Reading and Seeing: A Reply to Van Fleteren

Frederick Van Fleteren has written a very combative review of my book, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*.[1] Well, there are things to be learned from good intellectual combat. So here I take up some of Van Fleteren's challenges, proceeding in roughly his order from a methodological battle to a substantive one (with some minor skirmishes in the footnotes). The methodological battle (I) is about Augustine's reading, the substantive battle (II) about the vision of God. I conclude (III) with some remarks about the theological challenge posed by a critical reading of Augustinian inwardness such as I propose.

I.

Van Fleteren describes my book as an attempt at *Quellenforschung*, research into sources (p. 279). This is not quite right. I am a philosopher not a philologist, and though I admit to poaching now and then on the *Quellenforschers* territory I do not really claim competence there. So I have nothing really new to say about which Neoplatonist sources Augustine read, for instance, but rather dwell on how he read them—for that is where the philosophical action is if we want to understand how Augustine's thought developed. And my book is about how Augustine's thought developed with regard to one particular concept, the self as a private inner space.

My principal claim about sources is that Augustine found a concept of inward turn in Plotinus. My key claim about how he read them is that he liked this concept very much, gave it a great deal of critical attention (some of which we can trace in his texts) and eventually transformed it into a new and distinctively Augustinian concept of the self as private inner space. Van Fleteren's principal criticism of my treatment of Augustine's sources, on the other hand, is that I overemphasize Plotinus and virtually ignore Porphyry. Perhaps you can see why we are at cross purposes. Being no philologist, I am not in the business of "emphasizing" the influence of Plotinus or Porphyry or anyone else. I especially shy away from assessing the importance of texts that are no longer extant, such as Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles*, since hypotheses about such things can only be confirmed by a level of highly-educated guesswork that is quite beyond

1. *Augustinian Studies* 33/2 (2002) pp. 279–286.

my competence.[2] For related reasons Porphyry's *Sentences*, which is extant, is not particularly useful for my purposes, as the *Quellenforscher* inform us that it consists largely of excerpts and summaries of Plotinus. A good *Quellenforscher* might be able to determine with some precision which features of this text are distinctively Porphyrian, but that is happily not my job.

Instead I turn to Plotinus, where I find a concept of inward turn set forth in extant texts of great depth and power, at least some of which Augustine surely knew. Now I can breathe a sigh of relief and read like a philosopher, which is what Augustine did. Nor do I need to determine exactly which Plotinian treatises Augustine read, for the notion of inward turn is found in a great many of them.[3] Thus when I cite a multitude of Plotinian passages, as I regularly do in the footnotes, this does not mean Augustine was dependent on all of them but indicates he could have picked up some important idea from any one of them. That is sufficient for my philosophical purposes. So someone who thinks Augustine read less Plotinus than I do need not take exception to my reading of Augustine on that score.

We pass from *Quellenforschung* to philosophical reading when our concern shifts from finding out what Augustine read to understanding how his reading shaped his thinking. Here the *Quellenforscher* poach on philosophical territory, rather ineptly I think, with their talk about "influence" and "dependence." Philosophical reading does not make one dependent but rather gives one something to think about. So it seems to me Van Fleteren need not worry that if we found Augustine reading too much Plotinus we would have "dependence run rampant" (p. 279). Van Fleteren and I are both philosophy professors: when we encourage

2. Van Fleteren is pleased with my "emphasis on Cicero" (p. 281) but would like to see "more emphasis on Hortensius"—another text that is not extant! Again, this misses the point of what I was doing. I turned to Tusculan Disputations much more often than to Hortensius, for example, not because I thought it had more influence on Augustine (I have no expert opinion on such questions) but because it is extant and deals with the concept I was investigating (i.e., the inner structure of the soul).

