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Mind and Religious Experience in Saint Gerard of Cenad

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Abstract

In Deliberatio supra Hymnum Trium Puerorum (Meditation on the Hymn of the Three Young Men), St. Gerard of Cenad envisages, among other topics, the philosophical problem of mind as an important element in the act of faith. The mind has no human value than the interpretation of the Evangelical writings. With love, faith, and godliness, thoughts are mostly related to the heart, and this is the way of access to Christian virtues. Mind enlightened by the Holy Spirit is the key to understand symbols in the Scripture, understanding the mysteries of creation in general. Concern for the mind itself is not a pointless search, because the mind is a means by which man comes closer to God.

Keywords: Mind; faith; love; heart; symbol.

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Deliberatio supra Hymnum Trium Puerorum is not an easy text to analyze as it is written in a predominantly allegorical manner. Its composition can be misleading as we are tempted to believe that it might be somewhat primitive. In fact, St. Gerard expresses both theological and philosophical ideas as it is rooted in the medieval spirit of his time.¹ The difficulty of analyzing this writing is not only because of its allegorical character: there are many passages inserted from the Bible for illustration and argumentation, as well as references to philosophy and philosophers such as Plato, the ideas do not follow a detailed logical and conceptual thread, but are interposed throughout the eight parts of the text; furthermore, St. Gerard uses the second person.

The purpose of this study is to point out the philosophical ideas in *Deliberatio*, more precisely to discover the landmarks for a philosophy of mind, which involves capturing the connection between the mental and the experiential. The mind appears as a component of the religious experience, but without the central role the heart has. Knowledge is not a purely intellectual approach, but also faith, love, and dedication. However, we discover in St. Gerard's text the appearance of two antagonistic types of philosophizing: first, from the perspective of a simple mortal and second, from that of a created human close to God, who knows the divine nature. Obviously, the second type of knowledge is the authentic and true one. Understanding the essential truth conveyed through the Bible not only implies faith and awareness, but an effort of interpretation which opens the path of truth through faith and love. The experience which opens the path of truth is a deep, mystical one as it is the foundation of understanding the divine as divine and the divine in man.

I. A conceptual analysis of the mind in *Deliberatio*

It is necessary to make the distinction between two levels with comparative value concerning the concept of mind in Gerard's work and in general. In the first instance, on a *logical level*, we find references to the mind characterized through its rational aspect, based on reasoning, whose purpose in knowledge is pure instrumental. In the second instance, we take into account a *tropological level*, in which the mind relates to the heart, with the purpose of discovering the truths of biblical texts by interpreting symbols. The access of the mind and heart to the truth is not direct but mediated by symbols, "even if the literal meaning sometimes appears obvious on the surface, the deeper meaning is hidden in the inside part even for the most skilled readers. As long as the human mind is not opened from the heaven above, he acquires theological knowledge."²

Without divine grace, the access to the meaning of biblical texts remains suspended, books thus remain *closed*. The tropological aspect of the biblical texts is just an illustration of the mysterious character of fundamental significance. Opening the mind and heart through faith, accompanied by divine grace, is a form of knowledge and truth.

Gerard's conception may be included in the positive knowledge of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a fact which becomes obvious as one reads *Deliberatio*. We can describe the human being, that is, the creation, by its attributes or by God's ways of manifestation. The creation may be designated by a *name*, although "these revealed names (Human Being, Life, Light, Truth) have not

¹See Claudiu Mesaroş, "Deliberatio supra Hymnum trium puerorum, a philosophical text" in *Filosofia Sfântului Gerard de Cenad în context cultural și biografic* [The Philosophy of Saint Gerard of Cenad in Cultural and Biographical Context] (Szeged: Jate Press, 2013), 69-91.

²*Deliberatio supra Hymnum Trium Puerorum*, Book II. All fragments from this study are used according to the Latin edition of Batthyány (1790), translation by Marius Ivaşcu, mss. All English translations are mine.

been given to us to understand them.”³ All these names, which are descriptions of the ways God is present in the world, are objects of exaltation also known as, for instance, “Mind, Reason (Word), Knower.”⁴ Thus, in essence, the knowledge of divine truth is secret, God cannot be known with the mind as He is the Mind. We can have mind, which means having a divine attribute, only through faith and love, and this feature distinguishes us from other creatures. Through this religious experience, our mental possibilities can be fulfilled, otherwise we are similar to animals; the divine, mystic contemplation cannot be achieved only with the mind, but with the mind and heart together, and the divine grace that works in both.

II. Two types of philosophies in St. Gerard’s text

We discover in St. Gerard’s writings a distinction between two ways of making philosophy: a *philosophy of heaven* and a *philosophy of mortal beings*. We shall further on describe these two philosophies, with the specification that only the philosophy in the service of heaven is considered by Gerard as the knowledge and truth bearer.

