

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

from Plato to Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine

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Fragility in the encounter with the divine

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Fragility in the encounter with the divine

1. Conceptual background

Heike Springhart/Günter Thomas (eds.)

Exploring Vulnerability

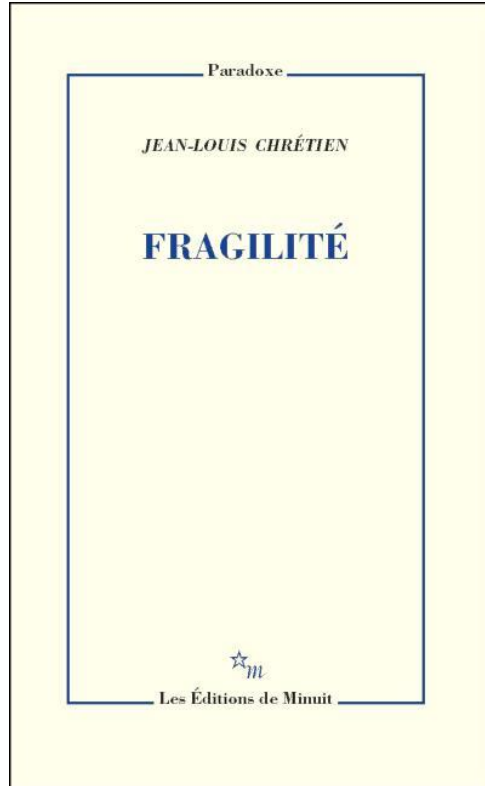


Heinke Springhart (“Exploring Life’s v Vulnerability: Vulnerability in Vitality”, in *Exploring Vulnerability*, 2017, p.14):

“Vulnerability in its complexity, I will argue, forms the basis and the center of a realistic anthropological framework. Vulnerability is the human condition that becomes real in various forms and situations: dying, disease, harm, and violence, but also love, trust, aspirations for enhancing life, just to name but a few of the related concrete experiences.”

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

1. Conceptual background



Jean-Louis Chétien, *Fragilité*, 2017, p. 263:

«C'est donc la fragilité seule qui forme la demeure de l'impérissable dans le monde.»

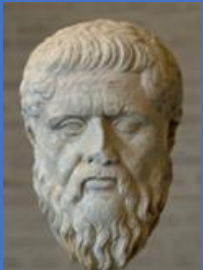
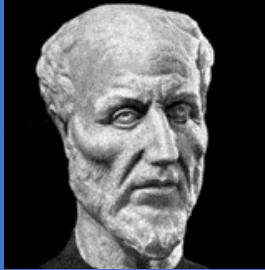






Fragility in the encounter with the divine

1. Main questions

1. How is epistemological fragility depicted in different renderings of the ascent to the divine in the Platonist tradition, including in Christian Platonism?
2. Which are the images used for (1) the human weakness, failure and instability in front of the overwhelming and blinding light, and (2) the difficulty to communicate such an experience?
3. How does the epistemological fallibility ground in ontological fragility and relate to moral impurity or imperfection?
4. How can we compare and contrast the individual or communitarian aspects of these “ascensions” (scenarios of ascent) and their role regarding the failure or stability of the vision?

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

Scenarios of fragility or fallibility

<p>Plato (428/7 -348/7 BC)</p> 	<p>Plotinus (c. 205- 270)</p> 	<p>Gregory of Nyssa (335/340 - c. 394)</p> 	<p>Augustine of Hippo (354-430)</p> 	
				
<p>simile of the cave</p>	<p>ascent to the One</p>	<p>vision of God</p>	<p>vision of Milan</p>	<p>vision of Ostia</p>
<p>Republic 514a–520a</p>	<p>Enn. VI.9.2 – VI.9.4</p>	<p>The Life of Moses 373B-377C</p>	<p>Confessions VII.10.16</p>	<p>Confessions IX.10.23-24</p>