3. Hence the long footnote where I list my guesses about which Plotinian treatises Augustine read (p. 158 n.11) concludes: "The most important point to note, however, is that I will try to make my thesis independent of minor disagreements about which treatises belong on the list of those Augustine read, by showing that the Plotinian conceptuality I attribute to Augustine could have come to him from any number of treatises. Such concepts as the inward turn and the divinity of the soul are too pervasive in Plotinus's writings to be missed even by someone who has read very few of them." So I do not think I need to claim authority for my amateur guesses (which are in fact thoroughly dependent on the work of real *Quellenforscher*) in order to make the claims I do about how Augustine read Plotinus.

our students to read more of the great philosophers it is precisely so that their thoughts might be *more* independent, not less. Philosophical reading, like thoughtful reading in general, works that way. Its ultimate result is not "influence" but new thoughts, such as Augustine's conception of the self as a private inner space.

The contrast applies to all of us. When dealing with matters outside our expertise we are often quite dependent, as I am when I cite works of *Quellenforschung* in my footnotes.[4] But when doing our own work, the more we read the *less* dependent we are. Hence in my preface I mention with gratitude my reading of Robert J. O'Connell's Augustine scholarship, which I say was like "being given permission to see with my own eyes" (p. xi).[5] That is the true debt of reading: we owe to others the thoughts that are our very own. Augustine, whose interest in reading was to see the truth for himself, would surely have understood.

But Van Fleteren, a long-time opponent of O'Connell's, apparently does not. Much of the review is taken up with continuations of his old dispute with O'Connell, whose distinctive views he finds hiding everywhere behind mine. Now it is true that I think O'Connell is one of the great Augustine scholars of the past 50 years, that he is right about many things, and that I have much to learn from him.[6] But Van Fleteren seems to have missed the part about seeing with my own eyes. *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self* is not concerned with the same issues that preoccupied O'Connell—a point which does not come across very clearly in the review. In particular, O'Connell's concerns are with the history of the soul, mine with its structure; so his central thesis is about the soul's fall, mine about its inner space.

In fact Van Fleteren mis-identifies the thesis of the book in the process of reading O'Connell's concerns into mine. According to Van Fleteren, "Cary states his thesis precisely two-thirds of the way through the book" (p. 279). I wish I had the courage for such eccentricity—but alas, my thesis is on display in the most unoriginal location, right in the first paragraph of the Introduction:

4. And in my bibliography: despite what Van Fleteren says to the contrary (p. 280) O'Meara and Hadot are there.

5. It is a strange and touching moment when Van Fleteren attributes to me things I felt but did not say: "Cary's first debt, expressis verbis, is to the 'late and lamented Robert O'Connell' (preface, p. xi)" (p. 279). The kind words Van Fleteren puts in quotes are not found in my preface nor anywhere else in the book. They are his words, though I am glad enough he talks as if they were mine.

6. It is not true, alas, that O'Connell was my "mentor," as Van Fleteren puts it (p. 279). More's the pity, I met the man but once in my life.

"the thesis I argue here is that he [Augustine] invented the concept of private inner space."[7] The much later formulation that Van Fleteren describes as my main thesis reads: "'A Plotinian inward turn plus a Plotinian doctrine of the Fall plus an orthodox Christian distinction between creature and Creator results (sic) [in Augustine] in the concept of the individual soul as its own space, distinct from the divine intelligible world and separated from other souls.' (p. 155)"[8] What attracts Van Fleteren's attention to this formulation is the reference to a Plotinian doctrine of the Fall, which means (as he sees it) that I am tracing Augustine's interiority back to a Plotinian fall of the soul into the body, a notion which "suffers from its origin in O'Connell" (p. 285).

