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8. Keeping Custody of the Eyes

Dangers of the Gaze in Augustine’s Consideration of Visual Images

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Abstract

Augustine’s concern about the influence of witnessing brutal spectacles upon the human soul is expressed when he recounts his friend Alypius’s addiction to the arena in *Confessions*, Book 6. He elaborates this concern in several sermons and argues that the simple act of looking at certain kinds of images can have a deleterious effect on the beholder, asserting that, like Alypius, one can become enthralled to spiritually harmful sights and take perverse pleasure in others’ mental or physical pain. He adds that such pleasure makes viewers accessories to brutality and inures them to suffering, instead of developing their compassionate nature. Here he speaks of the “lust of the eyes” as a parallel to lust of the flesh, a lust that seeks novel experiences and is not repelled by observing violence. He acknowledges that for some listeners, the reading of martyrs’ acts could be an instance of this, but insists that those who hear the story and imagine the scenes with the right attitude are inspired to be sympathetic to

the victims and uplifted by their heroic witness to Christ. In this way he discusses two different kinds of viewing arising from the beholder's essential character: the material gaze versus the spiritual witness. This essay connects this discussion of positive and negative sights to Augustine's theory of how the eye perceives and imprints visionary experiences on the memory and in turn affects the soul in both positive and negative ways. Because humans are vulnerable, even unintentionally, to the damage caused by seeing evil or cruel spectacles, they must consciously cultivate a gaze of charity and compassion.

Keywords: Alypius, Arena, idols, imagination, gladiatorial games, lust (of the eyes), martyrs (acts of), seeing (theory of), *Venatores* (beast fighters), victims

Introduction

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matthew 6:22-23).

In Book 6 of his *Confessions*, Augustine discusses the case of his young friend, Alypius, who developed an uncontrollable addiction to gladiatorial games. In all other ways a rather modest and naïve young man, Alypius initially had regarded such spectacles with distaste. However, one evening, when he was a student in Rome, friends coaxed him – even pressured him – into going along with them to the arena; and he reluctantly agreed to join them. En route he protested that he would not allow himself to be caught up in the show. Augustine quotes Alypius:

If you drag my body to that place and sit me down there, do not imagine you can turn my mind and my eyes to those spectacles. I shall be as one not there, and so I shall overcome both you and the games (*Conf.* 6.18.13; Chadwick 100).

Alypius's friends doubted that he could resist being caught up in the cruel spectacle, and they were determined to test him. Once at the arena, the atmosphere was impossible to ignore. The place was packed with boisterous fans, eager for blood sport. Although Alypius shut his eyes and tried to think about other things, he could not block out the sounds of the fighting and the roar of the crowds. When one especially loud cheer piqued his curiosity, he briefly opened his eyes. One of the contestants had been wounded. Even though he intended to maintain and even confirm his loathing for what he might glimpse, he nevertheless became engrossed in the spectacle and could not look away. His friends were right; he was completely taken in. He became one of the cheering crowd, as if now an utterly different person. As Augustine describes it:

He was struck in the soul by a wound graver than the gladiator in his body, whose fall had caused the roar. The shouting entered by his ears and forced open his eyes . . . As soon as he saw the blood, he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness. Without any awareness of what was happening to him, he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure (*Conf.* 6.8.13; Chadwick: 101).

This kind of sudden madness might seem implausible, unless one has observed otherwise rational friends or family members apparently lose all perspective when watching a sporting event live – or even on television – shrieking and cursing as if a player’s blunder, spectacular catch, or winning run was a matter of life and death. Alypius’s story instructively demonstrates how a brief, even unintentional, act of looking at certain kinds of scenes can ensnare someone in ways that he or she might not have expected. Moreover, Augustine sees their potential for real harm. Certain sights can “strike one in the soul” no less gravely than a sword can cut into flesh.

