



Henry of Ghent and the Power of Inspiration A Chapter in Neoplatonism

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Abstract

In the Middle Ages it was only natural to believe in a celestial, absolute, eternal, non-material world beyond our everyday experiences. Yet for many medievals, theologians and philosophers alike, the existence of such a transcendent reality posed a problem, for how can human beings, who after all belong to the world down here, ever get in touch with that splendid reality high above? While conceding that it is possible to have some sort of knowledge of the divine realm, the thirteenth-century theologian Henry of Ghent (1217(?)–1293) warns us that rational thinking is of limited use here. Instead he suggests another, more direct approach. Like his great predecessor Plato, Henry of Ghent seems to be aware of the, albeit limited, value of artistic inspiration as a means to connect with eternity. As I hope to show, some of his accounts on this elusive subject bring to mind the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. They are also surprisingly similar to the views of the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung.

To cite as

Spruyt, J., 2015, 'Henry of Ghent and the Power of Inspiration. A Chapter in Neoplatonism', *PsyArt* **19**, pp. 68–84.

Introduction

Theologians of the thirteenth century were the heirs of two completely opposite philosophical traditions. By that time, most of the works of Aristotle, which had been lost for centuries, had been rediscovered. They had gained wide popularity amongst scholars and were considered the *auctoritates* (authoritative texts) on epistemology. From Aristotle the theologians inherited the assumption that at birth the human mind is a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). The source of all knowledge is sensory experience, and the intellect has the potency to organise this material in such a way that it can be transformed into the subject

matter of knowledge. The latter will only be accomplished once we have managed to uncover the universal principles that underlie the singular experiences. The Aristotelian epistemology boils down to the notion that knowledge is not about individual instances as such, but about universals. For instance, knowledge is not about individual trees, but instead comprises the universal principles that govern the existence of the tree in general. So knowledge is gathered by carefully considering the individual instances, and by subsequently abstracting from them their universal features.

Now the starting point of the Aristotelian epistemology (the *tabula rasa*) is completely at odds with that of the Platonic tradition. Plato, as we know, assumed that the world that surrounds us is only a reflection of a true reality that lies beyond the domain of our experiences. Knowledge, that is to say the understanding of what is stable, true and eternal, cannot by definition be acquired through sensory experience, but is only achieved if we turn away from the world as perceived by the senses.

The Platonic take on the acquisition of knowledge found its way into the philosophy of Augustine (354-430 C.E.), who modified it, however, to suit his Christian world view. It is specifically Augustine's focus on the inner light, his theory of illumination, that sets him apart from Plato. Augustine distinguishes between different ways of seeing, viz. the kind of vision directed at objects in the outside world on the one hand, and the 'seeing' of what is beyond that world on the other. The kinds of 'objects' that fall in this latter category, for Augustine, include the principles of mathematics and moral truths. We cannot 'see' these objects without any help though. What makes these kinds of objects 'visible' to us, in Augustine's view, is the inner light, which has a divine origin, but is seated in the (human) soul.¹

It is this kind of seeing, and Augustine's clues as to how the human soul can connect with what is beyond our intellectual understanding, that found their way into the theology and epistemology of the theologian Henry of Ghent (1217(?)–1293)² – a contemporary of the more widely known Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Henry has left us with an extensive list of works. They include collections of so-called quodlibetal questions (*Quodlibeta*), i.e., discussions of all kinds of subjects of interest to medieval scholars, and the *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, a list of questions that were debated in the classroom, which were subsequently written down by the teacher (magister) and then later

¹ For a lucid summary of this particular aspect of Augustine's philosophy and its role in medieval aesthetics, see e.g. Umberto Eco (2002), ch. 6.

² More details about the specific influence of Augustine on Henry of Ghent can be found in the contribution by Roland J. Teske (2010).

on edited and distributed by the university. These two works were most probably compiled in parallel during Henry's teaching career at the University of Paris.³

Scattered throughout his works, we find Henry remarking on the ways in which the human soul can connect to the divine. This particular feature of his philosophy is especially interesting to look at, because while he usually follows a rational path to discuss what is essentially beyond the boundaries of our human cognitive abilities, his works also offer some interesting clues about a non-discursive passage to the unknown. From a contemporary, depth-psychological perspective, these remarks can be interpreted as his way of introducing the unconscious processes that are vital when it comes to our contact with the depths of our souls (which in the Middle Ages were projected upon a transcendent reality outside). In fact, on several occasions Henry suggests that logic and thinking cannot get us very far at all, but that it is rather our freedom from such constraints that holds the key.