2. Plato. Blinded by the Good?

- The initial moment in knowledge is that of the prisoners in the cave, unable to discern the degree of reality of the images they perceive, taking for reality or truth the shadows of the artificial objects (οἱ τοιοῦτοι οὐκ ἂν ἄλλο τι νομίζοιεν τὸ ἀληθὲς ἢ τὰς τῶν σκευαστῶν σκιάς, Rep. 515c).
- Any attempt to transcend this negative (epistemic) condition happens only as a manner of release or healing, and it is this way of release or healing (λύσιν τε καὶ ἴασιν) that becomes the concern of the philosopher. (515c)
- But the epistemic subject, too long enchained by illusions, too deep acquainted to see shadows as truthful and real, is unaware of the release. He cannot perceive his new condition as a better condition and cannot see the new objects of knowledge (the artifacts) as the real causes of the shadows. At first glance, the ascension in knowledge fails. Failure means the impossibility to correct the opinions of the prisoner.

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

2. Plato. Blinded by the Good?

- This failure is also accompanied by signs of ontological fragility. Just „lifting the eyes to the light“ (πρὸς τὸ φῶς ἀναβλέπειν) is a cause of pain. Moreover, it brings about the inability to discern the objects whose shadows were seen before. The dazzling effect of the light produces this inability to perceive the new objects of knowledge: διὰ τὰς μαρμαρυγὰς ἀδυνατοῖ καθορᾶν ἐκεῖνα ὧν τότε τὰς σκιάς ἑώρα (515c-d).
- But the passage from looking at the artifacts to looking at the source of light in the cave is even more painful: „compelled to look at the light itself, would not that pain his eyes...“ (εἰ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ φῶς ἀναγκάζοι αὐτὸν βλέπειν, ἀλγεῖν τε ἂν τὰ ὄμματα..., 515 e)
- Forced to leave the sight of this (cave) light, to ascend through the cave and to look at the objects outside the cave, the released prisoner experiences a new moment of unseeing, being blinded by the light outside: „and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things we call real...“ (516a)

2. Plato. Blinded by the Good?

- To overcome the effects of this blindness, the prisoner looks at first at the reflections of the objects, than at the objects themselves. Only in this way he is finally prepared to contemplate directly the source of light outside the cave – the sun: „And so finally, I suppose, he would be able to look upon at the sun itself and see its true nature, not by reflections in water or phantasms of it in an alien setting, but in and by itself in its own place“ (516b).
- Only here seems the epistemic fallibility to be lifted, the trajectory is complete, the goal has been reached, the ultimate source of knowledge and being is contemplated. But can this moment last? And how can this knowledge be communicated?
- The return of the released prisoner in the cave shows a new negative moment: he is blinded by the darkness (“eyes full of darkness”), as he returns suddenly (ἐξαίφνης) from the sun. The return to the inferior realities for the contemplation of the Good is a moment of non-vision. (517a)

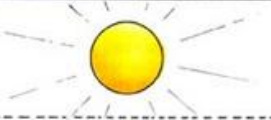

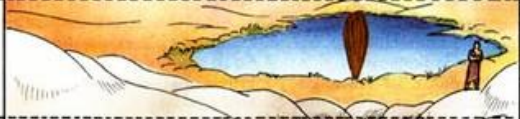







Fragility in the encounter with the divine

2. Plato. Blinded by the Good?

- This return shows also that the experience is not communicable: the other prisoners consider that the liberated one has “the eyes ruined”, do not allow him to release them and even try to kill him. The contemplation of the Sun – t.i. of the Idea of Good – cannot be narrated or explicated; it has to be experienced or lived. (517a)
- There is a failure in the social perception of the highest idea, the Good. Thus “the authentic source of truth and reason” (517c) remains inaccessible for those who do not strive personally to know it.

