





# **The Influence of Kant in Transcendental Thomism**

*Rahner, Lonergan and Von Balthasar*

Andres Ayala IVE, Ph.D.



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The Influence of Kant in Transcendental Thomism: Rahner, Lonergan and Von Balthasar

Andres Ayala, IVE

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## Preface

When facing the fundamental problem of knowledge and being, it is easy to take Kant's point of departure for granted. The modern reader either takes it for granted or at least does not react emotionally or intellectually to the "scandal" of Kant's point of departure. Kant states, "Reality is particular, our concepts are universal. Therefore, universality does not come from reality but is something coming from the subject." Kant's point of departure is easy and, to a certain extent, difficult to disagree with; but when, next to this, St. Thomas is quoted as if supporting or confirming Kant's point of departure—which happens in Transcendental Thomism—the unacquainted reader tends to accept this alliance between St. Thomas and Kant. This acceptance occurs because if Kant makes sense and "St. Thomas is always right" (as we Catholics tend to "confess"), would it not make sense that St. Thomas and Kant agree? What would be the point of even raising the question here? Why should we ask whether or not St. Thomas really said such and such, or whether St. Thomas actually agrees with Kant?

This is why, for me, it was so important to show the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant, as in my previous study.<sup>1</sup> In this way, readers are given an important instrument with which they can assess, for themselves, the actual source of what they read in Transcendental Thomism

In *The Radical Difference*, I made an effort to show the modern reader how far Aquinas is from Kant's point of departure. As a result, the path is clearer for the assessment of whether or not what Rahner and others maintain is in accordance with St. Thomas. In

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Andres Ayala, *The Radical Difference between Aquinas and Kant: Human Understanding and the Agent Intellect in Aquinas* (Chillum: IVE Press, 2021).

my view, what is missing in Catholic Theology today is not so much an understanding of what Rahner means or of Kant's point of departure, *but an understanding of the difference between Kant and Aquinas*. By making this radical difference clear, we hope to have provided the readers not only with a means to judge Rahner's Thomism, but also with the possibility of an alternative to Kant's point of departure. It may be easy to agree with Kant but if "St. Thomas is always right", should we not take a closer look at the Thomistic answer to the problem of knowledge and being?

*The Radical Difference* and the present work are one and the same endeavour: identifying a certain influence of Modern Philosophy in modern theology, particularly in Transcendental Thomism's authors. In this endeavour, the problem one faces is not mainly that Transcendental Thomism's authors are very difficult to understand; neither is the problem that the readers do not know Kant or do not understand the basics of Kant. The problem is that, many times, the readers do not know well St. Thomas and/or do not understand him correctly. And the proofs are clear. Many people think that Rahner is a Thomist and/or that his intellectual genius consists precisely in finding the point of convergence between the old and the new, St. Thomas and Kant.

This is why, in order to identify this Kantian influence in Transcendental Thomism, it was important, first, to focus on Aquinas and elucidate the radical difference between Aquinas' and Kant's epistemologies; and only then, that is in this work, to explore in detail some texts from Transcendental Thomism in which a Kantian inspiration may be discerned.

What is the point of labeling these authors as Kantian? It is not about kicking anyone off the soccer field, but about having every player wear the correct jersey, in order to avoid confusion about who is on which team. Rahner, Von Balthasar and Lonergan are on Kant's team, in the most radical way, but have been wearing St. Thomas team jersey and scoring against St. Thomas' team for

almost a century, making the game difficult. Can St. Thomas' team win, even so? Can a Middle Age team beat Kant's modern team? Let the game be fair, at least, and we will see.

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# Introduction

This research intends to show a Kantian influence in Transcendental Thomism, particularly in Rahner, Lonergan and Von Balthasar. What is meant by a Kantian influence is a certain attitude regarding the problem of the universals, an attitude which is radically different from St. Thomas'. In my previous work,<sup>2</sup> the radical difference between St. Thomas and Kant was shown. In this present research, what is argued is that Rahner, Lonergan and Von Balthasar follow Kant, not St. Thomas, with regard to the analysis of human understanding.

From each Transcendental Thomist author mentioned above, I have taken one sample text, one most significant work where each author's epistemology can be explored. Thus, I have selected Rahner's *Spirit in the World*,<sup>3</sup> Lonergan's *Verbum* articles<sup>4</sup> and Von Balthasar's *Theologic I*.<sup>5</sup> Two general reasons can be given here for these selections: firstly, the indisputable relevance of these works and secondly the fact that, in all of them, the authors intend to present their epistemological approaches as Thomistic. More

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<sup>2</sup> I write these lines after a detailed study, *The Radical Difference between Aquinas and Kant* (see Bibliography), in which I have tried to show precisely the radical difference which makes the Thomistic system irreducible to Kant's.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, translated by William Dych, SJ (New York: Continuum, 1994). In the following, this work will be referenced as Rahner, *SW*.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Volume 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997, reprinted 2014). In the following, this work will be referenced as Lonergan, *Verbum*.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I: Truth of the World*, translated by Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2000). In the following, this work will be referenced as VB, *Theologic I*.

particular reasons regarding each work will be given in their respective and relevant contexts.

Identifying this Kantian influence in Transcendental Thomism is extremely important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is not possible to ground true Thomistic metaphysics in Kantian principles. In fact, because St. Thomas and Kant, departing from the same fundamental problem, resolve that problem in opposite directions. Amalgamating their two systems into one system is not possible. Are these authors then not Thomists? My goal is to give readers sufficient doctrinal elements to answer this question for themselves. Rahner certainly knows St. Thomas, writes using Thomistic language, quotes St. Thomas thousands of times and is one of the sharpest interpreters of the Thomistic text. Something similar could be said of Von Balthasar and Lonergan. However, in my view, the relevant question is not whether Rahner expresses himself in Thomistic terms, or whether Rahner understands St. Thomas. The question is whether Rahner thinks like St. Thomas, whether his epistemological and/or metaphysical approach is Thomistic or Kantian.

The second reason for studying this issue in Rahner, Von Balthasar and Lonergan regards the consequences of Kantian epistemology for theological reflection. Doctrinal and moral relativism and ideas of God and of the Incarnation which are at odds with Catholic doctrine are, in my opinion, the most relevant examples of what Kant can effect (and has been effecting) in modern theology.

How is it possible that a Kantian doctrine be confused with Thomism? For many, the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant is not clear, or not even known. In my view, this confusion happens not due to lack of understanding of Kant, but due to lack of understanding of St. Thomas, particularly regarding Aquinas' basic epistemological approach. However, I believe this second research, also, is necessary so that this Kantian influence in Transcendental Thomism becomes even more clear.

Thus, in a brief Chapter One, I will summarize the radical difference between St. Thomas' and Kant's approaches to the problem of human understanding; then, in Chapters Two to Four and in the light of this radical difference, I will discuss excerpts (from the aforementioned Transcendental Thomist works) where I find more clearly expressed a Kantian epistemological approach.





## Chapter One

# Kant and Aquinas: The Radical Difference

For Kant, human understanding is an event of consciousness, a subjective fact, something happening in the mind. For Aquinas instead, human understanding is, from the start, a relationship to an object other than the mind. The Kantian “fact”, that is, Kant’s point of departure to study human understanding, is that we possess universal concepts; the Thomistic fact is that we know the natures of corporeal things. For Kant, the universal is an event of consciousness whereas, for Aquinas, the universal is something belonging to the things themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, for Aquinas, the universal is not originally an event of consciousness or a subjective modification, but an object; and knowing is not the possession of a concept, but a relationship to an “other”. When we know, for Aquinas, what happens is that the perfection of the known is somehow in the knower. He departs from the fact that we know *something*. The original duality of knowing is for him the only way to think about knowing: knowing,

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<sup>6</sup> Keep in mind the explicit Thomistic distinction between universal as nature and universal as the abstracted species (the concept) referring to that same nature (cf. for example *Summa* I, 85, 3 ad 1 and ad 4). This important distinction and the Thomistic texts supporting it can be found in Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 123-133. What belongs to the things themselves, from a Thomistic point of view, is the universal as nature (abundant and extensive Thomistic texts in Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 88-105).

originally, is knowing *something*, and there is no other way to think about knowing as an original fact.

When we know, for Kant, what happens is that we have a concept. Now, the characteristics of this concept make it impossible to think that this concept is simply something other: for Kant, the other of the spirit is simply particular and this concept in our mind is not. Therefore, in Kant's doctrine, the explanation of human understanding becomes the explanation of the subjective universality of the concept: in other words, the epistemological question becomes, "How is it that our knowledge of the particular is universal?" It is universal, Kant responds, because we categorize reality, we subsume the phenomenon into a priori subjective categories. For Kant, if reality is particular, then the only explanation of universality must be found in the subject: this is because universality is simply an event of consciousness, something happening in the mind and not in reality. Thus, in Kant's epistemological approach, the source of intelligibility must be in the subject.

By contrast, Aquinas departs from knowing as a relationship to the other: therefore, his explanation of human understanding regards the conditions of the possibility of this encounter, both in the object and in the subject. Aquinas' epistemological question regards how it is possible that the perfection of one thing is present in the other (*i.e.*, in the subject)? In other words, when we know, the subject is (objectively, cognitively) what it itself is not (subjectively): how is this possible? In *De Ver.* 2, 2, Aquinas argues for immateriality as the condition of the possibility of knowing.

In the particular case of human understanding, St. Thomas is also sensitive to the problem of the universals. Reality is particular and our concepts are universal: how can we say that our universal concepts make known to us the particular reality? Aquinas' solution to this problem is related to his distinguishing two meanings of "universal": as the common nature belonging to each

particular individual of the species, and as this same nature in its state of abstraction, as present in the mind.<sup>7</sup> This implies that, for Aquinas, the concept has two aspects: content (the nature which is represented in the concept) and mode of being of the content (that same nature's state of abstraction). In this way, the universal concept makes the particular known because the *content* of the concept is in the particular. This content (the nature) is not in the particular with the same mode of being as it is in the concept (that is, in a state of abstraction from individual conditions). But this difference in *mode of being* does not prevent the mind from knowing the same *content*, the same nature existing in the thing itself. This is the key to Thomistic Gnoseology: it is not necessary that the known be in the knower with the same mode of being as it is in the known.<sup>8</sup> For Aquinas, knowing comes about by means of the presence of the known in the knower, and the known is received in the knower according to the knower's mode of being. That which is received is the perfection ("form") of the known and this perfection actualizes the faculty, which is in potency of such perfection.

Now, a corporeal thing's nature is not in the thing itself in the abstracted mode of being which it (the nature) has in the mind (insofar as, in the corporeal thing, the nature exists together with individual determinations). How can we perceive this nature as abstracted? How can we "read" this nature into the corporeal thing? How can we know *what* this corporeal thing is? How can we

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<sup>7</sup> It may help to note that the universal nature is one *specifically* (all members of the species possess *the same* nature, specifically the same) and the universal concept is one *numerically* (all members of the species are known by *the same* concept, numerically the same). The numerical unity of the concept comes from the specific sameness of the nature in the various individuals.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for example Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 84, 1 c. (from now on, referenced as *Summa*); *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, lib. 1, lect. 10, n. 158; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 115 ff.

transcend its individual determinations? Before simply giving the answer, which has to do with the agent intellect, it is most important to understand the question. This question presupposes the fact: we know the natures of corporeal things. The answer to this question cannot again put the fact under discussion.

But why should we accept this fact without discussion? Because, actually, there is no reason to put the fact under discussion. To put the fact under discussion is an act of the will, it is a decision, and not a reasonable one. Why is this not reasonable? Because the study of human understanding must presuppose human understanding itself: we cannot study something which is not there to be studied. Now, human understanding, if it is anything, is the understanding of something. Let's say those two things again: before speaking about understanding, understanding *must have happened*, and understanding does not happen except *with regard to something*. If someone says, "I understand", then the question is, "What?" Human knowing is from the beginning a synthetic fact, a double-sided fact: no further reasoning can do away with this original duality. Human understanding is, from the beginning, the understanding of a "whatness" which appears to the intellect with a sheer character of alterity, like someone awaking us from sleep. The analysis of this "understanding something" will show that understanding is a communion of two, where the communion does not confuse the partners (as if they were one and the same thing). When a subject understands something, that something is not the subject's understanding, nor is the subject's understanding that something itself. The subject understands what things are. Again, how is that possible?

Aquinas' answer, in line with Aristotle, is that the natures of things need to be made intelligible by an agent intellect, through a process of abstraction from their individual conditions in the matter. The agent intellect, as a faculty of the intellectual human soul, is the condition of the possibility of human understanding, is what explains that we know the natures of corporeal things.

A comparison with Kant may help in clarifying Aquinas' answer. Both Aquinas and Kant are looking for an explanation of human understanding. Both face the apparent irreducibility of the universal content of human understanding and of the particular reality, one to the other. For Kant, this means that there is nothing intelligible in reality because intelligible and particular are opposed: the particular is only sensible. Therefore, in order to explain human understanding we need to presuppose that the origin of intelligibility is in the subject: thus, for Kant, the condition of the possibility of human understanding is a *formal a priori*, as something bestowing intelligible form to the raw (sensible) material of experience. Consequently, a universal concept is explained as the *result* of a subjective function (*i.e.*, the formal a priori) exercised on the sensibly given object (*i.e.*, the matter of human understanding). In other words, the universal (as an event of consciousness) is explained by the interaction of two elements: 1) a certain sensible material coming from experience, a "given", which explains for Kant the reference of the intelligible to the extramental reality and 2) the formal a priori, a subjective function, which explains for Kant the universality and necessity (the intelligibility) of our concepts. Knowing intellectually, therefore, is an action, an activity *per se* and not a receptivity insofar as, for Kant, the intelligible content is not something to be received from experience but something to be bestowed on experience. The formal a priori is thus the origin of intelligibility as content, is that which gives universality and necessity to the *absolutely sensible* extramental reality.

Now, for St. Thomas, the fact that the content of human understanding is abstracted from individual conditions does not contradict that this same content comes from the particular. Actually, this content is present in the particular with a different mode of being. For St. Thomas, it is not necessary that the form of the known be in ourselves with the same mode of being as it is in the known object. His example is neat: when we see the white

sugar, whiteness exists in the sugar together with sweetness whereas, in the eye, this same whiteness is separated from sweetness. In other words, we know something belonging to the sugar (its colour) but not in the way it is in the sugar (together with sweetness). The same happens in human understanding: we know something belonging to the thing itself (its nature or whatness), not in the way this something is in the thing itself (together with its particular determinations) but with a different mode of being. Now, what is it that allows human understanding to see a nature separated from its particular determinations? What gives the common nature, present in the particular, this intelligible mode of being? *This* is, for St. Thomas, the question of human understanding's condition of possibility.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, whereas Kant had to look for a formal a priori giving *intelligible form* to the raw material of experience, Aquinas needed a metaphysical a priori giving an *intelligible mode of being* to the nature of corporeal things. As the reader may notice, in both systems the subject “makes intelligible”: this is what allows scholars to confuse things and to replace St. Thomas' doctrine with Kant's doctrine. But, in Kant, the subject is responsible for the intelligible content, which in no way exists in the extramental reality; in Aquinas, by contrast, the subject is responsible for the intelligible

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<sup>9</sup> At least, from an epistemological point of view. From a metaphysical point of view, human understanding's condition of possibility is that a natural species (dog, cat, etc.), as perfection and act, is able to subsist in different material subjects (see the Thomistic doctrine of participation in Cornelio Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione secondo San Tommaso d'Aquino*, Opere Complete, vol. 3 [Segni: EDIVI, 2005], in the following referenced Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione*). This allows us to speak of an object (*i.e.*, the species, whatness or common nature) in a sense different from the individual (and therefore not sensible) but at the same time present in the individual (and therefore real). The object of human understanding exists in reality as the specific perfection of the real individual thing, a perfection which is limited in the individual by its matter (*materia signata quantitate*).

mode of being of an already extramental intelligible content. In Aquinas, the meaning of things (*i.e.*, their universal and intelligible content) is imbedded in reality and perfects the knower whereas, in Kant, the meaning of things is the result of the subject's activity perfecting reality. What reality brings to the knower is different in each system: for Kant, extramental reality gives the knower a sensible matter to work with; for Aquinas, extramental reality gives the knower a perfection (intelligible content) to receive and to make him or herself grow. And even if, with Aquinas, we need to admit that the knower gives intelligible perfection to the object of experience; we also need to remember that, for Aquinas, the term "intelligible" means two things: intelligible content and intelligible mode of being. Indeed, for Aquinas, intelligible content is not what the knower gives but what the knower receives, whereas intelligible mode of being is that which the subject gives to the object of experience.

Therefore, the difference between Kant and Aquinas cannot be a difference of complementarity but a difference of opposition. For Kant, the source of intelligible content and of all universality and necessity in human understanding is the subject; for Aquinas, the source of intelligible content is extramental reality. For Aquinas, there is something intelligible and universal in the things themselves; for Kant, there is nothing universal and necessary in the things themselves. Because of these different principles, their respective philosophical projects are different. Kant sets out to explain in what way the subject provides the raw material of experience with intelligible content (that is, he tries to explain the conditions of the possibility of science as a universal knowledge regarding the sensible objects of experience), whereas St. Thomas' endeavour is to explain that there can be something one imbedded in the many (doctrine of participation) and to justify the different mode of being of the universal content in the mind (doctrine of the agent intellect). Let it be noticed that the difference is not simply epistemological but also metaphysical, because it implies a

different judgment on the problem of the universals and, therefore, a different attitude not only regarding knowledge but also regarding reality. In fact, in Kant, because reality is denied universality (metaphysical aspect), human knowing must be constructed as the origin of universality (epistemological aspect). Whereas, for St. Thomas, because something universal can be present in the particular reality (metaphysical side), human understanding must be explained as the ability to see that universal content in the particular by means of abstraction (epistemological side).

Therefore, the relationship between the study of being and the study of knowledge in each system is essentially different. From a Kantian point of view, where “being” equals “being of consciousness”, the study of being can be grounded only in epistemology, because (intelligible) being is grounded in (intellectual) subjective activity. In other words, for Kant, the universal aspect of reality is nothing other than the result of the subject’s thinking activity on the raw materials from experience: universality is thus what the subject contributes to the known, acting according to the subject’s own rules. This is why, for Kant, the study of this (“objective”) universality is essentially dependent on the study of the subject’s a priori rules of thinking. From a Thomistic point of view, instead, where being is intelligible in itself and where being’s intelligibility (intelligibility as content, as *what* is known) does not depend on the subject’s activity, metaphysics is not grounded in epistemology. To be sure, epistemology is welcome to judge our knowledge of being: however, it is invited to judge the facts only, not to execute the witnesses. In other words, epistemology (as part of metaphysics) can judge and critique our knowledge of being, making us more keen about human knowledge’s limits and actual reach; but epistemology cannot destroy knowledge. In my view,



epistemology presupposes knowledge as a fact and receives the very notion of knowledge from metaphysics.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps one could say that epistemology defines knowledge, but only because epistemology is part of metaphysics. It is not necessary to say, however, that epistemology is grounded in metaphysics as the philosophical study of being; it is simply that the knowledge (not the science) of being is previous to the knowledge *and* the science of knowledge itself. In other words, if knowledge of being does not happen, epistemology does not have its object, which is precisely knowledge; when knowledge of being happens, metaphysics has its object (which is being) and can begin, but has not yet begun as a philosophical science; when knowledge of the knowledge of being happens, then epistemology has its object and can begin as well.<sup>11</sup>

Having considered briefly the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant in their respective approaches to human understanding,

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<sup>10</sup> In my view, the original notion of knowledge could be conveyed in these or similar words “knowing is becoming other as other” or “knowledge is a communion of two without confusion of the partners” or “to know is to possess (or participate) the perfection of another as other”. The other is present in the knowing subject not in a physical way (which is the way the subject’s natural or own perfection is present) but in a way that could be designated as objective, cognitional or intentional. This notion of knowledge must then develop into a broader or deeper notion of knowledge that includes self-knowledge also. This development and the very lack of a proper definition for knowledge must be referred to the fact that knowledge (like being) is a primordial and original phenomenon, irreducible to any prior category or notion.

<sup>11</sup> In my view, because both epistemology and metaphysics speak about their objects from the highest rational point of view, I do not see why they should be differentiated formally when treating the first concepts of each field, although I do understand the usefulness of separating them for teaching purposes. But even then, they should begin in the same way, explaining the relationship between knowledge and being, with particular reference to the problem of the universals.

I will offer that which, in my view, is textual evidence that some authors of Transcendental Thomism root their epistemologies not in Aquinas but in Kant. Since epistemology and metaphysics appear to be so interdependent, it is my hope that the following reflections help in understanding better each author's doctrine regarding other fields as well.

## Chapter Two

### Some Texts from Rahner's *Spirit in the World*

Having considered the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant, the following texts may help the reader to better understand Rahner's position. In an effort to reduce the dangers of ignoring Rahner's context as well as the dangers of interrupting the flow of his thought, these texts will be quoted as extensively as needed. Many other texts from Rahner's *Spirit in the World* could have been referenced, but those selected and quoted in what follows involve fewer words, yet clearly convey the systematic inter-connection of his ideas. All italics are Rahner's; instances of underlining indicate my own emphases.

#### 1) Rahner's Approach to the Problem of the Universals

The following text can prove helpful in showing Kantian principles at work and the interplay of these principles with references to St. Thomas Aquinas. Rahner is trying to explain the conditions of the possibility of human understanding: particularly, of human understanding as a relationship between sensible and intelligible contents. In other words, Rahner is giving his solution to the problem of the universals, to the fact that the actual intelligible (which is universal), as an event of consciousness, refers in some way to sensible experience (which is particular). Rahner states:

If sensibility and its objects are to be the only source of human knowledge, something actually intelligible cannot simply be received passively from sensibility, and so it can owe its origin only to a spontaneous activity of thought itself, over against what is given sensibly, that is, to the agent intellect. Thus the agent intellect is introduced again and again in Thomas as the *a priori* condition, inherent in thought itself, of the possibility of something actually intelligible, which actual intelligible as such is not found in sensibility, and according to the evidence of experience does not come to man from elsewhere, especially since what is constituted as actually intelligible refers of itself back to sensibility.<sup>12</sup>

Rahner's presupposition is that nothing coming from experience is intelligible. His fact is that the object of consciousness in human understanding is an actually intelligible object. His conclusion is that this fact can be explained only if we presuppose, on the subject's side, a spontaneous activity as origin of the intelligible aspect of human understanding's object. Thus, for Rahner, the condition of the possibility of human understanding (*i.e.*, of something actually intelligible in our consciousness) is a subjective activity providing the sensibly given with intelligibility. What is received in human understanding cannot be anything but sensible: therefore, the explanation of the actual intelligible lies not in a reception but in a spontaneous activity which is origin of the intelligible as such. The Kantian orthodoxy of this reasoning seems undeniable.

Rahner mentions clearly two Thomistic principles. His paragraph begins with the statement that the "only" source of human knowledge is sensible experience: properly understood, this certainly is a Thomistic principle. But this statement is immediately tempered with the affirmation that the actual

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<sup>12</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 136. My underline.

intelligible can owe its origin “only” to a spontaneous subjective activity. Is Rahner contradicting himself? In my view, Rahner does not contradict himself because, for him, sensible experience is the only *material* source of all human knowledge: the subject instead is the only possible source as regards human understanding’s *formal* aspect, that is, as regards intelligibility. For St. Thomas, however, sensible experience is source of intelligible content also, in such a way that not only the sensible content but also the intelligible content is received. What Rahner does not take into account is the Thomistic distinction between “intelligible” as content and “intelligible” as abstracted mode of being. From a truly Thomistic prospective, this intelligible mode of being can certainly owe its origin “only” to a subjective activity (the agent intellect’s abstraction), but this is not the case regarding the intelligible content.

The other Thomistic principle mentioned in this text regards the agent intellect as origin of intelligibility, explicitly referred to St. Thomas. However, Rahner invites Aquinas’ agent intellect to perform the Kantian function of a formal a priori, insofar as the agent intellect is, for Rahner, responsible for the intelligibility of an otherwise purely sensible given content. Therefore, the explicit mention of St. Thomas must not lead us astray. St. Thomas certainly spoke of an agent intellect, and the agent intellect certainly is a condition of the possibility of human understanding: in St. Thomas, however, the agent intellect is not a formal a priori (responsible for the intelligible content) but a metaphysical a priori (responsible for the intelligible mode of being of the content).

What Rahner says at the end of the quoted text might be confusing: that the actual intelligible, even if as such is not found in sensibility, “according to the evidence of experience does not come to man from elsewhere, especially since what is constituted as actually

intelligible refers of itself back to sensibility.”<sup>13</sup> Is he finally admitting that sensible experience is the origin of intelligible content? In my view, this would not make any sense. The explanation is, instead, that the actual intelligible comes only *materially* from sensibility, as we have pointed out before. This is why Rahner says also that the actual intelligible “as such”, that is, as actual, is not found in sensibility. In fact, sensibility is only in potency of receiving the performative influence of the agent intellect. Therefore “the evidence of experience”, in this text and for Rahner, is not that sensibility is the origin of the actual intelligible *in its intelligibility* (Rahner has just said the opposite), but that *we refer to sensibility* the actually intelligible object.

But still, is not the actual intelligible’s *referring back* to sensibility a proof that this actual intelligible comes from experience even in its intelligibility? Not necessarily, Rahner would say: it may simply be that this is the way we *think*. In other words, it is a fact that we attribute to experience the objects we think: but the condition of the possibility of that attribution or reference is not necessarily that the origin of our conscious objects is totally in experience. Let us suppose, instead, that knowing is a subjective spontaneous activity of self-projection into the world of experience. Let us suppose that intellectual activity is simply a “working on” experience, a “thinking out” experience. Let us suppose that thinking is, of itself, a spontaneous activity totally referred to sensible experience: this could be the reason we refer to experience the intelligible objects of consciousness. As we have seen, because—for Rahner—it is not possible to ascribe to sensible experience the origin of the intelligible as such, it is for him necessary to admit on the side of the subject an active formal principle of intelligibility. Therefore, even if he admits twice that the source of human understanding is sensible experience, he does not admit that the origin of

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<sup>13</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 136.

intelligibility is there. For Rahner, sensible experience is simply the material source of human understanding, while human understanding is an activity “in-forming” (completing formally) the world of experience.

## 2) Kantian Concepts in Thomistic Words: Abstraction, Potency, Becoming...

The following excerpt from Rahner’s *Spirit in the World* shows us once again a characterization of the “given” (*i.e.* the data from experience) as *purely* sensible, which necessitates that the origin of human understanding’s intelligible content be found in the subject. Moreover, intellectual knowing is described as a bestowing intelligible form on the sensible material from experience. In addition, Rahner explains these Kantian concepts misusing Thomistic terminology. Finally, this text gives me an opportunity to introduce Rahner’s overall project in his book.

*Spirit as Desire (Dynamic Openness) for Absolute Being.* Abstraction as such has been understood so far in a peculiar dual statement about it whose intrinsic coherence still has to be more explicitly apprehended. Abstraction showed itself on the one hand to be grounded and accomplished in an *excessus* to absolute *esse*, and on the other hand as the becoming conscious of the a priori structure of the spirit itself in the sensibly given content which it informs. The definition of the essence of the possible intellect already given shows how these two definitions of the essence of abstraction are to be understood as one and the same. The essence of the spirit is the “*quo est omnia fieri*”: spirit is in potency for absolute being. It is “in a certain way (that is, in potency and in ordination towards) everything.” Its becoming conscious of its a priori reality is therefore the pre-apprehension of absolute being, and vice versa.

As transcendent apprehension of absolute *esse*, this actuality of the spirit is a becoming, a dynamic orientation to the totality of its objects. Thomas also calls attention to this definition of the spirit frequently and forcefully. Since we are touching here upon the essential characteristic of the human spirit, under which the emanation of sensibility is to be grasped as its concrete application, we must go into this point in more detail.

The human spirit as such is desire (*Begierde*), striving (*Sterbe*), action (*Handlung*). For in itself it is *possible* intellect, that is, something which reaches its full actuality from its potentiality, and in fact by its own action, since by its own active power (agent intellect) of itself (always in act) it produces its object (the actually intelligible) from something only sensibly given.<sup>14</sup>

I will try firstly to explain some fundamental concepts for understanding Rahner's "metaphysical" project: this explanation seems relevant in order to study this particular text. Secondly, I will approach more directly the Kantian principles at work in this text and the misuse of Aquinas' terminology.

## **2.1. Rahner's Terminology in the Context of his Metaphysical Project**

Is metaphysics possible at all? This is the question here. Metaphysics seems to be the science of that which is beyond the sensible, of that which is somehow abstracted, separated from material reality. Metaphysics has to do with the universal, and most of all with the notion of being. Now, according to Kantian principles, extramental reality is purely sensible and particular: nothing universal or intelligible belongs to material reality. So, if there is actually nothing "metaphysical" (that is, beyond the

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<sup>14</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 280-281.



sensible) in the particular reality (which is the only reality naturally accessible to human mind), then metaphysics is not the science of an alleged extramental being which is somehow separated from matter.

Now, if this is so, should we say that metaphysics is the science of the subject's activity, which seems to be the only thing beyond the sensible? Not so fast. The subject's activity is essentially ordained towards the sensible, is a function of knowing the sensible. In this sense, we cannot say that the subject's activity is "separated" or "abstracted" from the sensible. But if we were able to become conscious of the conditions of the possibility of our subjective activity, if we were able to become conscious, even indirectly, of the a priori structure leading us to affirm being in the sensible, then we would have found what we were looking for: something intelligible separated from the sensible, not separated in reality but consciously separated as a certain intelligible "excess", as something going beyond that which is present sensibly, which is this a priori dynamism towards being.<sup>15</sup>

This is in my view what Rahner is trying to do in his book: to ground the possibility of metaphysics on this becoming conscious of the spirit's a priori structure towards being. This becoming conscious is the spirit's "excess" (i.e., going beyond) towards being which gives human consciousness access to the Metaphysical realm.

If my reading of Rahner is correct, then his terminology could be understood as follows:

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<sup>15</sup> The term "excess" implies both a distinction and a relationship: the aspect of distinction from the sensible allows metaphysics to have its object, but the aspect of relationship, which is equally essential to this excess, prevents us from thinking that the object of metaphysics is something really beyond the sensible.

- *Abstraction* is the operation by which we have access to the object of metaphysics, that is, to the intelligible as separated from the sensible. Now, the only thing going beyond the sensible is the spirit's dynamism towards absolute being. This dynamism goes beyond the sensible insofar as it is not exhausted by any particular sensible being, even if it refers necessarily to the sensible. So it is the spirit's dynamism itself, not the spirit's object, that which goes beyond the sensible. Therefore abstraction (the operation by which we have access to the metaphysical realm) is not a becoming conscious of an object, but the becoming conscious of the spirit's a priori structure, of the spirit's dynamism towards being.

- *Pre-apprehension*. Being cannot be found through a direct apprehension (as if being were a stand alone content of consciousness and not related to the sensible) but can be had only through a pre-apprehension: that is, through an understanding of the conditions of the possibility of understanding the sensible world. Thus, absolute being appears to consciousness not as an object but as a certain "goal" or "horizon" of possibilities. In this sense, "pre-apprehending" absolute being is something like anticipating infinite possibilities of thinking or affirming being.

- *Excessus* defines Rahner's abstraction, insofar as this "*excessus* to absolute *esse*" means a "going out" from the sensible and a "going beyond" the sensible towards absolute being. The spirit goes beyond the sensible towards absolute being insofar as the spirit becomes conscious of its own openness to absolute being, of its own dynamism towards being, of its own a priori structure leading to affirm being in the sensible.

Some distinctions may help to further clarify Rahner's doctrine. The *excessus* to absolute *esse* is the spirit's activity of going beyond the sensible by becoming conscious (in the act of knowing the sensible as being) of its own a priori structure as dynamism towards absolute being. This is the intelligible excess allowing metaphysics to have access to its object. This excess must be distinguished from

intelligibility itself, which is also a certain “excess”, insofar as intelligibility is an addition to the sensible raw material of experience. However, intelligibility, as form of this raw material, does not really “exceed” this material, but rather informs it. The true excess over the sensible content happens only in the spirit’s becoming conscious of its own a priori structure allowing the spirit to inform the sensible content. In other words, that which allows metaphysics is not thinking the sensible, but becoming conscious of the a priori structures for thinking the sensible. The intelligible form of the sensible object is not consciously separated from it, but the a priori structures allowing the spirit to think the sensible can be consciously separated. Being conscious of the sensible allows science to happen, being conscious of our a priori structures for thinking the sensible allows metaphysics to happen.

Also, the pre-apprehension of being should be distinguished from the spirit’s a priori structure as dynamism towards *esse*. Pre-apprehension is a becoming conscious of the spirit’s a priori structure, and therefore pre-apprehension presupposes this a priori structure itself. Both the a priori dynamism and pre-apprehension are related to absolute being and both can be said to somehow pre-contain absolute being or intelligible content; but only in pre-apprehension we have conscious access to absolute being. In this way, the a priori structure, that is, the spirit’s pre-containing somehow the intelligibility to be bestowed on the sensible material aligns with Kant’s principles and explains human understanding of the sensible; whereas the pre-apprehension’s pre-containing of being explains for Rahner how metaphysics is possible. In this text, my focus is what Rahner says about the first precontaining, because this is what allows me to show his Kantian approach to human understanding.

## 2.2. Kantian Principles at Work

For Rahner, only the subject can be the origin of intelligibility.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore necessary to find in the subject the conditions of possibility for the intelligibility of the object of consciousness. That is, it is necessary that we find *somehow already* in the spirit everything pertaining to the intelligibility of the object of experience.<sup>17</sup> Let me now expand and clarify two implications of these statements.

Firstly, this a priori source of intelligibility must be *active*, not simply in the sense of spontaneous but rather in the sense of productive, creative and/or positive.<sup>18</sup> This leads to a very specific notion of human understanding. On the one hand, for Rahner, intellectual knowing can no more be considered receptive regarding the perfection of another, simply because nothing intelligible is present in the outside world available to the senses.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, intellectual knowing must still refer somehow to the intelligible perfection of things (in the sense that “intellectual” refers to “intelligible”). Therefore, for Rahner, intellectual knowing must be considered an activity (as opposed to receptivity) in which the subject produces the object’s intelligibility out of the subject’s own structures, from the

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<sup>16</sup> In the passage under discussion, Rahner characterizes the given as “sensible” and even “only sensibly given”, and characterizes the subject’s activity as an information (“...the sensibly given content which [the spirit itself] informs.”) and a production (the spirit “produces its object (the actually intelligible) from something purely sensibly given.”)

<sup>17</sup> It may not be out of place to clarify that the fact that, for Rahner, all intelligibility is precontained in the subject does not mean that this intelligibility is precontained in its “final” form, as innate ideas.

<sup>18</sup> In this text, the spirit “informs” (in the sense of “posits form”) and “produces”.

<sup>19</sup> As we read in this text, the given is something “only sensibly given”.

subject's own potentiality.<sup>20</sup> The subject provides the object of experience with something this object does not have, that is, with intelligibility.

Secondly, this subjective active source *must possess a priori the intelligibility provided*, since no one gives what one does not have. Now, this intelligibility present a priori in the subject seems to require for Rahner two characteristics. First, it must be *somehow indefinite*, undetermined, because we do not possess a priori innate ideas.<sup>21</sup> Second, and however, this precontained intelligibility must also be *a certain fulness, like a virtual omnipotence*,<sup>22</sup> because otherwise the subjective a priori source of intelligibility could not sufficiently justify the finished intelligibility in each object of consciousness. In other words, that which is intelligible in each

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<sup>20</sup> Rahner says (my emphasis) that the "spirit is in potency for absolute being. It is 'in a certain way (that is, in potency and *in ordination towards*) everything'", clarifying that the spirit "reaches its full actuality *from its potentiality*". This notion of potency, as we will see more clearly in what follows, implies the presence of the perfection to be bestowed on the sensibly given.

<sup>21</sup> This is why Rahner prefers the language of affectivity ("desire") and of motion towards a goal ("dynamic openness", "excessus towards", "dynamic orientation", etc.). In fact, the object of desire and the goal of a movement are *somehow* present in the desire and in the movement, but in another sense they are not present. In a similar way, absolute being is not present as a definite object, but must be present somehow. This is also why being cannot be apprehended, but can only be "anticipated", "pre-apprehended" because is present only as a goal, as a possibility.

<sup>22</sup> Rahner qualifies the potentiality of the spirit as a potentiality precontaining somehow what it produces. This is why the spirit is said to be "in potency for absolute being. It is 'in a certain way (that is, in potency and in ordination towards) everything.'" Rahner also says that "this actuality of the spirit is a becoming, a dynamic orientation to the totality of its objects", and that the spirit is "something which reaches its full actuality from its potentiality." As we will see, Aquinas' qualification of the spirit's potentiality is different.

object of consciousness must be somehow already present in the subject, because it comes from the subject.

Summarizing, for Rahner, intelligibility in human understanding does not come from the object of experience and therefore must be *somehow* already present in the subject. The extramental object cannot provide of itself any intelligibility, and so the function of the spirit in human understanding is the active contribution of intelligibility.

### 2.3. Misuse of Thomistic Terminology

Let me recall the last part of the text we have been reflecting upon, where the Thomistic references are evident, but even more evident is Rahner's Kantian approach to human understanding.

As transcendent apprehension of absolute *esse*, this actuality of the spirit is a becoming, a dynamic orientation to the totality of its objects. Thomas also calls attention to this definition of the spirit frequently and forcefully. Since we are touching here upon the essential characteristic of the human spirit, under which the emanation of sensibility is to be grasped as its concrete application, we must go into this point in more detail.

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That Rahner's portrayal of human understanding is Kantian could not be more clearly expressed. However, the Thomistic references

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<sup>23</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 281.

accompanying Rahner's portrayal may invite the reader to believe that Rahner is following St. Thomas and not Kant. Therefore, let me try to explain the presence of these Thomistic references, showing how they are mistakenly used to justify a Kantian epistemology.

Let us begin with what Rahner calls "possible intellect". Rahner effects a passage from the Thomistic terminology of "possible intellect", which for St. Thomas is *tabula rasa*, to a concept of spirit as somehow precontaining intelligible content: that is, Rahner transforms the Thomistic possible intellect into a Kantian transcendental. The key concepts employed to effect this passage (from a mere capacity of receiving intelligible content to a virtual cause of intelligible content or a priori source of intelligibility) are "potency" and "becoming", both analogous concepts receiving several meanings. In fact, a potency can be passive or active, and the word "becoming" can be applied to something becoming *passively* under the action of an agent, or to something becoming *actively* from its own virtualities. Now, for St. Thomas, the possible intellect, as *tabula rasa*, has nothing to do with the second alternative, that is, with an active principle in the sense intended by Rahner (as source of actual intelligibility); moreover, Aquinas' agent intellect certainly is active, but in a different sense from the one proposed by Rahner (for St. Thomas, the agent intellect is active with regard to the intelligible mode of being, not the intelligible content); and finally, for St. Thomas the agent intellect and the possible intellect are different potencies: the agent intellect is active (regarding intelligibility as mode of being) and the possible intellect is passive (that is, receptive of intelligible content).

The words "potency" and "becoming" can be applied both to Aquinas' possible intellect and to the Kantian transcendental. This is possible because these words can receive analogous, different meanings, as I have shown. In this text, Rahner is using Aquinas' words to indicate a Kantian concept. Rahner transplanted Aquinas' terminology to a completely different doctrinal context. This

radical difference between Rahner's and St. Thomas' doctrines becomes clearer at the end of our text, where the spirit is called to "produce its object (the actual intelligible) from something only sensibly given":<sup>24</sup> Rahner's insistence on the fact that the given is "only" sensible, makes evident the necessity of finding in the subject the source of intelligible content.

Thus, Rahner is mistakenly portraying the Thomistic possible intellect as a Kantian a priori. That is why the Rahnerian possible intellect is not *tabula rasa*, but "something which reaches its full actuality *from* its potentiality";<sup>25</sup> it is not distinct from the agent intellect (at least not in any relevant sense<sup>26</sup>); and it is not only an active potency but an *action*, which "produces its object (the actually intelligible) from something only sensibly given."<sup>27</sup>

#### **2.4. Lack of Distinction between Possible Intellect and Agent Intellect**

Rahner does not distinguish possible intellect from agent intellect in any relevant sense. Even if the text just studied seems clear in that regard, let me revisit the text inserting my explanations along the way.

"The human spirit as such is [...] action." Rahner now explains: "For in itself [the spirit] is *possible* intellect, that is, something which reaches its full actuality from its potentiality." Rahner is trying to give an account of the spirit as action. Now, the spirit is considered

<sup>24</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> For the distinction between agent intellect and possible intellect in Aquinas, cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 214-219; Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 79, a. 7, c. For the lack of distinction in this text, see section 2.4., following this paragraph. For Rahner's characterization of the agent intellect as a formal a priori, see section 3 of this Chapter.

<sup>27</sup> For reflections on this characterization of the spirit as action, see section 2.5., a few paragraphs below.



possible intellect; the word “possible” indicates potentiality and there are two kinds of potentiality: active and passive. Rahner needs therefore to define the “possible” intellect as an active potency, a potency containing virtually the actuality which is able to produce: this is why “possible intellect” is explained as “something which reaches its full actuality *from* its [own] potentiality.”

Now, there seems to be a distinction between an active potentiality and an action: in fact, it is conceivable that an active potency is not always in act or acting. Rahner, however, is trying to explain that the spirit is action, not simply an active potency, and therefore the text continues “and in fact by its own action”. That is, the spirit reaches its full actuality not simply from its potentiality but rather by its own action. Does Rahner identify the spirit/possible intellect as active potency with its own action of producing the intelligible? It does appear to be so. In fact, Rahner explains that the spirit reaches its full actuality by its own action insofar as “by its own active power (agent intellect) of itself (always in act) it produces its object (the actually intelligible) from something only sensibly given.” Now, if Rahner’s spirit/possible intellect is an active potency, then “it’s [the spirit’s] own active power (agent intellect)” cannot be different from the spirit in any relevant sense. Furthermore, if the spirit/possible intellect is action, and the agent intellect is an active power always in act, then Rahner’s possible intellect and agent intellect are again not different in any relevant sense. Lastly, the spirit produces the intelligible “by its own action”, and the spirit “is action”; immediately afterwards, however, Rahner says also that the spirit produces the intelligible “by its own active power”; therefore, the spirit is also this active power “always in act”.<sup>28</sup> I may be taking Rahner too much to the

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<sup>28</sup> The words “always in act” refer directly to the spirit itself, not to its own active power; however, the spirit is always in act precisely regarding its own active power, and this is why the spirit reaches its full actuality by its own action

letter, but I do not see how anyone could distinguish possible intellect and agent intellect in Rahner in a way that aligns with St. Thomas' doctrine.

## 2.5. The Spirit/Possible Intellect as Action

That the human spirit as such is action is another important difference between Rahner and Aquinas, a difference which Fabro pointed out in his own book.<sup>29</sup> This characterization of the spirit implies the lack of distinction between substance and accident in the human spirit, and/or between essence and potencies of the soul. It is common in Modern Philosophy to dissolve the subject in its action, and to transform the being of the subject in a process of self-projection in the world. What is interesting is to notice Modern Philosophy's struggle to make sense of this notion. In fact, the subject is, on the one hand, "poor", that is, it is not "finished" or "fully accomplished" and it does not have innate ideas; it does develop; it is miserable in its own self-perception, it is alone in its pure subjectivity and so, as transcendental, the spirit does "need" the world, etc.. On the other hand, however, the spirit, because it is the only possible origin of meaning and intelligibility for the world, must be full, virtually complete, powerful, independent, a process of true self-making which begins from its own nothingness and develops into something, with the useless help of a meaningless world. This notion of spirit is a contradictory notion, but the only possible "beginning" of Modern Philosophy, the most necessary "a priori": if intelligibility does not proceed from the objects of

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in the production of the intelligible. The spirit is its own action of producing the intelligible and the spirit's active power is always in act for the production of the intelligible: there is no meaningful distinction between spirit and agent intellect in Rahner.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *La Svolta Antropologica di Karl Rahner*, Opere Complete, Volume 25 (Segni: EDIVI, 2011), 35. In the following, this work will be referenced Fabro, *La Svolta*.

experience themselves, then it must proceed from the subject, and therefore, even if the subject is empty, it must be at the same time the rich source of intelligibility. It is not difficult to see how this modern notion of subject will need to recur to the notions of becoming, action, movement, self-making, freedom, etc. (notions which include both being and not-being in a certain sense), and the concepts of containing implicitly, pre-containing, etc., in order to make the best possible sense of an activity which is the origin of meaning from no-meaning. And even if, as it happens in some of these modern systems, meaning itself could be dissolved into action, there is still no explanation of the subject itself: the subject remains as this contradictory notion of “ungrounded ground”, “pure action of self-projection of a not-yet-self”.

### 3) The Agent Intellect as a Formal A Priori

The following text is, perhaps, Rahner’s most articulated characterization of Aquinas’ agent intellect as a Kantian formal a priori. This text has raised concerns also in John Knasas,<sup>30</sup> Christopher Cullen<sup>31</sup> and Cornelio Fabro<sup>32</sup>. As I have been doing, I will present the relevant excerpt in its entirety, introducing my explanations afterwards.

In light of our considerations thus far it now becomes clear how Thomas understands his Aristotelian aposteriorism: for him there are no innate ideas.<sup>33</sup> But in the intellectually

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. John F.X. Knasas, “Why for Lonergan Knowing Cannot Consist in ‘Taking a Look,’” *ACPQ* 78, no. 1 (2004): 133; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Christopher M. Cullen, S.J., “Transcendental Thomism: Realism Rejected” in *The Failure of Modernism: The Cartesian Legacy and Contemporary Pluralism*, ed. Brendan Sweetman (American Maritain Association Publications, 1999), 78; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Fabro, *La Svolta*, 116.

<sup>33</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] *S.T. I*, q. 84, a. 3.

known, an *a priori* element which spirit brings with it from itself is known simultaneously (the light of the agent intellect is seen) and this is the condition of every objective knowledge (it is not known unless it is illuminated by light). This *a priori* element of all knowledge is therefore not an innate idea, since it is only known simultaneously as the condition of the possibility of the intellectual apprehension of what is given sensibly – namely then, when it exercises a “formal” function in respect to the material of sensibility. Therefore, Thomas can also designate the light of the agent intellect as form in respect to the sensibly given,<sup>34</sup> and the sensibly given as the “material element” of knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, *spirit* and *sensibly given* are related in the constitution of the intelligible as act and potency.<sup>36</sup>

This way of speaking should not be rendered harmless by finding in it only the statement that the agent intellect is the act of the phantasm only insofar as it produces something intelligible as an efficient cause which is absolutely distinct from what it produces. Its light is rather contained intrinsically and constitutively in what is actually intelligible and thus is really known simultaneously. Thomas teaches an apriorism not in the harmless sense of an efficient cause antecedent to the effect, but in the sense of *an a priori element inherent in the known as such*. Correspondingly to this, this sentence in Thomas is also to be taken seriously: “It cannot be said that sense knowledge is the whole and perfect cause of intellectual knowledge; rather, it is in a certain way its material cause.”<sup>37</sup> This sentence is not only intended to say

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<sup>34</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] *III Sent.* dist. 14 q. 1, a. 1, sol. 2, ad 2.