But a little attention to context would reveal that what particularly interested me about the Plotinian Fall is not O'Connell's thesis about the pre-existence of the soul, but rather a distinctively Plotinian notion about the soul's ontological structure. For Plotinus the soul, which has a non-spatial mode of being, is capable of a separation that is not in space, and such separation from the divine is precisely its Fall. No scholar doubts that some such idea of the soul's separation from God (not in the corporeal dimension of space but in the psychological dimension of attention and affection) plays an important role in Augustine's thought. And very few scholars have the hardihood to doubt that this theme derives from Plotinus, in light of passages like *Confessions* 1:17.28 (on how the Prodigal Son needed nothing like chariots or ships to distance himself from his Father) which combines the language of *Enneads* 1:6.8 with that of Luke 15:17–20.

Recognizing that O'Connell and I are not frying the same fish makes it possible to construe my formulation accurately. The claim is that Augustine's mature concept of the inner self drew on Plotinus's notion that we can turn inward to find the divine in the soul, but corrected it in light of the Christian notion that the soul is not itself divine, being creature not Creator—and then these two notions are harmonized by way of another Plotinian notion that Augustine found particularly suitable to Christianity: that the fallen soul is separated from the omnipresent God not in space but in will and affection. The upshot is that for Augustine we can turn inward and yet remain separate from God. Unlike Plotinus,

7. Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 3.

8. I quote from Van Fleteren's review, with his additions. Evidently the "sic" means that sentences like "two plus two equals four" are in his view ungrammatical. I think on the contrary that generations of schoolchildren were right to construe the whole noun phrase "X plus X" as a singular subject of the verb. But some skirmishes are more minor than others!

for whom the Inner simply is the Divine, the mature Augustine thinks we must not only enter within the soul but also look above it at the immutable Light shining above our mutable selves—a Light that is superior to us as the Creator is superior to His creatures. Augustinian inwardness is thus a movement "in then up." Precisely this leads to the new concept of a private inner self, a non-spatial world within us that is purely psychological rather than divine. In place of Plotinus's divine inner world (a common interior "space" shared by all souls because it is none other than the intelligible world itself, the contents of the divine Mind) Augustine's inner space is a separate psychological world inside the individual soul. So—it turns out that examining this later formulation of mine would not be a bad way to unfold the thesis of my book, if one read it and saw my concerns instead of O'Connell's.

One other issue where Van Fleteren's contention against O'Connell causes him to miss my point is his defense of the historicity of Augustine's accounts (in *Confessions* 7:10.16 and 7:17.23) of his transient visions of God during the summer of his conversion—experiences which Courcelle famously calls "failed attempts at Plotinian ecstasy" and Van Fleteren usually prefers to call "mystical ascents" (p. 281). The problem is that I never attacked the historicity of these experiences, because I was never very interested in the issue. My purpose was to trace the origin of a particular concept in Augustine's writings: the concept of the soul as private inner space. For that purpose the exact nature of Augustine's experiences around the time of his conversion in 386 is of little interest. What matters, rather, is how Augustine described them in the *Confessions*, about a decade later, when he had a much greater command of the Plotinian conceptuality of inwardness and doubtless a much deeper familiarity with Plotinus's texts.[9]

Hence I think a certain kind of discrepancy between the texts in *Confessions* 7 and the experiences of 386 is well-nigh inevitable: the young man of 386 could not have described his experiences in the sophisticated Plotinian terms that were available to the bishop of 397 (or thereabouts). This is clear from the texts we actually have: the *Confessions* is a far more Plotinian document than the Cassiciacum dialogues written a few months after his conversion. (Here it is

9. Van Fleteren attributes to me a wildly inflated estimate of how many treatises of Plotinus Augustine had read at Cassiciacum (pp. 279–80). I indicated in my book that I found the whole dispute on this issue misguided (pp. 33–34). The interesting issue (the relevant one for my purposes, at any rate) is not how much of Plotinus Augustine had read at Cassiciacum but how much he had read later, at the time when he was inventing the concept of private inner space.

important not to be misled by that baleful phrase, "Augustine's early Platonism," into picturing Augustine's development as if he became *less* knowledgeable of Platonist thinking as he matured. One of O'Connell's most important contributions is to remind us of just this). None of this means that the visionary experiences did not happen—just that they are described in terms available to Augustine the bishop but not to Augustine the convert. One must expect this precisely because the bishop's job is to teach the truth about God and the soul.[10] So in 397 bishop Augustine uses the terms that he thinks most truthfully describe the soul's vision of God, not the terms that most accurately reflect how he would have described the experiences if you had asked him in 386.

