

# The Medieval Christian in ‘Mirror-Mode’: A Brief Sketch of the Mirror as Sacred Tool from Paul’s ‘In Aenigmate’ to Dante’s *Paradiso*

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that Paul, Augustine, Bonaventure, and Dante all can be viewed as supporting the notion that the human mind cannot gather non-subjective truth from an object-filled world wherein it (the mind) is situated. The mind’s epistemological mode of accessing these objects always leaves open the possibility that the apparently stable physical backdrop of the world is a phenomenological fiction. For these thinkers, it is only in the assumption that an absolute, outside agent of omnipotent and supra-legislative standing exists that certain, or incorrigible, human knowledge is possible, for if there is no God that can bypass the epistemological equipment and the supposed proprietary rights of the human mind in order to implant genuine knowledge, then the ultimate kernel of the self is left with only a cracked mirror that always deficiently represents reality.

## **Keywords**

mirror, Paul, *in aenigmate*, Augustine, *The Confessions*, Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, Dante, *Paradiso*, epistemology, mediation, self, sensory data



This essay has two parts. The second part will trace out a slender line of the development of the mirror metaphor from St. Paul to St. Augustine, from St. Augustine to St. Bonaventure, and from St. Bonaventure to Dante. To do this correctly, however, I first must lay the groundwork of my definitions and presuppositions. This groundwork constitutes the first part of the paper, to which I will now turn.

### *Presuppositions and Definitions*

Of presuppositions I have primarily four. The first, with its ensuing corollaries and definitions, is this: Humans think in 'mirror-mode.' By the word *mirror* I mean that which (1) can reflect a dependent representation of an object existing independently from the mirror and (2) actually does reflect such a dependent representation. By 'dependent representation' I mean mostly a visual image which changes when the mirror changes, an image which is intimately and irrevocably bound to the pane of the mirror.

I would say a mirror in a darkroom is indeed an object which has the potential to produce representations of independent physical objects. But since this darkened mirror is not actually reflecting anything in the darkroom, it is not fully a mirror. We may still call it a mirror in order to simplify our language transactions, but I want to stipulate the condition that it is not actually a mirror until it is reflecting something.

If we say that consciousness is not truly consciousness unless it is conscious *of* something—and how can one claim to have consciousness if while having consciousness one is conscious of nothing?—then we see how it is necessary to always find an object (an image, a sensation, a thought, etc.) in the consciousness before we can think of the consciousness as a properly-functioning cognitive apparatus. In this way, consciousness is like the mirror in its full actuality. Something must always be flitting around in its reflecting pane for it to be defined as consciousness.

To continue the analogy, a flat-planed mirror can never reflect itself. The only way to capture such a mirror's own image in its own reflecting pane is to place another mirror in front of it, and even in this case the resulting image is secondary, for it is the image of the second mirror which now appears in the pane of the first, and couched in this secondary reflection will be the reflection of the first mirror. This 'self-reflection,' then, is at least twice removed. Slightly better is the situation of the physical eye. It cannot

see its own self except through a once-removed image, this image being a photo, a reflection in a mirror, etc. If we consider the mind's role in the construction of an image brought to it via sensory data (here I refer to the blind spots of the retina and the neurological re-configuration of an image that evidently reaches the mind upside down), then this image of the eye is twice removed.

But what of the self, then? Can I question, investigate, analyze my *self*? If the consciousness is indeed only a mirror, then I suppose I could reflect my self into the mirror and observe my reflection there. In this way, a quasi self-knowledge would be possible, and we will see that St. Augustine latched onto this possibility. However, it must be granted that if consciousness is only a mirror, then the essential 'I' which I take my self to be must exist exterior to and independent of the consciousness and that what I see in my consciousness as 'I' is only an image. This leaves the essential 'I' as a dark spot, an object which can be approached only by reflection.<sup>1</sup>

