

THE AGENT INTELLECT
(NECESSITY, NATURE, AND OPERATION)

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
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The intellect of man has been discussed to great extent throughout the ages. Aristotle, in his work De Anima, distinguished between the active and the passive intellect in man and this has contributed a great deal to the discussion. The Philosopher put forth his doctrine in the following words:

Since in every class of things, as in nature as a whole, we find two factors involved, (1) a matter which is potentially all the particulars in a class, (2) a cause which is productive in the sense that it makes them all (the latter standing to the former as e.g. an art to its material), the distinct elements must likewise be found within the soul.

And in fact mind as we have described it is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another which is what it is by virtue of making all things: this is a sort of positive state like light: for in a sense light makes potential colours into actual colours.

Mind in this sense of it is separable, impassible, unmixed, since it is in its essential nature activity (for always the active is superior to the passive factor,¹ the originating force to the matter which it forms).

As to the exact interpretation of this and other passages of the Philosopher concerning the same thing no one is able to state. Avicenna, Averroes, and Saint Thomas each gave their own interpretation of them.

According to Avicenna, there is one agent intellect for all men, and this intellect exists apart from men, being the last in a series of intelligences emanating from the First Cause. In relation to man and the whole order of terrestrial things, this agent intellect is a veritable "source of forms" or "giver of forms" in that it confers intelligible forms or species on man

when he understands, and infuses the substantial forms of things in natural generation.

Averroes, too, did not consider the agent intellect to exist as such in each man. He maintained that there was one intellect for all men; that this intellect was pure intelligence existing apart from man; and that man understands by means of it when it is operative on the phantasms in the human mind. Also he said that the possible or passive intellect, which he termed the material intellect, was both numerically one and common to all men.

This paper is an exposition of the doctrine of the agent intellect according to the mind of the greatest Aristotelian, Saint Thomas Aquinas. In a paper of this type it is necessary to presuppose a certain knowledge of the possible intellect and sense cognition. Because of this, extensive proofs concerning the existence and nature of both will not be given.

NECESSITY

Man has two types of cognition. The highest and most noble type of cognition is called intellectual cognition. This can be said to be the apprehension of universal essences. For example, we can think of the essence of man, rational animal. This idea is applicable to all men. It is abstracted from all concrete, individual substances and the "man" as such does not have dimensions or existence at a certain time in a certain place.

The second type of cognition is sense cognition. This can

be said to be the perception of individual concrete objects by the external and internal senses. For example, this apple is perceived by the senses. It can be seen, touched, and tasted. It has certain dimensions and exists in a certain place at a certain time.

The sensible impression by the object perceived on the internal senses is called the phantasm. This phantasm produces a true representation of the object. To make this more clear let us use an example. A phantasm can be compared in some respects to a billboard. The billboard has reproduced on it an exact representation of an apple. This representation, however, is concrete and individual. It still has reference to a particular apple existing in a certain place at a certain time. The phantasm is such a representation. It is still individual and has relation to matter. Even though sense cognition is a lower type of cognition, it is still very important to all men because, as Saint Thomas said, "all knowledge originates from sense."²

Man, then, has two distinct types of cognition. One is the knowledge of individual concrete things-- sense cognition--and the second is knowledge of universals--intellectual cognition. The problem then arises as to how man attains knowledge of universal things. How can the senses, which supply the material to the intellect, activate a power of the soul which is on a superior plane of existence? How can a sensory form which is both contingent and material act upon the intellect whose object is

an intellectual form?

It is obvious that sensory forms cannot act upon the intellect directly for the phantasm is individual and concrete whereas the intellect deals with universals. Saint Thomas makes it very clear that the phantasm cannot act upon the intellect.

"Nothing corporeal can make an impression on the incorporeal."³

Again, Saint Thomas makes it clear that the knowledge of the senses and the knowledge of the intellect are distinct and that one cannot of itself act upon the other in the following.

But the phantasms, since they are likenesses of individual things, and exist in corporeal organs, do not have the same mode of existence which the human intellect has: and they are not able by their own power to impress on the possible intellect.⁴

Thus it is, that the intellect is spiritual and understands universals, while the phantasms are individual and exist in corporeal things.

