

Agent Intellect and Black Zones

This essay addresses arguments regarding the “place” or “non-place” in which ideas originate and whether they are wholly transcendental, wholly contingent, or a combination of transcendental and contingent. Far from a resuscitation or recitation of Medieval scholastic disputations, the essay seeks to situate these untimely concerns in the context of spent discursive and ideological systems that support capitalist exploitation of the knowledge commons, exploitation only made possible because of a decisive and historically determined reduction of knowledge to fully contingent status as spectral commodity.

I. Aristotelianism

And this is the purpose of all of the sciences, that in all of them faith is strengthened, God is honored, character is formed, and consolations are derived consisting in the union of the spouse with her Beloved: a union that takes place through love, to the attainment of which the whole purpose of sacred Scripture, and consequently, every illumination descending from above, is directed – a union without which all knowledge is empty. – St. Bonaventure

To bury spent disciplinary or discursive justifications for knowledge as property and reverse the commodification of the knowledge commons to exploitable and scalable “intellectual property” do we need another Verdun, which Capitalism would appear to be only so happy to supply? Or is it possible to restore the immemorial coordinates of cultural production as formalized in “common law” by turning to the Holy Trinity of conceptual thought proper – that elegant, spare, and wintry tableau that haunts all forms of formative knowledge production? Through T.S. Eliot’s bleak visions, operating in apparent reverse, we might reach across centuries to examine Bonaventure’s reduction of the liberal arts to theology – theology, not religion; and theology as inter-subjective truth, not dogma. This communitarian spirit of intellectual austerities is the transitional state between gray areas (instrumental reason) and black zones (revelation or reverie). If it passes through subjective night, as Jacques Maritain suggests, via negative or apophatic theology, inclusive of negative dialectics (Adorno, 1978), it does so in service to the impersonal agencies of that anterior sky in which stars and constellations (both old and new “constellations of thought”) appear or re-appear out of a proverbial no-where. “La vita nuova,” perhaps – but also a strange diminution in the analogical, for/toward the anagogical. Therefore, the strange, wintry, and wonderful – or, Bonaventure’s “union without which all knowledge is empty.”

The problem of Agent Intellect, as controversy, has never quite gone away – with its origins in Aristotle’s *De anima* and its subsequent elaborations and disputations reaching from the Islamic Aristotelians, Averroes and Avicenna, to St. Thomas Aquinas. The issue of whether Agent Intellect is independent of human agency or transcendent to all intellectual activity suggests that this possible impersonal agency is the ultimate ghost in the machinery of thought. The universalizing tendencies of such a power (or source of power) are exceptionally elastic and, ultimately, indeterminate. If it belongs to mankind, as Avicenna thought, and not to individual subjects per se (not embedded within the intellectual capacities of souls), the penultimate question/issue becomes, What or *where* is such a power? Is this not the very origin of the idea of a knowledge commons? Assimilation to cultural patrimony is quite obviously not the same thing as the assimilation to the circuit of Capital. More critically, *How* is such a power to be accessed? According to Averroes: “The agent intellect is the last of the celestial Intelligences and moves the lunar sphere; the material intellect receives intelligible forms abstracted by the agent intellect. These intellects are not united to individual man by their substances, but only by their activity” (Nejeschleba, 2004, p. 70). Thus, signatures or intelligences (lights) are what matter. Gray areas shade into black zones, and reverie is birthright whereas instrumentalized reason or abject utilitarianism is a prison-house for Spirit.

