

Aquinas on Self-Knowledge

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1. Two kinds of self-knowledge

Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of self-knowledge. The intellect, he says, knows itself in two ways:

In the first place, singularly, as when Socrates or Plato perceives that he has an intellectual soul because he perceives that he understands. In the second place, universally, as when we consider the nature of the human mind from knowledge of the intellectual act. (*ST I*, 87, 1)

Although the second kind of knowledge about the nature or essence of man raises interesting issues, in this paper I want to consider just one thesis ascribed to Aquinas as concerns the first kind of self-knowledge in which the intellect knows its own mental states (hereafter self-knowledge *simpliciter*). This is the thesis that what distinguishes human beings from animals is 'a self-reflexive power that allows them to have not only cognitions but also cognition of the truth of their cognitions'. (MacDonald 1993, 186) Call this the M-thesis. One interpretation of the M-thesis might seem trivial: what distinguishes humans from non-rational animals is not merely the fact that they are able to have concepts and produce thoughts on the basis of the concepts that they possess but also that the indispensable precondition of being a person is precisely the fact of human self-knowledge. For what use would our concepts and thinking be if we did not know what concepts we are having or what thoughts we are entertaining?

The M-thesis might now be interpreted as expressing some kind of Cartesian view according to which mind is transparent to the subject and the subject has an infallible access to his own mental states. However, I will show that it is wrong to ascribe such a view to Aquinas.

2. Knowledge of our own mental states

We can divide our mental states into two groups: phenomenal mental states (sensations: bodily feelings and perceptual experiences, for example hearing a sound or feeling hot), and intentional mental states (cognitive, conative and affective attitudes such as my thought that it is hot outside or my desire to go back home).

(a) First-person access to phenomenal mental states

Apparently Aquinas would have no problem with ascribing to the intellect knowledge of the first group of mental states. For him, as for Aristotle, sensations belong to the realm of the sensitive and not of the rational soul. The proof of that is the fact that sensory experiences are always of particular objects. My seeing a dog is a relation between my sense of sight and this particular dog.

The realm of the intellect, in contrast, is the realm of what is universal. The intellect does not understand a particular dog but rather its universal canine nature. Phenomenal mental states are physiological, and thus the intellect by itself cannot have any (self-) knowledge about them. Having concepts is not sufficient for thinking about a particular experience. That is why the intellect can refer to

experiences only with the aid of the senses: we need perception to be able to point to a particular phenomenal mental state that we are having. As Aquinas puts it, 'It is clear that our mind cannot be directly aware of the individual. We are aware of the individual directly through our sense-powers.' (*DV*, 10, 5)

One might want to object to the idea that the mind knows its phenomenal mental states in such a non-problematic way, for this seems to necessitate the existence of a faculty of inner sense. If mental states are in some sense material, then in order to know them the intellect has to proceed as it proceeds with phenomena in the external material world. For this, on the Aristotelian-Thomistic (and -Brentanian) theory of knowledge, it needs the aid of a sense that would have mental states as its proper objects.

(b) Knowledge of our intentional mental states

Further problems with self-knowledge of our intentional mental states turn on the fact that, for Aquinas, only thoughts that are somehow based on sense images would be *about a particular thing* and thus the intellect could not know them by itself. Presumably, however, there are thoughts (e.g. mathematical thoughts) that are in no sense connected to sense images. For what sense image would we need in order to entertain the thought that $2 + 2 = 4$?

How, most importantly, could the intellect know its own universal thoughts? In the case of knowledge of external material objects, the intellect grasps the universal form contained in the particulars. The form that existed as a particular in an object acquires a new, intelligible and universal existence in the mind of the knowing subject. What is needed for the cognition of thoughts is that the intellect forms second-order thoughts about first-order thoughts, where second-order thoughts grasp the form from the first level.

