

Whether the Intellectual Soul Knows Itself by Its Essence

(S.T. I, Q.87, A.1)

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In Question 87, Article 1 of the Summa Theologica, St. Thomas deals with the concept of self-knowledge. Does the soul know itself by its essence? This paper will deal with the topic in four parts: part I will demonstrate the notion of what a soul is according to Aristotle and St. Thomas; part II will be concerned with the question as stated in the Summa; part III will review an article by Roderick Chisholm entitled "On the Observability of the Self;" and part IV will concern itself with drawing conclusions from the material presented.

I

Aristotle sees the soul as simply a name used "to designate a substantial form which confers upon the matter which it actualizes and determines the ability to perform what we call vital operations."¹ The soul is the substantial form of the body. The vital operations are those whose principles are within the operator, produced of the operator itself. The activity is immanent as opposed to transeunt activity. The operation is performed by the agent and remains within that agent, not passing out to a patient distinct from the agent. "The terminus of the operation is a perfection of the agent itself: it grows, it moves from here to there, it perceives, it thinks, all of which operations have as effect a new actuality in the agent itself."²

In Aristotle's De Anima, the philosopher distinguishes three kinds of souls according to the kinds of vital operations which living beings perform. They are the nutritive soul, the sensitive soul and the rational soul.³

The nutritive soul is the most fundamental type of soul. From it come the powers basic to all living beings, namely, the capacities for nutrition, growth and reproduction.⁴ These three activities may be taken as the minimal characteristics of life. They are that which distinguishes living beings from non-living beings. ~~Let~~

The second soul type, according to Aristotle, is the sensitive soul.⁵ The philosopher applies this term to that class of living beings which not only eat, grow and reproduce, but do something else besides. This something else is, namely, the ability to perceive or sense.⁶ Of the two types of living things, plants and animals, only animals have the ability to perceive. This ability is added perfection given to the matter of the living being by the substantial form of the being. Since we have said that the soul is the substantial form of a thing and the animal's ability to sense things other than itself is given to it from its soul, then the souls of animals must be of a different level or grade from those of plants.

Among animals there exist some which possess an operation not traceable to the sensitive soul, namely, the ability to think or rationalize. The substantial form of this animal, namely, man, is the third grade of soul, the rational soul.⁷ It is the principle of thought in man. Both thought and sense are cognition, and wherever there is cognition there is appetite or desire.⁸ There exist two types of desire, sensitive and rational.⁹ This second type, rational desire, may be referred to as will. Thus, the rational soul may be defined as the first principle in man of thought and will. This leads us to Aristotle's two defi-

nitions of soul, namely, the essential definition and the functional definition.¹⁰ Of the first, the philosopher suggests the soul is substantial form because the substantial form is the first actuality of matter, making it something, while accidental forms are second actualities, giving the material substance this or that non-substantial determination, such as hard or soft, warm or cold.¹¹ Of the second definition, Aristotle again presents the soul as substantial form because the soul is the first source of those powers which it possesses, namely, the powers of self-nutrition, sensation, thinking and movement.¹² For Aristotle, the soul is fundamental in everything.¹³ Man has neither a nutritive nor a sensitive soul, but rather a rational soul which confers nutritive and sensitive powers on his body. Of those powers, the principle of thought stands above the rest and defines man, since it is the power peculiar to him. Therefore, we call man a rational animal.

St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, also concluded that the soul is the substantial form of a living thing. For the human being, the soul is that first principle, that "anima," which is unique to the species and determines that the material is human. For Thomas, the human soul is not a separate substance, it is the form of the body.¹⁴ However, the soul is a spiritual substance, an intellectual substance. It is at this point that Thomas diverts from Aristotelian philosophy, since for him the soul is both a substance and a form. This is to say that the soul is a spiritual substance as well as a form, and it is a form due to the very kind of spiritual substance that it is. According to Aquinas the soul needs to have a body and to animate

that body. This necessity exists not primarily for the good of the body, but for the good of the soul. Unless the soul animates a body, the soul itself could not exist as a spiritual substance.¹⁵ It is the life-giving force of the body, the first actuality.