Before proceeding further it will be beneficial to have a general survey of the doctrine of Saint Thomas concerning the possible and agent intellect. The power of the soul which is in potency to all things which are able to be known is the possible intellect. The power of the soul which is in act in respect to intelligibles is the agent intellect. The possible intellect cannot reach the intelligibles as they exist in the phantasm. The operation proper to the possible intellect is that of understanding the intelligible forms abstracted from the sensible species in the phantasm. The possible intellect, so called be-

cause it is in potency to knowing, does not de-se abstract the species from the phantasm. This is clear from what Aristotle has taught, for he says that nothing is educed from potency to act unless by that which is already in act.

Now, the possible intellect in its own genus is regarded as a potency. Therefore, it must be reduced to act by that which is already in act. Since the possible intellect is brought from its potency to the intellective act of union with the intelligible species, there is a need for the agent intellect. Thus, in the rational soul, the possible intellect is reduced from its potentiality by the active power of the soul, that is, the agent intellect, through the intelligible species. In this way, the intellective part of the soul, conjoined to the sensible powers which virtually contain the intelligible forms for abstraction, is joined to these preparatory virtues and suffices to make the possible intellect pass from the potency of knowing to the actuality of knowing.

The work performed by the agent intellect is that of abstracting the species from the phantasm. The nature of its work is determined by the nature which it has. The nature of the agent intellect is such that it is a certain natural light, in virtue of which it is in act with regard to intelligibles. It possesses this from the very beginning since it is an immaterial power transcendent of matter from the body.

As it was previously stated, the intellect acquires its

knowledge through the medium of the senses. The forms of objects in the sense faculties however are particular and as such they are only potentially intelligible, for the intellect understands only universals. But what is in potency is reduced to act only through an agent. An agent, therefore, is necessary which causes the species existing in the sense faculties to be reduced from being potentially intelligible to be intelligible in act. It is impossible for the possible intellect to do this since it is in potency in regard to intelligible objects. Thus, another spiritual power must be posited to render this service. This power or faculty of making species which are potentially intelligible to become intelligible in act is called the agent intellect. Saint Thomas states one of his many proofs for the necessity of the agent intellect in this way:

...the intellect acquires such knowledge from sensible objects, through the intermediacy of the senses. However, since the forms of objects in the sense faculties are particular, as we just said, they are intelligible not in act, but only in potency. For the intellect understands nothing but universals. But what is in potency is not reduced to act except by some agent. Hence there must be some agent that causes the species existing in the sense faculties to be intelligible in act. The possible intellect cannot perform this service, for it is in potency with respect to intelligible objects rather than active in rendering them intelligible. Therefore we must assume some other intellect, which will cause species that are intelligible in potency to become intelligible in act, just as light causes colors that are potentially visible to be actually visible. The faculty we call the agent intellect...⁵

In addition to the above proof, the necessity of the agent intellect can be proved in the following way. The possible in-

tellec-t cannot make sensory forms intelligible, for this would suppose that the possible intellect is active prior to its act of knowing. There is only one formal object and one formal act of the possible intellect and that consists only in the intelligible object and the act of becoming identified with it. Thus, there must be another power of the soul separate or distinct from the sensory powers, whose objects are only potentially intelligible, and from the possible intellect which is only potentially intelligent. This power cannot be passive in respect to the sensory forms which are to be made intelligible. If it were, then another power would be needed to make the forms intelligible and this would go on ad infinitum. This power, then, must be active and must be an intellectual power. The name given to this power is the agent intellect.

Some men have held that an agent intellect is not needed; that the possible intellect can accomplish the act of intellection by itself. But, our act of intellection cannot be accomplished by the possible intellect alone, for the possible intellect can understand only when it is moved by an intelligible, and this intelligible, since it does not already exist in the real order, must be produced by the agent intellect. It is true that two powers, which are rooted in one and the same substance of the soul, do influence each other. This influence can be understood to occur in two ways: first, inasmuch as one power is hindered or totally prevented from performing its operation

when another power operates intensely; secondly, inasmuch as one power is moved by another, as the imagination is moved by the external senses. Now this is possible because the forms in the imagination and those in the external senses are generically the same, for all are individual forms. Therefore, the forms, which are in the external senses, can impress those forms which exist in the imagination, since they represent things as individuals; they cannot cause intelligible forms, because these are universal.⁶

Now the species received in the imagination from the sense of touch are not enough to cause the imagination to produce forms belonging to the sense of sight, unless forms previously received by the sense of sight are stored up in the repertory of memory or imagination. For one who is born blind cannot imagine color by any other kind of sensible species whatever.

