

A medieval manuscript illumination depicting Saint Augustine in a garden. Saint Augustine is shown kneeling in prayer, wearing a red robe and a halo, with his hands clasped in front of his face. He is positioned in the center of the frame, under a large, leafy tree. To the left, a pink building with a blue roof is visible. To the right, a white building with a red roof is partially obscured by foliage. The ground is covered in green grass and small white flowers. The overall style is characteristic of medieval manuscript art, with vibrant colors and detailed foliage.

CONFESSING WITH SAINT AUGUSTINE

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6 — AUGUSTINE ON KNOWLEDGE



OUTLINE

1. Cognition, perception and levels of knowledge
2. Augustine's refutation of scepticism
3. The communication of knowledge
4. Divine illumination
5. Faith and reason



COGNITION AND PERCEPTION



COGNITION AND PERCEPTION

Epistemology – the philosophical study of knowledge (its origin, nature, scope, limits)

Greek:

epistēmē - (knowledge, understanding)

logos - (reason, account)

AUGUSTINE'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

The mind desires truth; there cannot be knowledge of falsehoods. (Augustine, *Against the Academicians*, 3.3.5)

Augustine does not articulate a theory of knowledge for its own sake:

“knowledge of eternal truth should thus bring the soul by reflection on that knowledge, to knowledge of God Himself and God’s activity.”

(Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 52)

How can we know “eternal and necessary truths” with certainty and as eternal and necessary?



EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE

Voluntary: the mind desires understanding (also regarding self knowledge).
(See De Trinitate X:8.11).

Active perception:

- Extromission theory of vision: something “luminous” shoots from the eyes touching the object seen.
- The soul moves air (spiritus) through the nerves to activate the sense-organ.

Five external senses and an internal sense

Empirical knowledge and perception

- The bodily senses are designed to know external things.
- Normally, the senses provide knowledge; one might err, but not greatly.
- Various perceptions and reason can correct one’s (initial) perceptions: systematically done, an “empirical science.” (zoology, history, astronomy, etc.



LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE



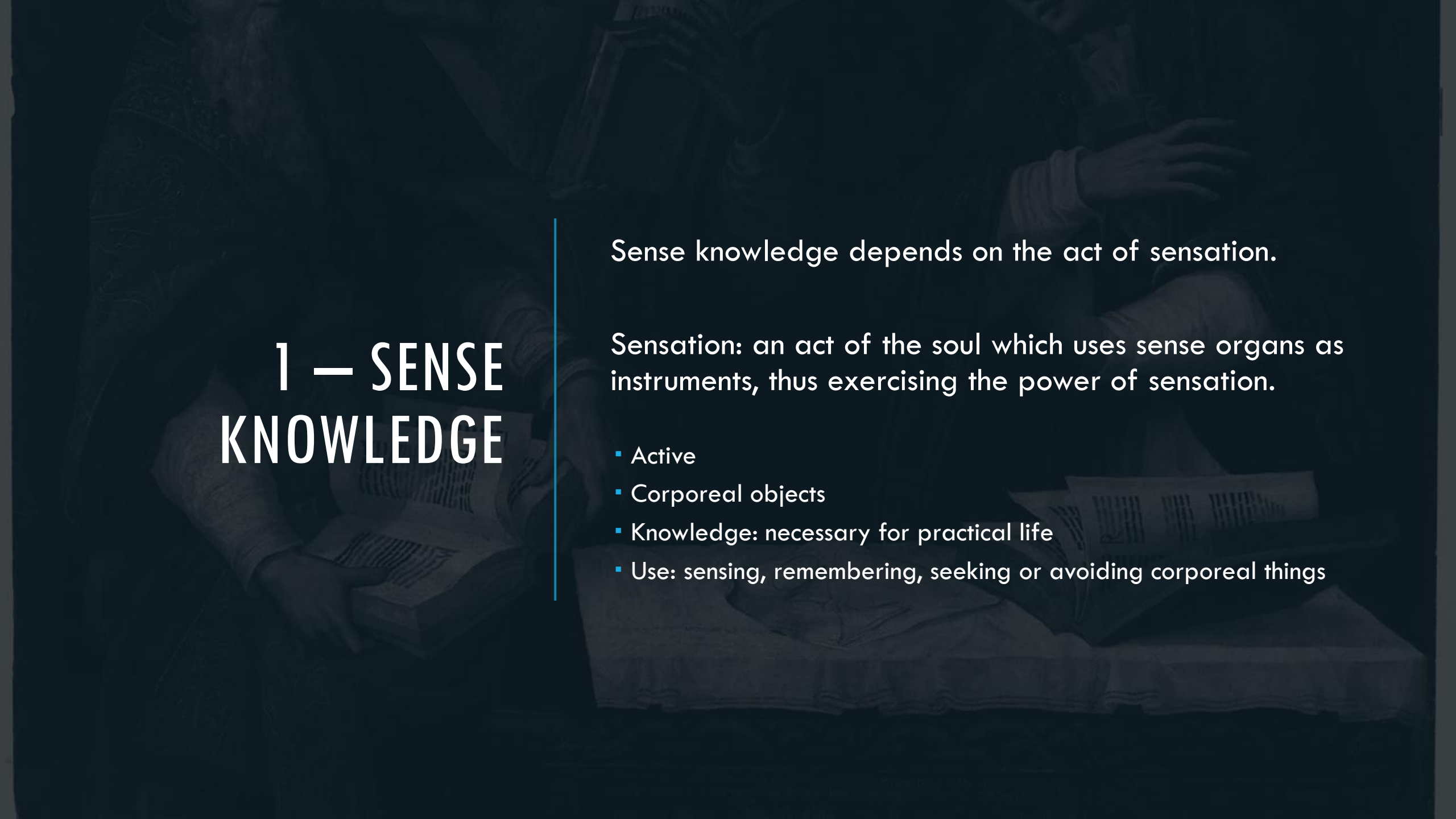
1 - SENSE KNOWLEDGE



2 - RATIONAL LEVEL OF
KNOWLEDGE



3 - CONTEMPLATION OF
ETERNAL THINGS (WISDOM)



1 — SENSE KNOWLEDGE

Sense knowledge depends on the act of sensation.

Sensation: an act of the soul which uses sense organs as instruments, thus exercising the power of sensation.

- Active
- Corporeal objects
- Knowledge: necessary for practical life
- Use: sensing, remembering, seeking or avoiding corporeal things



2 — RATIONAL LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE

The rational level of knowledge still involves the senses and sensible objects.

- Rational judgements about things
- Judgement by certain (eternal) standards — for instance, the beauty of objects by the standard of beauty; or circles to the “perfect geometric circle.”
- Practical



3 — CONTEMPLATION OF ETERNAL THINGS

Contemplating by the mind alone without exercising the power of sensation.

Objects: unchangeable

“True knowledge” — contemplation of eternal things (wisdom)