For Thomas, one cannot think of the soul as a human soul apart from the human body. It is the body which belongs to a particular species, not the soul.¹⁶ Man is a complete substance, that is, a composite of body and soul. Only the human soul is a substance, not the souls of plants or irrational animals. The idea of the soul as a substance is intimately bound up in the notion "human."¹⁷ The definition of the human soul would be incomplete without the definition of man. In order for the soul to be a human soul, it must be united with the body of a man. Without the human body, the soul would not be a complete substance.¹⁸ It is complete qua substance, being composed of its essence and its act of being; but it is incomplete from the point of view of the definition of its species, because, without its body, it cannot perform the operations of a being that belongs in the species "man."¹⁹ The fullness of human nature demands that it be a substantial composite of body and soul, along with all the powers that are its instruments inasmuch as it is a knowing and acting substance. It is impossible to think of the species "man" without thinking of that real substance which constitutes "man" in his fullness, i.e., human body and human soul. Unless there exists a body at some time, the soul cannot know or will. Simply stated, for the Thomists, there is no human soul where there is no man.

St. Thomas holds that the soul is "forma absoluta non dependens a materia."²⁰ It is pure, absolute form, not dependent upon nor mixed with matter of any kind. It exists as separate from matter, owing to its very nature, its natural immateriality. As we have seen, the soul is a human soul only because it is the substantial form of a human being. It can exist as substantial form separate from substance, but can only be the substantial form of a human being in direct relation to that substance which is of the species "man." This is what is meant when the Thomists say that the soul needs matter.

The human soul, for the Thomists, is a spiritual substance, an immaterial thing. It is also intelligent, but not pure intelligence.²¹ Aquinas held that pure intelligence was the mark of angels.²² Only angels exist as pure forms, not mixed with matter, in full possession of their individual being; themselves being the actuality in which their full potential is realized. Since the human soul cannot realize this potentiality in itself, it is dependent upon matter, upon a human body, to be able to exercise its intelligence. St. Thomas calls the human soul an "intellectual substance."²³ Although it is the lowest degree of intelligence, the soul is, none-the-less, capable of understanding.²⁴ Whereas intellects of higher degree already possess the ideas through which they understand, the human soul is created without these ideas through which it understands, but with the power of understanding. For the Thomist, the body is the instrument, in a sense, the "idea" through which the soul can come into contact with knowable essences and thus exercise its powers of intelligibility.²⁵ To put it another way, the soul

needs a body in order that through the body and its sense organs, the soul may attain intelligible natures through its intelligible powers. It readily perceives matter through the senses and abstracts the intelligible essences or forms through the intellect.

Although Aquinas' theory of soul and its relation to matter was a heavy adaptation of Aristotle's theory, the world-view of these two men was drastically different. Aristotle came out of a non-creationist philosophy. For him, matter is that independent ultimate stuff out of which all nature is generated. It exists in its own right and is of itself not generated from anything, but is eternal and imperishable. It is the primary condition of all that occurs in nature.²⁶ Aristotle wrote many times that matter exists for the sake of form and it is this expression which St. Thomas himself borrows.²⁷ Aquinas' creationist world-view, however, leads him to a different understanding of this expression. Matter is not ultimate or final as Aristotle thought, but is rather an instrument which God creates for Himself to use in creating the universe. Aquinas believes matter is entirely dependent on God, is made by Him for His creative activity. This is foreign to Aristotelian philosophy which holds that matter exists for the sake of form, that it is eternal in its existence, that matter always has and always will be the fundamental or primary condition for the concrete existence of every form. Form, for Aristotle, is the end of matter. It is that stuff in which matter realizes its full potential. The problem Aquinas has with Aristotle is the notion of matter existing eternally. If God is creator of all things,

then it follows if God desires certain forms to exist, He creates the necessary matter for them to exist in. If God desires the substantial form of a man to exist, He creates the necessary matter for that soul. The Thomistic view holds then that the soul has a body because the soul needs a body.²⁸

