

Saggi

Aquinas' Theory of Knowledge and the Representative Theory of Perception

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Abstracts

The representative theory of perception is one of the realist theories of perception which maintains we do not have direct access to the objects of perception; our ideas represent some objective objects in the world. In this paper, I will address the question about the representative nature of mental ideas from a Thomistic perspective. I will explore if some Thomists are entitled to claim that Aquinas' theory of knowledge based on his metaphysics can provide a basis for resolving this issue. I will argue that this question is wrong-headed and it should be replaced with the following question: If we assume the existence of a real world and that we are not under the influence of hallucination, how we can know that our ideas truly represent the world?

La teoria rappresentativa è una delle teorie "realiste" della percezione, le quali affermano che non è possibile avere un accesso diretto agli oggetti di percezione, per cui le nostre idee rappresentano solo gli oggetti nel mondo. In questo contributo, mi propongo di avvicinare la questione della natura rappresentativa delle idee mentali da una prospettiva tomista, tenendo anche in conto che per alcuni seguaci dell'Aquinate la teoria della conoscenza da lui formulata poteva effettivamente offrire una soluzione al problema. A mio avviso, la questione deve essere così riformulata: se si assume l'esistenza di un mondo reale, e nel contempo si è certi di non essere in uno stato di allucinazione, come è possibile affermare che le idee veramente rappresentano il mondo?

Keywords

Representative theory of perception; Hylomorphism; Thomism; the identity Theory of Truth; Truth



Introduction: the representative Theory of Perception and its Problems¹

The representative theory of perception is associated with indirect realism as opposed to direct or naïve realism. Naïve realism holds that our apprehension of objects is direct and unmediated. In this view, the object of knowledge has the properties which we subjectively perceive. The Oxford Companion to Philosophy states that according to direct realism “tastes, sounds, and colours are not in the heads of perceivers; they are qualities of the external objects that are perceived” (Ted Honderich 1995, p.602). As opposed to direct realism, indirect realism holds that the perceiver is most immediately only aware of his subjective apprehensions, and that his knowledge of the objective world which is independent of his mind derives from this subjective experience (Ted Honderich 1995, p.770).

The “New Way of Ideas” in Descartes and Locke – which represent this indirect realism – indicates that we in the first instance are only aware of the ideas in our minds through which we finally become aware of the real objects in the world (Nick Jones 2009, pp.44-45).

Descartes and Locke pursue two different kinds of indirect realism, which have been called inferential realism and representative realism respectively. The fundamental difference lies in the way the passage from ideas to objects occurs. For Descartes, the passage occurs via reasoning from ideas; in this

¹ In considerazione del fatto che il presente contributo viene da una realtà accademica in cui lo stile bibliografico adottato è desunto dal *Chicago Manual of Style*, si è ritenuto opportuno mantenere la formattazione originale dei rinvii bibliografici (NdE).

view, the senses *per se* do not and cannot inform us of the way real objects are (Nick Jones 2009, p.45).

By comparison, the standard interpretation of Locke in this regard is that the representative ideas are either like, or in fact are, little images or pictures of the objects in question, and that an idea represents an object by resembling it (Nick Jones 2009, p.45). In this view, at least the primary qualities of objects like their sizes and shapes are related to the ideas *via* a resemblance relation. This resemblance relation is the heart of the problem I am going to deal with here on some Thomistic grounds. The question is that how we can arrive from subjective ideas to a knowledge of real objects; in other words, how we can know that our ideas are truly representative of a real world.

In my view, and for this I will argue, this question is wrong-headed and I would like to replace it with the following question: If we assume the existence of a real world and that we are not under the influence of hallucination, how we can know that our ideas truly represent the world? The former question is seeking a way to justify the existence of the world independently of our minds. As I will show later, arguments to this effect are not convincing and end up assuming what they are trying to justify; rather than proving its existence. This is why I meant by saying that this question is wrong-headed.

Some Thomists have claimed that the Thomistic approach to knowledge can resolve this problem. In their arguments, they have not necessarily used the terminology of the “representative theory of perception”; they have mostly referred to issues like that of the mind-body problem and Cartesian doubt which I think share the main problematic of the representative theory of perception, since all revolve around the question about

how mental entities can represent the outside world. Before attending to these Thomistic arguments, I distinguish between two interpretations of the representative theory of perception, i.e. the three-term and the two-term interpretation.

