

Chapter 2

The Difficult Question

Mysticism and systematic theology have always made for uneasy bedfellows. The mystic claims to enjoy direct union with God. Hugh of Balma claims that the soul attains mystical union through ardent love free of any cogitation: “The Holy Spirit himself touches the soul’s supreme affective apex with the fire of love and sets it ablaze, drawing it toward itself wordlessly, without any cogitation or rational running hither and yon.”¹ Hugh does not deny that cogitation plays a role in preparing the soul for mystical union. Cogitation occurs during the preliminary phases of purgation, where the soul recalls its sins and asks for forgiveness,² and of illumination, where the soul acquires greater lucidity through meditation on the seven petitions of the Lord’s Prayer and additional scriptural material.³ Cogitation is present once again in what Hugh calls the *habitus* or ‘deposit’ of knowledge reaped by the soul after the mystical union.⁴ Only the mystical union itself allegedly takes place ‘without any cogitation leading the way or keeping it company.’⁵

¹. Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 165.

². See Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 73-80.

³. See Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 81-106.

⁴. ‘When the apex of the *affectus*, in which our being moved by ardor to God takes place, is touched, God’s touch leaves behind in the human spirit the truest of all understanding knowledge’ (Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 165).

⁵. Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 165; see also 71: ‘Then [in the mystical union], the soul steps up to a much higher level, in which, as often as she wishes, without

The systematic theologian raises the following objection against the very idea of purely non-cogitative, mystical love:

Augustine says, ‘We can love what we cannot see, but we can by no means love what we do not know.’ Therefore one must first know something by reasoning or intellectual cogitation before one can love something with the *affectus* of love. Thus cogitation necessarily precedes the affection of love.⁶

One cannot love something without having at least some conception of what one loves. Hence if mystical union consists in the soul’s ardent love for God, then even during the mystical union the soul must be guided by some cogitation of God.

Even so, the search for a purely affective mysticism is motivated by a legitimate concern. Hugh laments how:

in our day and age, many religious, indeed, many well-known and respected men, have abandoned the true wisdom in which God alone is worshiped perfectly and inwardly and is absorbed by single-minded lovers. Instead they wretchedly fill themselves with all sorts of knowledge, as if to fabricate idols for themselves out of various newfound proofs.⁷

The elaborate conceptual apparatus of systematic theology – especially the thicket of definitions, premises and syllogisms found in medieval Scholasticism – runs the risk of succumbing to intellectual idolatry by constructing a false idea of deity rather than adoring the true God. A completely non-cognitive mysticism holds out the prospect of sweeping away all such conceptual distortions, thereby allowing the soul to love the real divinity instead of a mere fantasy.

any cogitation leading the way, she is directly affected into God, something she cannot be taught by any sort of human effort.’

⁶ Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 156. Hugh does not quote from Augustine directly. See Martin’s introduction to *Roads*, 296 (n.2) and Walach, *Wege*, 293 (n.283) for references to original texts by Augustine where the saint is making a similar point.

⁷ Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 69; see also 71: ‘For love alone teaches most inwardly what neither Aristotle nor Plato nor any other mortal philosophy or science ever could or ever can understand.’

Hugh's official answer to The Difficult Question of whether there can be a purely affective union between the soul and God rests upon an inconclusive metaphor. Yet Hugh's text contains additional clues used by two recent commentators to develop or at least suggest philosophically more sophisticated answers. Although both answers are unsatisfactory, they encourage the critical reader to dig beneath Hugh's metaphorical language in search of non-metaphorical concepts and principles that might be applied to construct theologically viable positions, including a plausible answer to The Difficult Question.

A Bridge Too Far

Hugh compares the relation between intellectual acts of cogitation and mystical union to that between the wooden framework employed in the earlier stages of building a bridge and the finished bridge capable of standing alone once the framework is removed:

It is something like the building of a bridge. A framework of wood supports the stones during the earliest stage of building, but after the edifice is constructed and the stone walls have been completely fixed in place, the entire wooden framework is removed, since the structure of stone can stand immovably without the service provided by the wood. That is how cogitation is employed as a vanguard during the stage of gaining proficiency; when love's affection is perfectly attained, all the faithful service provided by reflection and meditation up to and through the proficient's stage is removed.⁸

Cogitation plays a supporting role in training the soul during the preliminary phases of purgation and illumination until it acquires proficiency in mystical love, whereupon the conceptual props can be removed so that the soul achieves purely affective union with God.⁹

⁸. Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 166.

