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**An Aristotelian Theory of Divine Illumination:
Robert Grosseteste’s *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics***

Two central accounts of human cognition emerge over the course of the Middle Ages: the theory of divine illumination and an Aristotelian theory centered on abstraction from sense data. Typically, these two accounts are seen as competing views of the origins of human knowledge; theories of divine illumination focus on God’s direct intervention in our epistemic lives, whereas Aristotelian theories generally claim that our knowledge derives primarily (or even entirely) from sense perception. In this paper, I address an early attempt to reconcile these two accounts—namely, Robert Grosseteste’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*—and I argue that Grosseteste’s efforts to bring Aristotle’s account of human cognition into harmony with a theory of divine illumination proves both philosophically interesting and largely successful.¹

Written in the 1220s, Grosseteste’s commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* (CPA) focuses largely on Aristotle’s account of how human beings acquire knowledge.² Historically, the commentary’s primary interest lies in its systematic introduction of Aristotelian epistemology to the medieval discussion; Grosseteste is a key figure in the re-introduction of Aristotle to the Latin West, the *Posterior Analytics* is a key Aristotelian work, and Grosseteste’s is quite likely its earliest completed commentary in the Latin West. Philosophically, the most original and intriguing feature of this commentary is its attempt to merge Aristotelian epistemology with a theory of divine illumination. One of the main developments in medieval epistemology previous to the thirteenth century was Augustine’s theory of divine illumination; as is clear both in the

¹ All references to Grosseteste’s commentary and translations of the Latin text are from to Pietro Rossi’s 1981 edition: *Commentarius in Posteriorum Analyticorum Libros* (Firenze, Italy: Leo S. Olschki).

² The exact date of the commentary’s composition is unclear; James McEvoy dates it to the late 1220s—and, most likely, to around 1228. This seems reasonable to me; since nothing of philosophical importance for this paper hangs on the exact date of composition, in what follows I will assume that Grosseteste wrote the commentary in the mid-to-late 1220s. (For a detailed discussion of this topic, see McEvoy’s “The Chronology of Robert Grosseteste’s Writings on Nature and Natural Philosophy,” *Speculum* 58 (1983), pp. 636-43. For a contrasting view, see Richard Southern’s argument for a slightly earlier date [1220-1225] in *Robert Grosseteste. The Growth of an English Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1986), pp. 131-33.)

CPA and in earlier works such as *De veritate*, Grosseteste himself advocates such a theory.³ At the same time, in the CPA he seems not only to explicate but also to advocate Aristotle's account of human cognition (according to which human beings acquire knowledge through a complicated process beginning with sense perception). In short, in his commentary he quite consciously juxtaposes this "new" Aristotelian epistemology with his earlier account of the role that divine illumination plays in our cognitive lives.

Grosseteste himself thought he had successfully reconciled the Augustinian and Aristotelian views. In what follows, I examine this attempt and evaluate the success of his project, defending it against the claim that he gives up the theory of divine illumination in the CPA in favor of Aristotle's position. In particular, after showing how Grosseteste's use of Aristotelian epistemology avoids a difficulty commonly associated with Augustine's theory (namely, that in cognizing necessary truths we come into direct epistemic contact with God himself), I address how a similar move in his general account of demonstrative knowledge (namely, his claiming that our corrupt bodies interfere with God's directly illuminating our intellects) also blocks a difficulty concerning proper warrant. Grosseteste's claim that God does not directly illumine our intellects in this life, however, opens his theory to the worry that Grosseteste leaves the *divine* out of his theory of divine illumination in the CPA. Steven Marrone, for example, holds that Grosseteste's Aristotelian focus in this work causes him to abandon the theory of divine illumination he advocated in the earlier *De veritate* in favor of a modified theory of "human" illumination.⁴ I argue in contrast that Grosseteste does give God a role in human knowledge in the CPA—a role, furthermore, that allows human beings to remain largely responsible for the acquisition of knowledge while still requiring God's illumination for actual cognition. In short, I conclude that, although human bodies interfere with God's direct illumination of our intellects, God nevertheless plays a crucial ideogenic role in human cognition by illuminating the objects of our intellection and making them intelligible to us.

I) Knowledge of Universal Truths and the Cognition of God

³ Although Richard Southern argues in favor of a later date for *De veritate* in *Robert Grosseteste* (p. 113), I follow Steven Marrone in holding that *De veritate* was most likely composed sometime in the 1220s. (See, e.g., Marrone's *The Light of Thy Countenance: Science and Knowledge of God in the Thirteenth Century*, Vol. 1: *A doctrine of divine illumination* (Leiden: Brill. 2001), pp.34-5.)

In I.7 of the CPA, Grosseteste breaks from a straightforward commentary on Aristotle's text in order to put the discussion of incorruptible truths and demonstrative proofs (*APo* 75b22-23) into a broader context that includes the relation of God's nature as Truth itself to principles for cognizing eternal and unchanging truths. In the process, he separates the cognition of necessary truths from the cognition of God himself. That is, Grosseteste claims that—at least in this life—the universal truths that we cognize are not the truths present in God's very nature. This move constitutes an important modification of Augustine's epistemology as it is traditionally understood—a modification that, as we'll see, also avoids a serious problem typically associated with theories of divine illumination.