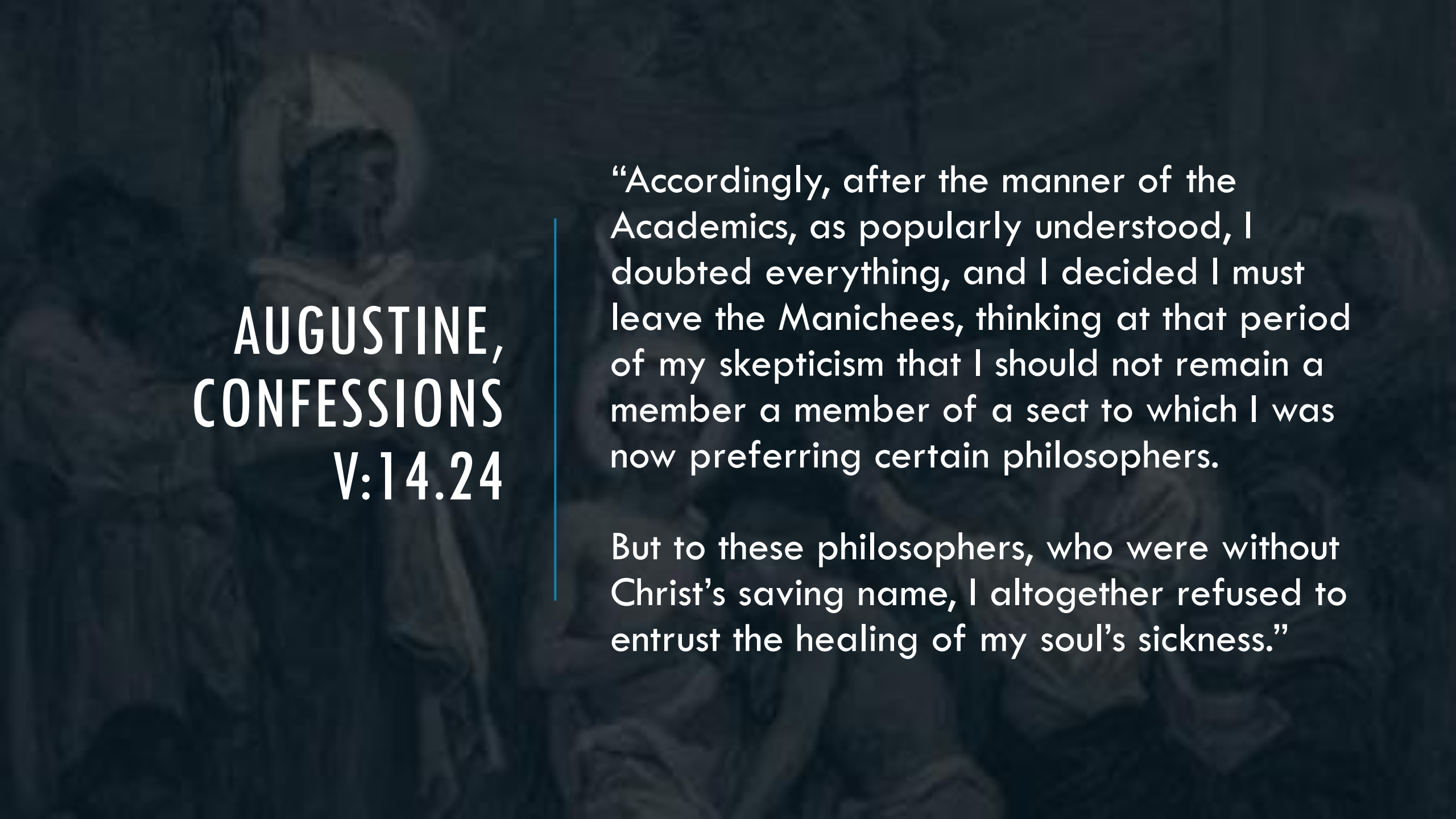


AUGUSTINE ON SCEPTICISM

AUGUSTINE,
CONFESSIONS
V:10.18

*“The thought had come into my mind
that the philosophers whom they call
Academics were shrewder than others.*

*They taught that everything is a matter
of doubt, and that an understanding of
the truth lies beyond human capacity.”*



AUGUSTINE, CONFESSIONS V:14.24

“Accordingly, after the manner of the Academics, as popularly understood, I doubted everything, and I decided I must leave the Manichees, thinking at that period of my skepticism that I should not remain a member a member of a sect to which I was now preferring certain philosophers.

But to these philosophers, who were without Christ’s saving name, I altogether refused to entrust the healing of my soul’s sickness.”

SCEPTICISM

Sceptics or Academicians: the truth is unattainable — only the approximation of the truth is.

Greek “*skepsis*” = “investigation”

Post-classical Hellenic philosophy; 3rd c BC.

Late Roman intellectual detachment

Zeno of Citium (c. 335-c. 263 BC) — founder of the Stoic school. Zeno’s definition of the truth is the basis of the Academician view that the truth cannot be apprehended.

Cicero (106-43 BC), *Academica* — Augustine draws his knowledge about scepticism from Cicero



AUGUSTINE'S REFUTATION OF SCEPTICISM

How can the finite human mind attain certain knowledge of eternal truths which transcend the mind? (Copleston, History of Philosophy, 52)

Augustine: Against the Academicians (386) (*Contra Academicos*)

- Assesses the sceptical theory of knowledge.
- Defends the possibility of knowledge against sceptical arguments



SCEPTICISM

Nothing can be known – humans are incapable of knowledge as far as philosophical matters are concerned. (Augustine, C. acad. 1.5.11; 3.9.18)

- There are no truthful perceptions which “accurately [reflect] the way the world is.” Things cannot be represented accurately.
- Emphasise “errors of the senses.” (C. acad.2.5.11-12)

Assent should be withheld always.

- Although humans are unable to have philosophical knowledge, they are “able to be wise, and the whole duty of the wise man [...] is accomplished in seeking the truth.” (C. acad. 3.14.31)
- The wise man gives approval to nothing – giving assent to the unknown risks error.
- The wise man’s “suspension of assent” is his “great action.” (C. acad. 2.5.12)



AUGUSTINE

It is plausible that “something can be known – that the truth can be found – as that it cannot.” (Peter King, “Knowledge,” 144,)

- “[The] question between us is whether their arguments make it plausible that nothing can be perceived and that one should not assent to anything.” (Augustine, C. acad., 2.13.30.)
- Augustine: “It’s enough for me that it’s no longer plausible that the wise man knows nothing.” (C. acad.. 3.5.12)