Augustine relates this story as he recalls the power, however empty, of the attractions of the secular world, even upon an individual whom he describes as being reliably virtuous. He remembers that during the time that Alypius was captivated by the games, he happened to attend one of Augustine’s lectures and judged one of his teacher’s classroom illustrations to be a personal rebuke. Fearing that Alypius would resent the public reproach, Augustine was instead surprised to discover that Alypius had decided to exert some self-control and give up the games. Overall, this episode was an instructive warning about addictive behaviors, not only showing how these behaviors might overtake individuals against their will (although it was partly that), but also showing how individuals might overcome these behaviors with God’s help.

Addiction was something that Augustine knew from personal experience, as is evident in many places in the *Confessions*. However, addiction to spectacles has a particular parallel to something in his own life that he reflects upon in an earlier section of the work. Rather than gladiatorial games, he acknowledges that he was captivated by theatrical shows. These, he says, were filled with depictions of his own miseries, which fueled his fire, by which he probably meant that the events on the stage aroused emotions and passions that he could not entirely control. This loss of control makes him aware of his vulnerability and later leads him to wonder why anyone would want to be made sad by recollecting old hurts, or take any joy in watching someone else endure suffering or tragedy. Why would anyone want to be a vicarious observer of someone else’s misfortune? Augustine finds it especially troubling that observers are not prompted to help or not compelled to stop the other’s pain. Rather, they appear to take some kind of pleasure in it. He asks why one should not be gladder to show mercy than to be perversely entertained by some feigned tragedy (*Conf.* 3.2.2).

Augustine’s reflections on the theatre will remind many readers of Aristotle’s defense, in the *Poetics*, of the social value of dramatic catharsis – the purging of unhealthy passions or excessive emotions through observation of staged suffering or other kinds of human misery that arouse pity or fear in spectators. Such theatrical events theoretically provided a safe, even remedial, outlet for the release (and relief) of these feelings, and so result in fewer anti-social behaviors (*Poetics* 6). Contrary to Aristotle, Augustine apparently did not see any beneficial aspects or emotional moderation – much less moral edification – in these arguably therapeutic experiences, even when the representation of suffering was merely performed (as in the theatre) rather than real (as in the games). Rather, he perceived members of the audience experiencing a palpable and perverse pleasure at watching someone else’s anguish while comfortably (and safely) ensconced in a theatre seat. Although audience members presumably can distinguish the play from reality and realize actors are only feigning their torments,

Augustine regards the gratifyingly manipulative spectacle as dangerous in its addictive escapism and moral apathy.

As bishop of Hippo, Augustine consistently discouraged his flock from attending both the gladiatorial shows and the theater. In a sermon dated to 420, he recounted Alypius's edifying story in this instance as a warning to his congregants that such spectacles were not only addictive but also soul-destroying. In the case of the games, he insisted that watching cruelty fosters cruelty. Like a bodily fever attacking one's body or sexual desire, avarice, or wrath overtaking one's soul, in a short time they become part of one's character and continue to produce uncontrollable and harmful urges (*S.* 9.8.10). The deeper one gets involved in this cycle, the harder it becomes to get out by effort alone.

Augustine's reflection on the power of spectacles presumes that visual images have autonomous power and agency. His example of Alypius shows that he also believes the very act of looking makes a viewer vulnerable to this power (and a victim of its effects). He seems to go even further, suggesting that once enthralled, a viewer becomes an accessory to the violence on display. Does Alypius become inured to another's pain because it has become part of his regular form of entertainment? Does the theatergoer eventually lose sight of the difference between watching human suffering on stage and encountering (or experiencing) it in real life?

Almost two centuries earlier, Tertullian condemned Christians who attended the games. Tertullian initially focused less on the games' brutality than on their idolatrous implications, specifically their associations with the pagan gods (*De Spectaculis* 1-13). Yet, like Augustine, Tertullian also warned against the agitated passions and emotions that the games stirred up in their spectators. He also focused directly on the games' cruelty and human bloodshed, insisting that no innocent person would take pleasure in the sufferings of another. This kind of sight, he insisted, is intrinsically polluting. And what is more, God is watching and knows what goes on: God observes those who attend the games (*De Spectaculis* 19-20).