Augustine himself famously claims that necessary truths are part of the divine essence, so that when human beings know truth they also (in some sense) know the divine Truth.⁵ In *De libero arbitrio*, for example, Augustine's argument for God's existence relies on our recognizing that all immutable truths are part of a single, higher truth. As he says, "You cannot deny the existence of an unchangeable truth that contains everything that is unchangeably true. And you cannot claim that this truth is yours or mine or anyone else's; it is present and reveals itself in common to all who discern what is unchangeably true, like a light that is public and yet strangely hidden" (II.12).⁶ All necessary truths (e.g., mathematical truths) are "contained" in some way in the divine essence.

If these unchangeable truths are part of the divine Truth, however, then it seems that in cognizing them, human beings come into contact not only with those truths but also with God himself. In Steven Marrone's words, "If God's light streamed down on mind in order to produce ideas, then the cognitive process itself involved contact with the divinity" (21).⁷ Marrone goes on to point out that this feature was often seen as an advantage by advocates of divine illumination: "Because it argued for direct, or nearly direct, cognitive access to the divinity under normal conditions of intellection, [this account] stood as eloquent testimony to an extraordinary intimacy between God and mind, even the world of sin" (22). In cognizing the immaterial,

⁴ This is his central argument in chapter six of *William of Auvergne and Robert Grosseteste: New Ideas of Truth in the Early Thirteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). It also features prominently in chapters one through four of volume one of his later *The Light of Thy Countenance* (pp. 38-108).

⁵ I won't attempt to do justice here to the intricacies of Augustine's rich theory of divine illumination; instead, I will sketch his account only in enough detail to show why it's been seen as open to a certain difficulty.

⁶ I'm using here Thomas William's translation in *On Free Choice of the Will* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 54; for this translation, he relies on the Latin text in the critical edition in the *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina* series, vol. 29, ed. W.M. Green (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1970).

unchanging, and eternal truth that $7+3=10$, we come into direct (or “nearly direct”) epistemic contact with God; even in a fallen world, an intimate relationship with God is still available to human beings.

Although this feature was touted as an advantage by some, however, the prospect of such epistemic contact with God in this life was (and is) seen by many others as posing serious difficulties. On the one hand, it’s unclear what it would mean to be in “nearly direct” epistemic contact with God, and it’s even less clear that any sort of *indirect* contact would provide the desired stamp of certainty for our knowledge (either of necessary truths or of God) that’s seen as one of the main advantages of a theory of divine illumination. After all, such a theory guarantees this certainty precisely through the direct connection it draws between necessary truths, God, and human intellects. *Direct* contact with God, on the other hand, is something the Western Christian tradition generally reserves for the afterlife or for highly unusual moments in the lives of the saints. The idea that we come into direct epistemic contact with God whenever we contemplate the Pythagorean theorem thus seems strange at best, and deeply implausible at worst.⁸ The prospect of this sort of direct contact with God seems even more troubling when one considers the fact that the majority of people who cognize necessary truths appear unaware that they’re also cognizing God; it seems unlikely that we could be in direct epistemic contact with God without being conscious of it.

Grosseteste’s theory avoids this objection, however, and it does so by incorporating key elements of Aristotelian epistemology into his general account of human cognition. In short, in I.7, Grosseteste makes it clear that the universals that human beings cognize in this life are the “formal causes” that Aristotle discusses in his *Posterior Analytics* and *not* themselves the necessary, immutable, and eternal ideas that Augustine describes as part of the divine essence. Cognition of those ideas is generally reserved for only the purest intellects, such as God and the angels.

In fact, over the course of explaining what sort of incorruptible truths constitute the conclusions of demonstrative proofs, Grosseteste introduces five different levels of universals, or

⁷ *The Light of Thy Countenance*, Vol.1.

⁸ As Scott MacDonald puts the problem: “...Augustine had suggested that insofar as any particular truth is necessary, immutable, and eternal, it must be or in some way be a part of God, since God alone is truth necessary, immutable, and eternal. But in that case it seems that in grasping a truth of this sort, ordinary human knowers are in direct epistemic contact with the divine nature, a state that Christian doctrine takes to be virtually unattainable by human beings in this life.” “Divine Illumination”, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

principles of cognizing—each of which corresponds to a different level of intellect.⁹ These five different types of universals are principles of cognizing: 1) uncreated ideas of things, which exist from eternity in the first cause, 2) exemplar forms and causative ideas of created things (which the intelligences possess and through which they aid God in the creation of corporeal species), 3) causative ideas of terrestrial species (located in the “powers and illuminating principles of the heavenly bodies”), 4) formal causes, or “that in the thing by virtue of which it is what it is”, and 5) ideas of accidents such as color and sound, which can eventually lead weaker intellects to the cognition of genera and species.¹⁰

The first type of universal is both itself the highest type of cognizing principle and the object of the highest sort of cognition. For certain intellects, these universals are also principles of cognizing the necessary truths that Augustine describes as contained in God (the one necessary, eternal, and immutable truth): Grosseteste characterizes universals of the first type as principles of cognizing the uncreated ideas (*rationes*) of things—ideas “that exist from eternity in the first cause.”¹¹ Unlike Augustine, however, who describes these ideas as present “in common to all who discern what is unchangeably true” (DLA II.12), Grosseteste reserves cognition of these principles for the highest intellects, “pure and separated from phantasms, able to contemplate the first light.” As he puts it, “When the pure intellect is able to fix its sight on these things, it cognizes created things in them as truly and clearly as possible—and not only created things but also the first light itself in which it cognizes other things” (108-111). In other words, these principles of cognition involve not only the clearest possible cognition of created things but also direct cognition of God (the first light).