2. Plato. Blinded by the Good?

Overview

Sonne		Idee des Guten
natürliche Dinge		Ideen
Schatten natürlicher Dinge		mathematische Gegenstände $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ 
Feuer		Sonne
künstliche Gegenstände		Lebewesen und Gegenstände 
Schatten künstlicher Gegenstände		Bilder 
Gleichnisebene		Sonnen- und Linien-gleichnis

<https://www.gutefrage.net/frage/was-wollte-platon-mit-seinen-hoehlengleichnis-sagen-wie-kann-man-das-bild-deuten>

2. Plato. Blinded by the Good?

Overview

1. The moments of epistemic failure in the ascent toward and descent from the realm of the intelligible and the Idea of the Good are associated with the „disturbances of the eyes“ (ἐπιπαραξίεις ὄμμασιν, 518 a).
2. They occur at the sudden passage from darkness to light and from light to darkness – thus, there are moments of temporary blindness, moments of discontinuity in the act of contemplating, when one passes suddenly from the sensibles to the intelligibles, or from the intelligibles to their ultimate source, the Good, but also when one comes back from the intelligible to the sensible world.
3. When the contemplation of the highest Good is communicated, there is a failure of the community in the reception of the truth resulted from this contemplation.
4. There is a feature of human fragility standing behind the fact of being „dazzled by the brilliance of a greater light“ (ὑπὸ λαμπροτέρου μαρμαρυγῆς ἐμπέπλησται, 518a).

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

3. Plotinus. Touching the One

Ennead VI.9. On the Good or the One

The difficulty: „What then can the One be and what nature could it have?“

Τί ἂν οὖν εἴη τὸ ἓν καὶ τίνα φύσιν ἔχον; (VI.9.3).

The One is the principle (ἀρχή) of all, the Good (τάγαθόν) and the First (πρῶτον).

Nevertheless, in her striving to reach the One, the soul:

- advances in the formless (ἀνείδεον)
- cannot grasp (περιλαβεῖν) the formless
- is not determined or imprinted (stamped) by it
- must fear, to have (grasped) nothing at all (οὐδέν)
- has the tendency to descend from this encounter with the One.

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

3. Plotinus. Touching the One

Ascent, vision and epistemic failure:

- The epistemic failure to grasp the One conceptually is due to the ungraspable, incomprehensible nature of the One. The developing of an apophatic discourse on the One (*Enn.* VI.9.3), modelled on the negative assertions of the first hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*, links to the awareness that the One cannot be reached by means of reasoned knowledge (*Enn.* VI.9.4.)
- The perplexity regarding the One is caused by the fact that it is inaccessible through knowledge or thinking/ noetic perception, as it is experienced „by the way of a presence superior to knowledge“:

Γίνεται δὲ ἡ ἀπορία μάλιστα, ὅτι μηδὲ κατ' ἐπιστήμην ἢ σύνεσιν ἐκείνου μηδὲ κατὰ νόησιν, ὡσπερ τὰ ἄλλα νοητά, ἀλλὰ κατὰ **παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα**. (*Enn.* VI.9.4)

- Therefore, if the soul remains at the level of intellectual knowledge it will fall into number and multiplicity and thus „go past the One“ (*Enn.* VI.9.4)

3. Plotinus. Touching the One

- In order to avoid this failure and this fall, the soul has to distance itself from any object of knowledge and any object of vision, because any such „objects“ are posterior to the One and generated by it.
- Moreover, there is a fundamental difference between what can be achieved by teaching (δίδαξις) and what can be touched through vision (θέα). (*Enn.* VI.9.4.). The teaching has a function of orientation, it helps the soul to travel to the vision of the One. The metaphor of the road associates to the teaching, which is an intersubjective process. On the contrary, the vision, associated to the destination of this travel, is an individual experience.
- The vision is a „passionate experience like that of a lover resting in the beloved“. It is an illumination of the whole soul. It is a harmonization with the One which enables grasping and touching the One through *likeness*. (*Enn.* VI.9.4)

