

THOMISM AND 'AFFECTIVE
KNOWLEDGE' (II)

IN order to understand what St. Thomas means by 'affective knowledge' or knowledge by 'inclination' or 'connaturality,' something must first be said of what he understands by 'knowledge,' and what by 'affect,' 'inclination,' or 'connaturality.' Readers will not expect in this short article a full and detailed account, let alone a justification, of St. Thomas's theory of knowledge and of appetite. A brief survey of some salient points such as is required for our present purposes is all we shall attempt; and to obviate the necessity of explaining St. Thomas's medieval terminology we shall frankly paraphrase his thought in less unfamiliar language. Those readers who wish to study the matter further in St. Thomas's own words will find at the end of the article a selection of 'readings' in which they may investigate the various points raised.

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St. Thomas's account of the nature of knowledge is much more 'phenomenological' than is often supposed by those who have not studied him closely. Nothing could be further from the truth than that St. Thomas's epistemology is based on an *a priori* 'faculty psychology,' or that he short-circuits the 'critical problem' of knowledge by unwarranted assumptions based on illegitimate abstractions. It is a first principle with St. Thomas (as it had been with Aristotle) that potencies can be affirmed only as inferences from actualities; and the whole structure of his 'faculty psychology' (if such it can indeed be called) is based on a thoroughgoing empiricist scrutiny of the 'given' *fact* of knowledge. The point is worth stressing; for the radical and revolutionary criticism of the whole tendency of the main stream of modern philosophy since Descartes, as it has been made by the 'Existentialists' and the 'Phenomenologists,' was already anticipated by St. Thomas. Descartes, as is well known, tried to rear the whole structure of philosophy on the *Cogito*—on the one indubitable fact that *I think*. But the *cogito* is only a selected *part* of a fact. It is an abstraction, and if it is not recognised as an abstraction the 'critical problem' will indeed be rendered insoluble and the way left open to the greatest extravagances of Idealism and solipsism. There never was just a *cogito*. I cannot just think; I must think *something*. 'To think' is not an intransitive verb; it must always (at least tacitly) have an *object*. St. Thomas was as emphatic as any of the modern Existentialists that there can be no

thought where there is no 'subject-over-against' (the word preferred by the Existentialists owing to the Idealistic associations which have gathered round the word 'object').¹ He was also emphatic that there can be no consciousness of a subject except in and through the consciousness of an 'object.' Unless Descartes had thought *something*, he would not have been able to affirm a subject of his thinking—he would not have been able to say 'I think.' But no more can there be perception of an object, *i.e.* perception of the other as other, without some perception of a subject, of an 'I,' set over against it. Thomism and Existentialism are in agreement at least as to this: that the given fact of knowledge must be viewed in its *wholeness* as we experience it if we are to construct a valid theory of knowledge. For any 'theory' must come to grief if it does not take into account the totality of the fact which it seeks to explain.

But our present purpose is not to criticise Descartes and his legitimate and illegitimate descendants. We need only to understand something of what St. Thomas understands by knowledge in its simplest and broadest sense. In a celebrated article of the *De Veritate* (Q. II, art. ii) St. Thomas gives his clearest account of what knowledge is, and how things which possess knowledge are differentiated from things which do not. Its basis is sternly empirical. There are to be found (*invenitur*), he says, two classes of 'perfection' or actuality in things. There is first of all that perfection or actuality whereby each thing is itself; the perfection of its own being which belongs to each according to its own kind. But, 'just because the distinctive being of one thing is other than the distinctive being of other things, it follows that, precisely in virtue of the proper perfections which it possesses, each created thing lacks the proper perfections of other things, and therefore lacks unlimited or absolute perfection. Thus the perfection of each thing in itself is imperfect, for each thing is only a part of the perfection of the whole universe.'

The very perfection of things in their variety and multiplicity involve an imperfection. 'So, in order that there should be some remedy for this imperfection, there is found a second sort of perfection in certain things, whereby the distinctive perfection of *one* thing

¹ We do not of course intend to endorse all the *developments* of Existentialism and Phenomenology, which have tended to degenerate into an anti-metaphysical phenomenism. But its basic criticism of post-Cartesian thought is undoubtedly sound and salutary. Marcel de Corte in his *La Philosophie de Gabriel Marcel* has shown convincingly how the preoccupation with Idealism has inhibited the full development of the Existentialist trend since Kierkegaard, and how its principles in effect demand the complement of a metaphysics such as Aristotle and St. Thomas have elaborated. See also Maritain's *Sept Leçons sur l'Être* and Gilson's *God and Philosophy*.

is found in *another* thing (without loss to the identity of either). This second sort of perfection is what is called *knowledge*; and it is by this that things which possess knowledge are to be distinguished from things which do not.'