By and large, however, human intellects are not pure and separated from phantasms: we primarily interact with physical objects, and our concern for physical well-being (among other things, as we’ll see) typically prevents us from transcending matter completely. Thus, human

⁹ Grosseteste here identifies universals with principles of cognizing: “...it must be said that universals are principles of cognizing” (100).

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of the nature and role of these principles in Grosseteste’s theory, see my “Robert Grosseteste on the Principles of Universal Cognition: Platonic Ideas, Aristotelian forms, and ‘*principia essentia et cognoscendi*’.” Marrone and James McEvoy also both discuss this passage in, respectively, *William of Auvergne and Robert Grosseteste*, pp. 166-178 and *The Philosophy of Robert Grosseteste* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 327-329.

¹¹ In addition, they serve as principles of creation (*creatrices*)—the “ideas of things to be created and [their] formal exemplar causes”. See also I.15 (142-150), where Grosseteste distinguishes the “ideas and uncreated natures (*rationes*) of things eternally in the divine mind” from the ideas involved in demonstrations and predication.

beings generally do not have access to this highest type of universal—at least in this life.¹² Instead, although some human beings achieve cognition of level-three universals (i.e. the “causative ideas of terrestrial species” located in the heavenly bodies) through the study of astronomy, human cognition typically involves only level-four universals (formal causes) and level-five universals (the “accidents that follow on the true essences of things,” such as shape and color).

In general, Grosseteste’s specific interest in the process of the acquisition of human knowledge leads him throughout the CPA to focus on this fourth type of universal—what he refers to as a thing’s formal cause, “which is in that thing and that by which that thing is what it is” (131-132). Importantly, he also identifies these widely accessible principles of cognition with Aristotelian universals, or ‘form’ understood both as genus or species (such as ‘animal’ or ‘human being’) and as principle of being. Indeed, Grosseteste explicitly claims that Aristotle is referring to this fourth type of cognitive principle in the *Posterior Analytics*’s discussion of universals and demonstrative science, stating baldly that “[T]his is Aristotle’s position with regard to genera and species” (140-141).

By distinguishing between both these different types of universals and the sorts of intellects that have access to them, Grosseteste thus separates our everyday cognition of universal truths from the cognition of the higher type of cognitive principle that would also entail direct cognition of God. In fact, in a later discussion, Grosseteste claims that level-one universals are wholly unrelated to the universals involved in demonstrative science: “[A]lthough uncreated ideas and definitions (*rationes*) exist from eternity in the divine mind, these ideas don’t pertain at all to the sort of thinking (*rationationem*) in which one thing is predicated of another” (I.15, 146-148).¹³ When a human being recognizes the necessary truth of the conclusion of a sound argument, she does not, in the normal course of events, also see the light of God’s own truth in so doing. By claiming that such cognition is possible for *pure* intellects, however, Grosseteste retains Augustine’s belief that God’s nature contains everything that is necessarily true. In this way, Grosseteste’s account of human cognition retains an intimate

¹² He does leave open the possibility that certain people “who are entirely separated from the love and phantasmata of corporeal things” (I.14) might receive illumination directly from God and thus share cognition of the first and highest type of universals, but he makes it clear that this is far from the norm for human beings whose intellects are weighed down by corrupt, corporeal bodies.

¹³ Grosseteste goes on to say that he’s talking here of predications involving “demonstrations and thought processes”—philosophical thought in general, then.

connection between God and necessary truths while diverging from traditional theories of divine illumination in claiming that cognizing necessary truths typically does not bring us into direct (or even “nearly direct”) epistemic contact with God.¹⁴

II) Proper Warrant and *Divine* Illumination?

Grosseteste’s denial in I.7 of the universality of human access to the eternal, unchanging truth of God’s essence might appear to move him toward a straight-forwardly Aristotelian account of human cognition. Yet, it’s clear throughout the CPA that Grosseteste is deeply committed to some sort of illuminationist theory; in fact, his attraction to the metaphor of illumination leads him later in his career to develop a complex “metaphysics of light,” according to which light is central to the workings of the physical universe as well as to human understanding.¹⁵ In this section, I’ll delve further into the nature of the theory of illumination Grosseteste presents in the CPA, examining how his claim that our corrupt bodies prevent God from directly illumining our intellects allows our knowledge to count as properly justified while—at the same time—it raises the further question of whether our intellects are *divinely* illuminated after all.