The three-term interpretation of this theory states that there are three parts in this theory and in our perception: the perceiver, the object perceived and the idea caused in the perceiver at the end of a long causal chain. This interpretation was common in the 17th and 18th century (G. Dicker 2011, p.28).

The problem with this interpretation concerns how the perceiver can be certain of the existence of the external object, since he might have received the idea through some kind of hallucination or dream and not from the external object. This interpretation came under attack after about 1950, and a two-term theory of perception became a commonplace (G. Dicker 2011, p.28).

According to the two-term interpretation, the perceived object at the end of the causal chain appears in some way to the perceiver. If the idea is not treated as an extra object, or is not reified there would not be three distinct parts in perception. (G. Dicker 2011, p.19).

In my view, the Thomistic arguments are attempting to stick to the latter interpretation, i.e. the two-term interpretation. Their arguments can be broken into two general groups as follows.

1- Ascribing an identity theory of truth, instead of the correspondence theory of truth to Aquinas

2- Seizing on the active engagement between the intellect and the object through perception, each of which I will now explain.

1. Argument from the Identity Theory of Truth

According to the identity theory of truth, the relation between the truth-maker – like external objects – and the truth-bearer, like propositions, is not a correspondence relation; rather, they should be identical with each other.

Some advocates of the identity theory of truth hold there is a kind of continuity between the intellect when is thinking truly and the world. John McDowell (1994) puts this idea as follows.

... there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. ... there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought (J.McDowell 1994, p.27).

However, it is by no means clear that how mental entities can be regarded as the continuation of the world taking into account the fact that they belong to different categories, i.e. physical and non-physical.

Along much the same line as this two-term interpretation, P. Kreeft (2009, p.64) states that the relation of mind and reality is a problem applying to the correspondence theory of truth. In his view, the problem with this theory is that it assumes some kind of thing in the mind – mental forms – whose correspondence relation with reality proves to be problematic. The problem is the same problem which occurs for the representative theory of perception.

Kreeft in his identity theory of truth, along the lines of the two-term representative theory of perception, argues against the reification of ideas in the intellect. He argues that Aquinas does not face the representative problem since his theory of truth is an identity theory of truth and not a correspondence theory. The main point is that, in Kreeft's view, the correspondence interpretation of Aquinas's theory of truth "thingifies" ideas in mind; this interpretation takes the ideas in the mind to be as material signs like a map or a finger whose relations with the objective world are problematic. Instead, Kreeft ascribes the term "formal signs" to Aquinas, according to which signs are not things to be known firstly, and then their relation with reality to be examined. This view, in his analysis, will be trapped in Scepticism. As opposed to this, Kreeft maintains, the technical term "formal signs" used by Aquinas implies that forms are only means to knowing the external world. In Kreeft's view, formal signs are pure signs and not things at all. These formal signs are mental acts of pointing to objects; they themselves are not things the relations of which to the real world pose an epistemological challenge. In this view, "there is a very form that both structures the matter outside our mind and structures the idea in our mind" (Kreeft 2009, p. 64).

I have not been able to locate such a terminology in Aquinas' works, as is claimed by Kreeft; but the idea is present in Aquinas' thought. Aquinas has mentioned this issue in the following arguments:

Some have asserted that our intellectual faculties know only the impression made on them; as, for example, that sense is cognizant only of the impression made on its own organ. Ac-

cording to this theory, the intellect understands only its own impression, namely, the intelligible species which it has received, so that this species is what is understood. This is, however, manifestly false for two reasons. First, because the things we understand are the objects of science; therefore if what we understand is merely the intelligible species in the soul, it would follow that every science **would not be concerned with objects outside the soul**, but only with the intelligible species within the soul;... Secondly, it is untrue, because it would lead to the opinion of the ancients who maintained that **“whatever seems, is true”, and that consequently contradictories are true simultaneously**. For if the faculty knows its own impression only, it can judge of that only (The *Summa Theological*, hereafter ST, I.85.2). (Emphasis mine).