<sup>35</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] *S.T. I*, q.84, a.6, corp.: *materia causae*.

<sup>36</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] *De Ver.* q. 10, a. 6, corp.; *De Spir. Creat.* a 10, ad 4; *Compend. Theol.* c. 88.

<sup>37</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] *S.T. I*, q.84, a.6, corp.

that the phantasm of itself cannot exercise any influence on the intellect. Rather it is not in itself actually intelligible (which it could be even if it could not exercise any influence on the intellect) and becomes actually intelligible only when the light of the intellect as *a priori*, formal element is joined with it as material cause, and the former is therefore known simultaneously in the actually intelligible.

It does not need to be gone into at length how the formal-material union between the light of the agent intellect and the phantasm cannot be thought of in the strict sense, after the manner of the union of a material form and matter in natural things. For otherwise this form of the light would itself be limited by the matter of the phantasm, and a spiritual, immaterial knowledge, which is supposed to be made possible precisely by the light, would not come about in principle.<sup>38</sup> Insofar as this *a priori* element is known only as the “form” of the phantasm, it is of course in this respect also *a posteriori* to the knowledge of the phantasm, and to that extent we can speak of an “abstraction” from the phantasm. The relationship of reciprocal priority which Thomas often stresses in the relationship of form and matter is valid here also.<sup>39</sup>

Let me now comment on this text, step by step. Rahner says, “In light of our considerations thus far it now becomes clear how Thomas understands his Aristotelian aposteriorism: for him there are no innate ideas.”<sup>40</sup><sup>41</sup> Rahner begins with something which would be accepted by anyone with some knowledge about philosophy. Of course, for St. Thomas, there are no innate ideas and Rahner certainly agrees with this. But St. Thomas’ Aristotelian

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<sup>38</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] Cf. Maréchal, *op. cit.*, pp. 134f.

<sup>39</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220-221. Rahner’s footnote here: “For example, *De Ver*, q. 9, a 3, ad 6; q. 28, a. 7, corp.; *In V Metaph.* lect. 2, n. 775, etc.”

<sup>40</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] *S.T. I*, q. 84, a. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220.

aposteriorism implies much more than that there are no innate ideas. For St. Thomas, in human understanding, the intellectual content also is a posteriori, that is to say, comes from experience. This, of course, is not what Rahner thinks. That is why Rahner continues: “But in the intellectually known, an *a priori* element which spirit brings with it from itself is known simultaneously (the light of the agent intellect is seen) and this is the condition of every objective knowledge (it is not known unless it is illuminated by light).”<sup>42</sup> First of all, the conjunction “but” is clearly nuancing Aquinas’ aposteriorism by introducing that which is, for Rahner, Aquinas’ apriorism. In Rahner’s view, there is in human understanding an a priori element which is in the realm of objective content. That is why this a priori element is “known”, that is to say, is part of the object as content, is “seen”. So, although Rahner denies that the intellectual content is ready-made in the mind, he affirms that the intellectual content (intelligibility) in the object of consciousness comes from the mind. The intellectual content is not ready or actual until it informs the sensibly given content; still, the intellectual content comes from the subject and this is the condition of the possibility of human understanding of the sensible world. That is why he concludes, “This *a priori* element of all knowledge is therefore not an innate idea, since it is only known simultaneously as the condition of the possibility of the intellectual apprehension of what is given sensibly.”<sup>43</sup> Notice, again, that the a priori element is “known simultaneously”, that is to say, is part of the object’s content, because this a priori element “exercises a ‘formal’ function in respect to the material of sensibility.”<sup>44</sup> And so, for Rahner, the object of human understanding is sensible matter (coming from experience) with intelligible form (coming from the subject), and is the result of the intelligible a priori

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<sup>42</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220.

<sup>43</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220.

<sup>44</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220.

subjective functions on the raw material of sensible experience: such is Kant's idea of human understanding.

Next, Rahner tries to confirm this doctrine with Thomistic texts. "Therefore, Thomas can also designate the light of the agent intellect as form in respect to the sensibly given,<sup>45</sup> and the sensibly given as the "material element" of knowledge.<sup>46</sup><sup>47</sup> I have already explained in my previous work the true context and meaning of Aquinas' text (that is, *Summa Theologiae* I, 84, 6), and I have included an excerpt of that explanation at the end of this book.<sup>48</sup> Briefly, the context of that article is St. Thomas' search for human understanding's agent object<sup>49</sup> (question 84, articles 2 to 6), whereas question 84 as a whole engages in the explanation of human understanding's characteristics as an operation. Therefore, the context is not about *what* we understand, which is already presupposed, but *how* we understand; and, more particularly, the question is by which agent object we understand. In this context, St. Thomas affirms that the phantasm (not the "sensibly given") is "*like a*" (*quodammodo* should be taken more seriously) "matter of the cause" (*materia causae*) in human understanding. The "cause" here

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<sup>45</sup> [Rahner's footnote] *III Sent.* dist. 14 q. 1, a. 1, sol. 2, ad 2. [In On line version: *III Sent.*, dist. 14, art. 1, quaestiuncula 2 (solution, that is, second series of titles), ad 2 (cf. <https://aquinas.cc/13/13/~2528> Accessed August 27, 2019). In my view, nothing in this text can support Rahner's comments. This text is actually making a distinction about what the agent intellect gives (a different mode of being to the material things) and what the possible intellect receives from the material things themselves (the notion of the thing); this text provides thus a confirmation of my previous book's claim that the agent intellect, for St. Thomas, is a metaphysical a priori and not a formal one.]

<sup>46</sup> [Rahner's footnote] *S.T. I*, q.84, a.6, corp.: *materia causae*.

<sup>47</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220.

<sup>48</sup> See *Appendix*, Note 1 on p. 223. Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 248-260.

<sup>49</sup> For an explanation of the meaning of "agent object", please see *Appendix*, Note 2, on p. 228.

is the agent object, which St. Thomas has just found:<sup>50</sup> the agent object is the intelligible in act, obtained by abstraction from the phantasm by the action of the agent intellect. Thus, the phantasm is not the agent object, that is, the total cause of human understanding; instead, the phantasm is *as it were the matter of the cause*, which means that *the agent object comes from the phantasm*, insofar as matter can be understood as that from which something comes *in some way*. In fact, the agent object is taken from the phantasm by means of abstraction. St. Thomas is stating that human understanding comes from sensible things, but the phantasm itself is not enough to cause human understanding: the phantasm provides the material from which the cause of human understanding (that is, the agent object) will be produced. He is not saying that the phantasm is the matter of what we know (which is what Kant would say), but that the phantasm is the matter, in a sense, of the means by which we know (that is, of the agent object). In what sense? In the sense that it is from the phantasm, by abstraction, that the intelligible in act is produced.

The final phrase of the paragraph stresses once more how, for Rahner, the spirit's contribution in human understanding is related to the content—that is to say, to the constitution of the intelligible. “Therefore, *spirit* and *sensibly given* are related in the constitution of the intelligible as act and potency.”<sup>51</sup><sup>52</sup>

Rahner continues: “This way of speaking should not be rendered harmless by finding in it only the statement that the agent intellect is the act of the phantasm only insofar as it produces something intelligible as an efficient cause which is absolutely distinct from what it produces.” The way this is written is misleading. What

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<sup>50</sup> That is, after discarding other four potential candidates to agent object in aa. 2 to 5, St. Thomas finds in article 6 what he is looking for.

<sup>51</sup> [Rahner's footnote] *De Ver.* q. 10, a. 6, corp.; *De Spir. Creat.* a. 10, ad 4; *Compend. Theol.* c. 88.

<sup>52</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220.



Rahner is portraying as insufficient actually appears to be our common understanding of St. Thomas. At the same time, the fact that Rahner uses the words “only” and “absolutely” invite the reader to think that Rahner is not simply denying the common reading of St. Thomas but suggesting that there might be something else contained in St. Thomas’ texts.

So, let us begin by remembering that St. Thomas certainly considers that the agent intellect produces something intelligible as an efficient cause. The agent intellect produces the intelligible species (the *species impressa*), the content of which comes from the phantasm by the action of the agent intellect. Also, for St. Thomas, the agent intellect is certainly distinct from this *species impressa*.

Now, is the agent intellect “absolutely distinct from what it produces”? Properly speaking, yes, insofar as the agent intellect (active *power* of the soul) is not the intelligible in act (agent *object* of human understanding). However, insofar as every effect can be said to *participate from* the agent cause, it could be said that the agent intellect is *present* in some sense in the agent object (*i.e.* in the *species impressa*). It is as when we say that the sun is present in the heat of the things heated by the sun. Is the sun absolutely distinct from that heat? Yes, but in a sense it is not: the sun’s *own* heat is there, in its effect. Now, for St. Thomas, the agent intellect’s effect (present in the object of knowledge) is a new mode of being, not a new or super-added content: for this reason, the agent intellect, properly speaking, is not itself seen but rather let’s other things be seen. Not so for Rahner: “[The agent intellect’s] light is rather contained *intrinsically and constitutively* in what is actually intelligible and thus is *really known simultaneously*.”<sup>53</sup> Again, for Rahner, the agent intellect’s light is seen because it is intrinsically constitutive of the object: it is known, it is intelligible content, it is the intelligibility of the sensibly given. That which is sensible, precisely because it is

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<sup>53</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220 (my emphasis).

sensible, has no other intelligibility than the one bestowed by the agent intellect. Clearly, Rahner makes no distinction here between intelligibility as content (*i.e.*, the common nature, as perfection of the sensible thing) and intelligibility as mode of being.

In what follows, Rahner again denies something which appears to be a common understanding of St. Thomas, and the only alternative Rahner gives is a Kantian reading of Aquinas: “Thomas teaches an apriorism not in the harmless sense of an efficient cause antecedent to the effect, but in the sense of *an a priori element inherent in the known as such*.”<sup>54</sup> I would agree to speak about Aquinas’ “apriorism”, if we want to use this term to speak about the Thomistic conditions of possibility for human understanding, particularly regarding the agent intellect. Now, it is certain that St. Thomas speaks of the agent intellect as an efficient cause of the agent object and, as every agent cause, the agent intellect is metaphysically antecedent to the effect. Now, St. Thomas would agree that the effect coexists with the influence of the agent cause and is not simply “temporally” antecedent. But the point Rahner wants to make has not so much to do with antecedence versus simultaneity, but with a kind of simultaneity “in the known *as such*” (my emphasis). For Rahner, the alternative to considering the agent intellect simply as an efficient cause antecedent to the effect is considering it as something not antecedent, but inherent in the known *as such*, that is to say, inherent in the known as the light that is seen, as part of the content. To be clear, Rahner does not say (at least, not here) that the agent intellect *as such* is known at every intellectual act, but that *something of it, something coming from it* is known. And that something is what makes the only-sensibly-given something actually understandable.

In order to support his Kantian reading of Aquinas, Rahner again uses the text of *Summa* I, 84, 6. Rahner states:

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<sup>54</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220.

Correspondingly to this, this sentence in Thomas is also to be taken seriously: “It cannot be said that sense knowledge is the whole and perfect cause of intellectual knowledge; rather, it is in a certain way its material cause.”<sup>55</sup> This sentence is not only intended to say that the phantasm of itself cannot exercise any influence on the intellect.<sup>56</sup>

This is exactly what St. Thomas meant: that the phantasm of itself is not the proportionate agent object in human understanding. However, the words “only” and “any” invite us to think that Rahner is not simply denying but rather suggesting something deeper. What is that?

Rather [the phantasm] is not in itself actually intelligible (which it could be even if it could not exercise any influence on the intellect) and becomes actually intelligible only when the light of the intellect as *a priori*, formal element is joined with it as material cause, and the former is therefore known simultaneously in the actually intelligible.<sup>57</sup>

Rahner says that the phantasm “is not in itself actually intelligible,” without distinguishing between intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being: this is because for him, as for Kant, *all* intelligibility in human understanding must come from the subject.

Moreover, the bracketed phrase in the above text<sup>58</sup> indicates that intelligibility is considered something strictly related to the *mode of being* of spiritual beings. How so? Rahner is saying that it is possible to entertain actually intelligible beings that do not exercise any influence on the intellect. By these intelligible beings, in my view,

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<sup>55</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] *S.T. I*, q.84, a.6, corp.

<sup>56</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 220-221.

<sup>57</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 221.

<sup>58</sup> That is, “(which it could be even if it could not exercise any influence on the intellect)”.

Rahner means something like separate substances, exemplar ideas, or something of the sort. Thus, for Rahner, intelligibility is strictly speaking something related to spiritual and intellectual beings. Therefore, if anything in the material object of experience can be called “intelligible”, then this must be due to the influence of an intellectual being, which in this case is the human subject. This being so, and however, the fact that this subjective intelligibility is said to be “known simultaneously” implies that the formal a priori is understood as content and as related to the content (as condition of the possibility of actual intelligibility in that which is not intelligible but sensible). Thus, for Rahner, intelligibility is at the same time something related to the mode of being (*i.e.*, the mode of being of an intellectual being) and something related to the content (as intelligibility of human understanding’s object).

I think Rahner’s conflation of intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being is evident. This conflation is Kant’s radical flaw. Extramental, material reality is particular: because of this, for Kant, all universality (as *content* of consciousness) must be a subjective element, something provided by the subject and, therefore, something related to the spiritual, intellectual *mode of being* of the subject. In other words, intelligibility has nothing to do with the mode of being of the object (considered by Kant as purely sensible material) and, therefore, intelligibility must be related to the subject’s mode of being.

Lack of distinction in Kant standing in sharp contrast with the explicit distinction between the two meanings of intelligibility in St. Thomas is the reason I speak of the difference between Aquinas and Kant as being radical. And this is why, in my view, Rahner and St. Thomas are radically different.

The text continues:

It does not need to be gone into at length how the formal-material union between the light of the agent intellect and the phantasm cannot be thought of in the strict sense, after the

manner of the union of a material form and matter in natural things. For otherwise this form of the light would itself be limited by the matter of the phantasm, and a spiritual, immaterial knowledge, which is supposed to be made possible precisely by the light, would not come about in principle.<sup>59</sup> Insofar as this *a priori* element is known only as the “form” of the phantasm, it is of course in this respect also *a posteriori* to the knowledge of the phantasm, and to that extent we can speak of an “abstraction” from the phantasm. The relationship of reciprocal priority which Thomas often stresses in the relationship of form and matter is valid here also.<sup>60 61</sup>

Rahner speaks about an analogy between the understanding of matter and form in natural philosophy and the understanding of these notions within the gnoseological realm. This does not necessarily mean that he accepts the Aristotelian-Thomistic “Physics” of matter and form: he is simply saying that the use of the “matter-form” dyad in these two realms is analogous. He also speaks about the Thomistic reciprocal priority in the relationship of form and matter. These Thomistic points may witness to the fact that Rahner knows St. Thomas and understands him, but they do not necessarily mean that he agrees with St. Thomas, especially regarding epistemology. What Rahner is presenting here is full of Thomistic references<sup>62</sup> and terms, but the reader needs to pay attention to the point under discussion, which is far from being Thomistic.

In fact, at the end of the paragraph, Rahner clarifies to what extent the *a priori* form can be considered “abstracted” and “*a posteriori*”:

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<sup>59</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] Cf. Maréchal, *op. cit.*, pp. 134f.

<sup>60</sup> [Rahner’s footnote] For example, *De Ver.*, q. 9, a 3, ad 6; q. 28, a. 7, corp.; *In V Metaph.* lect. 2, n. 775, etc.

<sup>61</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 221.

<sup>62</sup> Significantly taken from Aquinas’ natural philosophy, not from his epistemology.

insofar as it is known as form of the phantasm. That is, the a priori form is considered abstracted and a posteriori, not because the intelligible form is really coming from the phantasm, but because it is seen as belonging to the phantasm, which is the a posteriori element of the known. These statements clearly suggest that there is nothing formal or intelligible to be taken from the phantasm and that every intelligibility in the known is the result of a subjective function. Rahner is claiming that the condition of the possibility of a spiritual, immaterial (that is, intellectual) knowledge is the light of the agent intellect, not insofar as the intelligibility of the known is abstracted from the phantasm by the agent intellect, not insofar as the intellectual light lets the objects be seen in their own intelligibility, but insofar as the agent intellect's light itself is seen in the sensible objects as their intelligible form. The agent intellect is, for Rahner, a condition of the possibility of intellectual knowledge, not insofar as its light allows the phantasm's intelligibility to be "visible" to the eye of intelligence, but insofar as the agent intellect is source of the phantasm's intelligibility (intelligibility as content, as that which is known). For St. Thomas, instead, the agent intellect certainly is "source" of intelligibility, but of intelligibility as mode of being. That which is known in the phantasm, for St. Thomas, is not the agent intellect's light, but the phantasm's specific perfection (intelligible content) in the abstracted, intelligible mode of being produced by the agent intellect.

Further to these considerations, we could say that "abstraction", both for Rahner and for St. Thomas, indicates a relationship of the intelligible to the particular. In St. Thomas, however, this relationship is a relationship of origin: the intelligible is abstracted from the particular insofar as its content comes from the particular. For Rahner, instead, this relationship is a relationship of simple "reference": the intelligible "belongs" to the particular simply because it is "seen in" the particular. In other words, for Rahner, the intelligible belongs to the particular because the subject has

bestowed intelligibility on the particular, has “informed” the particular with the subject’s own intellectual light.

Lastly, in this section Rahner refers by way of footnote to Joseph Maréchal, the alleged source of inspiration for this attempt to integrate Kantian principles with Aquinas’ text.<sup>63</sup> It is not difficult to find connections with Maréchal in Transcendental Thomism.<sup>64</sup>

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Let me make a brief reference to a similar text, located a few pages later, the section beginning “We return to the question...” all the way up to “... and thereby it is the faculty which apprehends the

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<sup>63</sup> As well, Maréchal is quoted in Rahner, *SW*, 18 and 141.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Rahner, *SW*, 18, 141, 221; Lonergan, *Verbum*, xi, where Frederick Crowe is quoting Bernard Lonergan, “Insight Revisited” in *A Second Collection* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 265; Michael Vertin, “The Finality of Human Spirit: From Maréchal to Lonergan” in *Lonergan Workshop*, 19 (2006) 267-285; also Michael Vertin, in his course *Rahner and Lonergan* (University of Toronto. Toronto, Fall 2013), where he affirmed that “Both Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan devote much study to the role of philosophy in theology. Moreover, both are influenced importantly in this effort by the modern interpretation of Thomas Aquinas developed earlier by Belgian philosopher and mystical psychologist Joseph Maréchal. However, besides some obvious similarities in what they take from Maréchal, there also are certain crucial (if often unnoticed) differences” (from the course description); Cyril O’Regan, *The anatomy of misremembering: von Balthasar’s response to philosophical modernity* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Pub., 2014), 123-124: “the first volume of *Theo-Logic* constitutes essentially a re-reading of Aquinas on truth in line with the kind of reclamation projects of Maréchal, Rousselot, Lonergan, and even Rahner’s *Spirit in the World*, which sees transcendence as given in the embracing of multiplicity”, 612; Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. 1: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 144, 415.

universal.”<sup>65</sup> It seems to me an important text to see how Rahner interprets the agent intellect’s actuality as an actuality in the realm of content.

The question is explicitly “and *to what extent* [German: *inwiefern*] does the agent *confer universality* upon the sensibly given content when it becomes its actuality?”<sup>66</sup> “Universality” strongly suggests a reference to intelligible content rather than a reference to intelligible mode of being. For Rahner, the question here is not “if” but “to what extent” the agent intellect confers universality. This again indicates that, for Rahner, that which is purely sensible (and so particular) receives universality only under the influence of the agent intellect. And even if “universal” could also indicate the intelligible mode of being, Rahner’s lack of distinction between the two meanings of intelligibility makes this passage at least ambiguous.

As the passage continues, Rahner claims that to “illuminate” the material of sensibility means to “give it those metaphysical structures of being...” etc.: clearly, that which is given by the agent intellect belongs to the realm of content, to the point that the agent intellect confers the very metaphysical structures of being to the material of sensibility. In other words, for Rahner, all that is “metaphysical” (*i.e.*, beyond the sensible realm) in the object of human understanding must have a subjective a priori origin.

As a confirmation of his view that the agent intellect is a formal a priori, Rahner refers in footnote to some of the Thomistic texts which I use in *The Radical Difference* in order to show precisely the opposite, that is, that the agent intellect is instead a metaphysical a

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<sup>65</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 224-225. This text is referred also in John F.X. Knasas, “Why for Lonergan Knowing Cannot Consist in ‘Taking a Look,’” *ACPQ* 78, no. 1 (2004): 133 note 2.

<sup>66</sup> My italics.



priori.<sup>67</sup> As is clear, Rahner uses the same texts to support a radically different interpretation of St. Thomas: this is why I undertook a detailed explanation of Aquinas' text in my previous work and why I hope that Rahner's readers will be more careful in taking for granted his accuracy. Rahner quotes Aquinas hundreds of times, but this does not mean that he interprets Aquinas correctly. This means, in my view, that Rahner's interpretation is *radically* misguided, to the point that Rahner reads St. Thomas' every text with defective lenses, lenses which leave Rahner reading Kant instead of Aquinas. Some likely reasons for this misreading and its radicality have been discussed in *The Radical Difference*.<sup>68</sup>

At the end of this section, Rahner clearly identifies agent intellect and possible intellect: "the agent intellect... is the faculty which apprehends the universal." He refers many times to the agent intellect as apprehending.

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The differences between the doctrines of Rahner and of Aquinas are evident. However, what is most important is to understand the

<sup>67</sup> In footnote 72, Rahner quotes *In III De Anima* lect. 10, n. 739 (which in the Leonine Edition is *In III De Anima*, Chapter IV, 144-166) whereas I quote a section from the same text, *In III De Anima*, Chapter IV, 147-162; Rahner quotes also *De Spirit. Creat.*, a. 10, ad 4, whereas I quote from the same article the *Ad sextum*; he quotes *De Anima* a. 5, ad 6 and ad 9, whereas I quote the *corpus* from the same article. I report these three texts explicitly and in the very section in which I make the opposite point (cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 298-301). Rahner quotes also "S.T. I q. 88, a. 1, corp.", a text that I quote explicitly several times in order to support my position (cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 11, 109f, 187f, 200, 268ff, 412).

<sup>68</sup> A clear example is the misreading of the agent intellect's role. When Rahner reads in Aquinas that the agent intellect "makes intelligible", he interprets this making intelligible as providing intelligible *content* and the agent intellect as a Kantian transcendental, because Rahner does not distinguish between the two meanings of "intelligible".

reason for these differences: the Kantian principles from which Rahner departs. This understanding allows us to better interpret Rahner and to be more careful in our interpretation of St. Thomas.

#### 4) Is the Object of Knowledge “Other”?

The following section of Rahner’s work appears particularly helpful, not only in ascertaining his general approach to human knowledge, but also for considering in Rahner several “stages” of the notion of otherness. Some of the questions we could bring to the text are the following. Is the world outside of us “other”? Is the object of knowledge “other”? And, if so, in what sense do we attribute otherness to these realities? I quote first the passage in full, and then discuss it step by step.

In order to see what direction the final consideration of this chapter must take, we must go back briefly in our discussion. Man always finds himself with the world as objectively apprehended. We asked about the conditions of the possibility of such knowledge. The receptive intuition (*hinnehmende Anschauung*) of the other of the world was shown to be possible only in sensibility as an act of matter. Such sensibility, as the being-given of form (of being) to what is other than itself, can indeed then receptively accept the other because it *is* the other, but it cannot make possible an objective knowledge because it cannot differentiate itself ontologically from the other. The capacity of the subject to differentiate itself over against the other which is had in sensibility we called thought (*Denken*).<sup>69</sup>

“Man always finds himself with the world as objectively apprehended. We asked about the conditions of the possibility of such knowledge.”<sup>70</sup> Rahner is referring to the fact that the way we

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<sup>69</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 226.

<sup>70</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 226.

normally know the world is “as objectively apprehended”. That is, we consider the world around us something in itself, something other, something existing: it is in this sense that we consider the world “objective”, that is, something separated from us subjects, independent, “thrown-in-front” of us. The way we know the world, therefore, is as if things around us possessed certain intelligible contents (such as “being”, “being other”, “thing in itself”, etc.). This is the fact. Now, Rahner says, we need to find “the conditions of the possibility of such knowledge.” His presupposition (which is Kant’s point of departure) is, of course, that the world around us does not possess any intelligibility. Therefore, for Rahner, we need to explain how we engage a meaningless world and apply to it intelligibility, since the only possible source of intelligibility is intelligence.

In this text, receptivity is reduced to the realm of sensibility, and sensibility is portrayed as a “being-given of form” and as “act of matter”, that is, as the subjective form of the “matter” coming from experience. Therefore, the receptivity proper to sensibility is the receptivity of a material to be organized and informed, not the receptivity of a sensible content. This is important in order to see that, for Rahner, knowing is always an activity of information (in the sense of “giving form”) even in the sensible realm, which is supposed to be the most “receptive”.

Such sensibility, as the being-given of form (of being) to what is other than itself, can indeed then receptively accept the other because it *is* the other, but it cannot make possible an objective knowledge because it cannot differentiate itself ontologically from the other.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, for Rahner, sensibility “*is* the other” and “cannot differentiate itself ontologically from the other” because it is the *form* of the other, the other understood as matter. This is another

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<sup>71</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 226.

confirmation that, for Rahner, the a priori forms are functions of content, completing the object as such. Sensibility *is* the other because form (*i.e.* sensibility) and matter (*i.e.* the other of the world understood as raw material of experience) are one and the same thing, that is, they conform the *one thing* we call object of knowledge (as when we say, in Aristotelian physics, that matter and form compose this particular *individual*). In this sense, matter and form are not *different things* (things set apart from each other), but different aspects or essential parts of the *same thing*.

This is also why objects of knowledge are immanent in Rahner's philosophy: not because he thinks that all we know are ideas and we are closed to the world but because, for him, everything we know depends on the subject in its formal aspect. In other words, for Rahner, the object is complete *in itself* (that is, as this particular object of knowledge, matter and form) only *in human knowledge*, because it is only there that the object acquires its identity as object.

Thus, because the object is, in this radical sense, "one and the same thing" with the subject (Rahner says that sensibility "*is the other*"), the object's otherness can appear only later, and as a subjective function. Again, not that Rahner denies that there is something "other" out there, distinct and independent from the subject; however, this "other"<sup>72</sup>, before being informed by the subjective a priori forms, is not yet an object. When the "other" becomes an object, it is no longer "other" but one and the same thing, as matter and form, with sensibility.<sup>73</sup> Only in a further moment of "reflection" or "complete return" of the subject to the a priori

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<sup>72</sup> In our text, "the other of the world".

<sup>73</sup> In our text, "sensibility *is* the other".

forms of understanding, does the subject become able to know the object of sensibility “as” other.<sup>74</sup>

Now, in what sense is the “form (of being)”<sup>75</sup> given in sensibility? Is not being an intelligible content? Or what exactly is sensibility for Rahner? Let us leave this question open for the time being. The reason I bring this text to our consideration is that it clearly conveys a Kantian notion of knowledge as bestowing form, as completing formally a raw material from experience. To what extent does the subject complete this raw material? To the extent that the subject becomes ontologically one with the other of the world (sensibility “is the other”), as form and matter are one. Now, if all that is formal in the object of consciousness comes from the subject, then it is clear that the subject is source of objective content. It becomes clear also in what sense the object is immanent: the object is itself only in consciousness, because only in consciousness is the object complete. Finally, if subject and object are originally one in consciousness, as form and matter, in what sense will then the subject differentiate itself from the object by the functions of thought? What kind of otherness will belong to the object, if not subjective? For Rahner, objectivity and otherness must necessarily be a subjective function, the way we think the object of consciousness: that is, it is not that we think the object as other because the object is other, but rather the object is apprehended as other because we think of it as other.

## 5) The Denial of Intellectual Intuition in Rahner

In the paragraph we have just discussed, we read Rahner saying: “The receptive intuition (*hinnehmende Anschauung*) of the other of

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<sup>74</sup> This stage of “other” is referred to at the end of our text: “The capacity of the subject to differentiate itself over against the other which is had in sensibility we called thought.”

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Rahner, *SW*, 226: “Such sensibility, as the being-given of form (of being) to what is other than itself [...]”

the world was shown to be possible only in sensibility as an act of matter.<sup>76</sup> Let me make a note about Rahner's notion of intuition.<sup>77</sup>

Rahner clearly denies intellectual intuition, a point about which he seems to agree with St. Thomas. Now, in my view, the reason Rahner denies intellectual intuition is its receptive character. For Rahner, in fact, there is nothing intelligible to be received from experience in human knowledge: the subject receives from experience a raw material only, and this reception belongs to the realm of sensibility. Therefore, for Rahner, to admit an intellectual intuition would be like admitting that we receive intelligible content and/or that there is something intelligible out there which is independent of the subject's activity. Intellectual intuition, as implying receptivity of intelligible content, would be the opposite of an intellectual activity as origin of intelligible content: Rahner clearly rejects the first alternative to maintain the second.

Intuition, on the other hand, is a broad concept with several applications, which Rahner acknowledges. Intuition seems to refer basically to an unmediated knowledge, and that is why it can be applied to angelic knowledge and to the human knowledge of the first principles.<sup>78</sup> Intuition could also be taken to mean the unmediated knowledge regarding that which is present in its real being. In this more specific meaning and in human beings, intuition is the unmediated knowledge regarding those things which are really present in front of us, and the only things that can be present in this way, in this life, are particular things. Therefore, it is fair to say that, in this life, this kind of intuition (unmediated knowledge

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<sup>76</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 226.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. for the following remarks Rahner, *SW*, 25-26.

<sup>78</sup> In the case of the first principles, unmediated knowledge means without the mediation of reasoning. We do not reason in order to arrive at the first principles but rather we grasp those principles immediately, once the conditions to grasp them are given. Intuition, in this sense, is like a direct look not needing anything else to affirm what is being seen.

of that which is present in its real being) is strictly related to sensibility, since the only real beings which are present and reachable to our faculties are the material substances of this world.

Now, for Rahner, the fact that the “real” (the thing out there) for us human beings is only sensible means that *nothing* intelligible can come to us from the world. This is because of Rahner’s lack of distinction between intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being of the content. Rahner would be right in saying that things outside of us are not intelligible in their mode of being, but to conclude from there that nothing intelligible can be received from these things is not right: this conclusion presupposes that there is nothing intelligible in them (*i.e.*, that they have no essence or nature). I suggest that, in Rahner, the emphasis on denying intellectual intuition is meant to give a certain Thomistic support to his denying the reception of intelligible content in human beings.

Thus, for Rahner, if what is out there is sensible, then nothing intelligible can come to us from experience. Intellectual intuition would imply an immediate contact with something other which is intelligible; now, this is not possible for us human beings because, for us, the only “others” are sensible; therefore, human intellectual intuition, for Rahner, must be denied. But the key to understanding Rahner’s denial is his lack of distinction between “intelligible” as referring to content and intelligible as referring to mode of being.

St. Thomas would also deny intellectual intuition in human beings, if intellectual intuition is taken to mean the immediate contact with intelligible beings (that is, beings other than the subject which are intelligible in their mode of being, such as spiritual beings without matter). However, in Aquinas, the reason for denying this intellectual intuition has nothing to do with denying intelligibility to material substances. Moreover, St. Thomas admits an intellectual intuition of the first principles, insofar as their

knowledge is immediate (we grasp them as soon as the basic notions are understood).

The following text, while denying intellectual intuition, shows us as a consequence the foundation of being in the activity of spirit. In other words, for Rahner, if being is not intuited, then it must be a priori:

If first of all we presuppose hypothetically that metaphysics is possible, this *excessus*<sup>79</sup> [...] cannot immediately present any metaphysical objects in their own selves as objectively visible. For otherwise it would be the intuition of an object manifesting itself from itself and received by man as different. But such an intuition is essentially sensible, hence as such it gives no metaphysical object. Therefore, the *excessus* can only be the actuality of a formal principle on the side of the subject of the knowledge. [...] Being as such is not intuited objectively, but is had only in a pre-apprehension.<sup>80</sup>

As can be seen, the denial of intellectual intuition presupposes for Rahner the denial of the intelligible object's alterity and, therefore, the denial of the possibility of receiving this object. Rahner's denial of the intelligible object's alterity comes from his lack of distinction between intelligibility as objective content and as a mode of being. For Rahner, the intelligible cannot be the "other" because the only "other" we can encounter is particular; therefore, the intelligible must be subjective.

To be clear, I do not object that intuition is sensible, insofar as the adequate object of human understanding (the nature of a sensible corporeal thing) is immediately touched in its real being through the senses. But the fact that intuition is sensible takes away neither

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<sup>79</sup> *Excessus* indicates here the operation by which intelligence has access to the metaphysical object.

<sup>80</sup> *SW*, 396 (my underline).



that intellectual knowledge is receptive nor that there is something intelligible in the object of the senses.

## 6) “Being and Knowing Are the Same”

In the following text, we see how Rahner passes from the denial of intellectual intuition (which implies the denial of the intelligible’s *alterity*) to the affirmation of the *identity* of knowing and (intelligible) being:

Knowing does not come about ‘through a contact of the intellect with the intelligible thing,’ but being and knowing are the same [...] Individual knowing cannot be definitively conceived in its metaphysical essence if it is understood merely as the relationship of a knower to an object different from him, as intentionality. The fundamental and first point of departure for a metaphysically correct understanding of what knowledge is must rather be seen in the fact that being is of itself knowing and being known, that being is being-present-to-self (*Beisichsein*). *Intellectus in actu perfectio est intellectum in actu*:<sup>81</sup> the complete, ontological actualization of the intellect is the actually known, an essential proposition which can also be reversed; the actually known, in order to be itself, must be the ontological actualization of the intellect itself.<sup>82</sup>

I will focus on the Kantian principles present in this passage and not on the misuse of Aquinas’ text, “*Intellectus in actu perfectio est intellectum in actu*”, to try to support these principles. The meaning of this and similar texts in Aquinas has been considered in my previous book.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, Fabro claims that what Rahner quotes

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<sup>81</sup> Rahner’s footnote: *S.C.G.* II, 99.

<sup>82</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 69-70.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 157-168, 394-396.

is actually an interpolated text.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, I invite the reader to omit Aquinas' text, at least for now and for the sake of the considerations I offer, so as to reflect directly on Rahner's own words.

Here, Rahner is affirming the complete immanence of the object of knowing, that is, the *real* identity of object and knowing. It is not simply that being resides in our knowing or is somehow possessed by knowing: for Rahner, being is knowing, being itself is nothing other than the intellect's act of knowing: "the actually known, in order to be itself, must be the ontological actualization of the intellect itself."<sup>85</sup> In order to understand these radical expressions, let us remember that, for Rahner, the object of knowledge is a composite of sensible matter from experience and intelligible form provided by the subject; therefore, the known (the object of human understanding) in order to be itself (that is, in order to be an intelligible object including not only matter but also intelligible form) must be the *ontological* actualization of the intellect itself: the *real* act of the intellect (knowing) is the form and act of the known, is the being of the known. This is so because being, for Rahner, as intelligible *content*, does not belong to the object unless provided by the subject. Therefore, what Rahner is saying here is that being, as *intelligible object* (i.e., *this* being, composed of sensible matter and intelligible form), is nothing other than knowing, that is, nothing other than the act of the intellect on the sensible matter from experience.

Rahner has begun with a seemingly inoffensive denial of intellectual intuition and has ended with the affirmation of this absolute identity between being and knowing. Rahner's line of thinking is as follows: if the intelligible object is not an *other* from the subject (Rahner's denying intellectual intuition leads to his

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. Fabro, *La Svolta*, 65-75.

<sup>85</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 70.

denying the intelligible object's otherness), then this object must be *one and the same* thing with the subject in its [*i.e.*, the subject's] actualization on the sensible. Now, we may ask, why the intelligible object is not an *other*? For Rahner, because nothing intelligible can exist in the sensible. And why? Because Rahner does not distinguish intelligible mode of being from intelligible content: for him, that which exists in a concrete and particular mode of being cannot possess any intelligibility.

The seriousness of Rahner's affirmations is evident. Rahner is trying to portray as Thomistic a notion of knowledge by identity, a notion completely foreign to St. Thomas' thought and inspired, instead, by Kant. In my previous work, I have tried to show clearly how the true Thomistic notion of knowledge is characterized by receptivity of the other.<sup>86</sup>

Therefore, I think it is very difficult to miss seeing that Rahner, here, is openly affirming Modern Philosophy's basic principles (the absolute immanence of being in human consciousness and the foundation of being in consciousness), and it should not be so difficult to see the difference between what Rahner is saying here and what St. Thomas says. A short quote from St. Thomas ("*intellectus in actu perfectio est intellectum in actu*"), actually a textual interpolation (it should read: "*in actu perfecto*") and out of context, cannot hide Rahner's Kantianism in saying that "being and knowing are the same" or that "being is of itself knowing and being known." Surprisingly, Rahner is still widely accepted as a Thomist, despite how clearly Kantian his views are, and few people realize how slippery is the slope from these epistemological principles to a Theology which lacks a real God.

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<sup>86</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 141-220.

## 7) Knowing as Subjective Activity Completing Formally the Object

For formal object (*ratio formalis*) means nothing other than that respect, antecedent to the factual apprehension of the individual thing, under which such a thing can be the object of this faculty at all, a respect which is a priori grounded in the nature of the faculty in question.<sup>87</sup> Thus the formal object is the principle of the synthesis of the factually given individual objects, the cause of the union of these objects in the one knowledge by one power. But the principle of synthesis is always prior to what is to be unified, and must in itself be one.<sup>88</sup> So the cognitive power must contain this principle of synthesis in itself; it is determined by the essence of the

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<sup>87</sup> [Rahner's footnote] S.T. I, q. 1, a. 3, corp.; q. 59, a. 4, corp.; II-II, q. 59, a. 2, ad 1; S.C.G. I, 76; S.T. I, q. 1, a. 7, corp.: proprie autem illud assignatur objectum alicuius potentiae vel habitus, sub cuius ratione omnia referantur ad potentiam vel habitum, sicut homo et lapis referuntur ad visum in quantum sunt colorata. Unde coloratum est objectum proprium visus. See III Sent. dist. 27, q. 2, a. 4, sol. 1, corp. and ad 3.

<sup>88</sup> [Rahner's footnote] S.T. I, q. 65, a. 1, corp.: si enim diversa in aliquo uniantur, necesse est huius unionis causam esse aliquam, non enim diversa secundum se uniuntur. The principle is used here in Thomas in another context, but as a principle, that is, according to Thomas it holds universally. S.T. I, q. 3, a. 7, corp.: quae enim secundum se diversa sunt, non conveniunt in aliquod unum nisi per aliquam causam adunantem ipsa. Similarly, S.C.G. I, 18; In VII Metaph. lect. 13, nn. 1588-89.

synthesis;<sup>89</sup> the scope of this synthesizing faculty expresses itself in the breadth of the formal object.<sup>90</sup>

In this text, Rahner is discussing the a priori forms of sensibility. This passage is another example showing that, for him, knowing is a subjective activity completing formally the material object from experience. Let's review this text step by step.

For formal object (*ratio formalis*) means nothing other than that respect, antecedent to the factual apprehension of the individual thing, under which such a thing can be the object of this faculty at all, a respect which is a priori grounded in the nature of the faculty in question.<sup>91</sup>

The underlined phrase is the beginning of Rahner's misconstruction of Aquinas' doctrine: Rahner is trying to pass from Aquinas' formal object to Kant's formal a priori. Rahner's citations of Aquinas in footnote do not say that the "respect" in question is grounded *only* subjectively; if this were so, then the various objects would have nothing in common, which is the opposite of what St. Thomas says in that place: "man and stone are referred to the faculty of sight insofar as they are coloured things."<sup>92</sup> Certainly, for St. Thomas, a knowing faculty is such a knowing faculty before experience: this, however, gives the faculty an a priori capacity of *being perfected* by a certain object, not an a priori ability of perfecting the object. The faculty's

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<sup>89</sup> [Rahner's footnote] See *S.T.* I, q. 14, a. 12, corp.: *secundum modum formae quae est principium cognitionis*. In this sentence there is question first of all of the species considered ontologically, but as such it is dependent on the essence of the knower. In *II Metaph.* lect. 5, n. 332: *requiritur autem ad quamlibet cognitionem determinato [sic] proportio cognoscentis ad cognoscibile. Et ideo secundum diversitatem naturarum et habituum accidit diversitas circa cognitionem*.

<sup>90</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 114-115.

<sup>91</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 114.

<sup>92</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 1, a. 7, c.: "*homo et lapis referuntur ad visum in quantum sunt colorata*."

transcendental openness (or a priori *capacity* of being cognitively perfected by a *certain kind* of object) refers to an object in itself which, insofar as it corresponds to the faculty, is able to perfect this same faculty.

For Rahner, however, nothing formal can belong to the objects themselves, and that is why he continues: “The formal object is the principle of the synthesis of the factually given individual objects, the cause of the union of these objects in the one knowledge by one power. But the principle of synthesis is always prior to what is to be unified, and must in itself be one.”<sup>93</sup> This “principle of synthesis” is a further step in Rahner’s misconstruction of Aquinas’ doctrine: this principle is already the Kantian formal a priori, “cause of union” of the given multiplicity. Rahner quotes Aquinas saying that there is no unity in the multiplicity without a cause. This axiom, however, neither proves nor confirms anything because, firstly, here the multiple objects already have something in common (a certain formality such as, for example, being coloured) which does not need to be “caused” by the subject and, secondly, for St. Thomas knowing is not a process of unification or information of the object but a process of cognitive information of the subject (*i.e.*, the one receiving a form is the subject).

This passage concludes, “So the cognitive power must contain this principle of synthesis in itself; it is determined by the essence of the synthesis; the scope of this synthesizing faculty expresses itself in the breadth of the formal object.”<sup>94</sup> As we have seen, in this passage, Rahner has quoted Aquinas several times to try to support his view. Now, Rahner has suggested that the form of the known depends on the a priori cognitive forms as principles of synthesis of the raw material of experience. In those quotations brought by Rahner, however, St. Thomas is saying that the formal object of a

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<sup>93</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 114.

<sup>94</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 114-115.

potency is that respect or formality, present *in the object*, under which every object is referred to the potency; and St. Thomas is also saying that there is no unity in those things that are essentially diverse unless there is a cause. Aquinas and Rahner are speaking of totally different things. Rahner has transformed the Thomistic capacity of being cognitively informed into a synthesizing principle, into a Kantian capacity of unifying and informing the raw material of experience.

What makes this misconstruction of Aquinas' doctrine possible? In my view, the device used is the apparent similarity between the Kantian formal a priori and the transcendental ordination of every cognitive faculty to its proper object. The fact that this transcendental ordination is present a priori in the faculty itself, giving *the faculty* its essence, is taken to mean that the *object's* essence is somehow already present in the faculty. As if being hungry were the same as having a good hamburger in the stomach! In other words, the fact that the faculty of vision is transcendently ordained to know colours, that is to say, is *determined* to know only colours or (to say the same thing in different words) *is able to* know only colours, means for Rahner that the colours are somehow formally present in the faculty. However, for Aquinas, the faculty (as *potency* of knowing) is determined only *to receive* those colours, not to project them in the matter, as if the faculty already possessed virtually all colours. In Thomistic doctrine, *active* potencies contain virtually what they produce, but passive potencies do not: passive potencies are precisely *in potency* regarding the forms they do not possess, in potency of being perfected. Instead, in Transcendental Thomism, as in Kant, knowing cannot be a being-perfected because the subject has nothing formal to receive from experience: it is as if nothing could enrich the subject, who is the source of perfection of every object.

The notion of passive potency in Transcendental Thomism appears to be reduced to that of active potency or confused with it.<sup>95</sup> In my view, this is alarming and disturbing because the true Thomistic notion of passive potency is key to making sense of a world in which Creator and creature are distinct, and distinct creatures interact with one another. Aquinas' passive potency is what allows the creature to be perfected by the Creator and by other creatures as well, to be perfected insofar as the creature receives a perfection previously not possessed. In Modern Philosophy, instead, the principle of immanence tends to make distinctions and otherness disappear and, therefore, the true notion of passive potency (which requires an "actual other" from which to receive) finds its place no longer: unless passive potency is applied, somehow, to experience's raw material (Modern Philosophy's *tohu wabohu*<sup>96</sup>) which is subject to the informative activity of the knower (Modern Philosophy's demiurge<sup>97</sup>).

The experience of knowledge is as common as it is amazing; as is the experience of being. Both experiences are undeniable but also undefinable. They cannot be defined because there is nothing previous to them, nothing more known. This does not mean that we cannot understand them, but it does mean that some people can be confused and confuse everyone else regarding knowledge and being.

In order to understand knowledge and define it somehow, we need to first face knowledge and describe it. We need to rediscover the experience of knowledge, an experience that has been darkened by Modern Philosophy. In order to do that, I think is useful to employ images and comparisons. These are not meant to expose doctrine

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<sup>95</sup> Cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 116-133. Lonergan's study of the notion of active potency and other related notions is meticulous and thus very helpful, but I find it vitiated by his overall Kantian understanding of St. Thomas' text.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. *Genesis* 1:2.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 28a ff.



systematically but to present the object of study to the student's experience in a more accurate way. What are we talking about when we say "knowledge"? Or, more precisely, what is to know something?<sup>98</sup>

When we know something, there is a unity and there is a duality. The duality consists of "we" and the "something", whereas the unity is knowledge itself. The problem with understanding knowledge is making sense of this unity without dissolving the duality. In this sense, I prefer the terms "communion", "encounter" and the like in order to express what knowledge is. Knowledge is communion of two: we need a knower and a known. And, when the knower knows, the two remain: the knower as knower and the known as known. Both are needed for knowledge to exist as such.

Knowledge is unity in duality, communion of two, possession without control: we possess the other without imposing ourselves on the other. The knower receives the known as the knower's *own perfection* insofar as the known remains *other*: *we* know, but we know *it*. *It* is ours by knowledge, but we are not *it*.

The knower is enriched with the known precisely because the known is and remains distinct from the knower: the knower becomes rich because previously was poor regarding the known.