II

Our inquiry into the nature of the human soul leads us to the question posed by St. Thomas, namely, does the intellectual soul know itself by its essence?²⁹ The Angelic Doctor first presents three objections to the question. Objection #1 states that the soul knows itself by its essence because St. Augustine holds this view on the grounds of the incorporeal nature of the soul.³⁰ Objection #2 holds that the soul knows itself by its essence because both angels and human souls belong to the genus of intellectual substance. As an angel knows itself by its essence, so must the human soul.³¹ Objection #3 states that as Aristotle taught "in things without matter, the intellect and that which is understood are the same," so it follows that since the intellect and its object are the same in the human mind, the intellectual soul knows itself by its essence.³²

Aquinas next states a contrary position. As Aristotle taught "the intellect understands itself in the same way as it understands other things." Thomas elaborates on this by saying that the intellectual soul knows other things, not by their essence, but by their likenesses. He deduces that the soul must not know itself by its essence.³³

Aquinas states his argument thus: "I answer that, Every-

thing is knowable so far as it is in act, and not so far as it is in potentiality; for a thing is a being, and is true, and, therefore, knowable, according as it is actual Consequently immaterial substances are intelligible by their own essence, according as each one is actual by its own essence."³⁴

For Aquinas, God is the absolute simplicity of essence. In God, essence is equivalent to existence. The human soul must itself be of a lesser level or degree of essence, therefore, Aquinas develops the notion of the soul as a sort of composition. This composition he called one of act and potency.³⁵

What Aquinas meant by act and potency was, not that these two things were actual finite elements making up the soul, but that all substances, including the purely spiritual one (like angels) are composed of at least two constituent elements, which in their relation to each other function as potency to act.

To say a thing has potency or potentiality, is to say that it has the capacity or ability to be acted upon, to be changed, either by another thing, or by itself qua other.³⁶ This describes motion, or a process of change. A thing which is potency is still act, but it is act considered in a state of possibility with reference to a still more complete actuality that it is capable of receiving. This process of change is described in philosophy as "becoming," which itself implies movement.³⁷

A certain thing exists in potency when it is not all that it can actually be. It is capable of becoming, i.e., of being more than it is. Potency can be seen as incomplete actuality having in itself the capacity to move towards a more complete state of actuality.³⁸ For a thing to be actual, it must become all

that it possibly can, all that it has the potential of being. Aquinas, as we have seen, believes all things to be knowable in act and not so far as in potency. Therefore, immaterial substances, the human soul included, are not knowable by their own essence in potency, i.e., in their ability to become something more than they are; but are known in actuality, i.e., in what they have indeed become, in the fullness of their potentiality.

Having come to a realization of the effect act and potency have on the intelligibility of essence, Aquinas moves on to speak about the nature of the human intellect. ". . . in its essence the human intellect is potentially understanding. Hence it has in itself the power to understand, but not to be understood, except as it is made actual."³⁹ The Angelic Doctor claims that God is pure and perfect act, perfectly intelligible in Himself. He knows Himself by His essence and all other things by their essences. The angel is not a pure act and, therefore, cannot know other things by their essences, but rather by their likenesses.⁴⁰ The angel can, however, know itself by its own essence.⁴¹ The human intellect is only potential in the genus of intelligible beings. It has material and sensible things for its proper object and can know itself according as it is made actual by the species abstracted from these material objects. "Therefore," wrote Aquinas, "the intellect knows itself, not by its essence, but by its act."⁴² Aquinas states that this self-knowledge occurs in two ways: first, it occurs singularly, as when a man perceives that he has an intellectual soul because he perceives that he understands; second, it occurs universally,

as when we attain to some insight into the nature of the human mind from a knowledge of mind functioning as actual.⁴³ Aquinas clarifies himself by quoting Augustine, who says, "'We gaze on the inviolable truth whence we can as perfectly as possible define, not what each man's mind is, but what it ought to be in the light of the eternal exemplars.'"⁴⁴ For self-knowledge to occur singularly, all that is required is the mere presence of the mind, "since the mind itself is the principle of action whereby it perceives itself, and hence it is said to know itself by its own presence."⁴⁵ For self-knowledge to occur universally, more than the presence of the mind is required. There must also exist mental inquiry of some sort. Thomas' answer concludes with another Augustinian quote, "'Let the mind strive not to see itself as if it were absent, but to discern itself as present.'"⁴⁶