Knowledge is possible. (See the four types of knowledge)

One can always respond: “It seems to me that someone can know the truth.” (C. acad. 3.16.36.60-62)





TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE UNAFFECTED BY DOUBT

Logical truths about the world

“[The] number of worlds is either finite or infinite.” C. acad. 3.10.23

Mathematical truths

$3 \times 3 = 9$. Independent of sense-perception. C. acad. 3.11.25

Pure appearance claims

“It seems to me that X.” C. acad. 3.11.26

Augustine’s cogito argument

City of God 11.26

PURE APPEARANCE CLAIMS

“It seems to me that x is in front of me.” (King, “Knowledge,” 145.)

“Pure appearance claims”: the reliability of the sense-perception itself, the possibility of illusion, dreaming, insanity.

Augustine’s example: the oar appearing bent in the water – the senses are not at fault in this: it’s just how the oar looks. If the oar appeared straight in the water, then our sense perception would be faulty. (C. acad. 3.11.26)

There is an area of certainty, even if aspects of the external world are unknowable through the senses:

- Sense impressions can be relative, depending on sense-organs.
- Errors possible; but the senses/corporeal objects are necessary for practical purposes; these are a “starting-point” in the mental ascent to God.

“SI ENIM FALLOR, SUM”

Augustine, City of God, 11:26 – “For if I am deceived, I am.”



AUGUSTINIAN COGITO

Someone who doubts is at least certain of their own existence – even if one doubts the existence of other things or God, or if one is dreaming or insane. (Chadwick, Short Introduction, 53)

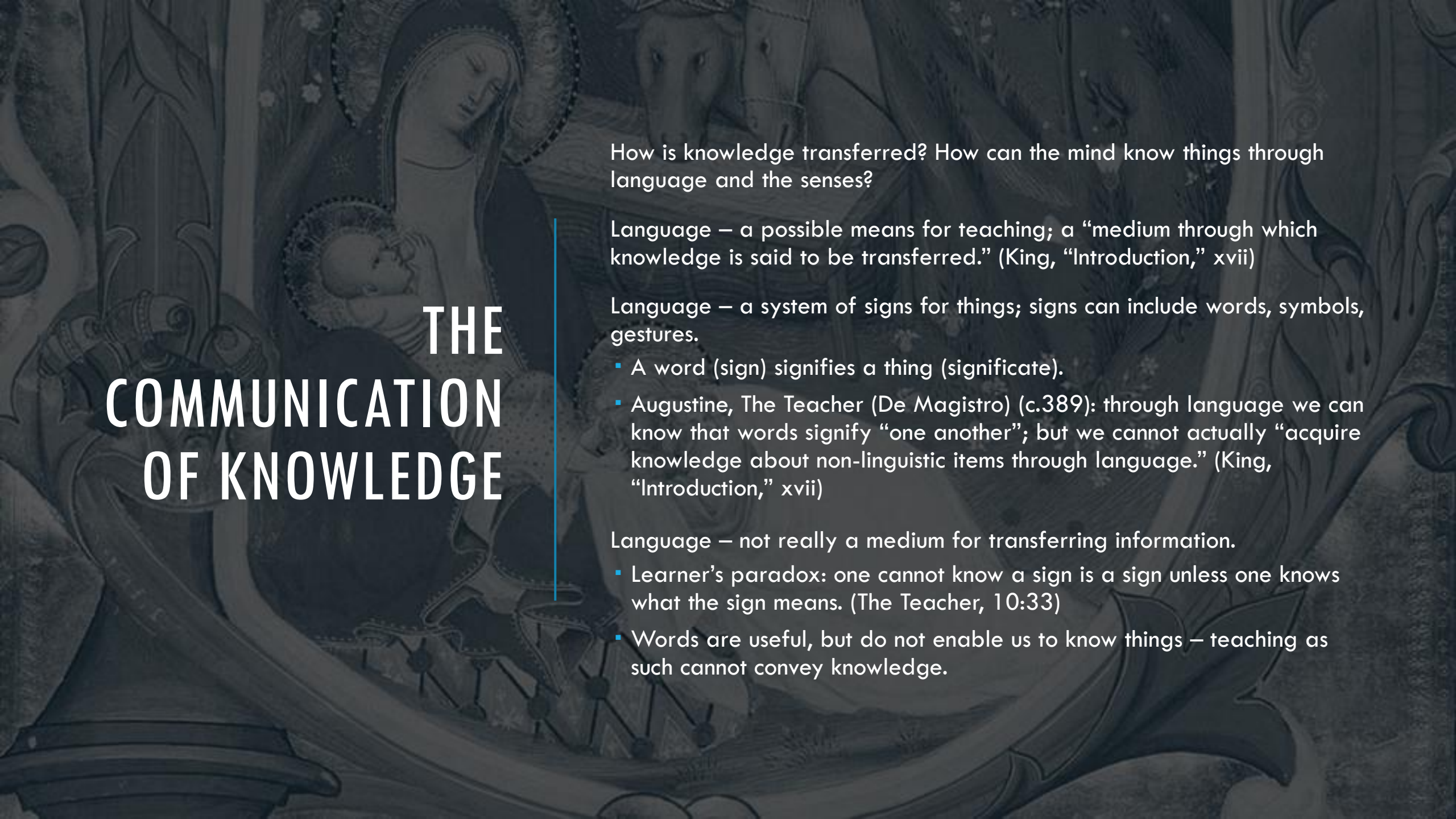
“Since, therefore, I, the person deceived, should be, even if I were deceived, certainly I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am. And, consequently, neither am I deceived in knowing that I know.”
(City of God, 11:26)