Grosseteste introduces his theory of illumination toward the beginning of the very first chapter of the CPA, writing: “Neither the one who produces an external sound nor the external visible writing in a text teaches—these two things merely move and stimulate [the learner]. The true teacher, however, is the one who internally illumines the mind and reveals the truth” (33-36). This is a clear reference to Augustine’s *De magistro* (12.39-40); the “true teacher” to whom Grosseteste refers here is, of course, God, who illuminates our intellects “from within” and who is directly responsible for human learning and knowledge. On a traditional Augustinian theory of divine illumination, the highest truth not only contains all truths—it also makes them known to us. Although a professor who gives a talk on universals might speak the truth about them, that talk is merely an instrumental means of the student’s acquiring knowledge about universals: the

¹⁴ One disadvantage of this distinction between the truth which is part of the divine essence and the truth which human beings cognize is that it appears to remove the explanation for the necessity of certain sorts of truths. Augustine thought that by identifying necessary truths with the divine, he thereby gained an explanation for their necessity. Grosseteste can’t make the same sort of appeal, however, and so he must provide another account of the necessity of necessary truths—one which is more Aristotelian in nature.

¹⁵ See his *De luce* (1235-40) for his fullest discussion of this theory.

student gains actual knowledge of the truth about these things only when God illumines her intellect while she contemplates what the professor is saying.

If God places these truths directly into our intellects, however, one might wonder whether our knowledge of them counts as properly justified—that is, whether it should count as knowledge at all. Many (if not most) philosophers hold that in order for a true belief to be justified, the human agent must be involved in some integral way in the acquisition of that belief. This aspect of the theory of divine illumination as it's traditionally understood (namely, God's directly providing us with knowledge) appears to violate that requirement. Thus, although it seems clear that *God's* beliefs would count as properly justified on this theory, it's not obvious that this justification would carry over to beliefs human beings receive directly from God.

Indeed, the intuition that human agents must be causally involved in the acquisition of their beliefs in order for those beliefs to possess proper warrant directly conflicts with the illuminationist's explanation for how human knowledge is attained. George Mavrodes, for example, has proposed a thought experiment in which God directly inserts a belief into someone's mind,¹⁶ to which Linda Zabzebski responds as follows: "Surely the man described by Mavrodes is not justified...because he has contributed nothing to the process generating the belief. No habits or processes within him, much less any such habits within his control, direct or indirect, have had anything to do with his acquiring the belief" (218).¹⁷ If God alone is responsible for a human being's acquiring knowledge of the truth, then that human being appears to contribute nothing relevant to her acquisition of the truth.

In general, proponents of this objection argue, in relying on supernatural intervention for our acquisition of necessary truths, the theory of divine illumination seems not to provide adequate justification for those truths. Lest this seem too strong, remember that, all else being equal, on this account God could just as easily decide *not* to illumine any given person's intellect: God could, say, choose to illuminate the intellects of exactly three of the ten human beings listening to a lecture on universals, even if all ten are paying strict attention and five of them are actively praying for illumination. Absent modifying the theory of divine illumination in a way that allows our desire for illumination to impact God's decisions about whom to

¹⁶ George Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 37-8.

¹⁷ "Religious Knowledge and the Virtues", in Zabzebski, ed. *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. 1993.

illuminate, our acquiring the truth is “pure luck from an epistemic point of view”.¹⁸

Furthermore, according to Zabzebski, “pure luck is not enough for justification or warrant” (218).¹⁹ Thus, if we receive illumination directly from God, we might have access in that way to the truth, but it’s not clear that we have *knowledge* in the relevant sense.

Again, Grosseteste’s theory explicitly avoids this worry. Grosseteste describes direct illumination as the *ideal* method for acquiring knowledge—he follows Augustine in believing that the highest and best sort of learning comes from the teacher “who illumines the mind and reveals the truth from within”—but he makes it very clear throughout the rest of the CPA that this is *not* the typical mode of human cognition. In short, Grosseteste holds that our bodies interfere with God’s directly illumining our intellects, and his account of the normal process of human cognition appears thoroughly Aristotelian. In fact, Grosseteste develops his theory of divine illumination in the CPA such that, while we still rely on God’s illumination of the objects of knowledge, our actually acquiring knowledge of these objects requires our active participation in the process—in particular, through abstracting from and reasoning about the sense data we gain through sense perception.

In defending Aristotle’s claim that sense perception is necessary for demonstrative knowledge in I.14, for example, Grosseteste breaks from his straightforward commentary on Aristotle’s text in order to comment on how a lack in sense perception causes a lack in knowledge only in the case of *human* knowers; both God and angels have knowledge without any sense perception at all, and in fact “knowledge is most complete in these things that lack senses” (227-8). Human beings have imperfect cognition, and this is why they are forced to rely on sense perception in order to acquire knowledge (and why a lack in sense perception causes a corresponding lack in knowledge). As we saw earlier, this imperfect cognition entails that human beings can’t come into epistemic contact with God; here, Grosseteste claims that it also keeps us from being illuminated directly by the first light (i.e. God).