By way of context, the games were a huge part of Roman social life in all regions of the Empire, but Africans were notoriously fond of them (Slim: 200). Gladiators and chariot racers alike were valorized as glamorous heroes who had passionately loyal fans. African enthusiasm for the games is still evident in the numerous depictions found on domestic mosaic pavements all over that region. Formal dining rooms apparently were decorated with scenes that depicted not only races, boxing matches, and hunting scenes, but also bloody contests between men and beasts. Some even showed the piteous deaths of condemned victims (see Brown).

Given their popularity, the games arguably had certain social values that Aristotle might have appreciated. Besides its cathartic purging of unruly emotions, staged and managed combat between men and animals or other men as a form of entertainment was believed to have an edifying purpose. Experiencing fear or bodily suffering from a safe distance, knowing that they personally were not in any danger, may have boosted viewers' pride, making them feel superior to the victims (if they regarded them as deserving their suffering) and allowing them to identify with the winners. More likely they were just relieved to be the ones watching instead of the ones being tortured. In either case, Augustine believed that observation of brutal sports ultimately desensitized them to others' pain.

According to some modern historians, this desensitization served a presumed social purpose. Civically sanctioned rituals of violence were simultaneously inhibitory and spirit-building. On the one hand, it was a spectacle of brutality; on the other, it was a way of channeling and controlling a society. They were displays of Roman power on an intimate scale. The arena was an “artificial battlefield” that displayed the virtues of courage and bravery, as well as the lack of self-pity, before an audience who might be “toughened up” to willingly face danger, to take daring risks, and to bravely endure bodily suffering when required. Watching accused criminals, rebellious slaves, political enemies, or adherents to prohibited cults meet humiliating and excruciating deaths was cautionary; watching gladiators battle to the death was – in a different way – motivating. Applauding risky actions and outrageous courage reinforced certain definitions of heroism, personal discipline, patriotism, and even nobility. Refusing to watch the scene, or being repelled by it, suggested a lack of proper tough-mindedness or possibly even a guilty conscience.¹

Augustine’s story about Alypius not only challenges these ostensible benefits, it raises a related and important issue. Even if one avoids attending cruel or violent shows, no one can keep from ever witnessing violence or control the way it affects them. Although Alypius thought that he could resist the spectacle’s power, he was unable to do so. Like Lot’s wife, he was tempted, and peeked. Yet, even viewers who were not coaxed or dragged to the spectacle by others often were unintentional witnesses to scenes that suddenly appear before them. Once seen, blocking the view, shutting one’s eyes, or turning away did not make it go away. Memories vividly retained images that individuals preferred to forget. Perversely, the images that had the strongest negative impact were often the ones that the mind unbidden recalled and that unconsciously shaped the viewer’s character and habits. Augustine explains how he understands this process in what might be called his theory of vision.

Augustine’s Theory of Vision

Augustine’s conviction that images have actual agency – to attract, influence, and even entrap viewers – is related to his explanation of how sight operates generally as an active rather than passive agent. He argued that sight is initiated by the eye even as a spectator allows it to enter the mind and become inscribed in the memory.

In a sermon on the Feast of St. Vincent, Augustine outlined this theory of vision. Largely drawing upon Plato’s claim that the viewer is the active agent in any act of observation, Augustine compared the speed of sight with the sluggish movements of human bodies. He believed vision was a kind of physical act, initiated by the eye, which issues a ray of light toward the object it seeks. According to him, this ray can travel great distances; it can even reach the sun itself just by opening and focusing one’s eye on it (*S.* 277.10). Thus the eye operates much like a blind man’s cane. This theory, called “extromission,” considers the viewer to be the active agent in the process of seeing. This makes seeing comparable to touching. A viewer extends some part of the body – most particularly one’s fingers – to feel one’s surroundings.

¹ Many important studies examine the cultural purposes of the Roman institutionalized violence, including Auguet; Plass; Gunderson; Futrell; and perhaps most thoroughly, Kyle.

Similarly, according to this theory, when the viewer turns to look upon something, the eye extends an invisible beam that physically takes hold of it.

Yet, for Augustine, the external object or body (image) that is perceived in this way comes to exist within the soul and is comprehended intellectually. The sight is also stored in the memory and thereby permanently retained. Augustine insists that the bodily eye is inferior to the mind's eye or intellectual vision. In this way, neither is vision passive nor are glances merely superficial. By moving from the exterior realm to the rational or interior one, the effects of active seeing are all that much more effective and lasting.