Now, if self-knowledge is really possible and if it means having second-level mental state ascriptions, then this suggests that there has to be a difference between the two levels of thoughts. However, on both levels the intellect is referring to one and the same universal form. Aquinas himself says that there is a difference between thinking about a stone and understanding that one is thinking about a stone (*ST I*, 87, 3). Perhaps this only concerns the 'mixed' kind of thoughts, i.e. those in which the intellect is collaborating with the senses. If so, then would the difference be between the two levels of 'pure' thoughts? Could we make any sense of the idea that in self-knowledge the universal form from the first-level thought acquires some kind of second-level intelligibility and universality? And how could the second-level grasp the individual that is *me* in all of this, since it can grasp only universal forms?

3. Is self-knowledge *knowledge*?

(a) Apparent infallibility of self-knowledge

A person can be said to have *knowledge* in a domain, if she has some true beliefs about this domain (without entering into details about what constitutes necessary conditions for knowledge). Is this the sense in which we have knowledge about our own mental states? The Cartesian trend in philosophy would suggest that not only do we have knowledge about our mental states, but also that this knowledge is total: we know all mental states we ever have and our access to our mental states is infallible.

Aquinas says in different places, for instance in *Summa Theologiae* (ST I, 85, 6) after St. Augustine, that 'the intellect is always true'. This claim as to the infallibility of the intellect does not seem to be limited only to self-knowledge; it should also apply to knowledge in general. But is Aquinas denying the very obvious fact that we make mistakes in our cognitive activities? One solution to this apparent puzzle goes as follows. Consider what happens when we think that our knowledge of our mental states belongs to what Aquinas calls the first operation of the intellect, in which the intellect forms an abstract idea, or a concept, of a given object of cognition. On this first solution it is then indeed acceptable to say that the intellect is never false, but this is so only because on this level of cognition we do not deal with knowledge properly speaking at all. For according to this solution the workings of our intellect are never false because they are never true, either.

(b) Is Aquinas a reliabilist?

Aquinas, however, offers a different explanation of the reliability of the intellect. Its reliability is not much different from that which we usually ascribe to our senses – namely that we usually rely on what they report without having too many doubts. This is how Aquinas explains this fact:

each potency, as such, receives an intrinsic, non-incident ordination to its proper object. But whatever has this sort of ordination is always the same. Thus, as long as the potency remains intact, judgments concerning its proper object are not defective. (ST I, 85, 6)

The veracity of the intellect means that 'it is not deceived about its proper objects'. The proper object of the intellect is the essence of things. The intellect is correct in understanding a thing, if it is 'assimilated to the thing understood'. (DA, III, XI) This means that the veracity of the intellect consists in the essence of the thing being correctly grasped by the concept that the intellect forms. (Haldane 1993, 21) I am not quite sure if this is sufficient as an explanation. What Aquinas is suggesting is that the intellect works like the senses: it is just a fact that, if my organ of sight is working properly (and certain other conditions are satisfied), then whenever the sense 'sends' the information to the intellect that there is a dog before me, then there truly is a dog before me. But as we shall see, there are still many problems connected with this interpretation of Aquinas' explanation of self-knowledge.

Firstly, this account of the veracity of the intellect indicates that its infallibility is something automatic, and that Aquinas' theory of knowledge is a reliabilist theory: we (usually) have knowledge about our own mental states *because our mechanism of cognition is reliable*. Such a reliabilist theory of knowledge, however, would not give any support to the M-thesis from the beginning of this paper according to which it is the fact that humans can consciously appraise the truth or falsity of their own mental

states that distinguishes them from non-rational animals. Aquinas, as it turns out, does not think that reliability of a mechanical sort is a good enough guarantee for the veracity of the intellect, for he 'makes it a requirement of justification that the person *possess* or have access to the grounds constitutive of his justification.' (MacDonald 1993, 186)

Another problem one might have with the given interpretation is that it seems to leave no room for any kind of privileged access that a subject has to her mental states. Instead, it suggests that we are as reliable or as likely to make mistakes in our statements about our mental states as we are in our statements about external objects. Again, this claim is not necessarily implausible. However, in order to provide a plausible support for the M-thesis we need to defend some kind of special access in the case of self-knowledge.

