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SIMONE GUIDI

THE PRINCIPLES OF ANGELIC SELF-KNOWLEDGE.
FROM THOMAS AQUINAS TO JOÃO POINSOT

Someone has himself indeed become Intellect
when he lets go of the other things that belong to
him, and looks at Intellect with Intellect; he then
looks at himself with himself. It is, then, actually
as Intellect that he sees himself.

(Plotinus, *Enneads* V 3, 4, trans. Gerson edition)

1. INTRODUCTION

Some scholars¹ have brought forth the intriguing hypothesis that scholastic debates on angels may have played a role in shaping aspects of early modern epistemology and metaphysics. While this paper does not delve into this historical perspective, it ideally aligns with these studies, dealing with a pivotal issue of scholastic angelology that could have significant implications for the emergence of the notions of “mind” and “consciousness” in the seventeenth-century: the problem of angelic self-knowledge and of the means enabling such cognitive action. With a primary focus on what Richard Rorty (1931-2007) referred to as «the invention of the mind»², this problem is here addressed also taking into account a specific perspective, which has stressed the importance of the debates on

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¹ See, for instance, R. SPECHT, “*Commercium mentis et corporis*”. *Über Kausalvorstellung im Cartesianismus*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann, 1966; J. SCHMUTZ, *Du péché de l'ange à la liberté d'indifférence. Les sources angéologiques de l'anthropologie moderne*, «Les Études Philosophiques», 61, 2 (2002), pp. 169-198; E. SCRIBANO, *Angeli e beati. Modelli di conoscenza da Tommaso a Spinoza*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006; T. SUAREZ-NANI, *Tommaso d'Aquino e l'angelologia: ipotesi sul suo significato storico e la sua rilevanza filosofica*, in *Lecture e interpretazioni di Tommaso d'Aquino oggi: cantieri aperti*. Atti del convegno internazionale di studio (Milano, 12-13 settembre 2005), a cura di A. Ghisalberti, A. Petagine, R. Rizzello, Torino, Istituto di filosofia San Tommaso d'Aquino, 2006, pp. 11-29; M. GERETTO, *L'angelologia leibniziana*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubettino, 2010; S. GUIDI, *L'angelo e la macchina. Sulla genesi della “res cogitans” cartesiana*, Milano, F. Angeli, 2018; ID., *Dagli angeli alle occasioni. Un'ipotesi a partire dal “problema della trasduzione”*, «Studi Lockiani», 2 (2021), pp. 109-136; ID., “*Acies mentis*”. *Il progetto cartesiano di un'epistemologia dell'“intuitus” e il suo ripensamento metafisico*, «Discipline Filosofiche» (2021), pp. 139-164.

² R. RORTY, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978, pp. 17-69.

the notions of transitivity and immanence in the shaping of the Western notion of the subject, over a long path connecting the medieval and the early modern ages³.

In order to connect these two phases of scholasticism, here I take the problem in its diachronic evolution within Thomistic theology, tracing a trajectory that links two major figures of this tradition, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and João Poinset (1589-1644). In section one, I recall the position of Aquinas about angelic self-knowledge. Subsequently I touch, in sections two and three, on the views of two other influential early modern Thomists, Thomas De Vio “Cajetan” (1469-1534) and the Jesuit Gabriel Vázquez (1549-1604)⁴, both of whom played crucial roles for the reshaping of the problem in seventeenth-century scholasticism. In section four I set out and discuss Poinset’s solution, offering in section five some concluding remarks.

2. IMMUNITY FROM MATTER AND IMMANENT ACTION: AQUINAS ON ANGELIC SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The self-knowledge of immaterial substances is among some traditional Aristotelian⁵ and Neoplatonic⁶ themes received and grafted into the body of thirteenth-century scholasticism⁷. In the specific case of Aquinas⁸, who reflects on it in different textual places – more specifically in the *De Veritate* (q. 8, art. 6), in the *Contra Gentiles* (II 96), in the *De spiritualibus creaturis* (art. 1), and especially in the *Summa Theologiae* (I 56, art. 1) – it appears to be a consequence

³ See A. DE LIBERA, *La double révolution. L'acte de penser – Archeologie du sujet*, III.1, Paris, Vrin, 2014, pp. 295-489.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations from Latin into English are mine.

⁵ See ARISTOT. *Metaphysica*, XII, 7, 1072b20-21.

⁶ See PLOTIN. *Enneades*, V, 3, 1-7. However, Plotinus reckons that the human soul cannot directly grasp itself intellectually and deals here in particular with the divine intellect, starting from what Aristotle argued about the νοῦς in *Metaphysics*, XII. See W. BEIERWALTES, *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit: Plotins Enneade V 3: Text, Übersetzung, Interpretation, Erläuterungen*, Frankfurt a. M., Klostermann, 1991; *La connaissance de soi. Études sur le traité 49 de Plotin*, sous la dir. de M. Dixsaut, avec la collab. de P.-M. Morel et K. Tordo-Rombaut, Paris, Vrin, 2002; R. CHIARADONNA, *Plotino*, Roma, Carocci, 2009, pp. 62-68. See then PORPHYRIUS, *Sententiae ad intellegibilia ducentes*, n. 44. These topics are relocated to angels beginning with Dionysus the Aeropagite’s *Celestial Hierarchy*.

⁷ A crucial reference for the scholastic tradition is AUG. *Gen. ad litt.*, II 8.16. Here it is stated that angels have self-knowledge simultaneously with their creation by God: «non primo cognovit rationalis creatura conformationem suam, ac deinde formata est; sed in ipsa sua conformatione cognovit, hoc est illustratione veritatis, ad quam conversa formata est».

⁸ See in particular T. SUAREZ-NANI, *Connaissance et langage des anges selon Thomas d’Aquin et Gilles de Rome*, Paris, Vrin, 2002, pp. 36-44.

of a specific metaphysical principle that thirteenth-century theologians found in their Islamic sources, and which they accepted for the whole category of spiritual substances.

