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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AQUINAS AND KANT IN
THE APPROACH TO HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

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THIS TITLE MAY LOOK LIKE saying: “The difference between apples and oranges. . .” Did we need a paper on that? Kant and Aquinas: who can doubt they are different? And however, there are some who equate Aquinas and Kant in doctrines in which they are actually opposed; some attribute to St. Thomas Aquinas approaches that are Kantian and by no means Thomistic. They make those mistakes by misinterpreting or misusing Aquinas’ texts.

Just two examples: Aquinas says that “the intellect in act and the thing understood in act are the same thing”,¹ and from here some conclude that the act of understanding is the very act of the object known; that is to say, they identify the act by which the thing is in reality (act of being) with the act of understanding it (act of knowing) as if the thing understood (as understood) had no other being in itself than the being it has in the mind.²

Aquinas also says that “the agent intellect makes intelligible”³ the particular reality; and from here some want to conclude that, for Aquinas, the universal content in human understanding does not come from the things themselves; instead, the things themselves, which are sensible and therefore have no intelligibility whatsoever, are made intelligible by the agent intellect, by our spirit. In other words, the doctrine of the agent intellect is for them a confirmation that, for Aquinas, universality, intelligibility and necessity in the object of human understanding are the result of the activity of the intellect, as for Kant.⁴ These are serious mystifications of St. Thomas’ texts

¹ Cf. ST I, q. 85, a 2, ob. 1: “The understood in act is the intellect itself in act” [intellectum in actu est ipse intellectus in actu].

² Cf. for example Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych SJ (New York: Continuum, 1994), 69-70.

³ Cf. ST I, q. 79, a 3: “We must therefore assign on the part of the intellect some power to make things actually intelligible...” [Oportebat igitur ponere aliquam virtutem ex parte intellectus, quae faceret intelligibilia in actu].

⁴ Cf. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 219-226.

with even more serious consequences for Theology.

I would like today to clarify a little bit the radical difference between the approaches of Aquinas and Kant to human knowledge. In my view, we need first of all to understand the problem of the universals, which is the basic problem of human understanding and, in a sense, the only problem of philosophy. Second, we need to understand the stance of both philosophers in front of this same problem. Only then will we be able to see what and how radical is the difference between Aquinas and Kant.

I. THE PROBLEM OF THE UNIVERSALS

The problem of the universals is basically this: what is it that we predicate of the many? When we say “Pluto, Lassie, and Rintintin are dogs”, what is “dog”? For some, because the many are all different (all dogs are different) and what we predicate of the many is only one (“dog”), the universal can be only a name or a concept. In other words, the universal is something subjective, a subjective construction, that we apply to the many because this is the way we function as human beings. For Aristotle, instead, the universal was something in the things themselves but in this sense: what we predicate of the many is the nature, is that specific perfection which gives to each particular thing its own kind. When I say “Socrates is man”, I am not attributing to Socrates simply a name or a concept; I am attributing to Socrates the nature of man.

“Socrates is man”: I am not saying that Socrates has the name of a man, I am not saying that Socrates is thought as a man, I am saying the Socrates *is* a man. I am saying that the nature of man belongs to him in reality; he *is* a man; he has in himself something for which I can say that he is a man. And, for St. Thomas, “it is not that man is white because I think he is white, but I think man is white because he is white”,⁵ whiteness

⁵ *In Met.* 9, lect.11, 1897.

belongs to man and is in man.

In order to understand Thomistic realism, what we have just said is crucial. Whatever the philosophical difficulties of explaining this might be, for St. Thomas, the object of human understanding is reality itself, and not a construction of the mind. In human knowledge we encounter reality. Human knowledge is not the production of an idol in the absence of reality. When we know, it is not that we know a construction of the mind but, rather, the mind, in its own way, in the way it can, embraces, attains the various perfections of reality. I said in the way it can: the mind knows reality through the mediation of a cognitive representation. But its object is reality, not the cognitive representation.

How can Aquinas say that the nature we know, which is one for all, belongs to the many? They are precisely *many* and each of them realizes differently that nature. Or put in another way: we do not find in reality a universal nature, an abstracted nature, but only material individual things; how can we say, then, that what we know exists in reality, that this universal nature is real? Aquinas' answer is that there is a distinction between the thing we know and the mode of being of that thing: the thing we know is certainly in reality, but not with the same mode of being with which we know it—in reality, the nature exists particularized, together with particular determinations; in the mind, instead, the nature exists in a state of abstraction, separated from those material conditions. But what we know and what exists in reality are one and the same thing, that is, the nature of the corporeal thing.