Notably, Aquinas disputed the Aristotelian views of Averroes and Avicenna (Latin Averroism) and placed Agent Intellect firmly within the bounds of the human soul, differing with other Medieval theologians in the process, yet primarily in terms of the relation between Agent Intellect and Possible Intellect – the latter term connoting mere cognition. Anselm of Canterbury, for example, considered Agent Intellect co-equivalent to angelic intelligences. More importantly, however, is what occurs when one follows the argument backward to the early Franciscan School, prior to Aquinas, when, in effect,

the major schoolmen said “Yes” to utterly contradictory statements concerning what exactly Agent Intellect was once it was operative within human cognition proper. The key figures here are Alexander of Hales and John of La Rochelle, the latter a teacher of Bonaventure. For example:

In John of La Rochelle’s view we can call the agent intellect both God and angel, and part of the soul with respect to different objects of cognition. God is the agent intellect for our knowledge of things higher than the soul, the angel is the agent intellect (in the sense of revelation or instruction) for our knowledge of things on the same level as the soul and, finally, the agent is a light innate in the soul for our knowledge of things that lie within the soul or below it (Nejeschleba, 2004, p. 76).

Thus Bonaventure and many Franciscans to follow maintained a dual vigil for the transcendental and contingent conditions for knowledge, both personal and collective:

The reason for the double-meaning of the agent intellect lies in the Franciscans’ characteristic and well-known attitude towards theology and philosophy. They tried to reconcile principles of Aristotelian philosophy with the Augustinian fundament of theology. With respect to noetics this means that they had to unify the Aristotelian theory of abstraction and the doctrine of the agent intellect, which Aristotle had already compared to light, with the Augustinian theory of illumination and the division of the human intellect into two faces, the higher, which is illuminated from God, and the lower, which is not illuminated (Nejeschleba, 2004, p. 77).

Thus gray areas and black zones, and all of the attendant problems of locating the place and means whereby the Imaginary (Possible Intellect) may be disciplined and/or illumined. Thus the condemned thesis 118 of 1277 proceeds as follows: “That the agent intellect is a separate substance higher than the possible intellect, and that with respect to the substance, potency and operation it is separated from the body, and that it is not a form of human body” (Nejeschleba, 2004, p. 78, with reference to Hissette, 1977, p. 193). This is but one of 219 Averroistic-Thomist theses condemned at Paris after Aquinas’ death in 1274.

Certainly this dual vision of Agent Intellect (both in its disputatious aspects and in the Franciscan doubling or tripling of its agency proper) suggests that the true issue is not whether it subsists as impersonal agency in the natural world (as a cosmological principle, for example) but, instead, whether it inhabits human intellectual activity and the products of the same. For the ambivalence seems less about whether Agent Intellect is outside *of* (or transcendent *to*) all human subjective states, as its other, than whether human agency without Agent Intellect has any merit whatsoever; and, in terms of disciplinarity or the knowledge commons, the question would be as to whether the production of forms of knowledge transcends mere utility and/or supports degraded forms of experience of this larger economy that, on the one hand, *is* cosmological and, on the other hand, *is* transcendental.

In the latter case, all of the various problems of privileging a universal intelligence collide with worldly endeavors that may, indeed, be productive of virtual prison-houses. The latter state would seem to be the path of Capital today as it serves merely its own interests – not the interest of individuals and certainly not the interest of the commons. In the first instance, language is always the First Instance for suspect motives and/or ideological sleights of hand; for, false claims to transcendental categories via Reason do, indeed, produce monsters. Such is the source of ideology – market ideology or otherwise. In the former case, when Agent Intellect is cosmological, the multiple disciplines of natural science and philosophy (or natural philosophy) take on exceptional importance to the critique of disciplines and forms of knowledge production that purportedly rely on this vision of universal, non-ideological intelligence. In both cases, there are as many problems as possible virtues, insofar as, since the divorce of theology and natural science, the orphaned middle ground has most often been moral philosophy and ethics. One very obvious analogue for the potential fusion of these discordant worldviews is to incorporate the intelligence embedded in natural systems directly and without mediation into human systems, which need not to be at odds with that larger universal economy (a semi-divine economy). Yet the inordinate nightmare of entropy follows upon every attempt to build synthetic systems that absorb and/or privilege natural systems alone, and the technocratic bias of contemporary culture betrays, repeatedly, any accord between competing visions, provoking the endless recourse to Apocalypse.