The principle at issue can be dubbed the “immunity from matter” principle. It asserts the metaphysical commutability between immateriality, incorporeality, intellectuality and intelligibility, and entails that what is immaterial is also immediately intelligible. A corollary of this principle is thus that self-intuition is an immaterial cognitive process that is structurally and immediately (i.e. without any need for a mediation) proper to all spiritual substances⁹. Indeed, the latter are at once intelligent and immaterial beings, so that they are simultaneously an intelligible object and an intelligent being that subjectively holds the intellectual power (note that here “subject” and “object” are employed according to the scholastic meaning of these terms)¹⁰.

The rationale for the connection between the “immunity from matter” principle and the self-knowledge of spiritual beings is set out vividly by Aquinas in his questions *De spiritualibus creaturis*, commenting on an argument he found in Averroes’ commentary on the *Metaphysics*. According to Averroes, “if there were a box without matter, it would be the same as the box which exists in the intellect”,¹¹ and hence it would be intelligent and intelligible due to its own substance. Aquinas extends this doctrine to all the spiritual creatures (such as angels, separated souls) that are pure forms, “immune” from the composition with matter:

⁹ As is known, Aquinas not only embraces all these premises but also subscribes to the idea that embodied and disembodied intellects take two divergent paths for this process, due to their different essential commitment to matter, a principle of unintelligibility. Yet, if it is true that the human intellect is, by its nature as part of the human hylomorphic composition, constantly impeded in immediate self-knowledge, it is nonetheless true that the case for disembodied minds constitutes the paradigmatic model for the whole domain of spiritual substances. In fact, apart from the bond to matter, which impedes this process from effectively taking place in the united human soul, for all spiritual creatures self-consciousness is a structural fact. Therefore, the model which here I dub ‘immunity from matter’ constitutes the ultimate paradigm for all the spiritual substance including the human soul, as efficaciously witnessed by the case of the separated soul. See S. PEGIS, *The Separated Soul and Its Nature in St. Thomas*, in *St. Thomas Aquinas, 1274-1974: Commemorative Studies*, ed. by A. Maurer et al., Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974, pp. 130-158 and GUIDI, *L'angelo e la macchina* cit., pp. 88-110. On regular human self-knowledge see TH. SCARPELLI CORY, *Aquinas on Self-Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

¹⁰ See, for instance, M. KARSKENS, *The Development of the Opposition Subjective versus Objective in the 18th Century*, «Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte», 35 (1992), pp. 214-256. See also A. PETAGINE, *Matière, corps, esprit. La notion de sujet dans la philosophie de Thomas d'Aquin*, Fribourg-Paris, Cerf, 2014.

¹¹ AVERR. *Commentarium magnum in Aristotelis Metaphysicae Libros, Metaph.* XII, comm. 36.

if the box were self-subsistent apart from matter, it would be something that understands its own self, because immunity from matter is the essential character of intellectuality. And in view of this, the box apart from matter would not be different from an intelligible box¹².

According to this perspective, whatsoever spiritual being is “immune” from matter is simultaneously, and necessarily, intelligent and intelligible, and such a condition must culminate in an act of self-knowledge. But how does that happen, exactly?

Aquinas’s answer relies especially on the premise that the *presence* of a intelligible being in an intelligent being is able to cause the information of the intellect and hence to bring about a cognitive act. In question 8, art. 6 of his *De veritate*, in *Contra Gentiles* II 96, and in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 56, art. 1, Aquinas’ doctrine is accounted by means of a more complex explanation, based on a crucial Aristotelian¹³ distinction – importantly at stake elsewhere in his thought¹⁴ – between transient and immanent actions. Transient actions are those actions in which the object into which an action passes is separate from the agent, whereas immanent actions are those in which the object is united with the agent instead¹⁵. Considering immanent actions, there can be a peculiar, necessary, immanent action that is that triggered by the *presential* interplay between two aspects of the “immunity from matter” principle in the same subject, i.e. when something intelligible is present and at the same time identical with something intelligent.

According to this view, an angel is simultaneously (a) a substantial being provided with a power of understanding and (b) the principle of intellection of an immanent cognitive act. Such an overlapping happens, however, as a specific sub-category of regular transient cognitive acts (e.g. human cognition), where (a) and (b) are simultaneously present but not rooted in the same essence or substance, and so what is known (b) is not the same as what knows (a). Indeed, the case for angelic self-knowledge is a peculiar case of the sempiternal co-presence of (a) and (b), which are inseparable since they inhere in the same identical essence or substance¹⁶. Let us read Aquinas’ own words in the *De Veritate*:

¹² THOM. *Quaestio de spiritualibus creaturis*, art. 1, ad 12. English translation from *Disputed Questions on Spiritual Creatures*, tr. by M. C. Fitzpatrick and J. J. Wellmuth, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1949.

¹³ ARISTOT. *Metaphysica*, IX, 8, 1050a24-b1.

¹⁴ Cf. for instance THOM. *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lib. 1, lectio 1, n. 13. See M. I. GEORGE, *On the Meaning of “Immanent Activity” According to Aquinas*, «The Thomist», 78, 4 (2014), pp. 537-555.

¹⁵ See THOM. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 56, art. 1, *resp.*

¹⁶ While it is clear that the angelic *intellect* is the power by which an angel knows itself, Aquinas wavers terminologically between different formulations, saying that this cognition is enabled by the angelic

[the angelic intellect] can understand itself only by means of an intelligible form that actually exists in itself. But, since the essence of an angel, which is in act in the genus of intelligibility, is present to it, an angelic intellect can understand this intelligible reality within itself, namely, its own essence – and not through any likeness of it but through the essence itself¹⁷.

And the same doctrine as set out in the *Summa Theologiae*:

Now, for the form to be the principle of the action, it makes no difference whether it be inherent in something else, or self-subsisting [...]. So therefore, if in the order of intelligible beings there be any subsisting intelligible form, it will understand itself. And since an angel is immaterial, he is a subsisting form; and, consequently, he is actually intelligible. Hence it follows that he understands himself by his form, which is his substance¹⁸.