In his treatise *On the Trinity*, Augustine distinguishes three components of the visioning process (*Trin.* 11.1.2-3). The first is the object itself, which has a prior existence. The second is the process of seeing, which activates the link between viewer and vision. The third is the viewer's conscious intention to initiate, mentally interpret the gaze, and permanently sustain the vision in the memory after the seen thing disappears from sight. In short, these components are: the thing seen, the act of seeing, and perception of the thing (= a type of trinity). Each of these components is inextricably connected to, while possessing a manifestly different nature from, the others. The object viewed is distinct from the sense of sight that lights upon it, which in turn is completely different from the actual sight itself that forms in the mind and is retained there. Yet, that sight could not come to be separated from the external thing. In his consideration of these three components, Augustine recognizes the complex way that images have impact on viewers. While he grants primary agency to the viewer, Augustine also allows that a willing choice to pay attention to something can be prompted by the object's intrinsic attraction. Attention fixes on the observed object while, in turn, the object's image literally impresses itself upon the subject's mind and soul.

This intellectual perception is not merely a kind of abstract figment; it in turn has the power to transmit its own imprint on the viewer's physical body and is able to affect it in a way comparable to the change in a chameleon's body as it transforms to match the colors that it sees. For example, Augustine cites the effect of a pregnant mother's gaze on different objects upon the embryo she is carrying. As further evidence, Augustine cites the biblical story of Jacob, who wished to create a flock of speckled sheep by having the ewes impregnated as they looked upon spotted rods set into their water troughs (Genesis 30:37-41; *Trin.* 11.1.5).

In one of his anti-Pelagian works, Augustine reiterates the same story in order to explain how forms can be conveyed from one being to another through vision as much as by actual physical transmission. He explains that viewers carry the memories of things they see in a way that in turn affects or infects them like the sin of Adam and Eve. At this point Augustine relates the story of the tyrant Dionysios who, because he was physically deformed, did not want to have children who would look like himself. Therefore, when he had sex with his wife, he placed before her a beautiful image so that her desire for its beauty somehow would cause her to conceive beautiful children (*C. Inl.* 5.14.51). These stories strike modern readers as fanciful, but they make a point that Augustine wishes to emphasize: the effect of visual images, like the sin of Adam and Eve, is not restricted to its origins but transferred to individual souls. Of course, the example of Dionysios's wife demonstrates that looking upon beautiful things can have a positive impact, just as looking upon something ugly or deformed have the opposite effect.

Concupiscence of the Eyes

Augustine's story about Alypius is relevant to his insistence that immoderate desire for sensual experiences is as harmful to one's soul as looking at the wrong kinds of images. *Confessions* returns to this topic in a section of Book 10 that discusses the dangers of sensual pleasure. Augustine allows that delightful sounds or sights can uplift the soul, and even lead one toward God; but he also warns that they can get hold of the soul, ensnare the unwary, and arouse longings for more. When these experiences are sought after and prized in themselves, instead of being viewed as conveyances toward the truly desirable, they cease to have an instrumental function and claim an intrinsic value. They become idols, ends rather than means. Thus, recognizing that apparent beauty is experienced rightly only insofar as a thing points beyond itself can remedy one's tendency toward acquisitiveness, inasmuch as transcendent beauty stands beyond personal possession (*Conf.* 10.35.54).

Augustine calls this acquisitiveness "lust of the eyes" (*concupiscentia oculorum*), which is clearly parallel to "lust of the flesh." He draws upon 1 John 2:15-17:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever (RSV).

Augustine goes on to apply this "lust of the eyes" not only to the desire to obtain and possess beautiful things, but also to a vain appetite for knowledge that is driven by morbid curiosity – or a vain lust for mere experience. This is a kind of restlessness, a constant need for something more than one has, either for information or for adventures just for their own sake. And above all the other senses, sight is the most engaged in this kind of acquisition, and is even given credit for stimuli transmitted by the others.

