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# The Nature and Functions of the Active Intellect According to St. Thomas

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THE NATURE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE ACTIVE INTELLECT  
ACCORDING TO ST. THOMAS

BY  
PETER P. SPRINGER

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
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## VITA

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## CHAPTER I

### HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE SUBJECT

Man's proper study may indeed be man, but if it is, man has his work cut out for him. For in his philosophizing man has attempted to explain a host of things, but none has he found so difficult to fathom as himself. From Thales on all Greek philosophers had attempted to explain nature and had believed--however implausible their solutions may seem to us--that they had done a good job. But there never was a philosopher in that time, or in any time, that was temerarious enough to say that he had explained man perfectly.

It was not, in fact, till (possibly) the time of Socrates before man's nature as man was in any true way adverted to: before any step was even made in the right direction; before, paradoxically, the real problems were even met. Thus when, with Plato and Aristotle, man was seen to be more than a sentient being, one of the foremost of these problems was introduced--the problem of how this being knows. For, if man is both animal and rational, he must have the two-fold knowledge consequent on these "forms". And, of course, man does experience a knowledge that is particular, and one whose note is universality. Now even a none too rarefied idea of what "spiritual" connoted indicates that there is a marked difference between these two cognitions; while a fuller and more complete knowledge of the term has caused some to make this difference almost a diversity.

And it is in this that the problem lies, for the two must somehow be reconciled in man. Now, save in the construction of a philosophical

system, it can hardly be said that anyone doubts man's (essential) unity. It is man then, who both "sees", and "hears", and also "thinks". It is man who knows this tree and "tree". But, save that something is being known in both cases, it is difficult to reconcile this tree with tree; i.e. how it is possible to get from the one to the other; how the apparent common-sense fact that we know this tree through "sense experience" can be reconciled with the fact that in knowing "tree" we transcend sense-experience.

The answers, needless to say, are multitudinous and varied, but they all do--and must--have this note in common; namely that intellectual knowledge, as being more abstract in nature, must have something to account for the difference. And so, all must in some way give the intellect the power--though this power need not be the intellect's own--of excluding the greater number of "non-necessary" notes in the sense data. And it is in this root need of abstraction that the notion of an "active" or "agent" intellect takes its rise.

## CHAPTER II

### DEVELOPMENT BEFORE ST. THOMAS

It is almost a belaboring of the point to say that the idea of an intellect was as slow in taking its form, or, for that matter of even being conceived, as that of "spirit" itself. If Thomas Aquinas be taken as the culmination of the speculation on this subject, it is evident that its history is an extremely long one. And again using Aquinas as the acme of such speculation, it will be well to see how this peak was prepared for by his predecessors. For what is called epistemology was the subject of much speculation previous to his time, and in no netic was it possible to ignore this most salient fact of man's dual knowledge.

The theories of knowledge of Pre-Socratics were, as has been hinted at, materialist. For since there was not as yet even a slightly adequate conception of spirit (witness the disappointment of both Aristotle and Plato at the failure of Anaxagoras to really grasp his "invention", "nous"), there was no real distinction made between sensation and intellection. Thus, to cite the outstanding incident, Empedocles saw knowledge as being caused--via "emanations" and "pores"--by "like" in us knowing the material "like" outside us. And the same general charge can be substantiated of all these early epistemologies. The consequence, therefore, was that there was actually no speculation on an abstractive power, since it was wholly unnecessary.

With Socrates' more realistic recognition of man's nature the possibility of an abstractive force arises, however. For he studied the conditions of human knowledge, developed the "Socratic concept", and so paved the way for a reference--albeit an oblique reference--to some need of differentiating

the two kinds of knowledge; for it was from his master's investigations that Plato formulated his theory of the Ideas. Again though, since for him man's ideas are innate, and, since he considers sense perception to be the mere occasion for somehow "knowing" these ideas, the abstraction here is an emasculated one. For here the necessary abstraction is taken care of by participation in the Ideas; there need be no "abstracting" of essences "in" some sensible notes, for essences already exist in the mind.<sup>1</sup>

Now between the two extremes of a materialism, on the one hand, and a pure idealism, on the other, was a solution offered by one who considered himself as the culmination of Greek philosophy. Aristotle's explanation of knowledge was--as must always be the case--one which followed logically on his definition of man, of the union of soul and body. As such it did not make man's two kinds of knowledge diverse, but merely different. Thus he says that through the medium of a sensible object and the several sense organs sensation is made possible. The "result" of this sensation is a representation left over in the imagination; and this result is also the term of sense knowledge.

Then intellectual knowledge begins; and for making the transition he introduces a power of abstraction as part of the intellectual function in man. Man's intellect is distinguished as to its active and passive (as well as actualized) functions;<sup>2</sup> the former, he says, makes the sensible

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1 of. Theatetus (p.156a); Phaede (p.1006); also Aristotle, Metaphysics I 9 (9916 3); et alibi.

2 Aristotle, De Anima, III, 5 (430A10).



datum now repositing in the imagination capable of being known in a universal fashion; the latter understands and knows this now somehow transformed datum. The process whereby the intellect as agent makes the phantasm (as the sensible datum or image is called) capable of being known is called by him "abstraction"; i.e., from that sensible likeness, which is particular, an intellectual likeness, which is universal, is somehow made to be in the possible intellect. (It may be noted here that this statement of what Aristotle said is that of St. Thomas--though there is much evidence for its being accepted. There are, however, dissenters to such an interpretation.)

Most prominent of these dissenters were the Arabian interpreters of Aristotle, who, as a consequence, had a different conception of the nature of the active intellect. This school of thought, though professing to hold the true doctrine of Aristotle, actually combined his teaching with New-Platonic and Arabic views. A major characteristic of this eclectic philosophy was its insistence, in one form or another, of an intellect common to all mankind.<sup>3</sup> And the two men who most rigorously held this view were Avicenna and Averroes. The former took certain statements in the third book De Anima to mean that the active intellect is separate and common to all mankind; and the latter extended this conception to both intellects. Thus, according to Averroes, each man has his own proper phantasms by means of which the separate intellect is joined in an accidental union with each individual according to that individual's personal disposition. And thus here, too, abstraction is not man's, but is accomplished by a separate substance "revealing" intelligibility to each man.

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3 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I, 79, 4, Resp.

A final great source of Thomas' doctrine on this subject was St. Augustine, the "Christian Plato". From this soubriquet the inference is (in this case) warranted that their reasoning is quite dissimilar. For, like Plato, Augustine looks upon sensation as, not the cause, but solely the occasion for knowledge;<sup>4</sup> the occasion for the re-awakening of the soul to knowledge which it had already possessed. There is not then, that strict casual activity attributed to objects in Aquinas' theory. For Augustine there are two ways in which the intellect arrives at the knowledge of things; the first is from sense knowledge, and proceeds to the causes of the sensibles and finally to their ultimate cause, God; the second is from introspection wherein we find truth dwelling within us ("Noli foras exire; in te ipsum redi; in interiore homine habeat veritate"). The source of all truth is God; in Him the essential types of truth are found; by Him the ectypes experienced in our world of concrete existence and corresponding to the prototypes of God's external Mind are "illumined"; so that, knowing the ectypes, we rise to a knowledge of truth, and from truth to Him Who is its author.<sup>5</sup> Hence--although no one has ever been able to determine fully--if there is any sort of an abstractive process here it is one "performed" by Truth Himself.

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<sup>4</sup> "sentire non est corporis, sed animae per corpus,..." DE GENESI AD LITTERAM, III, 5,7; col. 282. (et alibi).

<sup>5</sup> cf. Bourke's Interesting Commentary in Augustine's Quest of Wisdom, 74 f., 206, 210 f., et passim.

### CHAPTER III

#### BASES OF AQUINAS' DOCTRINE

Thomas was not, then, alone when he investigated the relations between sensible and intellectual knowledge. Available to his study of the relations of phantasm and intellect (to use his terms) were either the actual works of his great predecessors or else their teaching become the tradition of some school of philosophy. But he was alone, in that he could not accept any of the solutions "in toto"; for he could never accept their bases as being true. In any true foundation there is no "bridging" of sensible and intellectual knowledge, unless there be some rapprochement made between body and soul. If the union of soul and body cannot be some way explained, neither can man's dual knowledge; and conversely, however this union is explained, so will that of sensible and intellectual knowledge be. Thus, corresponding to the above enumerated theories of abstraction, man has been variously defined as purely material, as a pure soul "entangled" with a body, as a compound of soul and body, as a body with some separate intelligence guiding it, and again--though certainly not in the full sense of Plato--as a soul using a body.

