.* 11. 38-ra in arguing for his position. In this passage Augustine speaks of inner and outer light, and of things of the body and the soul, but he says nothing about whether we seek the judgement of the inner light in connection with things of the body.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., *c. acad.* 3. 9. 18ff; 3. 17. 37–38; *ep.* 118. 3. 19.

*tionis expertia, nec hominibus pecoribusque communia. Sed sublimioris rationis est iudicare de istis corporalibus secundum rationes incorporales et sempiternas: quae nisi supra mentem humanam essent, incommutabiles profecto non essent, atque his nisis subiungeretur aliquid nostrum, non secundum eas possemus iudicare de corporalibus. Iudicamus autem de corporalibus ex ratione dimensionum et figurarum, quam incommutabiliter manere mens novit.*

The passage permits the conclusion that a re-examination of the images of sense-perception is involved in our judgement of bodily things. The point of this re-examination is the separation of truth from probability. In this case we must therefore conclude that the eternal forms do, in fact, serve as a criterion of truth. I would, however, like to call attention to the way in which Augustine emphasizes that the distinction can be only imperfect “in matters such as these”, and that the truth in question is only a kind of bodily, not an intellectual truth (in the *De Trinitate* the word *spiritualis* does not allude to the level of *vivere*, but rather to that of *intelligere*). Hence, in the course of empirical knowing we take aim at a lesser order of truth.<sup>15</sup> On this level of being the “true” means only the “probable”; the probable represents merely the potential for error.

Augustine therefore is recommending a form of probabilism (?). The method is one of confrontation of a perception with the *rule of proportion and shape*. We are to compare the physical world of perception with the real thing, its pattern, namely the mathematical and physical laws that govern the nature of bodies. We can grasp these laws in the eternal rules. This process will lead us to the form of understanding that the *De libero arbitrio* expressed as *scientia comprehendere*.<sup>16</sup>

This is the same *scientia* that Augustine discusses at *De trinitate* 15. 12. 21–22, where, after the “si fallor, sum” argument in defense of the knowledge of the knowing subject, he extends the concept of knowledge to sense-perception and even to our acceptance of verbal and written communications. Bubacz also cites the passage as proof of Augustine’s constructive epistemology.<sup>17</sup> All the same, it is clear that here the philosopher is talking about knowledge only in a greatly reduced sense. Knowledge gained through the senses or other indirect sources – in contrast with the kind of knowledge that remains within the bounds of the knowing subject or tries to stretch those boundaries upwards – is not, for Augustine, indubitable. At another point of the *De trinitate* (12. 1. 3) and in a number of other writings as well, he draws a very strict line separating forms of knowledge that are completely beyond doubt, and those that are not;<sup>18</sup> the section of the *De civitate Dei* in which he propounds the *si*

<sup>15</sup> *c. Iul.* 4.14.65, also mentioned by BUBACZ (1981, 94), is a similar discussion of relative knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> cf. *ep.* 147. 16. 38, where the *mens* is the subject of and extremely complicated activity stretching from the voluntary fixation, recollection and grouping of images of the memory and the imagination to the act of passing judgement on them with the help of the eternal rules of which we read in *trin.* 12.2.2.

<sup>17</sup> See BUBACZ 1980.

<sup>18</sup> cf. *ep.* 147. *praef.* 4., *Gn. litt.* 12. 1. 3 *retr.* 1. 14. 3. See O’DALY 1987, 95ff.; KENDEFFY 2001, 195.

*fallor, sum* argument (19.16) asserts only that we must *believe* in the *evidentia* of sense phenomena and the communication of apparently reliable witnesses.

Augustine, on occasion, when discussing just the possibility of how one can avoid errors in sense-perception, mentions the eternal rules as a starting-point for the act of judgement.

A passage of the *De vera religione* (29. 59–32.62) sets the form of judgement that aims to eliminate the possibility of error in sense-perception in the same aesthetic-ontological context that we have observed elsewhere. Just as in the *De libero arbitrio*, here too Augustine moves from the visible to the invisible along the hierarchy of knowledge-faculties, and, as at *Confessiones* 10. 6. 9, he proceeds toward the original pattern of the beauty (here: *pulchritudo*) of the created world. Physical beauty is perceived (*sentit*) by a lower faculty of the soul, the so-called *vital nature* (*natura vitalis*) or, by another name, *sensitive life* (*vita sentiens*) (29. 52). Using the means offered by sense, a higher faculty, *thinking life* (*vita ratiocinans*) passes judgement (*iudicat*) on bodies (29. 53). This latter does not, however, judge autonomously, but rather on the basis of the intelligible divine nature that it perceives, if imperfectly, with its higher “part”: the rational mind (*mens*). In judging physical beauty, the mind works on the basis of one important aspect of the divine nature, unity. This is why similarity, symmetry, and harmony appeal to us in physical bodies (30. 54–55).

