*Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge,* by Therese Scarpelli Cory, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xi + 241. Hard Cover $90.00, ISBN:978-1107042926

Aquinas nowhere offers a single, sustained or comprehensive account of human self-knowledge. It is simply not a topic to which he ever devotes explicit *systematic* attention. Yet, the thesis at the heart of Therese Scarpelli Cory’s book is that we can, nonetheless, find such a theory in Aquinas, one that is “sophisticated and compelling” and utterly “central to [his] conception of human cognition and personhood” (7). Defending such a thesis is, to be sure, a formidable task. Cory proposes not only to reconstruct Aquinas’s theory of self-knowledge from various (often highly abbreviated) discussions of the topic, but to do so in a way that accommodates the commitments of both his cognitive psychology and his philosophical anthropology. The extent to which she succeeds in this ambitious project is quite impressive.

The book falls into two parts. Part I (chs. 1and 2) provides essential historical and textual background. Part II (chs. 3-8) is a topically structured study of Aquinas’s account of self-knowledge. Given Cory’s broader, systematic ambitions, her choice to structure the second, and core, part of the book in a topical, thematic fashion is somewhat surprising. While the topics she focuses on are important ones, and her treatment of them is often original and highly resourceful, it is not clear that the cumulative result is a thoroughly developed, or wholly consistent picture of Aquinas’s account self-awareness. I’ll have more to say on this below, but first an overview of each of the two parts of the book.

Part I: The first two chapters of the book, while not deeply integrated with second part of the book, do some important stage setting. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the thirteenth-century debate about self-knowledge, focusing in particular on some of the more prominent thinkers writing a generation or two before Aquinas. The basic lines of Cory’s historical narrative are already fairly familiar in the literature: in adopting a broadly Aristotelian conception of self-knowledge, Aquinas challenges the prevailing Augustinian/Neo-Platonist outlook. But even if the broad outlines of that story are well known, the views of the particular thirteenth-century figures Cory’s narrative focuses on—including, William of Auvergne, Jean de la Rochelle, and Albert the Great—are not. In introducing us to these figures, Cory significantly advances our understanding of little-known terrain in thirteenth-century debates.

Chapter 2 consists in a schematic outline of the development of Aquinas’s thinking about self-knowledge, from his earliest discussions in the *Sentences* commentary to his more mature treatments in texts such as the *De Anima* commentary and the *Summa*. Cory proceeds by studying a handful of texts representative of three distinct phases in his thinking. Along the way she identifies apparent inconsistencies across these phases of development, but ultimately argues that the inconsistencies are *merely apparent*. The account she offers is not only extremely helpful as an introduction and guide to a rather disparate group of texts, but is also absolutely crucial to the broader methodological approach she adopts in Part II. By providing “a bird’s eye view of Aquinas’s theory of self-knowledge as a whole” she prepares the way for the more selective and topical approach she pursues in ensuing chapters.

Part II: The second part of the book develops as a “thematically organized”, “problem-centered” analysis of various phenomena and problems associated with the four different types of self-knowledge that Aquinas recognizes: actual (i.e., occurrent) self-awareness; habitual (i.e., dispositional) self-awareness; apprehension of the essential nature of the rational soul; and judgment about the essential nature of the rational soul. While each receives independent treatment, the lion’s share of the discussion is devoted to Aquinas’s account of occurrent self-awareness. My summary and discussion share this focus.

