Hugh of St. Victor

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- Born c. 1096, perhaps in Savoy.
- Became master and then head of the school and abbey of St. Victor (now within the city of Paris) c. 1110, succeeding William of Champagne, the school’s founder.
- Well known in theology for his De sacramentis, an early “summa” of all theology.
- Quoted even later in the 13th century by people like Aquinas and Klibansky.
- Died in 1141.

Why Science and why Hugh?

- This study of Hugh of St. Victor is part of a wider investigation on the concept of science in Latin West medieval thought.
- From the 13th century onwards the Latin word scientia is used to translate the Greek epistêmê, Aristotle’s term for scientific knowledge in the Posterior Analytics.
- The concept of scientia gets a technical meaning, with thinkers worried, among other things, about the scientific status of the different disciplines.
- Expanding beyond the medieval period, Descartes uses it to designate knowledge that is certain.
- One important question is: is there any pre-13th century conception of science in the Latin West that may have guided thinkers in their reading and understanding of Aristotle’s philosophy of science?
- The answer is yes, starting with Augustine.
- After him, we have to jump to the 12th century for more than just cursory treatments of the matter.
- Hugh of St. Victor is, as far as I know, the thinker with the fuller account after Augustine.
- I use Augustine as a reference for comparison and as the strongest candidate for influence given the general similarities between them. But, see the “Unresolved Issues” section.
- I have also done work on Gauthier, a translator in Toledo in the late 12th century with treatises on the sciences trying to integrate this Arabic sources with the Aristotelian picture, and on John of Salisbury, who had already learned through the Posterior Analytics but did not attempt to study it with any depth.

Augustine on Scientia

- Augustine has a rich yet not systematic account of scientia which he deploys throughout works such as De trinitate, Retractationes, Confessiones and De doctrina Christiana.
- His basic thesis is that the goal of man is to arrive at sapientia (wisdom), which amounts to an intellectual contemplation of God.
- This is part of the ideas he picked up from reading “the works of the Platonic,” as he says in the Confessions.
- He also picked up the idea that the material should be avoided and that soul is basically going against the natural order in which the spiritual should be developed.
- Hugh subscribes to this view.
- In earlier works he seems to think that sapientia can be accomplished with just intellectual work if, for example, mathematics. Later on he gives a definite role to Christian faith in either case, i.e., turning the mind towards God, is necessary.
- Scientia is intellectual knowledge of the non-essential.
- It dwells in the rational part of soul and it is both necessary and dangerous. Indeed, it can be geared towards developing the spiritual and moving upwards to sapientia, but it can also be geared towards the material.
- Sinctly speaking, however, scientia is knowledge of good things.
- Humans need God’s illumination for scientia, and presumably also for sapientia.
- Learning is important for me.
- In earlier works Augustine was fond of the liberal arts as they were taught in pagan circles (especially of math). Later, in De doctrina Christiana, he revises the classical curriculum using Christian themes and puts an emphasis on the understanding of the Scriptures. Hugh will restore the pagan liberal arts to a place of honour.

Hugh’s Scale of Being

Hugh’s theory of knowledge is based on a scale of being with three main classes of entities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BODY</th>
<th>SPIRIT</th>
<th>GOD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bodies are a mix of the four classical elements. Elements themselves form a hierarchy. Earth &lt; Water &lt; Wind &lt; Fire</td>
<td>The spiritual class is also a spectrum with entities at higher and lower levels of being. Entities at the lower level of the spiritual spectrum are almost bodily, but God rejects that there might be an overlap between the spiritual and the bodily. (Hugh might be responding to Arabic medical sources on this.)</td>
<td>God, however, is a single entity in its own class. God can descend toward the spiritual; this is what revelation amounts to. However, revelation for Hugh is not necessarily the Scriptures. The process is presented as purely intellectual.</td>
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Perception and Scientia

- Scientia is a prerequisite of human beings only.
- The human body is capable of purifying the bodily materials obtained through sense perception and use them to generate knowledge (scientia).
- Perception is then an active purification of material being. The end product of that process is an imagination (imaginatio).

This is how the process goes using Hugh’s own example of vision:

1. The eye emits vision rays.
2. Vision rays hit the external object and return to the eye.
3. Internal organs and the frontal part of the brain purify the bodily vision materials and produce an imagination. This is a Galenic explanation.
4. The imagination is carried over to the center of the brain, where, says Hugh, “it teaches the very same rational substance of the soul and excitus the capacity to dream (choriometre), having been purified and made subtle so much already that it is joined together immediately with the same spirit.”

Scientia, Intelligence and Sapientia

- Knowledge gained through sense perception can be further purified until it reaches the level just short of the divine.
- Hugh calls the highest level of spirit contemplation. The instrument through which the soul can arrive at it he calls intelligence. Intelligence is acquired by the divine presence informing reason. So, God’s revelation (see the scale of being above) is needed.
- The goal of the human being according to Hugh is to arrive at this state of contemplation, which he calls sapientia (wisdom), just as Augustine did.
- Hugh’s theory of science is indeed integrated with his theology, the most important concept of which is manuratio (restoration), the idea that man was thrown in the realm of the bodily and that he requires going back towards God through science and intelligence.
- Learning becomes important, thus Hugh’s ideas on education and the scientific disciplines.

Hugh on the Sciences

- Unlike some of his contemporaries, Hugh believes that learning is useful even for the not so bright.
- Indeed, if science is available to all, the path towards contemplation is intellectual and is the same for everybody, independently of whether some may not get all the way up there.
- Hugh provides an update to Augustine’s De doctrina christiana in his Didascalicon.
- The major difference is that the pagan’s liberal arts are now one full side of the education of the Christian, the other being the study of Scriptures.
- Learning is accomplished by lectio (reading) and meditatio (meditation). Hugh does not mean much on the latter, but he does mandate a full curriculum for the former.
- He takes from Boethius the division of the sciences into practical, theoretical plus logic but adds a fourth kind, the mechanical (fabric making, agriculture, etc.).
- The mechanical sciences are still scientia, for they are about the theory behind the corresponding practical activities. Science is indeed purely intellectual.
- The practical and the theoretical belong to intelligence, i.e., the level above scientia, closer to God.

Conclusions

- Hugh is one example of a relatively well-developed account of scientia pre-13th century.
- Hugh’s theory draws upon major Augustinian themes.
- We may be justified in talking about an Augustinian conception of scientific knowledge in place before Latin medieval encyclopaedist Arnaldus’s Posterior Analytics. This conception should be taken into account in future scholarly studies of the reception of Arnaldus’s philosophy of science and Arabic commentaries on it.

Unresolved Issues

- There are still many questions begging in this study of Hugh, among them:
  - What is exactly the relation between science and intelligence?
  - What to make of Hugh’s use of Boethius? Is Boethius a stronger influence than Augustine or is Hugh trying to reconcile the two?
  - Hugh seems to be quoting from Neoplatonic sources, what are they?
  - Was Hugh’s theory of science common in early 12th century Paris?
  - Hugh incorporates medical sources, allegedly some of Arabic origin, did he read more from the Arabs and how did he gain access to these sources?

Sources

- Hugh’s theory of knowledge is in his short treatise De unione, of which we have a modern critical edition:
- Hugh’s ideas on education are in the Didascalicon:

For more information and a full bibliography, download the paper draft that originated this poster from my website:
http://rafaelnajera.com/events/reading-sapia-2014