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

3. Plotinus. Touching the One

Εἰ δὲ μὴ ἦλθέ τις ἐπὶ τὸ θέαμα, μηδὲ σύνεσιν ἔσχεν ἢ ψυχὴ τῆς ἐκεῖ ἀγλαΐας μηδὲ ἔπαθε μηδὲ ἔσχεν ἐν ἑαυτῷ οἷον ἐρωτικὸν πάθημα ἐκ τοῦ ἰδεῖν ἐραστοῦ ἐν ᾧ ἐρᾷ ἀναπαυσάμενου, δεξάμενος φῶς ἀληθινὸν καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν ψυχὴν περιφωτίσας διὰ τὸ ἐγγυτέρω γεγονέναι, ἀναβεβηκέναι δὲ ἔτι ὀπισθοβαρῆς ὑπάρχων, ἃ ἐμπόδια ἦν τῇ θεᾷ, καὶ οὐ μόνος ἀναβεβηκῶς, ἀλλ' ἔχων τὸ διεῖργον ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, ἢ μήπω εἰς ἓν συναχθεῖς — οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἄπεστιν οὐδενὸς ἐκεῖνο καὶ πάντων δέ, ὥστε παρῶν μὴ παρεῖναι ἀλλ' ἢ τοῖς δέχεσθαι δυναμένοις καὶ παρεσκευασμένοις, ὥστε ἐναρμόσαι καὶ οἷον ἐφάψασθαι καὶ θίγειν ὁμοιότητι καὶ τῇ ἐν αὐτῷ δυνάμει συγγενεῖ τῷ ἀπ' αὐτοῦ· ὅταν οὕτως ἔχη, ὡς εἶχεν, ὅτε ἦλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, ἤδη δύναται ἰδεῖν ὡς πέφυκεν ἐκεῖνος θεατὸς εἶναι — εἰ οὖν μήπω ἐστὶν ἐκεῖ, ἀλλὰ διὰ ταῦτά ἐστιν ἔξω, ἢ δι' ἔνδειαν τοῦ παιδαγωγοῦντος λόγου καὶ πίστιν περὶ αὐτοῦ παρεχομένου, δι' ἐκεῖνα μὲν αὐτὸν ἐν αἰτία τιθέσθω, καὶ πειράσθω ἀποστὰς πάντων μόνος εἶναι, ἃ δὲ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἀπιστεῖ ἐλλείπων, ὥδε διανοεῖσθω.

(VI.9.4. lines 16-35)

3. Plotinus. Touching the One

Overview

- Plotinus sees the highest form of knowledge as surpassing any intellectual knowledge and any endeavors of reason and thinking.
- The immediate experience of the One is considered in terms of vision and occurs after a contemplative ascent to the One, which requires an effort of interiorisation and separation from any object of knowledge and vision inferior to the One.
- The imagery of an encompassing light, of resting in love and touching through likeness (resemblance) helps to depict the immediate and intimate union with the One.
- Failure in this experience is caused by the fragility of the soul, who falls back into the multiplicity of reasonable thinking, or who is not yet freed by any „burden which hinders the vision“ (*Enn.* VI.9.4).

3. Plotinus. Touching the One

Overview

- For any failure in reaching the One *only the soul is to blame*:
 - it has not *purified* itself enough from all that hinders the ultimate vision;
 - it has probably not ascended *alone* but has taken something that constitutes a burden to the vision;
 - it is not enough *recollected* in itself and has not yet reached the inner unity necessary to bear the similarity (likeness) to the One and to approach it in the virtue of this similarity.
- The failure of the mystical experience resides ultimately in the *fragile constitution of the soul*.

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

4. Gregory of Nyssa. Seeing in not seeing

- *De vita Moysis* 373B-377C presents the ascent of the soul to the vision of God. The presupposition for this ascent is the purification of the soul. Only the purity of the soul is the way towards the highest knowledge (373B): the one who wants to reach the vision of the Being, must be pure in everything.
- The ascent of the soul is depicted in biblical imagery, which is attributed a spiritual meaning:

Image	Allegorical meaning
Cloths	The (pure) life
Animals	The unreasonable sense-perceptions
Mountain	The ineffable knowledge of God (<i>theognosia/ theologia</i>)
Moses	The soul in its ascent to God

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

4. Gregory of Nyssa. Seeing in not seeing

The goal of the ascent is the „contemplation of the transcendent nature“ (τῆς ὑπερκειμένης φύσεως θεωρία, *De vita Moysis* II, 153, 153, 373B)

The steps of the ascent are the following:

1. The life separated from sensible pleasures (II, 153, 373A)
2. The purity of the soul and of the body (II, 154, 373B)
3. Taking distance from the outer preoccupations of life (II, 154, 373C)
4. The ascent above the knowledge coming from the senses in the contemplation of the intelligibles (τὸ ὑπερβῆναι τὴν ἐξ αἰσθήσεως γιγνομένην γνῶσιν ἐν τῇ τῶν νωητῶν θεωρία, II, 156, 373C).
5. The contemplation of God which transcends not only the activity of the senses, but also the activity of the intelligence (II, 157, 373D).