Descartes (17th c.): “I think, therefore I am.”





THE COMMUNICATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE DOCTRINE OF ILLUMINATION



THE COMMUNICATION OF KNOWLEDGE

How is knowledge transferred? How can the mind know things through language and the senses?

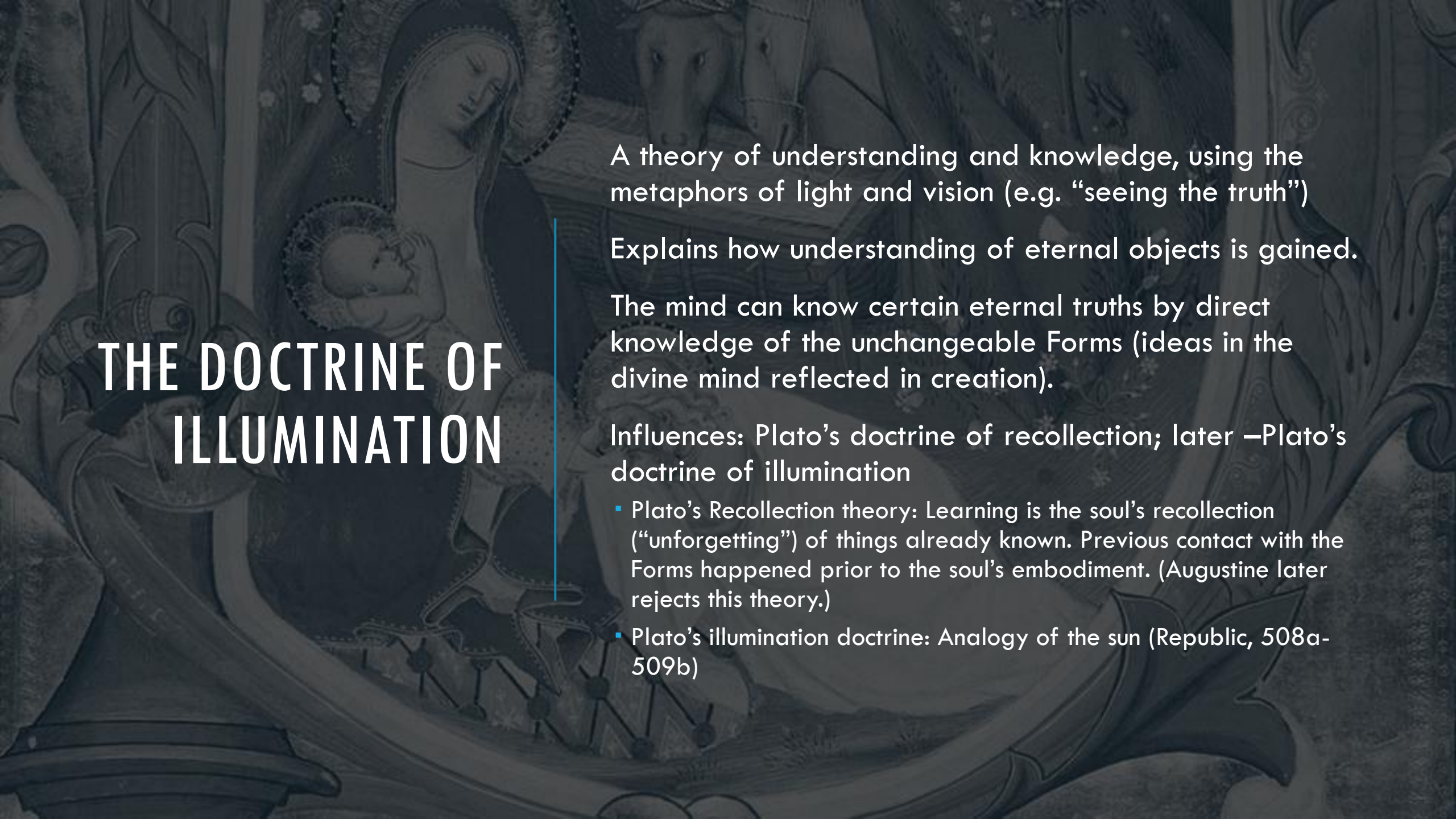
Language – a possible means for teaching; a “medium through which knowledge is said to be transferred.” (King, “Introduction,” xvii)

