

Mirrors of the Divine: Late Ancient Christianity and the Vision of God

By Emily R. Cain

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In modern perception, science and religion or theology, respectively, are entangled in a ‘warfare’ as a matter of principle. However, according to John Scotus Eriugena, rational enquiry of nature and faith do not conflict; rather, the former supports the latter and guides it ever deeper into the divine ineffable mysteries (*Periphyseon* I, 511B–C). Cain’s book provides further evidence of how easily thinkers of the past connected rational insights into the natural world with theological considerations. Even more, it shows that the knowledge provided by philosophy, medicine, and mathematics or geometry is the basis and backbone of central theological conclusions, for instance Gregory of Nyssa’s idea of divine hiddenness, which still allows for partial knowledge of God.

The book studies four early Christian authors, two of whom applied theories of vision to the acquisition of knowledge of God, and two connected the distortion of sight in mirrors and the knowledge of the hidden divine. The introduction presents theoretical and methodological justifications, whose importance for the chapters is not always discernible. It also introduces the triad identity, agency, and epistemology, which will be repeated throughout the book in a rather stereotypical manner.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the main ancient theories on sight. It groups approaches of ‘extramission’ (Plato, Euclid), ‘intromission’ (the atomists), ‘non-material theories’ (mainly the Stoics and Galen), and the role of vision in the Bible, which, however, is of lesser consequence for the following chapters. Chapter 2 presents Tertullian, who describes the active, perfect vision of God in Stoic terms and uses Epicurean ideas to explain the passive vision of humans, which becomes corrupted by evil sights. Tertullian differentiates men, women, and their respective sinfulness using visual theories. While male vision is still partially intact since it retains traces of active sight, female vision is entirely corrupted because their wholly passive vision is unprotected against evil. Chapter 3 discusses Clement of Alexandria, who famously compared baptism to cataract surgery. Cain shows how Clement combines Plato’s extramission, the atomists’ intromission, and Galen’s and Celsus’ descriptions of cataract surgery in ancient times. Analogous to a cataract surgery, baptism restores the ability to see God properly, which leads to the transformation of the baptised.

In chapter 4, the attention turns to the indirect and distorted vision through mirrors. Along with a short description of ancient mirrors, the chapter explores scientific (Lucretius, Ptolemy), moral (e.g. Plato, Seneca), and biblical aspects (prominently 1 Cor 13:12) as well as Plotinus’ metaphor of creation as a mirror of the eternal forms. This chapter is the basis for the following reflections. Chapter 5 outlines how Gregory of Nyssa employs theories of vision and mirrors to develop his idea of the hidden God who nevertheless can be partially known. Gregory transforms Plotinus’ metaphor by understanding the human soul as a mirror of the divine. Like a mirror, the soul, as the image of God, reflects the original only ‘dimly’. However, using atomist intromission, Gregory holds that this partial vision is real and impacts the viewer. Stoic active vision then leads to Gregory’s suggestion that the believer can ‘polish’ the ‘mirror’ of his soul through virtue and ascetic life to see somewhat clearer. Chapter 6 enlightens Augustine’s ideas of human will, divine grace, sin, and salvation by grounding them in Platonic and Stoic theories of vision and the understanding of a mirror as an optical illusion and hindrance. The latter serves as an analogy for spiritual vision, which is corrupted by sin.

Chapter 7 aims to weave together different threads from the previous chapters, focusing on ‘subjectivity’, ‘perception’, and ‘chronological patterns’. While the latter two provide some fresh and intriguing insights, the first section feels somewhat repetitive. This may be connected to one of the book's major issues: the lack of clarification of key concepts. The term ‘subjectivity’ is usually used throughout the book to denote the subjective nature of human vision. Yet in some places, such as chapter 7, it appears to refer to a theory of subjectivity, as it comprises the elements ‘agency, identity, and epistemology’. This can leave the reader wondering at times which meaning is being used. The concepts ‘agency, identity, and epistemology’ are equally underdetermined, often used in a formulaic way in the section’s introductions or conclusions without connection to the actual investigation (e.g. p. 161). In chapter 7, Cain attempts to relate them to the findings of the previous chapters. But the application is rather superficial and does not yield significant new insights. The lack of clarification also causes surprising applications. In chapter 3, for instance, the lack of spiritual vision in the heathen is labelled ‘identity’ (p. 72). Another issue is the book’s repetitiveness: The chapters’ introductions anticipate the results by outlining the investigation, its method, and content, followed by the actual investigation, and a final summary of the findings. The theories of vision are also frequently reiterated throughout the book, often presented as entirely new, including identical footnotes and quotations, to which further information is added as required. While some readers may appreciate this method, the dispersed description makes it difficult to grasp the full picture of the theories. Finally, some conclusions appear rather overstretched – such as interpreting the resolution of optical illusions or the inability to see God in Augustine as ‘hope’ (pp. 139–43).

Despite all this, the book offers intriguing insights into how central theological ideas are rooted in natural theories of vision, optics, and mirrors. Anyone seeking a deeper understanding of how the ancient authors understood the formation of knowledge through seeing, both physical and spiritual, will find a wealth of treasures in this book.

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