Aquinas’s approach to self-knowledge, as Cory presents it, is best understood as an attempt to reconcile two seemingly opposed phenomena, namely, “privileged self-access” on the one hand and “self-opacity” on the other. More specifically, Aquinas seeks to synthesize the traditional Augustinian notion that mind is *always* immediately present to itself with the Aristotelian contention that the mind’s knowledge of itself is posterior to and dependent on its cognition of external reality. The result of this effort, according to Cory, is a theory that grounds self-knowledge in our ubiquitous, first-person access to our own intellective acts or states (what she labels “actual self-awareness”). This approach allows Aquinas to strike a balance between Aristotelian opacity and Augustinian privileged access. Because mind’s access to itself is had by way of its awareness of its occurrent states, self-intelligibility is posterior to intellect’s being actualized in some cognitive activity or other. (Indeed, since Aquinas follows Aristotle in holding that all embodied cognition begins with the senses, self-knowledge is necessarily posterior to cognition of *external* reality.) Nevertheless, insofar as “the only impediment to self-awareness is the intellect’s natural lack of actuality” (111), it follows that once the mind is engaged in cognitive activity, it is thereby *immediately* aware of such activity and of itself as its subject. Despite the directness of mind’s access to itself and its occurrent states, however, it turns out that “[e]ach act of cognition is only partially self-revelatory, manifesting a tiny sliver of human potential: I perceive myself admiring a piece of sculpture, reasoning through a philosophical problem, feeling a cold wind, squinting in the bright sun, or struggling to recall the tenth digit of *pi*.” (113) Thus, such direct self-access is wholly compatible with our remaining largely ignorant regarding the essential nature of the mind itself.

Cory has an eloquent way of elaborating these features of Aquinas’s account, and of highlighting the way in which he is able to harmonize seemingly opposed authorities. While the broad lines of the account she ascribes to Aquinas are not wholly unprecedented in the literature, the way she endeavors to resolve problems and incongruities in this account by drawing systematic—if, sometimes, speculative—connections between the account itself and Aquinas’s broader views about cognition and intentionality is often ingenious. Let me give a few examples.

Cory begins (in ch. 3) by arguing that Aquinas’s notion of actual self-awareness should be understood as a species of a more general type of cognitive state, which she characterizes as “indistinct” cognition. Indistinct cognitions are states in which one perceives an object (Socrates off in the distance, say) under some very general, non-specifying description (e.g., ‘a being’, ‘an animal’, ‘a light-colored object’). In such cases we perceive the presence of some individual entity, but our grasp of its essential nature is limited. By assimilating self-awareness to indistinct cognition, Cory thinks we can make sense of Aquinas’s insistence that the intellect directly perceives itself while at the same time failing to grasp its own nature. Indeed, as is often the case in other instances of indistinct cognition, in self-awareness the intellect grasps its object via

some accidental qualities it possesses, namely, its own occurrent states and activities, and so cognizes itself under some concept or set of concepts which do not include its essence.

Of course, there is a longstanding interpretive puzzle regarding just how to understand Aquinas’s contention that the intellect cognizes itself *only* by cognizing its acts. On the face of it, this claim appears to entail that intellect is only indirectly aware of itself since its only access to itself is via awareness of something else—namely, its acts or states. If this is right, however, it mitigates Aquinas’s apparent commitment to the directness of self-awareness. In order to resolve such tension in Aquinas’s account, Cory attempts (in ch. 4) to situate Aquinas’s claims about self-awareness vis-à-vis his general conviction that “a substance and its accidents constitute a single perceptible object” (102). On Cory’s reading, an accident, for Aquinas, is merely “a determination or a mode of a substance” rather than something distinct from it. Hence to cognize some accidental feature of a substance is merely to cognize the substance “as it is manifested in its accidental determinations”. (102) This is a contentious reading of Aquinas’s account of the metaphysics of accidents (and Cory provides little by way of defense of it). Even so, it yields an elegant resolution to the interpretive puzzle. “For Aquinas, to cognize myself ‘by my act’ is to cognize myself-in-act—which is just to cognize myself”. (104)