Language – a system of signs for things; signs can include words, symbols, gestures.

- A word (sign) signifies a thing (significate).
- Augustine, *The Teacher* (*De Magistro*) (c.389): through language we can know that words signify “one another”; but we cannot actually “acquire knowledge about non-linguistic items through language.” (King, “Introduction,” xvii)

Language – not really a medium for transferring information.

- Learner’s paradox: one cannot know a sign is a sign unless one knows what the sign means. (*The Teacher*, 10:33)
- Words are useful, but do not enable us to know things – teaching as such cannot convey knowledge.



THE DOCTRINE OF ILLUMINATION

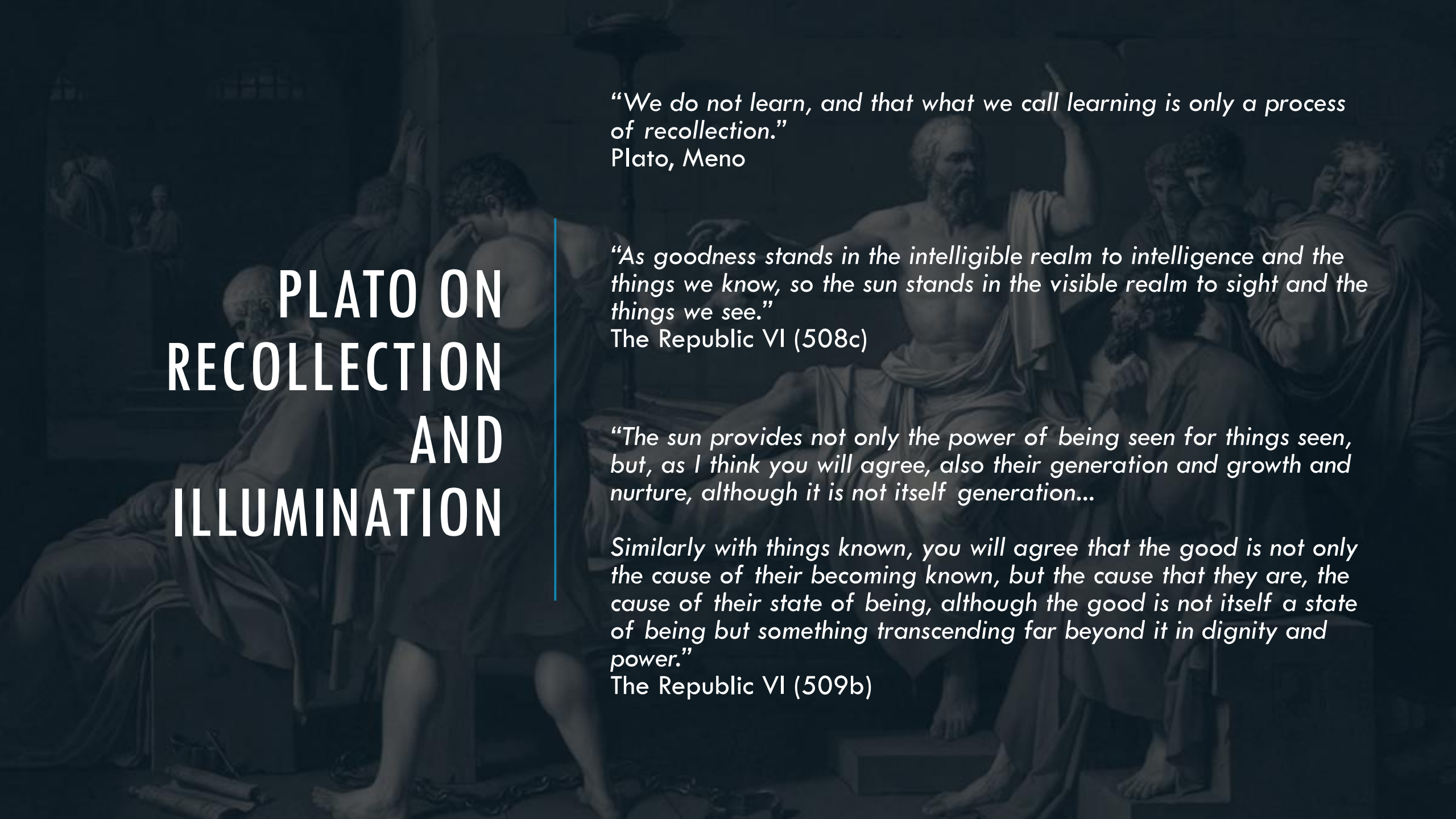
A theory of understanding and knowledge, using the metaphors of light and vision (e.g. “seeing the truth”)