For our purposes it is useful to first look into what Henry has to say about the ways in which human beings can talk meaningfully about and teach theology.

I Henry of Ghent on teaching theological matters

Although he is a theologian – and obviously theologians are expected to discuss all matters of faith in a rational manner – Henry acknowledges that human beings are not really equipped to deal with the subject matter of theology. For starters, one of the difficulties surrounding the acquisition of theological knowledge is that the contents of our linguistic expressions are tied up with the world around us. To give an example, we normally use the words 'lion', 'sheep' and so on to refer to living things; those are the kinds of things these expressions were 'invented' for. Basically, all our linguistic expressions derive from our confrontation with our environment and allow us to make sense of and find our way in the world we live in. Yet there is also a set of words that are used not only with reference to the world we are familiar with: we do not hesitate to call God 'wise', and 'good', and so on. Now given the fact that our language has a worldly origin and is meant as a tool to get around in the world, it follows that our linguistic expressions, even words like 'wise' and 'good', cannot really be used to talk about things beyond this world, at least not without loss of their 'normal' meaning. Unfortunately, this is the only kind of language we have.

³ Little is known about Henry's teaching career preceding his appointment at the Faculty of Theology in Paris. For more information about his life and teachings, see Pasquale Porro's entry 'Henry of Ghent' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Such is the dilemma that brings Henry of Ghent to consider the question whether or not we can actually make any positive claims at all about the divinity. This problem was discussed extensively in the thirteenth century, in the wake of an earlier tradition dating back to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (6th century A.D), an author famous for his Christianising of Neoplatonism. The latter's treatise entitled *De divinis nominibus* (On the divine names) was frequently discussed by medieval theologians. The central topic in these discussions was the application of traditional names, viz. 'being', 'good' and 'one', to the divine being.⁴ Connected with this problem (which included such questions as 'Which name is prior, the good or the one?', 'How do these names apply to God if God is essentially one?', and so on) was the issue of how we can use man-made language, which is normally meant for talking about the world, with reference to transcendent being.

Our medieval friends came up with quite ingenuous solutions to tackle this question. Some were of the opinion that if we call God 'good', this quality should be understood as an analogy.⁵ Another way out of the difficulty was to declare God's being as completely transcendent, to such an extent indeed that he cannot be expressed in any way at all. Consequently we can only say what God is not. Henry's solution seems to hover between these two extreme positions. He accepts the fact that people do talk about God as if he were something we could describe; again, there are things you simply cannot ascribe to the godhead, such as his being a monkey or some such. So from the fact that you can distinguish sense from nonsense in descriptions of the divine it follows that there are proper ways to talk about him.

Henry's account of the problem then goes in two directions. On the one hand he says that we can talk in a meaningful way about God; for example we can call him wise and good, and so on, without sounding ridiculous. In fact, he even claims that God is the first known.⁶ At the same time, we cannot escape the fact that when we use the traditional names for God, we are actually applying them in a different way than we normally do. The meaning of these expressions cannot be quite the same as when we use them in the normal way. For our language has a 'natural' (as opposed to supernatural) origin, in that it was 'invented' by a human being.⁷

⁴ See Jan A. Aertsen (2012), pp. 101-108; one of the expressions that entered medieval discussions thanks to pseudo-Dionysius was that of 'beauty', which he considered to be a divine name (*ibid.*, pp. 105-106).

⁵ Of course this does not really solve the problem. An analogy is a comparison between two objects or principles surrounding these objects, so an analogical use of a linguistic expression presupposes that each one of the (principles surrounding the) compared objects are known to us.

⁶ For an elaborate discussion of Henry's explanation of what it means to know God, see Aertsen (2012), pp. 309-313.

⁷ Medievals held that a name acquired its meaning by 'imposition'; a name was given to something by an 'impositor' – some thought this was Adam, but others identified a metaphysician as the original source of language. The thing named was encountered in an experience; in

So where does that leave our efforts to deal with the divine then? Several remarks of Henry's leave some very interesting clues that he is very much aware of the limitations of human rationality, but that this particular condition should not make us abandon our attempts to speak of matters related to the divine. Indeed Henry hints that sometimes we need to even let go of strict rational means to find our way 'up'. There are other ways to speak about, and *eo ipso* to come in contact with the divine. Sometimes we need to make creative use of language to communicate what is in essence incommunicable. On top of that the theologian indicates more mysterious routes to the beyond.

Let us first see how Henry assesses our linguistic tools. Earlier on I mentioned the notion of a so called 'negative theology', an account suggesting that God is so transcendent, that there is nothing positive we can say about him. In Henry's works this kind of approach is taken to a new level. In the final part of his *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, he devotes a separate section to the question whether it is more appropriate to use an affirmation or a negation with reference to God.⁸ So should we say of God that he is good, or rather that he is not good?