My second major presupposition is that physical objects are apprehended by us only in mirror mode. I am led to this conclusion by the answer to this question: 'When I become conscious of the appearance of a physical object by looking at it, do I become conscious of the object itself or of a representation of that object?' It must be the latter because when I look at a coin's face straight on, I am conscious of a sensory image of a circle, but when I look at the coin's edge straight on, I am conscious of a straight line. Surely the coin itself cannot be both these things at the same time in the same sense, for these descriptions comprise a contradiction in terms. Yet if I am aware of the very coin itself, its Platonic abstraction or Ideal form, when I see the coin, and not a dimensionally trapped, empirical representation of the coin, then I would not be restricted to being sensorially conscious of only

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<sup>1</sup> William James said that those who claim to be aware of the actual self are aware only of their actual breathing (in Jones 306). I lean toward the conclusion that the self we claim to come to know via self-reflection is a semiotic construction. But these are guesses . . . .

one side of it or of only one visual approach to it. Obviously this is not the case; so it likewise must not be the case that I am conscious of the coin itself instead of just a cognitive representation of the coin. All I get is sense data. If I look at it, I get sense data; if I taste it, I get sense data; if I touch it, I get sense data. And in the end the sense data give me nothing more than a reflection. It is all mirror.

This has been proposed before, I know, and most of this has been rejected by various detractors. However, almost none of this has been shown to be internally contradictory as an argument, so one is free, if one is disposed to do so, to accept it as a plausible state of affairs.

My third presupposition is as follows: consciousness gives us a perceived, re-oriented world of reflections which is to be understood as being only partially real. If the consciousness is essentially a mirror, then the data that I—the real 'I'—gets from the consciousness are only reflections of a world which I idiosyncratically assume to have more ontological import than the reflections do. I step toward a building I take to exist ahead of me, outside of me. What informs me of my forward progress towards this object? of my closing the physical distance between it and myself? My eyes, providing a sensorial representation. When I perceive that I have reached the building and stretch forth my hand to touch it, what do I use to gauge its solidity? The sensory data transmitted to my brain by my finger. All of this is basically more mirrors.

Which leads me to my fourth presupposition: we must engage in epistemological faith if we are to believe in a world which is objectively independent of a consciousness locked in mirror mode. By 'epistemological faith' I mean simply the jump one chooses to take from theoretical probability to practical certainty. We all have had the experience of looking into a mirror and of seeing in it the reflection of an object behind us. We have also had the experience of turning around and actually encountering the

physical object in the very space which was suggested to us by the mirror. That is, we have all gone from the ephemeral reflection to the direct viewing of the physical object reflected. This leads us to believe that, when we see a reflection in a mirror, the independent object exists somewhere outside the reflection, and so we have assigned a higher ontological status to the object itself and a lower status to its reflection.

However, this experience has never happened to any of us where the mirror of consciousness is concerned. For how can we turn off (or away from) our consciousness and be conscious of anything? Our consciousness is an ever-present filter, a ubiquitous mirror, and because we have never had even one experience of accessing the physical landscape without it, if we do render a mentally independent ontological status to the physical landscape, we do so by means of epistemological faith.

In fact, we do so with quite a lot of this faith. Many times we have turned from the physical mirror to encounter the mirrored object face-to-face, so I can see why we come to believe that for future instances the reflection can guide us backwards to a physical object. But one wonders why people believe in objects outside consciousness when these objects-in-themselves have never been encountered free from the confines of consciousness even one time. So it must be the case that if we believe the statement *the physical world independently exists* is true, we believe it is true for reasons other than the evidence supplied.

I suspect we are simply disposed to believe in it. The thing that what we have always taken to be a three-dimensional space with genuine depth and arrangement is so deeply engraved in our way of approaching our apparently physical environment that it is very often only with the greatest degree of difficulty that we can entertain the idea of a two-dimensional model in which depth and arrangement are products of our imaginations, not of an exterior system of genuine objects.

### *The Mirror Image in the Texts*

All this is not too troubling if one is ready to trade in the physical world for an essentially spiritual one (and by this I mean a non-physical one). From the beginning, the world of Western Christianity was ready to make this trade. Because of the constraints of this second part of my paper, which will extend only to Dante, the phrase *world of Western Christianity* means the teachings of Jesus as rendered by the apostles, the patristic writings, and the Pre-Reformation Roman Catholic theological monopoly.