The philosophy of heaven has the following descriptive elements as characteristics:

- Through the intuitions of his mind, the philosopher of heaven contemplates over the secret meanings of the Scripture
- Fulfilment, the superior type of understanding, metascience
- Interpretations come from the bottom of the heart
- High science follows love, life
- The mind endowed with the Holy Spirit, meditates on the infinity of the divine
- Thoughts come from the heart: “the philosopher Plato proves to be utterly stupid when he says that human thoughts do not come from the heart but from the brain.”⁵

Considering Gerard’s evocation of Plato, certain aspects of the Platonic theory of mind may be considered. This is relevant in order to highlight the fact that the philosophy of heaven may meet at a certain point with the classical Platonic philosophy. I do not have in mind here the tripartite division of the soul or the two ways of knowledge illustrated in the Allegory of the Cave,⁶ which deal with a general treatment of Plato’s theory of mind.

The issue of virtue and of remembering ideas is treated in Meno, but it contains a theory of mind in its substratum. Virtue, that is reason, is a component of the soul, and “when knowledge guides the soul, mental qualities become beneficial, and when ignorance guides them, they become harmful.”⁷ The mind not only designates a better use of reason, but it is also a tool for discovering the knowledge acquired by the soul prior to its life on earth. Socrates guides Menon’s slave on the path of remembering the solution to the problem proposed, by drawing the square with a double surface. By repeating, knowledge becomes mastery, so the slave reaches the right solution, “although it was never

³Claudiu Mesaroş, *Filosofii cerului. O introducere critică în filosofia evului mediu* [The Philosophers of Heaven. A Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of the Middle Ages] (Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, 2005), 73.

⁴Mesaroş, *Filosofii cerului*, 74.

⁵*Deliberatio*, Book VI.

⁶See Plato, *The Republic* (San Diego: ICON Group International, Inc., 2005), especially Book VII, 488-524.

⁷Plato, *Meno and Other Dialogues*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Robin Waterfield. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 127.

obvious, in the slave's mind, who never studied geometry, that knowledge was present in the virtual state.”⁸ In this particular sense, we note how the mind is in relation to the divine not directly but mediated by soul, thus the mind does not have access to essential knowledge. One cannot only through knowledge of the mind, through learning, find what is the nature of virtue, but “the excellence of good people comes to them as a dispensation awarded by the gods, without any knowledge – such as a politician with the ability to make someone else an expert politician too.”⁹

This parallel between St. Gerard and Plato is meant to show a certain resemblance between the two starting from the seemingly radical difference Gerard makes on the origin of thoughts not in the brain, criticizing Plato's view. Knowledge is possible through the Holy Spirit, says St. Gerard, and Socrates also places knowledge next to divine grace, therefore knowledge is not a mental, intellectual act. Furthermore, this knowledge cannot be learned, thus comprised with the mind, although Plato believes that certain “gifted” people could transmit it to others. Similarly, St. Gerard shows that the biblical teachings of the apostles are allegorical and involve symbolic interpretation with an open heart and mind: “As long as the human mind is not open by God, he cannot acquire theological knowledge.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, one must be cautious because the mystical and rational knowledge of the divine involves essential level differences.

The philosophy of mortals is characterized by the following aspects:

- Delights the mind
- Is deceptive
- Heretic statements, descriptions, thoughts and writings
- Fall into doubt
- Interpretation without the Holy Spirit
- Calculations to understand the sun and sky
- Thoughts come from the mind

Gerard sees the philosophy of mortals as lacking knowledge and truth, as a useless approach deprived of love for life, and of God's presence. The true philosophy, that of the heaven, is gained through the understanding of the symbolic secrets found in the Bible. Nevertheless the Bible also refers to profane philosophy:

Still, wisdom admits to the fact that the inconstant philosophy of mortals is sometimes mentioned in the divine Scriptures through the symbol of honey: For the lips of a harlot are like a dropping honeycomb (Prov. 5.3). She is rightly called a harlot because she has no man who would grow to hate her dishonest nature and to punish her for her misleading words. A dripping honeycomb because through the sweet ordinance and appropriation of meters, delights the minds of those who cultivate it, even if it is plenty teachings.¹¹

⁸Viorel Colțescu, *Istoria filosofiei: filosofie veche, medie si moderna* [History of Philosophy: Ancient, Medieval and Modern Philosophy] (Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, 2002), Vol. I, 137. English translations are mine.

⁹Plato, *Meno and Other Dialogues*, 142.

¹⁰*Deliberatio*, Book II.

¹¹*Deliberatio*, Book III.

Nevertheless, Gerard does not fully deny the useful character of philosophy and of the profane sciences in general. After all, they both come from divine wisdom, but they are not driven by love and the Holy Spirit, thus they lack divine knowledge earned through faith.

Gerard believes that profane philosophy leads to doubt, to lack of faith. Related to this aspect, one might highlight the fact that Descartes' methodical doubt was a method of privileged access of the subject to his own mind. Doubting reality, Descartes discovers a fundamental truth of his philosophy: thinking implies existence. Through doubt, however, he also discovers the nature of his imperfection, "so doubt, inconstancy, sadness and similar feelings, cannot be in Him" (God);¹² therefore, doubt is born from human imperfection compared to divine perfection. The truth about personal existence, discovered by analyzing his own thought, leads Descartes to the conclusion that this thought comes from God. Knowing the world and the personal rational existence would not be possible without the mental deduction of a supreme, perfect existence – "But after the knowledge of God and the soul has proven this rule, it is very easy to understand that the dreams which we imagine in our sleep should not make us in any way doubt the truth of the thoughts which we have when awake."¹³ By reducing a reality in its various forms to the absurd, the Cartesian doubt is a method which first of all highlights the limits of a strict natural knowledge, and secondly, it shows the possibility of a rational discovery of the existence of the soul and God.