II. Franciscanism

The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also that he had tried several times to link it to

other images, but it never worked. He wrote me: one day I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader; if they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black. – Chris Marker

This Medieval debate is interesting *today* if only because *then* the problem was the differing worldviews of the Augustinians and the Thomists – with the Augustinians and Franciscans privileging black zones, and the Thomists privileging gray areas. In terms of historical merit, the debate has lasted well into the first quarter of the twenty-first century primarily because there was no unitary, Medieval “scholastic” worldview (as there is no unitary Modern worldview), despite attempts to claim such – and the debates at the University of Paris Faculty of Arts in the thirteenth century concerned not so much the production of canon or dogma but the relationship of philosophy to theology (notwithstanding the various attempts by the authorities to shut down debate, plus warnings to theologians not to become philosophers). Indeed, it would seem that the chief argument between Bonaventure and Aquinas had to do with whether these two forms of knowledge (what we would today call disciplines) are different, and whether they *should* be different. Aquinas seems to have solidified the separation, perhaps unwittingly, while the Augustinians and the Franciscans were arguing for the preservation of philosophy (and metaphysics) *as* theology – and a proper study of whether this truly meant philosophy *as* subordinate to theology, or not, would resolve many of the petty arguments that persist in terms of what constitutes knowledge and what constitutes mere instrumental reason. Subsequent skirmishes generally further developed the schism, while around 1900 the argument returned in terms of the historiography of the Medieval world system and the various forms of high scholasticism that dealt with the issue of the created (eternal) world, best described as the focus of the sciences, and the uncreated (ideal) world, the realm of ideas and the source for knowledge *per se*, inclusive of all of the associated questions and non-answers attributed to not-knowledge, or revelation, always more or less left unaddressed due to the failure of language to properly reflect what was, after all, subjective, inter-subjective, and onto-subjective, pre-conscious experience. (Regarding the pre-conscious self, see Maritain, 1954.)

If Bonaventure and the Franciscans could say “Yes” (or “All of the Above”) to whether Agent Intellect “subsides” within human cognition, outside of it (in angelic beings, in the cosmos, etc.), or with a transcendent (absent) God, it is more than apparent that they were attempting to preserve the sacred province of affective thought as such – or thought undivided (precluding the production of two contradictory, and historically antithetical realms). “Hence, according to [Étienne] Gilson, the philosophy of Aristotle compelled the thirteenth-century theologians to reexamine the proper relation of natural reason to Christian revelation; as a consequence, the great scholastic systems were born” (Quinn, 1973, p. 23). Nevertheless, Gilson’s most controversial conclusions may be said to revolve around his quarantine of Bonaventure and his claims that the Franciscan harbored an irresolvable antipathy to Aristotelianism. According to Gilson, Bonaventure evaluated Aristotelian philosophy as “one who has understood it, seen through it, and passed beyond it” (Gilson, 1924, paraphrased by Quinn, 1973, p. 24). By 1270 the verdict was in. Bonaventure refused Thomism and Aquinas committed himself to the elaboration of an autonomous philosophy, one according to Bonaventure that exposed him to inevitable error. That Aquinas would dramatically stop writing altogether on December 6, 1273 suggests that Bonaventure was, after all, right.

Several differences of opinion between Bonaventure and Aquinas in the controversy concerning Agent Intellect are instructive in terms of the critique underway here of knowledge production and the biases given most especially to singular disciplines that rely on so-called objective knowledge (or natural reason), converting everything in the process to spectral commodity. For, as it has been said, in times of crisis Augustine almost always makes a re-appearance.

Thus, the Augustinianism of Bonaventure (and the term *Augustinianism* was only coined during the controversies of the thirteenth century) is the key. According to Gilson, Bonaventure was safeguarding certain traditional, patristic principles against creeping Aristotelianism. The main issue was what might be called the cosmological worldview that almost always signals the Medieval mindset anyway. The Agent Intellect controversy was part and parcel of a larger set of disagreements that only were resolved by the separation of Philosophy and Theology. “By founding his doctrine on the self-consciousness of the soul, Bonaventure clung to the Augustinian tradition while grounding his Christian philosophy in the experience of his interior life” (Gilson, 1924, paraphrased by Quinn, 1973, p. 25). The struggle between Bonaventure and Aquinas (and they were, after all, colleagues) was quite simply about what constitutes the highest form of knowing anything. While they both reverted to revelation, they also did