The condition of the recipient cannot cause a species, which has been received, to be transferred from one genus to another; however, it can alter a received species of the same genus according to some mode of being. Hence, since a universal species and a particular species differ generically, it follows that the cognitive activity of the possible intellect alone is not enough to give the particular species in the imagination the universality which they possess in the intellect, but that an agent intellect is required to do this.⁷

It is possible that the agent intellect and the possible

intellect are not really distinct according to some. Saint Thomas, however, holds the opposite opinion. For, powers are distinguished by their operations. If the operations are distinct then the powers are distinct. The operation of the agent intellect is to make intelligibles while that of the possible intellect is to receive these intelligibles. Thus, it is clear that their operations are distinct, and so the powers are distinct. Also the possible intellect has been described by Saint Thomas as being potential in respect to knowables.

The human intellect, however, is in potency with respect to intelligibles.....and in the beginning is "as a clear tablet on which nothing is written" as the Philosopher says in III de Anima.⁸

Therefore, it is only in potency. Now, what is in potency cannot be reduced to act by itself but only by an agent distinct from it. This agent which is distinct from it is the agent intellect.

The agent intellect is also nobler than the possible intellect. "Everything that is, in that it is or in what it is, is in act and the likeness of the first act, and on this account has nobility."⁹ A thing is said to be more or less noble insofar as it approaches God, since God is pure act and thus He must be the most noble. The agent intellect, then, is more noble than the possible intellect, for the agent intellect is active while the possible intellect is only a passive power. Saint Thomas puts this very precisely when he states that the agent intellect is nobler than the possible intellect "because an

active power is nobler than a passive power."¹⁰

From all the preceding it can be stated that man has two intellects--the agent and the possible intellect. These intellects are really distinct and the agent is nobler than the possible intellect. Does it follow from this that in man there are two powers of understanding? This is denied most firmly by the Angelic Doctor. Even though the possible intellect and the agent intellect are distinct, there are not two separate powers of understanding, for the act of the agent intellect does not make up a distinct act of understanding. The two intellects go together and constitute one act of understanding and this is peculiar to man alone.

There are two actions proper to the two intellects, the agent and the possible. For the act of the possible intellect is to receive intelligible objects: the act of the agent is to abstract the intelligible objects. From this it does not follow that there is a twofold understanding in man, because both of these acts combine to form one act of understanding.¹¹

How is it that these two acts go together to make one act of understanding? The agent intellect as such does not understand but it abstracts the intelligible species from the phantasm. Its operation is not the operation of understanding but of abstracting. The operation of understanding is proper to the possible intellect and to it alone. However, the possible intellect cannot operate, cannot understand without the agent intellect for it relies on the agent to make sensible species to be intelligible species. The agent intellect does not understand then, but the possible intellect. The agent intellect in

a sense reduces the possible from potency to act. The very act of understanding takes place in the possible intellect but it needs the agent intellect to abstract the intelligible species.

NATURE

There has been some controversy as to whether the intellect is one or many for all men. Saint Thomas interpreted Aristotle as saying that each man has a separate agent intellect, and he himself held this position. First of all, let us consider the action of the intellects. The possible intellect performs its action in receiving the objects to be understood and understands them. The agent intellect, however, causes things to be actually intelligible, and it does this by abstracting species from the phantasm. But both of these actions take place in one and the same man. For example, Joe has the power which abstracts the species and the power which understands what is abstracted. Thus, both intellects must be united to this man as a form.

And so both must be numerically multiplied in accord with the number of men concerned..... Moreover, ¹²agent and patient must be proportionate to each other.

Possibly the best way to prove that the agent intellect is not just one for all men but one in each man is by first proving that the agent intellect inheres in the soul. "Every action that is proper to a species proceeds from principles that emanate from the form which confers the species."¹³ In material creation, man alone is able to understand. He alone can perform this action; it is, then, an operation proper to the human species. Thus, the principles of this action of understanding

must come from the form of man--the human soul--for it is from the soul that man has his species. However, the principles of the action of understanding, the agent and possible intellects, do not extend to the body, for these perform their action independently of a bodily organ. The power of understanding, then, does not reside in a bodily organ. Action pertains to the same subject as does potency; the possible and agent intellect inhere in the one essence of the soul.