Knowing is unity in duality. Knower and known become one because they were not one: and they become one insofar as they are "two-gether", two who have been gathered together. Knowing is not to be oneself, but to become the other. Knowledge certainly makes you more perfectly yourself but, precisely, because you encounter the other, because you are perfected by the other. The

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<sup>98</sup> I have intentionally left out self-knowledge from this section. Knowing oneself cannot happen before knowledge of the other and the very notion of knowledge refers originally and essentially to a known object different from the knower (cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 87, aa. 1-3; Ayala, "The Weaknesses of Critical Realism", 83-91).

other has something which is meant for you, and you will become fully what you are meant to be on the day you will open yourself to the gift. The gift is always “given” (a *datum*) and, even if it is given to you, it is never you: it is given, it is yours as a gift.

Knowledge is unity. Modern Philosophy has tried to explain this unity as an absolute unity, as a substantial, physical identity of knower and known, as a unity after the pattern of the unity of matter and form. And why? Was the physical unity of matter and form the only unity we could think of? Was it not possible to think that we were, perhaps, a community of beings with all the means to relate to each other? Does it not look like we are many? Did we have to deny knowing’s evident duality in order to explain it?

We thought knowledge was something like getting married but Kant made it into something like getting chubbier:

Kantian knowing allows the knower to obtain more matter and transform it into the knower itself.

Kantian knowing, like eating, is a way of humanizing matter.

And humanity keeps eating data and vomiting nonsense, while the knower becomes more and more lonely...

It is not good to be alone.

Yes, it is easier to eat than to get married:

food does not have a saying... easier to deal with!

Eating much makes grow different parts of our body but not our heart:

actually, our heart may be adversely affected.

Kantian knowing will not take us anywhere,

at least not where we want to be.

The Kantian way may look easier but our hearts are suffering from it.

Let’s be again open to the adventure!

It is already late (the night is so dark!) but...

Wake up! Let’s open the window!

The world, out there, is singing a serenade for us...

## 8) Judgment as Abstraction's Condition of Possibility

For Rahner, since being (as intelligible content) is not intuited, being must be found *originally* in judgment. Judgment's affirmation is the origin of (intelligible) being:

Now, earlier explanations of Thomistic texts have shown that *esse* is the object of the judgment. Hence, if being, insofar as it expresses *esse*, is what is first grasped by abstraction, is the fundamental abstraction, then abstraction must abstract being insofar as it is grasped in the judgment as *esse*. [...] The awareness of the origin of the quiddity from the real things is nothing other than the reference of the quiddity to the real thing and thus a judgment. Hence if being is abstracted in the encounter with the real, sensible existent, it takes place in a judgment.<sup>99</sup>

This text shows clearly one of Rahner's several tergiversations regarding Aquinas' doctrine: abstraction is for Aquinas a condition of the possibility of judgment, whereas Rahner tells us the opposite, that is, that judgment is the condition of the possibility of abstraction. Why does Rahner say so?

Let us remember that, for Rahner, abstraction is the operation by which human intellect reaches the object of metaphysics, that is, the intelligible as separated from the sensible. Let us remember also that, for him, the intelligible is originally *for* the sensible: the intelligible is the form of the raw material from experience. Therefore, the intelligible can be *separated from* the sensible only after having belonged to the sensible. Now, the intelligible can belong to the sensible only after having been subjectively bestowed upon the sensible (because the sensible, of itself, has no intelligibility whatsoever): indeed, the intelligible is bestowed upon the sensible by judgment. Therefore, for Rahner, judgment

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<sup>99</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 207-208.

(as the operation bestowing intelligibility upon the sensible) is the condition of the possibility of abstraction (as the operation abstracting the intelligible from the sensible).

Let us revisit this text line by line, step by step.

“Now, earlier explanations of Thomistic texts have shown that *esse* is the object of the judgment.”<sup>100</sup> St. Thomas does say that *esse* is the object of the judgment, but in this sense: that as simple apprehension knows the “essence”, judgment knows “being” (*esse*), meaning by being not the *actus essendi*<sup>101</sup>, but rather the *esse in actu*, that is, the state of affairs, the fact of existence in one way or another, as when we say this “is” so or “is not” so. Does Rahner mean the same or is he going somewhere else?

“Hence, if being, insofar as it expresses *esse*, is what is first grasped by abstraction, is the fundamental abstraction, then abstraction must abstract being insofar as it is grasped in the judgment as *esse*.”<sup>102</sup> What does it mean that being (*ens*) is “what is first grasped by abstraction”? St. Thomas says that everything we understand we understand as *ens*, as “something that is”, and this is the meaning of “that which first falls in apprehension is *ens*.”<sup>103</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 207.

<sup>101</sup> “*Actus essendi*” means here the being (*esse*) which, for St. Thomas, is an intrinsic principle of the finite being (*ens*) and enters into composition with the essence. This “*actus essendi*” is different from *esse* as existence or *esse in actu*. In the words of Fabro, the *actus essendi* in this sense is a principle whereas the *esse in actu* is a result. Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *Partecipazione e Causalità secondo S. Tommaso D’Aquino*, 2nd. ed. (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1961) 52-53, 221.

<sup>102</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 207.

<sup>103</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2, c.: “*Illud quod primo cadit in apprehensione est ens, cuius intellectus includitur in omnibus quaecumque quis apprehendit*”; cf. *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a.3, c.; *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 1, c.; Ayala, “The Weaknesses of Critical Realism”, 102-104.

Now, what does it mean that being “expresses *esse*”? This is more ambiguous: Aquinas would say that we say *ens* with reference to *esse*, insofar as in the understanding of *ens* (as understanding of a *synthetic* content, of “something that is” as *composite* of “somethingness” and “being”) the notion of *esse* (which is simple) is somehow implied. From a truly Thomistic prospective, this means that the *esse* of judgment can appear later because it was already somehow present in the simple apprehension. That is, even if the simple apprehension focuses on the essence (the *id quod* of the *ens*), everything we understand in simple apprehension we understand as “*ens*” (and this is why St. Thomas says that “that which *first*”, i.e., in simple apprehension, “falls into the understanding of the intellect is *ens*”). For Rahner, instead, for whom nothing intelligible can “fall into” the intellect, the presence of *esse* in *ens* must be explained by a subjective activity. That is, instead of explaining the presence of *esse* in judgment by the implicit presence of *esse* in simple apprehension, as St. Thomas would do, Rahner explains the presence of *esse* in human understanding by the judgment as origin of *esse*. It is the judgment, the affirmation understood as *position*, which posits *esse* in human knowledge.

In other words, and for Rahner, if *ens* is the basic content of abstraction, if *ens* implies *esse*, and at the same time *esse* is the object of judgment, it follows that abstraction presupposes judgment: judgment is a condition of the possibility of abstraction. This is so because, for Rahner, no intelligible content can “fall into” the intellect or, properly speaking, be “abstracted” from the sensible. Now, how does Rahner explain that the intelligible content appears to be present in our consciousness as coming from the sensible? “The awareness of the origin of the quiddity from the real things is nothing other than the reference of the quiddity to the real thing and thus a judgment.”<sup>104</sup> In other words, having denied on principle the possibility of intelligible content coming from

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<sup>104</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 208.

sensible experience, Rahner needs to explain the conscious presence of the intelligible by a subjective activity (*i.e.*, judgment as “reference”) and needs to explain the attribution of the intelligible to the sensible as a physical, ontological, *fundamental* attribution. That is to say, the cognitive attribution of the intelligible to the sensible (*i.e.*, affirming *that* something [particular] is [essentially] so and so) becomes for Rahner a fundamental attribution; that is, affirming becomes *positing originally* a quiddity *into* something, positing the intelligible into the sensible. It cannot be otherwise because, for Rahner, the intelligible cannot possibly come from the sensible. This is why he says (and I quote again this important phrase): “The awareness of the origin of the quiddity from the real things is nothing other than the reference of the quiddity to the real thing and thus a judgment.”<sup>105</sup> That is, for Rahner, the fact that in our awareness the quiddity seems to come *from* the real thing is explained by the fact that, by judgment, we ascribe this quiddity *to* the real thing: the quiddity belongs to the real thing in our awareness, not because the quiddity is really present in the real thing or has been abstracted from the real thing, but because the quiddity has been posited into the real thing by judgment.<sup>106</sup>

“Hence if being is abstracted in the encounter with the real, sensible existent, it takes place in a judgment.”<sup>107</sup> In my view,

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<sup>105</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 208.

<sup>106</sup> In other words, and to emphasize the difference between Aquinas and Rahner: for Rahner, the intelligible content belongs to the real thing because it has been posited by the subject into the real thing; for St. Thomas, instead, we can abstract the intelligible *from* the real sensible thing precisely because the intelligible belongs to the real sensible thing.

<sup>107</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 208. Both for Rahner and for St. Thomas, the knowledge of the intelligible must happen in an encounter with the real: however, for Rahner, because the real has nothing intelligible of its own, this encounter must be understood as the subjective affirmation-position of the intelligible into the

Rahner is not identifying judgment and abstraction in this text. He is saying that the abstraction of being takes place in a judgment, in the sense that only in a judgment is being posited into the sensible and, thus, being becomes available for the abstractive activity of the intellect. Being is abstracted from judgment, that is, from the affirmation of being in the sensible. This is what Rahner means: that the abstraction of being takes place with regards to a judgment because judgment is the place of being. Abstraction, as the operation by which the intellect reaches being as separate from the sensible, is conditioned by judgment, where being is found together with the sensible (because being has been originally posited into the sensible by judgment).

Summarizing, Rahner's placing judgment as the condition of the possibility of abstraction is completely foreign to St. Thomas' doctrine and, most importantly, Rahner's transformation of Aquinas' doctrine regarding abstraction and judgment depends on Rahner's Kantian principles, that is, on Rahner's denying any intelligibility to the real sensible thing and, consequently, his considering the subject as active source of intelligibility in the act of judgment.

## 9) Kantian Roots of Rahner's Metaphysics

Towards the end of Rahner's book, the following text<sup>108</sup> offers an interesting overview containing and relating many points which we have discussed earlier, especially in Section Two of this chapter. The question is how, or in what sense, can we speak of metaphysics in human knowing? Is it possible to speak of metaphysics (as knowledge of the intelligible, as knowledge of being) when the only objects in front of us are sensible? As we will see, Rahner's

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real, and this is why Rahner places judgment (which is an affirmation) as the condition of possibility of abstraction (as knowledge of the intelligible in itself).

<sup>108</sup> The text is from Rahner, *SW*, 396. This time, for my commentary, I will present this text divided in four parts.

response depends on his Kantian approach to the problem of knowledge. Here, my focus is not so much Rahner's response to the problem of metaphysics as is the Kantian influence in the presuppositions Rahner makes for his response. Rahner begins:

If first of all we presuppose hypothetically that metaphysics is possible, this *excessus*<sup>109</sup> is defined from the viewpoint of metaphysics by the following characteristics: although it must open up the metaphysical realm, of itself alone it cannot immediately present any metaphysical objects in their own selves as objectively visible. For otherwise it would be the intuition of an object manifesting itself from itself and received by man as different. But such an intuition is essentially sensible, hence as such it gives no metaphysical object.<sup>110</sup>

Here, Rahner's underlying principle is that nothing intelligible can come from the particular. Therefore, if metaphysics as knowledge of the intelligible is possible at all, then metaphysics does not happen by means of an intuition, that is, by receiving anything objectively or as different and standing opposite. This is because all that is different and standing opposite a human being is simply particular. If the operation by which intelligence has access to the object of metaphysics is not an intuition (because the object of

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<sup>109</sup> *Excessus* defines Rahner's abstraction and is therefore the operation by which being (or the intelligible) as the object of metaphysics is reached. Rahner's term "*excessus*" indicates a "going out" from the sensible and a "going beyond" the sensible towards absolute being. The spirit goes beyond the sensible towards absolute being insofar as the spirit becomes conscious of its own openness to absolute being, of its own a priori structure leading to affirm being in the sensible.

<sup>110</sup> Rahner, *SW*, 396. This means that Rahner's *excessus* or abstraction has nothing to do with an intuition. Rahner is comparing *excessus* with intuition because both are operations.



metaphysics is not out there as something to be received), the consequence is evident:

Therefore, the *excessus* can only be the actuality of a formal principle on the side of the subject of the knowledge. As such this principle is necessarily a condition of the possibility of the objects of the knowledge, of the actually intelligible, and hence the ground of a priori and necessary knowledge.

For Rahner, the source of intelligibility as content is subjective and a priori, which is the Kantian way of explaining intellectual knowing: if intelligibility does not come from experience, then it must come from the subject. Now, metaphysics is knowledge of *the intelligible* as abstracted and in itself, whereas the understanding of *the sensible* may be called “science” (as a priori and necessary knowledge regarding the sensible). Intelligence is the faculty of both, science and metaphysics, and is able to do metaphysics insofar as intelligence is itself the principle of science. This is why Rahner says here, referring to metaphysics, that “the *excessus*” by which we have access to the object of metaphysics must be “the actuality of a formal principle”, that is, an act of intelligence as formal a priori. This is why Rahner says also, referring to science, that this same principle (intelligence) “as such” (that is, as formal a priori) is “condition of the possibility of the objects of the knowledge”: what he means is that intelligence is source of intelligibility for the sensible and thus “ground of a priori and necessary knowledge” (that is, ground of science). In summary, and for Rahner, we can have access to the intelligible (as object of metaphysics) only through intelligence as function of knowing the sensible, that is, as ground of science: this is because science’s judgment, as the original place of the intelligible, provides metaphysics with its object, that is to say, makes available to intelligence the object of metaphysics.

As the text continues, Rahner summarizes, in a very long sentence, the solution to the question of the possibility of metaphysics. First, he recaps the principles just established:

If as the ground of the possibility of metaphysics this formal principle of knowledge is, on the one hand, to be capable of opening up the realm of being as such, and, on the other hand, since there is no metaphysical intuition, at the same time it does not present the metaphysical object itself, and therefore must be a formal principle of the mode of thought which is related to sense intuition...

Let me try to explain Rahner's line of thinking. "Being as such" is the object of metaphysics. Knowing this or that being does not belong to metaphysics, but to the mode of thought which is related to sense intuition. Now, intelligence, as the formal principle of this mode of thought, must be capable of opening up the realm of being as such, of making available being as such, if metaphysics is at all possible. This is because being as such cannot present itself as an object, and so being as such must appear somehow in relationship with the faculty of knowing the sensible as being, in relationship with the faculty's own actuality. Now, in what way? In what way can the faculty's actuality in knowing the sensible make available being as such, so that metaphysics is possible?

... then both characteristics of this principle can be understood as compatible only in such a way that a pre-apprehending disclosure of being as such takes place only in a conversion to the objectivity of the sense intuition (whereby being as such is not intuited objectively, but is had only in a pre-apprehension), and this sensible objectivity can be had only through the disclosure of being as such in a human way, that is, as universal and standing opposite.

If my reading of Rahner is correct, being as such becomes available to human consciousness by understanding the conditions of the possibility of thinking the sensible as being. In other words, the fact

that we understand the sensible *as being* makes us realize that being (as such) must belong a priori to intelligence. This realization is what “opens up” the realm of being as such without presenting being as such (the metaphysical object) in itself. This disclosure of being as such is pre-apprehending, insofar as we do not behold (or apprehend directly) being as such, but we “anticipate it” only as the condition of the possibility of thinking.

Why does Rahner speak of the disclosure of “being as such in a human way, that is, as universal and standing opposite”? Rahner means perhaps that being (as intelligibility), insofar as is related to the sensible (human intelligence necessarily relates to sensibility), is “universality”, that is, the one (as one intelligibility) in the many (*i.e.*, in the chaotic multiplicity of experience). For instance, when we see a sensible object as “a dog”, “dogness” is the intelligible light or oneness in which we see this object of experience. We see the dog as standing opposite also, insofar as intelligibility is a light illuminating *the sensible*, and therefore we are made conscious of being *only as belonging to the sensible*. Of course, and for Rahner, not because being is really a perfection of the sensible (this has been excluded *on principle*), but because being has been subjectively added to the sensible.

As we can see, Rahner cannot deny that being appears as different, other and standing opposite, but he must deny that this otherness is objective, that is, he must deny that being really belongs to the object independently of the subject’s activity. This is because Rahner cannot differentiate between intelligible content (the universal as nature) and intelligible mode of being of that content (the same nature in a state of abstraction). For Rahner, the sensible other is absolutely sensible, to the point that nothing intelligible can belong to it. For St. Thomas, instead, something intelligible belongs to the particular and this is what makes human understanding *objective* in the sense of receptive of objective content.

Let me make two conclusive remarks about the text just studied.

Firstly, Rahner's denying objective otherness to human understanding's object is related to his consideration of knowledge as identity. In my view, Rahner's consideration of intellectual knowledge as identity<sup>111</sup> (the intelligible and the intellect in act are one and the same thing) comes from Rahner's assumption of the Kantian point of departure (intelligibility is an event of consciousness, because nothing intelligible can be found in reality) and this, in turn, comes from Rahner's lack of distinction between object and mode of being of the object. In fact, this distinction is the only way to explain that something intelligible can belong to the sensible.

Secondly, this text helps us understand Rahner's rejection of intellectual intuition, which is grounded on Rahner's underlying error (i.e., the lack of distinction between intelligible as content and as mode of being). In other words, intellectual intuition is rejected by Rahner for the wrong reason, which is his denying any intelligibility to the particular and thus the impossibility of finding the source of intelligible content in the particular. Rahner is not rejecting intellectual intuition simply insofar as it would presuppose the affirmation of objective beings intelligible *in their real mode of being* and standing opposite our intelligence. If this were the case, I would agree with Rahner, insofar as human intellectual knowing is not originally oriented to immaterial beings. Rahner, however, in denying one kind of encounter and reception of the intelligible, denies all kinds (or does not perceive other kinds) and *therefore* needs to find the source of intelligibility in the subject itself.

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<sup>111</sup> This is one of the points Fabro stresses the most against Rahner's interpretation of St. Thomas.

Rahner says: "If in this sense the reader gets the impression that an interpretation of St. Thomas is at work here which has its origin in modern philosophy, the author does not consider that such a criticism points to a defect, but rather to a merit of the book."<sup>112</sup> The difference between St. Thomas and Kant is radical, and therefore a Kantian interpretation of St. Thomas can only be erroneous, not meritorious. Is it a merit to have produced the most plausible case for a Kantian interpretation of Aquinas? It is not, especially when one considers the consequences of this misinterpretation of Aquinas in modern theology. To be honest, it is impossible not to acknowledge the sharpness of Rahner's genius, even sometimes in his clear understanding of Aquinas' text. However, the fact that Rahner so clearly misinterprets Aquinas in his most basic principles should raise eyebrows and at least some concern rather than candid admiration for the most famous theologian of the XX century.

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<sup>112</sup> Rahner, *SW*, lii.



## Chapter Three

# Some Texts from Lonergan's *Verbum* Articles

Lonergan's epistemology can be seen as deeply rooted in Kantian principles. In my paper, "The Weaknesses of Critical Realism",<sup>113</sup> I have discussed this issue. However, Lonergan's *Verbum* articles, which I had not considered when I first wrote the aforementioned paper, appear as a powerful and meticulous *Thomistic* support for Lonergan's *Kantian* epistemology. Therefore, having shown the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant, and having shown how Rahner too has tried to find support for his own Kantian epistemology in the Thomistic text, let us explore Lonergan's *Verbum* articles in order to more properly assess Lonergan's alleged Thomistic epistemology.

I present five sections, trying to group Lonergan's texts by topics.

### 1) Knowledge as Identity and Human Understanding in Lonergan

Lonergan also, like Rahner, has a particular understanding of the Aristotelian identity, that is, of the Aristotelian "*intellectum in actu est intellectus in actu*" ("the understood thing in act is the intellect in

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<sup>113</sup> Cf. Andres Ayala, "The Weaknesses of Critical Realism: On Lonergan's Cognitional Theory", *The Incarnate Word* 7, no. 2 (December 2020), 61-109. In the following, this article is referenced as Ayala, "The Weaknesses of Critical Realism".

act”). For Lonergan, this means that the act of the thing as intelligible (and so the object’s intelligible content, the object’s *forma intelligibilis*) is the act of understanding. In other words, for Lonergan, the Aristotelian identity is an identity between knower and known, between the faculty’s act and the object of understanding. In this conception, the phantasm-object has a material role and the faculty a formal role, in such a way that the intelligible object is complete only in human understanding and is one and the same thing with understanding in act.

In Lonergan’s own words:

[K]nowledge is by identity; the act of the thing as sensible is the act of sensation; the act of the thing as intelligible is the act of understanding. (...) ‘sensible in actu est sensus in actu, et intelligibile in actu est intellectus in actu.’<sup>114</sup>

Intellect in act is the intelligible in act. In this material world, of course, besides the knower in act and the known in act, there are also the knower in potency and the known in potency; and while the former are identical, still the latter are distinct.<sup>115</sup>

Clearly, for Lonergan, the Aristotelian identity is an identity between knower and known, to the point that the thing’s *only* intelligible act is the very act of understanding. Intelligibility is a function of the subject on the purely sensible raw material of experience.

Lonergan’s interpretation of the Aristotelian identity as an identity between knower and known is related to Lonergan’s theory of knowledge as identity.

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<sup>114</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 83. Exact same words on page 86: “The act of the thing as sensible is the act of sensation; the act of the thing as intelligible is the act of understanding.”

<sup>115</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 193.



But the problem of knowledge, once it is *granted that knowledge is by identity*, is knowledge of the other. As long as faculty and object are in potency to knowing and being known, there is as yet no knowledge. Inasmuch as *faculty and object are in act identically*, there is knowledge indeed as perfection but not yet knowledge of the other. But it is well to grasp just where the strength of the Aristotelian position lies. One might side with Plato and say knowing of its nature is knowing the other. But this brings up insoluble difficulties with regard to knowledge in the absolute being; for even Plato was forced to admit, in virtue of his assumptions, that absolute being, if it knows, must undergo motion.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 84. Lonergan says that understanding knowledge as alterity would bring “insoluble difficulties with regard to knowledge in the absolute being.” To this comment, I would say that *human* knowledge (and so not knowledge in general) is originally “defined” as alterity, that is, as intentional possession of the perfection of the other. In human beings, knowing is like a remedy of their imperfection: it is the acquisition of what they lack (cf. *De Veritate*, 2, 2). Precisely because God does not need to acquire perfection (from another), because every perfection (his and others’) is already in him with an intelligible mode of being, knowing in God is identity, like an intellectual self-possession.

Human knowledge is “originally ‘defined’ as alterity”. I say “defined”, with quotation marks, because the nature of knowledge, properly speaking, cannot be defined: knowledge is an original irreducible phenomenon, like being, and there is nothing previous of the same kind that can help us grasp better its nature. I say “originally” defined, because human knowledge is originally knowledge of the other, and self-knowledge can appear only later precisely in dependence on the knowledge of the other.

In the end, it seems that in order to “define” knowledge as such (not human knowing) we need to go beyond the notions of alterity and identity to the notions of becoming, possession, participation and the like; at the same time, we need to understand that our notion of knowledge originates in our notion of human knowledge, and human knowledge originates as a certain becoming the other.

This text shows us to what extent Lonergan thinks that knowledge is by identity. In Lonergan's mind, this implies embracing the Aristotelian-Thomistic doctrine of knowledge against the Platonic doctrine of knowledge by alterity. The meaning of identity in knowledge is clear: it is an identity between faculty in act and object in act, in which the object is one with the knower itself. Interestingly, God's knowledge is brought to the discussion to show the plausibility of this theory.

Now, it is clear that the interpretation of the Aristotelian identity for St. Thomas has nothing to do with an identity between knower and known, but is instead an identity between faculty and the cognitive species in its subjective being.<sup>117</sup> It should be clear also that St. Thomas has never defined knowledge as an identity and, instead, defined human knowledge as alterity in *De Veritate* 2, 2, in an article dealing precisely with the knowledge of God. Knowledge, in the end, is a special kind of possessing a perfection, is irreducible to anything else and implies immateriality. Many have agreed to call this special kind of possession of perfection "intentional" but the term, precise as it is, remains merely a term if we do not understand what it means. One of the problems in understanding what "intentional" means is that knowledge, as a fundamental notion, cannot be properly defined. However, we can attempt to describe knowledge and we can even hope to be successful because knowledge is part of everyone's experience.

Knowledge is a special kind of possessing a perfection, a special kind of being perfect. Knowledge is not simply to be, but to be aware, to be aware of being, to be conscious of being. In this broad description, awareness may regard one's own being or the being of another. Obviously, our notion of knowledge, the one we will apply to God, comes from our human experience of knowledge. If

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<sup>117</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 85, 2 ad 1; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 164ff. See *Appendix*, Note 3, on p. 231.

we speak about the knowledge of God, this is because we know what knowledge is. If we know what knowledge is, this is not because we have experienced God's knowledge, but because we have experienced our own knowledge, human knowledge.<sup>118</sup> My purpose here is not to explain how we can apply human notions to God, but to point out a methodological principle: our notion of knowledge depends on our experience of human knowledge. If we will ascribe knowledge to God as we do to human beings, our notion of knowledge must work for both. Therefore, we cannot take what is particular to God to establish a notion of knowledge for human beings as well. The particular way in which knowledge happens in God may help us purify our notion of knowledge, but cannot change this notion into a different notion. The fact that, in the knowledge of God, there is an original identity between knower and known, does not necessitate that knowledge, in itself, is an identity between knower and known. Knowing can be of the self or of the other, precisely because it is not a physical identity, but an intentional possession of perfection.

The notion of knowledge, in itself, implies a duality of knower and known. Knowing is knowing something, or it is nothing. Of course, that something you know can be the knower itself: but you cannot even think that you know yourself unless you place yourself as *both* subject and object. Even the way we write about self-knowledge betrays the duality in our notion. This is because our notion of knowledge comes from the experience of human knowledge, and human knowledge proceeds from potency to act, from imperfection to perfection, from not possessing to possessing. The tool by which we may possess intentionally a perfection is our intelligence. This intelligence does not possess intentionally any perfection by nature, from the beginning; neither

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<sup>118</sup> In other words, if we know what knowledge is, this is because we have known *something*, not ourselves. Cf. Ayala, "The Weaknesses of Critical Realism", 86-87.

does intelligence possess intentionally itself, because intelligence itself is not yet perfect (*i.e.* in act). Once intelligence is made perfect by the intentional possession of something, then intelligence can know itself, can possess intentionally its own perfection as intelligence. Only then can knower and known be the same thing. However, even then, this intentional possession of the self is an achievement, something that was not there from the start, something which cannot be identified with simply “being itself”. Knowing oneself is not simply being oneself, but being conscious of oneself.

It may be important to emphasize in what sense, in self-knowledge, knower and known are the same thing. They are *objectively* the same thing: the known (*i.e.*, the object of knowledge), in this case, is the knower. They are not *subjectively* the same thing: the knower, in itself and for what it is (that is, essentially and not simply in this case), is not the known. In fact, the knower is not the known at the beginning of the cognitional process, but other things are the known. In a similar way, the known, in itself and for what it is, is not the knower: in fact, when known, the other of the world is received, encountered and welcomed by the knower, not completed by the knower. And here we can see why Critical Realism is interested in emphasizing the identity of knower and known: because the known, for Modern Philosophy, is in itself formally completed by the knower. Note carefully: for Modern Philosophy, the knower does not make the known simply known but rather makes the known *itself*, because the known has no other perfection in itself than the perfection received from the knower. Without the knower, all we have is a raw material to work with, a raw material without form. Reality, as we know it, is the fruit of the knower’s activity.

There is, to be sure, an identity in knowledge, even if knowledge itself is not identity. To know is to become aware, is a certain becoming in the knowing subject, and therefore it must imply a subjective modification in the subject itself. This subjective

modification is the cognitive species. The cognitive species is the act of the knowing faculty, by which the objective content of the known is subjectively represented. The subject becomes the known through (by means of) the species.

Knowledge is not identity. Identity is the unity of one and the same thing. Identity is being the same. Knowledge is not being the same. Identity is the unity of one thing with itself. Knowledge is not being one with oneself, but being aware, conscious either of the other or of oneself. To be, or to be one with oneself is not yet to know and does not necessitate knowing: being and knowing do not mean the same thing. In God, to be and to know might actually be the same thing, but they still do not mean the same thing for us.

There is a unity between the knower and the known but this unity is not a unity of identity. When the known is the other, there is between knower and known a unity of communion: the knower participates the perfection of the known by encountering and welcoming the known into its horizon, into its life. The known remains other by being known. When the known is instead the self, the unity between knower and known is a very special unity: an intentional self-possession, a re-gaining oneself, like a conquest. Knowing oneself is an interior growing, like an ultimate development of our human possibilities, which is the gate to yet further achievements in the knowledge of the spiritual. But knowing oneself is not being oneself. Knowledge is not an identity.

To be sure, knowing oneself implies being oneself, as accident presupposes substance, but they are not the same. In the case of God, being oneself necessitates knowing oneself, but it is not so in our case. In God, being oneself is the same as knowing oneself, but it is not so in us. This is because in God ultimate perfection is his essence, whereas in us ultimate perfection is an achievement. God is being *per essentiam* and thus perfect for what he is, but we are beings *per participationem* and, therefore, perfect not for what we are essentially, but for what we *become* by means of operation.

The abovesaid may suffice to show an important point: the fact that, in God, knowing and being are the same does not necessitate our defining knowledge as an identity. It would be like saying that, because in God being and essence are the same, or substance and accident are the same, we need to obliterate these distinctions in creatures: this would not make any sense. Moreover, using the more obscure (*i.e.*, knowledge in God) to explain the clearer and closer to ourselves (*i.e.*, human knowledge) is not a convincing methodology.<sup>119</sup>

Like Rahner, Lonergan also has portrayed the doctrine of knowledge as identity between knower and known as Thomistic. In order to do so, Lonergan has transformed the Thomistic identity between faculty in act and cognitive species into an identity between faculty in act and formally completed object of knowledge. Lonergan has done this because, unlike St. Thomas, Lonergan does not believe that there is anything intelligible in the other of the world:<sup>120</sup> what comes from experience is simply a sensible raw material which needs to be formally completed by the subject's priori functions. For Lonergan, known and knower are one because the known cannot be itself (*i.e.* cannot be complete) without the knower: the known is not complete except in the knower, within the knower. The act of the knower is the form of the object or, better said, the act of the knower constitutes formally the object. Thus, for Lonergan, the object's intelligibility is the result of this subjective transcendental completing activity on the raw material from experience. In other words, the sensible raw material becomes intelligible when we understand it and

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<sup>119</sup> I do not think Lonergan is deducing human knowledge from the knowledge of God. He seems to be using the knowledge of God simply as something that may help the reader to see the fittingness of his doctrine of knowledge as identity.

<sup>120</sup> Here, in order to focus on intellectual contents, I intentionally leave outside my considerations the sensible formal contents.

precisely *because* we understand it; intelligence is that which makes intelligible the purely sensible material from experience; and this is because that which is given is purely sensible and, therefore, every intelligibility must come from the subject. Clearly, these are Kantian principles: however, as will be shown in the following, Lonergan finds in Aquinas' doctrine of the agent intellect a way to portray this Kantian doctrine as Thomistic.

## 2) The Agent Intellect in Lonergan (*Verbum*, 85-86)

The fact that St. Thomas says that the agent intellect "makes intelligible" seems to fit perfectly Lonergan's Kantian epistemology. That this is an abuse of Aquinas' terminology has already been discussed. Let us see now some texts in which this misconstrual of Aquinas' doctrine takes place.

Now the Platonism of this position [*i.e.*, the Augustinian explanation of our knowing the truth in God] is palpable, for its ultimate answer is not something that we are but something that we see; it supposes that knowledge essentially is not identity with the known but some spiritual contact or confrontation with the known. Such a view Aquinas could not accept. One knows by what one is. Our knowledge of truth is not to be accounted for by any vision or contact or confrontation with the other, however lofty and sublime. The ultimate ground of our knowing is indeed God, the eternal Light; but the reason why we know is within us. It is the light of our own intellects; and by it we can know because '*ipsum enim lumen intellectuale quod est in nobis, nihil est aliud quam quaedam participata similitudo luminis increati.*' [*Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 84, a. 5 c.] The act of the thing as sensible is the act of sensation; the act of the thing as intelligible is the act of understanding; but we can proceed from these identities to valid concepts of essence and true affirmations of existence, because such procession is in virtue

of our intellectual light, which is a participation of eternal Light.<sup>121</sup>

Lonergan's concern here is the critical problem, that is, the justification of the validity of human knowledge and, more specifically, the justification of the universal's attribution to the particular. In fact, he will suggest a few lines later that what St. Thomas states here, even if it serves to ground knowledge from a metaphysical point of view, is not enough to ground knowledge critically. Let me first make a few general remarks regarding the critical problem and then explore the text in more detail.

### **2.1. The Critical Problem in Kant and Aquinas**

The critical problem is the heterogeneity regarding sensible and intelligible contents. Intelligible and sensible contents are heterogenous: the universal and the particular seem absolutely different and, therefore, they seem disconnected, unrelated to each other in their essence. But they are, in fact, related: we see the universal in the particular, and attribute necessary laws to the contingent. How is this possible? How is the universal related to the particular? Kant's response is that they are related subjectively, that is, that the subject applies the intelligible to the sensible. Aquinas' response is that the universal and the particular are related objectively, that is, that the universal is actually present in the particular. For Kant, we apply the universal to the particular because this is the way we think, the way human beings function. For Aquinas, we attribute the universal to the particular because the universal is in the particular.

It must be clear that Kant's and Aquinas' responses are mutually exclusive. For Kant, universal and particular are related subjectively because it is impossible that they be related objectively: universal and particular are absolutely different *in*

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<sup>121</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 85-86.



*themselves* and, therefore, if they are related, this must be due to the subject. For Aquinas, instead, universal and particular are related objectively because the human mind depends on things and not the other way around. In other words, for Aquinas, if we subjectively relate the universal to the particular in our minds, this is because universal and particular are related in reality: we cannot relate subjectively that which is not related objectively.

These two radically differing approaches depend on Kant's and Aquinas' radically differing attitudes in front of the nature of universality and intelligibility. For Kant, the universal is an abstract concept, with all the attributions of a pure idea: oneness, immutability, necessity, etc. The universal's being in the mind is what characterizes essentially the universal: the universal is a *real* one, a numerically one real *concept*, which of course can exist only in a human mind. Where else, if not in the human mind, could a concept exist? Aquinas, instead, distinguishes two meanings of universal (the specific nature subsisting in the thing itself, and that same nature in the concept, in a state of abstraction),<sup>122</sup> and two different meanings of intelligible (as that which is understood, and therefore as something belonging to the thing itself, and as the abstracted mode of being of that which is understood, that is, the object's mode of being in the mind).<sup>123</sup> For Aquinas, one and the same thing (i.e., a specific nature) can exist in two different modes of being (together with its particular determinations in reality, or abstracted from those particular determinations in the mind); as, for example, whiteness can exist with greater or lesser intensity, in the sugar or in the salt, in reality with the sugar or in the eye without the sugar.<sup>124</sup> In other words, for Aquinas, the universal can

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 85, 3 ad 1 and ad 4; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 124 ff.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 84, 1, c.; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 113 ff.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 84, 1, c.

exist in the things themselves because the universal is not bound to exist with the abstracted mode of being it has in the mind.

In principle, a form or perfection can admit more than one mode of being. It is thinkable, and there is no reason to absolutely deny it. Kant confuses the universal as perfection with the universal's mode of being in the mind and, therefore, denies on principle that this form or perfection (the universal as nature) can admit another mode of being. Kant's point of departure is therefore irrational: there is no reason to confuse the universal as perfection with the universal's mode of being in the mind, there is no reason to deny that the universal as perfection can exist in reality with a different mode of being.

But, did not Kant have a point? How can we consider irrational a point of departure that seems grounded in the evidence of the heterogeneity of sensible and intelligible contents? My response would be that the evidence in this matter points not only to the distinction between the contents but also to their mutual relationship: for what reason did Kant accept one part of the evidence and forget the other? In other words, the relationship between sensible and intelligible contents was also evident. The attribution of the intelligible to the sensible was also evident. Our knowing the intelligible *in* the sensible was also evident.<sup>125</sup> For what reason, then, was it denied that the intelligible was present in the sensible as well? Precisely, because Kant did not differentiate intelligible content from the mode of being of this content in the mind. This is the Kantian flaw in the solution to the critical problem: the lack of distinction between the two modes of being regarding the universal.

From the lack of distinction between intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being of that content, what follows is the

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<sup>125</sup> This is the evidence from which Aquinas departs in *Summa Theologiae*, I, 84, 1, c.

denial of intelligibility as belonging to the particular *as such*. From this denial, and because in fact the particular is intelligible *for us*, it follows that intelligibility is an addition to the particular and that the source of the particular's intelligibility must reside in the subject. The intelligible object is, therefore, the *result of the subject's action* on the particular, and this implies that the intelligible object is *identical with this action itself* (knowledge as identity): the act of understanding is what formally constitutes the object of understanding. In other words, the object of understanding is *what it is* because this object has received intelligibility from the subject. Thus, and as a final consequence, there is no intelligible object outside the subject's consciousness (principle of immanence).

In my view, therefore, Transcendental Thomism's principle of immanence comes from the consideration of knowledge as identity, and the consideration of knowledge as identity comes from affirming the subject as source of all intelligibility; this in turn comes from denying any intelligibility to the particular, and this, from the lack of distinction between intelligibility as content and as mode of being of the content. In order to understand Transcendental Thomism's misreading of Aquinas, this particular thought sequence, this particular connection of causes and effects at the level of reason, must be kept in mind.

## 2.2. Lonergan's text

In this text, Lonergan is clearly showing a Kantian approach to the solution of the critical problem, and trying to align St. Thomas to his views. The clearest indications of Kant's approach in Lonergan's text are the affirmations of knowledge as identity and of a subjective origin for intelligibility (i.e., the affirmation of a formal a priori). Lonergan's clearest attempt to conform St. Thomas' thinking to his own is seen in his transforming the Thomistic agent intellect into a Kantian formal a priori and, also, by misreading several texts of Aquinas. Let us explore these issues.

Here, Lonergan is taking for granted that knowledge is essentially an identity, not a confrontation: “Now the Platonism of this position is palpable [...]; it supposes that knowledge essentially is not identity with the known but some spiritual contact or confrontation with the known.”<sup>126</sup> He takes for granted also that St. Thomas agrees with him: “Such a view Aquinas could not accept,”<sup>127</sup> and then tries to justify this claim. St. Thomas would say that, “One knows by what one is.”<sup>128</sup> In Lonergan’s mind, this means that, because knowledge is an active information of the raw material of experience, the source of form regarding human knowledge’s object is subjective. Therefore, “one knows” (bestows form) “by what one is” (by the formal a priori which are constitutive of one’s own being). Lonergan wants to find a confirmation of his doctrine in an article (84, 5) in which St. Thomas allegedly opposes St. Augustine, and stands for the agent intellect as formal a priori with Aristotle. Allegedly, here, St. Thomas opposes knowledge as confrontation (St. Augustine’s Platonic doctrine, in Lonergan’s mind) and embraces knowledge as identity (Aristotelian doctrine, again, in Lonergan’s mind): Aquinas would thus be stating that we do not “see” the intelligible object outside of ourselves, we know it through ourselves, through the agent intellect as formal a priori. For Lonergan, this is why knowledge is identity: because “the act of the thing as intelligible is the act of understanding.”<sup>129</sup> What this means is that, in the object of human understanding, all intelligibility is bestowed by the subject because, as Lonergan and Kant believe, there is no intelligibility in the raw material of sensible experience.

In my view, Lonergan is seriously misreading Aquinas, and this can be seen by attending to the following points.

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<sup>126</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 85.

<sup>127</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 85.

<sup>128</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 85.

<sup>129</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 85.

First, Aquinas would affirm that “one knows by what one is” against Averroes (88, 1; 79, 4), not against St. Augustine. For Averroes, the agent intellect is one for all human beings, and this is what Aquinas cannot accept: how can a man say that he is the one who understands if the principle of “his” understanding is not in himself, but separate from him (76, 1)? For Aquinas, a subjective action must be performed by means of a principle formally present in the subject itself, in this case, the agent intellect. Clearly, in *Summa* I, 84, 5, this is not the point.

Second, in *Summa* I, 84, 5, Aquinas is trying to find the agent object of human understanding, that “by which” or “in which” human understanding happens.<sup>130</sup> Now, the expressions “by which” or “in which” admit different meanings: this is what allows Lonergan to become confused. For Aquinas, there are three things “by which” human understanding happens, three “formal principles” of human understanding, in three different senses. The possible intellect is that “by which” human knowledge happens as subjective faculty, as that which passes from potency to act when we understand. The agent object is that “by which” we know as that which actualizes the faculty, as the act or form making our faculty pass from potency to act: this is the *species impressa* or the “intelligible in act”. The agent intellect is that “by which” we know as that which makes the agent object pass from potency (in the phantasm) to act (in the *species impressa*).

Let me make a comparison, which is limited but, perhaps, necessary at this point to make these matters as clear as possible. Let us compare understanding with eating a cake. In the action of eating a cake, there is one thing who eats, one thing which is eaten, and one thing which bakes that which is eaten. If a cake is not baked, it cannot be eaten; if there is no cake, no one can eat a cake; and, hopefully, the one eating a cake has a mouth with which to do

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<sup>130</sup> This is actually the point of the article.

so. For Aquinas, the possible intellect is the mouth by which someone eats; the species *impressa* is the cake; and the agent intellect is the oven, or the fire. One eats “by” the three of them, but those three are different and fulfill different roles in eating. So, if both St. Thomas and Lonergan claim that “we know by what we are,” the question is, do both mean the same?

Third, in 84, 5, Aquinas is denying that the agent object of human understanding are the ideas in God, as a *misreading* of St. Augustine could suggest. True, it does seem as though St. Augustine said that we know in God’s ideas as agent objects but Aquinas, who knew St. Augustine well, claims that this is not the case and proves it with *two texts*. It is not my purpose here to judge Aquinas’ interpretation of St. Augustine, but it does not seem reasonable to suggest that Aquinas disagrees with St. Augustine when Aquinas is precisely *saving* St. Augustine’s proposition. In a nutshell, St. Augustine does say that we understand in God’s ideas, but he does not mean that God’s ideas are our agent objects. According to St. Thomas, God is somehow the source of our intellectual knowledge, not however by a direct participation of the intelligible (as a purely Platonist reading of St. Augustine could suggest) but rather by a participation of God’s intellectual light.

Fourth, in 84, 5, St. Thomas is not denying that we see but that we see in God’s eternal reasons as agent object. Lonergan forgets the conclusion of the article, where St. Thomas states:

But since besides the intellectual light which is in us, intelligible species, which are derived from things, are required in order for us to have knowledge of material things; therefore this same knowledge is not due merely to a participation of the eternal types...<sup>131</sup>

In other words, St. Thomas says that there is something intelligible coming from the things themselves (which is actually the agent

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<sup>131</sup> 84, 5, c.

object of human understanding) in addition to the intellectual light by which we know, and that this intellectual light does not suffice without those intelligible species.

Therefore, is it true that “one knows by what one is”? One knows by three different “formal” principles. Two of them, the agent intellect and the possible intellect, reside in the subject. One of them comes from the things themselves, and that is the intelligible species as agent object. In 84, 5, St. Thomas is saying that “one knows” *not only* “by what one is” (the agent intellect) *but also* by what one receives from the things themselves (the intelligible species).<sup>132</sup> Is it true that “St. Thomas could not accept” that knowledge be accounted for by *any* “vision or contact or confrontation with the other”? In 84, 5, St. Thomas is not saying that. St. Thomas is saying that we do not see the known in the ideas of God but, rather, *we see* the known in (a participation of) His light and in the intelligible species coming from things.

A final question to the text (*i.e.*, 84, 5) could be the following. In what sense does the intelligible species come from things, if what makes it intelligible is precisely the agent intellect? Is this not an indication that St. Thomas, like Kant, placed the source of all intelligibility in the subject? The answer to this challenge has to do with the aforementioned distinction between intelligibility as content (which is what comes from the things themselves) and intelligibility as a mode of being (which is what comes from the agent intellect, and therefore from the subject). This distinction is

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. 84, 5: “But since *besides the intellectual light* which is in us, intelligible species, which are derived from things, are required in order for us to have knowledge of material things; therefore this same knowledge is *not due merely* to a participation of the eternal types...” [Quia tamen *praeter lumen intellectuale in nobis* exiguntur species intelligibiles a rebus acceptae ad scientiam de rebus materialibus habendam; ideo *non per solam participationem* rationum aeternarum de rebus materialibus notitiam habemus] (My emphasis).

clear, for example, in *Contra Gentiles* (II, 77, par. 2)<sup>133</sup> and in the already quoted and explained texts in which St. Thomas affirms that the universal as nature is in the things themselves, that universal is understood in two ways, that intelligible is understood in two ways, etc. Ignoring this distinction and, therefore, aligning St. Thomas with Kant appears to me like an old joke which can no longer be suffered by a mature Thomism.

### 3) Human Understanding's Twofold Origin: Lonergan, Kant and Aquinas

Let us now study other texts in which Lonergan's Kantian approach can be identified. See, next, how the intellectual light is made into a formal a priori, that is, into the source of intelligible content in human understanding.

Again, human knowledge has a twofold origin - an extrinsic origin in sensitive impressions, and an intrinsic origin in intellectual light in which virtually the whole of science is precontained.<sup>134</sup> Hence the reflective activity whence judgment results is a return from the syntheses effected by developing insight to their sources in sense and in intellectual light. The latter element of the return is mentioned more frequently; it is described as an instance of 'ratio terminatur ad intellectum'; and as the context makes clear, the *intellectus* in question is the *habitus principiorum*, the naturally known first principles that peculiarly are an effect of intellectual light.<sup>135</sup>

Above, Lonergan is showing clearly his Kantian point of departure, which is that, in human understanding, what comes from experience (a posteriori) are sensible impressions and, instead,

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 310 ff; Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 79, 4 ad 4.

<sup>134</sup> [Lonergan's footnote:] *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 6 c. ad fin.

<sup>135</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 76-77.



whatever is intelligible has a subjective origin. Lonergan immediately tries to conform St. Thomas to his views. Why is this a Kantian point of departure? Because Lonergan is denying that the source of intelligible content is experience itself, which is the Thomistic point of departure, as we have shown. Why does Lonergan try to align St. Thomas to his views? That is history and this is philosophy. *That* Lonergan tries to align St. Thomas with his Kantian views is obvious. Let us see how Lonergan does so in this text.