An important caveat of Aquinas' doctrine (and his conception of immanent action) is hence that, since the angel is able to simultaneously play the role of the intelligent power (a) and the intelligible principle (b), it knows itself *immediately*. Indeed (contrary to the later position of Marsilius of Inghen¹⁹ attributed to Duns Scotus²⁰ and Henry of Ghent)²¹, it can know itself without the production or the introduction of any new species (b). Therefore, since its creation, the angelic intellect is simply endowed with an extensive set of co-created intellectual species representing all creatures²², but not with a particular species representing itself, which would be simply useless.

form (*Summa*), the angelic *substance* (*Summa*), or the angelic *essence* (*De Veritate, Contra Gentiles*). In the case of angels, indeed, they may be equivalent, at least in Aquinas's view.

¹⁷ THOM. *Quaestio de veritate*, q. 8, art. 6 (trans. M. C. Fitzpatrick and J. J. Wellmuth).

¹⁸ THOM. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 56, art. 1, *resp.* Translation from *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, second and revised edition, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, London, Burn Oates and Washbourne, 1920.

¹⁹ MARSILIUS VON INGHEN, *Quaestiones super quattuor libros Sententiarum*, II, q. 7, art. 1-2. As reported by several early modern Thomists, Marsilius mistakenly attributes this doctrine also to Alexander of Hales.

²⁰ IOHANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ordinatio* (Vaticana), II, d. 3, p. 2, q. 1, n. 269-271. In fact, Scotus subscribes to the idea that angels do not need any additional species to grasp *intuitively* (i.e. in presence) themselves insofar as intelligibles. However, the Scotistic school will rather argue that the angel needs such a species to have *abstractive* knowledge of itself. Nonetheless, Scotus does contrast Aquinas's idea that angelic self-knowledge happens due to the immanent presence of the angelic essence *informing* the angelic intellect (n. 266-267; 273; 278). His model is rather that of the interplay between two partial causes based on the intuitive knowledge as knowledge in presence.

²¹ HENRICUS GANDAVENSIS, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, V, q. 14. Henry also does not seem to argue that the angel needs an additional species.

²² THOM. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 55, art. 1-2.

Resting on these foundations, Aquinas' account might appear clear and simple. Yet actually, it is not itself immune from remarkable questions when his idea of angelic self-knowledge as immanent action granted on co-presence is questioned as regards the process supposedly enabling this cognitive act. One issue, which I call the "problem of immanent knowledge in presence" (hereafter the "IKP issue"), is especially worth stressing here, as it would often be at stake in early modern Thomistic commentaries. As Aquinas puts it in *De Veritate*, it seems that the simple co-presence of (a) and (b) in the same identical essence or substance is able to make the substance inform the intellect and to bring about this process. But how can the intelligible object (b), by virtue of its mere presence, inform and enact the intelligent subject (a) in such a way as to substitute the role of an intelligible species in its intellect? What remains troublesome is in particular the *causal* interplay between (a) and (b) that makes this possible and whether we should understand it in terms of adherence, inherence, or information by (b) of (a). Moreover, how can the angelic intellect, which is a *part* of the angelic essence or substance – and is, for Aquinas and the whole Thomistic school, distinct²³ from both its substance and its essence – be immediately affected by the *whole* of the angelic substance or essence as by an intelligible form or species?

The relevance of this issue lies not only in remaining unsolved in the thought of the Angelic Doctor. With specific attention to early modern Thomism, it is particularly problematic as the IKP issue is linked with a major doctrine in Scotism intuitive cognition as knowledge in presence, in turn involved in some early modern reframing of the lexicon of intuitive and abstractive knowledge²⁴. In the following sections, I endeavor to reconstruct how this problem came to the attention of Renaissance and early modern Thomism, how it is addressed and solved by some of the most prominent Thomistic theologians, and how the debate on this topic shapes different views about angelic self-knowledge, concluding especially with Poinso's account.

3. IDENTITY, ESSENCE, AND ADHERENCE: CAJETAN

The IKP issue constitutes the raw matter for the subsequent critical debates about Aquinas' theory, particularly in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Thomism.

²³ THOM. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 54, art. 1-2.

²⁴ See especially D. HEIDER, *The "Notitia Intuitiva" and "Notitia Abstractiva" of the External Senses in Second Scholasticism: Suárez, Poinso and Francisco de Oviedo*, «Vivarium», 54, 2-3 (2016), pp. 173-203.

This appears clear already in the influential commentary by the Cardinal (and Master of the Order of Preachers) Thomas De Vio “Cajetan” on the *Summa Theologiae* (1508). This work, which has been for centuries the standard and official commentary on Aquinas’s *Summa*, constitutes a pivotal point for all the subsequent discussions and it is important to dwell on it before considering the positions of Vázquez and Poinset.

When examining Cajetan’s work, it is crucial to emphasize that his treatment of the argument set out by Aquinas in *Summa* I, q. 56, relies significantly on a premise found in his commentary on q. 54, art. 3. Here indeed, replying to a possible objection, De Vio did not renounce the Thomistic doctrine of the crucial distinction between the angelic substance and essence and the angelic intellect, but he also pointed out that the angelic substance *cannot* act as the efficient principle of action. Rather, it plays a causal role in angelic self-knowledge just as it is the power within which this occurs:

the angelic substance is not the principle, but rather the potency, that arouses [*elicitivum*] the intellectual act [of self-knowledge]. And as much as, without any mediating species, it concurs to the intellectual act, however it does not concur as what arouses [*eliciens*], but as the source²⁵ of the intellect in act with respect to itself, as would appear below²⁶.

As we shall see, based on this principle Cajetan would argue that the angelic essence or substance, however distinct from the intellect, may also play a role as *one* of the causes at stake in the triggering of the immanent act of self-knowledge in the angelic mind. And this happens ultimately due to the *identity* between the essence of the angelic substance and the angelic intellect.