Seeing is the property of our eyes. But we also use this word in other senses, when we apply the power of vision to knowledge generally. We do not say "Hear how that flashes," or "Smell how bright that is," or "Taste how that shines," or "Touch how that gleams." Of all these things we say "see." But we say not only "See how that light shines," which only the eyes can perceive, but also "See how that sounds, see what smells, see what tastes, see how hard that is." So the general experience of the senses is the lust, as scripture says, of the eyes, because seeing is a function in which eyes hold the first place but other senses claim the word for themselves by analogy when they are exploring any department of knowledge (*Conf.* 10.35.54; Chadwick: 211).

Augustine concludes that one can distinguish among the senses by the manner in which they are activated either by self-indulgent pleasure-seeking or by curiosity-driven inquisitiveness, and he re-asserts the primacy of vision among them. Pleasure pursues beauty, a reality that may be encountered in consuming delicious foods, hearing beautiful music, or touching soft fabrics, as much as in pursuing lovely sights. However, curiosity pursues experience, often merely out of a prurient interest that frequently seeks the very opposite of what is good or wholesome. Here he gives the example of people crowding around to see an accident, not

because they can be of any help to the victims, but simply out of voyeuristic, macabre, curiosity. What pleasure, he asks, can there be in looking at a lacerated corpse?

If he lived today, Augustine might approve the efforts to protect the dignity of the wounded or improve the physical safety of athletes. Yet, he might also wonder why audiences are nevertheless drawn to horror films or scary movies, or why it seems that the only point of the violence reenacted in television or films is to give audiences a cheap thrill. In Augustine's world, this was one of the main functions of the staged spectacles. Games of men fighting with beasts (or one another), chariot races, or executions of prisoners were popular entertainments that demonstrated that viewers are drawn not only to beautiful sights, but perversely also to those that are ugly, frightening, disturbing, or repellent. Many people alive today can still remember witnessing spectators at public hangings, behaving as if they were enjoying entertainments at a county fair.

Augustine addresses what he calls the "lust of the eyes" in a sermon preached around the same time (ca. 401 CE), on the Feast of St. Cyprian. Parallel with his admonition about the dangers of the lust of the flesh, he warns again against races and characterizes the games as addictive and soul-destroying:

What evils vulgar, shameless curiosity is the cause of, the lust of the eyes, the avid craving for frivolous shows and spectacles, the madness of the stadiums, the fighting of contests for no reward! The charioteers compete for some prize; for what prize do the crowds fight over the charioteers? But the charioteer delights them, the hunter delights them, the player delights them. Is this the way it is, then, that vile baseness delights the decent man? (*S.* 313A.3; Hill: 92).

Positive Viewing and Blessed Sights

Because Cyprian's martyrdom was the subject of Augustine's sermon on this occasion in 401, he used the story of the sainted bishop's death to emphasize his disparagement of those who seek violent entertainments. Yet, in this instance, he takes a completely different approach to observing suffering. In this case he explains that sometimes observing another's pain or suffering is not disordered but rather sanctifying. He encourages his listeners to prefer to watch (or imagine) the martyrs' contests and disdain the gladiators' fights. He has no concerns about their souls if they worthily praise and emulate the heroic men and women who fight in the arena or die for their faith rather than glorifying mere charioteers or hired beast fighters. The martyr's combat with Satan, he says, is the heroic feat to cheer, rather than attend displays of "wretched unfortunates" who "have been put in bondage to the voices of spectators, to the desires of the spectators, to the insane pleasures of the spectators" (*S.* 313A.3; Hill: 93).

In Hippo, probably on the Octave of Christmas around 418, Augustine noticed that a large portion of his congregation had skipped church in order to attend the games, and so urged those present to pray for the salvation of those who were absent. In a famously long sermon intended to hold them there until the games had ended, Augustine commends those among his flock who were former fans of these shows, among whom were even some who once had even been participants. Augustine draws upon his knowledge that some even had been beast fighters (*venatores*) to make the rhetorical comparison between Christ and a hunter. Christ, he says, is the one who hunts the hunters, driving them into the nets of salvation (*S.*

51.1-2). Then, in another rhetorical move that reverses the roles, he points out that Jesus himself was also the prey and victim of hunters, insofar as he made himself a spectacle to be gawked at: mocked, crowned with thorns, and hung upon a cross. Quoting 1 Corinthians he notes this is also true of Christ's disciples, who had been exhibited as though sentenced to death, "a spectacle to the world and to angels and men" (1 Corinthians 4:9).