so in different ways. “Bonaventure, Gilson stated, did not formulate his theology according to the norms of Aristotelean science. Following rather the Augustinian tradition, he recorded his personal experience of the Christian life without expressing it in an objective, or scientific, manner. . . . Bonaventure modelled his theology after the ideal of Augustinian wisdom; so he developed a theological wisdom which was inseparable from his own experience” (Quinn, 1973, p. 41).

Accordingly, Bonaventure’s and Aquinas’ worlds collide in the manner in which the outer, objective world and the inner, subjective world are dealt with. The role of intellect is central – Augustinians reserved knowledge (truth) for the internal tableau of direct illumination from the divine, not Aristotelian abstraction as such, nor an operation of the intellect. Here Pascal’s two infinities come into view. Bonaventure resisted permitting illumination (revelation) to be a guarantor of natural reason (Aristotelian abstraction); and, again, it required a certain acceptance of paradoxes, or the rejection of attempting to rationalize or reconcile discordant principles that effectively underscored that knowledge is not unitary (see Quinn, 1973, p. 39). As a result, “to solve some problems in the natural order, [Bonaventure’s] philosophy relied on a supernatural principle” (Quinn, 1973, p. 39). One exceptional example is the concept of the necessity of grace for all creatures to merely exist. In the case of animals, Bonaventure simply resorted to Augustine’s doctrine of seminal principles. In the case of humans, Bonaventure kicked the entire question upstream, placing infallibility out of reach of contingent intellect. Far from hedging his bets, in the case of the status of human existence, Bonaventure simply jettisoned the need to rationalize what was, in effect, a transcendental category of experience (Being as such). But he again turned to Augustine for support, this time utilizing the well-known metaphor of the double mirror that permits divine illumination to reach contingent intellect, if the latter is turned in the direction of the divine. This judgment of cognition as black mirror, a type of internal Claude Glass, is the very image of black zones (and revelation as path to knowledge). The path taken by Aquinas and Duns Scotus was the path not taken by Bonaventure. “Bonaventure withheld from the human intellect a power which would be sufficient for knowing truth with certitude” (Gilson, 1924, paraphrased by Quinn, 1973, p. 40). According to Gilson, Bonaventure was safeguarding a particular worldview (an interior vista) “to protect a Christian understanding of creation, divine providence, illumination and moral guidance” (Gilson, 1924, paraphrased by Quinn, 1973, p. 41).

The Neo-platonism is palpable, and an intermediary world of *semi*-divine ideas seems to be the key nonetheless. If both Bonaventure and Aquinas more or less grappled with Aristotle’s natural philosophy in different ways, and if each retained that which Aristotle rejected (the Platonic theory of divine ideas), the matter then returns (and rests) in where and how ideas are accessed; the result is a battleground between immutable, universal truths and contingent knowledge (or the mere administration of things). It might be argued that the historically determined triumph of the administrative intellect sponsored the emergence of capitalism.

It is possible, then, to see the entire scholastic operation sliding downhill and the mere description and administration (manipulation) of things and people becoming the entire point. The great scandals coming, of course, were named Giordano Bruno, Galileo, and Copernicus, plus Savonarola. (Regarding this period, see Hallyn, 1990.) Furthermore, it is possible to detect in the shadows the instantiation of new models of power and control, with the ascendance of Thomism unnecessarily burdened with the incipient power struggles within the Church between secular and sacred concerns. Thomism could be seen in such a light as a threshold crossed historically, never to be re-crossed other than personally (or existentially) – a metaphysical Rubicon. Augustinianism (as the antithesis), in turn, shelters a certain generous latitude within thought that privileges immemorial reserves within subjectivity (almost always the enemy and victim of power). The return (and/or the suppression) of the singular subject is, in this way, a constant theme in the symphonic histories of knowledge production and humanist disciplines. And the singular subject or, in modern terms, “citizen” is the foundation of both polis and commons. It is for this reason that the approach of Capital, or for that matter any exploitative ideology, to the gates of subjectivity is utterly frightening (Harris, 2017).

