

Aspectus and Affectus: Robert Grosseteste, Understanding and Feeling. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. (USA), 30 March-1 April 2017

The Latin terms *aspectus* and *affectus* were employed by various authors in the Middle Ages to articulate the relationship between the parts of the soul. While Robert Grosseteste was not the first to use or conceive of these terms, they can be found throughout the corpus of his thirteenth-century writings to great effect. The nature and operations of the soul were at the core of medieval scholastic enquiry, and the interaction between its constituent parts revealed much about human perception, experience, and the relationship between humans and the divine. For this reason, the Georgetown *Understanding and Feeling* conference, organised and co-ordinated by Professor Neil Lewis, marked an important academic gathering. Calling together a diverse group of historians, philosophers, scientists, artists and theologians, the conference placed Grosseteste's particular insights into *aspectus* and *affectus* at the centre of a series of papers which explore the wider implications of his work. This includes tracing both the earlier and later development and use of these terms in scholastic and monastic culture; a parallel comparison between Grosseteste and his Arabic counterparts; and the significance of Grosseteste's thought from a modern scientific perspective.

Given the theme and aim of the conference, it was fitting that the first paper was delivered by theologian Brett Smith, whose doctoral work at the Catholic University of America engages precisely with Grosseteste's use of the terms *aspectus* and *affectus*. In his paper, "*A Theme Song of His Life: Aspectus and Affectus in the Writings of Robert Grosseteste*", Smith aptly demonstrated the consistency of Grosseteste's thought across a range of his works, from the *De artibus liberalibus* to the *Hexameron*. In so doing, Smith's paper set out the neo-Platonic basis of Grosseteste's conception of the soul, demonstrated the influence of Augustine on the development of Grosseteste's ideas, and analysed the intricate yet nuanced relationship between the intermediary and rational parts of the soul in the process of sense perception. His presentation provided a contextual reference point for the subsequent papers, and prompted an informed discussion amongst the conference attendees, including (among others) the esteemed Grosseteste scholars Joseph Goering and Frank Mantello.

Following Smith's remarks, the next two papers focused on Grosseteste's intellectual inheritance through an analysis of similar themes in the earlier works Anselm of Canterbury and Isaac of Stella, respectively. The paper on Anselm, titled "*The Background to Grosseteste's Aspectus-Affectus Distinction: Anselm, Astronomy and the De spiritu et anima*", was delivered by Dr Giles Gasper, Reader in Medieval History at Durham University, and Principal Investigator of the Ordered Universe project. Dr Gasper offered important historical and theological context to Grosseteste's thought through a detailed appraisal of Anselm's descriptions of intellectual struggle, and the apposition of *aspectus* and *affectus* in his works. Dr Gasper's paper called upon his Anselmian expertise, and demonstrated the interdependence of the mind and the soul in religious devotion from the late eleventh to early twelfth centuries. This presentation was followed by Dr Sigborn Sonnesyn's paper on the mid twelfth-century Cistercian, Isaac of Stella, titled "*'Beati mundo corde quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt': Affectus of the Soul and the Sight of the Mind in Isaac of Stella*". Dr Sonnesyn, a historian and Latin philologist also at Durham University, gave an insightful paper on the *affectus* of the soul, and the sight of the mind, in Isaac of Stella's contemplative writings. Dr Sonnesyn's discussion of the mind's vision and sight, as an integral part of Isaac's approach to ways of knowing, paired perfectly with Dr Gasper's paper on Anselm. Collectively, the two papers provided the monastic contemplative and philosophical contexts to the intellectual landscape Grosseteste later inhabited, as well as the theological subtext to his ideas about the heart and mind.

Having considered Grosseteste himself, and his monastic and scholastic predecessors, the next section of the conference explored the intellectual legacy of *aspectus* and *affectus*, shaped by Grosseteste. This took the form of two papers: one titled "*The Structure of the Soul: Aspectus and Affectus in Richard Fishacre and Richard Rufus of Cornwall*", delivered by Professor Neil Lewis, a philosopher at

Georgetown University; another titled “Effectus, affectus, and defectus: *Causality and Causation of the Substrate*”, delivered by Dr Nicola Polloni, a philosopher at Durham University. Both papers documented the significance of *aspectus* and *affectus* in the philosophical writings of an array of thirteenth-century authors. Professor Lewis led an insightful technical discussion of the works of Richard Fishacre and Richard Rufus of Cornwall, tracing their philosophical positions on the structure and operation of the human soul. Dr Polloni, on the other hand, delivered an impressive paper on the use of *affectus* in the works of medieval philosophers, extending his discussion to the terms *effectus* and *defectus*, and the important distinctions between them. Ultimately, Dr Polloni’s work traced the significance of these terms in a wider discussion of the medieval doctrine of causality and causation, most notably found in the thought and philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Together, the papers of Professor Lewis and Dr Polloni broached the philosophy of these terms in the late thirteenth-century, and highlighted their continued and meaningful significance.