Henry's take on this issue is nuanced. Of course our author is theologian enough to recognise that there must be positive things we can say about God (otherwise what would be the point in practicing theology in the first place?). Yet his final response to the question is that strictly speaking the other option, saying things in the negative mode, would be best. But when doing so, one has to make sure that one succeeds in conveying the real message. In a previous discussion of these particular passages in Henry's *Summa*, I focussed on Henry's outlining the conditions for the success of such linguistic actions.⁹ But what is equally important in this connection, I think, is that the denials Henry is talking about here, the combinations like 'not good', 'not wise' and so on, are to be taken as symbolic expressions of what is beyond our comprehension. To understand what such expressions truly convey, the mind needs to make a giant leap, and that we are able to do so can only mean that we have an alternative, non-rational way of grasping something at our disposal. In other words, when it comes to knowledge of the divine there must be a source of inspiration that works more directly than step-by-step reasoning.

In the first part of Henry's *Quodlibeta* Henry deals with the peculiarity of theological knowledge. The discussion is prefaced by an account of knowledge in general, i.e., the question as to whether and, if so, how human beings can acquire knowledge. Theology is of course exceptional in that regard, as the 'object' of theology surpasses our sublunary experience. Yet it is up to theologians to teach their pupils about all matters concerning the divine. Now Henry

Henry of Ghent's view, a name truly captures the essence of a thing named. See E.P. Bos (2004), p.p. 83-84.

⁸ This problem is discussed in the *Summa Quaestionum Ordinariarum*, art. 73, ed. by Irène Rosier (1995), 'Henri de Gand, le *Dialectica* d'Augustin et l'imposition des noms divins'.

⁹ Joke Spruyt (1995).

says that when it comes to teaching the Scriptures, we should keep in mind that their subject matter is profound. Henry fully understands that while the Scriptures are expressive of eternal truth, that does not mean that you should take everything written in them at face value. The language used requires careful consideration, because reading the Scriptures can serve different purposes, each one of which require different teaching methods. Just like in teaching in general, it will not do to simply tell people what they need to know. Instead it comes down to sparking a light in the mind of the pupil, so that they can work things out for themselves. In this connection it is important to mention that for Henry the only true teacher is God; man does not have the power himself to acquire reliable knowledge, but can only do so with the help of God, through divine illumination.

What teachers in general need to do then is employ every kind of tool they can to allow their students to start their thinking processes themselves. In theology there is yet another complication, because while the linguistic expressions used in the Scriptures have the same *significatio* (i.e., semantic content) as the ones we use to describe our world with, they also have another layer of meaning, a *sensus*, which is only hinted at. The only thing the teacher can do is to employ different kinds of *expositio* to guide the pupils' minds in that direction. There is no direct route in this case.¹⁰

While Henry's view that the only true teacher is God fits in with the Aristotelian-like accounts of his contemporary Thomas Aquinas, nevertheless some of the things he says are remarkable. First of all he insists that learning is an inner process, that is to say it is not essentially brought forward by a human being's surroundings. These only play a coincidental role, he says, suggesting that it is not the confrontation with the outside world itself that sets off the learning process, but instead our inner way of dealing with it. In that sense Henry of Ghent's approach is comparable to that of Immanuel Kant, who has been credited with the motto that it is not the world that shapes the mind, but the other way round. Human beings can only know the world because they are endowed with intrinsic principles to organise their surroundings, without which the world would appear to us as utterly chaotic.¹¹

So much for the linguistic route to the divine. In the next section I will consider Henry's remarkable outlook on some of the drawbacks of our ties to the concrete world. In one particular passage, in *Quodlibet* II, qu. 9, we find an indirect allusion to what Plato considered to be predicament of the artist, as someone who is lacking in the rational department. In this passage Henry comments on the ineptitude of what he describes as a predominantly 'mathematical-imaginative' way of being in the world, and how this condition prevents a

¹⁰ For a more elaborate discussion of our author's account of theological education, see Joke Spruyt (2011).

¹¹ For a different view on Henry van Ghent's take on knowledge, see Aertsen (2012), pp. 291-292.

person from being a good metaphysician. In the next section I will present the background of medieval perceptions of art, and then closely look at the passage at issue.