Lonergan attempts to ascribe to the agent intellect the source of intelligible content taking out of context an excerpt from *De Veritate* which says, in his view, that the whole of science is virtually pre-contained in our intellectual light.

Et sic etiam in lumine intellectus agentis nobis est *quodammodo* omnis scientia originaliter indita, *mediantibus universalibus conceptionibus*, quae statim lumine intellectus agentis cognoscuntur, per quas sicut per universalialia principia iudicamus de aliis, et ea praecognoscimus in ipsis.<sup>136</sup>

Besides forgetting the context of the whole *corpus*, Lonergan forgets two qualifications of the text itself. Firstly, the text says “*quodammodo*”, meaning that the agent intellect precontains all science “in a sense”, not absolutely speaking, precisely because in another sense (in the sense of the content) science comes from the things themselves.<sup>137</sup> Secondly, the text significantly clarifies

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<sup>136</sup> *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 6 c. (my transl.): “And in this way, in the light of the agent intellect, all knowledge is in a certain sense implanted in us from the beginning, through the medium of universal conceptions which are immediately known by the light of the agent intellect, and by which [conceptions], as by universal principles, we judge all other things and pre-know them [*i.e.* all other things] in those principles.”

<sup>137</sup> Lonergan knows that the text says *quodammodo* (cf. *Verbum*, 92, footnote 162) but does not give to the expression the value it actually has for the interpretation of the text.

“*mediantibus universalibus conceptionibus, quae statim lumine intellectus agentis cognoscuntur*”, meaning that the agent intellect “in a sense” precontains originally all science insofar as the first “universal notions” (*ens, non ens*, etc., in which all things are pre-known) are immediately known “through the agent intellect”. These universal notions come also from sensible things, as St. Thomas says in the *sed contra* and in many other places.<sup>138</sup> For whoever reads the text in its entirety, it is obvious that, in speaking of a double source of science, Aquinas is speaking about a double source *of the intelligible*, and not saying that there is one source of the sensible and another source of the intelligible. Aquinas is saying that science comes from the sensible things themselves insofar as, in them, subsists “in act” that of which we are “in potency”: we are in potency of the forms (or natures) of sensible things, which is one of the meanings of intelligible (the nature of a sensible thing is the intelligible as *res intellecta* or intelligible content, that is, as what is understood).

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<sup>138</sup> Cf. *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, sc 2: “All our cognition consists originally in the knowledge of first undeducible principles. But the cognition of these arises in us from sense, as is clear from the Posterior Analytics. Therefore, all our knowledge arises from sense.” [Praeterea, omnis nostra cognitio originaliter consistit in notitia primorum principiorum indemonstrabilium. Horum autem cognitio in nobis a sensu oritur, ut patet in fine Poster. Ergo scientia nostra a sensu oritur]; *Q.D. De Anima*, a. 5, c.: “Indeed, some men thought that the agent intellect does not differ from our habitus of indemonstrable principles. But this cannot be the case, because we certainly know indemonstrable principles by abstracting them from singulars, as the Philosopher teaches in the *Posterior Analytics*” [Quidam vero crediderunt intellectum agentem non esse aliud quam habitum principiorum indemonstrabilium in nobis. Sed hoc esse non potest, quia etiam ipsa principia indemonstrabilia cognoscimus abstrahendo a singularibus, ut docet philosophus in *I Poster.*]; In *Boet. De Trin.* 6, 4, c. and Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 240 ff. Lonergan’s phrase “the naturally known first principles... peculiarly are an effect of intellectual light” (Lonergan, *Verbum*, 77) seems to bypass Aquinas’ doctrine regarding the first principles as also originating from experience.

And St. Thomas says also that science comes “in a sense” from ourselves insofar as the agent intellect “makes them [*i.e.*, the natures] intelligible”, that is, abstracted from material conditions, which is the other meaning of intelligible. Science comes in its intelligible content from the things themselves, in its intelligible mode of being from ourselves. What comes from the things themselves is called “form” by St. Thomas, not matter: we are in potency to receive that form, not in act of making it. We are in act of making that form “intelligible”, that is to say, abstracted; but those forms are already in act regarding their own perfection.

We will now explore a similar text from Lonergan’s *Verbum* showing this Kantian doctrine of the double source of human understanding, that is, sensible impressions and a formal a priori element. But let me first remind you why I say that this is a Kantian approach to epistemology. Here are the first words of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*:

There is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience; for how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses and in part themselves produce representations, in part bring the activity of our understanding into motion to compare these, to connect or separate them, and thus to work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience? **As far as time is concerned**, then, no cognition in us precedes experience, and with experience every cognition begins.

But although all our cognition commences **with** experience, yet it does not on that account all arise **from** experience. 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, which addition we cannot distinguish from that fundamental material until long

practice has made us attentive to it and skilled in separating it out.<sup>139</sup>

Compare Kant's remarks with Lonergan's in the text previously quoted, "human knowledge has a twofold origin - an extrinsic origin in sensitive impressions, and an intrinsic origin in intellectual light"<sup>140</sup> and with the following text:

Our knowledge has a twofold source - an extrinsic origin on the level of sense, but an intrinsic origin in the light of our intellects.<sup>141</sup> Sense is only the *materia causae* of our knowledge.<sup>142</sup> The object of understanding is supplied and offered to us, as it were materially, by the imagination; formally, as object of understanding, it is completed by intellectual light.<sup>143</sup>

To the previously referenced quote from Aquinas' *De Veritate*, here Lonergan adds Transcendental Thomism's favourite quote from Aquinas, that is, *Summa Theologiae*, I pars, q. 84, a. 6 *in finem*. How Aquinas' "*materia causae*" has become, in Transcendental Thomism, Kant's "raw material of sensible impressions" is mind-blowing. I refer the reader to my previous explanation of St. Thomas' text<sup>144</sup> which, I hope, may save 84, a. 6 from the jaws of Transcendental Thomism and give it back to sane Realism.

The following text (the last one in this section) shows the Kantian thought process we have referred to many times. That is, the object of science is intelligible, but the data of experience are

<sup>139</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 1 (Kant's bold, my underline).

<sup>140</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 76.

<sup>141</sup> [Lonergan's footnote:] *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 6 c. ad fin.: '... in lumine intellectus agentis nobis est quodammodo omnis scientia originaliter indita...'

<sup>142</sup> [Lonergan's footnote:] *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 84, a. 6 c. ad fin.

<sup>143</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 92.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 248-260 (an excerpt from this section has been included here in *Appendix*, Note 1, on p. 223).

purely sensible; therefore, there must be something in the subject which explains the intelligibility of the object of experience; that is, there must be a formal a priori as source of intelligible content. In Transcendental Thomism, for the reasons previously explained, the agent intellect is called to fulfill this formal a priori role.

This *intelligere* can be what it is only if there are objects to move it as well as the objects that it produces: the *intelligere* that expresses itself in judgment is moved by the relevant evidence; the *intelligere* that expresses itself in definition is moved by illuminated phantasm. But evidence as relevant and phantasm as illuminated are not mere sensible data; hence besides the sensitive potencies and the possible intellect there is needed an agent intellect.<sup>145</sup>

In this section, this text is relevant as showing that, in Lonergan's view, the agent intellect accounts for anything which is not purely sensible in human understanding. As we have said many times, this would not be inaccurate if it were referred to the mode of being of the content, or if the distinction between the two meanings of intelligible were present, but this is not the case in Lonergan's doctrine.

#### 4) Understanding as Addition of Intelligible Form to the Sensible Material

The following text affirms very clearly that, in human understanding, the intelligible content comes from the subject as an addition to the sensible material from experience. Lonergan's blending of true statements with misleading interpretations will require us later on to analyze his text step by step, so that we may discern better the value of each affirmation. But let me, for now, offer the entire text, beginning with a question which might

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<sup>145</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 150.

facilitate one's reading of it. For Lonergan, what is the relationship between the content of sensibility and understanding?

Objective abstraction, the illumination of phantasm, constitutes the imagined object as something to be understood with regard to its specific nature. Apprehensive abstraction, insight into phantasm, actually understands what objective abstraction presented to be understood. But what was presented to be understood was the imagined object, the phantasm; hence it was perfectly natural and no less reasonable for Aquinas so repeatedly to affirm that the object of human intellect in this life was the phantasm; if one cannot see that, then it would seem that one has very little idea of what Aquinas was talking about. But if what is understood is the phantasm, the imagined object, still what is added to knowledge, what is known, precisely by understanding is the *forma intelligibilis*, the quiddity, the *species intelligibilis quae*. This is known in phantasm just as actually seen colors are seen in colored things. It is not merely that there is the act of understanding and simultaneously the act of imagination, each with its respective object. But the two objects are intrinsically related: the imagined object is presented as something to be understood; and the insight or apprehensive abstraction grasps the intelligibility of the imagined object in the imagined object; thus, insight grasps imagined equal radii in a plane surface as the necessary and sufficient condition of an imagined uniform curve; imagination presents terms which insight intelligibly relates or unifies.<sup>146</sup>

What is Lonergan saying? What makes it Kantian?

Lonergan is saying that the object of human understanding is the phantasm insofar as, by understanding the phantasm, the human subject *adds* intelligible form to the phantasm as material element.

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<sup>146</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 188-189.

Understanding *as such*, for Lonergan, is an active information of a sensible material element (here, the phantasm); it is the process by which the phantasm acquires its intelligible *content* (since the acquired “*forma intelligibilis*” is here also “the quiddity”). For Lonergan, we understand—that is, *we add*—the phantasm’s intelligible content. This is why he says, “But if what is understood is the phantasm, the imagined object”, that is, if the object we deal with when we understand is the phantasm, “still what is added to knowledge, what is known, precisely by understanding is the *forma intelligibilis*”. This last phrase means that the *forma intelligibilis* is added to the phantasm by understanding *and* that same *forma intelligibilis* (in the phantasm) is the proper object of human understanding, precisely because understanding is adding this intelligible form to the phantasm. Understanding, here, is adding the intelligible form: this is why Lonergan explains the phrase “what is added to knowledge” with the phrase “what is known, precisely by understanding.”

The following consideration, also, may help us in understanding this text. As has been seen, Lonergan says that “what is understood is the phantasm” and, at the same time, that “what is known, precisely by understanding is the *forma intelligibilis*.” Can this make any sense? Which is the object of understanding, the phantasm or the *forma intelligibilis*? Both are object, to the extent that Lonergan conceives human understanding as an action, as an informing activity in which two objects can be recognized: the material object on which the action is performed and the form resulting on the matter by this action. Similarly, the object of the carpenter’s action is both the wood with which the carpenter works and the chair he or she makes, or intends to make. Clearly, for Lonergan, the phantasm is the material object of human understanding and the intelligible form is the terminal object, as the result of human understanding’s performance on the phantasm. Therefore, Lonergan can consider both the phantasm and the intelligible form

as that which is understood because the expression “that which is understood” can receive two meanings, in the sense explained.<sup>147</sup>

What makes this Kantian? Because Lonergan presupposes that there is no intelligibility in the things themselves or, more precisely, that the source of the object’s intelligibility is not in the things themselves outside the mind, but in the subject. This presupposition, in turn, comes from the lack of distinction between intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being of the content. That the source of the object’s intelligibility is in the subject is explicit in the text, and also explicit is the confusion between intelligibility as content and as mode of being of the content (the added *forma intelligibilis* is called also quiddity, without further distinctions). That these are fundamental Kantian principles has been explained many times.

What is Lonergan trying to do? He is trying to explain how human understanding, even if it regards the intelligible, is nonetheless about the (sensible) things themselves. He is facing a real problem (the problem of the universals) but his Kantian presuppositions (already discussed) vitiate Lonergan’s solution at its root. In what follows, I will discuss Lonergan’s explanation of the relationship between understanding and sensible things by considering some of the doctrinal elements appearing in this text.

#### **4.1. Objective Abstraction, Apprehensive Abstraction and *Dicere* in Lonergan**

Admittedly, this might be a difficult point to understand. In my view, the reason for this difficulty is that Lonergan’s doctrine regarding the objective and apprehensive abstractions intentionally

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<sup>147</sup> Coming back to the concept of human understanding as addition, it is easy to see how in “addition”, as adding something to something else, there are two objects: that which is added, and that to which something is added. Addition requires both objects in order to happen.



bases itself on the Thomistic doctrine of abstraction and even employs Thomistic terminology. In other words, Lonergan's and Aquinas' doctrines actually differ on this point yet present terminological similarities, and even a certain "parallelism": thus, confusions are inevitable. I will try to explain what Lonergan means by these two abstractions and to show the similarities and differences between Lonergan's and Aquinas' doctrines. I will include also some considerations on the act of *dicere*, which is mentioned in some of the texts regarding the two abstractions.

Firstly, objective abstraction is, for Lonergan, the constitution or establishment of the intelligible in act. The intelligible in act, for him, is *the phantasm as imagined* insofar as the phantasm is the object of inquiry by the intellect.<sup>148</sup> Objective abstraction is thus the phantasm's entrance into the light of the intellect, into the alertness of consciousness, into the realm of intellectual active wonder and inquiry.<sup>149</sup> Secondly, apprehensive abstraction

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<sup>148</sup> Cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 184-185: "[...] pure reverie, in which image succeeds image in the inner human cinema with never a care for the why or wherefore, illustrates the intelligible in potency. But let active intelligence intervene: there is a care for the why and wherefore; there is wonder and inquiry; there is the alertness of the scientist or technician, the mathematician or philosopher, for whom the imagined object no longer is merely given but also a something-to-be-understood. It is the imagined object as present to intelligent consciousness as something-to-be-understood that constitutes the intelligible in act"; 187-188: "Objective abstraction is the illumination of phantasm, the imagined object; it consists in treating the imagined object as something to be understood as far as its specific nature goes".

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 184-185: "this illumination of the imagined object, this reception of it within the field of intellectual light, has the characteristic of being abstractive; for it is not the imagined object in all respects that is regarded as a something-to-be-understood; no one spontaneously endeavors to understand why 'here' is 'here' and why 'now' is not 'then'; effort is confined to grasping natures, just as explanation is always in terms of the character of

happens with understanding or *intelligere*, when the intelligible becomes *intellectum* (understood) and is understood in the phantasm. Only here does the phantasm acquire its *forma intelligibilis*.<sup>150</sup> Finally, *dicere*, or the production of an intellectual *verbum*, which is for Lonergan a different moment from the previous *intelligere* (understanding as insight), is the understanding of the intelligible itself, in its distinction from the sensible.<sup>151</sup>

If my construction of Lonergan's doctrine is correct, the comparison with Aquinas is as follows. Lonergan's objective abstraction could be paralleled with Aquinas' abstraction (that is, not the agent intellect's first act, by which intelligibility as potentiality is bestowed on the phantasm, but the agent intellect's

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persons, the natures of things, the circumstances of events, but never in terms of their being then and there.”

<sup>150</sup> Cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 188-189: “Objective abstraction, the illumination of phantasm, constitutes the imagined object as something to be understood with regard to its specific nature. Apprehensive abstraction, insight into phantasm, actually understands what objective abstraction presented to be understood. [...] if what is understood is the phantasm, the imagined object, still what is added to knowledge, what is known, precisely by understanding is the *forma intelligibilis*, the quiddity, the *species intelligibilis quae*. [...] the insight or apprehensive abstraction grasps the intelligibility of the imagined object in the imagined object”; 184-185: “Finally, inquiry and wonder give place to actual understanding; the imagined object no longer is something-to-be-understood but something actually understood; this involves no difference in the phantasm but only in the possible intellect”.

<sup>151</sup> Lonergan's distinction between *intelligere* and *dicere* may be seen in Lonergan, *Verbum*, 150: “On the level of intellectual apprehension the agent object is the *quidditas rei materialis*, not *to ti estin* but *to ti en einai*, known in and through a phantasm illuminated by agent intellect; this agent object is the *obiectum proprium intellectus humani*; it is the object of insight. Corresponding to this agent object there is the terminal object of the inner word; this is the concept, and the first of concepts is *ens*, the *obiectum commune intellectus*”; cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 84 and 85-86 (texts quoted in the next page).

second act, by which the intelligible in act is produced from the phantasm<sup>152</sup>) insofar as both refer to the constitution of the intelligible in act; but, in Aquinas the intelligible in act is not the phantasm, but an abstracted intelligible species which by its nature can affect the possible intellect.<sup>153</sup> Lonergan's apprehensive abstraction could be paralleled to Aquinas' *intelligere*, insofar as both refer to the passage from intelligible in act to understood in act. However, since their notions of understanding differ completely from each other (as we have seen, understanding is active for Lonergan whereas for Aquinas understanding is receptive of objective content), their understanding of this passage from intelligible in act to understood in act is also different. Moreover, in Aquinas, *intelligere* and *dicere* are not two different moments, but simply two different aspects of the same act of understanding.<sup>154</sup>

Other questions may help us in this comparison between Aquinas' and Lonergan's doctrines. Should Lonergan use "abstraction" (*i.e.*, apprehensive abstraction) to name the act of understanding? Aquinas does sometimes call understanding "abstraction", using the word "abstraction" as consideration without matter.<sup>155</sup> Lonergan's terminology in this sense is still Thomistic, but his understanding of these terms is not, as is being shown.

Why does Lonergan, unlike Aquinas, differentiate understanding from the production of a *verbum*? Probably because Lonergan's

<sup>152</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 85, 1 ad 4; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 303 ff.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 85, 1 ad 3.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. *Appendix*, Note 4, on p. 233: "*Intelligere* and *Dicere* in Aquinas", for a more in-depth study and a closer look at Aquinas' texts regarding this point.

<sup>155</sup> St. Thomas speaks about abstraction as non-consideration in 85, 1, ad 1 and ad 2. Cf. Germaine Cromp, *L'intellect agent et son rôle d'abstraction* (PhD diss., Université de Montreal, 1980), 16 ff; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 252 ff.

notion of understanding as identity could not give an account of knowledge of the intelligible in itself and as other.

But the problem of knowledge, once it is granted that knowledge is by identity, is knowledge of the other. As long as faculty and object are in potency to knowing and being known, there is as yet no knowledge. Inasmuch as faculty and object are in act identically, there is knowledge indeed as perfection but not yet knowledge of the other. Reflection is required, first, to combine sensible data with intellectual insight in the expression of a *quod quid est*, of an essence that prescind from its being known, and then, on a deeper level, to affirm the existence of that essence. Only by reflection on the identity of act can one arrive at the difference of potency.<sup>156</sup>

The act of the thing as sensible is the act of sensation; the act of the thing as intelligible is the act of understanding; but we can proceed from these identities to valid concepts of essence and true affirmations of existence, because such procession is in virtue of our intellectual light, which is a participation of eternal Light.<sup>157</sup>

As far as I can see, Lonergan needs to distinguish these two moments because in the first moment, understanding as identity, there is intellectual awareness of the phantasm but not of the intelligible as such, as distinct from the sensible. That is, in understanding there is position of the intelligible, there is reference of the intelligible to the sensible, but there is awareness neither of this reference nor of the distinction between the intelligible and the sensible. In the first moment (*intelligere*) we understand the sensible, in the second (*verbum*) we understand the intelligible as referred to the sensible and, thus, the distinction

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<sup>156</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 84.

<sup>157</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 85-86.

between these two aspects.<sup>158</sup> In this way, for Lonergan, both moments are objective: understanding (*intelligere*) is objective because it is an awareness of the particular, whereas definition (the first *verbum*) is objective because it is attributed to the particular. In the first moment (*intelligere*) there is pure objectivity, there is only identity, because the intelligible form is posited in the phantasm, that is, the act of understanding informs the phantasm; in the second moment (*verbum*) we are aware of this pure objectivity, we are aware that the act of intelligence is referred to the phantasm, we conceive the act of intelligence as referred to the phantasm. In this second moment, thus, we conceive the intelligible, not the sensible; but we conceive the intelligible as referred to the sensible: we define the sensible.

In summary, the reason that Lonergan distinguishes between *intelligere* and *dicere* is as follows. Lonergan has characterized human understanding (*intelligere*) as an activity intellectually informing the sensible and thus an activity with a sensible object.

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<sup>158</sup> Cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 84: “Only by reflection on the identity of act can one arrive at the difference of potency.” For Lonergan, this reflection is a secondary act which is performed regarding the primary act of understanding and through which the *verbum* is produced. Reflection is also what allows us to know the intelligible in itself, as distinct from the sensible. This coming back to the act of understanding allows us to see “the difference of potency”, that is, the distinction between understanding’s formal and material elements which is presupposed to human understanding’s act. Thus, when Lonergan says “Only by reflection on the identity of act can one arrive at the difference of potency” he is referring to the three stages which he has just mentioned. When he says, “the difference of potency” he refers to the first stage: “As long as faculty and object are in potency to knowing and being known, there is as yet no knowledge.” When he says, “the identity of act” he is referring to the second stage: “Inasmuch as faculty and object are in act identically, there is knowledge indeed as perfection but not yet knowledge of the other.” And when he mentions “reflection” he is referring to the third stage: “Reflection is required...” etc. (All these texts are from Lonergan, *Verbum*, 84, just quoted).

This characterization depends on Kantian principles, as has been shown. Now, it is evident that human intelligence refers also to universal essences and makes judgments of existence: that is, intelligence refers not only to the sensible but also to the intelligible in itself. Therefore, Lonergan ascribes to another activity, *dicere*, this reference of intelligence to the universal in itself. However, this reference (*dicere*) is a reflection on the act of understanding, and therefore *dicere* refers to the intelligible as informing the sensible in the act of understanding: in this way, Lonergan keeps the connection between intelligence and sensible content in *dicere* as well. In other words, this reference to the universal in itself does not mean losing contact with the sensible. And, whereas an effort to keep the connection between the sensible and the intelligible in human understanding can be said to be Thomistic, Lonergan's principles render his solution Kantian rather than Thomistic.

My exploring Lonergan's doctrine on objective abstraction and apprehensive abstraction was intended to help the reader in understanding the distinction between Lonergan and Aquinas, given the fact that Lonergan proposes his own doctrine as Thomist. Also, I wanted to show Lonergan's internal coherence, on the one hand, and on the other hand his alignment with Kant.

#### **4.2. Is the Phantasm Really the Object of Human Understanding for Aquinas?**

In the passage with which we began this section, Lonergan makes a strangely "forceful" statement claiming that, for St. Thomas, the phantasm is the object of human understanding:

But what was presented to be understood was the imagined object, the phantasm; hence it was perfectly natural and no less reasonable for Aquinas so repeatedly to affirm that the object of human intellect in this life was the phantasm; if one

cannot see that, then it would seem that one has very little idea of what Aquinas was talking about.<sup>159</sup>

Lonergan's statement is complicated by several things: 1) Lonergan's authority as a scholar together with the forcefulness of his statement, 2) The fact that Aquinas actually says something which sounds similar to what Lonergan says and 3) Lonergan's claiming something which is evidently not Thomistic, namely, that the intelligible in act is the phantasm as imagined and not an abstracted species different from the phantasm.

In my previous research, I have addressed, at length, the second and third points, above.<sup>160</sup> That is, in showing that, for St. Thomas, the formal object of human understanding is the universal and not the particular (which is instead the object of sensibility), I have shown, as well, how to interpret those texts in which Aquinas speaks as though the phantasm were the object of intelligence. Without repeating those explanations, I would like to offer a few helpful considerations.

As Lonergan himself says a few lines after his forceful statement, what is known by understanding is the quiddity: this also is something Aquinas repeats many times. That the object of human understanding is the quiddity, the universal, etc., does not mean that understanding is not about reality: for Aquinas, the quiddity is real; that is, the quiddity, the universal, is present in the things themselves. The universal as nature is in the thing itself: not, though, with an abstracted mode of being (as the nature is in the intellect) but as the specific perfection of each particular being. This is why, for Aquinas, even if the object of human understanding is the universal, understanding is still about reality. The real being has a nature which is realized, concretized in matter: human knowledge is informed about the particular real

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<sup>159</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 188-189.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 71-88.

being's material conditions by sensibility, and about that same real being's quiddity by intelligence.

Sometimes, Aquinas does say (and this is what probably confuses Lonergan) that “the relation of phantasms to the intellect is like the relation of colors to the sense of sight.”<sup>161</sup> Aquinas, in full agreement, is quoting Aristotle. A superficial reading may suggest that, as the object of vision is colour, so the object of intelligence is the phantasm. This is not so, and the texts speak for themselves. What Aquinas means is that, as the colours on the wall are necessary for the eyes to see, since the species of colour present in the eye comes from the colour on the wall, so the phantasms are necessary for the intellect, because the species (i.e., the idea) of the phantasm—which is present in the intellect—comes precisely from the phantasm by abstraction. Therefore, St. Thomas is not referring to the formal objects of vision and intellect but to something else.

Let me show some textual evidence. In the following text, Aquinas is confuting Averroes' doctrine. Averroes claims that there is only one possible intellect for all human beings. However, for Averroes, we can still say that “this particular man understands” because each man has his own phantasms, to which the one separate possible intellect refers in understanding. In other words, even if this particular man does not have a possible intellect, we can still say that he understands because he has his own sensible phantasms. Of course, for Aquinas this would not make any sense. Aquinas states:

Therefore, as the species of colors are in the sight, so are the species of phantasms in the possible intellect. Now it is clear

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<sup>161</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 75, a. 2 ad 3: “. . . [P]hantasma enim comparatur ad intellectum sicut color ad visum”; q. 76, a. 1, c.; q. 54, a. 4 sc; as an objection in q. 85, a. 1 ob. 3; *In I De Anima* 2, 60-69. For an explanation of those texts, cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 76-85.



that because the colors, the images of which are in the sight, are on a wall, the action of seeing is not attributed to the wall: for we do not say that the wall sees, but rather that it is seen. Therefore, from the fact that the species of phantasms are in the possible intellect, it does not follow that Socrates, in whom are the phantasms, understands, but that he or his phantasms are understood.<sup>162</sup>

Here it is most clear that the “species of phantasms” [*species phantasmatum*], which are in the (separate) possible intellect, are distinct from the “phantasms” [*phantasmata*], which are in Socrates. *Species phantasmatum* and *phantasmata*, in this text, are different notions. The *species phantasmatum* are abstracted, are ideas, the *phantasmata* are not. What is relevant for our purpose is that, for Aquinas, even if that which one understands is the particular (represented in the phantasm),<sup>163</sup> one does not understand insofar as one possesses the phantasm but insofar as one possesses the phantasm’s idea which, because of its abstracted condition, can be present in the possible intellect. The parallel text in Aquinas’ *Commentary on De Anima* is even more clear regarding the

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<sup>162</sup> 76, 1, c.: “Sicut ergo species colorum sunt in visu, ita species phantasmatum sunt in intellectu possibili. Patet autem quod ex hoc quod colores sunt in pariete, quorum similitudines sunt in visu, actio visus non attribuitur parieti, non enim dicimus quod paries videat, sed magis quod videatur. Ex hoc ergo quod species phantasmatum sunt in intellectu possibili, non sequitur quod Socrates, in quo sunt phantasmata, intelligat; sed quod ipse, vel eius phantasmata intelligantur.”

<sup>163</sup> On the phantasm as representation of the particular, cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 183: “As to the first question, it is plain that phantasms are illuminated, immaterialized, universalized, made intelligible in act. Aquinas said so repeatedly. More precisely, it is phantasm, not in the sense of act of the imagination, but in the sense of what is imagined, that is illuminated [...]. [I]nsight into phantasm is like looking in, not looking at, a mirror.”

distinction between the phantasm and the intelligible idea as a *sort of likeness* of the phantasm:

The object whose representation is the species present in the knowing faculty, does not thereby become knower, but rather known. If the eye contains a likeness of a colored wall, this does not cause the color to see, but, on the contrary, to be seen. Therefore *if the intelligible idea in the [separate] intellect is a sort of likeness of our phantasms*, it does not follow that we perceive anything intellectually, but rather that we--or more precisely our phantasms--are understood by that separated intellectual substance.<sup>164</sup>

For Aquinas, the intelligible in act is not the phantasm but the abstracted idea coming from the phantasm. A further reference may help to confirm my interpretation. In *Summa* I, 85, 1 ob. 3, the objection suggests that we do not understand corporeal things by means of abstraction from phantasms, but by the phantasms impressing themselves on our possible intellect. This claim is supported by the Aristotelian phrase.<sup>165</sup> Aquinas' response (ad 3)

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<sup>164</sup> *In III De Anima* 1, 342-352: "Id enim cuius similitudo est species, in virtute aliqua cognoscitiva existens, non ex hoc fit cognoscens, sed cognitum. Non enim per hoc quod species quae est in pupilla, est similitudo coloris qui est in pariete, color est videns, sed magis est visus. Per hoc igitur quod *species intelligibilis, quae est in intellectu possibili, est similitudo quaedam phantasmatum*, non sequitur quod nos sumus intelligentes, sed quod nos, vel potius phantasmata nostra sint intellecta ab illa substantia separata."

<sup>165</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 85, a. 1 ob. 3: "The Philosopher says (De Anima iii, 7) that the phantasm is to the intellectual soul what color is to the sight. But seeing is not caused by abstraction of species from color, but by color impressing itself on the sight. Therefore neither does the act of understanding take place by abstraction of something from the phantasm, but by the phantasm impressing itself on the intellect." [In III De Anima dicitur quod phantasmata se habent ad animam intellectivam sicut colores ad visum. Sed visio non fit per abstractionem aliquarum specierum a coloribus, sed per hoc quod colores imprimunt in visum. Ergo nec intelligere contingit per hoc quod aliquid

makes crystal clear that what impresses itself on the possible intellect is not the phantasm, but an abstracted species containing the object's specific characteristics only. In other words, the intelligible in act is not the phantasm, but an abstracted species. Aquinas states:

But phantasms, since they are images of individuals, and exist in corporeal organs, have not the same mode of existence as the human intellect, and therefore have not the power of themselves to make an impression on the passive intellect.

This is done by the power of the active intellect which by turning towards the phantasm produces in the passive intellect a certain likeness which represents, as to its specific conditions only, the thing reflected in the phantasm.<sup>166</sup>

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abstrahatur a phantasmatis, sed per hoc quod phantasmata imprimunt in intellectum.]

<sup>166</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 85, a. 1 ad 3: "Sed phantasmata, cum sint similitudines individuorum, et existant in organis corporeis, non habent eundem modum existendi quem habet intellectus humanus, ut ex dictis patet; et ideo non possunt sua virtute imprimere in intellectum possibilem. Sed virtute intellectus agentis resultat quaedam similitudo in intellectu possibili ex conversione intellectus agentis supra phantasmata, quae quidem est repraesentativa eorum quorum sunt phantasmata, solum quantum ad naturam speciei." Cf. *Q.D. De Anima*, a.3, ad 18: "A phantasm moves the intellect insofar as it is made intelligible in act by the power of the agent intellect, to which the possible intellect is related as potency is to its respective active power. This is the way in which the intellect has something in common with a phantasm." [Phantasma movet intellectum prout est factum intelligibile actu, virtute intellectus agentis ad quam comparatur intellectus possibilis sicut potentia ad agens, et ita cum eo communicat.]; *Q.D. De Anima*, a.3, c.: "For species are actually intelligible only by being abstracted from phantasms and by existing in the possible intellect." [Species enim non sunt intelligibiles actu nisi per hoc quod a phantasmatis abstrahuntur, et sunt in intellectu possibili.]; *Q.D. De Anima*, a.2, ob. 7: "Inasmuch as intelligible forms inhere in the soul, they are individuated; but as the likenesses of things, they are universal, representing

Lonergan is suggesting that the phantasm is the intelligible in act and, in that sense, object of human understanding. This is not what St. Thomas says. The phantasm, as representation of the particular thing, is certainly what is understood: we understand the particular insofar as we understand the particular's *essence*, we understand *what* the particular is. In that sense, we could say that the phantasm or the particular is the "object" of human understanding but Lonergan, here, is confusing that which should be differentiated. To notice this is important. The phantasm for Aquinas is the source of the intelligible in act, insofar as the agent intellect abstracts from the phantasm the intelligible in act. The intelligible in act is the *species impressa*, which is universal through and through. Because of this, for Aquinas, the intelligible content comes from the things themselves, and understanding is a reception. For Lonergan, instead, the phantasm is itself the intelligible in act because, for him, understanding is an action perfective of the object, the phantasm is the object of that action and every intelligibility comes from the subject. For Lonergan, the phantasm (as imagined object) is intelligible because it can be understood, that is, it can be intellectualized, it can be given intellectual form. In other words, intelligibility can be bestowed on the phantasm and therefore the phantasm is intelligible in act; that is, the phantasm is ready to be understood (understood = given intellectual form). I think it is evident that Lonergan has a Kantian notion of human understanding, despite his Thomistic language and references.

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things according to their common nature and not according to their individuating principles." [Formae intelligibiles ex illa parte qua inhaerent animae, sunt individuatae; sed ex illa parte qua sunt rerum similitudines, sunt universales, representantes res secundum naturam communem, et non secundum principia individuantia.]

### 4.3. Understanding does not Change the Object: In What Sense, for Lonergan?

Lonergan emphasizes that the *forma intelligibilis* is known in the phantasm without changing the phantasm, just as colours are seen in coloured things without changing the coloured things.

But if what is understood is the phantasm, the imagined object, still what is added to knowledge, what is known, precisely by understanding is the *forma intelligibilis*, the quiddity, the *species intelligibilis quae*. This is known in phantasm just as actually seen colors are seen in colored things.<sup>167</sup>

Finally, inquiry and wonder give place to actual understanding; the imagined object no longer is something-to-be-understood but something actually understood; this involves no difference in the phantasm but only in the possible intellect, just as the difference between colors in daylight and colors actually seen involves no difference in the colors but only in eyes and sight; accordingly, the intelligible 'species quae,' which is understood in phantasm, is like the actually seen color, which is seen in the colored thing.<sup>168</sup>

It seems fair to say that, when we know, there is no change in the object known, but in ourselves: we are the ones being perfected, not the object, at least in a sense. Now, what does it mean that we change when we know? For St. Thomas, it means that we receive a perfection which we had not had, and which was present in the object. Is this what Lonergan means to say? In my view, No. For Lonergan, the perfection or *forma intelligibilis* is added to the phantasm, not received from it. For Lonergan, there is no change in the phantasm because understanding is an action in which the phantasm is passive, a material element; and, for the same reason,

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<sup>167</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 189.

<sup>168</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 184-185.

there is a change in the intellect, which is the intellect's action on the phantasm. This doctrine is rooted in the Kantian principle that, in human consciousness, all intelligibility is the result of the intellect's action on the sensible material.

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With my remarks, I do not mean to imply that there is nothing good in Lonergan. Without doubt, Lonergan contributes helpful insights. But, if Lonergan's Kantian roots are not acknowledged, one cannot understand Lonergan. Because of the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant, Lonergan is not a Thomist. And whoever does not understand this radical difference and, therefore, believes that Lonergan is a Thomist, will never understand St. Thomas. My final goal, then, is to free St. Thomas' writings from erroneous interpretations so that St. Thomas' insights may enlighten again our modern culture.

## 5) Intelligence as Source of All Intelligibility

Lonergan's Kantian portrayal of human understanding can be seen in the following texts also. For Lonergan, an act of intelligence is that which gives objects their actual intelligibility. However, he makes no distinction between the two meanings of intelligibility: in this way, without the intelligibility bestowed by the subject, the object is merely sensible.

The imagined object as merely imagined and as present to a merely sensitive consciousness (subject) is not, properly speaking, intelligible in potency<sup>169</sup>; but the same object

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<sup>169</sup> Lonergan writes in footnote: "*De potentia*, q. 7, a. 10 c.: "ipsa res quae est extra animam, omnino est extra genus intelligibile" [N.A. "the thing which is outside the soul is wholly outside the genus of intelligible things"]. The meaning is that material entities of themselves are not related to intellectual knowledge; the context deals with the nonreciprocal real relation of *scientia ad scibile*." Lonergan has taken Aquinas' text completely out of context. See *Appendix*,

present to a subject that is intelligent as well as sensitive may fairly be described as intelligible in potency. Thus, pure reverie, in which image succeeds image in the inner human cinema with never a care for the why or wherefore, illustrates the intelligible in potency. But let active intelligence intervene: there is a care for the why and wherefore; there is wonder and inquiry; there is the alertness of the scientist or technician, the mathematician or philosopher, for whom the imagined object no longer is merely given but also a something-to-be-understood. It is the imagined object as present to intelligent consciousness as something-to-be-understood that constitutes the intelligible in act.<sup>170</sup>

At each of the three stages of the imagined object, its intelligibility depends exclusively on the object's relationship to human intelligence. In the first stage, the object is not intelligible at all, because it lies beyond the reach of human intelligence. In the second stage, the object is intelligible in potency because it is present to an intelligent subject, even if the subject does not care to think about the object. In the third stage, the object is intelligible in act because the subject's attitude towards the object has changed: the object is always the same, the imagined object, but Lonergan refers to it as "intelligible in act" because the subject treats the object as something to be understood,<sup>171</sup> that is, because

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Note 5: "Does Aquinas Really Mean that the Thing Outside the Soul is Not Intelligible at All? A Brief Study on *De Potentia*, q. 7, a. 10", for an explanation of Aquinas' text and of Lonergan's use of it (in this book, p. 247).

<sup>170</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 184-185.

<sup>171</sup> Cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, 187-188: "Objective abstraction is the illumination of phantasm, the imagined object; it consists in treating the imagined object as something to be understood as far as its specific nature goes; like action and passion, it is one reality with two aspects; as effected by agent intellect, it may be named efficient; as affecting the imagined object, it may be named instrumental."

the subject wonders about the object. In all three stages, intelligibility is defined as something subjective, as something always depending on the human intellect's act and, therefore, completely foreign to the imagined object in itself.

We have already mentioned the difference between Lonergan's doctrine regarding the intelligible in act and Aquinas' doctrine.<sup>172</sup> We have also discussed the next stage in human understanding, *intelligere*, as the passage from the intelligible in act to the understood in act.<sup>173</sup> With the above mentioned text, I am simply showing once more that, for Lonergan, what makes an object intelligible is intelligence because everything which is different from intelligence cannot be intelligible, but merely sensible. For Lonergan, intelligibility is a characteristic of intelligence, not of the sensible (of course!) and, therefore, if intelligibility belongs somehow to the sensible, this is because intelligence has welcomed the sensible into its own realm.

Lonergan's consideration of intelligence as source of intelligibility would be acceptable from a Thomistic point of view if his consideration were related to intelligibility as mode of being. However, Lonergan does not distinguish between the two meanings of intelligibility and so, for him, intelligence provides intelligible *content* as well:

Unlike the natures of material things, which can be known only by what they do, human intellect can be known by what it is. Efficiently, it is the light of intelligence within us, the drive to wonder, to reflection, to criticism, *the source of all*

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<sup>172</sup> That is, for St. Thomas, the intelligible in act is an abstracted intelligible species and not the phantasm. Cf. this Chapter, Section 4, Subsection 2, p. 106; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 71-88; Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 85, a. 1 ad 3.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. \*\*\*.



*science and philosophy*. Receptively, it offers the three aspects of potency, habit, and act.<sup>174</sup>

My italics, above, indicate not only that intelligence, for Lonergan, is source of intelligible content; these italics indicate also his implicit reference to St. Thomas.<sup>175</sup> Lonergan made a similar reference to St. Thomas (this time explicit) in *Verbum*, pp. 76-77. I have quoted and discussed both Lonergan's and Aquinas' texts in this *Chapter*, Section 3, pp. 92 -97. In these pages, I explain why St. Thomas' text cannot be interpreted in the sense intended by Lonergan.

## 6) Concluding Remarks

I want to be clear about the problem of assessing Lonergan's Thomism. Both Lonergan and Aquinas claim that the agent intellect makes the phantasm intelligible, that the phantasm is like the matter of the act of understanding, that the agent intellect is in a sense the origin of all science, that the phantasm is the object of human understanding, etc. The fact that they say the same, does not mean that they mean the same. A clear instance of how the same words can be interpreted in such different directions, is the word "intelligible". If you, with Lonergan and Kant, assume that there is no intelligibility whatsoever in the particular, then the agent intellect will certainly be the one "making intelligible" in the sense of "being the source of intelligible content", adding intelligibility to the sensible raw material. But if you, with Aquinas, assume that there is a distinction between intelligibility as content and as mode of being of the content, you will not give this role to the agent intellect. Instead, with Aquinas, you will maintain that the intelligible content comes from the things

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<sup>174</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 193 (my emphasis).

<sup>175</sup> Cf. *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, c. ad fin.

themselves and that we are in potency of receiving that objective content.

One may think that no interpretation is perfect and that, therefore, there is no reason to condemn Lonergan or Transcendental Thomism as though nothing good could be taken from them. I would respond that no interpretation is perfect but when the problem of an interpretation is at its root, that is not a case of a less than perfect interpretation, but of a completely wrong interpretation. A Kantian approach to the problem of the universals is simply and radically incompatible with St. Thomas' doctrine. Whoever approaches St. Thomas in a Kantian way is not interpreting St. Thomas but is forcing Aquinas' text to say something Aquinas himself never intended.

If this is clear, one can then benefit from many insights and meticulous investigations found in these scholars' works. These philosophers and theologians—particularly Karl Rahner—researched and wrote at genius level, their minds learned, sharp, brilliant. However, theirs is not a plausible interpretation of St. Thomas, but a set of super-intelligent “Thomistic” excuses for their own Kantian doctrine.

Was this their intention? Not necessarily. In interpreting someone else's doctrine, it is not unusual to read too much of our own preconceived ideas into someone else's words: this is what may have happened to Rahner, Lonergan and Von Balthasar in interpreting Aquinas. In other words, perhaps these scholars, mistakenly but inadvertently, found their own Kantian doctrine in Aquinas' text. Now, how could three such geniuses so totally miss the point? In the end, regardless of what these three scholars meant to produce, we must acknowledge what they actually did produce: a Kantian misinterpretation of Aquinas.

## Chapter Four

### Some Texts from Von Balthasar's *Theologic I*

Originally, what attracted me to the study of Von Balthasar was that, among students, he was widely considered to be “on the good side” of modern Thomism. For me, on the other hand, the unorthodoxy of some of his claims was obvious. And so, for me, the question became: What about the *roots* of Von Balthasar’s doctrine? Would it be possible to save Von Balthasar’s system, once the doctrinal errors were removed? He, being the most learned man of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who, towards the end of his days was elected by Pope John Paul II to the College of Cardinals, deserves some special attention.

The notion of God we use in theology depends on our philosophical approach to the problem of knowledge and being. This must be so, at least from a theoretical point of view. It could certainly happen that a theologian be inconsistent with his or her own philosophy. It could certainly happen that a theologian not have a perfectly coherent system in which the conclusions always follow the principles. Nobody is perfect. However, my assumption is (and should be) that Von Balthasar’s theology is coherent with his philosophy and that his theology is, at least for the most part, a coherent system. This assumption is simply my respect for Von Balthasar’s genius, a respect which I hope will be obvious to whomever reads the following.

Now, the purpose of this chapter is neither to show the coherence between Von Balthasar's philosophy and theology, nor to assess his theology's internal consistency. My goal is to prepare the ground for a response to those questions by showing Von Balthasar's radical approach to the problem of knowledge and being. My goal, in particular, is to present Von Balthasar's epistemological approach as radically Kantian.

In order to achieve this goal, I have chosen texts from *Theologic I*, which is allegedly the best place to have a sense of Von Balthasar's epistemology. *Theologic I (Truth of the World)* originally appeared as a standalone book in 1947, but was released with some revision in 1985 as the first part of Von Balthasar's three volume *Theologic*. *Theologic I* deals directly with the problem of knowledge and truth from a philosophical point of view, and the author clearly intends to portray his doctrine as Thomistic.<sup>176</sup> In order to pursue my present research, I believe that *Theologic I*, being part of Von Balthasar's most important and latest endeavour (his Trilogy), is the best place to start.

Von Balthasar's doctrinal relationship with Modern Philosophy seems not so clear, at least in terms of what kind of relationship that might be.<sup>177</sup> I hope this relationship will be clarified by

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<sup>176</sup> Cf. *Theologic I*, 11. Other references of Von Balthasar to Aquinas' doctrine will be offered in what follows.

<sup>177</sup> Cf. O'Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering*: "As Schindler points out in *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth* (4-5) it is apposite to put Balthasar in the line of the transcendental Thomism of Blondel, Roussetot, and Maréchal to the extent to which Balthasar wants to open up the dynamic orientation of the self to a transcendence that can never be an object of inspection and verification. While formally similar, however, Balthasar leaves behind the Kantian commitments that bedevil transcendental Thomism. His position on truth has in Schindler's view much in common with that of Gustav Siewerth. There is no denying that Siewerth is one of the more important philosophical influences on Balthasar, just as it is no accident that Siewerth is

presenting Von Balthasar's gnoseological approach against the background of the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant.

As previously carried out with Rahner and Lonergan, I offer now a series of texts in which Von Balthasar's radically Kantian approach to human understanding can be seen. These texts (all of them from *Theologic I*) will help us also in understanding his general epistemology, his notion of truth and his use of Thomistic notions to support his own doctrine. The selected texts are distributed throughout ten sections, more or less thematically. The first section is key to understanding the rest, and the fifth section studies one of the most interesting texts.

## 1) Creative Mirroring Theory: Human Understanding in Von Balthasar's *Theologic I*

### 1.1. An Introductory Text and Systematic Presentation of This Theory

The following text serves as a good introduction to my analysis of Von Balthasar's theory of human understanding. Von Balthasar mentions explicitly both Aquinas and Kant regarding the problem of the universals and then suggests his own solution. Now, even if his solution differs from Kant's,<sup>178</sup> Von Balthasar's solution cannot be considered Thomistic. I will firstly quote the passage in its entirety and then revisit it with my explanations. The numbers in square brackets do not belong to Von Balthasar's text, but have been added for the sake of the ensuing explanation.

[1] In Thomistic terms, the question before us is how the accidents, which let nothing of the substance show through,

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constantly negotiating the relationship of Aquinas to Heidegger, which Balthasar has obviously engaged in *Wahrheit*."

<sup>178</sup> Von Balthasar's solution differs from Kant's historical solution, but is inspired by Kant's principles, as I will argue.

nonetheless mediate a real knowledge of it; in Kantian language, we are asking how the appearance, which in and of itself contains no trace of universality and necessity, can nonetheless lay the groundwork for universal and necessary knowledge. [2] The answer cannot be simply that the knowledge of the object's essence, which transcends the reach of the senses, is solely the product of the subject's spontaneity, more precisely, of its system of a priori categories, as if the relation between appearance and essence had no role to play in this process. [3] Otherwise we would have to see knowledge as a kind of conjuror's trick that, without having anything to go by in the appearance, successfully guessed, divined, beheld in itself, better, created out of itself, the truth of the *non-appearing reality*. This would once again transform knowledge into an unintelligible process. [4] The only possible basis for knowledge of the truth, then, is the subject's primary ability immediately to mirror – in the intrinsic interconnection between sense and intellect within itself – the mirroring of the essence in the appearance. [5] The subject's mirroring – the fact that its receptivity occurs in an immediately more than sensory, indeed, intellectual space – implies another fact: just as in its movement the appearance reverts to the essence in order to let the essence appear as such, sense intuition resolves itself into the concept in order to enable insight into a being's essence.<sup>179</sup>

Let us now discuss the text step by step, from number [1] to [4].