⁹. See also Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 70-1: 'For, when a bridge is being built, we note that the builders first construct a wooden framework, over which the solid stonework is assembled. When the structure is complete, the supporting wooden framework is removed completely. So it is with the human spirit, which, though at first imperfect in love, begins to rise to the

As it stands, Hugh's bridge metaphor is unpersuasive. The wooden framework represents the soul's intellectual acts during purgation and illumination, whereas the finished bridge represents the soul's purely affective union with God. Common to the framework and the finished bridge is a specific design including shape, size and other dimensions. This common design is essential to the framework, since if the design were subtracted the result would be a pile of lumber instead of a framework. Given that the framework represents intellectual acts and that the design is essential to the framework, the design itself functions as cogitation containing conceptual content. But the design is equally essential to the finished bridge, since subtracting the design from the bridge would leave only a pile of stones. Contrary to the conclusion Hugh wants to draw, the bridge metaphor seems to prove the opposite: just as there would be no finished bridge without the design the bridge shares with the framework, there would be no act of affective union without the conceptual content this act shares with the intellectual acts previously performed during purgation and illumination. Since the latter acts essentially involve some cogitation of God, so does the act of affective union.

The difficulty is compounded by Hugh's assurance that the soul's purely affective union with God leaves behind a *habitus* or 'deposit' of knowledge in the soul.¹⁰ Setting aside the question of what kind of knowledge is deposited in the soul by the mystical union, it may also be wondered exactly *how* the mystical union manages to leave behind the knowledge in question. In the absence of some alternative explanation, the most natural answer is that – contra Hugh's view of mystical union as neither immediately preceded nor accompanied by any knowledge or intellectual cogitation – the relevant knowledge already accompanies the soul's act of mystical union and then remains in the soul after the act of union subsides.

perfection of love by meditation until, strengthened by much practice in unitive love, she is raised far beyond herself by love's fiery affections and aspiration to the right hand of her Creator.'

¹⁰. See, for example, Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 119: 'the yearnings of unitive love leave behind in the soul a perfection of knowledge that is incomparably more complete than any sought by study, hearing, or exercise of reason.'

Coming to Our Senses?

Taking his cue from Hugh's remark that through the mystical union 'the human spirit perceives herself drawn by unfailing knowledge into the One who alone quiets her longing, something she knows truly and more truly than any material thing viewed by the physical eye,'¹¹ Harald Walach argues that aspects of the Aristotelian epistemology prevalent in Hugh's day can be combined with ideas familiar to Hugh from the work of Thomas Gallus to yield a plausible reconstruction of Hugh's view, according to which during the purely affective upsurge the soul gains direct and indubitable empirical knowledge of God.¹²

Initially, Aristotle's epistemology appears unsuitable for Hugh's purposes. Aristotle holds that empirical knowledge arises through a process of abstracting universal concepts from particular sensations.¹³ The process begins when the sensible form of an external object is received by a sense organ through sensory experience. Various sensible forms are then gathered in the common inner sense, where the intellect operating in conjunction with memory abstracts concepts like *horse* and *animal* to construct universal judgments like 'All horses are animals' that are capable of figuring in scientific syllogisms. As Walach notes, the apparent difficulty is that empirical knowledge is then restricted to general truths, thereby precluding any empirical knowledge of individuals. Specifically, direct empirical knowledge of God through mystical union of the kind Hugh describes seems to be impossible.¹⁴

However, Walach observes, Aristotle's epistemology contains a loophole right at the beginning of the abstractive process. When one of my sense organs receives the sensible form of an external object, the result is an instance of direct empirical knowledge, the truth of which I cannot reasonably doubt. For example, even if I am uncertain whether I am seeing an elephant or a large hill in the distance, I cannot

¹¹ Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 112.

¹² See Harald Walach, 'Notitia experimentalis Dei: Hugh of Balma's Concept of Empirical Knowledge of God,' in *The Mystical Tradition and the Carthusians*, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg: Institute for English and American Studies, 1996), 45-65. See also Walach, *Wege*, 274 (n. 178).

¹³ The *locus classicus* of Aristotelian epistemology is Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J.A. Smith, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House), 535-603; see especially 589-93.

