

A Commentary on St. Thomas'
Knowledge of Bodies

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Introduction

The intent of this thesis is to present, hopefully with some clarity, the Thomistic psychology which deals with the relationship of the intellect to particulars. The human intellect is our main concern. We will also look at the twelfth question, article #3 to contrast the discussion on intellectual particulars. The problem we find deals with the human intellect in its present state of existence and not in any future condition.¹ We should also mention that St. Thomas did not leave us with any special treatise on psychology in the modern sense of the term. For St. Thomas, the psychological facts were important only insofar as they were pertinent to the metaphysics of human nature. He was aware of the fact that philosophy needs empirical facts for its foundation and as a means of illustration. This awareness is reflected in his method of approach to the problem of mind. Thomas uses both an empirical and a metaphysical viewpoint.²

Knowledge of Bodies

In the first article, St. Thomas replies to the objection that the soul cannot know bodies through the intellect. According to St. Thomas the intellect does have knowledge of bodies and this knowledge is a science. If the intellect cannot know bodies then there cannot be a science of bodies, thus doing away with the science of bodies.³

St. Thomas then reflects on the earlier philosophers who inquired about the nature of things. For instance, they believed all that exists in the world are bodies. They also observed these bodies to be always in a state of flux. From this they concluded that we cannot have certain knowledge of the reality of things. Since things are always in a state of flux one cannot grasp with certainty the reality of a thing because the thing has changed again before our mind can form a judgment on it. St. Thomas uses a quotation from Heraclitus to help make the point: "It is not possible to touch the water of a passing stream twice."⁴

Plato was not overlooked by St. Thomas, for Plato held an opposing viewpoint. He held the universal over the particular, the essential over the contingent, and he believed that the universal essences were the true reality.⁵ In other words, Plato believed that in addition to corporeal things, there exists a category of related beings or genus which are separate from matter and movement and these he called species or ideas. Thus, the sciences and definitions which pertain to the act

of the intellect do not make reference to the sensible bodies, but do make reference to the genus of which there are immaterial and separate beings. Hence, it is Plato's belief that the soul cannot understand material things but only their separated species.⁶ St. Thomas replies that this cannot be true because knowledge of matter and movement, which is proper to natural philosophy, would be excluded from the sciences, and for that matter, excluded from any demonstration through material and moving causes. In addition, there is no reason for us to introduce other beings which are not material substances when we already have in front of us something that is material from which we can begin our inquiry. Now even if we have knowledge of these separate substances, this reasoning would not support our judgments concerning the sensible things.⁷

Man's knowledge begins with sensation. The material world affects our senses. Sensation, on the other hand, is an act of a bodily organ which is suited for receiving the universal form existing in an individual corporeal thing. But man's intellect cannot come to know the intelligible in its pure state. The apprehension of the pure intelligible is above man's powers.⁸

St. Thomas' solution to the problem is that knowledge of the particular is only indirect. He explains:

Our intellect cannot know the singular in material things directly and primarily. The reason of this

is that the principle of singularity in material things is individual matter, whereas our intellect, as we have said above (Ia, 85, 1), understands by abstracting the intelligible species from such matter. Now what is abstracted from individual matter is the universal. Hence our intellect knows directly the universal only. But indirectly, and as it were by a kind of reflexion (*indirecte et per quamdam reflexionem*), it can know the singular, because, as we have said above (Ia, 85, 7), even after abstracting the intelligible species, the intellect, in order to understand, needs to turn to the phantasms in which it understands the species, as is said in *De Anima*, III, 7 (431, b1). Therefore it understands the universal directly through the intelligible species and indirectly the singular represented by the phantasm."⁹

This description of the intellect is saying that the intellect grasps the particular by reflecting back to when the act occurred. In reflecting on this act, the intellect finds that its principle is the intelligible species, which in turn is from the phantasm. The phantasm is always singular and particular, it is the medium by which the intellect is in touch and has continuity with sense knowledge. This is also how the intellect is in touch with its object. The senses have the direct knowledge of the singular while the intellect knows

the singular indirectly, by turning back to the phantasm.¹⁰

It is certain that "to have" and "to grasp" are terms taken from the exercise of our corporeal powers. At first glance it seems that in applying these terms to intellectual activity would be to discard their real meaning. "Yet if action implies the passage of influence from one being to another, then it follows that such action will be all the more perfect according as it reaches the other being more fully, that is, in the being's reality and intimacy and unity, and the more imperfect according as it leaves the more of that being untouched by its influence (*Eius et unum convertuntur*)."¹¹ The material action is very abstract and because of this it is impotent and restricted. Take for example a stone-breaker smashing stones, a dog knocking over a flower pot, a horse trampling down the grass beneath it. But these actions reach reality in only an abstract sense. They do not encroach nor penetrate it, and neither do they conquer it whole and entire. In other words, all man is able to do by material activity is to transform some of the qualities of the object. He does not get in touch with the object's real depths.