II Roadblocks

While contemporary philosophers feel quite sympathetic towards and (maybe even slightly envious of) artists and their creativity in artistic expression, there was a time when a sharp distinction was made between the domain of imagination and that of rational ways of being in the world. Kardaun has shown us how Plato for example clearly seems overwhelmed by the frightening powers of the truly gifted artist.¹² The latter has an unorthodox pipeline to the beyond, elements of which are passed on to him in the form of his artistic creations. Yet while the truly gifted artist is in touch with a transcendent world of eternal beauty and values, Plato will not hesitate to keep him in check. In Plato's utopian ideal state, the philosopher, champion of *logos*, will assess the potential impact of any authentic work of art, and if need be, hide it from the view of the public at large. To Plato's mind the artist has no metaphysical control over his subject matter. The poor guy merely serves as a medium for the divine message and is not even considered sufficiently competent to decide for himself whether or not his work is suitable to be displayed.

Unlike nowadays, medieval scholars (theologians and philosophers alike) tend to focus on the meaning of works of art rather than their function as objects of an aesthetic experience *per se*. This is not to say that the latter was unimportant. Recent scholarship on medieval art has focussed for instance on the important role of the visual experience in an audience's confrontation with a work of art. Quite a few thirteenth-century scholars for instance took great pains to account for the ontology of visual images themselves, among which the images of works of art. Furthermore, medievals were also concerned with the ways in which a visual (corporeal) image could be transformed into a mental image, in such a way that the former could serve as a means to make 'visible' in what is essentially invisible.¹³

Still, what was behind most of the medieval conceptions of works of art was the notion that they were significative of something. What then exactly is this meaning, and how can it be grasped if not by linguistic means? It has often been suggested that for the medievals, artistic works that were worth considering conveyed a moral message, but this assessment is much too narrow. A well-known adage of the Middle Ages was *ars imitatur naturam* (art represents nature). As has been convincingly argued by the historian of medieval philosophy Kurt Flasch,¹⁴ this principle should not be understood in the superficial

¹² For an in depth discussion of this matter, see Maria S. Kardaun (2014).

¹³ See e.g. Katherine Tachau (1988).

¹⁴ Kurt Flasch (1965).

way it has often been taken for, i.e., literally translated as ‘art imitates nature’ (‘nature’, that is, understood as the objects we see around us). For starters, the medieval conception of nature is not the same as that of people nowadays, in the sense of the reality we can gather in our empirical observations. Instead it is to be taken as the exemplar, in Aristotelian terminology, the formal cause of art.¹⁵ The foundation of this principle can be traced back to the Platonic perspective on art, in the sense that what truly qualifies as art is representative of what Plato takes to be true reality, i.e., the world that lies beyond what is directly perceivable by us. Again, as has been rightly stressed by Kardaun and others,¹⁶ the expression *mimesis* cannot possibly be generically translated as ‘imitation’ as is still so often done by contemporary commentators; imitation is a characteristic only of the uninspired kind of ‘art’ Plato deems reprehensible. In the same vein, the medieval motto *ars imitatur naturam* should be understood as saying that art represents the ideal, the true essence of reality.¹⁷

The vicissitudes of the Platonic conception of artistic genius, specifically of his view regarding the artist’s divine source of inspiration, have attracted the attention not only of philosophical anthropology, but of psychiatrists as well. The German psychiatrist Hubertus Tellenbach, for instance, who became famous for his development of a psychotherapeutic approach known as *Daseins* analysis (which was greatly inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl), wrote a fascinating history of melancholy and depression.¹⁸ He was convinced that throughout history, invaluable attempts had been made to describe specific characteristics of the condition known as melancholy, and that studying these contributions could help uncover the true nature of this ailment. One of the main starting points in his own understanding of melancholy (and depression) is that it can be explained with reference to an individual’s condition of ‘spatial contraction’ and ‘temporal constriction’.¹⁹ What Tellenbach means is that human individuals have a natural desire to be free from spatiotemporal conditions, and a frustration of this desire, a getting stuck in the world that surrounds us, could lead to melancholy.

Later on once again a connection was made between the condition of melancholy and the human separation from what is given in the concrete world. The philosophy teacher Aline Feld wrote a book about the historical foundations of our understanding of melancholy, and she too highlights the limiting conditions of human existence that could lead to the emergence of melancholy. She also suggests that this condition has a relationship with creative genius.²⁰

¹⁵ Kurt Flasch (1965), p. 265.

¹⁶ Kardaun (1993); Peterson (2000).

¹⁷ Cf. *imitatio Christi*: this obviously is not a recommendation to superficially imitate Christ, but to follow him, i.e., to do as he does in essential matters.

¹⁸ Hubertus Tellenbach (1974).