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

4. Gregory of Nyssa. Seeing in not seeing

Failure in the ascent of the soul toward God (failure in the penetration of divine mysteries, II, 160, 376B) may occur because:

1. The human beings are not enough purified of their past actions, so they do not have a purified life (II, 161, 176C).
2. They have dared to start the ascent to God, but have not left behind the animal sensibility (II, 161, 176C).
3. They have not yet purified their thoughts, so their thoughts attack them as stones and lapidate them. (II, 161, 176C).

The reasons for failure in the ascent are partly similar with the reasons causing the fall away from the One in Plotinus. However, strong ascetical meanings are intertwined with the reasons that bear Platonic echoes.

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

4. Gregory of Nyssa. Seeing in not seeing

- But even for the one who “succeeds” in the ascent, it remains legitimate to ask: does this soul have full access to the light of God? In fact, to advance toward the vision of God means at the same time to advance towards the awareness of the invisibility of the divine nature (II, 162, 376D-377A). By interiorisation and by transcending the senses and the intelligibles, the way of contemplation leads into the “invisible and unknowable”:

Καταλιπῶν γὰρ πᾶν τὸ φαινόμενον, οὐ μόνον ὅσα καταλαμβάνει ἡ αἴσθησις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅσα ἡ διάνοια δοκεῖ βλέπειν, αἰεὶ πρὸς τὸ ἐνδότερον ἵεται, ἕως ἂν διαδύῃ τῇ πολυπραγμοσύνῃ τῆς διανοίας πρὸς τὸ ἀθέατόν τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον κάκαϊ τὸν Θεὸν ἴδῃ. (II, 163, 377A).

- The real knowledge is therefore “seeing in not seeing”: τὸ ἰδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν (II, 163, 377A). This is neither the expression of epistemic failure, nor of the fragility of the human subject. It represents the mere condition of vision resulting from the incomprehensible nature of the divine. Ultimately, God is separated from everything “by its incomprehensibility as by darkness” (II, 163, 377, Cf. Philo of Alexandria, *Poster.* 15)

4. Gregory of Nyssa. Seeing in not seeing

Overview

- In *De vita Moysis*, the ascent of the soul is presented in biblical imagery, which is endowed with allegorical or spiritual meaning.
- The gradual ascent to the vision of God involves the separation from sensible pleasures and worldly preoccupations, the purity of body and soul, and the ascent beyond the knowledge provided by the sense perceptions and by the reasoning intellect.
- Failure in this ascent is caused by insufficient purification in action, sensibility and thought (intellectual activity). Past actions, animal sensibility and impure thoughts disturb or totally compromise the ascent.
- But even the “successful” (accomplished) ascent involves the negativity of seeing and knowledge: the real vision is an encounter with the invisible (τὸ ἀθέατόν) and the real knowledge is an encounter with the incomprehensible (τὸ ἀκατάληπτον).

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

5. Augustine. The failed ascent (Milan)

Confessions VII.10.16:

- The ascent to the divinity, which follows the reading of the „Platonic books“, has an intellectual or noetic fabric and integrates a set of motives from the Plotinian ascent.
- The ascent starts from the interiorisation, from the return to the self (*redire ad memet ipsum*, Cf. Plot. *Enn.* V.1.1.) and the entrance in the innermost regions of the self (*intraui in intima mea*).
- The ascent means seeing, above the eye of the soul, the immutable light which is beyond and above the human mind (*mens*).
- This immutable light is categorically different and incomparable in brilliance and magnitude to any other physically perceptible light (*Non hoc illa erat, sed aliud, aliud ualde ab istis omnibus*). (Cf. Plot. *Enn.* V.3.9; V.3.12)

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

5. Augustine. The failed ascent (Milan)

Conf. VII. 10.15:

Et inde admonitus redire ad memet ipsum intraui in intima mea duce te et potui, quoniam factus es adiutor meus. Intraui et uidi qualicumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam **lucem incommutabilem**, non hanc uulgarem et conspicuam omni carni nec quasi ex eodem genere grandior erat, tamquam si ista multo multoque clarius claresceret totumque occuparet magnitudine. Non hoc illa erat, sed aliud, aliud ualde ab istis omnibus. Nec ita erat **supra mentem meam**, sicut oleum super aquam nec sicut caelum super terram, sed superior, quia ipsa fecit me, et ego inferior, quia factus ab ea. Qui nouit ueritatem, nouit eam, et qui nouit eam, nouit aeternitatem. Caritas nouit eam. O aeterna ueritas et uera caritas et cara aeternitas! Tu es Deus meus, tibi suspiro die ac nocte. Et cum te primum cognoui, tu assumpsisti me, ut uiderem esse, quod uiderem, et nondum me esse, qui uiderem. Et reuerberasti **infirmi- tatem aspectus mei radians in me uehementer**, et contremui amore et horrore; et inueni longe me esse a te **in regione dissimilitudinis...**

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

5. Augustine. The failed ascent (Milan)

Confessions VII.10.16:

- This light, which transcends the mind, can be known through love (*caritas*). (Cf. Plot. *Enn.* VI.9.4; *Enn.* VI.9.9.46; also *Enn.* I.6.7.2)
- The ascent to this light ends in a shattering of the „weakness of my sight“ (*infirmitas aspectus mei*) through the powerful radiance of the light; it therefore produces a trembling with love and awe (*contremui amore et horrore*) (Cf. Plot. *Enn.* I.6.7.12-19). This shock and the trembling are expressions of the fragility of the self in this experience.
- After this experience, the self understands itself as being in the „region of dissimilarity“ (*in regione dissimilitudinis*) (Plat. *Rep.* 273d; Plot. *Enn.* I.8.13.15). The Plotinian image of reaching the harmony and union with the divine One through likeness (*Enn.* VI.9.4.) underpins Augustine’s image of failure to unite with the divine.

5. Augustine. The failed ascent (Milan)

Overview

- The ascent through interiorisation by intellectual endeavor is deemed to fail.
- This solitary movement brings a vision of the immutable light, incomparable to any other light and ungraspable in mental categories, but this vision cannot last because of the infirmity of the human sight.
- This vision also brings the self to understand that it is exiled in the region of dissimilarity to the divine. The self sees itself in the region of non being, while God is Being.
- To reach similarity to God means reaching him through love, *caritas*.

5. Augustine. The accomplished ascent (Ostia)

Confessions IX.10.23:

- Augustine and his mother Monica, whose departure from this world is imminent, have a very intimate conversation near a window opening to a garden in Ostia.
- The setting is different from the vision in VII.10.16: not only that there is a human togetherness in the search of the truth, but Augustine records the presence of the truth itself guiding this togetherness.
- The truth searched for regards the „quality of the eternal life“, inaccessible to the eye, ear or even heart of the human (cf. 1 Cor. 2.9).
- There is a synergy between the heart of the two persons, which drank from the „spring of life“ (Ps. 35.10), and their intellectual attempt to capture the most high realities:

Sed inhiabamus ore cordis in superna fluentia fontis tui, fontis vitae, qui est apud te, ut inde pro captu nostro aspersi quoquo modo rem tantam cogitaremus. (IX.10.23)

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

5. Augustine. The accomplished ascent (Ostia)

Confessions IX.10.24:

Cumque ad eum finem sermo perduceretur, ut carnalium sensuum delectatio quantalibet in quantalibet luce corporea prae illius uitae iucunditate non comparatione, sed ne commemoratione quidem digna uideretur, erigentes nos **ardentiore affectu** in id ipsum perambulauimus gradatim cuncta corporalia et ipsum caelum, unde sol et luna et stellae lucent super terram. Et adhuc **ascendebamus** interius cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua et uenimus in mentes nostras et **transcendimus** eas, ut **attingeremus regionem ubertatis indeficientis**, ubi pascis Israel in aeternum ueritate pabulo, et ibi uita sapientia est, per quam fiunt omnia ista, et quae fuerunt et quae futura sunt, et ipsa non fit, sed sic est, ut fuit, et sic erit semper. Quin potius fuisse et futurum esse non est in ea, sed esse solum, quoniam aeterna est; nam fuisse et futurum esse non est aeternum. Et dum loquimur et inhiamus illi, **attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis**; et suspirauimus et reliquimus ibi religatas primitias spiritus et **remeauimus ad strepitum oris nostri, ubi uerbum et incipitur et finitur**. Et quid simile Verbo tuo, Domino nostro, in se permanenti sine uetustate atque innouanti omnia?