In order to assess this solution in detail one has to address Cajetan’s most extensive and influential discussion of the topic, the commentary on q. 56, art. 1. Here he presents the arguments employed by Aquinas according to a complex causal scheme. For Cajetan, indeed, Aquinas’ claims would be entirely aimed at finding four conditions for the angel itself to be an intelligible form for its own intellect, which are: 1) conjunction; 2) causality; 3) motion, and 4) adherence (*inhaesionem*)²⁷. With a specific look at the use of the notion of immanent knowledge, it is worth stressing that Cajetan’s idea is that (for Aquinas) the actual conjunction of the intelligible substance with the intellect implies, as a chain

²⁵ The latin text in the Leonine edition reads *fons*, but it also suggests *forma* as a possible alternative («*forma intellectus in actu respectu sui*»).

²⁶ THOMAS DE VIO CAJETANUS, *Summa Theologiae cum commentariis Caietani* (Leonine V), q. 54, art. 4, p. 50, col. 1-2, § 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, q. 56, art. 1, p. 63, col. 1, § 3.

of consequences, the fulfillment or the exclusion of all the other three conditions. Indeed, an intelligible object that is united with the intelligent power also constitutes the formal cause (2) of its intelligent act, and this does not require either a passage from potency to act (3), or the actual presence of the intelligible in the intellect as a form that informs by adherence its potentiality (4), as human intelligible species do. Accordingly, Cajetan argues,

for an intelligible to be in act in any intellect, it is required only that it is joined [to it], and so joined to the intelligent [power] as it is the formal principle of intellection in it; may it move it or not, may it adhere to it or not, or if it [just] subsists. From that, it plainly follows that, if something in the genus of intelligent beings exists as a subsisting intelligible form, that is, it has such complete reason which is intelligible in act with respect to itself, which assumes intelligible being, for that reason, it would understand itself by itself²⁸.

Hence, Cajetan too maintains that the only requirement for immanent angelic self-knowledge is the conjunction between the angelic intellect and an intelligible (in this case, the angelic substance). But, how is the angelic essence joined with the angelic mind? For Cajetan, one problem corresponding with the IKP issue remains with regard to (4), namely to the thesis that the intelligible essence of the angel does not have to inhere or adhere to the intellective power as an informing species in order to cause the angelic self-knowledge²⁹.

Cajetan's strategy to save immanent self-knowledge is complex and layered. On the one hand, he argues that the IKP issue relies on a false premise, i.e. that "the angelic essence is opposed to the angel, insofar as it is intelligent, as separate form", and just on this false assumption the angelic essence is said to be

²⁸ *Ibid.*, q. 56, art. 1, p. 63, col. 1, § 4. Cajetan's passage continues as follows: "And if you want to attentively go over, note that these four conditions correspond to the three conditions posed as a consequence: since the first two entail that it is understood as such; the third [condition is satisfied] because it [knows itself] from itself; the fourth [condition is satisfied] as it [knows itself] by itself. Indeed, from the fourth [condition] it follows that it is not necessary that a species which adheres to the intelligent [power] mediates; from the third [condition derives] that there is no need for a distinct being [*esse*] from the intelligent [actor] for the reason of the mover and the motion; from the first and the second, then, [it follows that] it must be an act and a form in the genus of the intelligible beings".

²⁹ In Cajetan's formulation – here directed toward a hypothetical Scotistic adversary, who hence upheld the need for an additional species – the issue appears like this: "How, therefore, is the intellect informed by the very intelligible being? [...] Since this conjunction of the intelligible [element] with the intellect may be in being (*in esse*) or in operation. Yet [it can]not be in the operation: since you say that this conjunction comes before the [intellect's] operation, and all to the contrary is its cause. Therefore, it is according to the being: [yet] not substantial, because the angelic substance is not, for you, the substantial form of its intellect according to a real distinction: hence, it occurs for adherence". CAJETANUS, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 56, art. 1, p. 63, col 1, § 5.

non-inherent to the angelic intellect. On the other hand, he shifts the whole problem to the ontological level. He contends indeed that one should first distinguish between being intelligible in an extrinsic or an intrinsic sense; and considering the *intrinsic* sense of being intelligible, i.e. being intelligible in itself, it appears clear that

the essence is the very angel, not only [taken] in the being of the intrinsic nature, but also in his intelligible being. So that it is an object that is intelligible in act, which is united [to the angelic intellect] more strictly than for information or adherence since it is joined by identity³⁰.

By this crucial passage, Cajetan builds his account on the structural unity between the angelic intellect and the angelic essence, caused by the fact that the angelic being *is* at the same time what is intelligent and what is intrinsically intelligible. He puts forth this position by retrieving a famous Aristotelian formula, reserved for the divine *nous*³¹, applied by Aristotle to the regular spiritual substances just in passing³², and by which he now stresses the ultimate *identity* of these two aspects of the angel. Indeed, not only does Cajetan push to the extreme a hidden premise of Aquinas' argument, i.e. that the intelligent power (a) and the intelligible being (b) must inhere in a substance which is *identical for* (a) and (b). But echoing Aristotle³³, he also argues that the very *reason* for the conjunction (Aristotle's γὰρ γίγνεται θηγγάνων) of (a) and (b) is the *identity* (ταὐτόν) of the angelic intellect and the angelic essence (νοῦς καὶ νοητόν; I refer to this theory as "identity thesis")³⁴. Such an identity ultimately joins the intelligent power (a) and the intelligible being (b), in a more strict way than how they would be joined

³⁰ *Ibid.*, q. 56, art. 1, p. 63, col 2, § 8.

³¹ See the aforementioned ARISTOT. *Metaphysica*, XII, 7, 1072b20-21: "thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the substance, is thought. And it is active when it possesses this object" (tr. Barnes edition). See DE LIBERA, *La double révolution* cit., pp. 516-ff.

³² ARISTOT. *De An.* III, 4, 430a2-5: "Thought is itself thinkable in exactly the same way as its objects are. For in 430a3-430a9 the case of objects which involve no matter, what thinks and what is thought are identical; for speculative knowledge and its object are identical" (tr. Barnes edition).