The proper object of the human intellect is quiddity; that is, nature existing in a particular corporeal matter. Thus it is not ours to know the idea of stone, but the nature of such and such a determined stone. This nature is the result of the union between a form and its proper matter. In other

words, it is easy to discern in the objects of human knowledge a universal and intelligible element which is associated with a particular and material element. The proper operation of the agent intellect is to dissociate these two elements in order to to furnish the possible intellect with the intelligible and universal which lay implied in the sensible. This operation is abstraction.¹²

St. Thomas speaks of three kinds of essential contents and three stages of abstraction. First of all, the intellect abstracts the species of natural things from the sensible individual matter, not from sensible matter in general. The intellect abstracts the species of man from this flesh and these bones and not from flesh and bones in general. Next, the intellect comprehends mathematical essences by abstracting from all sensible matter, both individual and in general. It is also able to abstract from intelligible matter, but only if it is individual and not intelligible matter in general. In this case the intelligible matter is a substance inasmuch as it underlies quantity. The intellect is able to lift the absolute nature of quantity from the sensible matter, then comprehend it as a universal concept in its essential elements and laws of being. The third and highest form of abstraction is metaphysical abstraction, in which case the intellect leaves behind intelligible matter in general and forms concepts such as being, unity, act, etc., which achieve actualization

without any matter in the region of immaterial substances.¹³

The term "abstraction", we might add, does not take anything away from the material object. The nature which is abstracted is an attribute of the object. "Abstraction is a purely mental process."¹⁴ Again, this process does not take the least bit away from the object. The physical nature of our awareness of the object remains intact. The change occurs in the nature of our awareness of the object. Very simply, abstraction is the representation of the essence of and object in the intellect.

We know that objects of the intellect are apprehended in sense data. But how is the concept derived from the sense data? How can we bridge the gap between sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge? The answer is through the process of abstraction. This again is a mental process by which the intellect "conceives" what the senses "perceive". So, abstraction is the act of the intellect whereby the intellect is able to abstract from an object what is essential while ignoring the rest. The result of this abstractive process is the idea or concept which represents in the abstract the essence of the object. The concept is universal and abstract because it is capable of being realized in an indefinite number of objects.¹⁵

According to St. Thomas the intellect obviously has knowledge of particulars. This is plainly the case, since making judgments is an achievement of the intellect. Included in these judgements there are some whose subject is a particu-

lar and whose predicate is a universal. An example of this would be: "Socrates is a man". Also, the mere recognition of a thing as, this one, suggests an intellectual knowledge of the thing. There is a cooperation of the intellect with the particular. The moment I give a thing a name, by calling it a car, a monkey, I link a universal concept with the sensual evidence of a thing.¹⁶

There are other facts to be considered. That is, all action ultimately concerns particular material things and situations. Our behavior is in accord with our principles and decision of our will. The will is an intellectual faculty. Moreover the fact is that the intellect knows the sensory faculties which are themselves material. In addition to this the intellect knows that the universal applies to the material particulars. The intellect also knows from what kind of particulars the universal has been abstracted. This knowledge occurs by means of the phantasm. The intellect must return to the phantasm in order to understand the concepts it has found. For example, when a general notion is in mind and we wish to convey this notion we must turn to the phantasm. The only way for this to occur is if the intellect knows the phantasm it needs or else the intellect could not produce the correct phantasm.¹⁷

What is a phantasm? What does it do? The phantasm is an image of a particular thing. It might be more accurate to say that a phantasm is an image of a particular thing, impressed or preserved in corporeal organs. We are in the realm of the

sensible, both from the point of view of the object and the subject. Our senses are stimulated to perception because objects are visible, tangible, etc., and each of the senses has its own group of qualities which separates one from the other. "Colors, for example, have the same mode of existence whether in the matter of an individual body or in the visual power of the sensitive soul. In both cases they subsist in a determined material subject."¹⁸ Colors by their nature are able to impress their likeness in the organ of sight. It is this same reason that the sensible, as well as the phantasm, will never penetrate into the intellect.