5. Augustine. The accomplished ascent (Ostia)

Confessions IX.10.24:

- The conversant persons leave behind the physical world and are lifted „by ardent affection towards eternal being itself“.
- The ascent makes them gradually transcend: the corporeal objects, the heaven, the interiority of their own minds, until they reach the „region of inexhaustible abundance“ (*attingeremus regionem ubertatis indeficientis*) and „the life of wisdom by which all creatures come into being“ (*uita sapientia... per quam fiunt omnia ista*).
- This touching upon the region of abundance stays in visible contrast to the self left in the region of dissimilarity in *Conf. VII.10.16*. The (participative) encounter with the source of life and being contrasts with the discovery of the self as not yet being in *Conf. VII.10.16*.
- The divine reality of the eternal life is touched „by a moment of total concentration of the heart“. It is a spiritually fruitful encounter: the return from this experience leaves behind „the firstfruits of the Spirit“ (Rom. 8.23). Moreover, the return from the ineffable is marked by the use of human speech, delimited through beginning and end of language units.

5. Augustine. The accomplished ascent (Ostia) u^b

Overview

- This ascent has a communitarian dimension: two persons are united in the search of the truth in the presence of the truth.
- The intellectual endeavors are coupled with a movements of the heart, as the heart is made permeable to the experience of the divine through God's grace.
- The ascent through the mind is completed by a movement which transcends the mind itself. This movement belongs to the heart (*toto ictu cordis*), which alone allows to touch the divine reality.
- This touch cannot last in time; but it is a fruitful experience – and even if the „firstfruits“ are left behind, they constitute a sign of achievement or accomplishment.
- The return from the ineffable to articulated language marks the end of the experience, and speaks for human incapacity to remain eternally in this mystical experience while still in the bodily condition.

Fragility in the encounter with the divine

6. Concluding remarks. Perspectives...

(Tentative) Answers to the main research questions:

1. Epistemic failure is depicted as: incapacity to perceive/discern the objects of knowledge at the “sudden” passage in the different stages of the ascent (Plato), impossibility to complete the journey to the divine (Plotinus, Gregory of Nyssa), failure to acquire the similarity to God (Augustine), and incapacity to reach God alone through the endeavors of the intellect/mind (Augustine).
2. The images used for the human weakness, failure and instability include: blindness (Plato), fall in multiplicity (Plotinus), lapidating by impure thoughts (Gregory of Nyssa), the exile in the region of dissimilarity (Augustine). Several images are used to render the difficulty to communicate the experience of the union with the divine: touching and resting in love (Plotinus), light and darkness (Gregory of Nyssa), touching by a stroke of the heart (Augustine).

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3. Epistemic fallibility is caused by the ontological fragility of the human (the soul not yet freed from its burdens in Plotinus, the self as “not yet being” in Augustine), but also by moral impurity and imperfection (Gregory of Nyssa).

4. If the communitarian dimension is linked with a communication failure in Plato, and with the failure in ascent in Plotinus (the ascent must be done by the soul alone), it is a necessary precondition of the accomplished ascent in Augustine. Gregory of Nyssa depicts a solitary ascent, but is confident that the whole community can rely on the words of the exceptional person who experienced a mystical ascent (160, 376BC).

Perspective: Against the background of a descriptive exploration of vulnerability, I propose the reconsideration of human fragility not in the categories of deficiency, infirmity, brokenness, fall, instability and slippery movements, but in the light of the transformative potential of fragility. Thus, this perspective sheds light on fragility *transfigured* in the encounter with the divine.

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