Now no action belongs to anything except through some principle formally inherent therein, as we have said above of the possible intellect. Therefore the power which is the principle of this action must be something in the soul.¹⁴

Since the agent intellect inheres in the soul, then there must be as many agent intellects as there are souls. For it is impossible for the numerically same power of the soul to belong to many substances.¹⁵ For powers of the soul are natural properties which flow from the essence.¹⁶ Now, properties are accidents whose nature it is to exist in alio, in another, as in a subject. Every substance, however, is individual for it is individuated by matter signed by quantity, as Saint Thomas states in the Summa Theologica.¹⁷ Thus, since the substance is individual, those things existing in it must belong to it and exist only in it.

That the agent intellect is a separate substance existing apart from individual men was a doctrine held by many Latin Averroists. These were men who, though they did not follow strictly the philosophy of Averroes, did maintain the point Averroes

stressed--that philosophy and theology must remain separate at all times. It was held that philosophical conclusions could contradict the teachings of Christian Revelation and still both could be right. Saint Thomas thought that the greatest of these Latin Averroists, Siger of Brabant, held that the agent intellect existed as a separate substance apart from us.

Contrary to this teaching, Saint Thomas states very definitely that the agent intellect is not a separate substance. Insofar as we carry out an operation by means of something having the character of a form, to that extent do we cause something to exist actually, just as, (if it is permitted to borrow an example from the Angelic Doctor), a hot thing heats by its heat inasmuch as it is actually hot. For a thing acts only so far as it is in act. Hence that by which a thing acts or operates formally, must be united to that thing with respect to its very act of existing. Hence, in the case of two substances existing in separation from one another, it is impossible for one of them to operate formally through the other. Thus, if the agent intellect is a separate substance existing apart from us, we cannot understand by it formally, although we may be able to understand by it actively, as we are said to see by light of the sun. It is, then, impossible to maintain the position that the agent intellect is a separate substance existing apart from us, and that we understand through the agent intellect as through a form.

The operation of the agent intellect consists in abstract-

ing the intellectual species from the phantasms. Now we are certain that this operation takes place in us. However, there would be no reason why such abstraction should sometimes occur and sometimes not as would be the case if the agent intellect were a separate substance. Thus, the agent intellect is not a separate substance.

Saint Thomas held, also, that if the agent intellect would be held to exist as a separate substance along with God, a consequence repugnant to our faith would follow; namely, that our ultimate perfection and happiness would consist not in a certain union of our soul with God as the Gospel teaches, "but with some other separate substance."¹⁸ But it is evident that man's ultimate beatitude or happiness consists in his noblest operation, intellection, which operation, in order to be fully completed, requires the union of our possible intellect with its active principle. For, indeed, anything passive in any way whatever is perfected only when joined with the proper active principle which is the cause of the perfection.¹⁹ Therefore those maintaining that the agent intellect is a substance existing apart from matter, say that man's ultimate happiness would consist in being able to know the agent intellect. This is manifestly false.

If the agent intellect were not something belonging to the soul, but were some separate substance, there would be one agent intellect for all men. And this is what they mean who hold that there is one agent intellect for all. But if the agent intellect is something belonging to the soul, as one of its powers,

we are bound to say that there are as many agent intellects as there are souls, which are multiplied according to the number of men. For it is impossible that one and the same power belong to various substances.

The Philosopher proves that the agent intellect is separate by the fact that the possible intellect is separate: because, as he says, the agent is more noble than the patient. Now the possible intellect is said to be separate because it is not the act of any corporeal organ. And in this sense the agent intellect is also called separate; but not as a separate substance.²⁰

Saint Thomas says that separated souls will understand thru species acquired while they existed in the body. But after the separation of body and soul, they will also understand thru an infused species.²¹ But this operation is not natural to the soul when it is united to the body, only after it leaves the body.