II

It may be that Van Fleteren and I are at such cross purposes because we are paying attention to different things. My book is about a concept in Augustine's writings, whereas his chief interest (as best I can tell) is in the experience of mystical ascent. Perhaps in fact he suspects that my account of this concept is meant to undermine the kind of experience he is interested in. Such a suspicion would not be off base. As I mention at the beginning of the book, I do not believe in Augustine's inner self: that is to say, I do not think the concept of private inner space is a very accurate way to describe ourselves.[11] Moreover, I do think that our experiences are inextricable from the concepts we use to describe them, so that people who are persuaded not to conceive of themselves in terms of inwardness will not experience themselves that way. They will have emotions and thoughts, of course, and maybe even visionary experiences—all of which can be described in the language of Plato or the Bible without picturing a private inner world of the self (such at least is the implication of the history presented in *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*). But they will not think of their experiences as located in an inner space, and this

10. Hence in my judgment Van Fleteren's point that "Augustine expressly informs his readers that he had intended to tell the truth" (p. 282) counts against Confessions 7 being a historically reliable account of Augustine's visionary experiences in 386. Precisely because bishop Augustine is concerned to teach the truth about the vision of God, he can be expected to use the most accurate concepts currently available to him to describe it (on this point see Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self, p. 39).

11. See Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self, p. viii–ix, which includes a brief discussion of the relation between concept and experience.

might lead them to turn their attention in a different direction from those who believe in the inner self (a point to which I will return at the end).

It may be that some such suspicion (of my undermining the experience of mystical ascent) leads Van Fleteren to his most drastic misrepresentation of my book.[12] He claims that "Despite Cary's denial, Augustine speaks often of a kind of secondary vision of the divine truth in this life" (p. 282). Here I think Van Fleteren is absolutely right about Augustine's view, but absolutely wrong about mine. My whole view of the structure of the Augustinian soul collapses if it is not the natural place to catch glimpses of divine Truth. In Augustine's epistemology the human mind cannot function as mind without seeing God, for the mind's most important job is to see unchanging truths, all of which are contained in God, "the immutable Truth containing all that is immutably true" (*On Free Choice* 2:12.33). Therefore, in order for the mind to function properly it must be catching glimpses of God all the time. These glimpses are dim, fragmentary and transient, and most of the time we are not even aware we are having them. But of course that is precisely why Augustine thinks we need to turn inward and look more closely at the soul and its powers.[13]

The controversial point (which comes across more clearly in other parts of Van Fleteren's review) is my claim that for Augustine these frequent glimpses of God are natural to the mind, not supernatural. They belong under the heading of epistemology rather than mysticism. Augustine's talk of vision (like Plato's in the Allegory of the Cave, from which so much of Augustine's visual imagery is ultimately derived) originates in an account of education, not mystical experience.[14] Hence when Augustine speaks of the limitation of the mind

12. Another drastic misrepresentation is plainly inadvertent. Van Fleteren writes: "Pace Cary, Augustine's statements at Cassiciacum about the soul as divine are [?] to be taken literally" (p 284). It seems clear from context that the word not has dropped out of the text here. In fact the literal seriousness of young Augustine's claim that there is a divine element in the soul is what O'Connell's writings gave me permission to see. For what I had seen, even before reading O'Connell, was that this claim is indispensable to Augustine's argument for the immortality of the soul at Cassiciacum. No reviewer has yet dealt with the textual evidence I present about this claim. It is, after all, not a major point in anyone's overall view of Augustine—for he soon changed his mind about it—but it is a very important point in the early development of his concept of inwardness. The inward turn begins as an attempt to identify something divine and immutable within the soul, but the mature Augustine must correct this in light of the orthodox Christian distinction between creature and Creator.