³³ Cajetan's direct use of Aristotle is not surprising, especially in the intellectual milieu of Padua, characterized by the presence of a strong Scotistic school (Antonio Trombetta) and the revival of Averroism (Nicoletto Vernia, Agostino Nifo). Both these currents were adversaries of Cajetan, who obtained the chair of metaphysics at the University of Padua already in 1494, having there the need to constantly grapple with Aristotle's text and to use it to interpret Aquinas' thought.

³⁴ For a parallel use of the notion of "identity", here applied to the soul as the form of the body, see CAJETANUS, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 76, art. 1, p. 212, col. 2. On this passage of Cajetan's commentary see GUIDI, *L'Angelo e la Macchina* cit., p. 140.

by information and adherence. Or, as Cajetan stresses in the reply to a possible counter-argument,

the reason why so many [theologians] were mistaken [about this issue] is that they considered the angelic intellect and the angelic substance as almost two separate things, and [then] they asked how they are united; since actually, though, the [angelic] intellect stems from the [angelic] essence as intelligible in act, and more intimately formed from there than whatsoever intentional species, and this within the genus of the intelligibles. And hence, whoever wants not to be deceived, should not distinguish between the intellect and the intelligent [being] as such, but rather [it] considers them as one thing³⁵.

4. ESSENCE AND PROXIMATE PRINCIPLE: VÁZQUEZ

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholasticism, Cajetan's solution is frequently discussed, restated, and further developed. Yet, at the same time, it is involved in salient debates within the general Thomistic line-up and also beyond the limits of the Dominican order. Among them, here I focus especially on the case of the Spanish Jesuit Gabriel Vázquez, the author of an influential commentary on Aquinas' *Summa* (1598) where the position of Cajetan is extensively discussed and criticized.

Even though Vázquez's contribution to the debate concerns especially his understanding of the IKP issue, the first point he questions is the very interpretation of Cajetan's view. Vázquez casts doubts especially over the following specific way of reading Cajetan's position (hereafter CTh1): "the substance of the angel is by itself sufficiently intelligible and present as to end the act of intellection"³⁶. According to Vázquez, this is the most popular reading of the thesis of Cajetan, who yet effectively had argued for a slightly different thesis (CTh2), i.e. that "the very substance of the angel is in place of, and the vicarious of the species in arousing the intellection [i.e. an intellective act] in the manner of a proximate principle"³⁷.

This point is particularly important in order to notice that Vázquez does not consider Cajetan's "identity thesis" in all its strength, and he seems to not grasp his idea that the identity between the angelic intellect and the angelic essence causally determines angelic self-knowledge. Rather, Vázquez focuses entirely on the IKP issue and it is no accident that he then has some critical

³⁵ CAJETANUS, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 56, art. 1, p. 64, col. 2, § 9.

³⁶ G. VÁZQUEZ, *Commentaria ac Disputationes in Primam Partem S. Thomae*, II, Venice 1606 [1598], d. 104, p. 453, col. 2.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

remarks for both these versions of Cajetan's view, and both his critiques pivot precisely on the interplay between presence and causation.

As for the first understanding (CTh1), Vázquez simply comments upon the premise that the essence of the angel, however intelligible in itself, is known by the angel just because it is present and joined to the intellect, "almost as though that presence would entail something [causing the act of cognition], once it is granted that the object does not concur with the intellect to the intellection in the way of a principle"³⁸. In Vázquez's perspective, all the processes leading toward angelic self-knowledge cannot occur without the intervention of an efficient principle of causation, which cannot be played by the angelic substance, however intelligible in itself.

Thereby, Vázquez grapples with the second way of understanding Cajetan's thesis (CTh2, which he considers to be the one actually supported by him) noting something complementary with the former. Indeed, the Jesuit challenges the very idea that the essence of an angel, which is a *substantial* form, can somehow act in place of a *intelligible* form of the angelic intellect. Indeed, if the essence of the angel is the form from which its very intellect flows out, how and for what reason can this form act as the proximate and proper principle that efficiently causes angelic intellection?

Moreover, in order to question that which he reckons to be Cajetan's genuine view, Vázquez puts forward a formulation that is very important for our story; one which is inspired by Scotus's criticism against Aquinas's immanentistic model³⁹ and that we may dub here the "root argument". For Vázquez, the cognitive act of CTh2 cannot be a true immanent action since the principle determining this operation should be present in the intellect itself. Rather,

it seems to be affirmed that the intellect is determined by itself [as the present principle determining the act of cognition], and so it is moved by the essence as by its first root [*ut a prima radice*], since the angelic essence and substance has in itself the complete intellective power⁴⁰.

It is worth stressing that this does not constitute Vázquez's own view on the issue, on which I dwell later. The "root argument" is indeed a way to argue that the angelic essence cannot play the role of a species, given that it does not adhere directly to the intellect, which is rather affected by the angelic essences *only* as by its ontological root.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ IOHANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ordinatio* (Vaticana), II, d. 3, p. 2, q. 1, n. 266-267.

⁴⁰ VÁZQUEZ, *Disputationes in Primam Partem*, d. 104, p. 454, col. 1.

In view of our discussion of Poinset's solution, it is also important to notice that Vázquez also reports the distinction between two aspects of the angelic essence, which he considers as a reply to this possible objection. This distinction, which appears to be quite similar but not identical to that put forward by Cajetan, is here ascribed to some undetermined theologians. It is the distinction between (e1) the essence insofar as it is a thing (*res*), and (e2) the same essence as an intelligible being. According to this view, the essence meant as a thing (e1), and so as a form, is an object of the intellect, although it should be said that the intellect is in the thing (the essence), rather than the thing being in the intellect. At the same time, the essence as an intelligible being (e2) acts as the principle of the intellectual act, at least as a part of such cognition⁴¹. This way, the angelic essence, even though it does not adhere presentially in the intellect (e1), causes the self-cognition of the angel inasmuch as it is an intelligible being (e2), and can be considered as the proximate principle of the intellection. However, Vázquez rejects again this perspective based on the following argument:

what, indeed, does not adhere cannot be a principle determining [the act] in the way of an efficient cause [*per modum efficientis*] [...]. Thereby, even though the essence of the angel is joined with its intellect, and even though it is the subject of the intellect: nonetheless, it is not sufficient to be the proper and proximate principle of intellection. In fact, in this way, it would be only a principle and a common principle, as it is such for all the other operations⁴².