All the materialist epistemologies were, of course, founded on a philosophy of man which denied his having a soul; hence they were unacceptable to Thomas. But the systems of Plato and Aristotle were not of such a sort as to be "prima facie" rejected. As a matter of fact, these were the two dominant philosophies of Thomas' time, and hence defined "man" for their adherents. Without going into the "problem of the soul in the thirteenth

century" and the struggles undergone before the triumph of the Aristotelian-like (not, of course, totally so, for "it cannot be, after all, gainsaid that Thomas...was strongly under an Augustinian influence")<sup>1</sup> definition of Thomas, there can be noted two defects into which any definition of man might fall into--and which these systems did not steer clear of: These defects are the failure to preserve man's quite obvious unity (by radically separating soul and body); and the consideration of the body as being at least "excess baggage", and often as being a positive hindrance to true human life. And the results of this unfortunate dichotomizing rendered such a philosopher's noetic of the same value.

Again avoiding too thorough a consideration of what man is for St. Thomas, it can be noted here that the essential note of the relation of soul and body is that of matter and form; the soul is the substantial form of the body. To say this is to say, in effect, that:

- (1) the soul "makes" the whole man, the whole being, a reality--"form a substantialis dat esse";
- (2) the soul, as form gives the composite being its specific human character; and that
- (3) it is the source of all activities in the organism.

In short, when the soul is called "form" it is meant that it is the actuating principle both for itself and for the body; and that it is incomplete by itself and "completed" when animating the body. But the soul does subsist, as well as "inform"; it is subsistent because "it has an operation of its very own, in which the body does not share."<sup>2</sup> Whatever exists must

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Schneider, "Bestimmung des verhältnisses" in Baumkers Beitrage, XX,VII,3--1930,56.

<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I,75,2,resp..

have reason for its existence, and that reason is its act. The soul, then, as a subsistent being, has operations which are peculiar to it as a spiritual form, viz., intellection and volition. But the soul, as a form, is, apart from the body, unable to attain to the object of its operation; it can only acquire knowledge naturally when united to the body, for only then can it apprehend its natural object. (The case of the soul "in patria" does not fall under these conditions.)

Hence there is a certain urgency in Aquinas' philosophy concerning the relation of sensible and intellectual knowledge, which is not to be found in the other, above-mentioned, systems. For here man is overtly and unequivocally stated to be a unity; and hence his manifestly dual knowledge--the objects for sensation being any sensible body, and for intellection "the quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter"<sup>3</sup>--must be either explained, or "double truth" stultification accepted. Likewise it is most certainly to be noted that the question has undergone a transformation here. For, here the problem of trying to reconcile an organic phantasm with a spiritual soul is not a problem of the soul confronted with a corporeal organ, but, rather, of the soul with one of its powers confronted with another power of the very same soul. (For the soul acts in its powers; and thus even those processes which take place in corporeal organs emanate from the soul as their remote principle--since the soul is the form of the whole body. Every function, thus, conscious or unconscious, is psychological.)

There are, then, the phantasm, the representation of a material thing in the imagination; and the intellect as in some way potential to knowing the same material thing.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., I, 84, 7, Resp..

## CHAPTER IV

### DISPUTED POINTS ON THE NATURE OF THE "INTELLECTUS AGENS"

But is all this really so manifest? Has St. Thomas the right to conclude to an "intellectus agens"? Is there a "raison d' être" for the intellect as active in this way? In opposition to Plato, St. Thomas maintains that the answers to all these are affirmative; that there could, indeed, be no intellectual knowledge unless such were the answer. For knowledge is the "intentional union of power and object". Now the object of the human intellect in this life is not something immediately available to it; for the intelligible for our intellect

is not something existing in reality, nor is it intelligible; for the possible intellect understands something as one in many and of many. <sup>1</sup> Such, however, is not found in reality...

And because "what is not could not 'move' anything", there could apparently be no intellectual knowledge in man unless there were some way to make the intelligible objects, which are the proper objects of our intellect, intelligible to us.

It is the "universal" then which is to be "seen", but in this "seeing" there arises difficulty.

Now since our knowledge is at the beginning through a "species" (a "species" arising in the sense and terminating in the phantasm) it might be asked why this species cannot suffice to overcome the barrier; for both a "species" and a "phantasm" are certainly in some way not so "individual"

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<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, De Anima, 4, Resp. <sub>10</sub>

as the existent physical reality. Further it may be noted that all that is known of a particular object must in some way be in the phantasm representing it; for surely it cannot be said that, when the soul gets to know some particular object, it gets to know more than the "imaged" object contains. If the phantasm is "of" the object, only through it can anything of the object be known.

But again Thomas says that such is impossible

because the "species" which is in the imagination is of the same kind as that in the sense, for both are material and individual; but the species which is in the intellect<sup>2</sup> is of a different kind, for it is universal.

It is not possible, therefore, to proceed from sense to phantasm to intellect in an uninterrupted line:

...the forms which are in the senses can affect forms in the imagination, moving the imagination as being of a similar nature. The forms in the imagination however, inasmuch as they are particular, cannot cause intelligible forms--since the latter are universal in character.<sup>3</sup>

It might still be said, without being hypercritical, that there is no "raison d' être" established for the active intellect. For might there not be "intelligibles" for us somewhere else than in those "clothed in material conditions"? But this is actually to rule out the argument altogether, for no longer is there agreement even on basic points. For, for Thomas the

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<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas, De Spiritualibus Creaturis, 10, ad 17.

<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas, De Anima, 4, ad 1.

object of the intellect in this life is the quiddity of a sensible thing; therefore, if we participate--a'la Plato--in "forms of natural things subsisting apart from matter" we are no longer also talking about the same "man".

Yet, admitting all this to be as Thomas says, must there still be a special abstractive power assigned man? Could not the possible intellect suffice for making sensibles intelligible? No. Because these things must be "made" intelligible; and, if the intellect were in potency to them before such a "making", it can only be concluded that the intellect, as potential, does not suffice. (If the intelligibles proportionate to our intellect were intelligible in act the "possible intellect" would, indeed, suffice.)

So that, save for utter materialists and violent Platonists, few could at this stage deny the necessity of some power making man's intelligibles intelligible to him. But here the agreement necessarily ends; there is discord when the nature of the "performer" of this office is sought; e.g., Augustine's ideas mentioned above. Now whether the "intellectus agens" is God, or a separate substance (as some maintained), or a faculty of the soul is hardly a contemporary question. Yet, without some notice of what was once a most bitterly disputed question in philosophy, Thomas' teaching on the agent intellect cannot fully be understood. (In passing it may be pointed out Thomas' opusculum De Unitate Intellectus was occasioned by this question. Cf. also Lattey, St. Thomas, for how the opposing solution contravenes faith.) For the answer to whether the agent intellect is a separate substance, or a faculty of the soul means much as to what its functions will be.



Why should anyone have ever considered the agent intellect to be a separate substance? Speculation might seem to point to two possible reasons; one of these is the disdain, bordering on contempt, with which some philosophers and philosophies regarded man's bodily "part"; the other is the very concept of intellection, which would seem to be so high as to be out of the control of earth-laden man. But, whatever the truth of what are at best guesses, there is a definite, concrete reason why Averroes, Avicenna, et.al. did hold their views. And the paradox, the irony of the "raison d' être" of their view is that it is based on the same philosopher--the Philosopher--on whom St. Thomas so greatly draws for his noetic. The special passage on which the theory of Thomas' opponents is totally based (the passage, from the third book De Anima, says that the "intellect as active" is "separatus et immixtus et impassibilis et substantia actu ens") is one that he concurs in most wholeheartedly--though, of course, in his, and not in his opponents' interpretation.