¹⁴ See Walach, 'Notitia,' 48-52.

doubt that I am currently having a visual experience.¹⁵ Each sense organ has its own kind of proper sensory object. Provided that there is a sense organ or ‘modality’ with God as its proper object, the way is open to the soul’s having direct and indubitable empirical knowledge of God.

Walach then contends that other writings familiar to Hugh supply him with a suitable sensory modality. Especially important in this regard is the thought of Thomas Gallus, according to whom the soul grasps what is true and eternal through the intellect but grasps what is good and united with it internally through the will.¹⁶ Following Gallus, Hugh could locate the requisite sensory modality in the soul’s inner volitional acts of affection or love, with the result that the soul can have direct and indubitable knowledge that God is goodness itself.¹⁷ Once the soul acquires this knowledge through the mystical union, it is easy to explain how the union leaves behind a *habitus* or deposit of knowledge in the soul: after the upsurge subsides, the soul exercises its memory to retrieve the direct and indubitable knowledge of God it received during the upsurge.

The problem with Walach’s reconstruction is that at key points it does not fit with Hugh’s text. Hugh repeatedly insists that the soul’s mystical union with God is neither immediately preceded nor accompanied by *any* intellectual cogitation or conceptual activity whatsoever:

Now this upsurge [*consurrectio*], which is said to take place through unknowing, is nothing other than to be directly moved through the ardor of love without any creaturely image, *without knowledge* [*cognitio*] *leading the way*, *without even any accompanying movement of understanding* [*intelligentia*], so that it has to do solely with movements of the *affectus*.¹⁸

¹⁵. For this point see Walach, ‘*Notitia*,’ 52-3.

¹⁶. See Walach, ‘*Notitia*,’ 59-61. As possible influences on Hugh, Walach also mentions the anonymous author of the pseudo-Augustinian psychological tract *Liber de spiritu et anima*, St Bonaventure (though without his stepwise depiction of the soul’s knowledge of God), and St Thomas Aquinas (though without his assertion that the knowledge in question is mediated, presumably by some concept).

¹⁷. See Walach, ‘*Notitia*,’ 59-61.

¹⁸. Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 141, emphasis added.

Consider again the case where I cannot reasonably doubt that I am currently having a visual experience even though I am uncertain where I am seeing an elephant or a large hill in the distance. At the very least I judge that I seem to see something large, grey and bulky over there. My judgment is an act of intellectual cogitation applying the concepts *large*, *grey* and *bulky*. If, as Walach proposes, the direct and indubitable knowledge of God the soul has during the mystical union is comparable to my direct and indubitable knowledge that I am currently having a sensory experience, then the soul does engage in at least some conceptual activity during the mystical union.

Furthermore, Hugh explicitly rejects Walach's assertion that the soul mystically united with God possesses direct and indubitable knowledge that God is goodness itself:

In response to the ninth objection [i.e., that God is apprehended in relation to being as supreme Unity, the supreme Truth, or the supreme Good] one must reply that, according to the method employed in the upsurge, God is not apprehended like other things are – namely, by the mode of being – of being one, true, or good. Rather, when the supreme strength of the soul, the apex of the *affectus*, is touched by the fire of love, by that notion and that touch the *affectus* sparks with aspiration for God.¹⁹

During the mystical union, the soul does not apprehend God under any one of the four transcendental notions of unity, truth, goodness and being: 'They [the uninstructed] are unlearned because mystical knowledge is found entirely above the human mind, where every sort of intellect fails which apprehends by means of the One, the True, the Good, and Being.'²⁰ To be sure, Hugh does say 'that the rational spirit cannot find any repose in anyone except in adhering to the highest

¹⁹. Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 168; for the ninth objection, see 158.

²⁰. Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 169. Thus even if one accepts Walach's thesis that Hugh did not compose *The Roads to Zion Mourn* as a unified work but retroactively compiled it from various texts he had addressed to different audiences over time, the foregoing passage occurs in 'The Difficult Question,' which Walach regards both as the earliest of these texts as well as the definitive statement of Hugh's position. See Walach, '*Notitia*,' 45-6.

Good.²¹ Yet the soul might acquire knowledge of God's goodness in some other manner without that knowledge either immediately preceding or accompanying the soul's mystical union with God. This possibility will be further explored in chapter 9.