In no way for Vázquez may the angelic essence play the role ascribed to it by most Thomistic theologians in order to solve the issues in Aquinas' doctrine. Neither can it causally participate in this process while being just a potency or a power, as argued by Cajetan in his commentary on q. 54. Hence, the whole IKP issue is here reduced to the "root argument", and thereby to the twofold problem of the presence and of the proximate efficient causation of the angelic essence with respect to its intellect. At this stage, Vázquez claims, no specific relationship allows for the essence to inform efficiently and proximately the angelic intellect, the angelic essence being just a general principle for all the powers and the operation an angel has.

But hence, what is Vázquez's ultimate account for the IKP issue? One could say that, without providing a definitive answer to the question, he even leaves the early modern Thomistic framework with an even more tangled picture and a general dismantling of the main arguments put forward for Aquinas' doctrine. The Jesuit indeed settles for rejecting that a species is needed for angelic

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, d. 104, p. 454, col. 2.

self-knowledge to be possible⁴³. However, he also suggests that the very angelic *intellect*, and not the essence or the substance of the angel, may act as the proximate principle which triggers in the angelic essence the self-cognitive act:

rather than the other way round, I consider the intellect, just as whatsoever other [angelic] power [*facultatem*], is the proper and proximate principle determining the essence, and the substance of the angel⁴⁴.

How is this claim to be understood? What Vázquez appears to be contending is that, even though the angel does not need any additional species to grasp itself, this process takes place as some sort of cognitive process that occurs in the intellect for some here unspecified reason. Thus, since this process happens in the intellect, the latter must be considered as the proximate principle of a cognitive act that reverberates into the whole angelic essence. By contrast, the angelic essence or substance is actually what is affected by this process, and not what causes it. This way, Vázquez would have entirely got rid of Aquinas' overall framework, restated by Cajetan through the identity thesis.

5. RADICAL INTELLECT AS THE PRINCIPLE OF INTELLECTION: POINSOT

The solution provided by the French-Portuguese theologian João Poinso to the IKP issue is set out in the second volume (1642) of his famous *Cursus Thomisticum*⁴⁵. This work is regarded as a masterpiece of early modern Thomism, written during Poinso's tenure as a professor at the Complutense University in Spain and reissued several times⁴⁶. With respect to the problem of the angelic self-knowledge it constitutes a strong rebuttal to Vázquez's critiques. The account of Poinso grafts indeed into the Cajetan-Vázquez debate, trying to defend and reassess Cajetan's view in support of the doctrine that angelic self-knowledge is immanent⁴⁷. In his extensive discussion of the issue Poinso

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ JOHANNES A SANCTI THOMAE (JOÃO POINSOT), *Cursus Theologici in Primam Partem Divi Thomae, a Quaestione XXVII ad finem usque eiusdem partis*, tomi secundi pars altera, Lugduni, sumptibus Petri Prost, 1642.

⁴⁶ On the editions of this influential commentary see M. FORLIVESI, *Le edizioni del Cursus theologicus di Joannes a s. Thoma*, «Divus Thomas», 97, 3 (1994), pp. 9-56.

⁴⁷ This is also the reason why, as the first thing, Poinso observes that Cajetan's view is often mistaken for another thesis, which corresponds with Vázquez's doctrine just mentioned above, i.e. that in angelic self-knowledge what plays the role of a proximate principle for the intellect is not the angelic substance, but rather the angelic intellect itself (see d. 21, art. 2, p. 354, col. 1).

champions Cajetan's viewpoint first of all by establishing that the angelic substance does perform the function of a form or intelligible species that leads to angelic self-knowledge:

the angelic substance has the reason of the form or the intelligible species, wherefore the intellect is made intelligibly perfect, and enacted [*actuates*] by its own substance, not only as its radical subject, but as an intelligible object, and such that leads the intellect to understand itself⁴⁸.

As I shall argue, Poinso's polemical target is here Vázquez's idea that Cajetan's doctrine can be reduced to, and eliminated by, the "root argument". Indeed, as Poinso would emphasize later, the angelic substance must be taken not only as the "radical subject" of the act of intellection, but also as the "intelligible object" that makes the angelic intellect understand the angelic substance. For now, however, Poinso stresses that this is proven by the possession by the angelic substance of three characteristic features of an intelligible species: 1) being intelligible by itself; 2) being proportioned to the intellect; 3) being intimately present (*intime praesens*)⁴⁹ and joined to the intellect (immanence). Yet, regarding this third condition especially, Poinso restates precisely Vázquez's "root's argument", this time to stress that such presence follows from the fact that the substance is

the immediate root from which the intellect flows out, and the intellect itself indwells in it, and accordingly they are present and joined [to each other] not less intimately than an additional species to the intellect, and even more, since, although the species that is added to the intellect adheres to it, it does not flow out from the intellect as from a root⁵⁰.

It must be noted, hence, that Poinso does subscribe here to Vázquez's "root's argument". Indeed, he argues that the substance is above all the *root* of the intellect and *not* its proximate principle and this is how it is united to it. Though, Poinso also argues – this time against Vázquez – that it is precisely in the capacity of a metaphysical root that the angelic substance is present for the angelic intellect, and indeed can act proximately causing an immanent act. The way this happens is further investigated by Poinso, who at this stage lists three problematic conditions required for the substance to play the *munus speciei*, and which might appear to be unmet by the angelic substance.

⁴⁸ POINSO, *Cursus Theologici* cit., d. 21, art. 2, p. 354, col. 2.