This historical parallel was done in order to illustrate the fact that the mystical and the rational types of knowledge, although distinct as methods of including the divine, can reach the relatively same conclusion: knowing the nature of God is the source of all essential knowledge.

III. The symbolic education of the mind

An intriguing aspect of *Deliberatio supra Hymnum Trium Puerorum*, is that it educates to find Biblical symbols. The Scripture can be understood as history, as an in-depth explanation through the mind. The Biblical teachings are primarily in the heart, and then revealed to the mind. In a reductionist way, the religious type of experience "can simply be understood as an emotional reaction to religious representations."¹⁴ I do not intend to follow this approach. Thus, understanding the Bible does not depend on the sharpness of mind. Following the words of St. Gerard, God opened the minds of the Apostles by the fact that the teachings were engraved in their hearts and "the brightness of apostolic preaching is everywhere a brightness which the Spirit allegorically hides in divine speech and is called *sun*."¹⁵ The sun does not symbolize enlightenment on a purely rational way, but the apostolic preaching where divine understanding may be disclosed. With this fundamental access to biblical significance, the mind develops from appreciating to understanding the holy meanings, "the meanings of God's mind, not those invented by the ingenuity of the human mind. For where the body is weary, sweat is in vain; where the Spirit works, there will undoubtedly be spiritual work."¹⁶

The symbolical education of the mind is thus understood as a superior type of access to the essential knowledge of the divine, a capacity acquired to discern between good and evil. Divine reward is given depending on the level of this education: "we must understand that according to each

¹² René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), 25.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 27.

¹⁴ Ilkka Pyysiäinen, "Cognition, emotion, and religious experience" in *Religion in Mind*, ed. Jensine Andresen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 71.

¹⁵ *Deliberatio*, Book V.

¹⁶ *Deliberatio*, Book VI.

person's capacity, the rain and dew and drizzle are made through mind meditation and utterance.”¹⁷ In St. Gerard's opinion, rain is eternal damnation, while drizzle is forgiveness following repentance and (re)-conversion.

In conclusion, three symbolic features of the mind found in *Deliberatio* should be highlighted:

- The interpretation of the Biblical symbols is a religious experience itself “when the pious mind is convinced about its truth and the use of preaching”¹⁸
- The mind enlightened by the Holy Spirit does not need a master: “Everything started from the initial intellect, from which all illumination and, at the same time, the peak of opacity came from”¹⁹
- The truth is revealed by the eyes of the heart and mind: “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Mt. 5, 8)

Of course, the Bible presents a variety of religious experiences, and their meanings generated numerous debates in the philosophical, theological, and even in exact science fields. Gerard points out the fact that understanding the essence of these meanings assumes to be anchored in religious experience, and their analysis from the outside does not represent knowledge, but only information:

All Biblical stories of spiritual experience speak to some degree of the longing people have always had for intellectual, emotional, psychological, and spiritual fulfilment from others; and especially from that infinite, transcendent, wholly other person, God. Most of those Biblical reports directly inform us on the nature of genuine spiritual experience and authentic religious practice.²⁰

Continuing this analysis with the religious experiences from a theoretical point of view, William James relied on the possibility of their understanding on a pure subjective level, through psychophysical manifestations in the first instance, making analogies with other manifestations of the affective spectrum. However what is remarkable here is the fact that with this analytical perspective, James managed to establish the supremacy of the individual's religious experience over the theoretical or even institutional considerations:

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow.²¹

¹⁷ *Deliberatio*, Book VII.

¹⁸ *Deliberatio*, Book VIII.

¹⁹ *Deliberatio*, Book VIII.

²⁰ J. Harold Ellens, *Understanding Religious Experiences: What the Bible Says about Spirituality* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 21.

²¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 31. Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/621/621-h/621-h.html> (last time accessed: October 21, 2014).

In other words, James emphasizes the personal, and mystical side, of the religious experience, and of the man trying to relate to the divine. Going through *Deliberatio*, one understands that St. Gerard mainly considered this mystical side of religious experience, but from the perspective of its practice. Allegory is a way or a method to signify the mystical side of the religious experience, accessible only in the human and divine essence.

IV. Conclusions

The first conclusion based on the *Deliberatio* text, is that divine philosophy, although it does not need earthly masters, is the teaching transmitted by Christ, and the Bible is the symbolic testimony on how to gain access to this knowledge. Secondly, St. Gerard's text is not a philosophy of mind, but a philosophy about mind from the religious experience perspective.

Deliberatio supra Hymnum Trium Puerorum contains theological and philosophical ideas which can be developed, harmonized, (re)-considered by analogy with others more or less recent texts. This aspect gives a wide dimension to this historically and spiritually important text, at least in the Central-Eastern European space.

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