

much else.(English myths, funnily enough.) In a dozen other ways it would be easy to list, belonging to the European Union is exposing the fragility of the United Kingdom. To have our beef rejected by the Continent may, or may not, show how unreasonable these foreigners are. But such a paranoid response might itself only show how deeply confused the very idea of being British now is. The mad cows have ripped through one more cherished myth.

F.K.

## Aquinas's Model of Mind

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### The Weakness of the Human Mind

One of the most interesting features in Aquinas's theory of mind relates to his view that the human intellect is inferior to that of an angel. St. Thomas gives the impression that if only our minds could act in the same way as those of the angels, many of our noetic difficulties would disappear. The weakness of the human mind is due, he believes, to the discursive process of human cognition which results from the application of our understanding to the potentially intelligible data that is acquired from the senses. Aquinas quite frequently deplores this mental condition, claiming that it represents a form of intellectual weakness (e.g. *S.T.* I.58.3). The result of such a discursive process is that the human mind struggles to understand by means of lengthy and arduous mental efforts (*S.T.* I.89.1). By comparison, the intuitive grasp of the angelic mind is swift and immediate, capable of directly obtaining knowledge of first principles (*S.T.* I.58.3). Aquinas perceives the latter ability as a sign that angels are truly intellectual beings in a way that humans are not and he reserves for us the term rational (*rationales vocantur*) as a way of describing our slower intellectual ability. In such a context, rationality obviously does not constitute a positive description but rather denotes a form of mental weakness (*ex debilitate intellectualis*). The latter, according to *S.T.* I.58.3, is quite clearly the

215

result of our present mode of mental discursiveness in which the intellect proceeds gradually towards the knowledge of truth. Indeed, such is Aquinas's pessimism at times as regards the possibility of humanly attaining truth that he seems to suggest that we have little chance of arriving at it, especially in the area of theological truth.<sup>1</sup>

In general, it would seem from his writings on the subject that Aquinas holds that the ideal mental state is one which excludes a discursive approach but is instead characterised by the kind of intuitive non-sensory based understanding possessed by the angelic intellect. This view is expressed in the following passage:

But, if from the beginning of a known principle they were straightway to perceive as known all its consequent conclusions, then there would be no discursive process at all. Such is the condition of the angels, because in the truths which they know naturally, they at once behold all things whatsoever that can be known in them. (*S.T.* I.58.3)

It is at this point that Aquinas proceeds to define the angelic mind as being truly intellectual on the grounds that intellect implies the habit of first principles.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Aquinas deplores the discursive acquisition of knowledge which characterises our weaker human minds:

For if they possessed the fulness of light, like the angels, then in the first aspect of principles they would at once comprehend their whole range, by perceiving whatever could be reasoned out from them. (*S.T.* I.58.3)

One might wonder in passing just what is the point of knowing all the implications of any given proposition. However, in the extract quoted above, it clearly constitutes a significant feature of intellectual superiority. What is evident from this and other Thomistic texts is a model of mind which is intuitive rather than discursive, angelic rather than human.<sup>3</sup> One might legitimately ask why the human mind was divinely created as an inferior intellect and indeed Aquinas himself explicitly confronts this question in *S.T.* I.89.1. His answer is that the nature of the human mind is such that it must intellectually depend on the senses since otherwise it would find it extremely difficult to function naturally at all. He illustrates this claim by suggesting that it is like the case of someone who is slow to understand and who needs many examples in order to grasp the point at issue compared with another of swifter intellect who needs less data from which to arrive at truth. The angelic mind is an example of the latter, he suggests, whereas we are

216

cognitively more retarded 'like uneducated men that have to be taught by sensible examples' (*S.T.* I.89.1). It is only in the beatific vision after death, according to St. Thomas, when the human mind is divinely enlightened in a way that wholly excludes any sensory input (and interference), that it operates at its best. This occurs in its engagement with the most sublime of all intelligible data, the divine nature itself \*. The difficulty is that this encounter is, by definition, supernatural in character which still leaves us with the question of why the human mind was divinely constituted so as to be intellectually weak.

Aquinas also attempts to deal with this issue in *S.T.* I.94.3 where he discusses how much human beings could have known prior to original sin. He concludes that:

the first man was established by God in such a manner so as to have knowledge of all those things for which man has a natural aptitude. (*S.T.* I.94.3)

This kind of primordial knowledge, Thomas suggests, virtually contained the first self-evident principles that relate to whatever the human being is naturally capable of knowing. However, he also remarks that it was necessary to have access to a form of supernatural knowledge in order to direct one's own life and the life of others which, from an ontological point of view, teleologically tend towards the supernatural end that culminates in the vision of God. Aquinas concludes that the noetic state of humankind prior to original sin implied 'knowledge of these supernatural truths as was necessary for the direction of human life in that state.' (*S.T.* I.94.3). He elaborates on this in his reply to the first objection where he asserts that this latter form of knowledge can only occur by means of the divinely infused *species*.