In my view, it is possible to take intelligible species mentioned by Aquinas not as independent objects, rather as mental signs which point to real objects. This interpretation fits with Kreeft's idea of formal signs.

I think Aquinas' above arguments are not convincing, since they both reiterate the need to have access to the external object, and the consequences of lacking such a knowledge; but he does not explain how mental forms can in fact represent the world.

In addition, the notion of pure formal signs ascribed by Kreeft to Aquinas constitutes the heart of this epistemological challenge, and cannot resolve it. Asking how our ideas are related to and represent the outside world is another way of questioning how pure these ideas are; in other words, it is a question about how human subjects are able to have signs that can purely represent the world without being tainted by psychological and

other aspects of the individual's their character or tradition.

In my view, it is more reasonable to take Aquinas' theory as a correspondence theory of truth, and then to consider it in the theological context which paves the way for a kind of epistemological reliabilism according to which we can rely on the representative character of our senses and cognitive capacities. Accordingly, I think Kreeft's formulation of the identity theory of truth cannot solve the problem of the representative theory of truth.

2. Argument from Active Metaphysical Object-Mind Engagement

The basic idea here is that since mind and object are both active in the process of knowledge, and both undergo metaphysical changes in the knowledge process by the intellect receiving the form of the object, the mind has not a problem in acknowledging that its ideas are representative of the world. For Aquinas, the intellect is active in the knowledge-process. It makes intelligible species out of phantasms which, themselves, arise in the imagination, as a product of sensation (See Aquinas' *On the Uniqueness of Intellect against Averroists*, ch. IV). In Aquinas' view (*ST*, I. Q.85 Art.1), truth consists in the conformity of the intellect and object; in this process the intellect receives the form of the object, and becomes identical with the thing formally not materially.

In this regard, Joseph Owens (1974, p.201) argues that in cognition both object and subject have active roles. The sensible through an efficient causal relation with the subject brings the agent into its own form, and thereby the thing

comes into cognitional existence in the agent. Though the long causal process between the thing and the agent is open to errors and slips that should be examined, the mind remains true and certain that the thing really exists in the external world. In Owens' view (1974, p.204), pre-Cartesian philosophers were right in their putative account that we directly perceive things without attending to epistemological concerns about the representation of real things by agents' concepts. Both entities – the external and the cognitional – are grasped together. The external thing is grasped directly, and therewith the cognitional existence due to the agent's co-formality with the object exists in the intellect. The agent's awareness of the cognitional existence is dependent on his perception of the direct object. The agent only by perceiving sensible things in their real existence is able to have cognitional existence, and build further constructions upon them. The thing can be perceived and dealt with directly without any need for the mediation of internal objects such as cognition and its products (Owens 1974, pp.203 & 205).

As long as the agent at the end of the causal chain receives the form of the thing, his intellect becomes the thing perceived; so the kind of physical distance that matters for physical things does not apply to cognition (Owens 1974, pp.197-8). Owens' point that the intellect becomes the things refers to Aquinas' definition of truth as "the conformity of thing and intellect" (*Questiones Disputatae de Veritate* I-1). In this view, the intellect and object become identical in form but not in the matter.

In a word, if I understand Owens correctly, the two entities – real and cognitive – are not of a kind that give rise to the epistemological question about the representative character of the cognitive entity. The real existence causes the agent to

have or to form the cognitive entity. Of course, as indicated by Owens (1974, p.201), many things might happen along the causal relation depriving the agent of a correct understanding of the nature of the thing; so our understanding should be open to scrutiny to eliminate habitual uncritical judgments about the nature of the thing; however, the agent still is certain with regard to dealing with a real entity in the world, even while he has to correct his understanding via a dialectical process.

M. Derksen (2011, p.9) argues that the radical methodological doubt is not a discovery but a creation of modern philosophy caused by the domination of subjectivity in knowledge and by the body/soul split. In this interpretation, this problem can be traced back to a Platonic epistemology, according to which soul is trapped in the body, and there is no essential relation between the two; rather, they are in war with each other, thus sensation cannot give us true knowledge of the real world. The radical bifurcation of mind/body results in epistemology becoming a starting point for all subsequent philosophical inquiry. While according to the hylomorphism of Aristotle, every thing in nature is composed of matter and form. Soul is the form of body and they are not independent and distinct things (M. Derksen 2011, pp.9-13).