In Thomistic terms, the question before us is how the accidents, which let nothing of the substance show through, nonetheless mediate a real knowledge of it; in Kantian language, we are asking how the appearance, which in and of

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<sup>179</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 153. Author's emphasis in "*non-appearing reality*".

itself contains no trace of universality and necessity, can nonetheless lay the groundwork for universal and necessary knowledge.<sup>180</sup>

The “question” Von Balthasar is introducing here is none other than the critical problem, that is, the heterogeneity between sensible and intelligible contents which invites us to ask how these contents are together in our knowledge of the real. The Kantian way of portraying the problem seems adequate; the Thomistic portrayal instead may need some clarifications, but those lie outside my present focus. In any case, for Von Balthasar, the *pure* Kantian solution is unacceptable:

The answer cannot be *simply* that the knowledge of the object’s essence, which transcends the reach of the senses, is *solely* the product of the subject’s spontaneity, more precisely, of its system of a priori categories, as if *the relation between appearance and essence* had no role to play in this process.<sup>181</sup>

In rejecting Kant’s solution, however, Von Balthasar does not reject the primary role of subjectivity—in fact, he qualifies it. Von Balthasar’s solution requires, as we will see, that the subject’s spontaneity relates in a very particular way to the object<sup>182</sup> and to God. Von Balthasar immediately gives the reason for his denying the purely Kantian solution:

Otherwise we would have to see knowledge as a kind of conjuror’s trick that, without having anything to go by in the appearance, successfully guessed, divined, beheld in itself, better, created out of itself, the truth of the *non-appearing*

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<sup>180</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 153.

<sup>181</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 153 (my emphasis).

<sup>182</sup> To the object or, more specifically, to the relation in the object between appearance and essence.

*reality*. This would once again transform knowledge into an unintelligible process.<sup>183</sup>

In other words, for Von Balthasar, attributing purely to the subject the origin of the universal content in human knowledge would make of intelligence something despotic and totally irrational: there would be no reason why we think some things in one way and other things in another way. Pure subjectivism is not the solution. What then? Von Balthasar's emphasis in "*non-appearing reality*" is preparing his solution: for Von Balthasar, reality is by definition something which is revealed in the sensible appearance. Reality is precisely "that which appears". For Von Balthasar, the purely Kantian solution would artificially separate appearance from essence, thereby making unintelligible the connection between the mind's concept and the thing's essence. Von Balthasar sees only one way out of the critical problem:

The only possible basis for knowledge of the truth, then, is the subject's primary ability immediately to mirror—in the intrinsic interconnection between sense and intellect within itself—the mirroring of the essence in the appearance.<sup>184</sup>

For Von Balthasar, human understanding is a creative intellectual reaction to the sensible appearance of the essence of things. Three points must be considered in order to understand this doctrine.

1) The essence is nothing other than that which is manifested in the appearance. This is one of the "metaphysical" aspects of this creative mirroring theory. For Von Balthasar, truth is self-revelation, and this implies that truth is not behind the appearances but in the appearance itself (*sensible appearance*) precisely as appearance *of the essence*. The essence, in turn, cannot be considered as separated from the appearances which are its own: the *essence itself* is that which appears. Thus, for Von Balthasar,

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<sup>183</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 153 (author's emphasis).

<sup>184</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 153.



ontological truth is the *movement* of self-revelation of the essence in the appearance.<sup>185</sup>

2) The subject's "creative reaction" *mirrors*, imitates, reproduces the essence's movement towards its manifestation in the appearance. This is the ground of human knowledge's objectivity: human understanding's creative reaction (*i.e.*, the concept) reproduces subjectively that which is out there (*i.e.*, the real essence) in a kind of identity, in a kind of dynamic adaptation to the real. This is the gnoseological centre of Von Balthasar's doctrine and of his solution to the critical problem.

3) The subject's a priori ability of creatively mirroring the essence of the things themselves is a participation from God's creative wisdom. This is another "metaphysical" aspect of creative mirroring theory.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 151-152: "In the object, there is no appearance that is not immediately an appearance of the essence. There is no appearance, therefore, that does not just as immediately step back before the essence, inasmuch as its very substance is to be inessential [*das Wesenslose*] and, as such, to manifest the substance of the essence", 137: "truth is, in fact, the revelation in the appearance of the very being that does not itself appear", 132: "The first point of contact between subject and object is the phenomenal images [*die erscheinenden Bilder*]. The object shows itself in them."

<sup>186</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 77: "It is this idea [i.e., God's creative idea] that grounds the object's true unity, for it is this idea that creatively founds the object's existence, just as the knowing subject participates in this productive work", 78: "The creative side of human knowledge is therefore the creature's analogical participation in the act by which God's archetypal, productive knowledge creatively metes out truth", 119: "God's knowledge is generative of truth [...]. Human knowledge can never be archetypal knowledge in the absolute sense. Yet the law of the analogy of being and of secondary causality implies that God allots to the creature something of his creative power even in the domain of truth. [...] The active potency that God has bestowed upon his creatures cannot have only an incidental effect in the domain of truth; it must have a more central significance than is usually accorded it. There must be an

I will address directly point two only, where the Kantian influence in Von Balthasar can be more easily identified. Points one and three will have their place in the context of point two.

What is this “creative mirroring”? Creative mirroring is the reproduction in the subject of the essence’s dynamism of self-manifestation. That is, as the essence moves towards the appearance to manifest itself, so also the subject moves towards the appearance, imitating the essence: thus, the subject reproduces in itself the essence of the sensible image. The metaphor of mirroring implies that what happens on one side of the mirror (here, the essence, the outside world) is reflected on the other side of the mirror (here, the subject, the inside world).

Why does Von Balthasar need this creative mirroring theory? Because, by way of this theory, he can give an account of knowing’s objectivity without setting aside his Kantian gnoseological principles. I refer to “knowing’s objectivity” because, with this theory, Von Balthasar can give an account of the fact that the content of human understanding is related to reality: thanks to this “mirroring”, that which is in reality (the essence as movement towards the appearance) is reproduced in our minds (the concept as movement towards the phantasm). I say “Kantian gnoseological principles”, because Von Balthasar’s point of departure is the total lack of intelligibility in the appearance and therefore needs to explain the object’s intelligibility as something coming from the subject. Now, does not Von Balthasar seem to grant the essence a real extramental being? As will be shown, Von Balthasar’s

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analogy of creative knowledge, and this analogy also implies the solution to the question raised above concerning the model that should guide the generation of the ideal.” I cannot help seeing a similarity between Von Balthasar’s recourse to God and Descartes’s, in this justification of human knowledge’s objectivity. The recourse to God has certainly a place in a truly Thomistic account of human knowledge, but that place is different because of Aquinas’ different point of departure.

affirmations regarding the essence do not change radically his Kantian approach but, rather, confirm it.

## 1.2. Creative Mirroring Theory in Von Balthasar's Words

Let me present this creative mirroring theory in Von Balthasar's words, that is, as expressed in the text of *Theologic I*. This is my attempt to confirm with Von Balthasar's text the systematic explanation I have introduced in the previous paragraphs. The text with which we began this section had shown us this theory's doctrinal place in the solution to the problem of the universals. Let us revisit the crucial section of that text:

The only possible basis for knowledge of the truth, then, is the subject's primary ability immediately to mirror—in the intrinsic interconnection between sense and intellect within itself—the mirroring of the essence in the appearance. The subject's mirroring—the fact that its receptivity occurs in an immediately more than sensory, indeed, intellectual space—implies another fact: just as in its movement the appearance reverts to the essence in order to let the essence appear as such, sense intuition resolves itself into the concept in order to enable insight into a being's essence.<sup>187</sup>

For Von Balthasar, as I have suggested, the subject knows the essence of things insofar as the subject creatively *mirrors*, reproduces the essence's movement of revealing itself in the appearance. This is the centre of Von Balthasar's creative mirroring theory. However, Von Balthasar refers here to “another fact” which, in my view, is meant to emphasize that the mirroring is not a “one-way” movement. That is, in human understanding, it is not only that the subject moves towards the appearance as the essence moves towards the appearance; it is also that sense intuition reverts to the concept as the appearance reverts to the

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<sup>187</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 153.

essence.<sup>188</sup> The appearance reverts to the essence insofar as the appearance is appearance *of the essence*: the appearance does not hide but reveals the essence. Sensible intuition reverts or resolves itself into the concept insofar as the image awakens and requires the concept: this is because the subject's receptivity (sensible intuition) occurs in an intellectual space, that is, the one who perceives the sensible is an intelligent subject who appropriates (understands) the sensible through the concept. With this reference to mirroring's "back and forth", Von Balthasar seems to further emphasize that the two aspects on each side of the mirror cannot be separated. That is, on the objective side of the mirror, appearance cannot be separated from the essence and, on the subjective side, the concept cannot be separated from the sensible image. And this, not because the two aspects cannot be distinguished, but because truth (as revelation) requires the two aspects at once.

Let us examine another text, where we can see that human understanding's creative aspect in Von Balthasar's doctrine comes from his denying the sensible any intelligibility. That is, since the sensible image lacks any intelligibility, the essential unity we understand must be the result of the subject's creativity.

In exercising its capacity for interpreting the unity of perception as a meaningful and, therefore, essential unity, the subject collects from the image a significance and an intellectual coherence that *are not located in the sensible as such*... [There is, first], a sort of creative "divination" by which the subject, engaging the spontaneous power of the intellect, so to say guesses the intelligible from the sensible clue. Human knowledge is all too full of error, which is to say, the misreading of the perceptible image: proof, then, that we are

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<sup>188</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 151-152 (text quoted and commented in Section 3 of this *Chapter*).

really talking about a guess, not about a direct intuition of the object's essence. But – and this is the second thing that happens – the image itself prompts and categorically demands this very divination.<sup>189</sup>

As the text continues, Von Balthasar passes from the understanding of essence to the affirmation of existence, applying the same “divination” theory:

As we have already suggested, the same phenomenon recurs when the intellect, in its supreme and, as it were, most audacious creative act, posits existence. It has to recur because *the image as such neither reveals nor contains any trace of this existence*. And yet the image is enough to give the subject, simultaneously with self-consciousness, the certain knowledge that its own [the subject's] center of existence is insufficient to account for the intelligible coherence displayed in the image. Such a coherence, it knows, immediately requires it to posit extramental reality.<sup>190</sup>

For Von Balthasar, we read, the intelligible significance is “not located in the sensible as such” and “the image as such neither reveals nor contains any trace” of existence; therefore, in both cases, the intellect's creative power must posit the intelligible, that is, essence and existence (in this text, by means of a certain “divination” or “guess”). However, Von Balthasar claims also that something in the sensible image “demands” and “requires” human intellect's creative power to posit both essence and existence. Von Balthasar wants to maintain two things: 1) that human understanding depends somehow on the sensible reality and 2) that whatever is intelligible in human understanding cannot possibly come from sensible reality, and must therefore be the result of the

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<sup>189</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 73-74 (my emphasis).

<sup>190</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 74 (my emphasis).

subject's functions.<sup>191</sup> Thus, for Von Balthasar, what necessitates the intellect's "audacious creative act" is the lack of any trace of intelligibility in the image; moreover, the intellect's creative power regards the intelligible *content* since it regards essence and existence. Once again, we find in Transcendental Thomism no distinction between intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being.

Von Balthasar goes on to show how this creative mirroring theory explains human knowledge's objectivity. The terminology of "mirroring" is here replaced by the terminology of "identity" and "coincidence" between subject and object, but the doctrine remains the same.

There is, then, a kind of identity between subject and object in knowledge: the object's essential word becomes audible and understandable through the sensible word by the mediation of the subject's own word (*verbum mentis*). The two words coincide, and in this coincidence the subject is able to take the measure of the object's essence and its existence. In this respect, the subject encloses the truth of the object within the unity of its own measure, which is to say, of its self-consciousness.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Both principles, and not only the second, are present in Kant. As per the first principle, in Kant's doctrine, the sensible element awakens the a priori functions and gives them material content (cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Guyer and Wood [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998] B 1-6, 75 [in the following, Kant, *KRV*; the letter "B" and the following number indicate the page number in the second German edition]). Kant's theory of schematism (cf. Kant, *KRV*, B 159 ff, 176 ff; Cornelio Fabro, *Percezione e Pensiero* [Brescia: Morcelliana, 1962] 246-251 [in the following, Fabro, *Percezione*]) is also an attempt to make more intelligible the connection between experience and the a priori functions of understanding.

<sup>192</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 74. The text continues: "But this identity gives way immediately, indeed, at the very moment it arises, to a definitive relative

For Von Balthasar, the reason human understanding is objective is that we reproduce in ourselves (in our concept) the object's essential word: "The two words coincide".<sup>193</sup> How we could verify this coincidence, and why this is not outright idealism is not my present concern: I will explore these issues later, when we discuss some of Von Balthasar's texts about human understanding's immanence.<sup>194</sup> However, it is clear that human understanding, for Von Balthasar, is not receptive of intelligible content, but productive of intelligible content.

In my view, Von Balthasar's coincidence of the two words (the object's essential word and the *verbum mentis* or concept) means that the concept is an objective mediation, that is, a (known) object through which another object (the object's essence) is somehow known. That is to say, for Von Balthasar, we see the object's essence in our own concept, not in itself. Now, to be clear, this has nothing to do with the Thomistic concept because for Von Balthasar the concept's intelligible content comes from the subject: we see the object's content (the "essential word") in the concept's content ("our own word") which we ourselves have created. For Aquinas, on the contrary, what comes from the subject is the content's *intelligible mode of being*, whereas the content comes (by way of abstraction) from the particular material object.

Finally, it may be helpful to note that, even if Von Balthasar speaks about "a kind of identity", this has nothing to do with the theories

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opposition [*Gegenübersein*] between knower and known, since the very meaning of self-consciousness is that the known be present in it as known, not as knower. Only when the subject understands that the object stands over against it as something having being-for-itself does it, the subject, inwardly possess the full measure of the object. The object's immanence in the subject's consciousness is the prior condition for understanding its transcendence."

<sup>193</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 74.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. Section 4 of this Chapter.

of knowledge as identity which we have previously explored. In a theory of knowledge as identity, the identity between the subject in act and the object of human understanding is a numerical identity, that is, the unity of one and the same thing. For Von Balthasar, instead, in this “kind of identity” there are *two things* (i.e., the concept and the object’s essence) which are *formally* identical or, in other words, “two words” which “coincide”. Still, that which the subject actually knows is its own concept only, and Von Balthasar’s reasons for affirming the concept’s coincidence with the object’s essence do not take away the complete immanence of human understanding’s direct (and only possible!) object.<sup>195</sup>

### 1.3. Kantian Principles in Von Balthasar’s Theory

My objective here is to show a Kantian influence in Von Balthasar’s approach to human understanding. Clearly, his creative mirroring theory includes this influence. The following text, for example, connects Von Balthasar’s theory with many Kantian principles. My explanations will follow.

The subject does not draw the experience of essence and existence immediately from the images; and since things are not manifest to it outside of the images, it can draw this experience from nowhere other than itself. Out of itself, out of its own substance, the subject nourishes the images and bestows upon them the rank of a portrayal of the world.

The subject does not do this without reason; its deed is no daring, fantastic risk; it simply follows its own law of bestowing sense on everything it encounters. This positing is so spontaneous that it precedes any free deliberation; it is nature. It arises out of the depth of the knowing subject. But its trajectory passes through the image into the depth of the object to be known. It uses the image as a fulcrum to swing

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<sup>195</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 54, text quoted and studied in Section 4 of this *Chapter*.



from out of the interiority of the subject into the interiority of the object. Of course, one of the primary and ineliminable presuppositions of the interpretation of sense itself is that these two unities are not coincident, that the object known is by no means identical to the knowing subject but possesses and claims its own sphere of essence and existence. The subject would not believe that this presupposition was annulled or called in question even if it could be shown that all the materials out of which its knowledge composes the objective world actually come from its own subjective storehouse. These materials may originate in the subject, but this is no argument against the legitimacy of their application to the object. On the contrary, this subject origin immediately requires it.<sup>196</sup>

The first paragraph opens with a clear Kantian principle: namely, that the main reason for affirming a subjective origin of human understanding's intelligible content is the sensible image's lack of intelligibility. I quote again:

The subject does not draw the experience of essence and existence immediately from the images; and since things are not manifest to it outside of the images, it can draw this experience from nowhere other than itself. Out of itself, out of its own substance, the subject nourishes the images and bestows upon them the rank of a portrayal of the world.

Von Balthasar explains next how, even if he claims that the origin of intelligibility is subjective, there is no risk of making human knowledge into an arbitrary construction of each mind:

The subject does not do this without reason; its deed is no daring, fantastic risk; it simply follows its own law of bestowing sense on everything it encounters. This positing is

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<sup>196</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 135.

so spontaneous that it precedes any free deliberation; it is nature. It arises out of the depth of the knowing subject.

This is an interesting point. Ordinary folk have always had a sense that the truth is something like an obedience or compliance, and not something despotic or capricious. That is, truth is a certain adequacy or correspondence, a certain “getting along with” something else rather than an imposition on something. Now, if the rule (of this “obedience” or correspondence) is not established by the object itself (whose essence is inaccessible to the intellect), then the only rule that can preserve human knowledge from complete anarchy must be interior, subjective. Kant’s a priori categories had a similar function, insofar as they were understood as certain subjective rules of thinking.

As his text continues, Von Balthasar inserts what I have called his “creative mirroring theory” but, in this instance, using the image of a pendulum:

This positing [of essence and existence] arises out of the depth of the knowing subject. But its trajectory passes through the image into the depth of the object to be known. It uses the image as a fulcrum to swing from out of the interiority of the subject into the interiority of the object.

What is this “interiority of the object”? Clearly, the essence, the intelligibility of the object. What does it mean that we arrive “into the interiority of the object”? Certainly not that we have a direct contact with the object’s essence. Von Balthasar is affirming that we ascribe (or posit) this intelligibility arising from the subject to (or into) the object through the sensible image: however, we know this subjective intelligible content *as* something belonging to the object itself because this is the way we function as human subjects. Human understanding is, for Von Balthasar, the positing of essence and existence into the “inessential world” according to subjective a priori laws.

What follows is Von Balthasar's attempt to defend this theory's realism, where he simply stresses once again the subjective origin of intelligible content.

Of course, one of the primary and ineliminable presuppositions of the interpretation of sense itself is that these two unities are not coincident, that the object known is by no means identical to the knowing subject but possesses and claims its own sphere of essence and existence. The subject would not believe that this presupposition was annulled or called in question even if it could be shown that all the materials out of which its knowledge composes the objective world actually come from its own subjective storehouse. These materials may originate in the subject, but this is no argument against the legitimacy of their application to the object. On the contrary, this subject origin immediately requires it.<sup>197</sup>

Von Balthasar says that, in order to maintain this theory, we need to presuppose the alterity of the object known. In this sense he says that "these two unities" (object and subject, or essence and concept) are not coincident: the object has its own being, distinct from the being of the subject.<sup>198</sup> Now, what is the reason for claiming this alterity? Or, better said, what is the reason for this presupposition? The reason can be no other than subjectivity itself, or our a priori rules: for Von Balthasar, the subject understands by positing essence and existence into the object, and *therefore* the object must possess essence and existence in itself: in other words, we would not think this way if the object were not this way. But please note: Von Balthasar has *concluded* the object's interiority by

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<sup>197</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 135.

<sup>198</sup> Von Balthasar's claim of non-coincidence between subject and object refers to the lack of a real identity between them (one is not the other), whereas the coincidence previously affirmed (cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 74) regards a formal identity between concept and essence (one is similar to the other).

analyzing the conditions of the possibility of thinking. The object's being depends critically on the subject's rules.

The text makes very clear that the intelligible content originates from the subject and is applied to the object. The "legitimacy" of this application does not make this doctrine less Kantian, but rather confirms its Kantian principles. The reasons for affirming that the application of intelligible content to the sensible object is legitimate might be very interesting, but they come too late: they come after Kantian principles have established that intelligible content must come from the subject because experience does not provide it. These Kantian principles, the hallmark of subjectivism, are radically different from Aquinas' epistemological principles and from any true realism.

#### **1.4. Metaphysical Aspects of Creative Mirroring Theory**

The following text may give us a glimpse of the metaphysical aspect of Von Balthasar's creative mirroring theory. But let me begin by introducing some terminological indications which may help in better understanding the text. Here, to "take the measure" of the object means to know the object's essence. Moreover, the object's "essence" is not the same as its "essential form": for Von Balthasar, the essence is an idea, and principally God's idea of this object, whereas the form is the object's metaphysical principle of unity. Thus, the object's form is grounded on God's idea but does not fully realize this idea: the object's form realizes only a moment of God's plan for this object, whereas God's idea is the true meaning of this object. For Von Balthasar, human understanding is a participation, not in the object's essential form but, rather, in God's creative idea.

The object, insofar as it is an object and not itself a subject, could not have taken this measure, nor, for that matter, could it have attained the unity with itself that it rather finds only upon entering into the light of a self-conscious spirit. For this

unity essentially transcends whatever unity may be actualized at any given time in the object. It is, of course, the unity of its essential form, but precisely this unity is only imperfectly expressed in any actual state of the *morphe*. The reason is twofold: the *morphe* is like an outline that is filled in only in relation to the surrounding world; and its primordial fulfillment ultimately lies in God's creative idea.<sup>199</sup>

See how, for Von Balthasar, the "light of a self-conscious spirit" perfects the object with its true essential unity, a unity that *the object does not have in itself*, even if a certain principle of unity is recognized in the object. In any case, and because my concern is to judge whether Von Balthasar aligns with Kant or with St. Thomas, what is relevant is not that Von Balthasar recognizes an essential form in the object. What is instead relevant is that, for Von Balthasar, the object's intelligible content does not come to us from the object's essential form, but from ourselves. The text continues:

It is this idea [that is, God's creative idea] that grounds the object's true unity, for it is this idea that creatively founds the object's existence, just as the knowing subject participates in this productive work. The mental word (*verbum mentis*), in which the subject pronounces the object's meaning and being, is much more than an imitation of its naked facticity. The object can receive its definitive meaning only from the subject, for the object can attain completion only in the superior, spiritual sphere of the subject. In the creative mirror of the subject, the object sees the image of what it is and of what it can and is meant to be. This creative act of the subject is no longer a mere attitude of justice but much rather an act of *love*.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 77.

<sup>200</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 77-78 (Von Balthasar's emphasis).

The subject's creative mirroring is here a participation in God's creative idea. It is again crystal clear that the intelligible content comes from the subject and is bestowed "graciously" upon the object. The object receives meaning from the subject, not the other way around. The object is completed by the subject with intelligible meaning.<sup>201</sup> This reference to "love" as opposed to "mere justice" implies that what is bestowed upon the object is more than the object "deserves" by justice. In other words, mere justice would require that the subject mirror the object exactly as the object is, not ascribing to the object more than the object actually has. However, the subject's concept goes beyond justice, because this concept realizes the essential idea more fully than the object's essential form.

It is important to notice how, in Von Balthasar's mirroring theory, the presupposition that there is an essential form in the object itself has nothing to do with the alleged necessity that our concept draw intelligible content from the object by way of abstraction: for Von Balthasar, human understanding's intelligible content does not come from the object. What are then the grounds of this presupposition? In my view, there are only two options: either we postulate this presupposition a priori, that is, as a condition of the possibility of human thinking as it appears, or we ground this presupposition in God, God's being somehow demonstrated previously. Von Balthasar seems to do both in that, previously, God has been found in human consciousness as a condition of the possibility of thinking. That is, finding God by an analysis of human

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<sup>201</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 113: "Now, we showed earlier that things are meant to attain their completion within the sphere of subjectivity. This space is reserved for them and placed at their disposal so that they can unfold latent potentialities that they cannot display elsewhere."

consciousness<sup>202</sup> has enabled Von Balthasar to ground the objectivity of the sensible object's essence and existence. This does seem to imply that the alleged "reality" which Von Balthasar claims for the object is no more than immanent reality, grounded critically (and so also metaphysically) on the subject. The being of creatures is a "presupposition" of our human thinking, and we can neither relate to nor encounter this being except as a "presupposition" in our own minds. Is this enough to establish that creature's being exists "independently" of human thinking?<sup>203</sup>

Having explored what I have called Von Balthasar's "creative mirroring theory" in *Theologic I*, let us now turn to the study of other texts.

## 2) The Subject as Source of Objective Content

For Von Balthasar, the subject is the source of every formality (sensible or intelligible) found in the object of consciousness. Clearly, this is grounded on the main Kantian epistemological presupposition that experience provides only a raw material which needs to be unified and organized by the subject's a priori functions.

Thanks to the unity of self-consciousness, the subject understands three things. First of all, it has the power to unify synthetically the in itself disjointed image. This is the *unity of perception* [*Einheit der Anschauung*]. Furthermore, because the subject has immediate access within its own inner space to the relationship between inward significance [*Bedeutung*] and outward sensible expression, it is able not only to unify the

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<sup>202</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 54 (this text is reported and commented in section 4 of this *Chapter*). It is beyond my present purpose to analyze what kind of idea of God is the one coming from Von Balthasar's doctrine.

<sup>203</sup> This question is more directly addressed in section 4 of this *Chapter*, "Does Von Balthasar fall into Idealism?"

image on the level of perception but also to confer upon it the unity of an inward, intellectual meaning, of a coherent, intelligible essence. The result is the *unity of the concept* [*Einheit des Begriffs*]. Finally, the subject experiences the unity of existing being in its own self-consciousness. Now, because this experience originates in the analogy, and inherent distance, between its own being and absolute being, the subject can adjudge to the essence it beholds in the image an objective, extramental existence. It thus establishes the *unity of objective existence* [*Einheit des Da-Seins*].<sup>204</sup>

Let us approach the text a little more closely. Von Balthasar is presupposing that the knowledge of oneself is what grounds critically the knowledge of the other. Therefore, for him, something we find in self-consciousness justifies our bestowing upon the sensible object perfections originally not belonging to it. This means that, for Von Balthasar, knowing the other is projecting the subject's different levels of unity upon the raw material of experience ("the in-itself disjointed image"). In this text, Von Balthasar is trying to explain some of these issues.

He begins, "Thanks to the unity of self-consciousness, the subject understands three things."<sup>205</sup> That is, having understood itself, the subject is now able to understand three aspects of its knowledge of things. This is what I mean when I say that, for Von Balthasar, the knowledge of the other is justified by the knowledge of oneself. The text continues, "First of all, [the subject] has the power to unify synthetically the in-itself disjointed image. This is the *unity of perception* [*Einheit der Anschauung*]."<sup>206</sup> This is the Kantian point of departure of all Modern Philosophy and therefore of Transcendental Thomism: what belongs to experience must be

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<sup>204</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 72-73.

<sup>205</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 72.

<sup>206</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 72.



unified synthetically by subjective functions, because in itself is disorganized and disjointed. This means that the unity of perception is subjective, not objective. As Fabro has shown in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, this clearly is not the case.<sup>207</sup>

Now, Von Balthasar is here speaking about the first level of subjective unification, which is still in the realm of sensibility. Significantly, Von Balthasar will not justify nor explain this level (unity of perception) as he does with the other two levels (unity of the concept and unity of objective existence). Perhaps, this is because it was obvious for him that a unified subject (which is an evident point of departure) would unify anything coming to itself from experience, or because this subjective unification of the object is something like a first principle that does not need demonstration. This second reason would make perfect sense from a Kantian point of view, since it is the point of departure of Kant's approach to the problem of the universals. This, however, is an unjustifiable point of departure, not as if it were evident and therefore did not need demonstration, but because it is an irrational choice against all evidence: what evidence can be produced of an "in itself disjointed image"? Or, if it is said to be a necessary presupposition, what reason can be given for this presupposition?<sup>208</sup> But let Von Balthasar continue:

Furthermore, because the subject has immediate access within its own inner space to the relationship between inward significance [*Bedeutung*] and outward sensible expression, it is able not only to unify the image on the level of perception but also to confer upon it the unity of an inward, intellectual

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<sup>207</sup> Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, Opere Complete, vol.5 (Segni: EDIVI, 2006); Andres Ayala, "Reflections on the possibility of Perceptualism", *The Incarnate Word* 6, no. 1 (May 2019) 35-41; Ayala, "The Weaknesses of Critical Realism", 63-77.

<sup>208</sup> Cf. Ayala, "The Weaknesses of Critical Realism", 68-77, 83-100.

meaning, of a coherent, intelligible essence. The result is the *unity of the concept [Einheit des Begriffs]*.<sup>209</sup>

For Von Balthasar, because we have the experience in ourselves of expressing sensibly what we intend interiorly, we can understand why we interpret as expressions of meaning the images which become available to us. In other words, because we know that our sensible expressions are manifestations of meaning, we can interpret sensible images in the same way, that is, as sensible manifestations of meaning. However, even if, as Von Balthasar makes clear in other places, we *must* interpret in this way the sensible image (because this is how we function), this is not a blind nor arbitrary process but rather a process based on the experience we have of the relationship “meaning-expression” in ourselves. In any case, what is clear is that we confer upon the image a meaning, we do not receive that meaning from experience; we do not take the meaning from the object, but we bestow the meaning upon the object.

This doctrine complements Von Balthasar’s creative mirroring theory. The “subject’s primary ability immediately to mirror”<sup>210</sup> the essence in the subject’s concept is understood in connection with the relationship between meaning and expression in the subject itself or, perhaps, in connection with the being of the subject understood as an essence that appears, a self-revealing essence.

Truth, for Von Balthasar, is not purely intellectual because the universal (the purely intelligible, the abstracted) does not exist. Or, better said, the universal “ex-sists”<sup>211</sup> in the image and nowhere

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<sup>209</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 72-73.

<sup>210</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 153.

<sup>211</sup> “Ex-sistence” can be understood as a certain “being out of itself”. This means that the universal is and has being not in itself but in expressing itself in the image. The universal cannot be “in itself” but must be “out of itself”. The

else. Conversely, the image without the universal (the essence) vanishes, and that is why the image in itself does not exist either and is inconsistent. This is why for Von Balthasar the truth is concrete: the truth is the concrete self-revelation of being, and so the truth in human understanding is not the intuition of an essence but the essence's self-manifestation represented in the concept. In other words, the truth is the movement from the essence toward the appearance and this is why in order to possess the truth we need to "catch" that movement in the concept or, better said, reproduce that movement by means of a concept. The concept is thus a movement towards the image which mirrors the essence. The truth of the object is not something we receive but something we enact, something we perform.

Let us now examine the last part of the text:

Finally, the subject experiences the unity of existing being in its own self-consciousness. Now, because this experience originates in the analogy, and inherent distance, between its own being and absolute being, the subject can adjudge to the essence it beholds in the image an objective, extramental existence. It thus establishes the *unity of objective existence* [*Einheit des Da-Seins*].<sup>212</sup>

This text could open the door to many considerations regarding Von Balthasar's notion of God, a door which is better kept closed for the time being. Instead, let me simply note how, according to Von Balthasar, the object's existence is posited by the subject and thus, once again, the intelligible content originates in the subject. For Von Balthasar, that which allows the subject to posit extramental existence, that is, an existence other than its own, is the fact that the subject perceives itself as other than absolute

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universal is simply one side of a movement of self-expression which can neither be nor be understood without the other side (the image).

<sup>212</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 73.

being. In this way, the “distance” (*i.e.* otherness) that the subject perceives *within consciousness* between itself and absolute being allows distance between subject and object to appear. More importantly, the subject perceives itself as a finite existing being before the absolute: this allows the subject to perceive the object also as a finite existing being. In other words, in the same way that the subject’s essence is perceived as other than absolute being because of its finitude, so also the object’s essence is perceived as other (and so as other *being*) than absolute being for the same reason.

Now, would not this distance between subject and object and this existence be distance and existence *within consciousness*? In my view, there is no question about that. “Extramental” can only mean, here and for Von Balthasar, “outside of the subject’s finitude” and not “outside of the subject’s consciousness”: nothing could be known outside consciousness and nothing can be posited outside consciousness. In fact, in this doctrine, absolute being is not outside human consciousness, otherwise absolute being never would have been discovered. Also, the human subject posits the unities of perception, concept and existence into the data from experience which are welcomed nowhere else but into consciousness: thus, for Von Balthasar, “extramental” existence is posited within consciousness.

Is this not contradictory? Not necessarily, although of course I am not suggesting that what Von Balthasar is saying is right. It may not be contradictory, once we accept that being is something found in human consciousness and posited by human subjectivity according to a priori rules. If this is so, then being cannot happen outside human consciousness, which does not mean that being is not real: it means, rather, that real being is within human consciousness, that real being is immanent. This, in turn, does not necessarily mean that the world is inside my head, but it does mean that whatever is meaningful in the world receives meaning and direction from my own subjectivity. As for most idealistic systems,

so also for Von Balthasar there is something outside of our own minds, but that “something” is not “being” unless it is thought as such. Being is an intelligible content which can be posited by intelligence only onto whatever is sensibly received by a subject.<sup>213</sup>

### 3) Abstraction and Conversion are the Same

The following excerpt is a genial expression of both Von Balthasar’s metaphysics and his gnoseology. The relationship between essence and appearance helps Von Balthasar in explaining the relationship between concept and sensible appearance. Von Balthasar expresses his doctrine in Thomistic terminology but ignores the Thomistic doctrinal distinction between intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being, thereby conflating abstraction with conversion to the phantasm.

Now, at first sight it might seem that the phases of this process move in opposite directions in the object and in the subject. In the object, the first thing was egress into the appearance, and only then did the appearance return into the essence. The subject, on the contrary, first abstracts from the appearance, thereby forming the concept; only in a second moment does it bend the concept back upon sensory intuition and verify it therein. But looked at more thoroughly, these two phases coincide. In the object, there is no appearance that is not immediately an appearance of the essence. There is no appearance, therefore, that does not just as immediately step back before the essence, inasmuch as its very substance is to be inessential [*das Wesenslose*] and, as such, to manifest the substance of the essence. And in knowledge the event of abstraction from the senses coincides even more clearly with the intellect’s conversion to the senses. The very act of

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<sup>213</sup> We will speak in Section 4 of this Chapter about the distinction between being outside of the subject’s finitude and being outside of consciousness.

abstraction in which the spontaneous power of the intellect (*intellectus agens*) turns to the sensory material in order to illuminate it with its light and to elevate it into its sphere is simultaneously the act in which the intellect inclines to the sensible in order to fill, and to find filled, its own empty unity in the latter's multiplicity. We said that a radical renunciation of the intellect lies at the root of every cognition: its renunciation of itself and the necessity of finding itself again in another through service. This sacrifice of the intellect now finds the complement analytically implied in it. The intellect sacrifices the world it has gained through the first renunciation. Only this second renunciation enables it to return into its own I as an actual knower who has been enriched with the content of the world.<sup>214</sup>

Let me go step by step. "Now, at first sight it might seem that the phases of this process move in opposite directions in the object and in the subject."<sup>215</sup> This "process" refers to the movement which has as one of its terms the "appearance". This process happens both in the object and in the subject: as the reader may remember, the subject "mirrors" the movement of the essence towards the appearance (the revelation of the essence, the truth of the object) by means of the concept, which is the subject's own movement towards the appearance (the truth in the subject).

Von Balthasar briefly explains this process, firstly in the object: "In the object, the first thing was egress into the appearance, and only then did the appearance return into the essence."<sup>216</sup> Secondly, he explains this process in the subject, with a simple and orthodox Thomistic explanation: "The subject, on the contrary, first abstracts from the appearance, thereby forming the concept; only

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<sup>214</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 151-152.

<sup>215</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 151.

<sup>216</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 151.

in a second moment does it bend the concept back upon sensory intuition and verify it therein.”<sup>217</sup> Von Balthasar, however, will immediately (in in his subsequent explanation) conflate abstraction and conversion to the phantasms into one action whereas, in Aquinas, abstraction and conversion to the phantasms must be distinguished. Let me therefore recall, at least briefly, Aquinas’ doctrine on this point.

Abstraction and conversion to the phantasms cannot be the same, at least not according to Aquinas. Firstly, because abstraction belongs to the agent intellect and conversion belongs to the possible intellect: now, agent intellect and possible intellect, in Aquinas, are different potencies.<sup>218</sup> Secondly, abstraction is the production of the *species impressa* (the intelligible in act), which is prior to the *species expressa* (the concept or *verbum mentis*), whereas the conversion presupposes the *species expressa*. The *species impressa* (product of the agent intellect’s abstraction) is “visible”, the *species expressa* (or better said, its content) is “seen” and the conversion to the phantasm is *the way* we see (we see the universal, represented in the concept, as existing in the particular). We would not see (through the concept) if that which is seen were not visible (through abstraction); we would not see the universal *in the phantasm* (conversion) if the universal had not been abstracted previously *from the phantasm* (abstraction). This of course implies Thomistic gnoseology, in which knowing is receptive of objective content, in which the intelligible content (the universal as nature) subsists in the things themselves, and in which the agent intellect is source, not of intelligible content, but of the intelligible mode

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<sup>217</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 151. This bending “the concept back upon sensible intuition” is a clear reference to Aquinas’ conversion to the phantasms. For Aquinas’ doctrine on this topic, cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 84, 7; Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 274-275 (especially footnote 601), 194, 258; and pp. 169-170 and 180-183 in this book.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 214-219.

of being of the content. But Von Balthasar's gnoseology has nothing to do with Aquinas' gnoseology, as we will see again in this text.

In fact, after distinguishing two phases in each process (in the object, the process of self-revelation of the essence in the appearance and, in the subject, the process of conceiving), Von Balthasar affirms the more radical identity of each pair of phases, beginning with the object's side:

But looked at more thoroughly, these two phases coincide. In the object, there is no appearance that is not immediately an appearance of the essence. There is no appearance, therefore, that does not just as immediately step back before the essence, inasmuch as its very substance is to be inessential [*das Wesenslose*] and, as such, to manifest the substance of the essence.<sup>219</sup>

Firstly, this explanation of the metaphysical process probably has the function of easing the way towards the serious gnoseological statements that come immediately afterwards. Secondly, Von Balthasar's dialectic between appearance and essence may indeed taste Hegelian, but it does have a point: even from a Thomistic stance, substance and accidents are not two separate compartments in the corporeal substance, even if substance and accidents are absolutely distinct. That is, the distinction between substance and accidents is not spatial ("*here* is the substance, unmixed with the accidents, and *there* are the accidents, floating over the substance without sinking into it") but metaphysical: substance and accidents are not the same, their essence is not the same, even if they subsist in the same thing. We can also speak Thomistically of an "inter-belonging" between substance and accidents: the accidents do belong to the substance, and the substance is perfected in the accidents. Now, whether or not Von

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<sup>219</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 151-152.



Balthasar's construction of the essence-appearance relationship is purely Thomistic is beyond my present purpose, but I thought it worthwhile to notice its plausibility. Thirdly, with all of that having been said, I wonder about the worth of this metaphysical construction of the object, given that it depends completely on thegnoseological side of the story. In other words, departing from Kantian principles, how do we know that there must be an essence that appears? Von Balthasar would respond: "Because this is the way we are wired, this is the way we think of the appearance, this is the way we must think according to our a priori rules and, therefore, the objectivity of this knowledge cannot be questioned." This would be a coherent Kantian explanation of the fact: now, if Kant and St. Thomas are radically different, then Von Balthasar's explanation cannot be Thomistic.

Let us continue with the most important part of the text, where thegnoseological aspect of this doctrine is treated. Here, Von Balthasar's use of Thomistic terminology and Von Balthasar's departure from Thomism (by identifying abstraction with conversion) are *simultaneously* most clear.

And in knowledge the event of abstraction from the senses coincides even more clearly with the intellect's conversion to the senses. The very act of abstraction in which the spontaneous power of the intellect (*intellectus agens*) turns to the sensory material in order to illuminate it with its light and to elevate it into its sphere is simultaneously the act in which the intellect inclines to the sensible in order to fill, and to find filled, its own empty unity in the latter's multiplicity.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 152. Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 74: "This manifold activity is characterized by a simultaneous elevation of sensory perception into the concept (*abstractio speciei a phantasmate*), on the one hand, and immersion of the intellectual meaning into sensory perception (*conversio intellectus ad phantasma*),

The deepest reason for Von Balthasar's misconstruction of Thomism is the lack of distinction between intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being of the content. This Kantian lack of distinction leads to the consideration of intellectual knowing as a certain "making sense of" or "thinking out", with the meaning of providing a purely sensible raw material with intelligibility as content. Thinking is for Von Balthasar "making intelligible", "intellectually unifying": now, because there is no other intelligibility than the one provided by the subject's intelligence, human understanding is nothing other than the activity by which human beings throw themselves into the sensible reality, informing that reality according to their own a priori functions. For Von Balthasar, human understanding is informing, not being informed. In other words, for him human understanding is like eating: we do not become what we eat, but instead what we eat becomes what we are, because of our natural powers to transform what we eat into what we are.

Coming back to the text, where can we see the lack of distinction between intelligibility as content and intelligibility as mode of being of the content? We can see it particularly where Von Balthasar states that the agent intellect in abstraction "elevates" the sensory material "into its sphere" of intelligibility. That is, for Von Balthasar, the sensory material receives from the intellect something it did not have; the sensory material is elevated, becomes what it was not: becomes intelligible. This intelligibility is not distinguished from the intelligible content, because the act by which the intellect provides this intelligibility is made one with the act by which the intellect understands, that is, with the act by which the intellect fills and *finds filled* "its own empty unity" in the multiplicity of the sensory material. In other words, for Von Balthasar, the act of the agent intellect (which is for him "the

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on the other. Now, this has two further results, which are also simultaneous. The first is a sort of creative 'divination'..."

spontaneous power of the intellect”, that is, a different way of considering the same faculty) is made one with the act of the possible intellect; again, the act which in Aquinas’ doctrine would relate to intelligibility as mode of being is made one with the act which relates to intelligibility as content: there is no distinction. For Von Balthasar, both abstraction and conversion are *turning towards the sensible*, a turning which informs intelligibly the sensible material, a turning which bestows unity (universality and being) to that which does not have unity (the multiple sensible material).

It is impossible to overemphasize the seriousness of Von Balthasar’s misinterpretation of St. Thomas’ doctrine. Human intellect is made into a Kantian transcendental whose only function is to bestow itself on the sensible. The human intellect is an emptiness (like the emptiness of a stomach) eager to be satisfied by the sensible crumbs of the world. This emptiness of the intellect is the emptiness of the Kantian a priori functions:<sup>221</sup> an emptiness which is filled by the other of the material world, since without the material world these a priori functions do not make any sense and are blind—as in Kant. This is why, a few lines later, Von Balthasar speaks of the intellect’s “necessity of finding itself again in another through service.”

We said that a radical renunciation of the intellect lies at the root of every cognition: its renunciation of itself and the necessity of finding itself again in another through service.<sup>222</sup> This sacrifice of the intellect now finds the complement analytically implied in it. The intellect sacrifices the world it has gained through the first renunciation. Only this second

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<sup>221</sup> Cf. Kant, *KRV*, B 75: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”

<sup>222</sup> This intellect’s “service”, “first renunciation” or “sacrifice” consists in the intellect’s letting things (i.e., the image world) enter consciousness.

renunciation<sup>223</sup> enables it to return into its own I as an actual knower who has been enriched with the content of the world.<sup>224</sup>

Von Balthasar is applying the metaphor of sacrifice (or renunciation, service, etc.), which he has been using in the previous pages, to the conflation of abstraction and conversion executed just now. Thus, the first and second renunciations of which he speaks here are, respectively, abstraction and conversion: in the same way he previously stated that abstraction and conversion coincide, he now claims that the second renunciation is analytically implied in the first one. Abstraction is the first renunciation, as a certain letting things enter consciousness which is also a “service” to things, as the subject’s “surrendering” his or her own inner space to the entrance of the image world. Conversion is the second renunciation, as the subject’s renunciation to the image world as such (which is already present within consciousness, that is, which has been “gained through the first renunciation”) by positing essence and existence into it.

Von Balthasar claims that the second moment was analytically implied in the first. This is because the only reason the intellect “services” the world through the first renunciation is re-gaining itself through the second renunciation; this intellect’s re-gaining itself is a finding itself (its own intelligibility) in the world by positing essence and existence onto the sensible material. In other words, for Von Balthasar, intelligence is a faculty essentially imposing its own form (intelligibility) onto other things: therefore, in order for intelligence to be what it is, to function as is meant, intelligence needs the other of the world. Thus, intelligence needs to get out of its own emptiness towards the world (first

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<sup>223</sup> This “second renunciation” or sacrifice of the intellect consists in the intellect’s sacrificing the images as such (as simply sensible images) by positing essence and existence.

<sup>224</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 152.

renunciation) in order to impose itself on the sensible material, “sacrificing” the sensible material by making it intelligible (second renunciation). Only then are we knowers, according to Von Balthasar: not when we have been informed by the world, but when we inform the sensible world according to our a priori functions.

However, someone may object, does Von Balthasar not say that we are knowers insofar as we have been “enriched with the content of the world”? Is not this being enriched something like being informed? I respond, in Von Balthasar’s mind, we have been enriched with the *sensible* content, with the material world; we have been enriched insofar as, without the sensible material, we could never have known anything; and this is because, for Von Balthasar, knowing is performing, informing and, in order to inform, something material is required. We have been enriched, Von Balthasar would say, because we have received from the world the material needed in order to impose ourselves in knowing. In another sense, however, we are the ones who have enriched the world with intelligibility. Once again, the opposition “image world” vs. “essence and existence” should leave no doubts that for Von Balthasar, as for Kant, nothing intelligible belongs to the sensible world unless it has been posited therein by the subject.

#### 4) Does Von Balthasar Fall into Idealism?

If by idealist we understand someone who believes that ideas in our own mind are the only possible object of knowledge, then Von Balthasar and for that matter any Kantian philosopher would very well qualify as idealists. Von Balthasar affirms in the following text that objects “display themselves within the subject” and that we know things inside of ourselves. Von Balthasar, however, does not affirm that the object of knowledge is the subject itself, nor that ideas are simply an expression of the subject, or a subjective modification which is made objective by a certain kind of a priori self-delusion. For Von Balthasar, the things we know, even if they

are known and found in our own consciousness, even if they exist nowhere else than in our own consciousness, are different from the human subject. For this reason, as will be seen in the following passage, Von Balthasar acquits himself of idealism all the while clearly subscribing to the Kantian principle of immanence. A text like the following invites us to distinguish philosophical doctrines from labels. In the end, it doesn't matter whether Von Balthasar is considered an idealist or not: what matters is how Von Balthasar constructs the relationship between subject and object... and what we mean by idealism.