¹⁸ This would constitute a fairly dramatic modification of traditional theories of divine illumination, which want to leave choices about whom and when to illuminate entirely up to God’s sovereign power.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that most Reformed Epistemologists would, in fact, claim that beliefs received from God in this way are justified. See, e.g., Alvin Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

The problem for human cognition is, of course, the corporeal body, corrupted by the fall:²⁰

“Similarly, if the highest part of the human soul, which is called the intellective part...were not clouded and weighed down by the weight of the corrupt corporeal body, it would have complete knowledge without the aid of sense-perception through an irradiation received from a higher light, just as it will have when the soul has been stripped from the body and perhaps as those who are wholly separated from the love and the phantasms of corporeal things have” (228-35).

In the perfect world, apparently, human cognition involves the separation of the immaterial intellect from the “weight of the corrupt corporeal body” and it takes place without the aid of sense perception.

Grosseteste goes on to claim, however, that this model of knowledge isn’t available to human beings in this life. As he writes: “Because the purity of the eye of the soul is clouded and weighed down by the corrupt body, all the powers of the rational soul in a human being are occupied from birth (*nato*) by the weight of the body so that they cannot act, and so are in a certain way sleepy” (235-8). That is, our bodies prevent our intellects from both perceiving and receiving the “higher light” which would otherwise illumine them and lead them to understanding.

At the end of this chapter, Grosseteste provides more detail about the way in which our bodies interfere with God’s illumining work, explaining that the weight of the body not only makes our intellects drowsy but also actively draws our mental vision away from its proper light:

“Now the reason why the soul’s sight is clouded through the weight of the corrupt body is that the affection and vision (*affectus et aspectus*) of the soul are not distinct, and it attains its vision only by means of that by which it attains its affection or its love. Therefore, since the love and affection of the soul are turned toward the body and toward bodily enticements, it necessarily pulls the soul’s vision with it and turns it away from its light, which is related to it just as the sun is related to the external eyes. But the mind’s vision that is turned away from its light is necessarily turned toward darkness and idleness (*otium*)” (279-86).²¹

The soul itself has vision; Grosseteste expands his metaphor of illumination here to describe how the body draws that vision away from its proper light because of the close connection between the soul’s vision and its affection. Our inner sight naturally focuses on the objects of our love.

²⁰ It appears that the difficulty of the body is two-fold for Grosseteste: on the one hand, he comes dangerously close to advocating the Platonic belief that souls would be better off without bodies to begin with; on the other hand, the Christian doctrine of the fall compounds the problem by leaving us with bodies that are even worse than they have to be.

²¹ See chapter 18, conclusion 28 for more about love and desire moving the soul.

Since the soul's affections are for the body and all its "enticements", our inner vision turns with those affections away from the light of truth and toward corporeal things, and the blame for the imperfect cognition with which human beings suffer is placed squarely on the shoulders of the fallen body.

Since he denies that human beings acquire knowledge directly from the illumination of a higher light,²² however, Grosseteste must look elsewhere for an explanation of how they can know, e.g., the type of universals he's already claimed we have access to. Not surprisingly, he turns to the text on which he's commenting, again using Aristotelian epistemology to account for aspects of human cognition left unexplained by his modified theory of divine illumination. Indeed, the rest of chapter 14 is devoted to a careful description of this alternate way in which human beings acquire scientific knowledge:

"And so when—over time—the senses act through their many meetings with sensible things, reason (which is mixed up with these senses and in them as if it were carried toward the sensible things in a boat) is awakened. But once it is awakened, reason begins to distinguish between and to consider separately things that had been confused in the senses—as, for example, sight confuses color, magnitude, shape, and body, and in its judgment these things are all taken as one thing. Awakened reason, however, distinguishes color from magnitude and shape from body and, furthermore, shape and magnitude from the substance of the body. And so, through drawing distinctions and abstracting, it comes to the cognition of the substance of the body that bears (*deferentis*) the magnitude, shape, and color. Nevertheless, reason knows that this universal exists in actuality only after it has made this abstraction from many individuals and after it has occurred to reason that it has found in many individuals what it judges to be one and the same thing. Therefore, this is the way in which the simple universal is obtained from individuals through the help of the senses" (238-52).²³

That is, although contact with the body makes the powers of our intellect "sleepy", reason begins to wake up when it encounters sense data. Faced with a mishmash of sense-perception, reason starts to draw distinctions between color and shape, for example; after it makes enough distinctions and abstractions, it can arrive at knowledge of substances. Thus, although the body prevents the intellect from achieving ideal cognition by drawing our mind's eye away from its proper light, it does provide the intellect with the means (through sense perception) for cognition.

There's a catch, of course. The sort of cognition made possible by sense perception is less perfect than the sort acquired through direct illumination in no fewer than three ways: 1) it's (obviously) acquired in an inferior way, 2) it's capable of being in error, unlike the sort of

²² A "higher light" could be either God or an intelligence's reflection of God's "*rationes causales*".

cognition which involves direct illumination, and 3) it's less clear, deep, and explanatory. This claim makes perfect sense if we turn back to the five different types of universals Grosseteste distinguishes between in I.7: using sense perception, we're able to access formal causes, but we're not able to cognize created things "as truly and clearly as possible", much less able to cognize the first light itself. Worse, although most people will at least arrive at the understanding of the essential nature of, e.g., a human being, through this process, Grosseteste does acknowledge that certain "weak intellects" will not be able to reach even full understanding of these lower-level universals.