It is ideational Franciscanism that merits a closer look today for traces of an alternative. And it is the “right to have no rights” that merits utmost scrutiny – a coinage credited to Hugh of Digne concerning the early Franciscan refusal of property and an elective embrace of Holy Poverty (Agamben, 2013). This highly principled embrace of Christian virtue defined subsequent anarcho-Christian forms of self-government and is not entirely inconsistent with anarcho-socialist agendas. That a schism between the Conventuals and the Spirituals centered on ownership of property (as the Franciscan order began to receive major gifts from generous patrons) only further underscores the significance of the renunciation

of worldly rights for higher rights – the latter generally reducible to the right to live where and as one wishes. The chief merit of this renunciation of rights is, notably, that in renouncing such rights the arrogation of those rights by anyone else is impossible.

An extended citation from *Einzig und sein Eigentum* (1844) by Max Stirner, bête noire of Karl Marx (Derrida, 1994), is instructive:

The time was politically so agitated that, as is said in the gospels, people thought they could not accuse the founder of Christianity more successfully than if they arraigned him for “political intrigue”, and yet the same gospels report that he was precisely the one who took the least part in these political doings. But why was he not a revolutionary, not a demagogue, as the Jews would gladly have seen him? Why was he not a liberal? Because he expected no salvation from a change of *conditions*, and this whole business was indifferent to him. He was not a revolutionary, like Caesar, but an insurgent: not a state-overturner, but one who straightened *himself* up. That was why it was for him only a matter of “Be ye wise as serpents”, which expresses the same sense as, in the special case, that “Give to the emperor that which is the emperor’s”; for he was not carrying on any liberal or political fight against the established authorities, but wanted to walk his *own* way, untroubled about, and undisturbed by, these authorities. Not less indifferent to him than the government were its enemies, for neither understood what he wanted, and he had only to keep them off from him with the wisdom of the serpent. But, even though not a ringleader of popular mutiny, not a demagogue or revolutionary, he (and every one of the ancient Christians) was so much the more an *insurgent* who lifted himself above everything that seemed so sublime to the government and its opponents, and absolved himself from everything that they remained bound to, and who at the same time cut off the sources of life of the whole heathen world, with which the established state must wither away as a matter of course; precisely because he put from him the upsetting of the established, he was its deadly enemy and real annihilator; for he walled it in, confidently and recklessly carrying up the building of *his* temple over it, without heeding the pains of the immured (Stirner, 1995, pp. 280-81).

III. Coda

In terms of “prior art,” or the contorted logic of the legal arguments for subsuming previously existing forms of knowledge, Agent Intellect is the foundation for immemoriality, immemoriality is the foundation for the commons and “common law,” the commons and “common law” are the foundation for statutory law, and statutory law is the foundation for intellectual property rights (patents, licenses, and copyright). Given the above arguments, Franciscanism and “the right to have no rights” may be seen as an early, yet pivotal attempt to protect immemoriality itself (in Platonic terms, the dynamic field known as anamnesis) and the attendant internal prospects for individuals and free subjectivity. In terms of the rights of citizens and the commons, this same logic suggests that the subjective conditions here denoted “black zones” are the foundational state for access to the “Kingdom of God” (which is always within), however that is defined and however that is experienced. Capital would appear, then, to have its sights set on controlling and monetizing Pascal’s and Kant’s two infinities. Indeed, “God did not die, He was transformed into money” (Agamben, 2014). The great copyright robbery underway since around 2000 (Hugenholtz, 2000) races ahead as technology permits regimes of surveillance for collecting tribute or imposing fines, while the surveillance state takes care of negating civil rights or the rights of citizens. This dual campaign, by Capital and by State, represents a turning point for the very concept of the commons and civil society. The double threat for resistance or insurgency is the usual threat – Apocalypse (a new Verdun).

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