Knowledge is thus essentially self-transcendence; more exactly it is the transcendence of the limitations inherent in particularised and finite selfhood. 'Things-which-know' differ from 'things-which-do-not-know' in this, that the latter are only themselves, while the former are (or become) other things as well, without either ceasing to be themselves or changing the 'others' into anything else but *themselves*. The latter 'possess nothing but their own specific reality' (i.e. 'form'), while 'it is of the nature of a thing-which-knows to possess also the specific reality of the *other*' (*Summa* I, xiv, 1). Knowledge is that which breaks down the barriers of mere self-identity whereby each creature is imprisoned in its own inherent limitations; which enables it, as it were, to step outside of itself and 'to possess the other, the not-self, in its very otherness and in its own selfhood. 'Hence it is clear that the nature of a thing-which-does-not-know is more constricted and limited, while the nature of a thing-which-knows has greater range and extension.' So St. Thomas can go on immediately (*loc. cit.*) to show that knowledge must be attributed to God—and not only knowledge but omniscience. For God is not *a* thing among things; in Him there is no limitation to be transcended. He is of His Nature All—which is not to say with the pantheists that all things are God.

But every creature, no matter how high and exalted, is *a* thing among things. It is of its very nature finite, limited by its own distinctive identity and its own specific reality; it is of its very nature its own particular self and therefore not the particular self of *another*. Its knowledge, therefore, can never be its own nature (*essentia*) or its own correspondingly particular being (*esse*), but must always be something additional to these: something which it *has* rather than something which it *is* (cf. *Summa* I, liv, 1 and 2). This is evident in ourselves; we *know*, we *have* knowledge—but we *are* not knowledge. It is by a second perfection—an *actus secundus*—a 'being' additional to our own distinctive being, that we 'are' or 'become' another.

If we are to understand and appraise St. Thomas's conception of 'affective knowledge,' and to evaluate the claims made for affective knowledge in more 'romantic' philosophies, it is necessary to recall certain important features in his theory of knowledge in general and of human knowledge in particular.

There is a sort of paradox inherent in the knowledge of the crea-

ture by the creature. Knowledge is essentially an identity of knower and known, a transcendence of the limitations inherent in each creature as such. The more perfect is knowledge, the more complete is the non-otherness of thought and thing. All knowledge as knowledge tends to assimilation to the Archetype of all knowledge, which is God's Knowledge of God, in which there is absolute identity of Knower and Known, Thinker, Thought and Thing.

Yet just because each creature is, as it were, confined within its own limited selfhood, just because each creature is itself and is *not* another, some awareness of the *non*-identity of Knower and Known, Thought and Thing, is inseparable from creaturely knowledge. If Knower and Known cease to be their several selves, and if their otherness be obliterated to consciousness, there can be no true knowledge for the finite creature. That is why, for Aristotle and St. Thomas (as for the Existentialists), some perception of the perciver (of the 'I' which thinks) must be contained in all true creaturely knowledge. Where the otherness of Subject and Object is not perceived, there may be some greater approximation to the *mode* of the archetypal Divine knowledge; there may be a more satisfying experience; but as knowledge of this object by this subject it will be a false and illusory knowledge. Creaturely knowledge—as it appears from the very nature of the creature as it is given in knowledge itself—must of necessity be knowledge of the other as other. Ecstasy, *participation mystique*, the submerging of self-awareness and reflexion in the merging of Subject and Object, brings with it a greater approximation to the condition of the absolute perfection of knowledge as knowledge, and as it exists in God. But the awareness of Subject-Object *distinction* is inseparable from the creaturely apprehension of truth. For here the Knower is *not* the Known.

This leads to a further point which is central in St. Thomas's epistemology, and which will be found to be of the greatest importance in appraising his conception of affective knowledge. Knowledge seeks truth; that is to say the conformity of thought and thing. But merely to possess a thought which is conformed to thing is not to possess truth about that thing. I must also *know* that my thought is conformed to thing if I am to know truth. Direct perception, therefore, is not sufficient for one creature to have true knowledge of another. There must be judgment; and all true knowledge must be at least implicitly reflexive knowledge. Perception or apprehension is the indispensable beginning of knowledge, but there is no true knowledge unless there be affirmation or negation, or their equivalent.