Now there is much to be said for someone's holding such views--as might very well be expected, considering the caliber of the men who did espouse these views. For, not only are Aristotle's reasoning and language far from pellucid here, but the four attributes mentioned do seem to apply to something preternatural. St. Thomas himself says that "we must needs observe that above the intellectual soul of man we must needs suppose a superior intellect, from which the soul acquires the power of understanding".<sup>4</sup> For anything--says a cardinal tenet in his philosophy--that is such by participation, that is movable, that is imperfect, always requires the

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<sup>4</sup> Sum. Theol.I,79,4,Resp..

pre-existence of something essentially such, essentially immovable, and essentially perfect. Moreover our intellect

reaches to the understanding of truth by reasoning, and because in those things which it does understand, it passes from potentiality to act.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, the very relation of potency to act leads to thinking the active intellect separate--"for the agent is found separate from what it 'reduces' to act, while that by which something is in potency seems to be wholly intrinsic to the thing."<sup>6</sup>

And so, many posited a separate active intellect which they called an "intelligence". Its relation to man was such that "our souls receive from it intelligible perfections".<sup>7</sup> This meant--among other things--that the phantasms, which are the product of our sensible knowledge, were by this separate intelligence "made fit" for intellectual cognition.

Aside from considering it false, what did St. Thomas think of this argument? He gave his answer in the combat with Siger of Brabant, and the Latin Averreists; and this answer--the opusculum, De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averreistas--shows his opinion of such a view, and of its proponents. For this opusculum is almost the classic example of the "anger of a patient man"; in his reply Aquinas, the "usually placid contemplative", castigates his opponents and even challenges them to meet him in open (philosophical) combat. New the theological consequences of maintaining

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1, 79, 4, resp..

<sup>6</sup> De Anima, 5, resp..

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5, resp..

that man does not act by himself must produce a violent reaction in any deep-thinking theologian--especially if the embryo heresy seems to be gaining the ascendancy. Yet it is not as a theologian that Thomas states his opposition to the Arabian theory.

Nor is such recourse a necessity; for, first of all, interpreting Aristotle is an endeavor anyone may essay, and there is no question that Thomas was able to advance arguments at least as convincing as those of his opponents. (Thus he can say that "separate" and "unmixed" merely mean that "impassible" means there is none of the "lower" type of passivity found in the senses, yet some sort of passivity towards intelligibles; and that "it is not repugnant to the soul to be in potency even though it is a substance in act".<sup>8</sup> Along these same lines he shows (in the Contra Gentes, Bk. II,c.78) a possible explanation of Aristotle's vague wording.)

But the argument is not to be settled by Aristotle, for the truth is at stake here, and not Aristotle's wisdom. Although they cannot be thoroughly explored here, there are actually many philosophical reasons which make a separate intellect an absurdity. For instance, the fact that potency and act are proportionate makes it impossible to say that the possible intellect, a "part" of the soul, has an act outside its genus--an act which would make its every action be in very truth "supernatural".

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<sup>8</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas. Summa Contra Gentiles.II,78.

Likewise man could hardly be said to exercise his proper operation, intellection, if this operation depended on an extrinsic principle. The consequence of this would be that man was not any longer "master of his actions"; "nor would praise or condemnation be earned; and the whole of moral science and political life would disappear..."<sup>9</sup>

The reason of reasons however, is something much more basically metaphysical, and much more distinctive of Thomas' teaching. For, granted there be a separate agent intellect, it still is necessary to assign to the human soul some power participating in that superior intellect, by which power the human soul would make things to be actually intelligible. There are, that is to say, second causes. Such is the case "in other perfect natural things, among which, besides the universal active causes, each one is endowed with its proper powers derived from those universal causes."<sup>10</sup> But among these "sublunary" things nothing is more perfect than the human soul; and so it too must have the "sufficient principle" for its proper operation.

All this we knew of course, with the test of all philosophical truth, experience. For we perceive that we abstract universals from their particular conditions. Now "nothing acts save through some power which is is formally in it".<sup>11</sup> But both the actions, that of the intellect as

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., II, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Sum. Theol...I, 79, 4, Resp..

<sup>11</sup> C.G..II, 76.

passive and as active "are man's"

for man abstracts from the phantasms, and receives into his mind things intelligible. ...It is necessary therefore, that the principles to which these actions are attributed, namely the possible and the agent intellect are power which exist in man formally.<sup>12</sup>

It should also be noted here that, since the active intellect is a power of the soul, it is not one in all--"for it is impossible that one and the same power belong to various substances".<sup>13</sup> Therefore no separate substance does "our thinking for us", although God is the agent intellect "where" we get our participated power. (As must, of course, be, for;

Thomas gives even the first principles of Aristotle's explanation of thinking an Augustinian tinge. The first principles of understanding in all souls are an image of truth as found in God; they have their metaphysical roots in God. In God's "thought" is to be found the ultimate foundation of their infallibility and immutability.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the "intellectus agens" both is, and is a power of the soul. Its sufficient reason is the intelligibility it must find in the phantasms. But before proceeding to make out exactly what this last means--and how the action is accomplished--it will be profitable to recall, in general, the relations between the active and the possible intellects. (In doing so a classical objection will be adverted to, namely "that it is impossible for a possible and an active intellect to come together in the one substance, the soul.") Now the one and same substance, the human soul, is in potency

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., II, 76.

<sup>13</sup> Sum. Theol., I, 79, 5, Resp..

<sup>14</sup> Martin Grabmann. "Die Philosophie des Mittelalters" in Sammlung Göschen. Bd. 826, 1921, 94.

to all intelligibles--"through" the possible intellect--and makes them to be in act--"through" the active intellect; and this seems to be completely contradictory since both are rooted in the same soul.

The difficulty however, Thomas holds to be really only a verbal one; for he says there is actually nothing forbidding something's being "in one way in potency and in another in act, as we see in natural things; for air is actually moist, but potentially dry, whereas the opposite is true of earth."<sup>15</sup> This relation is found between the intellectual soul and the phantasms..."for the intellective part stands in such a relation to the phantasm that in one way it is in potency to them, and in another way is actual in respect of them."<sup>16</sup> For the intellectual soul has something to which the phantasm is in potency, and vice versa. The soul has intellectuality, immateriality, but does not from this have that it can assimilate "to this or that determined thing." Meanwhile, these determined natures of sensible things are the very essence of the phantasm. A meeting, then, in this context is impossible, because the phantasms are "similtudes of sensible things, but in a material way."<sup>17</sup> And therefore, if--as there must certainly be--there is to be such a meeting (one uniting the potential intelligibility and the actual determination of the phantasms with the opposite characteristics in the intellectual soul as potentially knowing),

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<sup>15</sup> C.G. II, 77.

<sup>16</sup> De. Sp. Creat. 10, ad 9.

<sup>17</sup> C.G.II, 77.

there is required in the soul a "power which can actively work 'in' the phantasms, making them intelligible in act."<sup>18</sup>

Therefore the intellectual soul stands in relation to the phantasms as both act and potency, but it must not be thought that the relation is the same as that found in natural agents; for in them one is in potency to another "according to the same mode in which it is found in the other," (for the matter of air is in potency to the form of water as it is at present in the water). This is not--and this is the foundation of what is to follow--the case in the soul; for it is not in potency the same way as these are "in" the phantasms. If this were the case, there would be no need of an active, an abstractive, intellect. The soul, therefore, can only be in potency to the phantasms according as they are in some way brought to its level; as they are--in the usual phraseology--made intelligible in act by being "abstracted" from individual material conditions.

There remains yet one more "disputed question" in regard to the agent intellect. It is a part which, on exploration, seems to have been foolishly upheld by non-Thomistic philosophers. It is a point which would again serve to make of the "intellectus agens" a separate substance; or if not this, then at least change its nature radically. But again, it is a point that can be maintained by anyone with a bias; for the basis of it is the third book De Anima. Here, as noted before, there is an open field for "commentating", since Aristotle's language is far from unambiguous.

Apparently speaking of the "intellectus agens", he says (III De Anima, cap. V, 2; 430 a) "it does not at one time understand something, and at

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

another time not". This is, of course, something that cannot be said of the human soul, in which there is nothing that always understands. Thus, if this is what Aristotle says, and if he is to be truly taken as the Philosopher, there can be no answer given the argument.