The primary distinction within the identity of self-consciousness between the truth of the ego and the truth of the divine subject that infinitely encompasses it (*cogitor ergo sum* is the fundamental form of the *cogito ergo sum*) also ultimately grounds the very objectifiability of objects, hence, the intentionality of knowledge. Without this primary distance between the ego and God, there would be no reason why **the objects that display themselves within the subject** should not be apprehended and interpreted as forms, external aspects, or modes of appearance of the ego, in other words, why people should not be convinced idealists also in their daily lives. In fact, they are not. Rather, they adjudge external existence and value to **the things that they know inside of themselves**, and no argument in the world can convince them that this affirmation is a merely practical one that could be superseded from a higher speculative standpoint. In a word, they affirm the intentionality of intellectual cognition, whose primary direction is out of the subject, and they do so ultimately because, in the primordial act in which they lay hold of themselves as subjects, they know that another, holding them in his grasp, places them in existence, over against, and at a distance from, himself. Precisely in the reverent distance that thus opens up between God and the creature, one's fellow creatures have room to

appear in their own self-standing being. Because it must decide to confess its finitude before the infinite God, the finite subject must also decide to acknowledge that its fellow creatures, too, are self-standing existents. Before God, it recognizes that, while being as a whole is not simply unknown, it is not yet disclosed in its totality.<sup>225</sup>

As in much of Modern Philosophy, we find also in Von Balthasar that the knowledge of God is at least critically more primordial than the knowledge of finite objects. This is so, for him, not in the sense that we see God before seeing creatures, but in the sense that we see creatures *as* creatures, or as self-standing finite beings, only after we have seen God as absolute being in our own consciousness. It seems clear that this particular notion of God appears in the philosophical process of justifying human knowledge's validity and as a condition of the possibility of this knowledge. One may be rightly concerned that this notion of God is anthropological, that is, defined as a function of human knowledge and "infinite" only with a human infinity. By "human infinity" I understand not an actual-real infinity but, rather, the

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<sup>225</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54 (my bold, VB's italicized). Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 76: "On the other hand, the mere fact of knowledge gives rise to a new and unique relationship between subject and object. Obviously, the justice that the subject renders the object cannot rest unqualifiedly upon some right of the object. The subject has made the interiority of its perception available as a medium in which the object can unfold and display itself – in a way that would have been impossible to the object in itself alone. Nor is this all: the subject has offered the object its inmost spiritual sphere, that is to say, its most personal center, as a tool by means of which the object not only can display itself sensibly but also make itself intelligible in doing so. Consequently, the subject's rigorous objectivity entails a willingness to oblige the object, just as the unlocking of the subject's sensory sphere involves a kind of graciousness toward it. The fact that the object has at its command a spiritual space in which to develop its own innermost possibilities cannot rest upon some 'claim' that the object might have."

infinity of human possibilities (of freedom, of thinking always something else, of thinking always something beyond, etc.), an infinity always referred to the finite. This anthropological notion of God is not the main point of this research, but I thought it useful to mention this question here in order to see another possible commonality between Von Balthasar and Modern Philosophy.

In this text, Von Balthasar's purpose is to explain "the very objectifiability of objects",<sup>226</sup> that is to say, their otherness with respect to the subject, *given the fact that they appear and are known in the subject's consciousness*. Please note that Von Balthasar affirms the alterity of objects with respect to the subject and he thinks that, in this way, idealism is rejected. However, because Von Balthasar affirms also the complete immanence of the object (and of God himself) in the subject's consciousness, one may still wonder whether the previous alterity is enough to deliver Von Balthasar's gnoseology from the most radical Kantianism. Let us explore this text in more detail.

As we have read, the "primary distinction" between God and the subject happens "within the identity of self-consciousness": thus Von Balthasar affirms, at the same time, both God's otherness (with respect to the finite subject) and God's immanence (regarding the subject's consciousness). Even if otherness and immanence are referred to different aspects, Von Balthasar significantly claims that the "distinction" appears within the "identity of self-consciousness": this identity is therefore more primordial. Self-consciousness is the *one thing* within which the primary distinction between God and creatures appears.<sup>227</sup> The allusion to Descartes<sup>228</sup> is not accidental but rather one more proof

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<sup>226</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54.

<sup>227</sup> This can certainly be understood as a monistic system, which is coherent with an anthropological notion of God.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 54: "*cogitor ergo sum* is the fundamental form of the *cogito ergo sum*".



of Von Balthasar's Kantian approach to the critical problem; Von Balthasar departs from consciousness, as is common in Modern Philosophy, because consciousness is the only safe place to begin once the bridge towards reality has been destroyed by skeptical doubt. Clearly, since there is no bridge and a new bridge is not feasible, Modern Philosophy either remains within consciousness or jumps into the pit.

According to Von Balthasar, as we have read, the distance between the finite subject and God allows other finite beings to appear in their own self-standing being. Why? In my view, this is because the finite subject realizes that between his or her own finitude and the infinity of God many other possibilities open up. The finite subject feels like a simple drop before the ocean of being and realizes that his or her own finite being cannot exhaust the possibilities of being as a whole.

Von Balthasar portrays the distinction between God and creatures as a dialectic between finite and infinite, between being as a whole and finite being. This, in itself, should lead to the true metaphysical distinction between God and creatures, which is not a "spatial" distinction (as if God were not everywhere but only in "his place") but an absolute distinction. God's "absolute distinction" from finite being means that God, as actual infinite fullness of being, *cannot be the same thing* as the finite beings, even if God is the cause of every gram of finite being. This absolute distinction, however, does not find a place in Von Balthasar's account. For him, instead, infinite being is a function of self-consciousness and we do not find in self-consciousness an actual infinity but only a "possible" infinity or, perhaps better said, an infinity of possibilities. This is why Von Balthasar's distinction between God and creatures in terms of infinite and finite, as good as it may sound, will neither lead us to any meaningful notion of God nor to a true, real distinction between God and creatures.

For Von Balthasar, not only God but also every other object is completely immanent and within consciousness.<sup>229</sup> This immanence is one of the most important proofs of Von Balthasar's allegiance to Kant rather than to St. Thomas and for this reason cannot be overemphasized. Clearly, for Von Balthasar, other finite beings are not the subject; but no less clear is that, for him, these beings are not outside the subject's consciousness. Therefore, for Von Balthasar, other finite beings' otherness is a function of human consciousness. This is what he is trying to explain: that, even if finite objects happen within our own consciousness, we know them as distinct from ourselves. He even says that people "adjudge external existence and value to the things that they know inside of themselves."<sup>230</sup>

Why is this not an oxymoron? Because Von Balthasar would argue that outside of ourselves does not mean outside of our self-consciousness. For him, self-consciousness is the universe to which we are awake, the universe of the known, the universe of thinking; we discover ourselves with a fundamental position in that universe (perhaps the most fundamental) but in that universe we are not alone. In this doctrine, our very thinking *presupposes* absolute being but we do not *possess* it: in a sense, we only tend to it, we swim into it, we are in it but we cannot grasp absolute being. We are rather grasped by it, we exist like a part of it: we are not timeless as absolute being is, we are not infinite. This is my attempt to make sense of Von Balthasar's affirming the object's otherness and immanence at the same time.

In any case, what must be understood about Von Balthasar's way of thinking is that it begins by locking the subject into self-

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<sup>229</sup> True, for Von Balthasar, the material aspect of the object comes from experience and thus from outside the subject. I am not denying this. I simply mean to say that, for Von Balthasar, the complete object, matter and form, which is the only object we actually know, happens only within consciousness.

<sup>230</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54.

consciousness and then tries to form a universe (similar in terminology to the Thomistic universe) from the pieces found within self-consciousness. The problem is at the beginning: the reason to lock the subject into self-consciousness is the belief that nothing intelligible could have come to the subject from outside and, therefore, the essence and existence we find in consciousness are the result of subjective functions and events of consciousness. As we have said many times, this belief comes from the lack of distinction between the two meanings of intelligible, a distinction which we consider the radical difference between Aquinas and Kant.

I would like to consider briefly two more points in order to conclude this section: 1) Von Balthasar states clearly that both God and finite objects different from the subject are immanent to self-consciousness. 2) The reason for which he rejects idealism has nothing to do with realism and does not deny the complete immanence of the known. Regarding the first point, Von Balthasar says that the primary distinction between God and the subject happens “within the identity of self-consciousness”,<sup>231</sup> and that the finite objects different from the subject “display themselves within the subject”<sup>232</sup> and people know these objects “inside of themselves”.<sup>233</sup> One may object that Von Balthasar is not claiming that these objects “are” inside of ourselves, but that they *appear* and are *known* inside of ourselves. The response to this objection has to do with the second point. What is the reason that Von Balthasar rejects idealism? That there is a “space” outside the subject or, rather, a “distance” between God and the subject in which finite objects different from the subject “have room to *appear* in their own self-standing being.”<sup>234</sup> Now, if the primary distinction

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<sup>231</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54.

<sup>232</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54.

<sup>233</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54.

<sup>234</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54.

between God and the subject happens “within the identity of self-consciousness”,<sup>235</sup> is it not obvious that the distinction between subject and finite objects different from the subject happens also within self-consciousness? In other words, for Von Balthasar, finite objects not only appear but also are within self-consciousness and the subject is the one who adjudges external existence and value to that which appears within self-consciousness. Whether or not this is idealism is irrelevant but, certainly, this is not realism.

### 5) The Profession of Subjectivism

The word “idealism”, because of its ambiguity, does not seem to provide a clear description of Von Balthasar’s doctrine. Maybe the word we are looking for is “subjectivism”, in the sense of an excessive gnoseological emphasis on the subject. The excessive element comes from the fact that, in Von Balthasar’s gnoseology, the subject does too much, that is, the subject provides the object with intelligible content. As usual, the examination of Von Balthasar’s text will allow us to reflect on this point.

Von Balthasar affirms that there are objects outside of ourselves and that they have an essence of their own.<sup>236</sup> Why then is he considered someone who puts an exaggerated emphasis on the subjective side of knowledge? Because in Von Balthasar’s doctrine the object’s essence, existence, alterity, etc. are all posited by the subject and the object itself (as already having essence, existence, etc.) is a product of the subject’s activity and is immanent to the subject’s self-consciousness. Still, one may object that, for Von Balthasar, the subject posits essence and existence for a reason, that is, the subject has a priori the ability to mirror in itself the self-revelation of the object’s essence; therefore, because the subject

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<sup>235</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54.

<sup>236</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 54, commented on in the previous *Section*; VB, *Theologic I*, 153, commented on in *Section One* of this *Chapter*; VB, *Theologic I*, 74, commented on in this *Chapter*, *Section One*, *Subsection Two*.

functions according to a priori laws, our knowledge is objective and true. My response is that “subjectivism” means not only making the subject into an arbitrary force, into a tyrant who makes of things whatever he or she wants. Subjectivism is also, and essentially, making the subject into the only possible source of objective intelligibility, whether or not the subject functions according to a priori rules.

In the case of Von Balthasar’s subjectivism, the subject acts according to a priori rules; now, if this is the case, then the subject *must* be right. In other words, if we interpret the world as a meaningful world, and we cannot do otherwise, then our knowledge of the world must *in turn* be interpreted as objective and true, because knowledge operates according to its own rules. That is, for this kind of subjectivism, the truth is no longer adequacy between intellect and thing, but adequacy between the subject’s acts and its own a priori rules, adequacy with itself. The truth of knowledge is strictly measured according to the subject’s measure and all objectivity is based on pure subjectivity.

The following texts (selected texts from pages 132 to 138 of *Theologic I*) will help us to explore these and other interesting matters in Von Balthasar’s thought.

The first point of contact between subject and object is the phenomenal images [*die erscheinenden Bilder*]. The object shows itself in them. They in turn present themselves uninvited to the subject. The world is composed of these images as its material. The images are altogether manifest. To deny them is impossible. But they are manifest and disclosed in such a way that their very banal obviousness awakens the suspicion that there is some mystery behind them.<sup>237</sup>

The Kantian similarity is obvious: the sensible phenomenon is the material element of knowledge, and “awakes” the subject to

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<sup>237</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 132.

think.<sup>238</sup> Von Balthasar's metaphor of suspicion is genial: we suspect something we do not see. A suspicion comes from the subject even if something in the object moves the subject to suspect. The point Von Balthasar wants to make, however, is not beautiful: reality does not share its mystery with us, we do not encounter reality's mystery. We have to make it up. But, don't worry! We know how to do this! We are "wired" to refurbish reality with its mystery, everything is under control. Reality wanted to hide from us, but we discovered it—or, at least, so we think—and reality is left speechless to accept whatever sentence we may pronounce. But again, no worries: we are always right. The subject's laws are just, inexorable, unappealable. "We know what is good for you, Oh Reality: you must just accept it and it will be well with you...!" Von Balthasar uses the metaphor of "suspicion" to establish the subject as the origin of intelligibility, [intelligibility] which certainly is not provided by the phenomenal images.

I cannot compete with Von Balthasar's metaphors, but I can certainly warn philosophers with a fine sense of beauty: even true beauty can lead a person astray. Von Balthasar's finest artistic sensitivity certainly makes the reading of his text very enjoyable; the philosopher, however, must be attentive and ponder *what* is being said before getting carried away by a torrent of images towards the ocean of subjectivity. What I say has nothing to do with Von Balthasar's intentions, which could be good, but with Von Balthasar's doctrine. The fact that something "feels good" when I read it does not mean that is right. Our job as philosophers is not despising beauty when we find it, but neither is it to repeat in affected ecstasy phrases we do not understand. In my view, the consequences of Von Balthasar's doctrine are serious, regardless of his intentions, and the good philosopher must be able to discern in

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<sup>238</sup> Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 1.

Von Balthasar the good (which is not only his linguistic expression) from the bad.

A few lines later, the text continues:

*The Inessentiality of the Image World* (Das Wesenslose). The images simulate something that they themselves are not: a world. They suggest the idea of essence and existence, but they are neither. They have no essence, because they are nothing but surface without depth. They are mere appearance [*Erscheinung*] and are thus incapable of displaying any interiority at all. In themselves, they have neither distance nor proximity. They float in themselves, without any unequivocal relation either to an object or to a subject.<sup>239</sup>

Von Balthasar is thus denying the sensible appearance any intelligibility. The sensible images are not a world, they are neither essence nor existence, they do not have essence. The logical consequence, as in Kant, is to constitute the subject as source of the object's intelligibility:

It is scarcely possible to describe their reality: they are not nothing, since they occur as images; yet neither are they what the subject that apprehends them would spontaneously call being or existence. Perhaps the knowing subject, in a kind of distraction, at first identifies the images with being, until one day it notices that this property does not belong to the images, as it had thought, but was instituted and posited by the subject.<sup>240</sup> Thus, the images float without fixity between

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<sup>239</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 133.

<sup>240</sup> [Ayala's note]. Remember Kant's similar remarks at the beginning of *KRV*: "But although all our cognition commences **with** experience, yet it does not on that account all arise **from** experience. 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, which addition we cannot

being and nothingness, just as they float with no fixed residence in a no-man's-land between subject and object.<sup>241</sup>

This “kind of distraction” is certainly a metaphor but Von Balthasar will soon give a more philosophical explanation of the fact that we always interpret the world as already having meaning. This implies that, for Von Balthasar, the image world seems to have meaning in itself but, in reality, that meaning comes from the subject. Why does he think this way? Given that, for Von Balthasar, the world is sensible and has *therefore* absolutely no intelligibility, the *fact* that the world *seems* to be intelligible *must* be explained as a subjective addition of intelligibility to the image world. The fact that we are not aware, at first, of this addition does not give us the right to explain knowledge in any other way<sup>242</sup> such as, for example,

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distinguish from that fundamental material *until long practice has made us attentive to it and skilled in separating it out*” (Kant, *KRV*, B 1). Kant’s bold, my italicized.

<sup>241</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 133. “Between subject and object”, says Von Balthasar: is he not recognizing the reality of the objects in themselves? Von Balthasar may seem to believe in an external object but, 1) he has already shown us how an external object is compatible with a finite object immanent to self-consciousness and 2) even if he really believed in something external to self-consciousness, he critically grounds this affirmation in our a priori functions, that is, in our thinking and not in the perception of the real. At one point, like Descartes, Von Balthasar seems to ground the objectivity of knowing in God’s goodness, as we have seen while discussing the mirroring theory (cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 77-78, 119; discussion in this Chapter, Section 1, Subsection 1). That is, because we cannot get out of self-consciousness, we must trust God in order to entertain there being something outside self-consciousness.

<sup>242</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 134: “[T]he inessential, inexistent image world that we have just described does not occur at all in natural consciousness. It is an artificial abstraction that isolates the sheer matter of the world from the form that it always already has. And just as the apprehending subject has always already conferred on the images the depth dimension of essence, it has always already given them the dignity of existence.”



assuming that there is intelligibility in the sensible reality. This assumption, in Von Balthasar's doctrine, has been made impossible by his Kantian lack of distinction between intelligibility as content and as mode of being of the content.

The chaos of experience, which is the material element of knowledge, must be informed by the subject's activity, as in Kant:

Because the images have no depth and no essence, they also have no law. If the images alone existed, the world would be completely random [...]. If they are to start making sense, the images must be lent an essence and existence that they do not possess themselves. To lend them essence is to interpret them as the appearance of a coherent but non-appearing sense; to lend them existence is to interpret them as the index of existing things.<sup>243</sup>

Here is an interesting transition from a more mechanical expression ("posit", "lend", etc.) to a gnoseological one ("interpret as"). The expressions are equated: "To lend them essence is to interpret them as the appearance of a coherent but non-appearing sense."<sup>244</sup> In other words, to lend the images essence is the same as to interpret them as having essence, as being the appearance of an essence. Now, Von Balthasar has just said that the images "do not possess themselves" essence and existence. Therefore, for Von Balthasar, we interpret the images which do not have essence as having essence. How can we call this interpretation "objective" or "truthful" knowledge? For Von Balthasar, the answer is in the subject:

In itself, the regularity of the appearances is senseless, yet it intimates a meaningful regularity in what does not appear—to a mind that habitually strives to discover sense. *Because our mind is so structured* that it cannot avoid posing the question of

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<sup>243</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 133-134.

<sup>244</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 134.

sense, it has always already interpreted the world of images in terms of a coherent significance. It always already perceives in the images a perspectival depth that they *do not possess of themselves* and draws out of them a total form that is more than the bare outline of the naked appearance.<sup>245</sup>

That is, the fact that we interpret as having an essence that which does not have an essence is explained by the subject's a priori laws: this is the way we function. Is this a satisfactory explanation? This is the only possible explanation once we have severed, with Kant, the sensible reality from any kind of intelligibility. In other words, if, on the one hand, sensible reality cannot possibly possess intelligibility and, on the other hand, sensible reality appears to us as possessing intelligibility, then the only way to justify what appears in our consciousness is not only to attribute to the subject the origin of intelligibility but also to endow the subject with a priori laws. That is, it does not seem "just" to interpret the images as having essence when, in reality, they do not have it because there is no correspondence between the subject's interpretation and the images' reality: therefore, we need to justify the subject's activity by a transcendental law inscribed in the subject. In this way, there is a correspondence between the subject's activity and its own transcendental, a priori law. Consequently, even if it seems that the subject does not have a reason to interpret things in this way (*i.e.* as having an essence), we must acquit the subject of injustice by invoking the inexorable transcendental law: the subject was just following the rules. And because the law has been imposed on the subject, allegedly by God, the subject is certainly doing the right thing: things *must* have an essence of themselves, if in fact our

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<sup>245</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 134 (my emphasis). As the reader may have noticed, Von Balthasar speaks of lending the (plural) images a (singular) essence. We will discuss this question later. Our focus now is that, for Von Balthasar, the intelligible does not belong to the images unless by the subject's interpretation.

interior law obliges us to think in this way. Or, as Von Balthasar would put it a few lines later:

The subject does not draw the experience of essence and existence immediately from the images; and since things are not manifest to it outside of the images, it can draw this experience from nowhere other than itself. Out of itself, out of its own substance, the subject nourishes the images and bestows upon them the rank of a portrayal of the world.<sup>246</sup>

The subject does not do this without reason; its deed is no daring, fantastic risk; it simply follows its own law of bestowing sense on everything it encounters. This positing is so spontaneous that it precedes any free deliberation; it is nature. It arises out of the depth of the knowing subject. But its trajectory passes through the image into the depth of the object to be known. It uses the image as a fulcrum to swing from out of the interiority of the subject into the interiority of the object. Of course, one of the primary and ineliminable presuppositions of the interpretation of sense itself is that these two unities are not coincident, that the object known is by no means identical to the knowing subject but possesses and claims its own sphere of essence and existence. The subject would not believe that this presupposition was annulled or called in question even if it could be shown that all the materials out of which its knowledge composes the objective world actually come from its own subjective storehouse. These materials may originate in the subject, but this is no argument against the legitimacy of their application to the object. On the contrary, this subject origin immediately requires it.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> [Ayala's note]. These last remarks are the principle of all Kantian subjectivism, so many times discussed before.

<sup>247</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 135 (my emphasis).

After all we have discussed in the previous paragraphs, I think this text needs little comment, if any. For Von Balthasar, the world has a meaning because this is the way we have interpreted it; and we have interpreted the world in this way because this is the way we function, this is the law of our subjectivity. Our interpretation is legitimate not because it is in accordance with the reality of the images but because it is in accordance with our subjective a priori laws; and thus we can say legitimately that the world has essence and existence. The “presupposition” which Von Balthasar mentions is precisely this, a presupposition, that is to say, something previously supposed in the subject, a priori, as a condition of the possibility of interpretation.

I am not saying that apriorism has no place in the explanation of human understanding: philosophy is called to elucidate human understanding’s conditions of possibility. What I am saying is that in Von Balthasar, as in Kant, the a priori element in human understanding is the source of intelligible content, whereas in Aquinas the a priori element is the source of the act of knowing (in the possible intellect) and of the intelligible mode of being of the object (in the agent intellect) but not the source of the intelligible content itself.

In the pages following the section just quoted,<sup>248</sup> Von Balthasar rejects both Kantian Rationalism and Empiricism. This does not mean that Von Balthasar regrets any of the Kantian principles he has just confessed.<sup>249</sup> What Von Balthasar rejects in Kant is an idea

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<sup>248</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 136-138.

<sup>249</sup> Nor does it mean that he was perhaps “rehearsing” a doctrine (i.e., the Kantian doctrine) which he would eventually dismiss. Hegel employs this “rehearsal” device in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: he argues convincingly for a certain doctrine as if it were his own, only to confute it later with even more brilliant arguments. This stylistic resource may appear like a playing with the reader or even a certain manipulation, but it does have the advantage of recreating in the reader the thought process of the particular philosophers and

of truth which is exclusively related to the pure, abstract intelligible, whereas he rejects in Empiricism the relegation of truth to the senseless image world. For Von Balthasar, as we have said before, the truth is somehow in the middle: truth is precisely the revelation of the essence in the image, and therefore both, essence and image, belong to the truth. On the one hand, the essence does not belong to the truth unless the essence is revealed, and only the image reveals the essence; on the other hand, the image is nothing other than the revelation of the essence. Von Balthasar's conception of truth is therefore different from Kant's; Von Balthasar, however, is not rejecting Kant's principles but only some of Kant's conclusions. Von Balthasar's point of departure is the same as Kant's but, along the way, Von Balthasar takes another road. Von Balthasar never ceases to consider the image world inessential, which is the Kantian point of departure, and this is what necessitates for Von Balthasar that the source of intelligibility be in the subject. For him, as we have seen, subjective interpretation (according to a priori laws) is that which posits essence and existence into the image world.

That being said, it is important to underline in Von Balthasar's doctrine an insightful element which was also present in Aquinas' gnoseology, namely the necessary relationship between essence and appearance in true knowledge. Both Aquinas and Von Balthasar admit the distinction between these two aspects (essence and appearance) and both admit the necessary relationship between these two aspects in order to have an adequate knowledge of reality (in Aquinas' case, by means of his doctrine of the *conversio ad phantasmata*). The difference is that, whereas for Aquinas we need the subjective *conversio* because in reality the essence exists in the particular (objective knowledge must adapt to the way things

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of the very history of philosophy. In my view, there are other more direct and respectful ways to show the reader the coherence of an erroneous doctrine and of the history of philosophy.

are in reality), for Von Balthasar instead we discover the depth of reality (essence) by analyzing our own knowledge (objective reality must adapt to the way we interpret it). Furthermore, whereas for Aquinas the *conversio* presupposes that both contents, sensible and intelligible, come from reality, for Von Balthasar instead our mirroring or interpretation of reality presupposes that the intelligible content comes from the subject's storehouse and is posited by the subject. Additionally, whereas for Aquinas the subjective relationship between essence and appearance (*conversio*) depends critically on the way things are, for Von Balthasar the objective aspect (the relationship between essence and appearance in the object) depends critically on the way we know. Finally, the a priori element for Aquinas (that is, the agent intellect) is meant to unveil the intelligible content present in the thing itself, whereas in Von Balthasar the a priori element is meant to posit the intelligible content in the thing itself. This is because, for Aquinas, the intelligible content can be present in the thing itself with another mode of being whereas, for Von Balthasar, the intelligible content is foreign to the image world.

## 6) The Agent Intellect in Von Balthasar

In the following text, I want to focus on the usage of the term "agent intellect". In my view, this is a clear example of Von Balthasar's considering the agent intellect a formal a priori, that is, a faculty productive of objective content. For Von Balthasar, the intellect *itself*, as agent intellect, is source of intelligible content:

Worldly knowledge, then, can be distinguished from God's purely creative knowledge only if the measure of its truth is distributed between subject and object. Worldly knowing is always two things at once: receptive and spontaneous, measured and measuring. The two factors can, of course, be distinguished and accented differently. On the one hand, the spontaneity of knowledge can be completely at the disposal of its receptivity, can seem to turn into sheer passivity, in order

to welcome what is offered with as little prejudice as possible. On the other hand, the same spontaneity can, by a free and creative decision, pronounce on what is true in a given situation, indeed, on what has to be true in it. But wherever the accent may fall, one thing remains constant: *knowledge always both gives and receives the measure, and truth arises [entsteht] and consists [besteht] in this duality of measuring and being measured. The knowing intellect both produces truth (as intellectus agens) and registers it (as intellectus passibilis).* It is in this shifting middle, in a kind of balancing act between reason's two functions—receptive, consenting self-abandonment [*Hingabe*], on the one hand, and judgment, on the other—that truth itself moves.<sup>250</sup>

Von Balthasar's notion of agent intellect is, firstly, different from Aquinas' notion and, secondly, inspired in Kant.

It is different from Aquinas' notion of agent intellect for two reasons. The first one is that here the agent intellect seems to be one of the two ways in which the same faculty acts ("The knowing intellect both produces truth [as *intellectus agens*] and registers it [as *intellectus passibilis*"]) or one of the "two functions" of reason, whereas in Aquinas it seems clear that the agent intellect and the possible intellect are different faculties.<sup>251</sup> More importantly, and this is the second reason, here the agent intellect produces *the same* as the possible intellect receives, that is to say, truth; and both possible intellect and agent intellect act with regard to *the same thing*, that is, measure: the agent intellect measuring (imposing measure) and the possible intellect in a passive way, that is, being measured. In Aquinas, instead, the agent intellect and the possible intellect act with regard to different things, not only in different ways. The agent intellect produces or bestows an intelligible mode

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<sup>250</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 42 (my emphasis).

<sup>251</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 214-219.

of being on human intellect's object, whereas the possible intellect receives the already abstracted intelligible content. The agent intellect illumines and abstracts, that is, makes knowable, but only the possible intellect knows. The agent intellect does not relate directly to the truth, but to the knowability of the truth. For Von Balthasar, both agent intellect and possible intellect relate to the intelligible content,<sup>252</sup> one actively and the other passively: this is not so in Aquinas.

"Spontaneity" may be said of human knowledge, I agree, but why should it mean "creativity with regards to intelligible content"? Could it not simply mean that we are the source of our own acts, insofar as our acts issue "spontaneously" from us when we are "triggered" by objects? And if we, at least sometimes, spontaneously take intelligible content from our own storehouse and apply it to our present reality, could this not be explained by saying that our storehouse has been supplied by previous

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<sup>252</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 83: "To distinguish as sharply between profane and sacred reason as Bergson does is to absolutize the split and to place its healing beyond the reach of any remedy. It is to rip apart once and for all things that, for Thomas Aquinas, formed an inextricable unity: the judging intellect (*intellectus agens, dividens et componens*) and the perceiving intellect (*intellectus passibilis*): By the same token, it is to extract from 'rational' thinking its mysterious character and, in the same stroke, to deprive intuitive, insightful thinking of demonstrability and logical structure, thus condemning it to isolation and to irrationality. To be sure, the two aspects of intellectual cognition can be distinguished, and, in any given instance, one can be accentuated more strongly than the other. Nevertheless, it is only together that they constitute the true power and wealth of the intelligence. There is one intellect, which both proceeds logically and judges, on the one hand, and understands, on the other, and this one intellect finds itself face to face with the one object, which is both rationally graspable and endowed with a unique intimate sphere. To see no contradiction, not even an antithesis, in these two aspects of being has always been a hallmark of sound philosophy."



receptivity?<sup>253</sup> Besides, I do not think Von Balthasar would admit that we truly “receive” any truth or intelligible content from reality, except insofar as we receive the appearance which is, for him, appearance of the non-appearing essence: appearance is thus “truth” insofar as it is a “revelation” of the essence.

Towards the end of our text, Von Balthasar mentions several times knowing’s spontaneous aspect before the receptive one: “knowledge always both gives and receives the measure [...] measuring and being measured [...] produces truth... and registers it.”<sup>254</sup> Could this not be construed as Von Balthasar’s claiming the intellect’s receptivity regarding intelligible content? It would seem that, for Von Balthasar, we register that which has been *previously* produced. I don’t think so: the order of the words is not sufficient proof of Von Balthasar’s claiming a real sequence (at the beginning of the same paragraph the order was the opposite) and, in any case, this would not take away the fact that originally, for Von Balthasar, spontaneity (as creativity) regarding the intelligible content is primordial.

What appears to be the case, instead, is that Von Balthasar understands by “receptivity” the receptivity of the sensible appearance. If this is so, then the possible intellect is no longer understood in a Thomistic sense because knowing itself is no longer receptive but “positive” of intellectual content. Possible intellect would be for Von Balthasar the radical receptivity of the spirit regarding the sensible, that is, the spirit’s openness to the

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<sup>253</sup> For example, our present experience (recognizing my friend when I encounter him on the street) depends on our past experience (my memories of my friend). Fabro elaborates a Thomistic theory of schematism (based on the theory of the cogitative sense) which is very helpful in understanding the limits of human knowledge’s objectivity.

<sup>254</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 42.

image world through the senses.<sup>255</sup> Von Balthasar can still say that this sensible receptivity “registers” the truth, because it does receive the revelation of the essence. Revelation (it bears repetition) is understood as sensible appearance which, for Von Balthasar, cannot be truly separated from the self-revealing essence, even if they must be distinguished as two necessary aspects of the same process of self-revelation in which the truth consists.

The following text (from another section of *Theologic I*) would confirm my reflections from the previous paragraph. Here, Von Balthasar refers the subject’s receptivity to sensibility rather than to intelligibility:

These measures are always already impressed upon its [*i.e.* the subject’s] inward space (*species impressa*) by means of its receptivity, and they are transformed by means of its spontaneity (*intellectus agens*) into conscious measures that it can measure by the measure of its own self-consciousness (*species expressa*).<sup>256</sup>

Von Balthasar’s use of Latin Scholastic terms should not confuse the reader into thinking that this is Thomistic doctrine. Let me firstly say a word about Von Balthasar’s usage of “measure” and, secondly, try to interpret these Latin expressions in terms of what they mean for Von Balthasar.

It is important to consider that the term “measure” indicates something which refers to a patron: measure is one thing whose very being refers to another as its reason. For example, something

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<sup>255</sup> Here, I think there is a similarity with Rahner’s conception of sensibility as the intellect’s “receptive origin” (cf. Rahner, *SW*, 260 f., 285 f., etc.) and as “power of a spirit in the world” (cf. Rahner, *SW*, 26 at footnote). Both authors emphasize that the intellect’s receptivity regards the sensible because there is nothing intelligible to be received from the outside world.

<sup>256</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 69.

is three feet long: this is its measure. This concrete measure, however, is a certain expression of a patron which is not concrete but ideal and universal: “foot” as unit of measurement. Measure, then, is a dual phenomenon, a concrete expression of that which is present in the expression as its reason. In my view, Von Balthasar employs measure’s characteristic duality to indicate the appearance as an appearance of the essence.

*Species impressa* means here the sensible appearance (the object’s “measure”) as received or impressed into the subject’s consciousness. *Intellectus agens*, in this text, refers to that subjective spontaneity which creatively registers or reproduces the object’s measure as subjective measure, by mirroring subjectively the object’s essence. In other words, by the action of the agent intellect, the object’s measure is transformed into the subject’s measure, the object’s appearance is transformed into the subject’s expression (“conscious measure” or, here, also “*species expressa*”), because the subject reproduces in itself the essence’s self-expressing movement. The subject has in itself this ability to mirror the object’s essence, as we have discussed previously.<sup>257</sup> With these reflections in mind, what Von Balthasar says at the end of this text<sup>258</sup> can be understood as follows: the subject “can measure” (that is, can impose its own a priori patron to) the “conscious measures” (“conscious measures” understood as the appearances welcomed into the subject’s consciousness) “by the measure of its own self-consciousness”, that is, by interpreting the appearances as the subject interprets itself, that is, as finite being in the light of absolute being.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Cf. this *Chapter*’s section 1: “Creative Mirroring Theory: Human Understanding in Von Balthasar’s *Theologic I*”.

<sup>258</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 69: “conscious measures that it can measure by the measure of its own self-consciousness.”

<sup>259</sup> Cf. this *Chapter*’s section 4: “Does Von Balthasar Fall into Idealism?” and VB, *Theologic I*, 54.

That Von Balthasar and St. Thomas think differently regarding the agent intellect seems clear from what has been discussed so far. Besides, if we were to apply to St. Thomas the terms species *impressa* and *expressa*, this should be done in a completely different way.<sup>260</sup>

## 7) The Universal and Von Balthasar: No Stability in the World?

The following text can help us in seeing the consequences of Von Balthasar's notion of truth as a process of self-revelation, that is, as the essence's sensible appearance (or sensible manifestation). In Von Balthasar's doctrine, the truly Thomistic understanding of the universal as nature is compromised because, for Von Balthasar, there is no more real stability in the essence (the essence's "essence" is precisely *to appear* sensibly). In other words, Von Balthasar's notion of truth is in conflict not only with the Thomistic understanding of the universal (historical aspect), but also with the stability of nature (doctrinal aspect).

[Man] realizes his entire, one-of-a-kind uniqueness exclusively within the universal possibility of which he is a single instance. On the other hand, the concept of man cannot be abstracted in such a way as to leave the individual person's being outside its conceptual content. No individual man is a synthesis of universal human nature and individual personality. For it is precisely *intrinsic* to the universal concept of human nature to be realized from instance to instance only as an individual person. An abstract concept of man's being that did not always already include its concrete realization or concrete personal being would be at best an imperfect, rudimentary, and, so to say, blurry knowledge. Such

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<sup>260</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 341 ff. and 191 ff.

knowledge may reflect a stage of human knowledge, but never a divine idea of humanity.<sup>261</sup>

I will address three issues in my following reflections. Firstly, Von Balthasar diverges from Thomism with his notion of universal concept. Secondly, this divergence is rooted in Von Balthasar's radically Kantian concept of truth. Thirdly, Von Balthasar's notion of universal concept threatens to destroy any stability in nature, which was exactly the point of departure for the problem of the universals.

### **7.1. Von Balthasar's Deviation from Aquinas' Notion of Universal**

Firstly, then, Von Balthasar's notion of universal concept and St. Thomas' notion are different. Von Balthasar states that "the concept of man cannot be abstracted in such a way as to leave the individual person's being outside its conceptual content", whereas St. Thomas would say that intelligence knows by abstraction from the material individual conditions. Furthermore, "No individual man is a synthesis of universal human nature and individual personality", affirms Von Balthasar. However, if we were not able to distinguish in a human being that which is common to all human beings from that which is particular to this instance, neither would we be able to speak about human nature at all: the problem of the universals would never have been a problem. Now, if we are able to distinguish these things in a human being (nature and individuality), this is because these things somehow compose that same human being. I am not saying that we have two completely unrelated, spatially distinct, parts in a human being. What I am saying is that in each particular human being there must be something which accounts for what is common to all human beings, and something else which accounts for what is particular. Therefore, while it is true enough that, metaphysically speaking, a

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<sup>261</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 154.

man is not a composite of nature and individual conditions but rather a composite of matter and form, or of substance and accident, or of essence and being (being as *esse ut actus*); it is also true that the form accounts for what we understand as common to all individuals, and matter accounts for what is particular to this individual.<sup>262</sup> This may neither sound right, nor is it my present purpose to make sense of this: but this is clearly Aquinas' doctrine and therefore, here, Von Balthasar is not in agreement with St. Thomas.

For Von Balthasar, the truth is a process of real dynamic adaptation of the subject to the object, whereas for Aquinas this adaptation is intentional. For Von Balthasar, the subject must imitate in him or herself the essence's process of self-revelation; and I have called this imitation or adaptation "real" because, for Von Balthasar, the subject imitates in its own real being the essence's movement of self-expression. In this way, Von Balthasar explains the adequacy defining truth. That is, as in the real object there is no real distinction between the universal and the sensible, because the same thing is both (insofar as the particular thing is itself an instance of a universal nature); in the same way, in the knowing subject there must be no real distinction between the universal and its expression in the sensible. This latter distinction, in fact, would make knowledge less objective and truthful.

## **7.2. Deviation Based on Von Balthasar's Kantian Concept of Truth**

If we look at Von Balthasar's doctrine on this point carefully, however, we can see that his divergence from Aquinas' doctrine depends on his Kantian point of departure. That is, because Von Balthasar has reduced the image world to a purely sensible material (Kantian point of departure), he must now make human understanding's intelligible element a function of the sensible

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<sup>262</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, 85, 3 ad 4.

element, that is, he needs to connect *essentially* the intelligible to the sensible, or rather dissolve one into the other. Otherwise, Von Balthasar could not explain the unity of sensible and intelligible in human understanding. That is, for Von Balthasar, if intelligible and sensible contents were not essentially related and even dissolved one into the other, then the unity of intelligible and sensible would be impossible, *both* in the object and in the subject. In the object, this unity would be impossible because the image world appears to be purely sensible: where could we possibly find the ideal, the abstracted universal, in the real world? In the subject, this same unity (of intelligible and sensible) would appear to be arbitrary and therefore neither rational nor necessary, for two reasons: 1) because this unity would not reflect the constitution of the object, and 2) because the contents, in themselves, are simply different and there would be no reason to relate the intelligible content to the sensible content. In other words, if intelligible and sensible contents were essentially distinct, then intelligible knowledge could be considered on its own, separately from sensible knowledge and, therefore, *for Von Balthasar*, the truth would be something detached from sensible reality.

Things would have been different if Von Balthasar had begun by considering, with St. Thomas, that there may be something intelligible in the sensible reality. In fact, as St. Thomas argues, it is not necessary that what is abstracted (or separated) from the sensible in our minds be abstracted (or separated) in reality as well. In human knowledge, the conformity between object and subject is not physical but intentional: the content is identical but the mode of being is not. In order to save the objectivity of knowledge, that which is known must be in reality, but not necessarily with the same mode of being as it is in our mind.

Significantly, Von Balthasar refers to the “divine idea of humanity” when looking for a pattern for our true idea of humanity. In fact, according to St. Thomas, both what is common and what is particular to each individual are contained in the divine idea. This

is because God knows in a certain oneness that which in reality is multiple; moreover, all perfections (common and individual) must be contained in the First Cause with an intelligible mode of being. This is all very Thomistic but why should our *human* ideas be like the divine ideas? Von Balthasar might respond that there must be some analogy between Creator and creature. This is true, but also it is true that that which in the Creator is one and the same must be found in creatures multiplied and distributed in different perfections.

Creatures are multiple and distinct, whereas God is one. The distinct and multiple perfections of creatures are precontained in the actual, infinite perfection of God, as the different degrees of heat in a room are contained in a certain oneness in the fire of the chimney. That which is one in God is multiple in creatures. True, unity can be found also in creatures: but even unity in creatures falls short of the unity of God. God's unity is a unity of simplicity, whereas the individual creature's unity is a unity of composition (essence-being, substance-accident, matter-form, etc.).

Something similar happens with the knowledge of creatures' particular and universal aspects: that which is united and simple in God must be composite in us, because of our imperfection. Our knowledge is imperfect: it is a composite of sensibility and intelligence. However, that imperfect knowledge, through the *conversio ad phantasmata* and through the progress of each individual's knowledge (especially through resolution<sup>263</sup>) arrives, insofar as it is possible in this life, to resemble the content of divine knowledge. It is in this sense that we can speak of an analogy between God's knowledge and ours: both have a certain unity, but

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<sup>263</sup> Regarding the doctrine of resolution in Aquinas' metaphysical method, cf. Michael Tavuzzi, "Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics", *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, Volume 55, Number 2 (April 1991) 199-227; Aquinas, *In Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1, *Ad tertiam questionem*.



God's knowledge has a unity of simplicity, whereas human knowledge has a unity of composition.

In my view, Von Balthasar is bringing to the discussion the divine idea in order to justify in a Thomistic way his own doctrine of truth as a certain "middle" between intelligible and sensible. To be sure, for Aquinas, the divine idea's unity is a unity of simplicity. Now, according to Von Balthasar, this divine unity is analogically realized in human knowledge as a unity of conflation (of sensible and intelligible) or, better said, as the unity of two aspects of self-revelation's movement; whereas, according to St. Thomas, human knowledge's unity is a unity of composition, made possible by the relationship between two distinct contents. Indeed, for Aquinas, the intelligible and sensible contents are essentially distinct, despite the fact that they belong to the same real thing. This is because the real thing is also a unity of composition: thus, the sensible content corresponds to the thing's individual perfections (*i.e.*, to its concrete being in the matter), whereas the intelligible content corresponds to the thing's specific perfection (*i.e.*, to its nature). Thus, in my view, the analogy Von Balthasar sees between divine and human knowledge is not the same analogy Aquinas saw, and this difference depends on Von Balthasar's Kantian principles.

Von Balthasar parallels the divine idea to human understanding for still another reason: the divine idea is active and agent of reality, insofar as created reality's perfection comes from the divine idea. According to Kantian principles, human understanding also is active of the object's intelligible perfection, by projecting or positing intelligibility onto the raw material of experience. For Von Balthasar, this characteristic of "active" in both the divine idea and human understanding would be another element of analogy

between God's knowing and human knowing. I need not elaborate on why this is not a Thomistic analogy.<sup>264</sup>

### 7.3. Consequence: The Destruction of Stability in Nature

For Von Balthasar, the intelligible is *essentially* self-revelation in the sensible. Now, is it not Thomistic to affirm that the nature of corporeal things is essentially meant to exist in the concrete? Yes, but this “having to be concrete” is precisely “essential” to the nature. The nature itself is not concrete, is universal, but it “must be” concrete. A dog *must* have flesh and bones and cannot be thought otherwise. A dog *must* be a particular dog, and cannot be thought otherwise: we cannot think of a real dog as an existing platonic dog-in-itself, without a sensible matter.<sup>265</sup> But these “musts” are all essential features of the universal essence of dog: the word “must” expresses necessity and so relates to universality. That is why the Thomistic doctrine of *conversio* says that we understand the universal as existing in the concrete, not that we understand the concrete.<sup>266</sup> The concrete never becomes the *direct* object of human understanding,<sup>267</sup> but the mind's reference to the concrete is the necessary way to understand this direct object, the nature.

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<sup>264</sup> Certainly, the analogy would apply to creative artistic human knowledge, but this is not Von Balthasar's point.

<sup>265</sup> A platonic dog-in-itself without sensible matter would not have a body, would therefore not be an animal and so could never be a dog.

<sup>266</sup> Language could be misleading here, so I clarify: of course we understand the concrete (we understand “what this dog is”, and in this sense we understand this dog), insofar as understanding the concrete is perceiving its specific perfection, its nature, its whatness. However, in the sense explained in the main body of the text, we do not understand the concrete but the universal as existing in the concrete.

<sup>267</sup> I must set aside the question of the explicit intellectual knowledge of the singular and the possibility of a human *verbum* of the singular. Cf. Fabro, *Percezione*, 313-335.

I think a proportion can be seen here, between the way things are and the way human beings know. The corporeal nature's essential concreteness is not itself concrete, but it relates to the concrete. This is why the intellect does not know directly the concrete, but by the *conversio ad phantasmata* relates the essential to the concrete. Moreover, real concreteness (in this or that individual) does not belong to the corporeal nature in itself (that is, to the perfection by which this body is of a certain species) but real concreteness does belong to the corporeal nature's mode of being. This is why real concreteness does not belong to the intelligible content of knowing, but to the mode of knowing this same intelligible content.

Nature shows us that which is necessary existing in a contingent mode of being, or corporeal beings acting for the most part according to necessary laws. We are able to discover this necessity in nature. We are not required to separate this necessity from the contingent nature, but to admit that there is a distinction between that which is necessary in contingent things and the mode of being of that which is necessary.

Von Balthasar seems to have exchanged the Aristotelian matter-form pattern for the Hegelian infinite-finite pattern, in order to explain the relationship between universal and particular. For Aristotle, the object is a synthesis of matter and form, whereas for Von Balthasar the finite object is an expression of the infinite essence. For Aristotle, the form is a core of stability for the finite object, whereas for Von Balthasar the essence is a process of dissolution in the finite. The Aristotelian form requires a matter in order to exist, whereas the Hegelian infinite cannot even be understood without the finite. That which is universal is stable for Aristotle, whereas for Hegel it is process. That is why in Aristotle there is a distinction between specific perfection and particular realization, whereas for Hegel and Von Balthasar there is no meaningful distinction between the two moments of the process of self-manifestation. Better said, for Aristotle the universal explains

the particular, whereas for Hegel the particular expresses and explains the universal. For Aristotle, the universal is understood in abstraction from the particular; for Von Balthasar, the universal cannot be understood without the particular. This is because, for Von Balthasar, the universal is a process of self-revelation which must include that which is expressed as the universal's own content: the universal's *essence* is to reveal itself. For Von Balthasar, the universal is the foundationless foundation of expression, it is the unseizable starting point of being's movement of self-revelation.