Here Augustine, apparently without the slightest logical justification, fits the judgement of sense-perception (*sensus*) – which is to say the mental correction of erroneous sense-impressions – into the framework of his description of the aesthetic-ontological judgement of the phenomena of perception (*sensibilia*):

*Non solum autem rationalis vita de sensibilibus, sed ipsis quoque sensibus iudicat; cur in aqua remum infractum oporteat apparere cum rectus sit, et cur ita per oculos sentiri necesse sit. Nam ipse aspectus oculorum renuntiare id potest, iudicare autem nullo modo.*<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> 29. 53: The attentive reader will already have noticed that while in the *De libero arbitrio* Augustine said that the senses also pass judgement on sense-phenomena, even as the inner sense judges not only the perceived things themselves but also the senses that inform us about them, here he makes judgement the privilege of the rational faculty. There is in fact no essential difference between the positions taken in these two works. The kind of judgement that, according to the *De libero arbitrio*, the sense-organs pass on the objects of perception is of a purely elementary sort – the wholly unconscious reaction of the sense-organs to external impressions. The real subject of this judgement cannot, of course, be the sensory faculty itself, but rather the soul, which by its own striving towards the object (*intentio animi*) informs itself about the impressions that have reached the body (e.g. the sense-organ; see *quant. an.* 23. 45 ep. 137; 25. 48; *mus.* 6. 5. 10; *Gn. litt.* 8. 21. 42; 12. 16.33). This judgement expresses itself in terms of pleasure and pain (*lib. arb.* 2. 5. 12). The inner sense, following on this, judges and corrects the intensity of the perception (*ibid.*) The mind, according to *lib. arb.*, co-ordinates the activity of the different sensory faculties, and is at the same time the only faculty of the soul able to carry out the particular form of judgement directly dependent on the eternal rules. The apparent contradiction is resolved by the fact that, while *lib. arb.* concentrates on the interconnected nature of the different faculties of knowledge, *vera rel.* emphasizes the role of the subject of knowledge as a morally qualifiable rational being. In fact, of course, Augustine sees a close connection between the so-called “conscious” and “unconscious” forms of judgement, in so far as the former in some sense mirrors the latter. The activity of the essentially – if imperfectly – unitary soul is marked, in sense-perception as much as in the contemplation of the eternal rules, by a voluntary striving or directedness. cf. those passages of *De Trinitate* (11. 3. 6–4. 7), in which



At the end of this argument from the visible to the invisible Augustine raises the question of what conditions are necessary, for someone to be able to distinguish real, intelligible beauty from its physical imitations. He holds that “a man equipped with inner eyes and able to see invisibly” (*vir intrinsecus oculatus et invisibiliter videns*) will be “brave enough to judge even the delights of humanity” (*ut iudex audeat esse ipsius delectationis humanae*), which means that “he will judge not on the basis of pleasure, but will judge pleasure itself (*non secundum ipsam, sed ipsam iudicat*).” But this is not simply a question of natural endowments or luck. A person who takes delight only in the beauty of created things bears full responsibility for his error. Beautiful things do not mislead him, since they do not possess a will aiming to deceive (*voluntas fallendi*):

*Ergo corporea species, quia nullam voluntatem habet, non mentitur. Si vero etiam non putetur esse quod non est, nec fallit. Sed ne ipsi quidem oculi fallunt. Non enim renuntiare animo possunt nisi affectionem suam. Quod si non solum ipsi, sed omnes corporis sensus ita nuntiant ut afficiuntur, quid ab eis amplius exigere debeamus ignoro, Tolle itaque vanitantes, et nulla erit vanitas. Si quis remum in aqua frangi opinatur et cum inde aufertur integrari, non malum habet internuntium, sed malus est iudex. Nam ille pro sua natura non potuit alter in aqua sentire nec aliter debuit. Si enim aliud est aer aliud aqua, iustum est, ut aliter in aere aliter in aqua sentiatur. Quare oculus recte, ad hoc enim factus est, ut tantum videat. Ille autem vult mentem convertere ad corpora, oculos ad Deum. Quaerit enim intelligere carnalia et videre spiritalia, quod fieri non potest.*<sup>20</sup>