4. The special character of self-knowledge

Robert Pasnau in his *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* claims explicitly that Aquinas 'accounts for the special access we so clearly do have to our minds' through his theory of the reflective method of self-knowledge. (Pasnau 2002)

(a) Inner-sense model of self-knowledge

In the passage already quoted above Aquinas says: 'Plato perceives that he has an intellectual soul because he perceives that he understands.' (ST I, 87, 1) This suggests that the intellect directly grasps its own actions and that it somehow automatically perceives its own actions whenever they happen. Here, again, we might surmise that Aquinas is endorsing a Lockean 'inner sense' view about self-knowledge, a view according to which it is by acts of introspection (or by means of a special inner sense) that we perceive our mental states. On this view, as we said before, the intellect would have to form some higher-level ideas or concepts about its own mental states. However, as Pasnau puts it,

Aquinas denies that self-knowledge involves any further, special idea of ourselves or our own actions. (...) there is no further set of ideas, derived directly from mind, and what ideas we have of mind, we have precisely from things without. (Pasnau 2002, 342)

In Question 87 of the first part of the *Summa* Aquinas explains that the intellect is by its nature directed toward objects outside the mind. Self-knowledge, then, can only be a secondary activity of the intellect. Human intellect has no direct access to its own mental states and it can acquire knowledge of them only indirectly, by 'apprehending external things.' (Pasnau 2002, 341) This is so because 'there is no such thing as pure thinking: whenever we think, we are thinking of something.' (Kenny 1993, 121) Consequently, the natural role of concepts or ideas is to be the means and not the objects of thought. Concepts and ideas can become object of thoughts in reflection (Haldane 1993, 21) but not in the way in which the introspective model of self-knowledge suggests.

(b) Reflexive model of self-knowledge

Aquinas calls the way in which the intellect grasps its own actions 'a kind of return' or 'a kind of reflection' (DV, 10, 9) and he compares it to the way in which we look in a mirror:

Through a likeness within vision obtained from a mirror, one's vision is directly drawn to cognize the reflected object; but by turning back in a way it is drawn

through that same [internal likeness] to the likeness that is in the mirror. (*DV*, 2, 6)

When I look at myself in a mirror, what I usually see is, precisely, myself. Of course, I can also see the mirror, but only by making a special effort in this direction. In the same way, external things are the primary objects of thought, and thought itself can be known by the intellect only by some special effort on the part of the intellect. Therefore, as Pasnau notes, 'reflection, for Aquinas, is not an introspective turning away from external things, but a certain way of looking at external things: it is an outward look that is reflected back within.' (Pasnau 2002, 343)

Brentano (1969) seems to be advancing a view similar to Aquinas'. He claims that all our mental phenomena are intentional. This means that they are first of all directed to their objects; at the same time, each of them is also accompanied by a secondary consciousness of the mental act itself. Aquinas would thus agree with Brentano that it is not by turning away from the external world and looking within that we discover our own thoughts, but rather 'by attending in a special way' to the content of our original thoughts about the external world.

(c) Are all our mental states conscious?

According to Pasnau (Pasnau 2002, 344-347), there is one more similarity between Aquinas' and Brentano's views: both of them take consciousness for granted. This, Pasnau claims, is what constitutes a weak point in Aquinas' theory of self-knowledge. It is true that for Brentano every mental act is conscious as a matter of definition. I think, however, that Pasnau is going too far when he suggests that also for Aquinas self-knowledge is possible only because all of our mental states are conscious. To prove my point it will be useful to make another distinction within the initial typology of mental states presented above. For Aquinas, what I called *intentional mental states* do not constitute a homogeneous group. Rather, he would consider some of our beliefs and desires as *dispositions* to a certain kind of behavior. (*ST*, I, 87, 2) Those mental states that are always conscious, on the other hand, belong to another group: the group of propositional mental states; I will call them, simply, *thoughts*. (In fact, the same beliefs and desires could belong to either of the two groups; when they are not conscious, we call them dispositions.)

On this view, the intellect learns about its own dispositions in the same way in which it learns about other people's beliefs and desires, that is to say by observing its own behavior. As for thoughts, it seems that they always must be expressed (or *be expressible*) in language. My beliefs and desires can properly be called conscious only when I formulate them in language (either overtly to other people or silently to myself). If this is so, then it turns out that for Aquinas the special character of the human capacity for self-knowledge is in the end due to the fact that only human beings possess language.

References

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