Thomas' answer is that this is not what Aristotle had said, and here his case is much more convincing than the previous one, thus eliminating the horrible necessity of saying again that truth, and not what Aristotle said, is the object of philosophy. According to him, Aristotle "at first began speaking of the possible intellect, and afterwards of the agent intellect, and then began to consider the intellect in act, where he says 'Actual knowledge is identical with its object; and he distinguished the intellect in act from the possible intellect in three ways."<sup>19</sup>

(III De Anima, cap XV and XIX).

Here, then is what is of the very essence of his philosophy. Aristotle has considered the intellect from its actual and from its potential aspects. However, here the distinction is not one in relation to the phantasm, to the actual acquiring of knowledge; but is rather the intellect as the "tabula rasa" and as actually knowing. Here the "agent intellect" is not at all in question as was above assumed. The agent intellect actually has nothing to do with this question (even though it is the means whereby an intellect may be "knowing"); for the "intellect as active" neither is in potency to intelligibles to know them, nor does it, its work being finished, "know" (never does it "understand").

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<sup>19</sup> De Sp. Cr. X, ad 3.



The first of the threefold distinctions between the intellect as possible and the "intellect in act" is that "the possible intellect is not the thing understood,"<sup>20</sup> whereas the "intellect in act" is the thing understood. The second is in showing the order between the intellect as possible and the "intellect in act"; i.e. "in one and the same thing the intellect is first in potency before it is in act, not however simply, as it is often right to say this of those things which pass from potency to act."<sup>21</sup> Finally, he makes the above statement concerning "always understanding", as the great difference between these two "intellects"; for the possible intellect is possible because it does not understand actually, whereas "the intellect is made to be in act by the fact that it 'becomes' the very intelligibles."<sup>22</sup>

Immediately following this distinguishing, Aristotle now adds "separatum autem hoc solum quod vere est". This could only have been said of the "intellect in act", for the agent intellect and the possible intellect he had called "separate", but individually. It remains, then, that this statement is made

about that which comprehends both, namely the intellect in act...for that only in our soul can be called separate--not using an organ--and this is proper to the intellect in act; that is, that part of the soul by which we understand in act; and it comprehends the possible and the agent intellects,<sup>23</sup>

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20 Ibid.

21 De.An. 5, ad 1

22 C.G.II, 78.

23 Ibid.

and thus he adds that "this alone of the soul is immortal and perpetual," because it does not depend on the body; it is separate.

There are these three "intellects" to be remembered: the possible intellect--"possible" to knowing at all; the agent intellect, which is the quasi-instrument for producing knowledge by "working on the only materials which could give knowledge in man's present state; and the "intellect in act", the intellect knowing, the intellect as become the object of knowledge.

## CHAPTER V

### LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

The problem then has been delineated, yet it will be found that actually far from all has been said. To say that the human intellect must have the ability for making its objects of knowledge intelligible in act is, it is true, to solve a general problem, but it is, at the same time, to create a host of "detail" problems. For it is now to be asked how this rapprochement between sensible and intellectual knowledge is brought about. Granted that "both intellection and phantasm are processes, not things,"<sup>1</sup> it still remains to ask how these processes are made to meet.

Now it is clear that, in relation to the possible intellect, this fusion will effectively be the work of the "agent intellect"; for though for cognition "besides the presence of the active intellect we require the presence of phantasms, the good disposition of the sensitive powers, and practice in this sort of operation,"<sup>2</sup> the phantasm, the architectonic summation of sensations, etc.--is actually only the matter of the cause of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The phantasm is an instrument of the active intellect. And only a higher power could make this summation in any way whatsoever effect man's proper power, the intellect.

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<sup>1</sup> Sr. Mary Anastasia Coady. The Phantasm According to Teaching of St. Thomas. Catholic University Press., Washington, D.C., 1932, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Sum. Theol., I, 79, 4, ad 3.

<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, Quodlibetales, VIII, 3.

The "how" of it still remains, and poses the difficulties which must be encountered by all considering the problem. But for St. Thomas the problem is even more difficult; for the question asks, in effect, that the tangential point of two hierarehical orders--the sensible and intellectual--be discovered. But the problem for those who would follow Thomas is more difficult still; for their master, in what is probably his most explicit statement of the relation existing between phantasm and intellect (Sum. Theol. I, 84, 7, Resp.) in "the employment of metaphor...leaves his intended meaning not altogether clear."<sup>4</sup>

Thus in his exposition of the topic, not only in the passage cited, but in all others; such terms as "illuminare", "inspicere", "illustrare" and "lumen" abound. It will be the task here, therefore, to attempt to look behind these mataphors, and, in so doing, assay--if possible--a literal explanation of the four functions of the agent intellect which are verifiable in the writings of St. Thomas. (The very nomenclature used in describing these functions exhibits this metaphorical character, viz., "illuminating" the phantasm, "abstracting" the intelligible species, "strengthening" the possible intellect, and "making evident" first principles.)

Since there is no guarantee--nor indeed even a strong indication--that such can be done, and since the above seems to indicate at least some sort of disapprobation of the method Aquinas used, it may be well to

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<sup>4</sup> Coady, 7.

consider here what the use of the metaphor involves. Now St. Thomas has been roundly and frequently criticized for his use of metaphor (as well, of course, on the contrary charge of lacking imagination), as if this were peculiar to him alone among those who seek truth. (The point is a barren one, but it may well be pointed out that one whom most worship as a philosopher, William James, makes his psychology as interesting as a literary essay by reason of his popular metaphorical style.) This is certainly not the case, but, granted his use of metaphor, the Angelic Doctor is at least consistent with his view that "everything we know in our present state is known as a 'comparison' to sensible natural things."<sup>5</sup> We thus use the same words which depict the physical world outside us to describe the psychical or spiritual world within (as "broad" interpretation, "fertile" imagination, "coarse" manners, et al.)--"when we will to understand something we propose to ourselves sensible examples out of which images can be formed which help in understanding."<sup>6</sup>

The point to be kept in mind always is that metaphorical language in no way necessarily involves obfuscation. And if there be danger, it is one that cannot be avoided; for the things are innumerable which cannot be accurately defined or described by words, which are, after all, only sensible signs. On the other hand, however, there is the fact that analogy and metaphor, if used with due measure and caution, furnish a method of investigation and help to the progress of thought which is exceedingly useful.

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<sup>5</sup> Sum. Theol., I, 84, 8, Resp.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I, 84, 7, Resp.

And there can be no doubt that these were the motives behind St. Thomas' figurative language. With him the employment of either analogy or metaphor was but an attempt to express in terms of experience thoughts lying beyond our experience; to express the abstract in terms of the concrete; to picture forth the unfamiliar by means of the familiar; to express super-sensible thought by terms which express the sensible. Thus, for instance, "illuminare", "lumen", "lux" do illustrate and elucidate man's act of understanding. So, if analogy of proportion and analogy of attribution are given place in philosophy, the same privilege must be accorded metaphor; for the use of metaphor is implicitly a reasoning from analogy. And so "it must not be thought that the question of the "lumen intellectuale" is a pure dialectic discussion of a metaphor. Even if this were so, a correct solution would still be imperative since metaphors have a certain well-defined relation to the fact which cannot be ignored."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Edward F. Talbot. Knowledge and Object. Catholic University Press., Washington, D.C., 1932, 65.

CHAPTER VI  
FUNCTIONS OF THE "INTELLECTUS AGENS"

The first of the functions of the "intellectus agens" mentioned above also ranks first in its use of metaphor. But neither of these "firsts" is the reason why the function will be considered first here. For, granted the stimulations of sensory organs transmitted to the brain, and the resultant "phantasm", the next step towards becoming intellectually cognoscible must be what St. Thomas is pleased to call "illumination". The real process of abstraction is the generation of intelligible species, "but the illumination of the phantasm, the act of making it actually intelligible precedes abstraction and renders it possible."<sup>1</sup> Just as in the human composite sensible life in general is ennobled by its union with the supersensible, so also the sensible representations, the phantasms, receive from their union with the faculty of spiritual knowledge an aptitude or a disposition so that the intelligible species can be "abstracted" from them. And for a better understanding of such a process there was, in Thomas' time, no better comparison available than that of material light. And indeed, one would be hard-pressed better to express what is being conveyed in other than this manner. This can be seen in Thomas' explanation of how the comparison is to be applied;

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<sup>1</sup> Coady, Sr. Mary Anastasia. *The Phantasm According to Teaching of St. Thomas*, Catholic University Press., Washington, D.C., 1932, 52.