St. Thomas observed that in sensible things, the sensible form can be in one thing one way and in another thing another way. Whiteness, for example, can vary in intensity from a greater to a lesser degree, from one thing to the next. For instance, the whiteness of this page varies to a greater or lesser degree of intensity from the whiteness of a white Ford Mustang. We can also find whiteness with sweetness, such as white chocolate in one thing, or something without sweetness such as this piece of paper. In a similar fashion the sensible form is in one way in the thing which is external to the soul, and in another way in the senses which receive the forms of the sensible things without receiving matter. The color gold, for example, is received without receiving gold. The intellect in accord with its own mode receives under conditions of immateriality and immobility the species of material and moveable bodies. What is received is in the receiver according

to the mode of the receiver. It follows, therefore, that the soul knows bodies by the intellect through knowledge which is immaterial, universal, and necessary.¹⁹

In other words, when I know a car, I am that car or I become that car. This means that there is in me a conformity to that object. We are also able to say that there is in me a likeness of the object but in so far as it perfects the idea of image.²⁰ We know of course that the car physically is not in me, rather, I receive the form of the car in my sense of sight. There is a cooperation in form between the phantasm and the object. The phantasm is the same kind of form which is in the object. Thus the form of the object is united to the object. The form in the sense, however, is a reproduction which is not united with the material object.²¹ Thomas mentions three things required for knowledge: "an active power in the knower by which he judges about things, a thing known and the union of both."²² These three things are at the core of St. Thomas' theory of knowledge. This is important to note because in this paper we are considering the relationship between the intellect and the object of knowledge. This relationship, we find, is very complicated.

This brings us to St. Thomas' reply to the first objection. The objection first of all is that the soul cannot know bodies through the intellect. "For Augustine says that bodies cannot be understood by the intellect, nor indeed anything corporeal unless it can be perceived by the senses."²³ St. Thomas says that the words of Augustine refer to the medium of intellectual

knowledge and not to its objects. The intellect knows bodies by understanding them not through the bodies, nor through material and corporeal likenesses ~~but~~ through immaterial and intelligible species which can be in the soul by their own essence.

The important thing to consider is that the abstract concept is not the object of cognition but the means of cognition. If the concept or modification of the intellect were itself the object of knowledge, then it would follow that our knowledge would be a knowledge of ideas and not of things existing external to the soul.²⁴ The idea being that in understanding the meaning of a particular, or in making a judgment about it, the intellect somehow has to "contain" this particular. The cause of this mistaken notion may be due to the illusion created by the grammatical form in which expresses the operation of the intellect. This may come about because the name of the particular has to be employed in the sentence. The sentence expresses an intellectual operation:

Thus the common opinion that the particular is in

the intellect in the same manner as it is in the senses. The intellect knows that there are particulars. It knows too that it has ultimately derived all its contents from without. It suffers, as Rabeau expresses it, a shock from the phantasm. It undergoes another shock when encountering any image. This does not mean that the process of

abstraction has to be repeated every time an image presents itself . . . Sometimes a kind of renewal of the abstractive process takes place, when we encounter an object which we recognize as known without being able to place it. Recognition, however, usually does not consist in a comparison of a new impression with an image; it rather consists in the awareness that the new object--the same applies to objects of the intellect--fits into some already existing frame or constellation.²⁵

The property, which is of the particular things apprehended by the mind and also of the mind's own faculties by which this apprehension is achieved is materiality. The one particular material thing of which reason is fully aware of is the human body. The mind knows that it is united to matter, in this particular body. The body is not only matter, but it is matter informed by the soul. Our intellect has to be aware of the body as well as the sensory faculties which depends on this body, else we would not know at any time that a given sense impression is ours, nor would we know to actuate an act of will in the volitional faculty. The problem with the intellectual knowledge of particulars begins not only with the awareness of bodies outside of us but it also begins with the knowledge of ourselves.²⁶

Aquinas himself refers us, especially in regard to the operation of the will, to the *vis cogitativa*.

However close this internal sense may be to the intellect, it can never become a real mean because There is no mean imaginable between the materiality and immateriality.²⁷

A thing is either material or immaterial. There are not any transitions from the one to the other. This gap cannot be bridged by referring to some "spiritualization" of the image. This is only stating the facts and not an explanation of them.²⁸

Now, in reply to objection number two, St. Thomas says that Augustine is not correct in saying that as the sense knows only bodies so the intellect knows only spiritual things, because it would then follow that God and angels would not know bodies. The reason that the intellect cannot understand spiritual things is that the lower power does not extend to those things that are of a higher power. The higher power on the other hand is in a more perfected state or it would not be a higher power. Thus the higher power accomplishes in a more superior fashion what belongs to the lower power.²⁹

Since human knowledge begins with sensation it seems logical to ask these questions: Can we, through our senses, come to know God? Is our knowledge of God strictly intellectual?