⁴⁹ On this expression and its use in other early modern philosophical contexts see GUIDI, *L'Angelo e la Macchina* cit., pp. 349-360.

⁵⁰ POINSO, *Cursus Theologici* cit., d. 21, art. 2, p. 355, col. 1.

First (α) the angelic substance is united to the angelic intellect as its *subiectum sustentans* (i.e. its “root”) but this does not entail that it is united to it objectively, i.e. as the determining object and actualization of the intellectual power. Second (β), the angelic substance does not perform the function of informing form with respect to the angelic intellect; hence it enacts the intellect not by informing it, but only by way of an intentional object, in the same way whatsoever intentional object performs this function. Third (γ), the angelic substance does not play directly the role of an intelligible species, which immediately, proximately and hence efficiently, enables the angelic self-cognition by determining the intellectual act; rather, the angelic substance is just responsible for this cognitive act being the non-proximate and “radical” *principium operandi* of the operation⁵¹.

For all these three conditions, Poinsoot’s strategy is to argue that they are in fact fulfilled by the angelic substance if meant as an intelligible object, even though not in the way a regular intentional species does, but in an even “higher” manner⁵². Regarding the first condition (α), indeed,

the spiritual substances are given for the intellect not only subjectively, but also objectively, and insofar as [they are given] subjectively, so it sustains and receives entitatively the intellect since the intellect indwells in it; insofar as [they are given] objectively, they are joined to the intellect as what enacts it [*actuans*] and determines it intelligibly, and there it does not work as a substance, but as a determining intelligible, since the union and conjunction as a being are different from that as an intelligible⁵³.

In this passage, Poinsoot seems to silently line up with those, reported by Vázquez, who distinguished between two aspects in the same angelic essence (e1-e2), taken as a *res* or as an intelligible itself. Accordingly, he contends that the essence of the angel is present for the intellect both subjectively (e1) and objectively (e2), and just as the latter it determines the intellect as having an act of cognition. What remains to be explained, however, is the core of the IKP issue, i.e. *how* the presence of substance can do so, without being an informing form (β), or a proximate principle (γ). In Poinsoot’s perspective, the problem is even more tangled and posed in this way:

indeed, this is hardly understood, [i.e.] what is done by the very substance precisely according to its intelligibility, and not according to its real entity, given that the role and the intelligibility of the species is not separated in reality, nor can there be understood to be a real union [between two elements that are really distinct from each other], which would not even be

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, d. 21, art. 2, p. 355, col. 2.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

an intelligible union, which is exerted according to a real entity, at least as a given premise [*praesuppositiva*]. Moreover, it is not clear in which causal genus a real substance's entity, as is added intelligibly to an intellect that is already existing and that inheres in it [the substance], is united to it. Since in the genus of the material cause it unites the intellect to itself entitatively, and does not join to it intentionally and objectively, because it does not subsist in being as an object but as a subject; and however, it is not clear how the substance can really enact and inform the intellect itself, which is an accident inherent to it, in the genus of the formal cause. And to say that the assistance and the presence of the substance is sufficient without determining which causal genus such a substance is united to, and determines the intellect, is to say nothing⁵⁴.

As one can see, Poincot himself accepts that it is highly uncertain how a real union as of two different things between an intellect and an intelligible substance can cause, materially or formally, angelic self-knowledge. Yet, against Vázquez he solves the issue by drawing from Cajetan's "identity theory", here slightly reassessed. Indeed, for Poincot, the angelic substance effectively *informs* (β) the angelic intellect, but does not do so either for adherence or true information, but rather by way of identity⁵⁵.

However, on closer inspection, the ultimate core of the issue remains how the angelic intellect and the angelic substance can be one thing due to their identity, but two distinct actors when they interact and cause angelic self-knowledge. In this respect, Poincot's stance is original albeit quite ambivalent. On the one hand, indeed, he radicalizes Cajetan's "identity theory". On the other, he paradoxically resorts to Vázquez's "root argument" to explain how this identity can cause the interplay between the angelic intellect and substance. For Poincot, indeed, the identity at stake in his version of Cajetan's "identity theory" is not a general identity between the intellect and the substance, but rather an *intelligible* identity (*identificatur intelligibiliter*) between the intellect and the substance taken as its "radical principle of intellection", i.e. insofar as the intellect derives from it.

The latter expression indicates that the intellectual power itself "flows out" from the substance, and does so in a way that it does not need any additional species⁵⁶. This position may appear more understandable considering that, in Poincot's view, not only the substance but also the intellect should be taken in more specific terms, i.e. as what he calls "radical intellect". This expression means the intellectual power insofar as it is "rooted" in the substance, which, as said, is here understood insofar as it is the "radical principle" of the intellectual power. The notion of "radical intellect" thus expresses the identity between the intellect and

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, d. 21, art. 2, p. 356, col. 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

the substance, or the angelic intellect insofar as it is identical with its substance. This is the kind of identity upon which Poincot's whole version of the "identity theory" is grounded.

This explains why Poincot speaks here of an "*intelligible* identity". The specific identity here indicated as "radical intellect" indeed determines that the angelic intellectual power structurally comes to being as the same as the angelic substance, which hence must be taken not just as a subsistent subject, but also as something which *is* the intellectual power itself, and so is given to it in the form of an intelligible object. In effect, like Aquinas, Poincot applies here the principle of the 'immunity from matter', for which the angelic substance is intelligible in itself, and in this regard it can here be taken *objectively*, and not *subjectively*⁵⁷. This way, the same angelic substance, i.e. the angelic "radical principle of intellection" is at the same time also the "radical intellect"; which is the angelic substance taken as an intelligent subject, and the substance as the "radical principle" of this intellect, which is immaterial, intelligible in itself, and hence an intelligible object⁵⁸. This entails that the "radical intellect", i.e. the identity between the intellect and its substance, is an intelligent subject that comes to being as structurally determined by this constant object (the "radical principle of intellection"), which is on the other hand itself:

And so, in a word, the angelic substance as an object, and as objectively intelligible, informs by way of identity the very radical intellect, i.e. the substance itself [considered] insofar as it is the root and the principle of the intellect; however, it does not inform the intellectual power in itself [i.e. directly], but rather the intellectual power flows out from such identity of the substance as an intelligible object and the intellectual subject, in the way an intellectual power [flows out] from a subject, and [it comes to being] as intentionally determined towards the object, which is the substance itself; since now the very intellectual power flows out from its root and principle as complete and determined to understand itself⁵⁹.