Explains how understanding of eternal objects is gained.

The mind can know certain eternal truths by direct knowledge of the unchangeable Forms (ideas in the divine mind reflected in creation).

Influences: Plato’s doctrine of recollection; later –Plato’s doctrine of illumination

- Plato’s Recollection theory: Learning is the soul’s recollection (“unforgetting”) of things already known. Previous contact with the Forms happened prior to the soul’s embodiment. (Augustine later rejects this theory.)
- Plato’s illumination doctrine: Analogy of the sun (Republic, 508a-509b)



PLATO ON RECOLLECTION AND ILLUMINATION

“We do not learn, and that what we call learning is only a process of recollection.”

Plato, Meno

“As goodness stands in the intelligible realm to intelligence and the things we know, so the sun stands in the visible realm to sight and the things we see.”

The Republic VI (508c)

“The sun provides not only the power of being seen for things seen, but, as I think you will agree, also their generation and growth and nurture, although it is not itself generation...”

Similarly with things known, you will agree that the good is not only the cause of their becoming known, but the cause that they are, the cause of their state of being, although the good is not itself a state of being but something transcending far beyond it in dignity and power.”

The Republic VI (509b)

AUGUSTINE,
SOLILOQUIES,
I:12;15

“Now the truths of science are made visible to the mind, as the light of the sun makes visible to the eyes the earth and terrestrial objects.

But it is God Himself who shines. [...]

Thus, as of the sensible sun, we may predicate three things: namely, that it is, that it shines, that it makes objects visible; even so may we predicate three things of that most mysterious God whom you long to know: viz., that He is, that He is apprehended, that He causes other things to be apprehended.”