On the question of how exactly the eternal rules serve as a criterion for the recognition and correction of sense-errors, the passage claims that the sense organs themselves inform us of their own empirical impressions (*Non enim renuntiare animo possunt nisi affectionem suam*), and that this occurs by necessity (*Nam ille pro sua natura non potuit alter in aqua sentire nec aliter debuit*). The same physical processes or mutual interactions of cause and effect that determine the relations of external bodies characterize the relations of bodies and the sense-faculties as well. The laws which govern these interactions are revealed to the mind in the ideas, the eternal rules. So the mind is able, starting from these rules, to draw inferences about which processes led, in a given case, to a certain sense-impression. The argument is similar to the one we find at a point in the *De Trinitate* (11.2.3.) important in itself for our discussion, since here Augustine touches on an epistemological problem of considerable importance, the existence of the external world. The passage argues

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Augustine points to the presence of the will (identified with *intentio* and *amor*) not only in the contemplation of the ideas, but in perception and recollection as well (cf. *civ.* 14. 6. 13–7. 14). For Augustine the soul, if not to the same extent as God himself (*trin.* IV.5; VI.6,8), is a unified whole (*conf.* 10. 7. 12; see KÖRNER 1956; HÖLSCHER 1986, 101ff.). Hence judgement, as an essential function of the soul, permeates all its levels. Judgement cannot in fact really be distinguished from *intentio*: it is nothing other than the epistemological aspect of the latter.

<sup>20</sup> 33. 61–62.

that, just as it is possible in the external world to trace impressions back to an original form, so the mind is able to infer that the forms present to the senses must possess some original form in the external world.<sup>21</sup> Correction is possible, by the testimony of both texts, only in a relative sense, since we can draw inferences from sense-impressions to their causes only with the help of other sense-impressions and the powers of recollection and imagination founded on them. The process of knowing is therefore entirely open-ended; one can indeed say that the theory represents a form of probabilism, if not in the strictest sense.

The way in which, in the *De vera religione*, Augustine identifies the two forms of judgement as one and the same seems at first sight quite illogical: for him both faculties of judgement originate in the contemplation of the divine nature (30,54), even as it is clear that they are completely different; the one being aesthetic in nature, the other factual. How is it possible that both these faculties serve as a ladder connecting the different levels of being, each of which is both the subject of the one below and the object of the one above? Also surprising is the parallel drawn between aesthetic and factual error (*falli*) – for the latter is nothing other than incorrect judgement. The passage does, however, enable us to find the deeper parallel linking the two kinds of judgement and the two kinds of error.<sup>22</sup> The parallel is in fact a moral one. If I err in an aesthetic judgement, I cannot say that the perceived phenomena have deceived me, for these are always incorruptible witnesses; I am in fact the victim of my own mistaken ethical presuppositions: I have made the witness, physical beauty, into my standard of judgement, forgetting that the real standard is the incorporeal beauty of the divine. Similarly, it is not the oar or the water that tricks me when I see the oar in the water and really think it is broken, nor in fact my eye, but my incorrect moral standpoint: I have again made the witness, the sense-faculty, my criterion of judgement when the true standard of judgement is the Wisdom of God which expresses itself in the eternal rules. The purely epistemological issue simply does not interest the philosopher. What interests him is the moral inference to be drawn from any given judgement, correct or incorrect. Even so, or thanks precisely to this, the passage makes it clear that the degree of precision of our empirical knowledge is not at all indifferent. In this important question, therefore, I find myself in complete agreement with Bubacz. I would, however, like to make two additions to his thesis. 1) What I have called “the degree of precision of our empirical knowledge” can, as I hope is clear enough from the preceding arguments, extend only to a high level of probability. Observation of the world of perception from as many points of view as possible and the comparison of sense-data with the eternal forms can serve only as grounds for some sort of probabilism which leads only to a lower order of knowledge. 2) Augustine, in stating the identity of aesthetic and factual judgements, not only brings (perhaps distorting) moral elements into his epistemol-

<sup>21</sup> cf. *ep.* 147. 16.39.

<sup>22</sup> BUBACZ (1981, 96), citing other passages, correctly calls attention to the difficulty that in Augustine the two approaches to the problem of empirical knowledge run parallel to one another. One concentrates on the problem, in modern epistemological terms, of illusion and reality (e.g., “*si fallor, sum*”), the other on the ontological issue, and places the hierarchy of levels of being in the centre of attention.

ogy, but in fact reconstructs the epistemology itself on a moral foundation. Which is to say that he expresses the moral demand that the human mind doubt its sense-impressions and look further, subjecting them to reexamination and judgement and consulting as many witnesses in as many ways as possible. Dogmatism is a sin. This thought is closely tied to the way in which Augustine establishes the association of the lower order of knowledge, *scientia* as opposed to *sapientia*, with *actio*, the useful employment of temporal things,<sup>23</sup> itself dependent on our attainment of certain virtues.<sup>24</sup> Hence *scientia* is intimately connected with the moral and social spheres.<sup>25</sup>