At the close of chapter 14, however, Grosseteste fits this alternate means of cognizing into his broader theory of illumination. After explaining how the body interferes with the intellect's vision by dragging it away from the spiritual light²⁴ and down to corporeal matters, he claims that the human intellect can in fact begin to see the spiritual light after reason is awakened through sensory experiences. He then uses his theory of illumination to describe the process of reason's awakening and acquiring knowledge:

"The mind's vision that is turned away from its light is necessarily turned toward darkness and idleness until, in some way coming through the external senses out into the external sensible light, it in some way finds again a trace of the light born in it. When it stumbles upon that, it begins—as if awakened—to seek the proper light; and, to the extent that [the mind's] love is turned away from corruptible corporeal things, its vision is turned toward its light and finds that light again" (286-291).

The body might prevent the intellect from being illuminated directly by God, then, but it isn't kept permanently in the dark. When it receives sense data through sense perception (and here Grosseteste is thinking specifically of sight and visual data)—something possible only because the external light of the sun illuminates both our eyes and external objects—reason has something to work with and the intellect is able to begin the process of becoming illuminated itself. Once this process has begun, Grosseteste believes that the intellect both can and will begin to seek "the proper light", using sense perception as the impetus and foundation for fuller illumination.

The changes Grosseteste makes to a more traditionally Augustinian theory of divine illumination appear to circumvent two of the central difficulties often associated with

²³ This is the process for acquiring what Grosseteste calls a simple universal; he also describes how human beings arrive at knowledge of complex experiential universals, but that discussion is tangential to the topic of this paper.

illuminationist theories. Nevertheless, these very modifications leave Grosseteste's account open to an objection that's potentially even more damaging. In claiming both that our intellects are prevented by the body from acquiring knowledge directly from God and that we must instead work to acquire knowledge through sense perception, Grosseteste seems to leave little to no room for God's work in human cognition—surely a unfortunate feature of a theory of divine illumination.

That Grosseteste explains God right out of the picture in the CPA is, in fact, Steven Marrone's main thesis in his discussion of simple truth in *William of Auvergne and Robert Grosseteste*, and an argument he reiterates in chapter one through four of his more recent *The Light of Thy Countenance*. Indeed, as we've seen, Grosseteste appears to offer a theory of divine illumination that applies to human beings only hypothetically or potentially: *if* the human intellect were completely purified or not joined to a corrupt corporeal body, *then* human beings could acquire knowledge by gazing at God's light. *When* the body dies, *then* the unencumbered intellect can receive illumination directly from God. Since human intellects are, however, joined to corrupt bodies and almost never free from the love of corporeal things²⁵, it might seem that Grosseteste doesn't actually employ his illumination theory to explain the process by which human beings typically acquire scientific knowledge. One might rather get the impression that, although divine illumination accounts for knowledge in the life to come, Aristotelian epistemology is the place to turn for an explanation of knowledge in this life.

In making this observation, Marrone does touch on what looks to be a problem within the CPA. (He rather overstates his claim, however, in saying that “The central theme around which all [Grosseteste's] discussions of truth in the theological works [e.g. *De veritate*] turned was that God was instrumental to [human] knowledge of simple truth. When Grosseteste came to write his *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*...he had by this time totally excised any mention of God or a conformity to some ideal exemplar from his formal definition of simple truth” (157). It seems to me that Marrone here appears to have overlooked the natural consequences of the dramatic shift in topic between the two works. An explanation of the nature of truth naturally has a very different focus from a discussion of how human beings acquire demonstrative

²⁴ It's important to note that Grosseteste's use of the phrase “spiritual light” isn't meant to indicate that this light is in some way divine. Instead, it merely distinguishes this light from the corporeal light which he held was the basis of the material world.

knowledge.) Despite his own intentions, in adopting a generally Aristotelian epistemology and giving sense perception a key role in the acquisition of knowledge, Grosseteste may well have diminished the role of God's illumination in our cognitive activities to insignificance.

III) Relocating the Light

I believe, however, that Grosseteste's theory of divine illumination in the CPA isn't merely hypothetical or potential, nor does it abandon God's role in human cognition in this life. Instead, I will argue in the remainder of this paper that Grosseteste sees God's light as shining in a slightly different direction than in traditional theories of divine illumination. In short, since our bodies get in the way of God's directly illuminating our *intellects*, Grosseteste holds that God's central role in human cognition lies in illuminating the proper *objects* of human cognition, such that our intellects are able to grasp those objects, even though they must begin with sense perception.²⁶ In short, whereas on Augustine's theory, God acts directly in our intellects so that we can see the truth, according to Grosseteste's theory, God acts on the proper objects of our intellection so that we can know them.