The possible intellect is disposed by nature to receive species from phantasms only so far as the phantasms are actualized by the light of the agent intellect which is a kind of participation of the light of superior substances. In De Veritate, Saint Thomas explains the light as follows:

The light of the agent intellect proceeds in the rational soul, as from a primary source, from God. And, for this reason, it is true that our mind receives knowledge from sensible things; nevertheless, our mind forms the likenesses of things in itself inasmuch as the forms abstracted from sensibles are made intelligibles in act through the light of the agent intellect, so that they may be received in the possible intellect. And thus in the light of the agent intellect, all knowledge is in some way originally innate in us, through the mediation of universal concepts, which are known at once by the light of the agent intellect, and through which concepts, as through universal principles, we judge about other things, and know them in themselves.²²

Saint Thomas describes the agent intellect as a light. It is said to illuminate, to light up the phantasm. In this activity it can be compared to the light of the sun. Take for example a person standing in a dark room. The colors in that room are only potentially able to be seen just as the forms in the phantasm are only potentially able to be understood. As the colors exist now they cannot be seen--as the species exist in the phantasm they cannot be intellectually known. Just as the person is only potentially able to see the colors so the possible intellect is potentially able to know. If the light of the sun enters the room the person immediately sees the colors. The agent intellect works in the same way. It is the light which illumines the phantasm. It turns towards the sensible species and projects upon them its light. It illumines and transfigures them, so to speak.²³

OPERATION

What exactly is the agent intellect able to do? What is the operation of the agent intellect? Since the possible intellect cannot actuate itself as Saint Thomas shows in De Anima, we must posit an agent intellect. This agent intellect must cause the actual intelligibles which actuate the possible intellect.

The possible intellect is in potency in regard to the species in the phantasm. The agent intellect is related to such species as the act which produces them because it makes them to be actually intelligible by abstraction. The possible intellect

is in potency to intelligible species with respect to that mode of existence of the species according to which the agent intellect is related to them as the one producing them.

The human soul, the lowest among all intellectual substances, is united to a body in order that the soul may receive intelligible species from material things through the possible intellect. Nor is its natural intellective power greater than that required for perfecting its knowledge through such forms. Hence, the intelligible light, in which the human soul participates and which is called the agent intellect, has as its function to actualize intelligible species of the type referred to. Since the soul is directed toward inferior things, from these it abstracts intelligible species proportionate to its intellective power; and it is in this way that the soul is perfected in knowledge.

The agent intellect is said: (1) to convert or direct itself towards the phantasm; (2) to abstract from it the essence; (3) to illuminate and make actual intelligible what is potentially intelligible in the phantasm; (4) throughout the process the agent intellect is chief agent, while the phantasm is viewed merely as an instrumental agent.²⁴

The action of the possible intellect consists in receiving the objects understood and in understanding them. And the action of the agent intellect consists in causing things to be actually understood by abstracting species.²⁵

Not only does the agent intellect illumine phantasms, it does more; by its power intelligible species are abstracted from phantasms. It illumines phantasms because, just as the sensitive part acquires a greater power by its conjunction with the intellectual part, so through the power of the agent intellect phantasms are made more fit for the abstraction of intelligible in-

tentions from them. Now the agent intellect abstracts intelligible species from phantasms inasmuch as by its power we are able to take into our consideration the natures of species without individual conditions. It is in accord with their likeness that the possible intellect is informed.²⁶

Phantasms are needed for the agent to operate. Man cannot even reflect upon things without turning to the phantasm. For all of man's understanding the phantasms are needed. Phantasms are said to be to the intellect what sensible things are to the sense. Without sensible things, the senses could not operate, they would not have a proper object. Without the phantasm the agent intellect, in the same way as the senses, could not operate. For, as Saint Thomas states in De Anima:

We maintain that the agent intellect produces knowledge in our possible intellect through phantasms rendered actually intelligible by the agent intellect.²⁷

For the operation of each of them bears on phantasms; the agent intellect renders phantasm actually intelligible, whereas the possible intellect receives the intelligible species abstracted from phantasms.²⁸

CONCLUSION

For a more complete exposition of the agent intellect, the following is an outline of the process of intellectual cognition showing the important role that the agent intellect has in this vital process of rational activity.