What all this seems to mean is that in the primordial state of innocence as conceived by Aquinas, the human mind fully possessed a comprehensive grasp of what is naturally knowable. However, it was still incapable of naturally attaining to the vision of God's essence which is definitively supernatural in character. What is not quite clear, however, is whether or not the senses were involved in the natural knowledge of first principles of what was naturally knowable in the primordial state. There is the suggestion, though, that human experience contributed to the advancement of natural knowledge in this state:

not in the number of things known, but in the manner of knowing: because what was known speculatively would subsequently have (been) known by sense experience. (*S.T.* I.94.3)

It is possible to argue therefore that the Thomistic conception of the flawed human mind which is intellectually weak is a consequence of the belief in original sin. This being said, however, Aquinas's model of mind as intuitive and non-discursive still seems to constitute his overall criterion for what the finite intellect should ideally be despite all that he writes in positive support of the notion of a natural interdependence of mind and senses in human cognition.

### **Aquinas's Difficulty**

One of the most remarkable texts which indicate Aquinas's difficulties on this whole issue is to be found in *S.T.* I.89.1 earlier mentioned. The specific issue addressed here is whether the human mind can understand anything after death in the absence of the senses and the body since this would exclude the possibility of any potentially intelligible sense data being made available to the intellect. One intriguing feature of this text lies in its challenge to Aquinas's own use of an Aristotelian-based interpretation of human knowledge. It is clear that Thomas is very aware of this throughout the whole article. Indeed, we find him torn between the need to justify human cognition as a sensory-based process while also admitting that Platonism would offer a better way forward by providing a solution to the question of non-sensory knowledge were we to dispense with the need for a substantial union between soul and body.

The whole approach of Aquinas in *S.T.* I.89.1 is quite intriguing and baffling. Instead of presenting us with an account of how the human mind could ever function intelligently after death, which one would naturally expect from the question posed at the outset of the article (i.e. whether the separated soul can understand anything?), Thomas devotes nearly all of the text to a defence of the Aristotelian position that it is proper for the human mind to function in conjunction with the senses. It is only in the last sentence of the body of the article that he states almost casually that 'it is possible for (the soul) to exist apart from the body, and also to understand in another way.' There is another brief reference to this claim in the reply to the third objection when he says that the human mind is, at that stage, divinely enlightened in a way similar to the angelic intelligences so that it can function in a non sensory mode of cognition.

From the point of view of Aquinas's model of mind, the interest in this text lies chiefly in the continuing comparison which St. Thomas makes throughout between the human mind and its angelic counterpart. There is a distinct tone of regret on the part of Aquinas at being unable to accept a Platonic interpretation of how the human mind can know without the senses and body being present. However, he admits that

such a position would imply an accidental rather than substantial relationship between soul and body<sup>5</sup>:

the difficulty (of knowledge in the absence of sensory images) would vanish; for in that case when the body was once removed, the soul would at once return to its own nature, and would understand intelligible things simply, without turning to the phantasms (or sensory images), as is exemplified in the case of other separate substances (i.e. angelic beings).

This passage is strongly evocative of Plato's own description of what happens when the soul is released by death from the body (e.g. in *Phaedo* 79D). If such were the case, suggests Aquinas, and the soul did not require any sensory images or phantasmata for cognition, it would then behave intelligently like the angelic mind. The argument against this, he acknowledges, is that, as a consequence, one would have to concede that the unity of soul and body is not for the soul's good, a proposition which Thomas will not entertain, at least at this stage in the argument. But, in that event, Aquinas concludes, it is difficult to see how the human mind obtains knowledge after death.

He tries to resolve this difficulty by claiming that the human soul can function noetically both in conjunction with and in the absence of the senses. I have argued elsewhere that this concept of the soul and mind is undoubtedly derived from Aquinas's Neoplatonic sources, notably from Proclus.<sup>6</sup> What is obvious in all of this is Aquinas's preference for mental activity without the senses becoming involved and the superior form of knowledge that occurs as a result. This is encapsulated in *S.T.* I.89.1 in the form of a very explicit recognition by Aquinas that the angelic intellect constitutes his model of mind. It is true, he states, that 'it is nobler in itself to understand by turning to something higher than to understand by turning to the phantasms (or sensory images)'. He then proceeds to situate his model in a framework which is unmistakably linked with the tradition of Platonism:

... every intellectual substance possesses intellective power by the influence of the Divine light, which is one and simple in its first principle, and the further off intellectual creatures are from the first principle so much the more is the light divided and diversified, as is the case with lines radiating from the centre of a circle. (*S.T.* I.89.1)

This means, concludes Aquinas, that while God understands through the divine essence (as divine *species*) and angelic beings obtain knowledge directly from a number of intelligible *species*, the human mind's status as a lower intelligence makes it necessary for it to have

available a greater number of species in order to understand. (These are derived from the potentially intelligible sensory images). Aquinas then employs this analogy, earlier mentioned, to explain the difference between the angelic and human mind:

We can see this to a certain extent in man for those who are of weaker intellect fail to acquire perfect knowledge through the universal conceptions of those who have a better understanding, unless things are explained singly to them and in great detail.

