Thomas Aquinas On Knowledge

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Thomas Aquinas in his prolific work titled “Summa Theologae” explicated his position on how individuals come know things. These things, which are outside of individuals, are things that are foreign from us, and because it is foreign, it is somehow unknown to us. Things that are not with or in us are things that are enigmatic, since these things are do not belong to us. The things that belong to us are things that already revealed themselves and are known to us, these things that are known to us are familiar to our consciousness and comprehension. Our consciousness, and comprehension are able to know things that are foreign to us, since we as intellectual individuals have the capacity to apprehend intelligible things.

Thomas Aquinas’ epistemology says that individuals who comprehend things are different from those individuals who cannot comprehend things, since the former is capable to absorb the form of the knowable things outside of him, and since the latter does not have the capacity to absorb the things that are outside of him. “Knowing agents differ from those that do not know in the fact that the non knowers possess their own form only, while the knower is adapted from its origin to possess also the form of another thing, in the sense that the species of the known thing may be present in the knower.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Individuals, as knowing agents, absorb the form of things that are being known by the individual. The individual somehow becomes the thing he absorbs to know. The thing known by the individual is absorbed by the knower, and the knower becomes the thing he absorbs.

The knower of the object who possesses the ability to comprehend objects absorbs the form of the things he decides to comprehend. To comprehend the things an individual wants to know, the individual has to absorb its form. When the individual absorbs the form he wants to comprehend, the form he comprehends would already present in the knower. The presence of the form in the knower whose capacity to absorb things that are knowable translates the images he conceived in his mind. The mind then comprehends the things the individual absorb in making meaning for it.

Since, individuals are intellectual beings who have the capacity to comprehend things that they want to comprehend, it is a natural faculty for individuals to absorb the forms of things without becoming things. For example, a girl of eight years old walked on the road and got hungry; she then looked for something to eat, she saw a plant that was not familiar to her. The plant has yellow elongated fruits she saw for the first time did neither looked, nor smelled dangerous since some living creatures are devouring some of its parts. She then concluded that that elongated fruit was safe to eat. When the girl saw the elongated fruit, she absorbed first the image of the fruit. She absorbed the fruit without becoming the fruit, since she only absorbed the image of the fruit and not the fruit itself. The girl as the knower of the object had imprinted in her mind the image of the fruit, and therefore was able to comprehend the fruit through its image that was absorbed by the mind she has.

Moreover, Thomas Aquinas believed that individuals who cannot absorb the forms of objects that are knowable are restricted and limited, since they could not know or comprehend the things that are beyond them.

“It is clear, then, that the nature of a noncognitive thing is more

restricted and limited, while the nature of knowing things has greater fullness and extension. This is why the philosopher [Aristotle] says in the third book, On the Soul (8, 431b21), that ‘the soul is in a way all things.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

All things are in a way the soul for Aristotle who was the model of Thomas Aquinas. The soul could be all things, since the soul has the capacity to comprehend things. And when the soul comprehends things, it absorbs the forms of the things without becoming the thing itself.

Since the soul is immaterial, it comprehends things that are immaterial. The immateriality of the images that come from the objects are therefore absorbed by the soul, in order for the soul to know.

“Now, the limitation of the form is due to matter. Hence we said above that the more immaterial forms are, the more do they approach some sort of infinity. It is plain, then, that the immateriality of a thing is the reason why it is able to know; and the level of cognition depends on the level of immateriality.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Things that are material cannot absorb the images given by the knowable objects. The knowable objects have forms that are abstracted by the mind of the knower. Since the cognitive capacity of the mind of the individual is immaterial, it is capable of absorbing the sense images, or what we call the phantasms of objects without being the object himself. The phantasms are images that are imprinted in the mind of the knower, and these phantasms are immaterial. Since these phantasms are immaterial they are intelligible objects capable of being absorb by an intelligent being.

Whereas on the other hand, there are things that cannot absorb other things since they are only composed of materiality and lack immateriality. Plants for example cannot absorb the form of another plant, since it does not have an immaterial faculty that would enable it to absorb the form of another plant. The cognitive faculty of the mind of higher beings, such as humans enables them to absorb immaterial forms of things. The imprint or the sense images that is abstracted by the mind of the individual is immaterial. The capability of the mind to abstract things that are immaterial only proves that the mind of individuals are also immaterial substances, and these immaterial substances, in order to know, abstract other immaterial substances without becoming the things absorbed by it itself.

Furthermore, Thomas Aquinas believes that there are three levels of how the mind is capable to know things that are foreign to it. The first level of knowing is sensation. Second, it is the angelic intellect. And third, it is the combination of the former and the latter. These levels of knowing is believed by Thomas Aquinas to exist and work when individuals are in the process of learning and comprehending objects that are beyond and foreign to them.

The first level of knowing for Thomas Aquinas is sensation. Knowing through sensation means that the objects we tend to comprehend goes first through our senses. We could say for example that a papaya is rough when we have touched its surface. The idea of roughness do not solely come from the mind, it is through the senses that the mind got the idea that the papaya is rough. The senses that perceived sensations from material objects translate to the mind in order for the mind to comprehend.

Secondly, Thomas Aquinas believes that our knowledge comes from our angelic intellect. Our intellect primarily is immaterial as such as angels. The immateriality of angels could be equated to the immateriality of our intellect, since of them cannot be perceived by our senses. And since they are not perceived by our senses, our knowledge must have come from something that is also immaterial. Our intellect perceives things that are material although they are immaterial, but they only see material objects in their immaterial form or what we call the phantasms.

And Lastly, Thomas Aquinas believed that there is a middle ground between the senses and the angelic intellect. Thomas Aquinas believed that it is neither the sensation nor the intellect that enables an individual to comprehend things, both of them work together, since the senses translates the sensation to immateriality and this immateriality is in the form of materiality. To know the objects outside the knower, the knower has to abstract the phantasms from these objects. The objects then are translated from materiality to immateriality. The knower absorbs the immateriality of the objects without becoming like the object.

Furthermore, Thomas Aquinas does not stop in investigating on how things could be known by the mind of the individual. Thomas Aquinas proposed that there is a way to know the existence of a higher being than humans who created all things. This being who created all things is the source of all things. Yet, although he is the source of all things, this Being does not come from a source; this Being who caused all things was not caused by any other being, since he is the cause of Its own Being. The cosmological argument of Thomas Aquinas argues using reason itself. And since Thomas Aquinas used reason to create his cosmological argument, it is therefore coming from the ancient tradition of the Greeks.

1. Thomas Aquinas, *The Pocket Aquinas: Selected from Summa of Theology and More than Thirty Other Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas,* Edited by Vernon J. Bourke, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)