Finally, Poincot also counters Vázquez's twofold assertion that the angelic essence or substance cannot be the proximate principle that triggers self-knowledge in the angelic intellect and that, rather, the intellect is the principle that affects the essence or substance. For Poincot, if so, what determines the essence is not the intellect in itself, but the "radical intellect". The latter, however, is entirely identified with the substance and "is the substance due to the same formal virtue for which it is the intellect"⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, d. 21, art. 2, 356, col. 2.

6. CONCLUSION

In his *La double révolution*, Alain de Libera has noted that, already in the fourteenth century, two meanings of *subiectum* circulated in Western thought reflecting alternative meanings of *substantia*: “one that makes it the synonym of the substrate of the accidents, another a synonym of subsistence”. For Libera, this twofold notion is at play in a quite famous “chiasmus” between the scholastic notions of *subject* and *object* that, beginning in the late middle ages, presents itself in the thought of Descartes to appear then in the current meaning of these concepts⁶¹. This process is that through which “the Aristotelian subject has turned into the modern agent-subject by becoming the ‘supposit’ of acts and operations”⁶². As Libera argues, it is in particular the outcome of the thirteenth-century reaction against the Averroistic reading of Aristotle and this development passed through a comprehensive reassessment of scholastic noetics, built upon a conception of the thought as an *immanent* action⁶³.

The story we have outlined in this paper is part of this wide history of “subjectivity”, and it brings together similar elements in a different order. It is not implausible that medieval theologians, and notably Aquinas, employed angelology as a theoretical place for developing theses that were somehow too radical for human beings, particularly in noetics. If this is true, the problem of angelic self-knowledge is perhaps a peculiar and pivotal plexus where Aquinas and his school defended and radicalized a model that looks at thought as an essentially *immanent* activity. Angelic self-knowledge, which is not yet a form of self-awareness, is indeed the borderline case of a model of thought conceived in terms of a personal, subjective activity addressed towards an intelligible object. Yet it is also the place where the difference between these elements blurs, allowing for a coincidence of subject and object, or for experimenting with new meanings of these terms.

What makes the Thomistic tradition here explored particularly intriguing is then that they put to work not only the idea of an interplay between the angelic intellect and its substance, but also their general bewilderment as for the specific causal process disposing the angelic mind towards its substance. More specifically, Aquinas seemed to have renounced right from the start the too-demanding Aristotelian idea that the contact between these two might lie directly in their identity, rather arguing that the mere co-presence of an in-

⁶¹ DE LIBERA, *La double révolution* cit., p. 449.

⁶² A. DE LIBERA, *Archéologie du sujet*, I. *Naissance du sujet*, Paris, Vrin, 2007, p. 39.

⁶³ DE LIBERA, *La double révolution* cit., pp. 295-489.

telligent being and an intelligible was sufficient to trigger some information and hence a cognitive act in the intellect, caused by the angel itself inasmuch as it is “immune from matter”. Yet, all his commentators appear to be aware of the IKP issue, and hence that the essence or the substance cannot perform, by co-presence alone, a function similar to that of an intelligible species that adheres to the intellect and enacts it.

In the face of this problem, Cajetan’s “identity theory” appears to be a direct strategy to champion Aquinas’ thesis that angelic self-knowledge is a purely immanent activity generated in the same angelic substance-intellect, and he does that drawing directly on Aristotle’s model of αὐτὸν νοεῖ ὁ νοῦς. Though, in turn, his “identity theory” does not spell out how the angelic intellect can be affected by the angelic substance as by an intelligible object. Vázquez’s discussion knocks this point in particular, arguing that the angelic substance is the root, and not the proximate, causally determining principle of the angelic intellect; it is just a general principle of its intellection, insofar as the intellect ontologically roots in it. Poinso’s treatment of the problem appears to be structurally aimed at replying to Vázquez, advocating for Aquinas and Cajetan, and contending that the *radical* identity between the angelic intellect and the angelic substance supports the notion of the angelic self-knowledge as a purely immanent cognitive event. Yet, Poinso’s strategy also draws on Vázquez’s critique and eventually sets up a model in which the coincidence of the intelligent and the intelligible takes place only at the “root” level of the substance, where the notions of “subject” and “object” almost overlap. The intellect as the “radical intellect” can be reduced to the substance and at the same time is a constant, structural object of it insofar as it is itself an intelligible being.

In the Vázquez-Poinso debate the conceptual scope of the discussion is determined by the twofold paradigm laid out by the doctrine of “immunity from matter”, and above all by the problem of the presential causation of an immaterial, intelligible substantial form on an intellect. Within these coordinates, which include a still substantialistic understanding of “subjectivity”, early modern scholastics however develop original ideas that chronologically overlap with those considered as already marked by the new principles of modernity. Following Cajetan, Poinso endeavors in particular to construct a model where not only the intellect and the substance share a strong causal connection by virtue of their ultimate identity, but also where the *subject* endowed with intellect and its intelligible *object* or “principle of intellection” constantly intermingle at the “root-level” of the substance. This solution – interestingly,

quite close to that provided by Suárez earlier⁶⁴ – allows Poinset to think of the angelic mind as something structurally and necessarily oriented towards itself as an intentional object, championing Aquinas' immanentist model and taking it to the extreme.

⁶⁴ See F. SUÁREZ, *De angelis*, in ID., *Opera omnia*, Paris, Vivès, 1856, III, bk. II, ch. 4, § 9. See also S. GUIDI, *Baroque Metaphysics. Studies on Francisco Suárez*, Coimbra, Palimage 2020, pp. 199-208.