It must be that corporeal images are applied to spiritual things by a certain similitude, which is indeed a similitude of proportionality...for 'light' as applied to spiritual things is that which makes for an intellectual manifesting, just as corporeal light manifests sensible reality.<sup>2</sup>

There were two theories of the nature of light in vogue in the thirteenth century (cf. I, 79, 3, ad 2).<sup>3</sup> One theory regarded light necessary for sight inasmuch as it made color actually visible; it was light which gave visibility to colors. But this opinion was not Aristotle's. He rather taught that, while light was necessary for sight, its function was not to give visibility to colors, but to make the medium through which the color passed luminous "in actu"--and thus capable of transferring the color from the object to the sense organ. It was this latter theory that St. Thomas used for his analogy. And so, as figures and colors are always found in bodies, but can only be seen if light rays fall on the bodies, so the object of the intellectual representation, i.e., the quiddity, is really in the thing; but, in order for that essence to be perceived by the soul, it has to be separated from the material conditions which accompany it in the individual. Now that separation does take place when the immaterial power of the soul "turns toward" the sensible representation; it is through the union with the spiritual light that the essence "hidden" under sensible phenomena reveals itself to the intelligence. And since this act of the "intellectus agens" transcends any operation familiar to our experience, St. Thomas, for want of a better illustration likens the process to an "illumination" of the phantasms. But whatever be the nature of this operation, it produces a result as illuminating to the intellect

<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas. In II Sent., d. 13, a.2.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gilson's interesting discussion of "light" in The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure, 271 et seq.



as light falling upon color does to the eye.

A modern illustration of this--itself about to become classical--is that of the X-ray. For, when cathode rays enter matter, the latter not only fluoresces, but also emits an entirely new kind of radiation. These rays also have the startling property of penetrating media that are opaque to ordinary light. Here there is a fine simile between the workings of the material X-rays and the immaterial "intellectus agens"; for, just as the former separates, as it were, bones from flesh in the hand (without producing any change in the hand), so, too, the latter separates the universal from the particular existing in the phantasm (and, in its turn, leaves the phantasm unchanged).

(There are, however, in this comparison of the action of physical light to that of the "lumen intellectuale", some very important differences. Thus, in the physical theory the colors are visible "in actu", independent of the action of the light; the active intellect by its light however, makes the phantasms which were intelligible only in potency, intelligible in act. Moreover, the phantasm does not determine the possible intellect in the same way that color determines sight; nor does the light of the agent intellect act directly on the possible intellect as physical light acts on the sense organ. The phantasm is acted upon by the light of the active intellect, and thus intellectual light is really not focused in any way on the possible intellect, but wholly upon the phantasm.<sup>4</sup> The result--although this is to anticipate--is that the intellect as possible receives, not illumination, but the intelligible species illumined by the "intellectus agens".)

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<sup>4</sup> Edward F. Talbot. Knowledge and Object. Catholic University Press. Washington, D.C., 1932, 68.

This point must be emphasized, namely, that in this illumination, just as in the case of the X-ray's effect on its matter, there is no change made in the phantasm. There is no modification effected in the phantasm by the illuminating power of the "intellectus agens" according to St. Thomas. The phantasm originated, and must ever remain in the imagination--and this permanence must also apply to its makeup. All that the agent intellect does is to make it intelligible, and in so doing, affects the image no more than any object is affected by throwing a light on it. There is nothing in the texts of Thomas that indicates any sort of modification other than that which the possible intellect participates in. The act of the "intellectus agens" is to separate the universal from the particular without affecting the particular; just as we can consider color in, or separate from an apple without affecting that apple.<sup>5</sup> The form in the phantasm is not transferred physically from the imagination into the possible intellect.<sup>6</sup> As the figures and colors of a body merely become visible to the eye when light falls upon the object, and as the light is the medium by which these features of the object impress our sight, so the sensible representations are not transferred from the phantasy to the possible intellect. Thus it is that, not these representations, but the power of the soul called the "active intellect" which will be seen to produce the intelligible species in the possible intellect.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sum. Theol., I, 85, 1, ad 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. I, 85, 1, ad 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. I, 85, 1, ad 4.

All this, however, is not so potently obvious as stated here. For, as was above stated, St. Thomas did not very explicitly show the relation of phantasm and intellect, and hence did not show what all was involved in saying that phantasms are "illuminated". Such a condition, naturally, drew a host of commentators and commentaries, all of whom would interpret "ad mentem divi Thomae". All agree on what Thomas had said, viz., that the phantasms "are an instrument of the agent intellect," but, "they are much divided in explaining in what manner it is an instrument."<sup>8</sup>

In apparently the only attempt he made to indicate what "illuminat" was, St. Thomas seems to indicate that this "lighting up" is a formal one (i.e., "through the inherence of light in the 'illuminated' subject."<sup>9</sup> Saying this calls for some spiritual power or light to be derived from the 'intellectus agens' in order that the phantasms might be lighted up in a formal manner".<sup>10</sup> Unexpectedly enough, this view is not the same as that of most of Thomas' great commentators for comment is needed on this topic which Thomas did not amplify to much extent. Thus Cajetan, for instance, states that the "intellectus agens" operates "in" the phantasms, not through a "formal," but an objective illumination, which he considered enough to show that the phantasm did in some way concur in producing the intelligible species. An objective illumination is "one in which an object is made apparent through the assistance of some extrinsic light...and in

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<sup>8</sup> John of St. Thomas. Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus Naturalis Naturalis Philosophiae., IV Pars, Q X, a. 2.

<sup>9</sup> C.G., II, 77.

<sup>10</sup> John of St. Thomas, X, 4.

this the 'light' is said to inhere, not in the object lighted, but in the medium of visibility."<sup>11</sup> Another interpretation is that of Sylvester Ferrariensis, who thought that phantasms were "illuminated" neither formally nor objectively, but only "radically," inasmuch as the phantasms are 'rooted' in the same spiritual soul as is the agent intellect; and thus this common source is sufficient to produce 'illuminated' phantasms, i.e., phantasms which are conditioned already so that the agent intellect could abstract from them a species (and this 'conditioning' renders the phantasm intelligible in act)."<sup>12</sup> Finally, there is the opinion of others who, like Rubio, hold "that the agent intellect lights up the phantasms by reason of the intelligible species, in which alone is the object rendered intelligible in act, which was only potentially intelligible in the phantasms."<sup>13</sup>

Now it was already shown that there can be no modification of the phantasm according to St. Thomas. It was also seen that the material phantasm cannot, as such, affect the possible intellect. It must be in line with these two principles, then, that some judgment be made of the several above views on what "illumination" is. Thus it appears that it can be said of the "radical" illustration, or illumination, that it forgets these two principles; for, from this "being rooted in", it does not seem that the phantasm and its action do not receive any immateriality, or any power

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11  
Ibid., X, 4.

12Ibid., X, 4.

13Ibid., X, 4.

exceeding the corporeal and material nature, for is not the soul (as was shown previously) the remote principle even of processes which take place in corporeal organs? Since the soul is the form of the whole body, every function of man--conscious or unconscious--is "psychical". But are we then to conclude that every function of man is a spiritual one? The answer is, of course, that such a conclusion is obviously false. But then, how is it to be maintained that what is certainly not a spiritual action (namely, that process involving the phantasy), can be called spiritual on only this basis, namely, that it is--as is the agent intellect--somehow rooted in the soul? Certainly a common source does not say that the two elements involved are "habilitated" for somehow acting on each other.

Therefore, if there is only this "radical habilitation", this "rooting" must either have in it something of spirituality (and hence destroy the nature of the phantasm), or else the same difficulty obtains as before, viz., how the material can affect the immaterial. And thus it seems impossible that Thomas' theory of how the active intellect affects the phantasms is to be found in this interpretation.