Von Balthasar's gnoseological and metaphysical dissolution of the universal in the particular comes from Von Balthasar's original inability to distinguish the universal from its mode of being in reality. This led him not only to attribute all source of intelligibility to the subject, as Kant had done, but also to dissolve intelligibility into a process, into a groundless movement of the self out of itself and towards the world—as Hegel (Absolute Self) and Heidegger (particular self) had done.

For Von Balthasar, then, things remain undefined because they are the momentary result of a self-defining process. The only thing “stable”, the only thing “behind” the appearance is this movement of self-determination in the sensible. This movement cannot be defined in itself because that would mean to separate it from its determination, a separation which for Von Balthasar is impossible, unthinkable and, most of all, untrue. For him, truth is manifestation, self-revelation, which includes both the self which is revealed and the self's own revelation; truth is in the middle, that is, in the dissolution of the intelligible in the sensible, in the movement which has always departed from the essence towards a never fully achieved sensible appearance; truth is not the sensible, but it is revelation in the sensible; truth is not the intelligible, but the intelligible's revelation.

In Von Balthasar, as in other thinkers, the intelligible has become *movement* towards the sensible, *action, being in the world*, because this is the necessary consequence of the Cartesian *cogito*: intelligibility originates from the subject and becomes thus pure subjectivity, pure position of itself on the other of the world. Subjective determinations of the object (in the active exercise of the subject's a priori functions) come from the subject's own lack of definition or, better said, from the subject as undefined-self-determining-in-the-other being.

Was it not evident that there is in nature something stable behind the sensible appearances? Was it not possible to make sense of it? Had not Aristotle and St. Thomas done so already? It is often said that a little error at the beginning makes for a great disaster at the end. But if the error at the beginning is enormous, like Kant's error...

## 8) Kant and St. Thomas in Von Balthasar: Receptivity and Spontaneity<sup>268</sup>

In our next quote, Von Balthasar refers clearly to both Kant and St. Thomas. The section is entitled "The Freedom of the Subject" and begins this way:

Ascending the scale of beings from the point of view of the object, we have found that truth, as self-unveiling, has increasingly taken on the form of freedom. At the top of the

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<sup>268</sup> When I criticize Von Balthasar's notion of spontaneity, I mean to criticize a Kantian spontaneity regarding the intelligible content, as a certain subjective creativity of this content. I do not criticize but rather I maintain the human subjects' spontaneity regarding their own acts, insofar as human subjects are sources of their own acts. And I also maintain a certain spontaneity regarding the content, insofar as human subjects' knowing acts spontaneously reach and embrace the *given* content. Moreover, and as has been said many times, the agent intellect's activity regards the content's mode of being, not the content itself.

hierarchy, a being's self-revelation is left to the discretion and responsibility of the being itself.<sup>269</sup>

That is, the subject, because it is at the top of the scale of finite beings, is free to unveil itself to another subject. Von Balthasar suggests in the following lines that a "conventional" notion of knowledge is a Kantian notion, in which the subject alone is active and the other of the world provides only the raw material for the subject's activity. Even if Von Balthasar does not align completely with this conventional notion of knowledge, neither does he depart from it in any meaningful way.

The relationship between subject and object seems almost to have inverted into the opposite of our conventional conception of it. The object is no longer the inert material of knowledge, of which the subject alone is the active, creative agent. It is all but transformed into the active partner, whereas the subject, which is primarily receptive, almost seems forced into a helpless passivity.<sup>270</sup>

This merely apparent exchange of roles does not actually change Von Balthasar's doctrine as exposed so far and the author clarifies why immediately: subjectivity has always implied receptivity in his doctrine.

We vigorously underscored at the beginning how subjectivity implies a space that at any given moment is already open to the outside and that objects have always already forcibly occupied for their purposes. Any spontaneous opening, or even closing, of this space would already come too late with respect to its primary structural openness. Now, knowledge not only begins in this position, which makes of the subject a sort of hospitable dwelling wherein things can unfold their potentialities, it also never leaves it behind. If, then, we are

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<sup>269</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 108.

<sup>270</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 108.

going to speak of the subject's freedom in knowledge, we must use the term in a relative sense that leaves in place this primary receptivity.<sup>271</sup>

This "primary receptivity" (which, as Von Balthasar will explicitly say, is related to the sensible) is not simply primary, as if it were something necessary at the beginning only, but a constant characteristic of human understanding. In other words, the human mind can never be separated from the senses. Quoting indirectly both Kant and St. Thomas (and one immediately after the other...), Von Balthasar then explains how we should understand this connection between intelligence and sensibility:

And yet there is no context where even the mind's spontaneous intellectual activity can ever be completely separated from this receptivity. Concepts without intuitions are empty; the content of cognition always begins with the senses, even when it transcends them.<sup>272</sup>

The indirect reference to Kant is: "Concepts without intuitions are empty." The indirect quotation of St. Thomas is: "the content of cognition always begins with the senses, even when it transcends them." What Kant says is, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."<sup>273</sup> What Aquinas says, significantly in Transcendental Thomism's favourite text, is "The Philosopher says (Metaph. i, 1; Poster. ii, 15) that *the principle of knowledge is in the senses.*"<sup>274</sup> "Therefore, on the part of the phantasms, intellectual knowledge *is caused by the senses.*"<sup>275</sup>

<sup>271</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 108.

<sup>272</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 108.

<sup>273</sup> Kant, *KRV*, B 75.

<sup>274</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I*, 84, 6, sc: "Sed contra est quod philosophus probat, I Metaphys., et in fine Poster., quod principium nostrae cognitionis est a sensu."

<sup>275</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I*, 84, 6, c.: "Ex parte phantasmatum intellectualis operatio a sensu causatur."

“Sensitive knowledge is not the entire cause of intellectual knowledge. And therefore it is not strange that *intellectual knowledge should extend further than sensitive knowledge.*”<sup>276</sup> I have already discussed how this text (*Summa* I, 84, 6, the article of “*materia causae*”) has been misused by Transcendental Thomism in order to justify a Kantian epistemology.<sup>277</sup> However, it is interesting to see Von Balthasar blending explicitly Aquinas’ and Kant’s concepts.

Now, would it not be right to blend Aquinas’ and Kant’s concepts, if they are actually saying the same thing? Are not Kant and Aquinas in agreement with regard to the material role of the senses in human knowledge? No, they are not, and it bears some repetition. For Aquinas, the sensible is the *matter from which* the intelligible content is abstracted. For Kant, the sensible is the *matter on which* the intelligible content is posited. For Aquinas, the sensible is a point of departure, the beginning of understanding; for Kant the sensible is a point of arrival, is that which is informed by the subject’s activity. Now, why would Von Balthasar blend these two radically differing accounts into one? In any case, the blending is not justified by saying that in both accounts there is a necessary relationship between the senses and the intellect, because that relationship can be explained in completely different ways, as we have seen. Nor is this blending justified by the usage of the same word “matter” in both accounts: this word can receive various and differing meanings, and even when these meanings may present a certain analogy, this is not enough to merge them into one doctrine. In my view, this blending is a complete misunderstanding of Aquinas in favour of Kant, to say the least.

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<sup>276</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, 84, 6 ad 3: “Sensitiva cognitio non est tota causa intellectualis cognitionis. Et ideo non est mirum si intellectualis cognitio ultra sensitivam se extendit.”

<sup>277</sup> Cf. above pp. 35 ff, below *Appendix*, Note 1, on p. 223 and Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 248-260.



Von Balthasar tries again, in the following lines, to balance this Kantian spontaneity, which threatens to subjectivize completely any relevant element of human knowledge, with affirmations regarding human knowledge's objectivity and receptivity. Here also, Von Balthasar refers to Aquinas, and quite explicitly in my view. Von Balthasar begins,

In the end, the subject is not free to think as it pleases. It does not have the freedom of the object, which can reveal itself or veil itself in silence. In apprehending a thing, the subject has to conform to the law of what has been revealed.<sup>278</sup>

“In the end, the subject is not free to think as it pleases...” This, in my view, proves only that the subject does not construct *arbitrarily* the object, because the subject acts according to a priori laws. It also proves that the subject needs the object's sensible revelation in order to think, because, as Kant says, “Thoughts without [sensible] content are empty.”<sup>279</sup> Now, Von Balthasar says also that the subject must “conform to the law of what has been revealed.” This, in my view, should be understood according to his creative mirroring theory: that is, the subject conforms to the objective essence by reproducing in itself, according to a subjective a priori ability, the essence's movement of self-revelation in the appearance. In other words, the subject conforms subjectively to the objective law because the subject has an a priori creative ability to do so, not because the subject receives the intelligible content from the object. But still, is there not something we receive, according to Von Balthasar? He responds:

The fundamental gift bestowed upon the subject in knowledge is the privilege of apprehending things as they are. It can enlarge and enrich its own limited perfection through

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<sup>278</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 108.

<sup>279</sup> Kant, *KRV*, B 75.

the perfection of the other beings that exist along with it and so become an image of the universe.<sup>280</sup>

“The fundamental gift”, that is, that which the subject receives in knowledge is “the privilege of apprehending things as they are.” The essence, the ideal, is not what is “out there” and real: what is real is the appearance of the essence. In other words, for Von Balthasar, the essence is not real if it does not appear. Therefore, what Von Balthasar means to say is that the subject apprehends things *as they are* insofar as it receives their sensible appearance: this, the sensible appearance, is *how* things are. The essence *exists* in the appearance... Again, for Transcendental Thomism, as for Kant, receptivity is strictly connected to the sensible and not to the intelligible because, even if the intelligible were out there, it could not appear in itself. The only thing that can enter consciousness is the appearance; that is, the only thing which can appear to the subject is the sensible, the image world.<sup>281</sup>

The text continues with an obvious reference to Aquinas. Von Balthasar says, “[The subject] can enlarge and enrich its own limited perfection through the perfection of the other beings that exist along with it and so become an image of the universe.”<sup>282</sup> Von Balthasar refers to Aquinas’ *De Veritate* 2, 2, c. In that place,<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 108.

<sup>281</sup> Perhaps Von Balthasar meant “fundamental gift” as referred directly to the “privilege” (etymologically “private law”), understood as the subjective a priori law by which human intellect is able to mirror the essence’s movement of self-revelation. If so, this privilege would be Nature’s gift or God’s gift to the subject. This alternative reading would not change the doctrine as we are explaining it.

<sup>282</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 108.

<sup>283</sup> Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2, c.: “In order that there might be some remedy for this imperfection, another kind of perfection is to be found in created things. It consists in this, that the perfection belonging to one thing is found in another. This is the perfection of a knower in so far as he knows; for

Aquinas means that we are perfected with the perfections of other beings because we receive those perfections. Aquinas speaks of knowledge in general (both sensible and intellectual).

Von Balthasar appears to apply Aquinas' text particularly to intellectual knowledge, since Von Balthasar speaks about knowing "other beings" "existing along" with the finite ("limited") subject. Now, this subjective finitude and this "being-along-with" as conscious elements seem to imply that the subject has already interpreted the other beings as finite, that is, that the subject has already posited essence and existence. In any case, Von Balthasar's application of the text to intellectual knowledge is not problematic, since what St. Thomas says regarding both knowledges can certainly be applied to one of them.

The question is, do Von Balthasar and Aquinas mean the same? Does Von Balthasar think that we receive the intelligible perfection of other things by means of knowledge? Von Balthasar does think that we are perfected, through knowledge, with the intelligible perfections of other beings. Now, are we perfected 1) because we

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something is known by a knower by reason of the fact that the thing known is, in some fashion, in the possession of the knower. Hence, it is said in *The Soul* that the soul is, 'in some manner, all things,' since its nature is such that it can know all things. In this way it is possible for the perfection of the entire universe to exist in one thing. The ultimate perfection which the soul can attain, therefore, is, according to the philosophers, to have delineated in itself the entire order and causes of the universe." [Unde ut huic imperfectioni aliquod remedium esset, invenitur alius modus perfectionis in rebus creatis, secundum quod perfectio quae est propria unius rei, in altera re invenitur; et haec est perfectio cognoscentis in quantum est cognoscens, quia secundum hoc a cognoscente aliquid cognoscitur quod ipsum cognitum est aliquo modo apud cognoscentem; et ideo in III de anima dicitur, anima esse quodammodo omnia, quia nata est omnia cognoscere. Et secundum hunc modum possibile est ut in una re totius universi perfectio existat. Unde haec est ultima perfectio ad quam anima potest pervenire, secundum philosophos, ut in ea describatur totus ordo universi, et causarum eius].

receive those intelligible perfections from the objects or 2) because only when we receive the objects' sensible appearance can we posit intelligible perfection into the image world and then be perfected by the result?

For the sake of this good [that is, enriching the knower's own limited perfection], the knower must in the first instance serve things. And yet knowledge does also mean spontaneity, and spontaneity is an expression of the subject's interiority. If there were no freedom of any kind in the spirit's act of knowledge, this knowledge would not be spiritual activity.<sup>284</sup>

In other words, according to Von Balthasar, in order for us to be perfected with the intelligible perfection of other beings we need two things. First, we need to be determined by the appearance, to receive the appearance: "serve things". Second, we need to spontaneously posit intelligibility on the appearance. Von Balthasar refers to a certain "freedom" which, here, means not being determined by another in one's own action. Thus, the subject posits intelligibility, not as determined by the object itself, but rather as determined by its own a priori laws.<sup>285</sup> In other words, in positing the intelligible, the subject is free from the object's determination but not free from its own a priori laws. However, if the subject is free from the object's determination, in what sense does Von Balthasar say that the subject must at first serve things? The subject is not free to think in the void (that is, without an appearance), and that is why the subject needs first to "serve things". Now, once things enter the subject's domain, the subject knows what to do with them: things do not determine the subject's

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<sup>284</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 108-109.

<sup>285</sup> This is why Von Balthasar stated previously (VB, *Theologic I*, 108) that the subject "is not free to think as it pleases... In apprehending a thing, the subject has to conform to the law of what has been revealed."

action. The subject's action is determined, instead, by the subject's a priori laws.

It appears that, according to Von Balthasar, we are perfected with the perfection of things as a carpenter is perfected by wood. The carpenter would never have constructed such a beautiful cottage without wood. The wood is now perfected with the form given by the carpenter and now that wood is his house: the carpenter enjoys the cabin's perfection as his own, the carpenter possesses the cabin. For the sake of this enjoyment, the carpenter had first to "serve" the wood, look for it, work on it, etc. But thanks to his own art, the wood is now a home. The carpenter was not free to build without wood, but once he obtained the wood, he shaped it according to his own art: the wood didn't have a say.<sup>286</sup>

Regarding human understanding, Von Balthasar does not distinguish the realms of spontaneity/activity and receptivity as St Thomas does. For Aquinas, receptivity regards the form, the objective content, and activity regards the mode of being of the known (agent intellect as a metaphysical a priori); for Von Balthasar, as for Kant, receptivity regards the matter and spontaneity/activity regards the form, with both receptivity and activity referring to the objective content.<sup>287</sup>

### **Other Texts on Receptivity and Spontaneity in Human Understanding**

In the following text from *Theologic I* we can see how human understanding's spontaneity is referred to the intelligible content.

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<sup>286</sup> What St. Thomas teaches regarding art (as *recta ratio factibilium*) should not be applied to human understanding in general, even if sometimes St. Thomas compares the agent intellect with art (Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 263 [footnote n. 579], 289-291, 408-410).

<sup>287</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 74: "Because of the inextricable interweaving of receptivity and spontaneity in knowledge, the relationship between subject and object, and thus truth itself, has a curious two-sidedness."

The reference to art is also significant because, for Von Balthasar, art is a clear example of a “subject acting in the order of knowledge” and of “intervening creatively in the truth of things themselves at the level of knowledge.” For Von Balthasar, human understanding should be considered as similar to art, in order to satisfy the analogy of being, that is, that our knowledge is analogous to God’s knowledge. As in artistic production the form of the artifact comes from the subject, also in human understanding the form of the object should be considered as coming from the subject. For Von Balthasar, it is too little that we consider human understanding as receptive of objective content: if we want to be faithful to the analogy of being, then human understanding must be considered as creative of truth.

If man’s cognitive function were purely measured by things, he would be, at least in this respect, no longer a cause, but a pure effect. His cooperation would be limited to the potency for the sheer reproduction of already existing truth. He would, of course, be enriched by insight into the order existing around him, but he would be incapable of intervening creatively in the truth of things themselves at the level of knowledge. He would have the power of a secondary cause only as a subject acting in the practical order, but not also, like God, as a subject acting in the order of knowledge – with the possible exception of certain limited sorts of cognition, such as artistic knowledge, in which he would be able to fashion a piece of reality according to a freely projected idea. But this does not seem to satisfy the law of the analogy of being.<sup>288</sup>

Another text can help us seeing how, in Von Balthasar, spontaneity and receptivity are understood in a Kantian way, even if Von Balthasar’s terminology is Thomistic. For St. Thomas, the possible

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<sup>288</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 119.

intellect's receptivity refers to the intelligible content and the agent intellect's spontaneity refers to the intelligible content's mode of being. For the Kantian Von Balthasar, instead, intuition and receptivity refer to the sensible material from experience and spontaneity refers to the intelligible content, insofar as the subject's a priori activity informs the raw sensible material. This is why, for Von Balthasar, the spontaneity of the a priori forms is wholly at the service of sensible intuition.

Insofar as the spontaneity of knowledge is wholly at the service of receptivity (insofar, that is, as the *intellectus agens* is the tool of the *intellectus passibilis*, the intuitive intellect), the knowledge of the truth and the truth of knowledge are synonymous with the strictest objectivity. Truth is the measure of being and, therefore, the expression of what is. Any departure from the precise rendering of the actual facts is also a departure from truth.<sup>289</sup>

Von Balthasar's talk about objectivity and conformity to the facts might indeed be impressive, but we must not lose the context. Truth is "the expression of what is" insofar as, for Von Balthasar, truth is the self-revelation ("expression") of the essence ("what is") in the appearance. "Any departure from the precise rendering of the actual facts is also a departure from truth" insofar as, for Von Balthasar, truth is not something intelligible which can be artificially separated from the sensible: truth is unintelligible without the sensible, the essence does not exist without the appearance; actually, *the essence cannot even be understood without the sensible*, insofar as the essence's self is dissolved in its manifestation. For Von Balthasar, the essence is self-revelation and cannot be found except in its appearance: the essence cannot be abstracted. In addition, as the essence is a process of self-manifestation, the subject's concept is a movement towards the sensible which

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<sup>289</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 75.

mirrors the essence's movement of self-expression. This is why, for Von Balthasar, there is no departure from the sensible without a departure from truth. The *content* of truth is a process of finitization, a movement towards the sensible, and that process, as truth of consciousness, is a subjective act impossible to abstract from its sensible object: an act of love...

The creative side of human knowledge is therefore the creature's analogical participation in the act by which God's archetypal, productive knowledge creatively metes out truth. By a kind of grace, knowledge draws the other into the properly spiritual sphere, thus giving it the opportunity to unfold therein by the power, and in the light, of the subject—*before* it has to become, in its objectivity, the object of knowledge. Indeed, the full knowledge of the object unexpectedly completes and heightens even this objectivity (to which the subject has also contributed), raising it to the true measure and image that only love can inventively behold.<sup>290</sup>

As we can see again, Von Balthasar assimilates our knowing to God's knowing for the same reasons that he would assimilate human understanding to art: because the form of the known comes from the knower. Also, here Von Balthasar is talking about intelligible content, and this is why he speaks of a knowledge which "creatively metes out truth". In line with this, the subject's spontaneity is clearly referred to the content: the subject "completes and heightens even this objectivity (to which the subject has also contributed)". The language of affectivity ("a kind of grace", "love") as referred to knowledge is also present, again suggesting that Von Balthasar understands the subject's spontaneity in knowledge as a certain providing of intelligible content. Since in my previous research I have discussed Aquinas'

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<sup>290</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 78 (VB's emphasis).



doctrine regarding these matters, I think it is sufficient to show Von Balthasar's texts to the attentive reader and to indicate the doctrine behind his words. Thus, it is not difficult to perceive how Von Balthasar's analogy between the knowledge of God and that of human beings is not inspired by Aquinas but by Kant.

In the following text, we find again Von Balthasar's Kantian denial of any intelligibility to the outside world (which is therefore characterized as "image world"<sup>291</sup>) and his consideration of receptivity as referred exclusively to the sensible. For Von Balthasar, as I have previously shown, the reason we discover the essence through the image is absolutely a priori: indeed, the essence is not what we perceive but, rather, we posit the essence thanks to our a priori functions of interpretation.

The object has announced its presence within the subject. It has, however, made this announcement through a word that is, at first, a pure expression, which does not yet disclose the essence either of the object or of the subject as it is in itself. And yet this expression of the object in the language of sense images is as much of the object as the subject can immediately grasp. Even if the subject will penetrate to the object's being and essence thanks to the sensory images, it will find these realities – which, after all, cannot be immediately perceived by the senses – only in the images, which are in fact the expression of being and essence. The subject will never find the sense of the words except in the words themselves.<sup>292</sup>

It may be helpful to notice that, in this text, "word" does not refer to the inner word but rather to the sensible expression of the inner word, and is applied metaphorically to the sensible appearance as expression of the object's essence.

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<sup>291</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 134, 150.

<sup>292</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 72-73.

## 9) Subjectivity and Objectivity

The following text can be helpful in clarifying how Von Balthasar understands objectivity and subjectivity as referred to human understanding's intelligible content. Granted, with Kant, that the intelligible content comes from the subject (which makes this content necessarily subjective), Von Balthasar needs to justify that this same content must be considered objective.

The ideal picture that the knower cherishes when he is also a lover is as much subjective as it is objective. Its subjectivity does not consist in the fact that, say, it does not conform to the truth; it is subjective because its truth attains to real, objective truth only through a subject, just as a fruit can come to maturity only in a certain climate. Unless the knower presented the ideal, the object known would never have dreamed of aspiring to it, or else it would have grown faint because the attempt would have seemed too fantastic.<sup>293</sup>

So, the truth of the ideal is subjective because the ideal needs a subject in order to attain to real and objective truth. Therefore, the ideal's objectivity depends on its subjectivity: subjectivity is the condition of the possibility of the ideal's real and objective truth. Let us see, firstly, in what sense Von Balthasar affirms this primacy of subjectivity and, secondly, whether this relationship between subjectivity and objectivity could be understood in a Thomistic sense.

**1)** Von Balthasar understands objectivity as a certain "belonging to the object". The intelligible's belonging to the object depends on the subject: the subject posits intelligibility on the raw material of experience. This is why the ideal (the intelligible) attains to real and objective truth (that is, attains this "belonging" to the object) through a subject (through the subject's activity according to a

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<sup>293</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 115.

priori laws). The ideal's objectivity depends on the subject because the ideal could not belong to the object in any other way. The ideal comes from the subject, and therefore, if the ideal belongs somehow to the object, it is not because the ideal was there before, but because it has been posited there by the subject. In this way we could understand Von Balthasar's remarks a few lines later:

In this creative happening, every distinction between subjective and objective becomes meaningless. The image that love saw and held up is doubtless an image of the object. Not, however, of the object as it is, but of the object as it could be. It is the ideal, not the real, reality of the object. This ideal reality exists nowhere else than in the love of a subject. It is only in this space that the ideal can unfold. There is no free-floating "ideal reality" in some impersonal, abstract "domain of pure formal values". The actual locus of these ideal images is the personal love of another being.<sup>294</sup>

For Von Balthasar, then, the ideal is a "creation" of the mind, a subjective creation which is objective because what the subject is creating and positing on the object is an ideal of the object. The subject makes the ideal objective because this is how the subject works, this is the subject's ability and a priori function. The "distinction between subjective and objective becomes meaningless"<sup>295</sup> because the objective (the ideal as belonging to the object) is subjective (the ideal comes from the subject and is posited by the subject on the object). Von Balthasar's doctrine here is the consequence of his having dealt with the problem of knowledge in a wrong way. That is, this doctrine is the consequence of dissolving the duality of knowledge into an identity of subject and object, of dissolving the cognitive communion of two beings into a physical unity of matter and form. Von Balthasar

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<sup>294</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 115-116.

<sup>295</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 115.

claims explicitly that the ideal does not exist outside the subject: this would be for him like a going back to a Platonic “ideal reality”. In fact, for Plato, the ideal existed in an abstracted mode of being in the world of ideas. Plato might have been wrong indeed, I agree, but does not the ideal exist outside the subject, in the image world, with a different (non-abstracted) mode of being?

Von Balthasar denies a “free-floating” platonic ideal reality, but does affirm an “ideal reality” in another sense, as we have read: “It is the ideal, not the real, reality of the object.”<sup>296</sup> This apparent oxymoron, or at least disturbing comment is, nonetheless, coherent development of Von Balthasar’s doctrine, or the unavoidable collapse of a misconstrued building. This reference to “ideal reality” means that, if we take the term “reality” as related to objectivity and consider, with Von Balthasar and Kant, that the subject informs the object, then it is clear that that which becomes reality is that which the subject thinks the object is. For Von Balthasar, reality is not “the real” out there, is not “the object as it is”, at least not only that. Reality is also what the subject thinks the real could be, and because the subject thinks so.

Fabro says that the Cartesian *cogito* coherently becomes *volo*<sup>297</sup> because the functions of subjectivity, once the patron of reality has disappeared, become completely autonomous in the establishment of meaning and intelligibility. Subjectivity is determined by itself, becomes something like a freedom, like a will. Von Balthasar’s speaking about love in the above texts can certainly be related to these considerations. Obviously, Von Balthasar’s reflections can be applied usefully to other parts of human psychology and to

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<sup>296</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 115-116.

<sup>297</sup> I take from Fabro this idea of the Cartesian *cogito* coherently developing into a *volo* in Modern Philosophy, even if my subsequent explanation may be slightly different from his. Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione all’Ateismo Moderno*, Opere Complete, vol. 21 (Segni: EDIVI, 2013) 79-81, 889 f., 894 f., 1013 f., 1084-1086; *Riflessioni sulla libertà* (Segni: EDIVI, 2004) 50-51.

psychotherapy, insofar as affirmation, validation and the showing of the ideal—as when we say to a person “you certainly can do this!”—can really help a person grow.<sup>298</sup> However, where I disagree is in Von Balthasar’s considerations being applied to gnoseology’s foundations.

2) Now, from a Thomistic point of view, what is the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity? Could we say that, for St. Thomas, true objectivity is a function of true subjectivity? For Aquinas, what belongs to the subject is the cognitive act, and what is objective is the content. Of course, there is no knowledge without cognitive act, but the cognitive act grasps what is given: the cognitive act neither constructs the given nor informs nor completes the given (at least not originally). In this sense, true objectivity (to know things as they truly are in themselves) depends on true subjectivity (cognitive acts able to grasp reality as it is). Objectivity depends on subjectivity, not because the objective content is made or completed by the subject, but because the objective content is reached by the subjective cognitive act. If something real is not known, it can still be out there, but it is not an object of knowledge and, therefore, in this sense, is not “objective”.

I hope that after so many pages what I am saying is crystal clear. The object does not depend on the subject to be what it is and to have its own natural perfections. Knowing the object, instead, obviously depends on the subject: in this sense, objectivity (that is, to be an object of knowledge) depends on subjectivity (that is, on the act of knowledge). However, the subject’s function is not constructive of the object, is not metaphysical but cognitive: the subject encounters the object, the subject grasps, reaches the

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<sup>298</sup> In this sense, I believe that Von Balthasar’s helpful insights, when put in their proper place, could be harmonized with a Thomistic Gnoseology and/or shown to be grounded on more radical Thomistic principles.

object, possesses the object *as other*. This is why we are perfected by knowledge, because the perfections of other beings belong to us, not physically but objectively or intentionally.

## 10) Intelligibility as the Subject's Contribution in Human Understanding

This final text can help us in seeing how, for Von Balthasar, knowing the intelligible is somehow knowing oneself, because intelligibility can be nothing other than the subject's activity on the sensible.

Let me try to introduce this text's immediate context.<sup>299</sup> For Von Balthasar, the essence cannot be separated from its appearances: in fact, the potentiality of the being that appears is exhibited precisely in the appearances themselves. In like manner, the spirit cannot be separated from sensibility at any later phase of the process of knowing. Von Balthasar then explains:

Its [i.e., the spirit's] essential activity remains that of ordering, describing, interpreting, and understanding sensible objects, and it is capable of elevating itself beyond the sensible only insofar as the sensible itself guides it to this height ("tantum se nostra naturalis cognitio extendere potest, in quantum manuduci potest per sensibilia", *S. Th.* I, q. 12, a. 12 c).<sup>300</sup> Only by turning in this way to the senses does it know and experience itself. In the mirror of matter it knows the spirit; in the mirror of the exterior, it catches sight of the interior. It follows that the word it speaks is not simply the expression of an interior, already determined, immovable

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<sup>299</sup> Cf. VB, *Theologic I*, 170.

<sup>300</sup> [Editor's translation in footnote] [Our natural knowledge can reach as far as it can be led by sensible things.]

intellection, but is likewise an ingredient in the determination of this intellection itself.<sup>301</sup>

In other words, for Von Balthasar, the spirit's activity is one of informing the sensible raw material from experience and, only insofar as the spirit's activity is different from that raw material, can we distinguish between an intelligible aspect (the spirit's own action) and a sensible aspect (the sensible material) in the finished product of human understanding. Now, because the spirit's action is essentially dependent on the matter upon which this action is performed (in the sense that there would be no action without a matter to work with), Von Balthasar says that the spirit "is capable of elevating itself beyond the sensible only insofar as the sensible itself guides it to this height"<sup>302</sup> To what height? The height of that which is beyond the sensible, the height of the intelligible, which for Von Balthasar can be nothing other than the spirit's own action and a priori laws: "Only by turning in this way to the senses does it [*i.e.* the spirit] know and experience itself. In the mirror of matter it knows the spirit; in the mirror of the exterior, it catches sight of the interior."<sup>303</sup> That is, the intelligible can appear only in the mirror of the sensible (only by turning toward the sensible) because the intelligible is an activity (the act of the spirit) needing the sensible in order to exist, in order to be there. Von Balthasar must then conclude: "It follows that the word it [*i.e.*, the spirit] speaks is not simply the expression of an interior, already determined, immovable intellection, but is likewise an ingredient in the determination of this intellection itself."<sup>304</sup> In other words, the intelligible is not something stable, within the spirit, separated from the sensible, but is instead the spirit's movement towards the sensible. Thus, the word itself, as the spirit's expression, as the

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<sup>301</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170.

<sup>302</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170.

<sup>303</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170.

<sup>304</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170.

spirit's movement towards the sensible, is not something related to the intelligible but is instead the intelligible itself or, as Von Balthasar puts it, an "ingredient in the determination of this intellection itself", insofar as the spirit's word plus the sensible material constitute intellection as a whole.

Von Balthasar states that the spirit's word is not "simply"<sup>305</sup> the expression of an interior, already determined, immovable intellection: so the spirit's word *is* this expression, but not "simply". Would not this statement challenge what we have said above about intellection as movement towards the sensible in Von Balthasar's doctrine? It is Von Balthasar who is affirming both (word as expression of an immovable intellection and word as ingredient in the process of determination of this intellection), so he is probably affirming each in a different sense. Word as movement towards the sensible has already been explained, what remains to be explained is in what sense Von Balthasar considers the word something related to intellection as immovable. In my view, he is considering the word in the finished act of understanding, as already form of the sensible. Therefore, the word is expression of intellection, not as if intellection were one thing and its expression another different thing, but as the face of a person is a sign that we are in front of that same person. In this sense, word is the same as accomplished intellection. Following Von Balthasar's text, this intellection is "interior",<sup>306</sup> insofar as human understanding is immanent and can happen only "within" consciousness: no word can happen outside consciousness and the sensible is welcomed into consciousness in order to be informed by the spirit's activity. Intellection is also "already determined",<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170.

<sup>306</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170: "It follows that the word it speaks is not simply the expression of an interior, already determined, immovable intellection, but is likewise an ingredient in the determination of this intellection itself."

<sup>307</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170.



insofar as it has already happened as determination of the sensible. Finally, intellection is also “immovable”<sup>308</sup> in the same sense, that is, insofar as it has reached a certain matter and “rests” in it. Now, in my view, this “immutability” does not refer to the condition or quality of the spirit’s act, which for Von Balthasar is not “immutable” but rather process and living action: instead, this immutability refers to intellection’s objective, to intellection’s having reached a certain sensible element.

The final phrase, “It follows that the word it speaks is not simply the expression of an interior, already determined, immovable intellection, but is likewise an ingredient in the determination of this intellection itself”<sup>309</sup> needs one more clarification. It could be said, also from a Thomistic point of view, that the *species expressa* is not something separated from intellection: this is because the *species expressa* is the very act of intellection with its intelligible content, not because the *species expressa* is the intelligible content itself. In other words, for St. Thomas, intellection and intelligible (that is, act of understanding and intelligible content) are two different things: intellection grasps the intelligible content. For Von Balthasar, instead, the intelligible element in human understanding can be nothing different from the subject’s activity. This is because, for Von Balthasar, the act of human understanding consists of both a formal aspect and a material aspect, where the subject’s activity is the form and the sensible material is the matter whereas, for St. Thomas, the act of understanding comprises both a subjective aspect (the subjective act) and an objective aspect (the intelligible content). And this explains that, for Von Balthasar, the subjective act completes the object whereas, for St. Thomas, the subjective act “sees” the object. In this way, for Von Balthasar, the subject knows itself in the material other whereas, for St. Thomas, the subject knows initially only the object. In the end, two

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<sup>308</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170.

<sup>309</sup> VB, *Theologic I*, 170.

different accounts of knowing are at play here: knowing as communion of two (St. Thomas) and knowing as identity of one and the same (Kant and his followers), or said differently, knowing as communion between subject and object (St. Thomas) and knowing as substantial unity of matter and form (Kant).

## 11) Concluding Remarks

The Kantian influence in Von Balthasar is radical. This does not mean that Von Balthasar assumes or repeats the Kantian system, but that Von Balthasar assumes Kant's principles. Von Balthasar clearly develops these principles in a different way, perhaps in a more coherent way than Kant: the result, however, cannot be other than subjectivism, a system radically different from Aquinas' realism.

The texts I have used to confirm my interpretation are necessarily limited in number and the reader of *Theologic I* can certainly find more texts and, perhaps, better ones. My intention with the explanation of these texts was to give doctrinal keys for understanding Von Balthasar's often obscure and always suggestive text. One of the challenges with my selection of texts was that Von Balthasar is a man of long sentences and, therefore, many of the texts I chose were necessarily long in order to confirm the point in question. Moreover, I always prefer long texts because short texts are easier to take out of context and can often be interpreted in opposite directions. These are the dangers of "proof-texting", which I have tried to avoid.

"Proof-texting", as the reader may know, has a negative connotation and indicates an attempt to prove one's own point by quoting texts out of context. However, it is obvious that the only way to support one's own interpretation of an author is quoting the author's own words and explaining them with one's own words. Therefore, as long as one tries to avoid taking texts out of context, one does not fall into "proof-texting". I hope scholars will

spare me labels and offer instead their different views based on Von Balthasar's text. They may not need to quote Von Balthasar's text explicitly and extensively, as I do. Call it obsession, if you wish. But grant me that my meticulous reading has managed to provide a plausible explanation of a very complicated text, an explanation which may help to understand better Von Balthasar's epistemology.

The exploration of Von Balthasar's epistemology naturally leads to certain metaphysical questions. Does Von Balthasar really believe that things have an essence of their own? In my view, if by "essence of their own" we understand an essence subsisting outside the subject's consciousness, then the answer is "No." For Von Balthasar, not even God is outside self-consciousness. Now, if by "essence of their own" we understand that finite things exist in self-consciousness *as different* from God and the finite knowing subject, then the answer is yes.<sup>310</sup> However, it is clear that, for Von Balthasar, every exteriority and alterity of the object are the result of subjective functions and, therefore, this exteriority and this alterity are not able to free the finite object from its enclosure in self-consciousness.

An important fruit of my research is a warning against reading Von Balthasar superficially. He sometimes makes claims which would define him as a dogmatic realist, but other times he clearly takes the road of subjectivism. Sometimes he appears as a Thomist, referring to St. Thomas with approval, using St. Thomas' terminology, etc., but we have also seen him departing from Thomistic principles and aligning with Kant's program. Is Von Balthasar incoherent? That would be a very easy thing to conclude,

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<sup>310</sup> The further question may arise: Is that "essence of their own" one for each finite thing or one for all of them? Difficult question. I think that in the end each finite thing ends up a different mode of being or a different expression of the only one essence, Absolute being, which belongs to self-consciousness. This, however, is not the point of my present research.

but I think we should give Von Balthasar's brilliant mind more credit than that. This is why I have tried to show how his seemingly realistic claims can be understood in the context of his subjectivism: that is, in Von Balthasar, the content's objectivity does not take away its subjective origin but presupposes it. And this is why the relevant question we must bring to Von Balthasar's work is, "Where do you stand regarding your radical approach to human understanding? With Aquinas or with Kant?" In my view, there is no doubt about the answer. And, from here, we might discover a coherent system in *Theologic I*.

## Conclusion

Can we liberate the reading of St. Thomas from false interpretations inspired by Kantian principles? What might happen if we do? In my view, there are six signs and characteristics of a Kantian misinterpretation of Aquinas:

1. The transformation of Aquinas' agent intellect into a Kantian formal a priori.
2. The transformation of the Aristotelian identity ("the intellect in act is the understood in act") into Modern Philosophy's immanence of the object.
3. The manipulation of Aquinas' text in *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6 to justify a Kantian reading of Aquinas' epistemology.
4. Lack of distinction between intelligibility as content and as mode of being of the content. Denying the sensible any intelligibility.
5. Confusions between agent intellect and possible intellect and between abstraction and conversion to the phantasm.
6. Lack of distinction among the various meanings of object in Aquinas (especially, between the sense in which the particular is object and the sense in which the universal is object).

And now, I invite you to rediscover Aquinas' pristine doctrine.

St. Thomas may not be perfect insofar as his doctrine is a human endeavor. However, rarely have I heard a convincing argument

about a single error in his doctrine.<sup>311</sup> Perhaps we are so accustomed to seeing errors in the greatest doctors that we too easily accept that St. Thomas has errors as well. No one is perfect, right? Right. But no one is like St. Thomas.

St. Thomas cannot be compared with any other doctor. Others may have written with better style, but who has been more profound, more precise and more clear, all at the same time? Who was more orthodox and saintly?<sup>312</sup> Who wrote with more humility?

The beauty of Aquinas' style lies precisely in his hiding behind his teaching.<sup>313</sup> From my further reflection on this insight, I would say that St. Thomas is so committed to doctrinal clarity that the writing subject drops out of sight behind the light of what is written. Joy comes with your discovery... when you realize that, reading St. Thomas, you were so absorbed in understanding what the Angelic Doctor was saying, so captivated by the beauty of a

<sup>311</sup> For interesting facts about St. Thomas' error regarding the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, cf. Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione a San Tommaso: La Metafisica Tomista e il Pensiero Moderno*, Opere Complete, vol. 34 (Segni: EDIVI, 2016), 93-95. Fabro quotes St. Thomas affirming many times Our Lady's absolute purity from sin with regard to her soul, and then explains how Aquinas could maintain, at the same time, that her conception was not without sin. In Fabro's view, this depends heavily on medieval theory that the human soul was not infused into the human body at the moment of conception, but later.

<sup>312</sup> In the saying of Pope Pius XI: "The holiest among the wise, the wisest among the saints." Cf. *Discorsi di Pio XI*, Turin 1960, vol. I, p. 783, quoted by Paul VI, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, Carta del Sumo Pontifice Pablo VI en el VII centenario de la muerte de Santo Tomás de Aquino (November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1974), n. 30. [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/letters/1974/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_let\\_19741120\\_lumen-ecclesiae.html#\\_ftnref47](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/letters/1974/documents/hf_p-vi_let_19741120_lumen-ecclesiae.html#_ftnref47) (Accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>313</sup> This idea from a lecture by Prof. Gilles Mongeau, S.J. (in his course "Aquinas: the Summa Contra Gentiles", Regis College, University of Toronto, Fall 2012).

new light, that you forgot the teacher. And when you understand what Aquinas meant, already enjoying the new light you have found, there, sometimes, you turn to look at the doctor as if to thank him... and there is nothing left of him but his signature at the foot of the painting. He did it on purpose! Aquinas disappeared behind the light, not in the dark: he disappeared, not because he hid his authorship, but because he dazzled us with the light of truth, and made it impossible for us to see him. There is something mysterious and very beautiful about this humility. Truth does not belong to the doctor as to its source, but as water belongs to the canal: water passes through the canal, coming from a wellspring which is higher up. Truth comes from God.<sup>314</sup> St. Thomas knew the truth and communicated it, enriching others with what he himself had received. In order to not distract his students from their greatest good which is the truth, not the teacher, St. Thomas allowed himself to disappear behind the light.

As teacher, St. Thomas is artist. If you want aesthetic pleasure in reading, there are other doctors who will be able to satisfy you. But if you want aesthetic pleasure in the perfection of the educational method, there is Aquinas. He gave more light to the Church than all of the other doctors: he knew them all and assumed them in his own doctrine.<sup>315</sup> The wise will shine like the stars...

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<sup>314</sup> In the sense that the participated truth we are able to find is always grounded in the absolute truth which is God himself. We participate the capacity to understand, the light to see and (indirectly) the very intelligible content from God himself. Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 48-50, 284-285, 309.

<sup>315</sup> In the words of Pope Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy, n. 17: "Among the Scholastic Doctors, the chief and master of all towers Thomas Aquinas, who, as Cajetan observes, because 'he most venerated the ancient doctors of the Church, in a certain way seems to have inherited the intellect of all' (Cajetan's commentary on Sum. theol., IIa-IIae 148, 9. Art. 4; Leonine edit., Vol. 10, p. 174, n.6)." Regarding Aquinas' relationship with St. Augustine, cf. Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione*, 87 (at footnote 16): "St. Thomas was assiduous

(cf. *Daniel* 12:3) and St. Thomas shines like the sun, the greatest star, the closest, the one that gives us warmth with its light.

It is true that there are many difficulties and challenges in understanding the Thomistic text. However, the fact that the Church continues to instruct us explicitly to study Aquinas' doctrine<sup>316</sup> should give us the energy and inspiration to break down cultural and terminological barriers and thus enter more deeply into his thought. St. Thomas is clear. What sometimes is not clear for us is his terminology and his context.

St. Thomas is clear because he writes in a straightforward and syllogistic manner. He is concise without omitting any of the steps that lead to the conclusion. St. Thomas requires us to pay attention to each of his words: none is superfluous and all illuminate. I do not suggest reading Aquinas obsessively, as if he were hiding something: Aquinas is doing the opposite. His goal is clarity and *all* of his words are employed to attain this end *only*. In this respect, Aquinas' greatness lies in the fact that he knew the rules of writing, convincing and teaching, and seems to employ them at all times.

What sometimes is not clear to us is Aquinas' terminology and context. His terminology is sometimes not clear for two reasons.

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disciple at the school of St. Augustine and was abundantly nourished by his profound insights, as is evidenced by the approximately 1,700 quotations from St. Augustine that Baron v. Hertling found in the works of Aquinas (G. v. HERTLING, *Augustinuszitate bei Thomas v. Aquin*, in "Sitzungsberichte der philos.-philol. und histor. Klasse der K. B. Akad. der Wissenschaften", 1914, 4, pp. 535-602)." St. Augustine's influence on Aquinas and on all medieval thinking can be compared only to (Pseudo) Dionysius' influence: in Aquinas only, there are 1,702 explicit quotations of Dionysius (cf. Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione*, 87).

<sup>316</sup> Cf. II Vatican Council, Decree *Optatam totius*, n. 16 and Declaration *Gravissimum educationis* n. 10; Code of Canon Law, can. 252 §3. A good collection of Magisterial interventions in this regard can be found in <https://tomasdeaquino.org/#3>.



The first is that St. Thomas employs the terminology of his time, current and accessible to the students of his own era but inaccessible to most of today's folks. The second is that Aquinas' terminology has been obscured, ignored or confused by later interpretations of the Thomistic text. Also, the historical and scientific context of St. Thomas is difficult for us to understand. I suggest taking this cultural context as a key to understanding St. Thomas rather than as a limitation of his doctrine. That is to say, the medieval context should not be considered a reason to devalue St. Thomas' doctrine. Instead, the medieval context should be seen as a challenging yet necessary factor in better understanding Aquinas' doctrine and thus establishing it as the foundation of present and future philosophical and theological endeavours. We must extract what is dross and claim what is gold. How stupid it would be to throw gold in the garbage simply because we did not want to take the trouble to remove the mud from it! The Church has told us Aquinas' doctrine is gold. A little more trust could make us a lot richer. Rich in the knowledge which is lacking in the Church today: "My people perish for lack of knowledge..." (*Hosea* 4:6).

Human being does not live on bread alone! In our current era of stout bodies and sickly spirits, hungering hearts and searching minds, may the original light of the Angelic Doctor fill our hearts and brighten our minds that we might live.



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## *Appendix of Notes*

### Note 1

#### **The Text of *Summa Theologiae*, I, 84, 6: *Materia Causae*.<sup>317</sup>**

Let us take a closer look at 84, 6. The question is whether or not the soul acquires its intellectual knowledge from the sensible things, and the answer is positive, but with a distinction. Throughout the entire article it seems clear that knowing is receptive and not active, since the issue of the source of knowing is referred to the principle of a proportionate cause, *by which* knowledge is produced in the faculty. In other words, the agent *object* of intellectual knowing must be different from the one of sensibility, because there must be a proportion between effect (here, the different knowing) and agent. [...]

The point is, then, that there must be a proportionate cause that produces intellectual knowledge in the possible intellect (i.e., the intelligible in act), as the sensible in act is proportionate cause of sensible knowledge. The corpus is better understood in this sense:

And therefore in order to cause the intellectual operation according to Aristotle, the impression caused by the sensible

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<sup>317</sup> The following text is an excerpt from Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 248-260.

does not suffice, but something more noble is required, for ‘the agent is more noble than the patient,’ as he says.<sup>318</sup>

Here *agens* does not refer to the agent intellect directly, but to the intelligible in act produced by the agent intellect, as the following comparison with the Platonic idea and the reference to “*intelligibilia in actu*” suggest:

Not, indeed, in the sense that the intellectual operation is effected in us by the mere impression of some superior beings, as Plato held; but that the higher and more noble agent which he calls the active intellect, of which we have spoken above,<sup>319</sup> causes the phantasms received from the senses to be actually intelligible, by a process of abstraction.<sup>320</sup>

In other words, intellectual knowledge cannot be caused by the mere impression of sensible things (for lack of proportionate cause), nor is it caused by the impression of a Platonic idea (for the source of knowledge must be in the sensible things, which are the true reality), but by the impression of the *intelligible in act*,

<sup>318</sup> 84, 6, c.: “Et ideo ad causandam intellectualem operationem, secundum Aristotelem, non sufficit sola impressio sensibilibus corporum, sed requiritur aliquid nobilius, quia agens est honorabilius patiente, ut ipse dicit.”