(*S.T.* I.89.1)

He concludes that human souls are like slow learners and are divinely appointed to be joined to bodies so that they can employ the variety of species derived from sense data like the uneducated who can only learn through sensory illustrations. It is this intellectual tardiness, according to Aquinas, that constitutes the reason for the substantial relationship between human soul and body though he concludes, as was said earlier, that it is possible for the soul to exist in the absence of the body and to function intelligently while in this state.

The extraordinary character of the Thomistic argument in *S.T.* I.89.1 (given that St. Thomas sees himself as a Christian Aristotelian) is thus clearly marked by an explicit preference for the angelic model of mind. It is this that results in the obvious tension in the article between an Aristotelian and Platonic view of intellect which is of course accentuated by Aquinas's own Christian need to believe in a mental and personal transcendence of death. All of this necessarily gives rise to the continuing ambivalence in the whole account about the nature and functioning of the human soul and mind which is very well captured in this piece:

The separated soul is, indeed, less perfect considering its nature in which it communicates with the nature of the body : but it has a greater freedom of intelligence. (*S.T.* I.89.2 ad 1)

The retrospective nature of Aquinas's justification for a form of knowledge available to the human mind in the absence of the senses contributes to the peculiar character and awkwardness of the whole discussion as shown in the extract just quoted.

## **The Divine Mind**

The Thomistic model of mind as a non-sensory based intellect reaches its most sublime heights in those parts of Aquinas's writings where he speculates on the nature of God's mind and on what occurs during the

beatific vision. In *S.C.G.* .III.51, we are told that the human mind sees God in the divine essence itself where the latter is both the medium and the object of knowledge. Aquinas agrees that it is difficult to account for how this could occur, given the finite restrictions on what the human mind can accommodate. However, he argues that the beatific vision is the only logical conclusion, in view of the intellect's desire for truth. Since God, as the ultimate truth, must constitute the goal of this desire, it is not inconsistent with God's essence, he says, for the latter to be the intelligible likeness for the mind. However, he is careful to warn that divine transcendence remains a permanent feature of this encounter and invokes the notion of *scientia* to explain how such transcendence is retained.

A complete scientific knowledge of God, according to Aquinas, would require that we understand why and what God is. No mind, other than the mind of God, is ever in a position to acquire such knowledge, he insists, and he illustrates his claim by using a very interesting geometrical example, a variation of which was later used by Descartes in a somewhat related setting.<sup>7</sup> Aquinas states that there are two ways of knowing that a triangle can have three angles equal to two right angles. One is by way of opinion based on probable reasoning where we accept the opinion of others who know that such is the case. A more perfect way, however, is by geometrical knowledge where the geometer understands scientifically the nature of such equivalence. Our knowledge of what God is, claims Aquinas, is similar to the first whereas God's knowledge of the divine nature in relation to why and what it is, is comparable to the second and restricted to God alone. Thus while we know God conclusively in the beatific vision, our theological knowledge is not scientific, according to the Thomistic understanding of *scientia*:

We do not however say that the divine substance is seen yet not comprehended by a created intellect, as though thereof something were seen and not seen; since the divine substance is utterly simple: but because it is not seen by the created intellect as it is visible, even as one who holds a demonstrated conclusion as an opinion is said to know it perfectly, that is scientifically, although there be no part of it that he knows not. (*S.C.G.*III.55)

The point here is that God is not seen nor known by any finite mind, human or angelic, as perfectly as He is capable of being seen and known. The transcendent divine mystery is thus protected and the divine mind still retains its supremacy.

## Conclusion

It seems clear from what has been said that Aquinas's model of mind is a non-sensory intuitive one which, on his account, would appear to devalue the human intellect. The unflattering references to a weaker and inferior human mind and the illustration given in *S.T.* I.89.1 of a slow learner all contribute to this conclusion. One might say, of course, that Aquinas's use of an angelic model of mind is unacceptable today in a climate which by and large is extremely sceptical about the possible existence of angels and would be scornfully dismissive of any claims to the contrary.<sup>8</sup> However, I believe that such criticisms miss the point of the Thomistic position. Ultimately, of course, there is the suggestion in Aquinas's approach that it is the divine mind that constitutes the only model of what mind should be. However, since that is also an impossible criterion by which to measure the finite mind, Aquinas seems to be suggesting that the next best thing for us to aspire to is a mind like that of an angel. This is achievable, if supernaturally, during the process of divine enlightenment which characterises the beatific vision. In the course of this encounter, the senses seem to have become *permanently redundant, put on hold, as it were, for all eternity* (*S.T.* I-II.4.5 & 6.)