Kant's problem is that, unlike Aquinas, Kant cannot separate what we know from its abstracted mode of being. Reality is particular, contingent, unstable; our science is universal and necessary; therefore universality and necessity cannot come from reality but must be the result of the action of the spirit on the matter of experience. In other words, if there is in human knowledge a certain universality, stability and ne-

cessity, these characteristics cannot come from the unstable and contingent reality but from the subject; the unstable reality cannot be the cause of any stability in our knowledge.

Why then do Aquinas and Kant differ so radically in their respective accounts of human understanding? Because they depart from different facts. The Kantian fact is the universality of the nature in the mind, in other words, that we have a universal concept in the mind. The Kantian fact is that we possess universal science. The Kantian fact is an event of consciousness, something which happens in the mind. What Kant needs to explain is this fact of consciousness which is universality; now, it seems obvious that the universality we find in our minds cannot derive from the particularity and multiplicity of experience; therefore, for Kant, it is obvious that this universality can derive only from the subject. Universality is explained by means of a subjective function, *a priori* from experience.

The Thomistic fact, instead, is that we know the nature of sensible things, that is, that we know something belonging to the things themselves. What St. Thomas needs to explain, therefore, is not that those natures belong to or are attributed to the things themselves, because this is the point of departure. What he needs to explain is instead the abstracted mode of being of that same nature in the mind, or, perhaps better said, how we know those intelligible natures.

Both Aquinas and Kant face the problem of the universals: we attribute to the particular a universal essence, we say that Peter is a man. For Kant, however, because there is absolutely nothing universal in the particular (what we have called “the Kantian fact”), if we attribute the universal to the particular, then this must be explained as a subjective function: it is the way we think. For Aquinas, instead, we attribute the universal essence to the particular because it is in the particular: this man is a man precisely because he has the essence of a man. Now, the way the essence of a man is in this man is different from the way his essence is in our minds. The mode of being is

different, but the essence is the same. This is what may need to be explained. But for Aquinas, in order to know something, it is not necessary to know it with the same mode of being it has in reality.

Aquinas and Kant depart from two different facts which imply two different notions of knowledge. For Kant, to know is to have a representation in the mind: to explain knowledge, is to find the source of that representation. For Aquinas, to know is to engage reality: to explain knowledge is to find out how this is possible. Kant departs from the unity of the subject with his representation, and tries to find out in what sense that representation has something to do with the other, with the outside-world. Kant departs from an object which is immanent. Aquinas departs from the unity of the subject with the other of the world; in other words, for Aquinas there are two poles from the beginning: knowledge is not the possession of a subjective representation, but the possession of the other as other. What Aquinas needs to find out is how this is possible. For Aquinas, to know is to know something, something other than the subject. For Kant, to know is to know a representation, something belonging to the subject. That is why Aquinas needs to explain the unity of subject and object, and Kant needs to explain their distinction: that is, Aquinas tries to explain the subjectivity of the object, how the object-other becomes one (in a sense) with the subject. Kant needs instead to explain the objectivity of the subjective representation, that is, how the subjective form is applied to the world of experience. This is the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant.

Let us try to see Kant's and Aquinas' radically differing approaches in their own words.

II. AQUINAS' POSITION IN ST I, Q. 84, A. 1

In this article, the question is whether the soul knows the corporeal things by means of intelligence, and the point is lo-

cated precisely in the problem of the universals.⁶ Having considered those who denied the possibility of a scientific knowledge of reality because of its instability (Heraclitus), having considered also Plato, who put stability outside the “apparent” reality in a true “world of reality” (his “ideas”), and having shown the inconvenience of Plato’s solution, Aquinas goes to the root of the problem:

“Now it seems that Plato strayed from the truth because, having observed that all knowledge takes place through some kind of similitude, he thought that the form of the thing known must of necessity be in the knower in the same manner as in the thing known.”⁷ This is the main problem in the form of a general principle. The following is an explanation of Plato’s error in the intellectual realm:

Then he observed that the form of the thing understood is in the intellect under conditions of universality, immateriality, and immobility: which is apparent from the very operation of the intellect, who understands in a universal way and with a certain necessity: for the mode of action corresponds to the mode of the agent’s form. Wherefore he concluded that the things which we understand must have in themselves an existence under the same conditions of immateriality and immobility.⁸

6 The following is a summary from Andres Ayala, “The Agent Intellect in Aquinas: A Metaphysical Condition of Possibility of Human Understanding as Receptive of Objective Content” (PhD diss., University of St. Michael’s College, 2018), 111-115.