¹⁹ These are Aline N. Feld’s circumscriptions of Tellenbach’s labels for two characteristics of the *typus melancholicus*, viz, ‘Inkludenz’ and ‘Remanenz’; see Aline N. Feld (2013; 2011[1]).

²⁰ Aline N. Feld (2013; 2011[1]), p. 186.

Interestingly enough, her historical analysis appears to enforce her idea that melancholy has its roots in man's separation from the divine and that the only way to overcome this condition would be to recognise the 'darker' (that is to say the more hidden) side of the human soul.²¹

Both Tellenbach and Feld mention a specific passage in Henry's work, in which he speaks of the limitations of mathematics. This passage occurs within the context of a discussion about angels' relationship to space (i.e., spatial dimensions), and the question at issue is whether the nature of angels is such that they can operate without being in a spatial dimension. In the course of this discussion Henry comes to speak about people who assume that if angels were to exist, they would have to be entities with spatial dimensions. Henry dismisses this account and smartly explains what is wrong with these infidels. What is so interesting is that he describes these people as imaginative-mathematical types.

Here is the passage quoted in full:

Sunt illi de quibus dicit Commentator, super secundum Metaphysicae, in quibus virtus imaginativa dominatur super virtutem cognitivam. Et ideo, ut dicit, videmus istos non credere demonstrationibus nisi imaginatio concomitetur eas. Non enim possunt credere plenum non esse, aut vacuum, aut tempus extra mundum. Neque possunt credere hic esse entia non corporea, neque in loco, neque in tempore. (...) Secundum non possunt credere quia intellectus eorum non potest transcendere (...). Sic non possunt credere neque concipere hic, hoc est inter res et de numero rerum universi quae sunt in mundo, esse aliqua incorporea quae in sua natura et essentia careant omni ratione magnitudinis et situs sive positionis in magnitudine, sed quicquid cogitant quantum est, aut situm habens in quanto ut punctus. Unde tales melancholici sunt, et optimi fiunt mathematici, sed pessimi metaphysici, quia non possunt intelligentiam suam extendere ultra situm et magnitudinem in quibus fundantur mathematicalia. (*Quodlibet* II, qu. 9, pp. 63-64, ed. Wielcokx)

There are those of whom the Commentator [viz. Averroes] says, on the second Book of the Metaphysics, in whom the imaginative faculty dominates the cognitive faculty. And therefore, he says, we see that they do not believe demonstrations unless the imagination accompanies them. For they cannot believe that there is a plenum [i.e., a filled space], or a vacuum, or time beyond the world. Nor can they believe that here are beings that are non-corporeal, nor in a place, nor in a time. (...) The second they cannot believe because their intellect is unable to transcend (...). So they cannot believe or conceive that here, that is among things and in the number of things of the universe that are in the world, are some incorporeal beings that in their nature and essence lack

²¹ Aline N. Feld (2013; 2011[1]), p. 183.

any aspect of magnitude and of place or of a position in magnitude, but whatever they think is a quantum [i.e., something that has a quantity], or has a place in a quantum, such as a point. Hence these people are melancholic, and they make the best mathematicians but the worst metaphysicians, because they cannot extend their intellect beyond place and magnitude, in which the mathematical entities are grounded.

The passage has also caught the attention of other scholars, specifically people who are involved with (the history of the discipline of) mathematics. For instance, it features in a volume of essays discussing medieval views on mathematics in connection with science and natural philosophy.²² In his contribution about medieval strategies to colonise the world for mathematics, A. George Molland quotes Henry's passage, explaining it as a piece of evidence of Henry's distrust of imagination.²³

Unfortunately, George Molland's rendering fails to do justice to what Henry is trying to say. First, his assessment of Henry's perspective does not fit in with how the theologian discusses imagination elsewhere. In *Quodlibet* IV, for example, he is quite explicit about what the notion of the imaginative power (*virtus imaginativa*) entails, telling us that it involves three elements. The first is a species²⁴ which exists in memory, without which, Henry claims, knowledge is impossible. This species, he continues, is like an 'accidental form' residing in a subject (by which he means something like an 'idea' that enters the person who is seeing an object). The second element is the act of imagining, and the third is the object that is imagined.²⁵ From this explanation

²² Edward Grant and John E. Murdoch (eds.) (1987). The passage is also mentioned in a quite recent volume devoted to research in mathematics education (Elizabeth Freitas and Natalie Sinclair (2014). The volume contains a chapter on historical perspectives on mathematics, in which the authors focus on what they call a "long tradition associating success in mathematics with various senses or particular sensory organs." (*ibid.*, p. 143). Interestingly enough, Henry's passage is highlighted as example of his opposition against a rationalist view of mathematics – this view comes down to taking the discipline of mathematics as involving the analysis of mathematical concepts –; the authors have Henry claiming that mathematical thinking is based upon the idea of something's having spatial dimensions. (*ibid.*, p. 143). The rationalist view was later on more famously rejected by Immanuel Kant, who insisted that mathematics is intimately linked to spatiotemporal apprehension.