The consideration of Grosseteste and his intellectual inheritance and legacy prompted two further humanities papers on the first day of the conference. These papers reflected the ongoing research of their authors in the wider climate of twelfth-century intellectual culture. The first was provided by Timothy Farrant, a doctoral candidate in theology at the University of Oxford, who discussed the relationship between perception and moralized zoology in a chapter of Alexander Neckam’s *De naturis rerum* entitled *De visu*. Commencing his paper, titled “*Celestial Illusion, Perception, and Moralised Zoology in Alexander Neckam’s De naturis rerum*”, with reference to Neckam’s description of celestial illusion, Farrant went on to explore the theological implications of Neckam’s interest in the created world which, he argued, was as much concerned with zoology as with natural phenomena. In a similar vein, Kathy Bader, a doctoral candidate in history at Durham University, explored the intense interest of English intellectuals in Arabic astronomical developments with her paper titled “*Arabic Astronomical Texts in the 12th-Century Severn Valley*”. Focusing solely upon Severn Valley twelfth-century astronomical texts, Bader drew upon a fascinating group of manuscripts and diagrams to illustrate the links between the English and Arabic worlds of learning, and the zeal for scientific enquiry in the West Country of England. Collectively, these two papers extended the question of how one perceives one’s own soul, to broader questions about created existence, natural phenomena, and astronomical occurrences in the minds of twelfth-century schoolmen.

The proceedings of the first day concluded with a public lecture by the principal investigators of the Ordered Universe Project, Dr Giles Gasper and Professor Tom McLeish, and projection artist and designer, Ross Ashton. Dr Gasper and Professor McLeish detailed the importance of the collaborative efforts of the Ordered Universe Project in producing editions and commentaries of the texts of Grosseteste, and the subsequent results of interdisciplinarity. To this end, Professor McLeish detailed his initial readings of Grosseteste’s work on light, and his moment of realisation of the need for collaboration between science and the humanities. This led to an overview of the scientific findings of the project on sound and space, prompted by Grosseteste’s treatises. Dr Gasper reiterated the importance of collaboration, and described ongoing work between the project with creative artists. The public lecture culminated with a detailed exposition from Ross Ashton about his involvement in the project as a projection artist, and his three popular light and sound shows entitled *The World Machine*, which were exhibited at Durham (2015), Berlin (2016), and Cambridge (2017).

While the first day of the conference was primarily focused on the philosophical outputs of Grosseteste and other medieval thinkers, the second saw contributions exploring the natural philosophies of both medieval and modern periods. The morning session saw two presentations from Professors Nader El-Bizri and Tom McLeish. Professor El-Bizri, the Director of the Civilization Studies Program at the American University of Beirut, delivered a fascinating overview of Alhazen’s pioneering advances in visual perception. In his paper, “*Alhazen’s Theory of Visual Perception and its Physiological, Cognitive and Experiential Bearings*”, Professor El-Bizri laid out a biographical course of Alhazen’s percipient

studies into the nature of vision, which were truly pioneering for their time and remain singularly influential. Following this, Professor McLeish, Professor of Physics at Durham University and co-investigator of the Ordered Universe Project, explored the mental and emotional conditions conducive to scientific creativity in his presentation titled “*An Exploration of Scientific Creativity through the Mirror of Aspectus and Affectus*”. While on paper the two subjects might not seem directly connected, it will perhaps not be surprising that there was a fair amount of synergy between them. Both talks provided insight into the process of doing science and some of its related social and cultural factors, from initial inspiration through to its reception. Ultimately, both presentations were successful contextualisations of science, the former into history and politics, the latter into personality psychology, and the emotional-rational dichotomy illustrated by *affectus* and *aspectus*.

The two presentations that followed explored some of our modern understandings of sensory perception, and some of the fruits from interdisciplinary collaborations between the modern sciences and medieval thought. Dr Hannah Smithson, an Ordered Universe Project co-investigator and Associate Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford, delivered a presentation titled: “*The Embodiment of Human Perception: Exchanges between Robert Grosseteste and Modern Perceptual Science*”. Dr Smithson provided a comprehensive foundation of perception—the bridge between the external world and the mind—illustrated with exciting examples from both her own research into vision science and scientific outputs of the Ordered Universe Project. The following presentation was delivered by Joshua Harvey, a doctoral candidate in Engineering Science at the University of Oxford, titled “*On the Generation, Visualisation, and Perception of Sound*”. Examining the perception of sound and speech, Harvey explored some of the thirteenth-century theory of auditory perception described by Grosseteste in his treatise *De generatione sonorum*, before going on to contrast it with his own experimental research into the visualization of acoustic waves and the perceptual mapping of vowels. Both talks gave interesting illustrations of how sensory perception both enables and fundamentally limits our experience of the external world, and demonstrated the increasingly evidenced value of exchanges between the sciences and medieval thought.

The final presentation of the conference was delivered by Luke Fidler, who is based at the Department of Art History, at the University of Chicago, and became acquainted with the works of Grosseteste through their reception among avant-garde filmmakers. Fidler’s presentation, “*Aspectus and the Apperception of Sculpture*”, drew on his own research into Anglo-Saxon and medieval sculpture, and situated the demarcation of idols into the broader discussion of *aspectus* and *affectus*.

In and of itself, the conference at Georgetown can be considered an important contribution to the ongoing dialogue between these two Latin terms, and reflected the wealth of research surrounding them. There were clear benefits from the diversity of interests amongst its delegates, and it was good to see contributions come from a variety of experience levels and career stages. As doctoral students at the start of our research careers, it was especially encouraging to be invited to present papers and participate in the proceedings. We would like to thank all the conference organisers at Georgetown for making such a productive time possible, and everyone who presented for their insightful contributions. If we could take only one lesson forward from the Understanding and Feeling conference at Georgetown, perhaps it would be the value of interdisciplinarity. The bringing together of these often-divorced academic communities, namely modern science and medieval history, continues to surprise and inspire.

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