7 ST I, q. 84, a. 1: “Videtur autem in hoc Plato deviasse a veritate, quia, cum aestimaret omnem cognitionem per modum alicuius similitudinis esse, credit quod forma cogniti ex necessitate sit in cognoscente eo modo quo est in cognito.”

8 ST I, q. 84, a. 1: “Consideravit autem quod forma rei intellectae est in intellectu universaliter et immaterialiter et immobiliter, quod ex ipsa operatione intellectus apparet, qui intelligit universaliter et per modum necessitatis cuiusdam; modus enim actionis est secundum modum formae agentis. Et ideo existimavit quod oporteret res intellectas hoc modo in seipsis subsis-

Here the Thomistic distinction between the *object understood* and the mode of being of the same is already clear. St. Thomas proceeds by showing the inconsistency of Plato's principle, and he tries to make it more clear by using an interesting progression. In his first step, he considers the sensible realm in its objectivity:

But there is no necessity for this. For even in sensible things it is to be observed that the form is otherwise in one sensible than in another: for instance, whiteness may be of great intensity in one, and of a less intensity in another: in one we find whiteness with sweetness, in another without sweetness.⁹

That is to say, the real accidental quality *albedo* (*whiteness*), being the same in every white thing, can subsist in different modes in different white things. St. Thomas is trying to show in this first step how easy it is for us to conceive that one and the same quality may exist in different modes. The second step is already in the gnoseological realm: "In the same way the sensible form is conditioned differently in the thing which is external to the soul, and in the senses which receive the forms of sensible things without receiving matter, such as the color of gold without receiving gold."¹⁰ It seems the main reason St. Thomas uses the senses as an example here is the ease with which one can accept that, when we see the colour, we receive the colour not as it subsists in reality (with the gold included, in the example), but *in another way*. St. Thomas thus opens the way to the solution:

So also the intellect, according to its own mode, receives

tere, scilicet immaterialiter et immobiliter."

⁹ ST I, q. 84, a. 1: "Hoc autem necessarium non est. Quia etiam in ipsis sensibilibus videmus quod forma alio modo est in uno sensibilibus quam in altero, puta cum in uno est albedo intensior, in alio remissior, et in uno est albedo cum dulcedine, in alio sine dulcedine."

¹⁰ ST I, q. 84, a. 1: "Et per hunc etiam modum forma sensibilis alio modo est in re quae est extra animam, et alio modo in sensu, qui suscipit formas sensibilibus absque materia, sicut colorem auri sine auro."

under conditions of immateriality and immobility, the species of material and mobile bodies: for the received is in the receiver according to the mode of the receiver. We must conclude, therefore, that through the intellect the soul knows bodies by a knowledge which is immaterial, universal, and necessary.¹¹

It should be clear that the species can be called “material”¹² insofar as they subsist in the matter, but not as if they were nothing other than matter. The whole argument would be pointless. St. Thomas is highlighting precisely that, even if the form does not subsist in the same way in the intellect as it does in reality, this fact does not prevent the intellect from knowing *that same form*. St. Thomas is implying that the stability denied by the natural philosophers (regarding corporeal things), and projected by Plato in a parallel world, is actually imbedded in the material things as their form or species, but not in the immaterial way in which it is known.¹³

This can be seen in the answer to the third objection as well. The third objection maintained that, because the intellect refers only to necessary and immobile things, and the bodies are contingent and mobile, the intellect could therefore not know the bodies. St. Thomas answers:

Every movement implies something immobile: because when a change in quality happens, the substance remains immobile; and when a change in the substantial form happens, there remains the matter immobile... and because of this, nothing prevents us from having an immobile science of mobile things.

11 ST I, q. 84, a. 1: “Et similiter intellectus species corporum, quae sunt materiales et mobiles, recipit immaterialiter et immobiliter, secundum modum suum, nam receptum est in recipiente per modum recipientis. Dicendum est ergo quod anima per intellectum cognoscit corpora cognitione immateriali, universali et necessaria.”

12 In the Latin text, It seems clear that “quae sunt materiales et mobiles” refers to the plural “species” and not to “corporum,” which is neutral.