In Thomas' reply to Objection #1, he states that the mind can know itself by means of itself, because it is the mind which, by virtue of its own act, leads its inquiry back to itself. It is itself that it knows. The intellectual soul is, as has been stated earlier, the first principle of the body, and first principles are said to be self-evident.⁴⁷

In replying to Objection #2, Thomas rejects the notion that the human soul, since it belongs to the same genus of intellectual substances as angels, can know itself through its essence as angels know themselves through their essence. His grounds for such a rejection follow from what has been discussed above. The human intellect exists either in potentiality to intelligible things or in actuality to intelligible things. It can know itself in how it differs from other intelligible objects.⁴⁸

The Angelic Doctor's rejection of Objection #3 is based on the same grounds as that of Objection #2. To say that "in things without matter, the intellect and that which is understood are the same," as Aristotle held, can only be applied to angels (separate substances). As Thomas said, this "is verified in their (the angels) regard, and not in regard to other substances . . ." ⁴⁹ For the Thomist, the intellectual soul knows intelligible things through their likenesses, not their essences. ⁵⁰

III

The question of self-knowledge is a popular topic of discussion, not only in Scholastic circles, but in schools of contemporary philosophy as well. Roderick Chisholm of Brown University entertains this question in his article, "On the Observability of the Self." Chisholm initiates the discussion by citing the point of contact of "The two great traditions of contemporary Western philosophy--'phenomenology' and 'logical analysis' . . ." ⁵¹ This "point of contact" is the thesis according to which one is never aware of a subject of experience. ⁵² Chisholm notes that this thesis does not pertain to bodily perception, but rather, the data derived from our immediate experience, or "as Hume puts it, (when) we enter most intimately into what we call ourselves." ⁵³ Chisholm holds that we perceive ourselves because we are identical with our bodies and, thus, do so every time we perceive our bodies. He claims the two traditions have become lost on their journey towards a realization of the true meaning of self-knowledge and much of the difficulty

lies with mistakes in the doctrines of Hume, the foundation for both phenomenology and logical analysis.

Chisholm first refers us to a quote from Hume's "Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature:" "'As our idea of any body, a peach, for instance, is only that of a particular taste, color, figure, size, consistency, etc., so our idea of any mind is only that of particular perceptions without the notion of anything compound.'"⁵⁴ Hume has entered into a fallacy, according to Chisholm. He believes that the mistake is made in the claim that our ideas of things are only ideas of the particular qualities attributed to those things. He holds that our idea of a peach is not something which has the qualities of sweetness, roundness or fuzziness, but rather, it is an idea of something that is sweet, round or fuzzy. He notes, "We also make clear what is essential to our idea of a peach, that the thing that is round is the same thing as the thing that is sweet and also the same thing as the thing that is fuzzy."⁵⁵ It is noted that Leibniz, in criticizing Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding, arrives at the same conclusion, namely, what the mind perceives is a thing which is of certain qualities, and not, rather those particular qualities themselves. It follows then that not only is the first part of Hume's observation incorrect, but so is the second. The idea of a mind or self is not an idea of just 'particular perceptions,' but of the self which is those 'particular perceptions.'⁵⁶

We are next referred to the way in which data or evidence is interpreted in the writings of Hume. Chisholm cites as an example Hume's "bundle theory."⁵⁷ Hume argued that mankind was

"nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions."⁵⁸
 When man comes into contact with his self, he "stumbles" on particular perceptions, such as heat or cold, love or hatred. Man never comes into contact with his self apart from these perceptions, and never observes anything but these perceptions.⁵⁹
 What Chisholm has difficulties with is not the evidence which went into formulating the "bundle theory," but rather, the way in which Hume interpreted that evidence. Hume not only holds that there are such perceptions as heat or cold, love or hatred, but that there is a someone who stumbles upon these perceptions, and this someone who stumbles upon one perception is the same one who stumbles upon all the other perceptions, and this someone stumbles upon nothing but perceptions. Chisholm believes that Hume's final conclusion, i.e., that man never observes anything but perceptions, cannot be based on his earlier premises, i.e., that man observes not only perceptions, but it is man, a someone, who observes them. The difficulty lies in Hume's inability to keep his statements subjectless. Chisholm questions whether Hume could have done otherwise. Referring to himself, Hume said that he found nothing but impressions. "It is essential to Hume's argument that he report not only what it is that he finds but also what it is that he fails to find What Hume found, then, was not merely the particular perceptions, but also the fact that he found those perceptions as well as the fact that he failed to find certain other things. And these are findings with respect to himself."⁶⁰

Chisholm asks, "Why, then, is it so tempting to agree with

Hume in his report of his negative findings?"⁶¹ He tends to think it is because we reason that if we perceive ourselves in our immediate experience, such a perception must resemble "in essential respects" the way we perceive external things. However, what we find is that we do not perceive ourselves in the same way as we perceive external things.⁶² ". . . to know that I perceive myself to be thinking I need not know that I perceive what is a proper part of myself. Sartre said that the ego is 'opaque' . . ." ⁶³ Chisholm in keeping with Sartre would rather think the ego to be "transparent."⁶⁴ This view would lead one to hold that a man, in being aware of himself as experiencing, may not be aware of himself.

It is precisely because of this view that we are referred to what Chisholm claims to have perplexed early 20th Century British and American philosophers, namely, the sense-datum theory. Simply put, "if a physical thing appears white or rhomboidal or bitter to a man, then the man may be said to sense or to be aware of an appearance that is white, or an appearance that is rhomboidal, or an appearance that is bitter."⁶⁵ This theory also states that when a man is sensing these appearances, the physical conditions around him and within him bear heavily on the way he perceives. Although the sense-datum theory attempts to explain some apparent truths concerning perception, Chisholm believes there exists a definite fallacy which runs through the theory and this fallacy lies with the way we use words. It is not so much semantical as it is grammatical. Without reiterating the somewhat lengthy linguistic analysis which Chisholm presents, let it be said that:

so called appearances or sense-data are 'affections' or 'modifications' of the person who is said to experience them. And this is simply to say that those sentences in which we seem to predicate properties of appearances can be paraphrased into other sentences in which we predicate properties only of the self or person who is said to sense those appearances. If this is correct, then appearances would be paradigm cases of what Scholastics called 'entia entis' or 'entia per accidens.' These things are not entities in their own right; they are 'accidents' of other things. And what they are accidents of are persons or selves.⁶⁶

Chisholm returns to his earlier contention, namely, that when we perceive ourselves as experiencing, since we are identical with our bodies, we also perceive ourselves--selves which are affected or modified in a certain way. In other words, we presuppose that we perceive ourselves, since it is the appearance which is the modification of the self, and the self which is the thing apprehended or perceived.

Chisholm admits that this doctrine of his is despised by some. Kant, for instance, said that all we could ever hope to know of the self is what predicates it has or what properties it exemplifies. We can never know the self per se. Similarly, Sartre held that "we seem to have no access to the en-soi--to the self as it is in itself. Whatever we find is at best only pour-soi--the self as it manifests itself to itself."⁶⁷ This, however, does not restrain Chisholm from concluding that acquaintance with the self as manifesting itself as having certain qualities is clear proof that we are acquainted with the self as it is in itself.

IV

It appears that both Aquinas and Chisholm agree on the question of self-knowledge, but there is a marked difference in their approach. Aquinas held that the soul knows itself in its essence, not as it exists potentially, but as it exists actually. That is to say that the soul is cognizant of itself in its relation to other things. Chisholm says the same thing, but in different language. His is the language of Empiricism, not Scholasticism. He claims that the self knows itself in its essence due to its acquaintance with itself as manifested in certain qualities. That is to say we know the self in its essence because we know the self in relation to our body. Both Thomas and Chisholm claim the same thing, i.e., the soul knows itself in its essence in relation to things other than the self. For Thomas, these "things other than the self" are the acts of the soul. For Chisholm, who borrows directly from the Scholastics, they are the "entia entis," the accidents of the self, namely, the body.