Let us begin with the Apostle Paul. In the thirteenth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians, we find the text that E. P. Nolan has usefully called the "Corinthian mirror-dictum of St. Paul: '*videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate.*'"<sup>2</sup> Of course, this is from Jerome's Latin Vulgate. The Koine Greek of Paul's time renders the word *mirror* as *esoptron*, and the *in aenigmate* of Jerome's is pretty much a transliteration of the Koine *en ainigma*, which, according to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* is best translated as 'by means of an obscure saying.'<sup>3</sup> A more-or-less literal translation, then, is 'now we see in a mirror by means of an obscure saying.' Thus Paul is talking about a mirror which takes reality and reflects it back to us—or speaks it back to us, if you will—in the form of a riddle.

Specifically, Paul is outlining a sort of fallen-from-grace epistemology. This is made clear in the context of the mirror-dictum. The dictum is 1 Corinthians 13:12. For context's sake, here is 1 Corinthians 13:10-12.

[W]hen perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we

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<sup>2</sup> Nolan 56.

<sup>3</sup> See Greek entries nos. 1722 and 135, on pages 28 and 8, respectively, in the appendix "Greek Dictionary of the New Testament"; these entries are cross-referenced to the entry for *darkly* on page 233 in Strong's main text.

shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

This is from the New International Version, and the mirror dictum is rendered slightly different from my own loose-handed translation, but nevertheless, the gist is clear. Paul is talking about knowing things. At present, we cannot know reality by means other than a poor, riddling reflection. The change in apprehension does not come until the change of the time-space continuum comes: “Now we see by means of a dark, riddling mirror,” but “then,” Paul says, “face to face”—*tunc autem facie ad faciem* in the Vulgate. The *then*, I believe, is referring to the eternal, non-physical locale of heaven, where the mirror will be removed and a new, completely functional epistemological schema will be set in place. Until then, according to Paul, our earthy epistemology is fundamentally flawed, but by design, per Paul’s staunch stand in favor of granting God a full sovereignty over the nature and affairs of man.

Roughly three centuries later, St. Augustine of Hippo took the mirror dictum and worked out a way by which one could have an escape from the riddling reflections. For Augustine, as E. P. Nolan again points out,

all analogies are cracked looking glasses. Indeed, it is the perception of the crack, the way in which the one member of an analogy is false to the other, in which the image is false to the original, that allows [the mind] to make any epistemological headway at all. It is the very discrepancy between the model and the thing it is a model of that triggers the speculative mind into useful and creative action.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine explains this concept more fully in the seventh book of his *Confessions*, where he tells us that our reason is capable of

withdr[awing] its thoughts from experience, abstracting itself

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<sup>4</sup> Nolan 57

from the contradictory throng of phantasm in order to seek for that light in which it [i]s bathed. Then, without any doubting, it crie[s] out that the unchangeable [i]s better than the changeable. From this it follows that the mind somehow kn[ows] the unchangeable, for, unless it had known it in some fashion, it could have had no sure ground for preferring it to the changeable. And thus with the flash of a trembling glance, it arrive[s] at that which is.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that we get frustrated at the deficiencies we see in the mirror tells Augustine that the mind somehow has *a priori* knowledge of the non-deficient. The frustration means we recognize a disjunction, and how would we know this if we had no clue as to what the proper junction is in the first place? Thus, one might not have to wait till heaven in order to know correctly. One might be able to coax back this knowledge of the un-reflected (i.e. un-altered) truth if one learns to analyze the hazy reflections the right way.

But what is this right way? It is the way of faith, for having faith in the Christian tenets allows one to be reconciled to the divine image carried latently in the human soul. Or, to use more orthodox terms, a healthy faith in Christianity allows the regeneration of this image to happen. This is the key to the riddling, for something must serve as a viable hermeneutic key to make sense of the cracked images our consciousness relays, and Augustine is absolutely confident that "nothing is better adapted to this purpose than that which is [. . .] called His [God's] image."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the Christian in mirror-mode can assume that as long as the reflections of a consciousness trapped in the here and now are interpreted by means of the light given by the truths of Christianity shining upon a restored

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<sup>5</sup>Augustine 142-43.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine qtd. in Nolan 59.

inward image-of-God in a human subject, these reflections can help to open the narrow epistemological path toward proper knowing.