Nor is the idea of a formal illumination totally adequate. For an illumining of this sort seems also to violate the principles on which a true interpretation must be based. Again it must be recalled most emphatically that a phantasm is an image and is, as such, particular; it is by definition corporeal. And, although it must in some way be a partial source of intelligibility, it can itself be no more than intelligible in potency. If, then, we are to say that the active intellect formally illumines the phantasms (if some light "inheres in" the phantasm) and thus makes it

intelligible, we in effect destroy the phantasm. Any such immutation of the phantasm cannot but deny the exclusively potential intelligibility of this image. Thus the action of the "intellectus agens" on the phantasm cannot be of this "formal" nature.

Nor does it seem that Cajetan's solution can avail; for although it seems that, unlike the previous example, no intrinsic mutation takes place--only an extrinsic assistance being given--, such a change actually seems unavoidable. For this extrinsic assistance--this illumination of the medium of "visibility"--either serves to make the object intelligible in the phantasm, or not; if not, then, of course, the phantasm is potentially intelligible, just as it was before the "illumination". While if some such effect is, on the other hand, had, its term is either in the phantasm (and thus there is a "formal" illumination)--which, since it would constitute an intrinsic immutation, Cajetan most emphatically denies; or else in the possible intellect--but this latter effect would be the very "impressed intelligible species" in whose forming he seeks the part played by the phantasm; or else--and finally--in something joined to the phantasm (as air is diffused around a colored object). But this last, while it seems plausible, is as unacceptable as the other alternatives, since the power derived from the "intellectus agens" is spiritual and "cannot be more diffused through a corporeal thing than in that very phantasm which is its subject, which itself is corporeal"<sup>14</sup>; so that the spiritual illumination

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., X, 4.

actually has illuminated nothing. Hence, though there must be some effect produced by the spiritual light of the intellect remaining in the phantasm, Cajetan's solution cannot serve to explain it.

In the face of this last failure it is well to recall again the two principles upon which a valid interpretation of what St. Thomas calls "illumination" can be made. These two conditions are rooted in the very natures of things; on the nature of the phantasm, and on the relations--if any--which are possible between the material and the immaterial (spiritual). Now a phantasm is a material image which comes to be as the culmination of sensible knowledge; it is the "summation" of sensible notes which expresses the thing known in its most complete sensible "form."

But a phantasm is only material; any intelligibility it purely potential intelligibility. And in this is the crux of the problem. For the knowledge of man as man must be the knowledge consequent on man's highest power; i.e., it must be intellectual knowledge. Now all knowledge comes in some way from the senses and ultimately from the phantasm. But how is this possible; how can the material phantasm affect an immaterial faculty? From this consideration then are the two principles mentioned above derivable. For it must be said that the material cannot affect the immaterial; but it must also be said that the phantasm, if it is to remain such, cannot suffer any modification which would destroy its nature.

Now in order that "illumination" be possible of definition, it remains to see what St. Thomas has said about the one of the solutions above advanced which has not yet been considered. This yet uncriticized view of

"illumination" is one that does not seem to involve rendering the knowable object intelligible in the phantasm itself. But it does say that the phantasm is somehow "used" by the "intellectus agens" as an instrument elevated by it "to the production of a spiritual and intelligible species" in which the object is first of all represented in an immaterially intelligible mode--thus not violating--at least at first glance--the two "regula".

But is this so? Does this not involve what has been vehemently vetoed up till now, i.e., a corporeal instrument's producing a spiritual effect? Although difficult of explication, this can be denied; and the palliation here is that the corporeal instrument is "elevated by a spiritual power". Now that such is a possibility in the philosophy (and theology) of St. Thomas is truly ineluctable; for instance, fire, elevated by God, can apparently torture a spiritual substance; likewise, sacraments--material beings--cause grace in the soul. And the reason for the possibility is equally inescapable, granted Thomas' thought. For the union of spirit and matter in man is "for the perfecting of the intellect itself." It is therefore fitting that things corporeal should be subordinate to the spiritual in the formation of that which pertains to the perfection of intellect--here, the "impressed species". And thus, as the virtue of the artificer is determined by the knife to producing a sharp incision, and the instrument, in turn, by the artificer, so that the incision be of such kind; so is the power of the active intellect determined by the phantasm "so that the species of such (tale) an object or quiddity be elicited." And the phantasm, from the motion and elevation of the "intellectus agens"



is now used to produce a species representing in an immaterial mode, and without the conditions of matter, the quiddity of the object to be known.

We might still ask if all this is not gratuitous. Can texts be brought forth to show it is not? If the actual words of St. Thomas substantiating this particular possibility be sought, they can be found in the answer to the fourth objection of the first article, question eighty-five, in the "Prima Pars." Here Aquinas points out that the agent intellect's power is in respect of the phantasms, but abstraction is in respect of the species. But, since there is no intelligibility in act without abstraction, it would be absurd to say that the phantasms are made intelligible in themselves. The "illumination" is thus not one of some immaterial perfection being somehow placed in the phantasm; rather, it consists only in rendering the phantasms "habilia" for the "extraction" of the intelligible species.

Now, lest this be thought to be the same general position as the one considered above, it must be said that the "habilitas" concluded to here is not something "radicale" in the phantasms, since "they" are said to be "habilitated" by the power of the intellect "as active"--not as the inevitable condition of being rooted in the soul. But this power, it must be understood, is not the root of the phantasms (the soul is), and so posits in them not something "radicale", but "actuale"; and therefore "cannot be anything else but some moving or impression by which the phantasms are moved and subordinated to the agent intellect; and thus in the same way an axe is by art made able to product artefacts, so is the

phantasm made an instrument able to produce species."<sup>15</sup> It is for this reason that St. Thomas can call the "intellectus agens" an "artist" and the phantasm an "instrument".<sup>16</sup>

Thus then does St. Thomas explain illumination. One might well question whether this is an explanation; but it seems that this is all Thomas has to say on the matter. Admittedly there remains much to be said; for an "elevation" of the phantasm to a position where it can be used as an "instrument for the production of species" still leaves what Maritain calls "mystery." Yet what could there be but mystery when there is any question of any sort of relation between the material and the spiritual orders? If knowledge is an acquisition of "being," why should the mystery in which "being" is shrouded be thought to be absent?

How--it was also asked (and answered)--can the same intellect be conceived clearly by us as being both passive and active? And the answer to this is also the answer to how the "intellectus agens" "prepares" (by illumination) the phantasm so that it might from it produce an intelligible species. That answer is that the case in each is one involving a metaphysical necessity. Surely the potentially intelligible source (and the only source) of root intellectual knowledge must be somehow 'made' actually intelligible. And as long as it be remembered that this can only be so on the basis of the two above-mentioned principles, it must also be admitted that only this solution of Thomas can--of all the others mentioned--be accepted.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., X, 4.

<sup>16</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas. De Veritate, X.; cf. also Quodlibet. VIII, 3.

However, this may perhaps be better understood when it is noted that illumination is neither the sole work of the agent intellect, nor is illumination the only element in reducing potential intelligibility to actual intelligibility. For having completed its work of "illumining" the phantasm--using again here, static, substantial terms for what is in fact, a process--the active intellect proceeds to carry out its second major function in the acquisition of knowledge the abstracting of the intelligible species. An understanding of this function is as difficult of attainment as that of the previous function--though here there is probably a better image to be formed of the process than in the previous case. Yet the difficulty is great--or perhaps more so, due to the use of images for what is a metaphysical point. But the attempt will be rewarding as well, for "the key to St. Thomas" theory of cognition is the abstraction of the 'species intelligibilis' from the phantasm; but in truth it seems difficult to find the lock."<sup>17</sup>

A beginning can be made by considering what abstraction involves in itself. For St. Thomas it may occur in two ways; first by way of composition and division, and "thus we understand that one thing does not exist in some other, or that it is separate from it";<sup>18</sup> secondly, by way of a simple and absolute consideration, and "thus we understand one thing without considering another."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, for the intellect to abstract from one

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<sup>17</sup> J. L. McKenzie. "Abstraction in St. Thomas". Modern Schoolman, IX, 1934.