Finally, and most seriously, the bare certainty that I am currently having a sensory experience falls far short of the robust certainty about God supposedly revealed through the mystical union. When I seem to see something large, grey and bulky in the distance, I do not know whether what I seem to see really exists or exactly what it is. But according to Hugh, mystical union answers both of these questions about God:

For, by a roundabout path, contrary to all writers on matters of theology, it teaches that one attains unmediated cognition of the Creator not by the mirror of creatures nor by genius in research nor by exercise of intellect, but through flaming gasps of unitive love. By these, although living in sin and misery, we have an unfailing foretaste not only of the fact that God is but indeed of how the most blessed God himself is the beginning and origin of all beatitude.²²

Walach's German translation of the last sentence is even more emphatic: 'Durch sie können wir, die bisher im Elend leben, bereits im voraus zweifelsfrei verkosten nicht nur, warum Gott ist, sondern auch, was Gott ist' ('Through it, we who so far live in misery already have an absolutely certain foretaste not only that God is but also of what God is').²³

²¹. Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 129.

²². Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 118.

²³. Hugh of Balma, *Wege*, 166-7 (my English translation). See 164, where Hugh describes God as 'that beyond which nothing can be desired' ('über den nichts ersehnt werden kann'), and 282 (n.221), where Walach takes Hugh to be following William of Saint-Thierry's 'dynamization' ('Dynamisierung') of Anselm's intellectualized version of the ontological argument in which God is conceived as that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Yet any ontological argument, whether intellectual or dynamic, purports to show not only *that* God is but also *what* God is: i.e., necessary, omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. These conclusions are much richer than the epistemologically cautious judgment that even if I do not know whether

Admittedly, it remains to explain how the purely affective, non-intellectual mystical union enables the human soul to gain rich insights into divine existence and the divine nature. That is precisely The Difficult Question, to which Walach's reconstruction does not provide a satisfactory answer. To begin to move in a more positive direction, it will help to consider a different answer on Hugh's behalf that has been proposed by another recent commentator.

Mixed Metaphors

In his Introduction to *The Ways to Zion Mourn*, Dennis D. Martin cautions against overemphasizing the role of affectivity in Hugh's teaching:

In short, Hugh's allegedly exotic total affectivity is actually rather mundane and commonsensical: We begin to love God by meditating on revelation, on Scripture, on all creatures, even those from the heart of hell. That in turn incites love for God, which surges up in our hearts. And that upsurge of love leaves behind a deposit of real knowledge that Hugh identified as Pseudo-Denis's 'sapientia Christianorum' – the wisdom of Christians.²⁴

On Martin's reading, intellective and affective elements are interwoven in the purgative and illuminative phases prior to the mystical upsurge and in the deposit of wisdom left behind in the soul after the upsurge. Martin agrees with Vincent of Aggsbach, one of the participants in the Tergensee debate, that 'only for a specific point (the crucial point, to be sure) in the soul's relationship with God'²⁵ does the soul free from all intellectual cognition surge upward to God.

I am experiencing something real or exactly what I am experiencing, at least I cannot currently doubt that I am having an experience.

²⁴. Martin, introduction to *Roads*, 32.

²⁵. Martin, introduction to *Roads*, 24. Martin is responding in part to commentators like Walach, who read Hugh as excluding any intellectual cognition from mystical theology and consequently see an inconsistency in Hugh's willingness to allow intellectual meditation on the longer exposition

Philosophically, Martin has not yet shown that Hugh has a convincing reply to The Difficult Question. If it is obscure how a purely affective upsurge that is neither immediately preceded nor accompanied by any cognition of God could count as aspiration or love toward *God* (rather than toward something else or even toward nothing at all), then the obscurity is not removed merely by restricting the purely affective upsurge to the specific point between (1) the earlier phases of purgation and illumination and (2) the later deposit of knowledge in the soul.

Upon closer inspection, Martin does suggest a definite answer to The Difficult Question of how, as he prefers to describe it, the soul's purely affective 'dynamic movement'²⁶ toward God is possible. Hugh says:

The Holy Spirit himself touches the soul's supreme affective apex with the fire of love and sets it ablaze, drawing it toward himself wordlessly, without any cogitation or rational running hither and yon. Just as a stone pulled by its own weight is naturally drawn down to its own center, so the apex of the *affectus* by its own weight is carried up to God directly and unmediatedly, without any oblique tangentiality, without any cogitation leading the way or keeping it company.