At this point I wish to relate question eighty-four to question twelve. Question twelve asks "How is God known by us?" To be more specific we will deal with article three, "Whether the Essence of God Can be Seen With the Bodily Eye".

St. Thomas in his general reply says, that it is impossible for us to see God by the sense of sight, or by any sensible power of the soul. This power of the sense is the act of a corporeal organ, as we discussed earlier. The corporeal organ has a proportioned amount of act. Therefore this sense power of the corporeal organ is limited to corporeal things. God is incorporeal, therefore "He cannot be seen by the sense or the imagination but only by the intellect."³⁰ Our senses are limited to the sensing of material objects only.

In the reply to objection number one of question twelve, article three, St. Thomas says that after the body is resurrected the corporeal eye sees God. Thus, it is the mind's eye which sees God and not the corporeal eye. In the second reply St. Thomas uses Augustine's word which preceded the remarks made in objection number two which helps to make his point. It is evident that the glorified eyes will see God in much the same way as it sees the life of another here on earth, but we cannot see life in itself as something clearly visible to the bodily eye. But we can see it as an accidental object of the sense, which is not known by sense alone, but together with sense and some other cognitive power. For the intellect to see God instantly on sight is caused from the keenness of the intellect and from the shining of the divine glory infused into the body after its renovation.³¹

Now, in reply to objection number three, St. Thomas says the essence of God is not seen in a vision of the imagination, but that the imagination receives a form representing

God in accord to some mode of likeness. As in scripture things are described metaphorically through sensible things.³²

Our sensitive power is the lowest form of knowledge in the universal order.³³ But the highest sensitive powers of the soul brings us to the threshold of our intellectual activity.³⁴ In our present state we draw our ideas from sensible knowledge. Starting with the sensible knowledge it is not possible for us to know the pure being of God. But we do need the sensible knowledge to have positive knowledge of God. The sensibles are the effects of God. We know Him indirectly as their cause.³⁵ Sense knowledge, however, is not the entire cause of intellectual knowledge. Thus our intellectual knowledge is extended beyond sensitive knowledge.³⁶

Finally in question eighty-four, article one, St. Thomas says that we can have an immoveable science of moveable things, because every movement presupposes something immoveable. When a qualitative change takes place the substance is left unmoved. And even when there is a change of substantial form, matter is left unmoved. Things that change have an immoveable state. Take for example, Socrates, though he is not always sitting, but when he does sit it is an immoveable truth that he remains in one place.³⁷

In beginning to pull things together, we can say that the human being perceives particular material objects by its senses. The object of sense is a sensible particular. The intellect comes to know by abstracting the intelligible species or universal from the particularized matter. In this case the

intellect can only have knowledge of universals. However, the intellect exercises its activity of knowing only through a turning of attention to the phantasms or images in which it apprehends the universal, and in this way the intellect has an indirect knowledge of the particular things which are represented by the images. Hence, our sense perception of Socrates allows the mind to abstract the universal man. The important thing to consider is that the abstract idea is a means of knowledge or an instrument of knowledge to the intellect, but only insofar as the universal(man) refers to Socrates.³⁸

This is not to say that the intellect does not have knowledge of corporeal particulars. Rather, the mind has only an indirect knowledge of particulars. The direct object of knowledge is the universal. In stressing the point here, the particular corporeal object is excluded from being the direct object of the intellect's cognitive power and not because it is material. The mind knows only by abstracting from this or that matter.³⁹

We ask now, why is there a need for a phantasm? When the intellect is a spiritual power, St. Thomas argues in question eighty-four, article 7, that in its present state the human intellect must have phantasms to understand something about beings. In the general reply he says that since the soul is united to a corruptible body, it is impossible for the intellect to understand something actual without turning to a phantasm. There are two things he points out as indicators. First, by reason of the proper object of the intellect which as

we mentioned earlier is the "quiddity" of a particular corporeal body. Secondly, the intellect requires the phantasm by reason of the nature of the intellect in its present state coming from the substantial union of the soul and body.⁴⁰

The reason for this is that the power of knowledge is proportioned to what is known. Thus the proper object of the angelic intellect, which is without a body, is an intelligible substance without a body. From this we can know that all knowledge consists in the union of the knower with the thing known according to the nature of the knower. The human intellect, by its very nature, exists in some individual which is not separate from corporeal matter. For instance, it belongs to the nature of a tree to be in an individual tree, and to the nature of a dog to be in an individual dog and so on. Hence, we cannot know the nature of a tree or any material object completely and truly, except in as much as it is known as existing in the individual. It is through the sense and the imagination that we apprehend the individual. Thus if the intellect is to understand the individual actually, it has to turn by necessity to the phantasm. Now, if the proper object of our intellect were a separate form, it would not be necessary for the intellect to turn to the phantasm. The intellect would understand without the phantasm.⁴¹

In the things that we come to know with our senses the essential differences cannot be known. We view them in light of their accidental differences which are rooted in their essences, in much the same way as the cause may be determined

from the effect. "With respect to the abstraction of metaphysical and mathematical essences, the theory stands on surer ground."⁴² St. Thomas continues talking about limitations and emphasizes the human limitation by saying that up to his time no philosopher had known the essence of a fly.