<sup>18</sup> Sum. Theol., I, 85, 1, ad 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., I, 85, 1, ad 1.

another, things which are not really abstracted from each other would imply falsehood in the first of these modes above; while in the second mode such a procedure is perfectly in order and involves no falsehood. For, if it were said that color is not in a colored object, or that it were separate from it, there would be error in what was said or thought. However, if the color and its properties are considered without reference to the subject they are in, there is nothing amiss; for any particular colored object is not essential to color, and thus color can be understood independently of "hoc" object.

In the same way, the things which belong to the species of a material thing can be considered without considering the individual principles which do not belong to the notion of the species. This, then, is what is meant by abstracting the universal from the particular, or the intelligible species from the phantasm. In other words, this is to consider the nature of the species apart from the individual notes as presented in the phantasm.

This last is, of course, that abstraction which is the agent intellect's second function. But again, the matter is far from as clear as might seem from cursorily reading the above sentences. Oddly enough, however, the reason for much of the obfuscation is not in the doctrine itself. True enough, knowledge is far from being a process easy of explanation. And the process of abstraction, the very foundation of what can be called

Thomas' noetic, must more than share in this disability. But the darkness here truly is not so much from the almost unfathomable depths of thought on an almost unfathomable problem which the mind of an Aquinas can lead; but rather is it from the multitudinous misinterpretations with which his explanations have been burdened.

The actual point in question here is that "the species of a material thing can be considered without considering the individual principles which do not belong to the notion of the species." This formula "formerly signified the taking up of something; now it would signify the neglect of something."<sup>20</sup> Thus, at present, as the mere consideration of the mere consideration of the word would consciously indicate to everyone, the idea is "to be rid of something", of matter--which last involves an even greater error, since matter is not to be abstracted away in the knowing of a material object. Such connotations, then, are not "ad mentem divi Thomae", and are far from giving abstraction the exalted meaning he does--rather is this new view almost purely a negative one.

For, as defined by Thomas, abstraction was the "taking up of the essence by the intellect; it was an elevation of the essence to the level of intellect".<sup>21</sup> In no sense was it conceived of as the discovery of a "new point of view"; for a "new point of view would still have as its object and end the phantasm of an individual object. It could never attain that higher

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<sup>20</sup> M. Maher. Psychology, Empirical and Rational. Longmans, Green Co., 1900, 307.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 307.

sphere of activity in which the essence is made evident."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, for any investigation of this second function of the active intellect the correct meaning of the word itself must be constantly kept in mind.

In abstraction two causes must be considered as finally productive of the intelligible species in the "intellect as possible." The "intellectus agens" is the cause insofar as it renders the object intelligible in act. The phantasm is the cause insofar as, in virtue of this principle cause, it furnishes the essence of a determined object to be cognized. St. Thomas characterizes the relationship by saying that the phantasm is the instrumental cause of the intelligible species--in that receiving in which the possible intellect acquires the species of things, the phantasms act as a secondary and instrumental cause"<sup>23</sup> (while the agent intellect is the principle and primary cause"). Thus the intelligible species is "in" the "possible intellect as conditioned by both and not by one only".<sup>24</sup> And thus, since neither the active intellect, nor the phantasm, alone are sufficient for such a species, it must be said that "intelligible forms in act do not exist as such either in the phantasm or in the agent intellect, but solely in the possible intellect."<sup>25</sup>

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22 Talbot, 71.

23 St. Thomas Aquinas. De Veritate., X, 6, ad 7.

24 Ibid., X, 6, ad 7.

25 Ibid., X, 6, ad 7.

But what is this caused thing, this intelligible species? It is not an overly mysterious thing, however occult be the manner in which it "enters" the mind. It is simply the nature of an object considered in itself without regard to the material conditions in which it exists. The object is intelligible now, because, although it does not--and cannot--exist as immaterial, it is considered without the conditions of its matter; it is abstractively immaterial.

But it may be asked--along with the host of not strictly pertinent questions which the matter above invites--how an abstraction from matter could even be considered possible. For the essence of a material object is a material essence; and, unless one means to say, for instance, that, in knowing man he can know man's soul "apart" from man's body, then it cannot apparently be said that the form is abstracted from the matter. It would thus seem that this function of abstracting is truly a metaphorical one. But this is to forget one most important point, viz., that a material object, "qua" material, cannot, abstraction omitted, be actually intelligible to an immaterial faculty.

The complete reply to such an objection will serve not only to answer the objection, but to indicate precisely what happens when an "abstraction" is made from "illuminated" or "prepared" phantasm. The reply is a quotation from the Summa Theologica, and, while lengthy, it is indispensable for an understanding of Thomas' thought on the subject:

matter is twofold, common and 'signate', or individual; common, such as flesh and bone; individual, such as this flesh and these bones. The intellect therefore abstracts the species of a natural thing from the individual sensible matter, but

not from the common sensible matter. For example, it abstracts the species of 'man' from 'this flesh and these bones', which do not belong to the species as such, but to the individual, and need not be considered in the species. But the species of man cannot be abstracted by the intellect from 'flesh and bones.'<sup>26</sup>

The point, then, is that in its second function the "intellectus agens" does not abstract from matter, but from material determinations. In cognizing some object via this "abstraction" which is productive of that object's intelligible species, the form is not abstracted as pure and self-subsisting--this would be an error--but as a material principle, the act of an individual material object determining that object to be what it is (matter is such and is known as such only through its actualization by the form).

Now here, as in his statements on illumination, Thomas stops his analysis of abstraction. And as in the previous case he does stop at the "mystery"; he does stop at that point where there must be some sort of interaction between the material and the immaterial. The phantasm has been "prepared"--via illumination--so that it might be "made" in some way the source of actual intelligibility. But for actual intelligibility there must be more than preparation; there must be this process called abstraction, for it is through this that the intelligible species is produced. And the point here is again the "must"; for we are faced here again with a metaphysical necessity.

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<sup>26</sup> Sum. Theol., I, 85, 1, ad 2.



How the possible intellect is, as the result of illumination and abstraction, enabled to "see" the essence, encased in matter--for St. Thomas does say that the essence is known in the phantasm--is as difficult to clearly know as how the phantasm was originally "elevated" to this state. Certainly it can be said the "elevation" must be continuous. But just as certainly must it be said that the phantasm must not be destroyed as to its materiality; and that the phantasm as such cannot affect an immaterial faculty such as the possible intellect. So that it can only be concluded--more definite texts on the matter being unavailable--that the phantasm is "raised" (by its conjunction with the agent intellect as acting on it) to where it can serve as the instrument whereby its intelligibility is reduced--by the agent intellect--from a potential to an actual state.

This, then, is the function of abstraction, the presenting of the essence ("from" the "illuminated" phantasm) to the possible intellect, and the consequent generation of the intelligible species. As for the possible intellect, "in being impressed by the abstractively immaterial form which determines the essence of the object, it is impressed immediately by the object; and by this similitude it knows what the object is."<sup>27</sup>

With this it would seem that the "intellectus agens" has completed its immediate work in regard to the acquisition of knowledge. It has, but only as far as being the liaison between the phantasm and the possible intellect, between sensible and intellectual knowledge. But there are yet

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<sup>27</sup> J. L. McKenzie, "Abstraction in St. Thomas". Modern Schoolman, IX, 1934, 91

two other functions of the agent intellect verifiable in St. Thomas works, functions which, while not so apparently metaphysically necessary as the two above, are nevertheless an integral part of the relationship of the "intellect as active" to "intellect as passive" on the way to the consummation of the "intellect in act."

The textual sources for a third function of the "intellectus agens", that of "strengthening" the possible intellect, are comparatively meager. The clearest reference to it, few will dispute, is that in the Disputed Questions on Truth--"for since everything which is understood, is known through the intellectual power of man; the very thing known, inasmuch as it is of 'such' kind includes in itself the intellectual light as participated, from which there is derived power to 'strengthen' the understanding."<sup>28</sup> But the textual reinforcement is not here the usually most vital part; the true source of this function is not a text--it is Thomas' philosophy as a whole.