13. See especially Confessions 7:1.2 and 7:7.11 ("that Light was within, I looking outward").

he uses the same Platonist metaphor of dazzled eyes that is found in the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysus, but his point is closer to Plato's. When we first see the brightness of the divine light, we are dazzled because our mind's eye is weak, distracted by things of the flesh or diseased by sin. But it is a dazzlement we can overcome by a process of education and purification and healing, which restores our natural ability to see the intelligible Truth. By contrast, the Dionysian tradition (which includes Anselm, Aquinas and other Western writers as well as the whole of Eastern Orthodoxy) traces this same dazzlement to the incomprehensibility of God and the natural limitation of every created mind. Hence the key test of my interpretation is the following textual claim: whenever Augustine speaks of the dazzlement of the mind's eye he attributes it not to our natural limitations but to some defect or corruption in our nature, such as sin. Consequently in Augustine's doctrine of grace, we need grace to heal and assist the soul, curing the disease of sin and restoring the strength of our nature, but we do not need grace to elevate the soul—the specifically supernatural grace of Thomism which raises us above our natural capacities.[15] For seeing God is not for Augustine a supernatural event but the natural fulfillment of the mind, just as enjoying the light is the natural fulfillment of the eye.[16]

You can see why this is a controversial claim. If I am right, none of the great traditions (Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant) can follow Augustine this far. The Catholic tradition has particularly important and nuanced reasons for disagreeing. If my reading of Augustine is correct, then Catholic "ontologists" were probably right to appeal to him in support of their view, rejected by the Holy Office in 1861.[17] Likewise, the famous passage of the encyclical *Humani Generis* that so many thought was aimed at De Lubac may have missed its

14. Despite its immense importance for the Christian mystical tradition, Plato conceives of the Allegory of the Cave as a description of education, not mystical experience (Republic 7:1,514a). Augustine's use of the Platonist imagery of vision was originally meant to explicate the program of education for beatific vision sketched in the Cassiciacum works. See Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self, pp. 73–76 and 83–94.

15. See my "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Origin of the Thomistic Concept of the Supernatural" in Pro Ecclesia 11/3 (Summer 2002) 340–355.

16. See City of God 8:8, where "man's true Good" is "not like the enjoyment of friend by friend but like the eye's enjoyment of light."

17. For discussion and references, see Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self, p. 69. Augustine is of course not the kind of ontologist (like Malabranche) who thinks we see everything in God's mind. It is only intelligible and unchanging truths we see there—because that is the only place to find them. Just as God is the Mind that contains Platonic ideas (On 83 Different Questions, 46.2) he is "the immutable Truth containing all that is immutably true" (On Free Choice 2:12.33).

target and hit Augustine. Pius XII writes against those who "vitiate the true gratuity of the supernatural order by affirming that God *could not* make intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision."[18] But if the intellect is by nature an eye designed to see the light of divine Truth, then intellectual beings *cannot* have any lasting happiness other than beatific vision, the seeing of God that makes us eternally happy.[19]

Van Fleteren wonders in exasperation: "Has Cary read Henri de Lubac?" (p. 282). Indeed I have, but my main interest is in understanding the controversy that greeted de Lubac's work.[20] Why was a deeply Augustinian position like this so fiercely rejected by Catholic traditionalists in the mid-twentieth century? I suggest that the simplest explanation is the most likely: authentic Augustinianism really *was* unacceptable to those Neothomists who took the concept of a supernatural order to be fundamental. Hence the resolution of this controversy, which rehabilitated the Augustinian approach without running afoul of the Thomist strictures in *Humani Generis*, had to be complex and oblique (such as Rahner's "supernatural existential") or diligently add subtle qualifications to Augustine (such as the insistence that he is talking about "concretely graced nature" rather than "pure nature") or work in a tradition where the concept of "nature" need not be invoked at all (such as in the phenomenological account of the human person given by John Paul II).