All knowledge reaches its completion in relationships of the knower to the object. The foundation of this relation is the comprehension of the essence, and the comparison is represented in the judgment. What about certainty? St. Thomas says that "truth is attained by the reflection of our thoughts on themselves and by the knowledge that our intellectual faculty has an essential tending toward the external object."⁴³ If in the act of intelligence there is no indication that we can certainly attain to truth, then the evidence of things is impossible.

As we have seen, knowledge is always a knower knowing something. It is necessary that the knower and the object or the thing known merge in one reality. This merger occurs in sensation. "The sense, before the act of sensation, is a power or a potency to perceive some object, and the object is a potency to be perceived."⁴⁴ Now, in the act of sensation the two potencies are actualized in one and the same actuality. "The sense, actualized and determined by the form of the thing sensed becomes that thing, in so far as the thing is sensed."⁴⁵

Finally, what we have attempted to do here is by no means an exhaustive study of how the human intellect comes

to know things. But rather this has been an attempt to lay the facts out, to see how St. Thomas deals with this question. We find that he believed our senses come in contact or grasp "external sensible determinations of substances, e.g., their color, odor, sound, and taste." The accidental forms are received by the senses but do not receive the substances themselves. The forms are in some way separated from the substances and then reunited again in cognition by the senses. Then, the imagination, with the aid of other internal senses, forms a phantasm of the object. The phantasm is the mental image from which the intellect abstracts its universal idea of the thing perceived;

The man's active power of sense, through its determination by the spiritual immutatio or impressed form of the object, becomes the object perceived, and expresses itself, thereby, expressing the object, in a phantasm.⁴⁵

Notes

¹ Anton C. Pegis(Editor), Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas (New York: Random House, Incorporated, 1948), p. 376.

² Rudolph allers, "Intellectual Cognition", Essays in Thomism, ed. Robert E. Brennan, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942), p. 41.

³ Pegis, p. 377.

⁴ Ibid, p. 377.

⁵ Hans Meyer, The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, Trans. Frederick Eckhoff (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1946), p. 326.

⁶ Pegis, p. 378.

⁷ Ibid, p. 378.

⁸ Etienne Gilson, The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 217

⁹ H. D. Gardeil, Introduction to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1956), p. 167.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 168.

¹¹ Pierre Rousselot, The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1935), p. 25.

¹² Gilson, p. 218.

¹³ Meyer, pp.228-229.

¹⁴ Joseph Barron, Elements of Epistemology (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), p. 90.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 89-90.

¹⁶ Rudolf Allers, "The Intellectual Cognition of Particulars", The Thomists, ed. The Dominican Fathers (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1941) pp. 96-97.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 97.

¹⁸ Gilson, pp.217-218.

- 19 Pegis, p. 379.
- 20 Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans. The Summa Theologica (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1974), p. 477.
- 21 Pegis, p. 382.
- 22 Robert W. Mulligan, Truth: St. Thomas Aquinas (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), p. 54.
- 23 Pegis, p. 379.
- 24 Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy (New York: Image Books, 1962), p. 111.
- 25 Allers, pp. 159-160.
- 26 Ibid, p. 153.
- 27 Ibid, pp. 153.
- 28 Ibid, p. 153.
- 29 Pegis, p. 379.
- 30 Ibid, pp. 75-76.
- 31 Ibid, p. 76.
- 32 Ibid, p. 76.
- 33 Etienne Gilson, The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1937), p. 226.
- 34 Ibid, p. 231.
- 35 Gilson, p. 103.
- 36 Pegis, p. 395.
- 37 Ibid, p. 395.
- 38 Ibid, p. 396.
- 39 Ibid, p. 396.
- 40 Ibid, p. 397.
- 41 Ibid, pp. 397-398.
- 42 Meyer, p. 333.

⁴³ Ibid, p.3334.

⁴⁴ Brother Benigus, Nature Knowledge and God (New York: Bruce Publishing Co., 1949), p. 228.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 228.

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