For St. Thomas Aquinas, reality is not discrete or discontinuous; rather is it closely bound and, in a wondrous manner, hierarchically arranged. In his view, everything created could be graded in perfection in one line from the angels down ("could be" only, for, without much more knowledge than man could ever possess, the task is an impossible one physically; though the metaphysical possibility remains). In fact, we do recognize some of these larger gradations, such as the vegetative, sensitive, and intellectual. Now, between these grades there is to be found no total disjunction

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<sup>28</sup> De Ver., IX, 1, ad 2; cf. also X, 13.

with either the one immediately above or below; for St. Thomas maintains that the highest and lowest in any of these classes have powers of operation much akin to the lowest and highest of the grades that flank it. Thus, in the classic example, the "estimative sense", which "judges of intentions", is a power of the highest animals, which closely approximates the power of the lowest intellectual creature, man.

However, it is not in this, as such, that the hierarchical arrangement of reality is of value for considering the agent intellect. For this order means much more than a similarity of power in intellectual substances; for such substances it really means a sort of natural order "communion of saints". This last is most fully evident in Aquinas' philosophy in his theory of angelic knowledge, in which a "lower" angel knows something more because a "higher" angel makes its own more universal knowledge evident even to this lower species. But these highest intellectual creatures not only "illuminate" each other, but have their effect on the lowest intellectual creature, man, (in the Christian religion this effect is part of their ministry); "since the order of Divine Providence disposes that the lower things be subject to the actions of the higher..., just as the inferior angels are illumined by the superior, so men, who are inferior to the angels, are illumined by them."<sup>29</sup> The effect of this on man is, that his intellect is strengthened and the more his intellect is so strengthened, "so much higher an intelligible truth can be elicited from the species derived from creatures."<sup>30</sup> Hence, as the nobler, the higher, the more perfect and full

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<sup>29</sup> Sum. Theol., I, III, 1, Resp.

<sup>30</sup> Sum. Theol., I, III, 1, ad 2.

in being aids the lower, so can the "intellectus agens" as the act of the possible intellect--and consequently the nobler of the two--aid and strengthen it.

Previously it was shown that light can only be spoken of "in the way we would speak of corporeal light". Now corporeal light is the medium by which we see, and serves sight in two definite ways; in one way, in that through it something is made visible in act which was formerly only visible in potency; and in another way, in that the visual power is itself strengthened for seeing. (Thus intellectual light can be called "the very vigor of the intellect for understanding", or even that by which something is made known to us.) Hence, an illumination of one intellect by another is two-fold; first, by it an intellect is made strong, or stronger for knowing; secondly by it an intellect is "led" (*manuducitur*) to the knowing of something. But these two are conjoined in the intellect, "as can be seen when something, by means of a medium which the mind conceives, so strengthens the intellect that it can now understand things which it previously could not."<sup>31</sup>

According to this, one intellect is said to be illuminated by another "inasmuch as there is given it some medium of knowing, by which it is strengthened for the understanding of things which it could not previously know."<sup>32</sup> Thus, for instance, a teacher, by his spoken word, gives to his pupil a certain medium through which the student's intellect is made able

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<sup>31</sup> De. Ver., IX, 1, Resp.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., IX, 1, Resp.

to understand things which were not, and could not be understood by him previously. And this "strengthening" of a potency, and its perfection comes naturally from its conjunction with its act.

Now, since everything understood is understood by what can be called the "strength of intellectual light", the very thing understood, as such, includes in itself the intellectual light as participated, through whose power it has it in itself to strengthen the intellect. Just as, in the example above, it is obvious that the master gives something to his pupil through the medium of demonstration, "in which there is a participation of the light of the agent intellect...and the same applies to all secondary principles which are proper means of demonstration".<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the third function of the "intellectus agens" consists in its giving--via its instruments, the first principles--the possible intellect the power to understand, to know what it could not have known before--"to this end, that it might be led to knowing." For, as without abstraction there could be no "change" from a sensible to an intellectual status for the object to be known, so here, could there be no knowing, or judging the object without the intellect's having given the power (via its instruments, as was shown). With this "strength", the possible intellect may now know its proper objects.

If "strengthening" the possible intellect appeared to be a difficult and nebulous thing, the fourth of the functions of the "intellectus agens", that of "making evident" the first principles, will be found to be more

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., IX, 1, ad 2.

concrete and less difficult. This function--a "part" of the third function-- is indicated in its substance in these words:

the possible intellect cannot, however, have knowledge of the principles except through the agent intellect. For knowledge of the principles is received from sensible objects... but the intelligible cannot be received from the sensible except via the abstraction of the agent intellect.<sup>34</sup>

Thus St. Thomas attributes to the "intellectus agens" not only that it "produces a species by abstracting and rendering objects intelligible in act, but also that it illumines the possible intellect, manifesting by its light the first principles, and through the medium of these, those things which are known through these principles..."<sup>35</sup>

This function is, of course, basically a corollary of the fact that only via an active intellect can any knowledge at all be engendered in the mind; but it is not for all this something as immediately to be seen as "illumination" and "abstraction". Now this is not to be taken in any way to mean that its importance is less than that of other functions. On the contrary, it is, in fact, the very cornerstone of all human knowledge, and has even been considered by some to be the very essence of an "intellectus agens" ("some indeed believe the agent intellect to be nothing else than that habit of indemonstrable principles which is in us"<sup>36</sup>). Now that such adulation be given the first principles is to exaggerate, yet, whatever all the first principles Thomas speaks of be, they are for his philosophy of total importance; for if--"per impossible"--they could be shown false,

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<sup>34</sup> De An., IV, ad 6.

<sup>35</sup> John of St. Thomas, X, 4.

<sup>36</sup> De An., 5, Resp.

he should have to admit that his whole philosophy (as well, of course, as all "scientia") had only a probable, if indeed any, basis.

But here it must be noted again that this effect of the agent intellect "is not immediately effected by it, but mediately, inasmuch as in the species thus abstracted the strength of the intellectual light shines forth, rendering the objects themselves intelligible--which objects can then serve for making other objects attainable and manifest."<sup>37</sup> Through the medium of the "impressed" species the "intellectus agens" thus "flows into" all the acts of the human intellect (cognitions). All knowledge, even the habit of first principles, is from the senses--"we know even the very indemonstrable principles themselves by abstracting from singulars."<sup>38</sup> But sensibles are objects which are rendered intelligible in the very species which the "intellectus agens" had abstracted; "whence it is necessary that the agent intellect be prior to the habit of principles as their very cause."<sup>39</sup>

And from these considerations can now also be delineated the last of the functions of the "intellectus agens" to be considered here--"and thus it is clear that the intellect in act does not suffice for reducing the possible intellect from potency to act without the agent intellect; but in this reduction the agent intellect acts as an artificer, and the principles of demonstration as instruments."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> John of St. Thomas, X, 4.

<sup>38</sup> De An., 5, Resp.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 5, Resp.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 5, Resp.

Nor could any other inflowing have been expected, since the agent intellect cannot "illuminate" by knowing, nor by producing some habitual light in the intellect. For were there such a habit, if it were acquired, it would be made through the medium of some cognitive act; if it were infused, it would not be made at all by the agent intellect, but by God.

Therefore the active intellect is said to manifest the first principle by its light,

not as presenting this very light, which is the habit of first principles, because this habit is acquired through some act of cognition (since it is not an infused, nor an innate habit)...but from the very cognition of the terms there is generated an assent to the principles and the habit itself is produced.<sup>41</sup>

But, since it needs nothing for this assent except the explication of the terms--and this through the species themselves as in the first place abstracted by the agent intellect--the manifestation of first principles is of the "mediate" nature just described.

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<sup>41</sup> John of St. Thomas, X, 4.



## CONCLUSION

According to the principles of St. Thomas Aquinas, there exists a necessary proportion between the object of knowledge and the human conditions of knowledge. Granting that the proper object of the human intellect is the essence of a material substance, there follows, as a necessary consequence, that there must be a "turning to" material things for our knowledge. From this arises the necessity of assigning the intellect some active, abstractive power whereby the essences "encased" in this matter might be known. And in this act of attainment there seems to be certain indispensable "parts"; these, under the names given above, are the functions of the "intellectus agens".

However, all that has been said would be valueless, unless it be remembered that the "intellectus agens" is not an observable fact. It is based on what is wholly basic in Thomas' thinking, namely, the doctrine of potency and act. But this does not make the resulting conclusions less, but rather more, ineluctable. The active intellect and its functions are pure metaphysical necessities.

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The thesis submitted by Peter P. Springer has been read and approved by three members of the Department of Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

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