<sup>319</sup> The Ottawa edition refers to 79, 3 and 4.

<sup>320</sup> 84, 6, c.: “Non tamen ita quod intellectualis operatio causetur in nobis ex sola impressione aliquarum rerum superiorum, ut Plato posuit, sed illud superius et nobilius agens quod vocat intellectum agentem, de quo iam supra diximus, facit phantasmata a sensibus accepta intelligibilia in actu, per modum abstractionis cuiusdam.” Cf. *In III De Anima* 4, 76-77, where St. Thomas interprets the Aristotelian phrase: “the agent is more noble than the patient” (my trans.) [honorabilius est agens patiente] in the *De Anima*’s text on the agent intellect as referred to the agent intellect itself. I do not think that this challenges my interpretation of the *Summa*, for the reasons exposed above, and for what we will say about the agent intellect as *actus intelligibilium*, i.e., in what sense the agent intellect could be said to be that which actualizes “formally” the object of understanding.

produced from the phantasm by the agent intellect and impressed in the possible intellect.

According to this opinion, then, on the part of the phantasms, intellectual knowledge is caused by the senses. But since the phantasms cannot of themselves affect the passive intellect, and require to be made actually intelligible by the active intellect, it cannot be said that sensible knowledge is the total and perfect cause of intellectual knowledge, but rather that it is in a way the [matter of the] cause.<sup>321</sup>

*Quodammodo materia causae*, therefore, means that the phantasm is the “matter” out of which the agent intellect produces the intelligible in act by means of its illumination, and that same intelligible in act will be the proportionate cause of intellectual knowing.

Is this not precisely what leads some readers of Aquinas to reduce sensible knowing to providing the matter for the completing activity of intelligence? It is important to remember that in question 84, Aquinas is trying to explain how intelligence works (in this life), not directly what it knows, which is already presupposed. In other words, the problem is not whether we understand corporeal things, but how. The first article (84, 1) tells us by which faculty we understand (precisely making the important distinction between *res intellecta* and *modus rei intellectae*), whereas the following articles tell us by which agent object. That is why, after denying that knowledge of corporeal things is verified by means of intelligible “ready-made” intermediaries (the intellect’s

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<sup>321</sup> 84, 6, c.: “Secundum hoc ergo, ex parte phantasmatum intellectualis operatio a sensu causatur. Sed quia phantasmata non sufficiunt immutare intellectum possibilem, sed oportet quod fiant intelligibilia actu per intellectum agentem; non potest dici quod sensibilis cognitio sit totalis et perfecta causa intellectualis cognitionis, sed magis quodammodo est materia causae.”

own essence [84, 2], innate species [84, 3], infused species [84, 4], or the essence of God [84, 5]), Aquinas goes to the other “extreme”, the sensible things, in order to show in what sense something that is not actually intelligible can be the source of the intellectual operation; in this way, Aquinas finally arrives at the abstracted species as agent object. Therefore, in this context, that sensible knowing is in a certain sense the matter of intellectual knowing should be understood of the operation (how), not of the content (what), i.e., of intelligibility as a mode of being, not of what is understood. St. Thomas is not saying that the phantasm is the matter of *what is understood*, but that the *mode of being* of the phantasm is not proportionate to be the agent object of intellectual knowing, and therefore, in its particularity, the phantasm works only as a “matter” from which the agent intellect produces the agent object, which is the intelligible in act. In other words, he is not saying that sensible things are a matter that obtains intelligibility as content when the agent intellect illuminates them; he is saying that the phantasm is *like a* matter that obtains intelligibility as a mode of being when it is illuminated by the agent intellect. As we have seen,<sup>322</sup> for Aquinas, sensible things are what is understood, insofar as the universal nature subsisting in the corporeal things is the object of understanding.

The agent object is necessarily an intelligible in act. That is why the sensible things cannot be the agent object of intellectual knowing. But because our agent object does come from sensible things, they can be said to be in a certain sense the source of our intellectual knowing. The agent intellect produces the intelligible in act from the phantasm, and for this reason, the phantasm can be considered a certain “matter” of the agent object, in the sense of “that out of which” the intelligible in act comes in some way.

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<sup>322</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 88-105.

In what way? Aquinas mentions it: “*per modum abstractionis cuiusdam*.” The way the phantasm is made intelligible in act by the agent intellect is “by a certain abstraction,” that is, not by preserving the phantasm’s particularity, nor by borrowing a certain content, but by the intellect’s “taking from” the phantasm. Aquinas has previously explained abstraction as a “separation” of the universal object from its individual conditions in the matter.<sup>323</sup>

[...] For the reasons explained, it does not seem that a notion of experience that provides only the raw material for the informative activity of intelligence can be grounded on this text. I would add that the “*quodammodo*” should be taken more seriously, and therefore less as a precise reference to a “raw material.” It must be admitted that this particular text is not as clear as others; in any case, however, the meaning of more obscure statements should be clarified by paying attention to the rest of the treatise, since it is not plausible that St. Thomas denies here what he affirms elsewhere. The three previous chapters<sup>324</sup> are intended to provide that context.

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<sup>323</sup> Cf. 79, 3, c.; 79, 4, c.; 85, 1 ad 3. That St. Thomas considers abstraction more a “consideration” than a “separation” (cf. 85, 1 ad 1) does not take away the fact that he considers the species “taken from” the phantasm (cf. *In I De Anima* 2, 261). The context should be regarded in each case: when abstraction refers more to the production of the intelligible in act as agent object, it means something more like “separation”, because the intelligible species is really separate from the phantasm, as two different agent objects (cf. *De Spirit. Creat.*, a.10, c.); but when it regards the universal content of the species, as distinct from the sensible, St. Thomas prefers to speak about “consideration”, because the content, though absolutely speaking distinct (and therefore knowable without the other), is not really separate from the particular (cf. *In III De Anima* 6, 274-276). This is clearly related to the distinction between abstraction as act of the agent intellect and as act of the possible intellect (cf. Crompt, 16ff.; *Chapter 1*, section 4; *Chapter 4*, section 2).

<sup>324</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, Chapters 1 to 3.

## Note 2

### On the Agent Object

In order to understand what agent object means, let me first refer to three passages of *The Radical Difference*<sup>325</sup> and secondly offer a few other remarks.

-- "... What must be kept in mind is a series of actualizations which, in Aquinas' mind, must take place in order to explain the fact that we simply understand. This fact is already an actualization (A1); that is, we pass from understanding in potency to understanding in act. The perfection which allows us to understand [...] is the intelligible nature of a corporeal thing, already in act of being intelligible [this is the agent object: the intelligible in act]. Now, that intelligible is not available to the intelligence, insofar as the nature of a corporeal thing is not out there already intelligible in act; the intelligible exists only in the potentiality of the phantasm. In order for the intelligible in potency, which is in the phantasm, to become intelligible in act (A2), an agent, an efficient cause is needed. Therefore, it is the agent intellect which, in an efficient way, actualizes (A2) the intelligible in potency so that it becomes intelligible in act; but **it is the intelligible in act which actualizes (A1) the possible intellect, which was previously in potency.**<sup>326</sup> [...] Therefore, when St. Thomas

<sup>325</sup> Besides the following texts, cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 341-349.

<sup>326</sup> The necessity of the intelligible in act in human understanding could be found in Plato also, but not the necessity of an agent intellect (at least not in the Aristotelian sense, cf. 79, 3). Cf. *De Spirit. Creat.*, a.9, c.: "And similarly it would not be necessary to posit an agent intellect if the universals which are actually intelligible subsisted of themselves outside the soul, as Plato asserted. But because Aristotle asserted that these universals do not subsist except in sensible objects, which are not actually intelligible, he necessarily had to posit some power, which would make the objects that are intelligible in potency to be actually intelligible..." [Et similiter non esset necesse ponere intellectum



says ‘*facere intelligibilia in actu*’ he means that the agent intellect produces from the potentiality of the phantasm **an intelligible species representing the nature of a corporeal thing, a species which is able (because it is in act) to perfect the possible intellect with the knowledge of that nature itself.**<sup>327</sup>

-- “... This *species impressa*, [the intelligible in act] however, is not the act of the possible intellect, but the “catalyst” of this act, the agent object which is able to actualize the possible intellect and will do so. Is the agent intellect the cause of the *species expressa*? It is cause of the agent object (the *species impressa*), and the agent object is cause of the act of the intellect *precisely* as agent object.<sup>328</sup> The agent intellect does not need to move the possible intellect in any other way because the possible intellect is already transcendently ordered to its own object. It is the possible intellect itself that understands, that embraces intentionally (and thus possesses) the object which has been presented by the agent intellect.<sup>329</sup> It does

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agentem, si universalia quae sunt intelligibilia actu, per se subsisterent extra animam, sicut posuit Plato. Sed quia Aristoteles posuit ea non subsistere nisi in sensibilibus, quae non sunt intelligibilia actu, necesse habuit ponere aliquam virtutem quae faceret intelligibilia in potentia esse intelligibilia actu. . . ]

<sup>327</sup> Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 106-108.

<sup>328</sup> Cf. 87, 1, c.: “[Our intellect] understands itself according as it is made actual by the species abstracted from sensible things, through the light of the active intellect, which not only actuates the intelligible things themselves, but also, by their instrumentality, actuates the passive intellect. Therefore the intellect knows itself not by its essence, but by its act.” [ . . . consequens est ut sic seipsum intelligat intellectus noster, secundum quod fit actu per species a sensibilibus abstractas per lumen intellectus agentis, quod est actus ipsorum intelligibilium, et eis mediantibus intellectus possibilis. Non ergo per essentiam suam, sed per actum suum se cognoscit intellectus noster. ]

<sup>329</sup> As far as I can see, it is not that the possible intellect produces the *expressa* as a different species, but rather it only “embraces” the species (the *impressa*) that

not seem necessary to add a divine pre-motion to the possible intellect, but understanding should be considered as an *intentional* potency (that is, moved by its proper object) and not as a physical potency, needing to be moved by a cause in order to ‘reach’ or ‘affect’ the object. In any case, a divine influence should be supposed on the side of the agent intellect and of the agent object.”<sup>330</sup>

-- “There is a metaphysical priority of the intelligible in act (= *species impressa*) over the intellect in act (= *species expressa*). The result of the action of the agent intellect on the phantasm is the intelligible in act, but not yet ‘intellected’ in act; **the intelligible in act, as agent object, ‘causes’ the possible intellect to understand, to pass from potency to act of understanding.** The agent intellect produces the passage from potency to act of *being intelligible* (regarding the nature of corporeal things); the agent object (already intelligible in act) produces the passage from potency to act of understanding. The two passages are clear for example in 79, 7, c.: ‘Nevertheless there is a distinction between the power of the active intellect and of the passive intellect: because as regards the same object, the active power which makes the object to be in act must be distinct from the passive power, which is moved by the object existing in act.’ [Diversificatur tamen potentia intellectus agentis, et intellectus possibilis, quia respectu eiusdem obiecti, aliud principium oportet esse potentiam activam, quae facit obiectum esse in actu; et aliud potentiam passivam, quae movetur ab obiecto in actu existente.]”<sup>331</sup>

There is a complementarity between the way we say that knowledge is “receptive” and the way we say that the intelligible in

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is already there: in this sense, the *impressa* “becomes” the *expressa* when it is understood.

<sup>330</sup> Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 193-194.

<sup>331</sup> Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 63 (at footnote n. 174).

act or the sensible in act are “agent” objects. Insofar as knowing is a certain passage from potency to act, the agent object fulfills that necessary role of “cause” which explains the passage and gives an account of the “passivity” of the subject. The subject is passive insofar as it receives something from somewhere else, that is, insofar as the subject is truly “perfected”. Now, because knowledge is intentional, because it proceeds from an intentional potency, that is, a potency of *objects*, this reception is actually an embracing, yes, but an embracing “produced” by the object, *moved* by the object itself. This is what I mean by agent object, and that is why I say that there seems to be no other agency needed on the side of the possible intellect, unless we want to say that the possible intellect needs a divine pre-motion in order to embrace the agent object. The act of the possible intellect seems to be like a “reaction” to the presence of the intelligible in act, like the reaction of the stomach when food is present and the process of assimilation begins. What moves the stomach to work is the presence of food (the agent object) and what explains the movement of the stomach itself is simply its transcendental ordination to process food, to its proper act.

Note 3

**The Aristotelian Identity**  
**in *Summa Theologiae*, I, 85, 2 ad 1<sup>332</sup>**

Let us now examine some texts that may show more clearly the position of St. Thomas in these matters. Aquinas’ specific interpretation of the Aristotelian “The thing understood in act is the intellect in act” (“*Intellectum in actu est intellectus in actu*”) has been anticipated in the previous section. In 85, 2 ob. 1, it is suggested that the presence of the object in the intellect is the same

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<sup>332</sup> The following is an excerpt from Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 164-165.

as the presence of the species in it as its perfection; therefore, species and object of the intellect are the same thing.<sup>333</sup> The argument is the Aristotelian text, the authority of which St. Thomas does not question. But Aquinas says in the *Ad Unum*: “The thing understood is in the intellect by its own likeness.”<sup>334</sup> Notice how, from the beginning, he is not talking about “the thing understood in act” (“*intellectum in actu*”) but about “the thing understood” (“*intellectum*”), which stands for the object itself and not for the species (here “likeness”, “*similitudinem*”); this is the confusion in the objection. Aquinas continues:

And it is in this sense that we say that the thing understood in act is the intellect in act, because the likeness of the thing understood is the form of the intellect, as the likeness of a sensible thing is the form of the sense in act.<sup>335</sup>

This is the precise interpretation of the Aristotelian text for Aquinas. That is, the identity (“*est*” can be interpreted in that way to some extent) is the identity of an actualized operative potency (*intellectus in actu* = *intellectus formatum*) with its perfective form

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<sup>333</sup> 85, 2 ob. 1: “It would seem that the intelligible species abstracted from the phantasm is related to our intellect as that which is understood. For the understood in act is in the one who understands: since the understood in act is the intellect itself in act. But nothing of what is understood is in the intellect actually understanding, save the abstracted intelligible species. Therefore this species is what is actually understood.” [Videtur quod species intelligibiles a phantasmatis abstractae, se habeant ad intellectum nostrum sicut id quod intelligitur. Intellectum enim in actu est in intelligente, quia intellectum in actu est ipse intellectus in actu. Sed nihil de re intellecta est in intellectu actu intelligente, nisi species intelligibilis abstracta. Ergo huiusmodi species est ipsum intellectum in actu.]

<sup>334</sup> 85, 2 ad 1: “Intellectum est in intelligente per suam similitudinem.”

<sup>335</sup> 85, 2 ad 1: “Et per hunc modum dicitur quod intellectum in actu est intellectus in actu, in quantum similitudo rei intellectae est forma intellectus; sicut similitudo rei sensibilis est forma sensus in actu.”

(*similitudo rei intellectae = intellectum in actu*). This may not be Aquinas' interpretation of the Aristotelian text in other contexts, and it may also be a misinterpretation of Aristotle; however, for Aquinas, here, *intellectum in actu* does not mean object of the intellect (*quod actu intelligitur*). Therefore, he can conclude: "Hence it does not follow that the intelligible species abstracted is what is actually understood; but rather that it is the likeness thereof."<sup>336</sup> The species is certainly the perfective form of the intellect for Aquinas, and still it is not what is understood, but a representation of what is understood. That is why, if an identity is supported with this Aristotelian text in Aquinas, it is not the identity between object and knower, nor the identity between the being of the object and the being of the knower, but the identity of the intellect with its species as perfective form.<sup>337</sup>

#### Note 4

### ***Intelligere and Dicere in Aquinas***

#### *The Thomistic Distinction between the Act of Understanding and the Formation of a Mental Word*

What is the distinction between understanding and forming a concept? In my view, for Aquinas, *intelligere* (the act of understanding) and *dicere* (the forming of a *verbum* or mental word) are not two different acts, but simply two different aspects of the same act of understanding. In the following, I will explore more in depth what this distinction means for Aquinas. Firstly, I will give a mostly doctrinal or systematic overview of the issue and, secondly,

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<sup>336</sup> 85, 2 ad 1: "Unde non sequitur quod species intelligibilis abstracta sit id quod actu intelligitur, sed quod sit similitudo eius."

<sup>337</sup> The same interpretation can be seen clearly in other texts and works of Aquinas: cf. *CG II*, 98, par. 14-19; *Ibid.*, 99, par. 5-7; *In III De anima* 7, 37-48; *Summa I*, 14, 2 (see *Appendix 2*, Note 25).

I will support my claims with relevant textual evidence, taken exclusively from Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*.

### 1. Not Two Different Acts: Systematic Overview

*Intelligere* and *dicere* are not two different acts of the possible intellect, because the possible intellect does not essentially have two acts, but one, which is understanding (*intelligere*) through a concept (*verbum*), as I will explain. Additionally, *intelligere* and *dicere* do not correspond to simple apprehension and judgment respectively, because there is a *verbum* in simple apprehension, which is the definition. In other words, simple apprehension is not only *intelligere*, but there is also *dicere* and *verbum* in simple apprehension.

Simple apprehension and judgment are two different operations of the same faculty, but no faculty can have two acts at the same time under the same respect. This is what I mean when I say that the possible intellect, which is the faculty of both simple apprehension and judgment, has essentially only one act which is understanding. Simple apprehension and judgment are two different instances of understanding and, therefore, both of them happen as acts of the possible intellect and both of them through a *verbum*.

We form a *verbum* when we understand. This does not mean that we first understand and then form a *verbum*, but that the very fact that we understand something implies that we have formed a *verbum* of it.<sup>338</sup> There is no real difference between the act of

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<sup>338</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 27, a. 1, c.: "For whenever we understand, *by the very fact of understanding* there proceeds something within us, which is a conception of the object understood, a conception issuing from our intellectual power and proceeding from our knowledge of that object" [Quicumque enim intelligit, *ex hoc ipso quod intelligit*, procedit aliquid intra ipsum, quod est conceptio rei intellectae, ex vi intellectiva proveniens, et ex eius notitia procedens]. In Aquinas' text, the emphasis is always mine, unless otherwise indicated.

understanding and the formation of a *verbum*. We would not have a *verbum* if we had not understood something, but we would not understand something if we did not have a *verbum* of it.

Therefore, to conceive something and to define something is the same as to understand it. If you have no “idea” (*verbum*) of what something is, it is because you have not yet “understood” (*intelligere*) it.

Let me explain this in terms of the process of understanding. Once the agent intellect has abstracted the intelligible species, this intelligible species, as agent object, is impressed upon or acts upon the possible intellect. This is not the act of understanding. This is the act of the *species impressa* or, in another sense, of the agent intellect but not the act of the possible intellect. That is, at this point, the possible intellect is acted upon, the possible intellect is actualized (by the *species impressa*) but does not yet act itself.<sup>339</sup> What makes the possible intellect *able to act* is precisely this being acted upon by the *species impressa*, which is intelligible in act. Once actualized by the *species impressa*, the possible intellect acts: the possible intellect embraces the *species impressa* in a concept. This is the cognitive moment, this is the intentional reception, this is the moment of understanding. The contact of the possible intellect with the intelligibility in act of the *species impressa* is what allows the

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<sup>339</sup> Can we not say that if the possible intellect is actualized, then it passes from potency to act and there we have the first act of the possible intellect? Not really. Suppose fire and wood. Does the fire burn the wood, or does the wood burn? Who is the one burning, the fire or the wood? Both, of course. But the wood is burnt, not the fire. Unless there is a fire, the wood does not burn, but to be burnt is not the act of the fire but the act of the wood. Do they not happen at the same time? Yes, of course: as soon as the fire burns the wood, the wood is burnt. Are they not, then, the same act? Of course not: the act of the fire causes the act of the wood, but the act of the wood is its own. The act of the fire is not the act of the wood. In a similar way, the activity of the *species impressa* over the possible intellect is not the act of the possible intellect itself.

possible intellect to pass itself from understanding in potency to understanding in act.<sup>340</sup> Only then, the *species impressa* passes from intelligible in act and in potency to be understood to understood in act (*species expressa* or *verbum*). The *species expressa* is the act of understanding as completed. And this is what it means to say that “*intellectum in act*” (the *verbum* or *species expressa*) is the same as “*intellectus in act*” (which is the act of understanding).<sup>341</sup>

Certainly, we could never conceive what we have not understood, and St. Thomas says that *verbum* is “*ex eius notitia procedens*.”<sup>342</sup> This, however, does not mean that the act of understanding is previous to the conception of the word, but that it is the reason of the conception of the word: a concept forms in the intellect because the intellect has understood something. The notional sequence and distinction in our mind (*i.e. distinctio rationis*) do not necessitate metaphysical sequence and distinction (*distinctio realis*), as if the two acts were really distinct and not simply two aspects of the same act.

We may then understand why St. Thomas says that *intelligere* and *dicere* are not the same.<sup>343</sup> They do not have the same meaning and, therefore, even if they occur at the same time and are aspects of the same act, they must be distinguished. *Intelligere* indicates a relationship of the intellect to that which is understood (we

<sup>340</sup> This is what it means that the *verbum* is “act from act”: the *species expressa* comes from the actuality of the *species impressa*, the act of understanding comes from the actuality of the intelligible. It does not mean that the *verbum* comes from a previous act of understanding.

<sup>341</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, 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*].

<sup>342</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 27, a. 1, c.: “proceeding from our knowledge of that object”.

<sup>343</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1, ad 3: “Anselmus vero improprie accepit dicere pro intelligere. Quae tamen differunt.” I will explain in detail this text in section 2.



understand *something*), whereas *dicere* indicates a relationship of the intellect to its own act, to its own subjective perfection (we say or speak an *interior word*, we conceive a *concept*). And even if we also say “something,” we say it or speak it through a word: the term “speaking” directly indicates the use of words and indirectly what we say. Clearly, St. Thomas is making this distinction because he wants to attribute *dicere* only to the Father, and understanding to the three Persons in the Blessed Trinity. This distinction, however, does not imply that in the Trinity understanding happens separately from speaking; but that only one person speaks, and the three of them are spoken through the same word.<sup>344</sup>

St. Thomas says that the word proceeds *ex notitia concipientis* in the sense that the word proceeds from the intellect insofar as the intellect understands [something]. We could differentiate notionally the two moments, and put one as the “cause” of the other, but in reality both are the same thing. In order to conceive something, we must see it first; the moment of seeing something could be called *intelligere*, and the moment of conceiving, *verbum*. But if seeing is the act of the intellect with reference to the object seen, what is the difference with the *verbum*? There is no difference in reality: we are talking about the same act of the intellect. But there is a difference in the signification, because the act of the intellect has two different aspects, and this is exactly Aquinas’ point in distinguishing *intelligere* and *dicere*. Insofar as the intellect refers to the thing understood, we use the term “understanding”: we understand something. Insofar as the intellect is referred to its own act, that is, to the word by which it understands, we use the term “speaking”: we speak a word. The notion of “understanding” in itself does not imply procession, but rather possession and perfection. “Speaking” implies procession, because we issue a word. Again, we do not “issue” something insofar as we understand

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<sup>344</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, q. 34, a. 1 ad 3.

it, but we *possess* that something as our own perfection. The word instead issues from the one who speaks the word.

Therefore, and coming back to the Blessed Trinity, because understanding implies only a relationship to that which is understood, the Three Divine Persons understand, insofar as they know themselves and in themselves know everything else; whereas because speaking or conceiving implies a relationship to that by which something is spoken or conceived, only the Father speaks.

## 2. Analysis of Textual Evidence

Let me support my claims with the Thomistic text. In *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1, c., St. Thomas quotes with approval St. John Damascene: “he says that ‘word’ is called ‘the natural movement of the intellect, by which the intellect moves, understands and thinks’”<sup>345</sup> The *verbum* is always related to the act of understanding, in the sense that we conceive [a word] by understanding [something], and we understand something by conceiving a word.

On the other hand, “to be spoken” belongs to each Person, for not only is the word spoken, but also the thing *understood* or signified *by the word*. Therefore, in this manner, to one person alone in God does it belong to be spoken in the same way as a word is spoken; whereas in the way whereby a thing is spoken as *being understood in the word*, it belongs to each Person to be spoken. For the Father, *by understanding* Himself, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and all other things comprised in this knowledge, *conceives the Word*; so that thus the whole Trinity is “spoken” in the Word; and likewise also all

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<sup>345</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1, c.: “dicens [Damascenus] quod ‘verbum dicitur *naturalis intellectus motus*, secundum quem movetur et intelligit et cogitat.’”

creatures: as the intellect of a man by the word *he conceives in the act of understanding* a stone, speaks a stone.<sup>346</sup>

Clearly, in this text<sup>347</sup> and for St. Thomas, we conceive by understanding: “The Father... by understanding... conceives” [Pater... intelligendo... concipit], “as the intellect of a man by the word he conceives in the act of understanding a stone...” [sicut intellectus hominis verbo quod concipit intelligendo lapidem...]; and we understand by conceiving, by a word: “the thing understood or signified by the word” [res quae verbo intelligitur], “a thing is spoken as being understood in the word” [res in verbo intellecta].

For whenever we understand, *by the very fact of understanding* [ex hoc ipso quod intelligit] there proceeds something within us, which is a conception of the thing understood, a conception issuing from our intellectual power and *proceeding from our knowledge* of that object [ex eius notitia procedens].<sup>348</sup>

I do not think it can be said more clearly that the concept forms precisely in the very act of understanding and as the very act of understanding. “*Notitia*” refers to the act of understanding in the same way as “*ex hoc ipso quod intelligit*”; that is, the word proceeds

<sup>346</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1 ad 3: “Sed dici convenit cuilibet personae, dicitur enim non solum verbum sed res quae *verbo intelligitur* vel significatur. Sic ergo uni soli personae in divinis convenit dici eo modo quo dicitur verbum, eo vero modo quo dicitur *res in verbo intellecta*, cuilibet personae convenit dici. Pater enim, *intelligendo* se et filium et spiritum sanctum, et omnia alia quae eius scientia continentur, *concipit verbum*, ut sic tota Trinitas verbo dicatur, et etiam omnis creatura; sicut intellectus hominis *verbo quod concipit intelligendo lapidem*, lapidem dicit.”

<sup>347</sup> All of the following quotations in this paragraph are excerpts from the text just quoted, that is, Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1 ad 3.

<sup>348</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 27, a. 1 c.: “Quicumque enim intelligit, *ex hoc ipso quod intelligit*, procedit aliquid intra ipsum, quod est conceptio rei intellectae, ex vi intellectiva proveniens, et *ex eius notitia procedens*.”

from the act of understanding (*ex eius notitia procedens*)<sup>349</sup> insofar as the word proceeds by the very fact that we understand something (*ex hoc ipso quod intelligit*).

That the term “*notitia*”, for St. Thomas, signifies the act of understanding may be taken from the following text. Here, St. Thomas is clarifying St. Augustine’s use of the term “*notitia*”, because St. Augustine has used this term to indicate the concept, which is not the way St. Thomas uses it.

Therefore when we say that ‘word is knowledge’ [*notitia*], the term ‘knowledge’ does not mean the act of a knowing intellect, or any one of its habits, but stands for what the intellect conceives by knowing.<sup>350</sup>

That is to say, *notitia* is commonly used to indicate the act of understanding (or its habit), but here is used by St. Augustine to indicate the concept. Significantly, St. Thomas says that the concept is that which the intellect conceives precisely in the act of knowing something, in the act of understanding (“what the intellect conceives *by knowing*” [quod intellectus concipit *cognoscendo*]). Understanding and the issuing of a word are not two different acts of the intellect, but two different aspects of the intellect in the same act of understanding.

The concept “*proceeds by way of intelligible action*, which is a vital operation; from a conjoined principle (as above described); by way of similitude, inasmuch as the concept of the intellect is a likeness

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<sup>349</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa I*, q. 34, a. 1 c.: “The concept of the heart has of its own nature to proceed from something other than itself—namely, *from the knowledge of the one conceiving*.” [Ipse autem conceptus cordis de ratione sua habet quod ab alio procedat, scilicet a *notitia concipientis*.]

<sup>350</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I*, q. 34, a. 1 ad 2: “Cum ergo dicitur quod verbum est *notitia*, non accipitur *notitia* pro actu intellectus cognoscentis, vel pro aliquo eius habitu, sed pro eo quod intellectus concipit *cognoscendo*.”

of the thing understood.”<sup>351</sup> The concept proceeds by way of an operation of the intellect from the intellect itself. What operation of the intellect is not understanding, which is an assimilation regarding the thing understood? If *intelligere* were an act different from *dicere*, what would be the difference? Both would be operations from the intellect in which the intellect is assimilated to that which is understood: again, what would be the difference? The concept’s assimilation regarding the thing understood is stressed also in the following text: “Regarding our intellect, instead, we use the word ‘conception’ in order to signify that in the word of our intellect is found the likeness of the thing understood, although there be no identity of nature.”<sup>352</sup>

The concept is “what the intellect conceives by knowing,”<sup>353</sup> that is, what is conceived by the very act of understanding. There is no understanding without word. There is a distinction in the way of signifying that allows for confusion perhaps, insofar as *intelligere* could be considered the operation essentially, in itself, as operation, as *in fieri*, and the concept signifies the operation *in facto esse*, as completed. However, because of the particular characteristics of understanding, there is no real distinction between *in fieri* or *in facto esse*: either we understand or we do not.

So much so that whoever understands, understands in the concept: the thing understood is manifested to the one who understands “in

<sup>351</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 27, a. 2, c.: “*Procedit enim per modum intelligibilis actionis, quae est operatio vitae, et a principio coniuncto, ut supra iam dictum est, et secundum rationem similitudinis, quia conceptio intellectus est similitudo rei intellectae.*” Aquinas is speaking directly about the Word in God, but what is quoted here applies to the human concept also.

<sup>352</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 27, a.2 ad 2: “*Sed in intellectu nostro utimur nomine conceptionis, secundum quod in verbo nostri intellectus invenitur similitudo rei intellectae, licet non inveniatur naturae identitas.*”

<sup>353</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1 ad 2: “*quod intellectus concipit cognoscendo.*”

the word uttered.”<sup>354</sup> And that is why Aquinas says that the three Persons in the Trinity are understood and *therefore* said in the concept: “although each Person understands and is understood, and consequently is spoken by the Word.”<sup>355</sup>

If *intelligere* and *dicere* correspond to the same act of understanding, why does Aquinas make a distinction between these two notions?

Anselm took the term “speak” [*dicere*] improperly for the act of understanding [*intelligere*]; whereas they really differ from each other. For “to understand” [*intelligere*] means only the relationship of the one who understands to the thing understood, in which relationship nothing about origin is conveyed, but only a certain information of our intellect, forasmuch as our intellect is made actual by the form of the thing understood. In God, however, it [i.e. *intelligere*] means complete identity, because in God the intellect and the thing understood are altogether the same, as was proved above. Whereas “to speak” [*dicere*] means chiefly the relationship to the word conceived: for “to speak” is nothing but to utter a word. But by means of the word it [i.e. *dicere*] imports a relationship to the thing understood which in the word uttered is manifested to the one who understands.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1 ad 3: “in verbo prolato manifestatur intelligenti.”

<sup>355</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1 ad 3 in finem: “cum tamen singula personarum sit intelligens et intellecta, et per consequens Verbo dicta.”

<sup>356</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1, ad 3: “Anselmus vero improprie accepit dicere pro intelligere. Quae tamen differunt. Nam intelligere *importat* solam habitudinem intelligentis ad rem intellectam; in qua nulla ratio originis importatur, sed solum informatio quaedam in intellectu nostro, prout intellectus noster fit in actu per formam rei intellectae. In Deo autem importat omnimodam identitatem, quia in Deo est omnino idem intellectus et intellectum, ut supra ostensum est. Sed dicere importat principaliter habitudinem ad verbum conceptum; nihil enim est aliud dicere quam proferre

St. Thomas is not saying that the terms *intelligere* and *dicere* correspond to different acts of the intellect, but that they indicate different relationships in the same act of understanding. *Intelligere* indicates the relationship of the intellect to that which is understood: now, given that in God the intellect and that which is understood are the same thing, here, in God, there is no real relation. *Dicere* is the relationship of the intellect to its word: now, because this relationship is a relationship of origin, here, in God, there is a real relation.

*Intelligere* is the relationship of the intellect to its object; *dicere* is the relationship of the intellect as principle of operation to its operation. Now, the relationship of the intellect to its object (understanding) is through its operation, through the intellect's "reaching out" to the object, through the concept. That is why, even if *intelligere* indicates the relationship of the intellect to the thing understood, *dicere* relates also, through the word, to the thing understood because it is precisely the word that manifests to the one who understands that which is understood:<sup>357</sup> we understand in the word. In my view, this explanation and the fact that Aquinas, in this text (I, q. 34, a. 1 ad 3), emphasizes the connotation of each term, as each term indicating different relationships regarding the intellect's operation,<sup>358</sup> show clearly that, for Aquinas,

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verbum. Sed mediante verbo importat habitudinem ad rem intellectam, quae in verbo prolato manifestatur intelligenti."

<sup>357</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1, ad 3: "...the thing understood which in the word uttered is manifested to the one who understands" [...rem intellectam, quae in verbo prolato manifestatur intelligenti].

<sup>358</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 1, ad 2: "Nothing belonging to the intellect can be applied to God personally, except word alone; for word alone *signifies* that which emanates from another. For what the intellect forms in its conception is the word. Now, the intellect itself, according as it is made actual by the intelligible species, *is considered* absolutely" [Nihil eorum quae ad intellectum pertinent, personaliter dicitur in divinis, nisi solum verbum, solum enim verbum *significat* aliquid ab alio emanans. Id enim quod intellectus in

understanding and the production of a concept are not two different operations. They are, instead, two different aspects of the same operation: *intelligere* is the relationship of the intellect to its object, and *dicere* the relationship of the intellect to its own operation on the object.

Other texts may confirm our interpretation:

In those things in which there is a difference between the intellect and its object,<sup>359</sup> and the will and its object, there can be a real relation, both of science to its object, and of the willer to the object willed. In God, however, the intellect and

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concipiendo format, est verbum. Intellectus autem ipse, secundum quod est per speciem intelligibilem in actu, *consideratur* absolute].

In my view, here and because of the context, “species intelligibilem” stands for the *species expressa*, that is, for the concept, and not for the *species impressa*. Certainly, in many places Aquinas uses this terminology “species intelligibilis” for the *species impressa* instead. However, that the concept, in Aquinas, can be considered an intelligible species can be taken from the following passages as well. Cf. *Summa* I, q. 27, a. 2, c.: “for He proceeds by way of intelligible action, which is a vital operation; and from a conjoined principle (as above described); and by way of similitude, inasmuch as the concept of the intellect is *a likeness of the object conceived*” [Procedit enim per modum intelligibilis actionis, quae est operatio vitae, et a principio coniuncto, ut supra iam dictum est, et secundum rationem similitudinis, quia conceptio intellectus est *similitudo rei intellectae*]; *Summa* I, q. 27, a. 2, ad 2: “In our way of understanding we use the word ‘conception’ in order to signify that in the word of our intellect is found the *likeness of the thing understood*, although there be no identity of nature” [Sed in intellectu nostro utimur nomine conceptionis, secundum quod in verbo nostri intellectus invenitur *similitudo rei intellectae*, licet non inveniatur naturae identitas].

<sup>359</sup> Notice how, for Aquinas, the Aristotelian identity between “intellectus in actu” (the intellect in act) and “intellectum in actu” (the understood in act) does not mean that *intellectus* (the intellect) and *intellectum* (the understood or the object) are always the same thing. They are the same thing only in God, not in us.



its object are one and the same; because by understanding Himself, God understands all other things; and the same applies to His will and the object that He wills. Hence it follows that in God these kinds of relations are not real; as neither is the relation of a thing to itself. Nevertheless, the relation to the word is a real relation; because *the word is understood as proceeding by an intelligible action*; and not as a thing understood. For, when we understand a stone, that which the intellect conceives from the thing understood, is called the word.<sup>360</sup>

The word is that which proceeds by means of an intellectual action. What intellectual action, if not the act of understanding? This is why St. Thomas mentions immediately the example of the act of understanding a stone.

St. Thomas, as part of an objection, affirms the following principle: “whoever understands, by understanding conceives a word.”<sup>361</sup> Therefore—the objection continues—if the three Persons in the Trinity understand, the three of them should conceive a word, and therefore word is not a personal name, but something regarding

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<sup>360</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 28, a. 4, ad 1: “In his in quibus differt intellectus et intellectum, volens et volitum, potest esse realis relatio et scientiae ad rem scitam, et volentis ad rem volitam. Sed in Deo est idem omnino intellectus et intellectum, quia intelligendo se intelligit omnia alia, et eadem ratione voluntas et volitum. Unde in Deo huiusmodi relationes non sunt reales, sicut neque relatio eiusdem ad idem. Sed tamen relatio ad verbum est realis, quia *verbum intelligitur ut procedens per actionem intelligibilem*, non autem ut res intellecta. Cum enim intelligimus lapidem, id quod ex re intellecta concipit intellectus, vocatur verbum.” This text shows also that, for Aquinas, there is concept not only in judgment but in simple apprehension as well. We form a concept in understanding “stone”.

<sup>361</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 2, ob. 4: “Quicumque intelligit, intelligendo concipit verbum.”

the three Persons. St. Thomas' answer to this objection does not deny the aforementioned principle:

To be intelligent belongs to the Son, in the same way as it belongs to Him to be God, since to understand is said of God essentially, as stated above. Now the Son is God begotten, and not God begetting; and hence He is *intelligent, not as producing a Word*, but as the Word proceeding; forasmuch as in God the Word proceeding does not differ really from the divine intellect, but is distinguished from the principle of the Word only by relation.<sup>362</sup>

The act of understanding implies issuing a word, the act of understanding happens by means of the issuing of a word. In the Trinity, the act of understanding is one and the Word is also one: but the act of understanding is essential and instead the Word, because it implies a real relationship to its principle, is Personal. What I find relevant for my present purpose is that, for Aquinas, the principle remains: "whoever understands, by understanding conceives a word."<sup>363</sup> The act of understanding happens by issuing a word.

## Conclusion

Our purpose has been to show that, for Aquinas, *intelligere* and *dicere* are not two different acts of the intellect, but two different considerations of the same act of understanding, based on two different relationships of the intellect: the relationship between the

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<sup>362</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 2, ad 4: "Eo modo convenit Filio esse intelligentem, quo convenit ei esse Deum, *cum intelligere essentialiter dicatur in divinis*, ut dictum est. Est autem Filius Deus genitus, non autem generans Deus. Unde est quidem *intelligens, non ut producens verbum*, sed ut verbum procedens; prout scilicet in Deo verbum procedens secundum rem non differt ab intellectu divino, sed relatione sola distinguitur a principio verbi."

<sup>363</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I, q. 34, a. 2, ob. 4: "Quicumque intelligit, intelligendo concipit verbum."

intellect and that which is understood, and the relationship between the intellect and its own operation or act. In the *Summa Theologiae*, there is textual evidence that St. Thomas makes a distinction between *intelligere* and *dicere*, but no textual evidence refers this distinction to two different acts. Textual evidence refers this distinction to two different relationships in the intellect itself, and leads to affirm that these two different relationships happen in the same act of understanding.

#### Note 5

### **Does Aquinas Really Mean that the Thing Outside the Soul is Not Intelligible at All?**

A Brief Study on *De Potentia*, q. 7, a. 10

In the text we are studying,<sup>364</sup> Lonergan has affirmed: “The imagined object as merely imagined and as present to a merely sensitive consciousness (subject) is not, properly speaking, intelligible in potency”,<sup>365</sup> and he confirms his point, in footnote, by quoting Aquinas: “*ipsa res quae est extra animam, omnino est extra genus intelligibile*” [“the thing which is outside the soul is wholly outside the genus of intelligible things”].<sup>366</sup> In other words, for Lonergan, the thing outside the mind, insofar as it is outside the intellect’s influence and reach, cannot be said to be intelligible in potency. This is why, for Lonergan, St. Thomas says that the thing outside the mind is completely outside the intelligible genus; now, *completely* outside the intelligible genus includes obviously, at least for Lonergan, being intelligible in potency. In the last part of

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<sup>364</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 184-185.

<sup>365</sup> Lonergan, *Verbum*, 184.

<sup>366</sup> Lonergan’s complete footnote is as follows: “*De potentia*, q. 7, a. 10 c.: ‘*ipsa res quae est extra animam, omnino est extra genus intelligibile*’. The meaning is that material entities of themselves are not related to intellectual knowledge; the context deals with the nonreciprocal real relation of *scientia ad scibile*.”

his footnote, Lonergan tries to show also that he is aware of the text's meaning and of the context, perhaps in an effort to soften an almost obvious taking out of context Aquinas' words.

Three things seem to be needed in order to understand what Aquinas says and why Lonergan's reference to this text is out of place. We need, first, a better contextualization for Aquinas' text; second, a proper interpretation of the same; third, showing other quotes from Aquinas saying the opposite of what Lonergan tries to portray as Thomistic. Instead, let me go to the main point: in this text, St. Thomas is saying that the thing outside the soul is outside the intelligible genus because the intellect's act does not affect this thing in its real being. St. Thomas is saying *absolutely* ("omnino") outside this genus, because the intellect's act does *absolutely* nothing to the thing itself in its real being outside the soul. Intelligible genus refers here to the genus of the intellect's act, as the immediate context of Aquinas' text shows:

And there are some things to which others are ordered but not vice versa, because they are *wholly foreign to that genus of actions* or power from which that order arises: thus knowledge has a relation to the thing known, because the knower *by an intelligible act* has an order to the thing known which is outside the soul. Whereas the thing itself that is outside the soul is not touched by that act, inasmuch as *the act of the intellect* does not pass into exterior matter by changing it; so that the thing which is outside the soul is *wholly outside the genus of intelligible things*. For this reason *the relation which arises from the act of the mind* cannot be in that thing.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Aquinas, *De Pot.* q. 7, a. 10, c.: "Quaedam vero sunt ad quae quidem alia ordinantur, et non e converso, quia sunt *omnino extrinseca ab illo genere actionum* vel virtutum quas consequitur talis ordo; sicut patet quod scientia refertur ad scibile, quia sciens, per *actum intelligibilem*, ordinem habet ad rem scitam quae est extra animam. Ipsa vero res quae est extra animam, omnino non attingitur

Aquinas, in this article, is denying the presence in God of a real relationship to creatures. He compares God's relationship with creatures to the relationship of the known to the knower, in order to show the possibility, in principle, of a relationship which is real in one of the members (in this case, the knower) and is not real in the other member (in this case, the intelligibly known). The reason for which the relationship is not real in one of the members is, as St. Thomas says explicitly, that this member is completely outside the genus *of the action* on which this relationship is based. This is a general principle which St. Thomas applies in particular to the relationship between the knower (*sciens*) and the intellectually known, a relationship based on the intellect's act. Now, because this act does not affect in anyway the thing outside the soul, this thing remains completely outside the genus of the intellect's act; that is, the thing does not participate in any way the intellect's subjective act.

Some clarifications may be needed. For Aquinas, the intellect's act does not affect the thing outside the soul because understanding is not like the act of the efficient cause, changing or perfecting a material being.<sup>368</sup> Moreover, St. Thomas is speaking about intellectual knowledge as already having happened; because of this, it is odd—at the very least—that Lonergan uses this text to confirm a point regarding intellectual knowledge as not yet possible. St. Thomas is not saying, as Lonergan seems to suggest with this text, that the object's intelligibility depends on the intellect's action but, on the contrary, that the object in its real being will never be affected by the intellect's action, not even once

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a tali actu, cum *actus intellectus* non sit transiens in exteriorem materiam mutandam; unde et ipsa res quae est extra animam, *omnino est extra genus intelligibile*. Et propter hoc *relatio quae consequitur actum intellectus*, non potest esse in ea.”

<sup>368</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *De Pot.* q. 7, a. 10, c.: “actus intellectus non sit transiens in exteriorem materiam mutandam”.

understanding has happened. Moreover, St. Thomas is not talking about the agent intellect's action, but about the act of understanding, which is the act of the possible intellect. However, neither does the agent intellect's action affect the material being in its real being: the agent intellect affects (illuminates) the phantasm.

St. Thomas, then, is saying that the material thing outside the soul is outside the intelligible genus because this thing is not affected in its real being by the intellect's act. St. Thomas is therefore obviously speaking of intelligibility as a mode of being, not as content. The intellect's act is *subjectively* intelligible, intellectual, spiritual, separated from matter, etc. The thing outside the soul does not participate these characteristics, at least not from the knowing subject. Because the intellect's act is not a communication of intelligibility as mode of being to the real object, but rather the intellect's participation in the object's intelligible content.

St. Thomas is not saying here that things outside the soul have no intelligibility whatsoever. As I have shown to exhaustion, for St. Thomas there is something intelligible in the things themselves, their quiddities, which is what we understand.<sup>369</sup> Intellectually knowing the intelligible means participating that intelligible perfection subsisting in material beings, which is in turn a participation of God's exemplar ideas.

Thus, the understanding subject is perfected by the intelligible perfection of a material thing, even if that material thing remains outside the genus of the intellect's act; in a similar way, created being receives its own perfection from God, even if created being remains completely outside the genus of God's action in creation,

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<sup>369</sup> Cf. Ayala, *The Radical Difference*, 113 ff. (texts in which St. Thomas distinguishes between the intelligible object and the intelligible mode of being of the same), 88 ff (Thomistic texts saying that the universal as nature is in the things themselves).

because God's action is God's being. In both cases the relationship between both members is real, but one of the members is not modified in its real being by this relationship. In the case of human knowing, because, in principle, knowing does not affect the known thing; in the case of creation, because God's action cannot be anything different from his eternal substance.

Lonerger's misreading of this particular text depends on two things. First, Lonergan does not distinguish between intelligibility as content and as mode of being of the content. Therefore, he cannot see that intelligible genus in *De Potentia* q. 7, a. 10 is the genus of the intellect's *action*: the known thing is said to be absolutely outside *that* genus and not outside the genus of the intelligible as content. Second, Lonergan's notion of understanding as giving intelligible form to the sensible material leads him to think that the intellect's act is the only source of intelligible content. For this reason, St. Thomas' statement that the thing in itself is not intelligible because it is not affected by the intellect's act seems to be, for Lonergan, a statement matching Lonergan's own notion of understanding.





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