It may sound as if I have introduced some new elements here, elements that go beyond the traditional and orthodox Christian tenets. But when Augustine says one has the image of the divine stamped upon the soul, an image that springs to life by the process of salvation, he is obviously pulling from Pauline passages that speak of this inner vivification, passages like Romans 8, 1 Cor. 2, and Ephesians 2. And when Augustine insists that the knowledge of the image of God does not come through a faulty mirror, I take this as a declaration that this knowledge does not originate in our consciousness, which, according to St. Paul, is a faulty mirror. Certainly Augustine would believe that it originates in God, and because of his views on predestination and sovereignty, Augustine would also believe that God can bypass the human consciousness in order to put this image, this knowledge, in us unaltered. In this way Augustine could get past the obscuring effects of the consciousness in order to make possible in us a immaculate decoding key. All these things are Christian tenets.

So Paul tells us we have a riddling mirror, and St. Augustine assures us that if we accept the basic tenets of Christianity's theology, Christology, and pneumatology, we can still use the riddling mirror profitably. Many theologians after St. Augustine took his encouragement seriously, but the one I want to focus on next is the one who I believe most respected the limited capacity of this tool and most pointed out the practical uses for it in the horizontal plane of the physical creation of this world. In these ways, this theologian best preserves the spirit of St. Augustine's conclusions.

In his treatise *The Journey of the Mind to God*, St. Bonaventure picks up on the idea that a human mind can access via faith a non-mirror-mediated knowledge of reality.<sup>7</sup> In this way he is no different from Augustine. The

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<sup>7</sup> Petry 128.

difference comes in the limited place and rudimentary role Bonaventure assigned to the mirroring consciousness. He puts it at the very bottom rung of a meditative ladder that leads to God. Bonaventure's method of meditation is a version of the commonplace of the medieval meditative device known as 'Jacob's Ladder.' He says, "Since it is imperative first to make the ascent of Jacob's ladder [. . .], let us place the first step of the ascent at the bottom, holding up this whole sensible world before us as a mirror, through which we may rise to God. [. . .] The supreme wisdom, power, and benevolence of the Creator are reflected in all things."<sup>8</sup> This is simply an expansion of the mirror from the mental locale of the mind into the physical realm of the world.

Granted, this may not seem so unique to St. Bonaventure. After all, Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa* discussed at length the nature of the mirror of the earth. But it is St. Bonaventure who takes both the mirror of man's consciousness as it reflects to the re-born self and the mirror of nature on earth, and uses them in the quest for the pinnacle of knowledge one is able to acquire this side of eternity. For it is Bonaventure's mirrors which start the medieval Christian on the way to the mystical vision. And Bonaventure does not limit himself to the typical vision. He points the way to the ecstatic vision, the highest vision possible, the flashing epiphany of the essence of God which, once it somehow slips past the faulty consciousness and is received into the human subject, cannot be fully recounted (or perhaps even remembered) here on this earth.

This high experience we see happening in Dante's *Paradiso*. But before Dante the Pilgrim reaches the pinnacle of spiritual knowledge, Dante the Poet with the text of the *Paradiso* expands both the inner mirror of consciousness and the Bonaventurian mirror of the creation. Bonaventure seemed to limit his mirror to the creatures experienced in one's sojourn here

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<sup>8</sup> Petry 136-7.

on earth. Dante, on the other hand, adds to the horizontal axis a vertical one, having the whole nested spheres of the medieval cosmos redounding in mirrors. There are mirrored images of the saints in their allocated stations, the saints themselves being seated all the while in the mirror of the Mystic Rose of the later cantos; there is the density of the moon explained by means of a trinity of mirrors in Canto 2; and there is the mirroring effect of the River of Light in Canto 30. Moreover, James L. Miller in his influential article “Three Mirrors of Dante’s *Paradiso*” points out at least three other places Dante refers to mirrors: in Canto 13, the beneficence of God is described as “‘mirrored,’ in the nine orders of angels”<sup>9</sup>; in Canto 21, Beatrice tells Dante “Now make your eyes the mirror of the vision / this mirror will reveal to you, and fix / your mind behind your eyes in strict attention”<sup>10</sup>; and in Canto 29, where Beatrice lauds God “for having created so many mirrors of Himself” throughout the heavens.<sup>11</sup>