Hence this highest power of the human spirit, this *affectus*, is capable of being joined directly to the Holy Spirit by chains of love. And this highest power of the human spirit is unknown to almost everyone, except those whose apex is being touched and moved directly, without mediation, by the fire of the Holy Spirit.²⁷

Martin underscores how during the purely affective mystical upsurge, 'the Holy Spirit comes down and inflames the *affectus* to the point that no more rational discernment takes place, that is, the human spirit no longer makes the distinctions it has made up to this point.'²⁸ No cogitation is required to mediate the direct relation between fire and an object it ignites, or between a stone and the centre of the earth toward which it falls, or between two entities chained together. To the extent

of the Lord's Prayer during the illuminative phase; see Walach, *Wege*, 278 (n.197).

²⁶. Martin, introduction to *Roads*, 29.

²⁷. Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 165.

²⁸. Martin, introduction to *Roads*, 28.

that it resembles these metaphorical examples, the relation between the soul and God during the mystical upsurge is also unmediated by any sort of cogitation.

Each metaphorical example Hugh gives does reflect an aspect of the mystical upsurge. The trouble is that, taken literally, the examples run counter to each another and hence cannot be combined to produce a coherent, non-metaphorical explanation of the envisaged upsurge.

To anticipate a bit, Hugh's metaphor of fire igniting an object reflects the soul's transformation into God during the affective upsurge.²⁹ The ignited object is certainly transformed into fire. Even so, the nature of the igniting fire cannot be read off from the ignited object. Elsewhere, Hugh uses the example of a dry wick exposed to intense sunlight that ignites it.³⁰ Any sufficiently powerful heat source suffices to ignite the wick. As far as the ignited wick itself is concerned, the igniting 'fire' could be the midday sun or an open flame or a red-hot poker. But as became clear in the previous section, Hugh also believes that through the affective upsurge the soul grasps both *that* as well as *what* God is. By contrast, the latter aspect of the mystical upsurge is better reflected by Hugh's metaphor of a stone inscribed with an inherent, Aristotelian tendency to fall toward the centre of the earth, since nothing else other than the earth's centre can activate the stone's intrinsic tendency. Yet unlike an ignited object transformed into the igniting fire, the stone does not resemble the centre of the earth, let alone get transformed into it.

Hugh's metaphor of two entities chained together reflects a kind of interdependent self-determination exemplified in the mystical upsurge that will be further explored in chapters 6 and 7. X being chained to Y depends on Y being chained to X. Since Y being chained to X also depends on X being chained to Y, X being chained to Y depends on itself and so is at least partially self-determining. (Y being chained to X is similarly self-determining.) So far, though, it is hardly obvious how this kind of self-determination arising from mutual dependency pertains to divinity in relation to the soul during the mystical upsurge, especially if divinity is supposed to be essentially independent from the soul or any other creature. Moreover, the chain metaphor does not capture the

²⁹. 'This love alone, by its very name, ought to be named the noblest good *habitus*, because it transforms the soul, by her own deifying reach, into God, who alone is good by self-definition' (Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 123).

³⁰. See Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 113.

first aspect of the mystical upsurge, since the chained entities do not have to resemble or be transformed into one another. Nor does the chain metaphor do justice to the mystical upsurge's second aspect, since the nature of Y cannot be read off from the mere fact that X is chained to it (any more than the nature of X can be read off from the mere fact that Y is chained to it).

There is a silver lining. Hugh frequently falls back on various metaphors to describe the mystical union between the soul and God. Hugh's official answer to The Difficult Question exploits the metaphor of a temporary wooden framework employed in building a bridge. Martin's suggested answer takes its departure from Hugh's metaphors of fire setting something ablaze, a weight falling toward the centre of the earth, and two things chained together. More metaphors crop up in *The Roads to Zion Mourn*, many of which will be closely examined in subsequent chapters. The examination rests on a conjecture that much of Hugh's metaphorical language can be cashed out in terms of non-metaphorical principles suitable for definitely answering The Difficult Question and bringing Hugh's overall theology into sharper focus. To begin to make good on this conjecture, the next chapter probes Hugh's provocative imagery of illuminating firelight, rusty iron filed until it gleams, and a cavity that has been scooped out and packed with a bounty of goods.