13 This stability in sensible things is also affirmed in *In Boet. De Trin.* 5, 2, c.; *In Met.* 11, lect. 6, 2232.

The reason we can have an immobile science of mobile things is that there is something immobile in mobile things.

Another text from the *Disputed Question on the Soul* can help us here. What we know (the nature) exists really in the things themselves, even if it does not exist with the same mode of being:

According to Aristotle, the fact that the intellect understands a one-in-many in abstraction from individuating principles, is to be attributed to the intellect itself. And though nothing abstract exists in reality, the intellect is not void of any real content, nor is it misrepresentative of things as they are; because, of those things which necessarily *exist together*, one can be truly understood or named without another being understood or named. But it cannot be truly understood or said of things existing together, that one exists without the other.¹⁴ Thus whatever exists in an individual which pertains to the nature of its species, and in respect of which it is like other things, can be known and spoken of truly without taking into consideration its individuating principles, which distinguish it from all other individuals [of the same species].¹⁵

St. Thomas is saying clearly that the nature of a dog, which is what makes this dog similar to other dogs, exists in the dog *together* with that which makes this dog different from others.

¹⁴ That is, I can *understand* the nature of a dog without understanding its individuating principles, but I cannot say that the nature of a dog *exists* without individual matter.

¹⁵ *Q.D. De Anima*, a. 3, ad 8 (Parenthesis mine, square brackets translator's) "Sed secundum sententiam Aristotelis hoc est ab intellectu, *scilicet quod intelligat unum in multis per abstractionem a principiis individuantibus. Nec tamen intellectus est vanus aut falsus, licet non sit aliquid abstractum in rerum natura. Quia eorum quae sunt simul, unum potest vere intelligi aut nominari, absque hoc quod intelligatur vel nominetur alterum; licet non possit vere intelligi vel dici, quod eorum quae sunt simul, unum sit sine altero. Sic igitur vere potest considerari et dici id quod est in aliquo individuo, de natura speciei, in quo simile est cum aliis, absque eo quod considerentur in eo principia individuantia, secundum quae distinguitur ab omnibus aliis.*"

That nature is what we know in our universal concept.¹⁶

In the words of Fabro, what we know is immanent in the things themselves, and this is the difference between Plato and Aristotle:

Aristotle, applying himself decisively to the consideration of *being (ens) as being*, found in the realities *complementary* the essence *and* its concrete determinations, the knowledge of the intelligible *and* that of the sensible characteristics, because **the form is not “separate,” but immanent to matter**. Certainly, science is always of the universal; the real reality, however, that is, the one which is ascertained by us, is the singular as concrete *ousia*: to it pertains first of all the character of reality and *the universal can be called real only inasmuch as it is recognized as immanent in the concrete*.¹⁷

Therefore, because it is a fact that we know the nature of corporeal things, and it is also a fact that those natures are not abstract in reality, there must be a difference between the mode of being of those natures in reality and the mode of being that they have in our concepts. There is no difference regarding the content: the content, that which we know, is the same. The difference regards the mode of being: the nature subsists in reality together with individual determinations, and in the mind abstracted from those material conditions. Plato erred because he

16 Cf. ST I, q. 76, a. 2, ad 4: “But there is this difference, according to the opinion of Aristotle, between the sense and the intelligence—that a thing is perceived by the sense according to the disposition which it has outside the soul—that is, in its individuality; whereas the nature of the thing [which is] understood is indeed outside the soul, but the mode according to which it exists outside the soul is not the mode according to which it is understood.” [Sed hoc tantum interest inter sensum et intellectum, secundum sententiam Aristotelis, quod res sentitur secundum illam dispositionem quam extra animam habet, in sua particularitate, *natura autem rei quae intelligitur*, est quidem extra animam, sed non habet illum modum essendi extra animam, secundum quem intelligitur.]

17 Cornelio Fabro, *Percezione e pensiero* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1962), 305-306 (this translation by Prof. Giulio Silano). Fabro’s italics, my bold.

did not distinguish, and Kant erred in the same way.