You can see the problem this raises for Augustine scholars. In making the vision of God natural to us, Augustine is not quite a good Catholic—and certainly not a good Protestant either. But the Catholic point is more important, because Catholic scholarship on Augustine is more important. Great scholars like Etienne Gilson have devoted considerable energy to rescuing Augustine from charges of ontologism, for instance, and still found their own interpretation not quite satisfactory.[21] Again, I opt for the simpler view,

18. Denzinger-Schönmetzer, Enchiridion Symbolorum, #2318 (emphasis added); discussed in Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self, p. 68.

19. Van Fleteren complains that my talk of "beatific vision" is a "retrojection" (p. 282). But of course I do not attribute the medieval term visio beatifica to Augustine, but rather the concept which that term designates. "Beatific vision" means that seeing God is what makes us eternally happy, and no one denies that Augustine believes in such vision.

20. It was my own initial befuddlement about this controversy (why were Catholics at mid-century so intent on contrasting "concrete nature" to "pure nature," both of which were entirely foreign to my Protestant ears?) that finally led me to realize what was so controversial about my reading of Augustine.

which requires no rescue operation but has the cost of acknowledging that Augustine is not what any of us, Catholic or Protestant, really wants him to be.

III

If I am right about Augustine, then none of us can quite believe him, though some of us come closer than others. What Christian philosopher, after all, would want disagree with the old philosophy professor from Krakow who sums up the heritage of Catholic Augustinianism when he teaches that the human person inherently longs for the splendor of Truth?[22] But John Paul is not so enthusiastic about the inward turn, the Augustinian notion that the light of divine Truth is best seen within the soul.

The problem, as I would put it, is that Augustine wants to find the Other within the self, and this is the wrong place to look. When we want to find something, everything depends on where we direct our attention; and when we seek what is other than ourselves, we need a way to look outside ourselves. The Eastern Orthodox tradition does this splendidly with its teaching that we see the uncreated light which comes from the transfigured human face of Jesus Christ, through the icons of the saints whom He has transfigured. The Protestant tradition shifts emphasis from seeing to hearing and directs our attention above all to the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, which is an authoritative external word, to believe which is salvation. But Luther's notion of the power of the Gospel to save us is in turn deeply indebted to Catholic sacramental teaching, which directs our attention to external signs with the power not only to signify the gift of divine grace but confer it on those who believe.

Thus all three great traditions, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, have ways of directing our attention outside ourselves to find the grace and truth of God. My quarrel with Augustine is that he gives us another way of directing our attention, an inward turn that derives from Plotinus rather than God's Word. That of course is not all he gives us, but unfortunately my book is not about all the good things in Augustine (this father of ours in the faith, from whom we

21. See Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self, p. 70.

22. See especially the encyclicals Fides et Ratio and Veritatis Splendor. For the educational possibilities and problems posed by an Augustinian account of the innate love for Truth, with a particular eye on the Augustinianism of John Paul II, see my "Study as Love: Augustinian Vision and Catholic Education" in K. Paffenroth and K. Hughes (eds.), Augustine and Liberal Education (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) 55–80.

have learned so much) but only about the invention of the inner self; so it focuses on the quarrel. Nor is my quarrel simply that Augustine owed something to Plotinus. It seems to me Plotinus was right about a few things (for example, the eternity and omnipresence of the divine) and the Christian tradition has done well to learn a thing or two from him—in large part through Augustine. But when it comes to seeing God, I have yet to get beyond the lesson of the Master (not Augustine's inner teacher, but God in the flesh teaching by external words): "Have I been among you such a long time, Philip, and you do not know me? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

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