Even granting all this, one might still wonder how self-awareness of the sort Cory ascribes to Aquinas is possible. After all, Aquinas holds, on the one hand, that acts are individuated by their object and, on the other, that the mind cannot be engaged in multiple acts at one time. How, then, can one be simultaneously aware of two distinct objects: some non-mental object—a toad, say—and one’s own act of thinking about it. Cory’s solution (in ch.6) turns on connecting self-awareness to a broader type of intentional phenomenon she describes as “implicit cognition”. Her explanation of Aquinas’s account of the nature and mechanisms associated with implicit cognition is exceedingly difficult to parse owing to the density of the Thomistic jargon within which it’s framed. The basic idea, however, is this: the content of a given cognitive act or state will include not only the object at which that state is explicitly directed, but also and implicitly some representation of that by means of which the object is rendered cognizable. So, for example, when we perceive the color red the content of the perception includes not just the color itself, but also the light by which it is rendered visible. We see not just red, but *illuminated*-red (or perhaps red-as-illuminated-by-light). Of course, on Aquinas’s view, the intellect plays a role in rendering its objects intelligible (the agent intellect is, after all, the “light” by which the material world is rendered intelligible). Thus, every intellective state includes, at least implicitly, some self-representing content. This fact, Cory claims, can explain our ability to simultaneously cognize the non-mental objects of our cognitive states and those states themselves. When I intellectively cognize a toad, Cory tells us, “the toad-species [i.e. the mental representation of the toad] *is just as much the intellectual manifestation of the Intellect-thinking-about-the toad-nature as it is the intellectual manifestation of toadness*” (155, original emphasis).

Cory proceeds in much the same way throughout the whole of the second part of the book—elaborating and defending Aquinas’s theory of self-knowledge against a series of philosophical and interpretive problems by attempting to tease out connections the theory has to his broader philosophical psychology. One liability of her approach, however, is that we never arrive at a cohesive presentation of Aquinas theory *as a whole*. And, at certain points it’s not obvious how

the various lines Cory develops in response to different dialectical challenges come together as a single, coherent theory. Let me conclude with one example of this sort of concern.

As just noted, Cory insists (in ch. 6) that self-awareness, for Aquinas, is a function of (implicit) self-representation. That is, she insists that self-awareness is explained by the fact that all our outward-directed states represent not only some external object, but also the intellect as engaged in thinking about that object. Thus, she claims, “not only does every intellectual act include self-awareness, but *its inclusion of self-awareness is essential to its intentionality*” (204, original emphasis). In a much earlier chapter and very different dialectical context, however, Cory seems to deny that self-access requires any sort of representation (implicit or otherwise). In this context (namely, ch. 4), she argues that the species plays a purely “metaphysical role” (110) in self-awareness, namely, that of actualizing the mind in thought. Hence, she insists, unlike other cases of cognition in which a species functions psychologically as a representation of the object cognized, it plays no such role in self-awareness. Instead, she emphasizes the mind’s being “naturally self-present” (111), where the strong implication is that mind’s access to itself is a matter, not of representation, but of direct-acquaintance. This same theme is echoed elsewhere: for example, in Cory’s claiming, at one point, that self-awareness requires that we “must have some sort of irreducibly direct self-access” (100) and again, much later (in ch. 8), in her talk of the intellect accessing itself in a kind of sui-generic “from the inside” manner (207).

Now it may be that when Cory speaks of the intellect itself as included “in the content” of all of its outwardly directed states, she does not mean that it is included in its *representational* content. Indeed, this may explain her tendency to talk about the intellect as “being manifested in the act of thinking” rather than in terms of it being *represented*. But if this is right, other aspects of her account begin to look problematic. On such a reading it is difficult to see how we are to construe her account of self-awareness as a type of indistinct cognition (that is, as a type of cognition which involves grasping an object under various generic, non-essential descriptions), or how to construe her characterization of it as having “a fairly rich content” (since, as she points out, for Aquinas self-awareness is supposed to include, among other things, perceiving “that one has a soul, that one lives, that one exists” (70)).

It may be that that is there is a way to reconcile the tensions among various strands of Cory’s interpretation—indeed, given her resourcefulness, she may very well be able to do so. My point here is merely to indicate something about how the structure of Cory's discussion both gives rise to such tensions and yet leaves them unresolved. That said, there is no gainsaying the tremendous value and interest of this book. To be sure, there is more work to be done in ironing out the details of Aquinas’s theory of self-knowledge. But Cory’s book makes serious inroads into that project and, along the way, provides many novel suggestions for avenues along which further progress might be made. As a result, it will stand as an important resource for scholars working on this topic for a long time to come.