Through sensation, Aristotle contends, the likeness or the formal existence of the object comes to the intellect, just as a piece of wax receives a seal without having the iron or the gold of the signet-ring. The formal existence is in the intellect, and the material existence is in the world. In Aquinas' terms, material form exists in the object, as cognitional form exists in the intellect. These forms do not represent things like Cartesian and post-Cartesian ideas, rather they *present* things in the world

(M. Derksen 2011, p.14-15).

Thomas S. Hibbs (2007, p. 65) maintains, along similar lines, that in Aquinas' view, pervasive doubt about all our knowledge is a fatal illusion. In his view, for Aquinas, doubt arises with regard to some claims of knowledge against the backdrop of what is known or assumed. Hibbs (2007, p. 65) explains the impossibility of pervasive doubt for Aquinas as follows. The act of knowing is the actualization of soul. The self is not constituted prior to such an act. It cannot actualize itself; rather, it should be realized by objects outside itself. The self prior to its actualization cannot pose questions as to how it knows, and once actualised it is capable of answering such questions only by presupposing its first acts of knowing.

To put things more simply, the self for Aquinas is not sufficiently constituted previous to the acts of knowing, and once it gets constituted it learns to answer questions about the reliability of its knowledge by assuming its first acts of knowing. I am tempted to add to this claim that even the act of radical doubt is performed by an actualized self whose actuality is indebted to the very process of knowing he is trying to put into doubt. Accordingly such a doubt would be illegitimate for him to raise, since he is arguing against the very basis from which the doubt is derived. So Hibbs (2007, p. 55) concludes that Aquinas' emphasis is on "wonders" and not on "doubts".

I think wonder differs from doubt in that it is not as radical and extensive as doubt. Wonder is raised against the background of certain claims to knowledge, and it is not seeking to doubt the very foundations of knowledge.

In my view, neither Aquinas' theory of knowledge nor his exegesis by the Thomists discussed above can resolve the problem

of the representative theory of perception. I think Aquinas' theory of knowledge assumes from the outset the existence of the real world and its objects. It is far from clear to me that the argument from active metaphysical engagement presented above can be used to prove such an existence, or to show how and why the knower does not need to meet such a challenge. The active mind-object engagement can be compatible with the agent's illusions concerning what he takes to be a real object. This illusionary object, if thought to be a real object, might work well as a real object to have active engagement with the mind.

One way to show the possibility of the occurrence of hallucination in Aquinas' theory of knowledge is along the following lines. According to Aquinas, mind makes an intelligible species out of phantasm. Intelligible species is the likeness of things.

The hallucination problem here is that how we know 1- that the thing exists in the real world, and 2- that the intelligible species is the likeness of the thing; in other words, if we know the thing through the mind's operation which produces the intelligible species, and we do not have direct access to the thing itself, how can we be certain that the likeness is really the similitude of the thing? If we do not have a direct knowledge of the thing, how can we know for sure that something else is its likeness?

In Aquinas' theory of knowledge, our contact with the thing is via the intelligible species; so we do not have direct access to the thing to recognise its similarity with the intelligible species; accordingly, both the existence of the thing and its similarity with the intelligible species might be the products of

an illusion. The irony is that Aquinas himself holds that the intelligible species is understood secondarily, and the object is understood primarily;

But since the intellect reflects upon itself, by such reflection it understands both its own act of intelligence, and the species by which it understands. Thus the intelligible species is that which is understood secondarily; but that which is primarily understood is the object, of which the species is the likeness (ST. I.85.2).

However, Aquinas' theory does not explain, in my view, the primary understanding of the object; as a result, I think the active relation between mind and object cannot prove to be immune to the charge of possible illusion in his theory of knowledge.

The fact that Aquinas has not faced Cartesian radical doubts does not mean that he and his theory are logically immune to them. Furthermore, I wonder if Descartes' doubts concerning the existence of the real world were genuine doubts. This kind of doubt for Descartes has been a methodical assumption to see if it is possible to base knowledge on some foundation which is not dubitable.