Chisholm further contends that much of what has been said on the observability of the self is a muddle.⁶⁸ Hume's bundle theory, the sense-datum theory of the Empiricists, Sartre's "pour-soi" and "en-soi," are all an attempt at disproving the argument held by Thomas and other quasi-Aristotelians like Chisholm. The muddle lies not with what Thomas said, but with the Humians, Kantians and Empiricists: their belief that one cannot know the self per se, but only predicates, thoughts detachable from self. Their doctrine fails. If all we are is

a bundle of thoughts, what is it that holds this bundle together? Must not such a theory presuppose that there exists selves which are more than mere bundles of perceptions? Are we merely what Kant referred to, namely, the I which we "attach to our thoughts?"⁶⁹

Chisholm is doing us a favor in a sense. He is contrasting the Empiricist concept of detachable thoughts with the Thomistic concept of self-knowledge through acts. Although he never refers to Thomas, he demonstrates his Scholastic tendencies by arriving at the same conclusions regarding self-knowledge as does Thomas. He does what Thomas could not do, namely, refute Humians, Kantians and Empiricists. Thomas would also have contended that the muddle lies with these schools. The self knows itself in its acts, its manifestations, because the self is that sort of thing and nothing else.

NOTES

¹ Brother Benignus, FSC, Nature, Knowledge and God (New York: Bruce Publishing Co., Inc., 1949) pp.149-50.

² Benignus, p.148.

³ Benignus, p.150.

⁴ ibid.

⁵ ibid.

⁶ ibid.

⁷ ibid.

⁸ ibid.

⁹ ibid.

¹⁰ ibid.

¹¹ see Aristotle, De Anima, in Richard McKeon, (ed.) Introduction to Aristotle, p.182.

¹² Benignus, p.150.

¹³ see Aristotle, De Anima, op. cit., p.190.

¹⁴ Etienne Gilson, Elements of Christian Philosophy (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1960) p.205.

¹⁵ Benignus, p.150.

¹⁶ Benignus, p.207.

¹⁷ ibid.

¹⁸ Benignus, p.209

¹⁹ Benignus, p.207.

²⁰ Gilson, Elements of Christian Philosophy, p.208.

²¹ ibid.

²² ibid.

²³ Etienne Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages (New York: Random House Press, 1955) p.376.

²⁴ ibid.

²⁵ Benignus, p.207.

²⁶Benignus, p.206.

²⁷ibid.

²⁸Benignus, p.207.

²⁹S.T. I, Q.87, A.1, p.425.

³⁰ibid.

³¹ibid.

³²ibid.

³³ibid.

³⁴S.T. I, Q.87, A.1, p.426.

³⁵ibid.

³⁶Gilson, Elements of Christian Philosophy, p.62.

³⁷ibid.

³⁸ibid.

³⁹S.T. I, Q.87, A.1, p.426.

⁴⁰ibid.

⁴¹ibid.

⁴²S.T. I, Q.87, A.1, p.427.

⁴³ibid.

⁴⁴ibid.

⁴⁵ibid.

⁴⁶ibid.

⁴⁷S.T. I, Q.87, A.1, p.428.

⁴⁸ibid.

⁴⁹ibid.

⁵⁰ibid.

⁵¹see Roderick Chisholm, "On the Observability of the Self" in John Donnelly (ed.) Language, Metaphysics and Death. p.137.

⁵²ibid.

- 53 ibid.
- 54 Chisholm, p.138.
- 55 ibid.
- 56 ibid.
- 57 Chisholm, p.139.
- 58 ibid.
- 59 ibid.
- 60 Chisholm, p.140.
- 61 ibid.
- 62 Chisholm, pp.140-41.
- 63 Chisholm, p.141.
- 64 ibid.
- 65 Chisholm, p.142.
- 66 Chisholm, p.144.
- 67 Chisholm, p.146.
- 68 ibid.
- 69 Chisholm, p.145.

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