My argument for the claim that Grosseteste's account truly is a theory of divine illumination will be two-fold: since Marrone argues that the light mentioned in the CPA is merely the light of the human intellect, I will first show that Grosseteste refers to *God* when he speaks of the "spiritual light" which shines on the mind's eye and on what that eye sees; second, I will defend the claim that, even though in this life the body interferes with the intellect's being illuminated, God still plays a vital part in how human beings acquire knowledge—*viz.* by illuminating the objects of our cognition and making them intelligible to us.²⁷

First, then, what is the "spiritual light" to which Grosseteste refers throughout his commentary? According to Marrone, it's the light of human reason: "There is ample evidence [Grosseteste] held that the mind itself had a power that could be described as a light and that

²⁵ For a discussion of what people might qualify for this extremely rare distinction, see the discussion in McEvoy's *The Philosophy of Robert Grosseteste* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 325-329.

²⁶ He does illuminate our intellects to some degree as well, as I will discuss below, but our bodies keep this illumination from being complete, and so God's role in illuminating the objects of our cognition becomes the central way in which Grosseteste's theory is one of divine illumination.

²⁷ One might think that saying that God illuminates the objects of our cognition is just another way of spelling out how he illuminates our intellects. This is true in one sense, the sense that allows Grosseteste's theory really to be a theory of divine illumination, but in another sense, there's something quite different between God directly causing our minds to understand and him making the objects of our understanding the sorts of things human intellects can cognize.

acted to make intelligible objects visible to it” (198). Since “the intellect was its own illuminator”, Marrone writes, “Here is a way to read the image of intelligible light without making any reference to God at all, and it appears to have the explicit approval of the author himself” (199). In short, Marrone denies that the light that illuminates both our intellect and the objects of our cognition in the CPA is God, claiming instead that it is the intellect itself.

The other possibility, of course, is that the proper light of the intellect is God—the “first light” discussed in chapter 7. Grosseteste himself doesn’t specify what this light is in his discussion either in I.14, saying there merely that the body and “bodily enticements” draw intellect’s gaze away from it. In I.17, however, claims Grosseteste makes about the spiritual light and its relation to both our intellect and the objects of cognition clarify his position; these claims, I believe, give us good reason to think that he identifies the spiritual light of the intellect with God in the CPA in the same way he did in earlier works (such as *De veritate*).

First, in a passage early in I.17, Grosseteste describes the light that shines on both our intellects and the objects of our cognition as follows:

“I hold that there is a spiritual light which pours over intelligible things and the mind’s eye—a light that is related to the interior eye and intelligible things just as the corporeal sun is related to the corporeal eye and to corporeal visible things. Therefore, the intelligible things that are more receptive of this spiritual light are more visible to the interior eye, and the things that are more receptive of this light are by nature more similar to this light. And so the things that are more receptive of this light are penetrated more perfectly by a mental sight that is also a spiritual irradiation, and this penetration is more perfect and more certain” (39-47).

There are two features in particular of this passage which lead me to believe that Grosseteste identifies the “spiritual light which pours over intelligible things and the mind’s eye” here (and elsewhere in the CPA) with God and not with the human intellect. First, Grosseteste claims that the light is related to the mind’s eye and the objects of cognition in the same way that “the corporeal sun is related to the corporeal eye and corporeal visible objects”. If we take this comparison seriously, it seems hard to believe that the spiritual light is the light of the human intellect. The sun is external both to the eyes and to external objects, and it shines on both alike. If the spiritual light were the intellect, it’s difficult to see how this analogy would work: the intellect would have shine on itself at the same time as it shone on the objects of cognition.

Second, and more convincingly, Grosseteste here describes a “mental sight” which he claims penetrates the more intelligible objects more perfectly, and he calls this power of the intellect “*also* a spiritual irradiation”, comparing it in this way to the spiritual light he was

already discussing. That is, the mental acuity is *also* a sort of light, but this seems to rule out the possibility that it's the spiritual light itself. Marrone is right to claim that "the mind itself had a power that could be described as a light", but he is wrong to identify that light with the spiritual light of which Grosseteste speaks throughout his commentary. [not a light at all, but rather a reflection of the light?]

Later in the same chapter, Grosseteste explains that universal demonstration is superior to particular demonstration because "universal demonstration brings one to know what is less mixed up with phantasmata and closer to the spiritual light through which mental vision becomes certain. Therefore, universal demonstration brings one to know better, since it brings one to know what is more visible to the mind's eye" (212-6). Universal demonstrations are better, then, at bringing about knowledge because the objects of universal demonstrations are both easier to see with the mind's eye and nearer to the spiritual light that makes knowledge possible.

At the end of I.17, Grosseteste expands on the nature of this spiritual light in a discussion of which objects of cognition are prior:

"For things that are prior are closer to the spiritual light, by which—when it pours over intelligible objects—those objects are made actually visible to the mind's vision (*aspectus*). And these prior things are more receptive of that light and more penetrable by the mind's vision, for which reason they are more certain, and knowledge of these things is more certain knowledge. Considered in this way, the knowledge belonging to separated incorporeal substances is more certain than the knowledge belonging to incorporeal substances that are tied to a body, and this knowledge in turn is more certain than the knowledge belonging to corporeal substances" (340-7).²⁸

The point of the last sentence of this passage seems to be that knowledge possessed by intelligences is said to be more certain than the knowledge possessed by human intellects, because that knowledge is of things which are closer to the spiritual light. It would make little sense for Grosseteste to claim that intelligences had knowledge of things closer to the spiritual light than the objects of human cognition, however, if that spiritual light were the human intellect itself.