... because our senses deceive us sometimes, I was willing to assume that there was nothing which existed the way our senses present it to us... I determined to pretend that everything which had ever entered my mind was no more true than the illusions of my dreams... I saw that I could pretend that I had no body and that the world and the place where I was did not exist (Descartes 1637, part4).

As the quote shows, Descartes' doubts are more like some kind of assumption or pretention than a real doubt. Accordingly, I think Aquinas' theory of knowledge can in the like manner be logically open to such radical doubts, doubts which I think no sound mind normally would make due to its interaction and engagement with the world, an interaction that does not have to be along the lines of Aquinas' metaphysical engagement.

In my view, the mere fact that intellect plays an active role in acquiring and processing knowledge, and that it is not a passive recipient cannot resolve the question about its representative character, because it is possible for the intellect to be affected by some factors such as psychological and perspectival impediments resulting in a distorted picture of the object. The individual's characteristics including his prejudices and desires, and the limitations of his perspective might deprive him of a correct understanding of the issue.

However, I would suggest that the fact that Aquinas' theory of knowledge cannot resolve the problem of the representative theory of truth is not a flaw in this theory. In my view, this question is in principle a wrong-headed question. By this I mean the question is fundamentally wrong to ask. I am here arguing from the latter Wittgenstein's perspective according to whom the idea that the world exists independently of us is a part of our way of life immune to both justification and repudiation (J. Lear 1982, p.395). Taking this belief as a part of our way of life means that we cannot argue for it, rather we argue from it.

Accordingly, instead of arguing how Aquinas' theory of knowledge or any other theory can assure the agent of the existence of the real world, it would be better and more fruitful to argue about how mind can be certain that its accounts of the

nature of things are correct; in other words, the more relevant question is how mind can be assured that its accounts of things are in agreement with their reality, instead of arguing how we may be assured about the real existence of things.

One Thomist who is moving in the direction of the question regarding the correspondence of the content of our ideas and theories with their objects is Alasdair MacIntyre. In his theory of truth, MacIntyre has given a dialectical and fallibilistic aspect to Aquinas' theory of truth which to some extent is like the fallibilism of Popper. In MacIntyre's view (1988. p. 118), our theories should remain always open to falsification and the best theory surviving the objections can count as a true theory. As he puts it, "we may arrive at a conclusion as to which of these best survives the strongest objections which can be advanced on the basis of the others" (1988. p. 118). We can, tentatively, be assured of the truth of a theory if it is capable of surviving against the strongest counterevidence emerging against it (MacIntyre 2006, p.188). This approach is similar to the Fallibilism favoured by Popper; other than, MacIntyre, despite Popper, does not give up the ideal of truth and the possibility of arriving at truth.

Conclusion

In this paper, I mentioned two sets of Thomistic argument which can be offered as a response to the challenge of the representative theory of perception. The first argument was based on ascribing an identity theory of truth to Aquinas, according to which the forms in the intellect are not things; rather they are pure signs which point to objects directly.

The problem with this theory concerned the question

how we can know that our mental forms are pure and not contaminated with distorting facts such as prejudices, desires, perspectival limitations and even hallucination; accordingly, this approach begs the question.

The second approach was centred upon the metaphysically active engagement between intellect and object required by the hylomorphism of Aristotle and Aquinas according to which the knowledge process is process of change and like any other kind of change involves, from a Thomistic perspective, the actualization of some potentialities. This kind of actualization, in this view, renders the intellect assure of the existence of the real objects in the world. The problem with this was that the active engagement could still be based on what we sincerely take to be real even if it is not real as a matter of fact.

My alternative is to dissolve this question rather than resolving it by pursuing something like Wittgenstein's notion of the way of life, according to which some principles like the existence of an independent world are parts of our ways of life and the foundation of our further argumentation which themselves cannot be and do not need to be justified. Instead of what is conventionally meant by the problem of the representative theory of perception, I propose to ask the question about how we can rest assured that the content of our ideas and theories correspond to reality. The Thomistic dialectical theory of MacIntyre might be a good example in this category.

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