²³ Molland explains that the imagination was often connected with views that ran contrary to Aristotle's teachings. One such view, which was characterised as 'imaginary', that is to say 'pictured in the imagination', involved the existence of infinite space outside the heavens.

²⁴ Henry was among the philosophers who assumed that vision is enabled by a kind of image, which is produced by an object and is multiplied through a medium (normally this would be the air, the last one of which reaches the senses and then is transformed into a species in the imagination (the *species imaginativa* or *phantasma*). For a more detailed account of this process (including references to Henry's text), see Katherine Tachau (1988), pp. 29-30.

²⁵ *Quodlibet*, IV, qu. 21, pp. 349-350 (eds. Wilson & Etkorn): "(...) in virtute imaginativa sunt tria, species ipsa a specie existente in memoria sine qua nihil posset percipere propter esse suum organicum et materialem, et ipse actus imaginandi, et tertium est ipsum obiectum imaginatum. Quorum species est imaginativa ut forma accidentalis in subiecto, actus imaginandi sicut motus in moto, imaginatum sicut obiectum in cognoscente." (" (...) in the imaginative

it is obvious that *imaginatio* is part and parcel of what happens when we are looking at and seeing an object that is presented to our senses as existing in the outside world. Given Henry's account of imagination as an ordinary product of sense perception, it would be very odd for him to criticise imaginative types *per se*.

Besides being firmly grounded in the process of cognition, the imaginative power can take on a very important role as a guide in human life, as we shall see (see III, below). So rather than speaking critically of imagination, Henry seems to be talking about a problematic *combination* of attitudes in one person, what Tellenbach and Feld labelled the mathematical-imaginative type. These people are somehow imprisoned in the world of objects surrounding them, unable to move beyond what is presented to them in the spatial dimension. In order for them to believe that something exists, it would have to have the kinds of properties we are familiar with in this world, and which we can measure so to speak. Instead of being too imaginative, these people cannot imagine anything beyond what is 'normal'; they do not have the knack for metaphysics.²⁶

Apparently this is a depressing state, because Henry ascribes to these people the ailment of melancholy. Tellenbach rightfully, I think, explains the melancholic state that accompanies this particular condition with the person's desire to reach beyond his or her spatial constrictions, and at the same time recognising their inability to do so. As is suggested by Tellenbach (p. 14), this condition can also be connected with artistic genius. In that sense it fits in with the Platonic perspective on the artist, who seems to have no other connection with the beyond than through inspiration, and is just as much incapable of rationally understanding what is sent to him as is Henry's mathematical-imaginative type unable to free himself from the boundaries of the existing world. It is the yearning for what lies beyond that is marked as the source of melancholy.

In this particular context Henry alluded to man's longing for the divine, and the affliction of the mathematical-imaginative type who is unable to establish a rational connection. In the next paragraph I shall turn to what Henry says about more mysterious sources of awareness.

III Visions and dreams

In the *Quodlibeta* Henry twice addresses the possibility of human beings acquiring knowledge in a way that deviates from the normal course of events.

power there are three elements: the species of the species that exists in memory without which nothing can be perceived because of its organic and material being, and the act of imagining, and the third is the object imagined itself. Of these elements the species is imaginative as an accidental form in the subject, the act of imagination as a movement in what is moved, and what is imagined as an object in the knower.”)

²⁶ In the thirteenth century, metaphysics was understood as the discipline concerned with being as such, i.e. the most fundamental principles underlying everything that is (that is, not only actually existing things, but also what is possible).

The first time is in *Quodlibet* II, where he discusses a question connected with the good life. Now the medievals were flooded with reports in the Scriptures about human beings receiving messages from the beyond. The question Henry addresses then is in what form these messages are delivered to us. It is set against the background of Aristotelian epistemology. As we saw, Aristotle considers knowledge as the product of working through the data of sensory perceptions. So what is at stake here is not whether it is even possible for people to acquire knowledge while they are asleep; this is taken for granted by Henry because such can happen (and indeed has happened to some people) in the form of a revelation. But he needs to sort out *how* this kind of thing can happen. Should we ascribe the presence of these messages to our imaginative or to our intellective power?²⁷