The intellect is immaterial and its proper objects are universal and immaterial forms. The universal nature is enclosed, as it were, in the particular. The intellect has the universal as its proper object, but cannot reach it until it is disengaged

from the material aspects with which it is bound up in particular. In other words, we can say that the universal nature must be stripped of all its material appendages. This cannot be accomplished by any material power, since immateriality can be realized only by an immaterial agent.

The dematerialization through which the universal nature becomes disengaged from matter has to be the work of the intellect, and the intellect has to be immaterial. Since the intellect is incapable of determining itself and it receives its data from the senses, it is of logical necessity to postulate a faculty which is intrinsically able to act of itself and which will put the possible intellect in act. This faculty is the agent intellect. The proper object of the intellect is the knowledge of essences. But in order to arrive at these essences abstraction from matter is a conditio sine qua non. The freeing of the universal nature then is achieved by the process of abstraction in which the "active intellect" operates on the phantasm presented to it by the sensory powers. From the phantasm that enters the intellect the conditions of matter will have to be obliterated. The abstraction from the conditions of matter is the function of the agent intellect. It is a ray of spiritual light which, when falling on the phantasm, transforms it and leaves aside its conditions of matter.

Then, with the "sublimated" phantasm as the instrumental cause, the agent intellect as the efficient cause educes from

the potency of the possible intellect an accidental form which is the intelligible species,--now being completely dematerialized. The agent intellect then presents the abstracted intelligible species to the possible intellect which is in potency and becomes actualized by the species intelligibilis impressa. The universal nature disengaged from the phantasm and thus made intelligible is called the species intelligibilis impressa and becomes, after informing the possible intellect, the species intelligibilis expressa, or what Saint Thomas calls the verbum mentis. The verbum mentis is the concept and the spoken word is the symbol of this concept.

The reason why Aquinas (Saint Thomas), following Aristotelian tradition, deems it necessary to credit man with two distinct performances, the abstraction of the concept by the active intellect and the final formation of it by the possible intellect, is not within the province of empirical evidence to determine. This reason is of a philosophical character. The universal nature is in the phantasm as potentially intelligible. For it to be made actually intelligible an agent, itself actual, is indispensable. This agent has to be of the intellectual or immaterial order, otherwise it cannot actualize the universal which is intelligible and immaterial. The intellect, therefore, has to possess the capacity of actualizing the universal nature: hence the saying of Averroes, quoted with approval by Saint Thomas: Intellectus agit universalis.

Thus we come to the end of the process of intellectual cognition. We have seen how sensible beings, the proper objects of our intellect, are only potentially intelligible, and in order to explain the fact of intellectual knowledge we must say there is in the soul a special spiritual virtue, an intellectual beacon of light--THE AGENT INTELLECT.

25. Compendium of Theology, Ch. 88.
26. Summa Theologica, I, q. 85, a. 1, ad 4.
27. Quaestio Disputata de Anima, Article XV.
28. Ibid.

FOOTNOTES

1. De Anima, Book III, Ch. 5, 430a, 10-19.
2. Summa Theologica, I, q. 1, a. 9, co.
3. Ibid., I, q. 84, a. 6, co.
4. Ibid., I, q. 85, a. 1, ad 3.
5. Compendium of Theology, Ch. 83.
6. Quaestio Disputata de Anima, Article IV, ans. to obj. 1.
7. Ibid., Article IV, ans. to obj. 3.
8. Summa Theologica, I, q. 79, a. 2, co.
9. Summa Contra Gentiles, Book I, Ch. 70.
10. Questio Disputata de Anima, Article V.
11. Ibid., Article IV, ans. to obj. 8.
12. Compendium of Theology, Ch. 86.
13. Ibid., Ch. 87.
14. Summa Theologica, I, q. 79, a. 4, co.
15. Ibid., I, q. 79, a. 5, co.
16. Quaestio Disputata de Anima, Article XIX.
17. Summa Theologica, I, Q. 74, a. 4, co.
18. Quaestio Disputata de Anima, Article V.
19. Ibid.
20. Summa Theologica, I, q. 79, a. 5, co.
21. Quaestio Disputata de Anima, Article XV, ans. to obj. 11.
22. De Veritate, q. 10, a. 6.
23. Etienne Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages, p. 378.
24. Michael Maher, Psychology, p. 312.

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