After expanding the mirror of the earth into the mirror of the cosmos, Dante then expands the mirror of the mind. In Canto 33, Dante the Pilgrim gazes into the trinity of self-reflecting circles. He notices that the second circle “which shone forth in Thee, / conceived as a reflection of the first— / [. . .] seemed in Itself of Its own coloration / to be painted with man’s image.”<sup>12</sup> Of this spectacle, “Allen Tate has argued that the image in the circle is a reflection of the pilgrim himself, and therefore a symbol of self-knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> This interpretation seems plausible, maybe even probable. But notice that it is still couched in mirror lingo, for the image is given to Dante in the form of a reflection. Dante, therefore, is still in mirror-mode.

When Dante actually reaches God—the essence of reality—he accesses the knowledge by means of some other way than a consciousness in

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<sup>9</sup> Miller 269.

<sup>10</sup> Dante 21.16-18.

<sup>11</sup> Miller 269.

<sup>12</sup> Dante 33.127-31

<sup>13</sup> Miller 271.

perpetual mirror-mode. Dante's last bit of text merely says that "the truth I wished for came / cleaving my mind in a great flash of light. / Here my powers rest from their high fantasy."<sup>14</sup> We get nothing by way of description. It is as if Dante knew he experienced the truth, but since he has returned to earth, he cannot remember what it was. He just remembers the power and the emotion which went along with it:

What then I saw is more than tongue can say.  
 Our human speech is dark before the vision.  
 The ravished memory swoons and falls away.  
 As one who sees in dreams and wakes to find  
 the emotional impression of his vision  
 still powerful while its parts fade from his mind—  
 just such am I, having lost nearly all  
 the vision itself, while in my heart I feel  
 the sweetness of it yet distill and fall.  
 So, in the sun, the footprints fade from snow.  
 On the wild wind that bore the tumbling leaves  
 the Sybil's oracles were scattered so.<sup>15</sup>

Maybe he cannot remember it because it is not accessible via the mirror-bound consciousness of a mind once again travelling on earth. If so, then Dante does not end up changing the nature of the riddling mirror; he simply shows us how far we can go with it.

### *Conclusion*

So what can we learn from all this? We know that during the Renaissance, the mirror-dictum changed. No longer was it accepted as a commonplace that the way of knowing was by means of a riddling mirror. A confidence inspired by the resurgence and refinement of the empirical

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<sup>14</sup> Dante 33.140-42.

<sup>15</sup> Dante 33.55-66.

method, along with the invention of Venetian clear-glass mirrors, which could reflect much more accurately than the colored glass or convex mirrors of the late Middle Ages, allowed the age to re-make the trope of the mirror.<sup>16</sup> As Benjamin Goldberg puts it, “In the humanistic philosophy of the times, the mirror reflected clearly, and the clear mirror became the clear spirit, and the clear spirit then liberated man.”<sup>17</sup>

There were exceptions to this, to be sure. But I think that in the main, we can trace our current, extremely limiting and exclusively empirical epistemological stance to something like this. It certainly does not accord in any way to Dante’s full expression of a Christological epistemology centered in a non-physical universe populated with greater minds than the merely human. It is not built on this because there is hardly any respectable room for a non-physical world-view in most of today’s academic centers. Yet, as I stressed in the first part of this paper, a belief in a physical world existing independently of our minds takes as much epistemological faith as Dante’s belief in a world beyond, one not bound to physical measurement or sensorial apprehension. Why does the fact that we can measure and re-measure—essentially, that we can quantify—bolster us in our acceptance of the independently physical? After all, might we not merely be measuring signs, be quantifying reflections? Our consciousness has not ceased to be mirror-moded, and we certainly have not come any closer to answering the really pertinent questions of life and death than Dante did. I suggest we embrace faith again and return to the spiritual way. I suggest we do this in the academic arena. Perhaps those medieval theologians and poets had something we could use today, not only for a balm but for a full restorative.



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<sup>16</sup> Goldberg 135, 145.

<sup>17</sup> Goldberg 147.

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