Henry's conclusion is that revelation can occur (and indeed, has occurred) in different ways, based upon the diversity of the people who had the revelation, or of the things to be revealed, or to whom the revelation is presented. And so sometimes a revelation has occurred to the intellect without being 'covered' by images, and sometimes to the imagination in the likenesses to things.²⁸ From this passage we can gather not only that imagination can be a very worthy source of information, but also that it is not necessarily bound to the sensory perception of existing things.²⁹

Henry has more to say about an alternative way in which knowledge can come to us in *Quodlibet* IV. One of the questions he discusses in this book is whether it is possible to have intellectual knowledge in one's sleep.³⁰ By now it should not come as a surprise that he thinks such can be the case, but again he devotes some time to explain how exactly this can happen. In this context he insists that this kind of event is not possible within the course of nature. For under normal circumstances, the intellect derives its knowledge from the actually existing objects with which it is confronted in experience. But during our

²⁷ *Quodlibet* II, qu.13, p. 80 (ed. Wielcokx): "Sequuntur duae quaestiones pertinentes ad bona vitae praesentis. (...) Prima erat utrum revelatio in somno fiat potentiae intellectivae vel imaginativae." ("Two questions follow pertaining to the good things of the present life. (...) The first was whether a revelation during sleep occurs to the intellective or imaginative faculty.")

²⁸ *Quodlibet* II, qu.13, p. 81 (ed. Wielcokx): "Dicendum ad hoc quod revelatio diversimode potest fieri et facta est sanctis: vel secundum diversitatem eorum quibus facta est revelatio, vel ipsorum revelandorum, vel cui revelatio est proponenda. Et ita facta est aliquando intellectui sine omni velamine imaginum (...) aliquando vero imaginationi in rerum similitudinibus." ("It should be said to this that a revelation can occur in different ways and has occurred to the saints: either in accordance with the diversity of those to whom the revelation happened, or of the things to be revealed, or to whom the revelation should be put forward.")

²⁹ For a discussion of another thirteenth-century author's attempt to provide a more elaborate explanation of the processes involved in imagination, see Jan R. Veenstra (2004), pp. 1-12.

³⁰ *Quodlibet* VI, qu. 9, p. 83 (ed. Wilson): "Sequitur de eis quae pertinent ad animam coniunctam. Quorum unum erat ex parte potentiae cognitivae (...), utrum in somnis habetur aliqua notitia intellectualis." ("Next about questions that pertain to the conjoined soul. The first of which was on the part of the cognitive faculty (...), whether during sleep one could have a form of intellectual knowledge.")

dreams, these objects are missing and so the species³¹ we are confronted with in our dreams can only be the ones that exist in our imagination. And these are not the proper objects of knowledge. In other words, naturally speaking it would be out of the question to acquire knowledge in our dreams, simply because the proper conditions are not met.³² However, there is another way in which it is possible to acquire intellectual knowledge in our sleep, and that is in a supernatural way, viz. in dreams and via revelation. And this can happen both via intellectual cognition and in a vision.³³ From Henry's remarks then it is evident that the sense-less images, i.e., the ones that do not originate from sense perception, can only play a role in cognition if they come from a supernatural source. As such they are not produced by the psyche of an individual.

We have just seen that Henry makes a distinction between natural dreams and those deriving from what he calls a supernatural origin. The former type include dreams that are simply the residue of one's waking experiences, but the way these images occur in our dreams have nothing more to do with what is real, for Henry, and therefore they cannot possibly be the source of any kind of knowledge. It is only the 'big dreams' that are of a supernatural order. Henry's brief account of this kind of dream indicates that they are teleological, i.e., they serve an important purpose, as an aid in achieving the good life.

This way of looking at dreams bears an astonishing resemblance with the dream theory as developed in the 20th century by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung.³⁴ Jung distinguishes between merely personal, relatively uninteresting dreams on the one hand and big, archetypal dreams on the other. The contents of the latter have a significance beyond our petty everyday concerns.

³¹ For an explanation of 'species' in this connection, see above, n. 25.