Indeed, this passage appears to refer back to I.7; Grosseteste claimed there that intelligences used higher principles of cognition than human beings—higher in the sense that they were closer to the first light, i.e. God. The spiritual light to which those things are closer certainly seems to be the first light Grosseteste speaks of in I.7; thus, it seems relatively certain

²⁸ By "incorporeal substances that are bound to a body", Grosseteste clearly refers to human beings, whose immaterial intellect is tied to a corporeal body.

that Grosseteste is referring to God and not to the human intellect when he speaks in these passages of a light which “pours over intelligible objects” and which makes those objects “actually visible to the mind’s vision”.

It seems clear to me, then, that Grosseteste has not simply removed God from his theory of illumination—it is still a theory of *divine* illumination. What’s left to do in the paper, then, is to show where, precisely, God fits into Grosseteste’s theory. As we’ve seen, although Grosseteste speaks of a spiritual light which shines on both our mind’s eye and intelligible objects, he’s concerned to point out that our bodies interfere with our intellects’ being illuminated directly by God; it seems, then, that God’s primary role in human cognition appears to consist in illuminating the objects of our cognition in a way which makes them intelligible to our intellects.²⁹

In the last chapter of book one, chapter 19, for example, Grosseteste describes how God illuminates both the eye of the mind and the objects of our cognition:

“I hold that there is a mental vision for the apprehending of intelligible things, that the things visible to this vision are what we call intelligible and knowable, and that there is a light that—pouring over both the vision and the visible things—brings about actual sight, just as the light of the sun brings about [sight] in external vision” (29-32).

God makes intelligible objects visible to us, then, in much the same way that the sun makes corporeal objects visible to our eyes—namely, by lighting them up in a way that makes us able to see them.

Several of the passages from I.17 which I’ve already examined also illustrate the way in which God aids human cognition by making the objects of our cognition intelligible to our intellects, as when he writes that: “[T]hings that are prior are closer to the spiritual light by which—when it pours over intelligible objects—those objects are made actually visible to the mind’s vision.” It’s the spiritual light, namely God, which makes the objects of our cognition visible to us; this point is made even clearer by the fact that the closer those objects are to the light—not the closer they are to our intellects—the more visible they are to us.

We also saw Grosseteste make the same point when he claimed that “there is a spiritual light which pours over intelligible objects and the mind’s eye. . . . Therefore, the intelligible things that are more receptive of this spiritual light are more visible to the interior eye, and the things that are more receptive of this light are by nature more similar to this light.” Here again the

²⁹ Our bodies get in the way of even this sort of illumination, however, as I’ll discuss below.

emphasis is on the nature of the objects of our cognition. God *qua* spiritual light makes intelligible objects visible to the mind's eye, and the objects that are closer in nature to the light are more visible to us—they're "brighter", so to speak.

These passages seem to set up a straightforward picture, then, according to which the closer intelligible objects are to God, the more illuminated they are, and more visible they should be to our intellects. Thus, it seems our knowledge of things closest to God (e.g. God's nature, the nature of intelligences) would be most certain. Once again, however, the fallen physical body complicates this model of human cognition. Toward the end of I.17, Grosseteste claims not only that our bodies prevent us from receiving complete knowledge straight from God, but that they also interfere with our cognition of the intelligible objects closest to God:

"Divine things are more visible to the mind's vision that is healthy and not clouded by phantasmata. . . But to the mind's vision that is unhealthy,³⁰ such as our vision is while we are burdened by the weight of the corrupt body and the love of corporeal things, the things that are more visible are covered up with phantasmata. . . Therefore to the human intellect such as is currently in us, mathematical things are most certain, for the imaginable phantasmata received by sight aid us in comprehending them. But to the intellect such as it ought to be—considered in its highest state—divine things are most certain, and to the extent that things are prior and more sublime by nature, they are more certain" (353-365).

Once again, then, Grosseteste makes the point that the intellect "considered in its highest state" is both illuminated directly by God and able to know the highest objects of cognition. In our present state, however, the intellect requires sense perception to begin the process of cognition, and acquiring knowledge through sense perception gets in the way of cognizing "things that are prior and more sublime by nature" because the intellect becomes "clouded" with phantasmata. The body thus not only interferes with God's direct illumination of our intellects, but it also keeps our intellects from fully knowing the objects which God illuminates. In his own terms, it leaves us with knowledge of the fourth type of universals, "genera and species," and not knowledge of the uncaused and uncreated ideas of God.

In general, Grosseteste's attempt to combine Aristotelian epistemology with a largely Augustinian theory of divine illumination is both fascinating and surprisingly successful. In claiming that God isn't responsible for our knowledge in a traditionally Augustinian way, Grosseteste appears to leave himself open to the objection that the spiritual light which illuminates the mind's eye and intelligible objects isn't God at all but rather the natural light of

³⁰ Taking '*aegro*' for '*egro*'.

reason, but I've argued that this light is, in fact, God; further, I've claimed that Grosseteste's theory deserves to be called a theory of divine illumination because of God's role in illuminating the objects of our cognition, making them visible to us.³¹

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