ILLUMINATION, CONTINUED

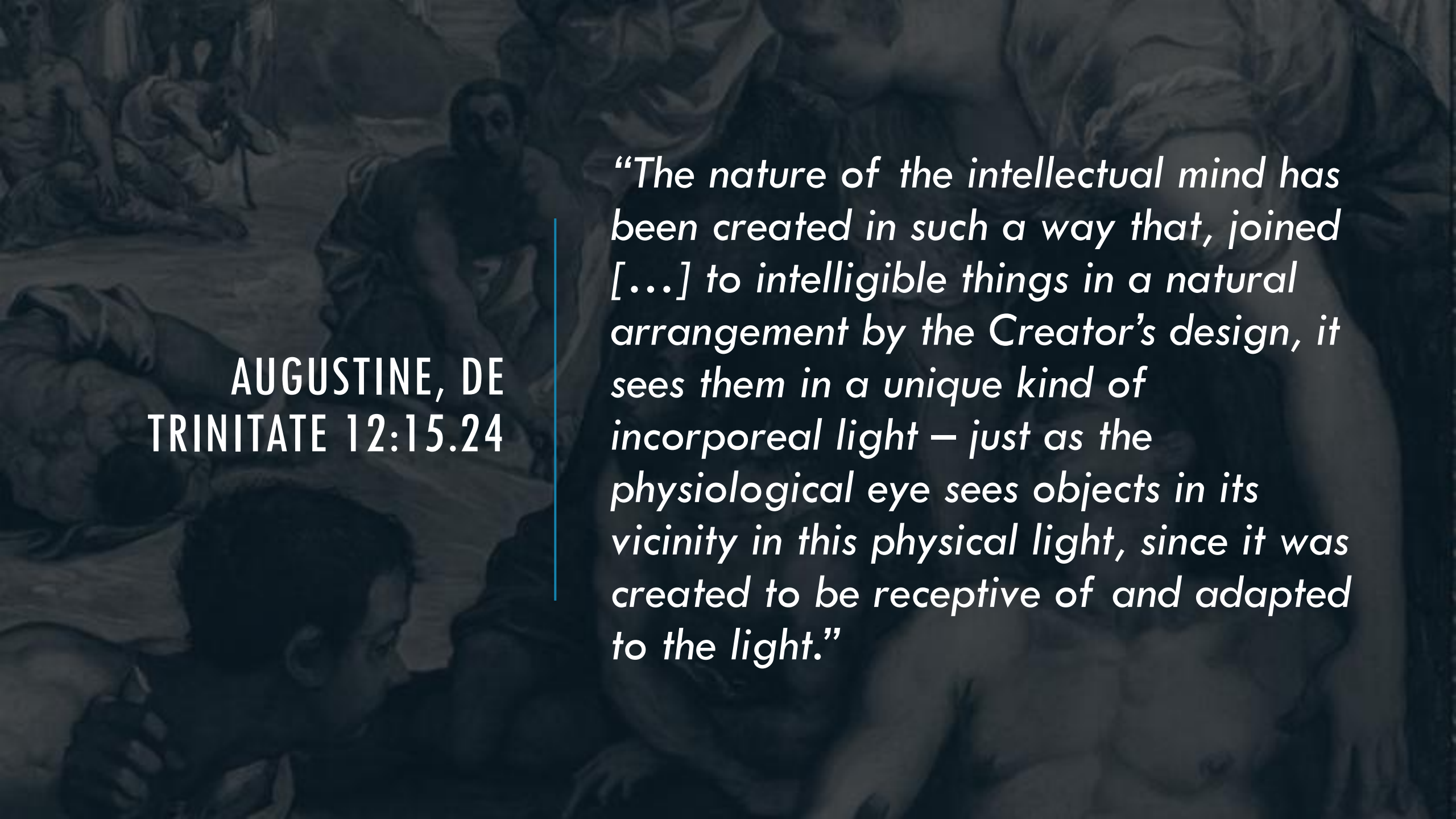
Illumination — grasping “special objects” (the Forms) by reason.

Intellectual insight about intelligible objects (as opposed to sense objects through sense perception).

Judgement by an interior criterion (mathematical or logical truths, or moral intuitions) known by oneself, not because they are believed through a teacher or a book, but “because we see them for ourselves.” (Tornau, “Saint Augustine”)

Illumination is necessary because eternal things are beyond the capacity of the human mind, which is changeable





AUGUSTINE, DE
TRINITATE 12:15.24

“The nature of the intellectual mind has been created in such a way that, joined [...] to intelligible things in a natural arrangement by the Creator’s design, it sees them in a unique kind of incorporeal light – just as the physiological eye sees objects in its vicinity in this physical light, since it was created to be receptive of and adapted to the light.”

ILLUMINATION AND COGNITION

Debate on illumination: “seeing the truth” - does that mean beholding divine essence itself?

Cognition of intelligible objects – not transmitted by a teacher, but occurring through intellectual activity resulting in intellectual insight.

- This we judge by an internal criterion. God is the “criterion of truth of this intellectual insight.” (Tornau, “Saint Augustine”)
- What shows this truth? - Christ as truth is the inner Teacher of the soul. (King, “Introduction”).
- Cognition does not occur merely from Christ’s presence in the soul, but by “consulting the inner Teacher” and “testing propositions that claim to convey truth about intelligible reality” (Tornau, “Saint Augustine”)

Each person can access intelligible truth according to ability without experience or “external testimony.”

FAITH AND REASON

Inseparability of faith and reason — good to use reason to search for an understanding of truths accepted from the authority of biblical revelation; not overly confident in human reason either.

Believing vs knowing (e.g. events of salvation history)

True understanding of God is after this life.



FAITH AND REASON

Faith and reason are intermingled in the journey to perfection:

- Faith comes prior to rational insight but reasonable decisions can be made about beliefs (e.g., which authority to believe, which witness to accept).
- Philosophical arguments need to be combined with the authority of Scripture and the Creed.
- The mind can be (supernaturally) illuminated by faith, and thus know the truth.



READING

Confessions, Book X

King, Peter. "Augustine on Knowledge." In *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump. Second edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 142-165.

Kenney, John Peter. "Faith and Reason." In *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 275-291.