³² *Quodlibet* VI, p. 84 (ed. Wilson): "Dicendum quod notitia intellectualis duobus modis potest haberi. Uno modo naturaliter, hoc est secundum communem cursum naturae. Alio modo supernaturaliter et supra communem cursum naturae. Primo modo cognitio intellectualis nullo modo potest fieri in somnis. Ratio est quia in somnis (...) imaginativa virtus, quae viget interius, non possit percipere res sub ratione rerum (...), quia non percipit eas neque nata est percipere nisi in vigilia, aliquo vel aliquibus sensibus particularibus existentibus in exercitatione operis. Unde imaginativa quae libera est et extra ligamen somni, si operetur somniando, hoc non est nisi percipiendo imagines pro ipsis rebus, non imagines secundum quod habent esse in organo imaginativae quod est interius." ("It should be said that intellectual knowledge can be had in two ways. In one way naturally, that is in accordance with the common course of nature. In the other way supernaturally and above the common course of nature. In the first way, intellectual knowledge cannot occur in any way at all. The reason is that in sleep (...), the imaginative faculty, which is active inside, cannot perceive things as they really are (...), for it does not, nor is it able to perceive except during wakefulness, when a particular sense is or particular senses are actually carrying out their work. Hence the imaginative faculty that is free and beyond the tie of sleep, if it operates while sleeping, this is only by perceiving images instead of things themselves, not the images that are in the organ of the imaginative power that is inside.")

³³ *Quodlibet* VI, p. 86 (ed. Wilson): "Supernaturaliter autem et supra communem cursum naturae et per somnia et per revelationes bene potest haberi perfecta cognitio intellectualis, et hoc secundum quodcumque genus visionis et intellectualis cognitionis." ("But supernaturally and above the common course of nature, it is well possible to have perfect intellectual knowledge both by means of dreams and by means of revelations.")

³⁴ Jung 1972 [1948]; Jung 1972 [1956]; Jung 1976 [1961].

Of course, for Jung the origin of dreams is firmly rooted in human nature (it is not transcendent but transcendental in the Kantian sense). What Jungian psychology has in common with the likes of Henry of Ghent, is that they both view the contents of dreams and visions as potentially valuable guides for an individual's well-being. Dreams tend to serve a purpose. They are helpful regulative forces in what Jung understood as the realisation of the Self.

Concluding remarks

Henry of Ghent is a fascinating figure in the history of western thought. While his philosophy is firmly rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, he was also indebted to the Neoplatonist Augustine. True to Aristotelian doctrine, he explains the acquisition of knowledge as being the result of observing the objects in the world around us. The latter reach the observer in the form of images, which are then subjected to scrutiny by the mind. Yet unlike Aristotle, he does not accept that the human mind on its own is able to recognise the authenticity of these images. Rather, it needs the aid of the divine to be able to do so. We are endowed with a priori principles without which we could have no knowledge at all. Again, when it comes to knowledge about what is beyond the domain of our sublunary existence, it is not only our power of reasoning that can show us the way. Henry's ambivalence regarding our connection to the divine comes forward when he discusses the most appropriate way to talk about God. He admits that to that end our linguistic tools are not always enough, so that we need to come up with more creative ways to talk about the divine so as to reveal God's true nature.

Furthermore, Henry implicitly reveals the limitations of human rationality when he talks about human beings who are mathematically gifted. His remarks in this context suggest that human beings are at a loss when they are unable to transcend. It is no coincidence that we come across the expression 'transcend' in this connection: not only is it reminiscent of the Platonic word *view*, but it also highlights the opposition between the ordinary, everyday way of being in the world, with our feet firmly on the ground,³⁵ and the elevated state we so desperately long for. Henry's use of the expression 'metaphysics' in this regard is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand the aim of metaphysics is to unravel the true foundations of being in a rational manner. We are reminded of Plato, who favoured the philosopher as the only one who could ever attain a vision of the transcendent Forms. At the same time, however, the true foundation of

³⁵ My paraphrase of the words of the famous historian of ancient and medieval philosophy, L.M. de Rijk, who summarises the controversy between Aristotle and Plato as "the painful difference between 'knowing a Firm Ground' and 'having your feet firmly on the ground'" ("het pijnlijke verschil tussen 'het kennen van een Vaste Grond' en 'met beide benen op de grond staan'"); L.M. de Rijk (1988), p. 3.

our existence is necessarily beyond our understanding, and beyond what we (on our own, that is) can even imagine.

Yet in another context imagination plays centre stage in Henry's account, precisely where he focuses on situations in which natural reasoning, i.e., our mode of being in the world in a state of conscious experience, is shut down. He poses the question whether it is possible for us to acquire knowledge in a state of dreaming. Admittedly, he explains that such is the case 'supernaturally', highlighting that it is not to be expected in the normal course of events, but the fact that he even considers the question is telling. It shows that he was fully aware of another, non-rational side of the human spirit, which works through its own 'logic'. Coupled with his ideas about the true source of knowledge and his mistrust of the limited capabilities of mathematical imagination, I think we have evidence here of a most intriguing notion about the complexity of human spirituality, and a firm stance against a one-sided reliance upon human reasoning. It is these kinds of notions that would become the basis of Jung's conception of religion as intertwined with man's quest for wholeness.

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