The strain that such a theory puts on Aquinas's adherence to Aristotle's teachings on soul and mind is a marked consequence of his position. The limitations of an Aristotelian-based approach to these issues are only transcended when Aquinas uses what is appropriate from the tradition of Platonism. The problem with the latter, of course, lies in its view of the bodily dimension that defines us as human beings, a factor which Platonism finds difficult to take on board. One consequence for the Christian Platonist emerges dramatically, as we might expect, with regard to philosophically interpreting the doctrine of bodily resurrection. Aquinas is also clearly awkward when he comes to consider a role for the body in the beatific vision, as is evident from *S.T.* I-II.4.5 and 6. These latter texts, when examined side by side, suggest that he was not quite sure how to explain the body's function in the beatific experience other than by asserting that it must be present to signify the fully human nature of our ultimate encounter with God. It may well be, as Simon Tugwell has remarked, a Thomistic embarrassment exists about the body's role in beatitude.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever about that, it is clear that there is need for more work to be done on the role of Platonism in Thomistic thought. While some studies have addressed this important aspect of Aquinas's thinking, further work is necessary, if only to expose the existence of Platonism in his work and its consequences for the extent of his loyalty to Aristotle<sup>10</sup>.



Unfortunately, there is still some resistance around to the notion that Aquinas might be anything other than a Christian Aristotelian. While this is partly the legacy of his own perception of himself, it is now time for Thomistic scholars to go beyond that assumption and to make a fresh start by exploring the rich vein of material that constitutes Aquinas's Platonism. In the final analysis, the challenge that St. Thomas presents in this regard is a measure of the extent to which any philosophical attempt, whether Platonic or Aristotelian, is successful in interpreting the Christian view of life. If our conclusion from reading Aquinas is that any such an effort is ultimately doomed to founder, then at least our study will have been worthwhile if only by making us aware of the limitations of philosophy itself.

- 1 See Aquinas's views on this in *Super De Trin.* 3.1, *De Ver.* 14.10, *S.C.G.* I.4, *S.T.* I.1.1 & *S.T.* II-II.2.4. He was very influenced on these issues by Moses Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* Book I, Chs.31–35.
- 2 The Latin text reads: 'Et ideo dicuntur intellectuales; quod etiam apud nos ea, quae statim naturaliter apprehenduntur, intelligi dicuntur. Unde intellectus dicitur habitus primorum principiorum.' *S.T.* I.83.3.
- 3 There are some interesting comparisons that could be made here between Aquinas's model of mind and that of Descartes. See the latter's 4th Discourse and 2nd and 3rd Meditations in Descartes, *Discourse on Method and The Meditations* trans. by F.E. Sutcliffe (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), pp.53-60 and 103–131.
- 4 In this connection, see Chapter 5 of my forthcoming work *Aquinas, Platonism and the Knowledge of God* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996). See also Patrick Quinn, 'Aquinas's Concept of the Body and Out of Body Situations', *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol.24, No.4, October 1993, pp.387–400.
- 5 Though he disagrees here with the notion of an accidental soul-body relationship, Thomas argues later in the text that the soul's nature, which remains the same throughout embodiment and disembodiment, is capable of functioning intelligently in a bodily mode of existence and also in the absence of the body.
- 6 See Chapter 3 in my book, *Aquinas, Platonism and the Knowledge of God*.
- 7 See *S.C.G.* III.55 & *S.T.* I.12.7. See also Descartes, *op. cit.*, p.57.
- 8 It is worth pointing out that the belief in angelic beings was not confined to the Christian tradition. It is also a feature of Jewish and Islamic thought and is found in Plotinus (e.g. *Enn.*III.4) as well as being reflected in the Platonic notion of daimon.
- 9 Simon Tugwell O.P., *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), p. 153.
- 10 Cornelio Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione* (Societa Editrice Internazionale di Torino, 1963); W.J. Hankey, *God in Himself* (Oxford: University Press, 1987); R.J. Henle S.J., *Saint Thomas and Platonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956); Arthur Little S.J., *The Platonic Heritage of Thomism* (Dublin: Golden Eagle Books Ltd., 1949); Patrick Quinn, *Aquinas, Platonism and the Knowledge of God* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996).