III. KANT'S POSITION IN *CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON*, B 1-6

In my view, the root of Kant's approach to human understanding can be taken from sections *I* and *II* of the *Introduction* to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason (KRV)*.¹⁸

Experience teaches us, to be sure, that something is constituted thus and so, but not that it could not be otherwise [...] Experience never gives its judgments true or strict but only assumed and comparative **universality** (through induction), so properly it must be said: as far as we have yet perceived, there is no exception to this or that rule. Thus if a judgment is thought in strict universality, i.e., in such a way that no exception at all is allowed to be possible, then it is not derived from experience, but is rather valid absolutely *a priori*.¹⁹

In other words, that which is universal cannot come from experience because experience is of the particular: therefore, it must come from the subject in some way. It is crucial to note that Kant's assessment comes from a consideration of the contents precisely as contents of human knowing. That is why he says: "For it could well be that even our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty (merely prompted by sensible impressions) provides out of itself."²⁰ Kant is analyzing the content of cognition, and trying to identify the source of those contents *as such*, taking for granted that it could be possible that not all content comes from experience. What may or

¹⁸ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B 1-6. In the quotations from the *KRV*, the letters "A" or "B" are respectively the indication of Kant's first or second edition, and the following number is an indication of the page of the original German.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, B 3-4.

²⁰ *ibid.*, B 1.

may not come from experience is something that is *already* in cognition: the point of departure is an analysis of the content *insofar as it is in the knower*. This analysis of the content insofar as it is in cognition leads him to reject experience as the source of the intelligible content.

The incompatibility which Kant sees between particular and universal implies that he is considering the universal with the mode of being which it has in the subject. And of course, the abstracted universal *as abstracted* can have nothing to do with experience; this universal is immutable, whereas reality is changeable; it is necessary, not contingent as reality is. This heterogeneity of contents, then, is that which requires a subjective origin for the intelligible content of human knowing, probably because what is more cannot come from what is less or—more likely—because only the similar produces something similar to itself.

Note again that for Kant, at the crucial moment where Epistemology begins, the intelligible content is not distinguished from its mode of being. For Kant the intelligible content is an event of consciousness, it is the idea as subjective representation. The Kantian fact is the subjective possession of a universal representation. That is, the Kantian fact is the knowledge of the universal as abstracted, not the knowledge of the nature of *the sensible thing*. That is why he says: “if a judgment is thought in strict universality [...] then it is not derived from experience, but is rather valid absolutely *a priori*.”²¹ *The Kantian fact is that the judgment* as thought is necessary, not that its truth belongs to experience: so much so that the very fact that it is universal is enough for him to conclude that *it does not* come from experience. Another way to see it is this: he does not question the universality and necessity of the judgment, but rather denies that anything like universality or necessity comes from experience. In other words, universality and necessity are qualities of

²¹ Kant, *KRV*, B 4.

the thought and not of experience. Experience is so foreign to these qualities, that they need to be explained a priori.

It seems clear, then, that the difference between the approaches of Kant and Aquinas is radical. The reason also seems clear: they begin from different cognitive facts and, as a consequence, their respective explanations regarding the facts are different. Kant's explanation views what is a priori (categories) as the source of intelligible content: the categories make intelligible, give intelligibility and necessity to that which is not intelligible or necessary at all. For Aquinas, instead, what is a priori (the agent intellect) is the source of the intelligible mode of being of the content. The agent intellect also makes intelligible, but in the sense that it gives intelligibility as mode of being to something "intelligible", i.e, the nature, which is already in the things themselves. For Aquinas, the intelligible content is a posteriori, it comes from the things themselves because it is in the things themselves. Instead, for Kant, who did not differentiate the content from the mode of being of the content, the intelligible content could never be a posteriori.

One of the dangers of Kant's approach is that, because reality doesn't have anything stable of its own, natural law can have an origin only in the subject: this is the birth of relativism. Another huge consequence is that if all intelligibility comes from the subject, then being, which is the first intelligible, is also explained through a function of thinking. Being is being intelligible, being is being thought. Now God, who is said to be the absolute being, also becomes a function of human thinking, and so a God made in the image of human beings. God is found in human being, as the infinite horizon of human thinking, or of human desires... The God of modern philosophy is a God defined by human possibilities, a human infinity which has nothing to do with the real God.

Thomistic gnoseology is challenging because it explains reality as it is, and reality is mysterious. St. Thomas did not escape the mystery, but faced it. St. Thomas did not wish to stay

in the plains of doubt, where uncertainty and denial of truth give human beings all kinds of excuses to creep on their bellies like the rest of animals. St. Thomas climbed the mountain and, arriving to the top, realized that we also had wings to fly towards God. It is only through the hard path of study and virtue that we are able to enjoy who we really are. It is easy to stay on the plain, but at the top of the mountain is God. And because it was hard to climb, God himself descended to the plain to help us. The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and gave us power to become children of God (cf. *John* 1: 12.14). May he always help us to find the truth.

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