These general conceptions apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to all creature-

ly knowledge—animal, human, angelic.² Even the lowest of animals already possess something of this 'second perfection' which we call knowledge; already there is something of this power of self-transcendence which is to-day loosely called 'mind.' The animal has the same power of active assimilation and growth as the tree. Its body has similar limited and defined physical dimensions. But centred within its body is the new power which we now call *mind*, which through the avenues of the sense-organs of sight, hearing and smelling, radiates or reaches out a certain distance into space and time, beyond the body's limits, so that the animal's individuality, by this new power of mind, extends beyond its own skin, beyond its own material body, and holds in its mental grasp, and actually occupies mentally, a much larger space-and-time environment than the body occupies. In contrast with the plant whose individuality is confined to its own physical dimensions and which is thence confined to a physical world alone, the animal with its double body-and-mind nature lives in a double physical-and-mental world . . . This mental world which emerges as this new power of mind in animal life is a non-material world which transcends the laws of the material world and the material bodies in it, as for example the law that two bodies cannot simultaneously occupy the same point of space. The living physical body in which the mind centres is subject to all the laws of the physical world as is any non-living material body; but the mind radiates, as we have said, into a much larger region, so that the minds of two animals whose bodies occupy mutually exclusive regions of space can occupy a mutually inclusive mental region' (*The Miraculous Birth of Language* by Prof. R. A. Wilson, Guild Book edition, p. 114).

St. Thomas's account of the sense knowledge of the animal is strikingly similar to that of this contemporary observer. Some element of immateriality in the sense of some transcendence of the physical limitations of the subject is of the very essence, as we have seen, of what we understand by knowledge, and this is already apparent in the sense-knowledge of the animal. It is able to perceive the other as other than its perception.³ But sense-knowledge, and

² We here leave out of account angelic perception, which, though of objects does not derive from objects: An angel, according to St. Thomas, does not judge, for his God-given ideas are comprehensive and render judgment superfluous. But angelic knowledge is also in its own way reflexive, and involves the awareness of Subject-Object distinction.

³ The 'reflection' of sensation (*sentire se sentire*) is, according to St. Thomas, 'incipient' only; it attains only to awareness of the otherness of perception and perceived. Only intellect can achieve the *reditio completa*, and affirm the 'I' and the 'That.'

the corresponding self-transcendence, is strictly limited. For while transcending the physical limitations of the subject, sense-knowledge is wholly explicable in terms of physical and material causation, and it is limited in its scope by the limitations of such causality.

When we come to Man we discover a kind of 'mind' which differs not only in degree but also in kind from that of the animals. We find sense-knowledge, and we find the whole range of human knowledge to be conditioned by, and to presuppose, sense-knowledge. But we find also a functioning of thought which transcends not only the physical limitations of the subject but also the possibilities of purely physical causation. Man is confronted by the same sense-phenomena as the animals, but man is capable not only of sensing their material qualities, but of understanding them, conceiving them as noumena, of co-relating, defining, dividing, dissecting, generalising, systematising them. He can affirm and deny them, not merely as phenomena, but as things. We are not here concerned with the 'trans-subjective' validity of these mental processes. We are concerned only with the fact of them, which is the fact of which any realistic and comprehensive *theory* of knowledge should give an account.

This consideration leads St. Thomas to important conclusions when he sets out to explain the *how* of human knowledge, and which must be borne in mind when we would appraise the value of affective knowledge in respect of the sense world. Those who think of St. Thomas as a 'naive realist' are very wide of the mark. The human intellect, for St. Thomas, is not at all a mere passivity which merely reflects the 'outside' object. It cannot be so; for the 'outside' world with which the human mind is confronted is a world of sense-phenomena, which is not actually but only potentially intelligible to the purely immaterial operations of the intellect. It is, moreover, even potentially intelligible only as *extra genus intelligibilium*. This means that the world around us is *intrinsically* non-intelligible, and must be *made* intelligible by the activity of mind itself. It is this that leads St. Thomas to infer (*i.e.* from the very immateriality of human thought with respect to material objects) a creative and dynamic power of the mind which (following Aristotle) he calls the *intellectus agens*. The point need not be enlarged upon here; it need only be mentioned as a presupposition to our evaluation of affective knowledge with respect to material objects:

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(*To be continued*)

The list of SELECTED READINGS will be found on p. 139.