The other important passage concerning sense-error is *De Genesi ad litteram* 12. 25. 52:

*Illuditur autem anima similitudinibus rerum, non earum vitio, sed opinionis suae, cum approbat, quae similia sunt pro iis quibus similia sunt, ab intelligentia deficiens. Fallitur ergo in visione corporali, cum in ipsis corporibus fieri putat quod fit in corporibus sensibus; sicut navigantibus videntur in terra moveri quae stant, et intuentibus coelum stare sidera quae moventur et divaricatis radiis oculorum duas lucernae species apparere et in aqua remus infractus et multa huius modi, aut cum putat aliquid hoc esse quod similiter coloratum est vel similiter sonat vel olet vel sapit vel tangitur; hinc enim et medicamentum aliquod ceratum coctum in cacabo putatur legumen et sonitus transeuntis vehiculi putatur ex tonitruo, et si nullis aliis sensibus exploretur sed soli adiaceat olfactui, citrium putatur herba quae vocatur apiaria, et cibus aliquo dulciculo succo affectus putatur melle conditus, et ignotus annulus contrectatus in tenebris putatur aureus aut argenteus, aut cum repentinus inopinatisque corporalibus visis anima turbata vel in somnis videre se putat, vel aliquo huiusmodi spiritali viso affici: unde in omnibus corporalibus visis et aliorum sensuum contestatio et maxime ipsius mentis atque rationis adhibetur, ut quod in hoc rerum genere verum est inveniatur quantum ineniri potest. In visione autem spiritali, id est in corporum similitudinibus, quae spiritu videntur, fallitur anima, cum ea quae sic videt, ipsa corpora esse arbitratur; vel quod sibi suspicione falsa coniectura finxerit, hoc etiam in corporibus putat, quae non visa coniectat.*

The passage in my opinion does *not* say that “the mind, that is to say the insight of reason” enables us to distinguish without fail, with the help of the eternal rules, cucumbers from aparias, or wax from vegetable stew.<sup>26</sup> Augustine elsewhere (*trin.* 4.16.21) denies the possibility that this kind of purely empirical knowledge can have anything to do with the contemplation of the ideas. In my interpretation Augustine here attributes the following function to the eternal rules: since they give insight,

<sup>23</sup> *trin.* 12. 14. 22.

<sup>24</sup> *trin.* 12. 14. 21.

<sup>25</sup> See *trin.* 12. 3. 3–14. 21.

<sup>26</sup> The latter example reminds one of the Hellenistic anecdote that illustrates the difference between approval and contingent acceptance based on probability in Stoic epistemology. See DL 7. 177; Athenaeus, 8. 354e.

according to the degree of preparation of the mind in question, into the mathematical and physical laws that govern the physical world, we can compare any given external object with them by investigating it through as many sense-faculties and as many points of view as possible.<sup>27</sup> The relative nature of the result is expressed in similar terms to the passage at *trin.* 12. 2. 2, which we have already discussed: “the discovery of the truth, insofar as this is possible at all in matters such as these”. The statement “this is a cucumber”, which, it would seem, ought to be confirmed with relative ease, can never in fact be true in the same way, as, say, the Pythagorean theorem. Here we are dealing with a form of truth better described as probability.

The Christian philosopher, therefore, recommends a kind of probabilism.<sup>28</sup> His sort of probabilism is, however, rather permissive, since the lesser order of knowledge with which it is concerned extends not only to the senses, but to knowledge based on indirect communications as well. Where no direct sense-impressions are available, we are forced, even obliged, to make do with verbal or written information, and to relate each datum one to the other in a hierarchy of probability just as we would the data of direct sense-perception, if only because Christian life is active and social by nature. Faith, based on revelation, sets further limits to probabilism, since according to Augustine the miraculous epiphanies of God and his Incarnation and the miracles of Christ and his disciples must be considered true and not merely plausible; we do not however, establish their truth by comparing our sense-impressions, recollections, and imaginative images with the natural laws grasped through the contemplation of the eternal forms.

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*De Trinitate* (CCSL 50, 50A)  
*De civitate Dei* (CCSL 47, 48)  
*Contra Iulianum* (PL 44)

(CCSL: *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*; CSEL *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*;  
 BA: *Bibliothèque Augustinienne*; PL: *Patrologia Latina*)

<sup>27</sup> The roots of this thought can be found also in the early *Contra academicos* (3. 11. 26), cited up to now only as a source for the opposite tendency.

<sup>28</sup> cf. KENDEFFY 2001 190ff.

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