Augustine finally distinguishes between two types of people who attend spectacles: those who are materially-minded and those who are spiritually-minded. The former gape at mangled bodies in the arena and think how miserable the victims are – thrown to wild beasts, beheaded, and burned – while the latter watch like the angels from heaven, not fixing their attention on those dreadful acts, but marveling at the complete faith of martyrs, who suffered those same torments. Here Augustine recognizes that the same scene will give some viewers the perverse thrill of watching horribly mangled bodies, while others will instead be either overcome by grief and gratitude or edified by a display of courage and constancy. This proves his point about the third and final component of vision. The viewer's intention controls the experience, not the image itself. Much of the time viewers see not only *what* they choose to see but *how* they choose to see. Moreover, viewers not only control the effect of what they see but their act of seeing in turn actually affects the object. Augustine insisted that an object had the power to change a viewer's physical self (like Jacob's sheep or the color of the chameleon's skin) as well as her perceptions. Here he proposes that the opposite also pertains: that the viewer affects the appearance – if not necessarily the substance – of the object.

This new angle in his argument prompts reconsideration of Augustine's example of the rubber-neckers at the scene of an accident. He does not suggest that Christians should avoid scenes of suffering or seek only attractive objects for their viewing. Rather, he cares about the motivations and effects of seeing. Those who seek to satisfy prurient curiosity or take perverse, thrill-seeking enjoyment in such a sight are actually complicit in the act. By contrast, those who cultivate a socially positive response of empathy and care, and who seek to comfort the suffering or care for the dying, have achieved a different kind of vision. Witnessing the suffering of others in fact can be critically important, insofar as one must not avoid the truth of others' suffering or the importance of addressing the hurt and injustice that exists in this world. To see suffering in this way is not to exploit or enjoy it, but to work for its alleviation and redress. This aligns with his identification of two kinds of viewers who observe the torments of martyrs: the materially-minded and the spiritually-minded. One group instinctively delights in seeing the pain; the other (who does not seek the sight) instinctively reacts with grief, compassion, and a desire to assuage pain. In terms that he might use, this is the "gaze of charity" – the opposite of the "lust of the eyes."

Yet, as discussed above, viewers do not always choose what they see. Sometimes images simply appear before one's eyes. Thus, while it matters *what* viewers choose to see, *how* they see is even more important. The sense of sight is not an impediment to spiritual advancement, but is in fact an asset, if one knows how to deploy it. Perceptions indeed have inherent power to attract, distract, deceive, or entrap; but they are also capable of affecting the witness in dynamically positive ways. Over time, individuals develop habitual choices for what they see, and establish accustomed practices of seeing itself. Vision is not a simple mechanical activity, but one that is directed by the will and informed by practiced intentions. This is also true of the inner eye (the imagination). For this reason, Augustine would say that faithful Christians

should practice a discipline of selective and compassionate seeing. Perhaps this suggestion parallels, but also reframes, the old-fashioned Catholic virtue, “custody of the eyes.”

This discipline is fundamentally about choices, attitudes, perspectives, and conscious attention, not only to what one watches but how one watches. It also pays attention to the effect and power of images. The aim is to cultivate the gaze of charity. Christians should look upon earthly beauty with gratitude rather than with possessiveness, upon violence with horror rather than enjoyment, and upon suffering with a desire to alleviate it rather than to draw prurient pleasure from it. Thus, what Augustine teaches is that the entertainments one chooses are not necessarily harmless; the things one sees are never innocuous. Images may be morally edifying or destructive; they may heal or damage. They enter into and change individuals as much as the food they eat or the air they breathe. Vision is not a passive activity, but an operation of choice and character, one that can be trained to make the eye into a sound lamp.

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