Mental Language in Aquinas?

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It would be anachronistic, at the very least, to attribute to Aquinas a theory of mental language. As historians of philosophy seem to agree, and I will not question, it is only after Aquinas that thinkers elaborated theories of mental language, or of a "language of thought," with attempts to provide a linguistic (especially semantic and syntactic) analysis of cognition: first within the project of later medieval nominalism, and more recently (and apparently independently) by thinkers in contemporary analytic philosophy (foremost Jerry Fodor).[1]

Nonetheless, allowing that we do not find a recognizable *theory* of mental language to Aquinas, I want to consider the sense in which it is appropriate to attribute to Aquinas some *conception* of "mental language," and then to explore whether, given that conception, a Thomistic theory of mental language would be possible, and, if so, what it might look like and how it would differ from more familiar versions. For, as will become clear, Aquinas did regard cognition as having certain language-like qualities; but as I also hope to show, given his particular understanding of cognition, there are reasons why a syntactic and semantic analysis of the "language" of thought in a Thomistic framework would have only limited similarities to what we recognize in other thinkers as theories of mental language. I will begin, then, with a brief review of some of the features of mental language theory as developed explicitly in medieval nominalism and in contemporary analytic philosophy, in relation to which we can then better appreciate the distinctiveness of Aquinas's own attention to the language-like features of thought.

MENTAL LANGUAGE: NOMINALIST AND CONTEMPORARY ANALYTIC VERSIONS

Ockham is usually recognized as the first to have developed a theory of mental language. Other thinkers before him had, for various theological and philosophical reasons, treated some aspects of thought as language-like, but, in the

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1. An exception to this general historical consensus is Peter King, "Abelard on Mental Language," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81 (2007): 169–187. Claude Panaccio has responded to this in "Mental Language and Predication: Ockham and Abelard," *Analytica* 14 (2010): 183–194.

words of Claude Panaccio, who has traced this history, "Ockham's originality in the history of the idea of mental language is to have systematically transposed to the analysis of non-linguistic discursive thought the grammatical and semantic categories that the science of his time employed in the study of oral or written language."[2]

Ockham's development of a theory of mental language was, if not determined by, at least fostered within, his nominalist project. Desiring to preserve the universality of scientific knowledge *without* a commitment to universal objects, Ockham found it attractive to take propositions, rather than common natures, as objects of knowledge, for even universal propositions could be verified, on Ockham's nominalist semantics, by reference only to particular individuals in the world. But if they were to transcend the particularity of individual language communities, the universal propositions which are the objects of scientific knowledge could be not just tokens in spoken and written language but items of a "mental language," which is "not in any language," that is, an interior language of the mind not bound by conventional oral or written expression and therefore in principle common to all human beings.[3]

In the mature form of Ockham's theory, the components of mental language, its terms and expressions, are not some *objects* of intellectual acts, but the very intellectual acts themselves. Whether, for Ockham, these intellectual acts or concepts can be said to *represent* or be *similar* to their objects, or whether their direct causal connection to their objects can be described apart from, and even in opposition to, a "representation" or similitude relation, is a controverted point,[4] but what is undeniable is that Ockham's articulation of a theory of mental language, taken up by later nominalists, allowed for the development of a sophisticated semantic analysis of cognition while upholding the characteristic nominalist goal: in this case, to restrict both the *objects* and the *apparatus* of cognition to concrete individuals (and to no more concrete individuals than was necessary).

In recent analytic philosophy, Jerry Fodor and other theorists have defended a "language of thought hypothesis," according to which, as for Ockham, thought is language-like in having a compositional structure and bearing semantic prop-
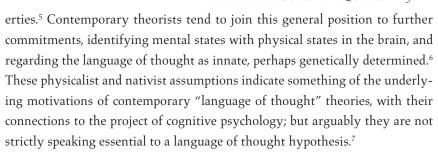
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2. Claude Panaccio, *Le discourse intérieur de Platon à Guillaume d'Ockham* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1999), 278.

3. Ibid., 256.

4. For a variety of positions see, for instance, ibid., chap. 8; Peter King, "Rethinking Representation in the Middle Ages: A Vade-Mecum to Mediaeval Theories of Mental Representation," in *Representation and Objects of Thought*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 83–102; and Gyula Klima, "Ockham's Semantics and Metaphysics of the Categories," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. P. V. Spade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 118–142.

erties.[5] Contemporary theorists tend to join this general position to further commitments, identifying mental states with physical states in the brain, and regarding the language of thought as innate, perhaps genetically determined.[6] These physicalist and nativist assumptions indicate something of the underlying motivations of contemporary "language of thought" theories, with their connections to the project of cognitive psychology; but arguably they are not strictly speaking essential to a language of thought hypothesis.[7]

These are brief outlines that do not do justice to the details of the theories, nor to the varieties that they have taken in particular medieval and contemporary authors, but they are sufficient to lead us to expect that Aquinas would not have a theory of mental language. For a simple, not to say simplistic, version of Aquinas's view is that intellectual cognition involves the form or nature of a thing being received immaterially in the mind. This immaterial-reception-of-forms account seems to share very little of (indeed, seems directly at odds with) the theoretical frameworks that have fostered the development of historical mental language theories: materialist functionalism for Fodor, and aversion to extra entities like natures distinct from their individuals for the nominalists.

Nonetheless, this is not enough to help us understand why Aquinas did not develop his own, alternative theory of mental language—after all, we have not presented any reasons why an approach to thought as somewhat language-like (and thus as susceptible to semantic and syntactic analysis) *must* have a particular motive or take place within a framework of particular theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, the immaterial-reception-of-forms account of Aquinas's view that I have given is indeed too simplistic. The real story for Aquinas is more complicated and subtle. Telling it and working out some of its details will allow us to clarify the roles of representation, intentionality, mediation, and other notions central to Aquinas's account of intellectual cognition, and will also prepare us to develop a more nuanced appreciation of how the notion of "mental language" can apply to Aquinas's approach to cognition.

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5. The founding text is Jerry Fodor, The Language of Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975). For an overview and other references, see Murat Aydede, "The Language of Thought Hypothesis," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy *(Fall 2004 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/language-thought.

6. Cf. Aydede, sections 1 and 4.

7. Ibid. An assumption apparently more central to contemporary mental language theories is that of "mental representationalism" in the sense typical of modern empiricism: that we know things in the external world only by attending to mental phenomena that somehow represent those things. But there is some question as to how "externalist" or "internalist" the implied representationalism must be. Fodor has apparently developed his view on this point.

WORKS OF THE MIND

As is well known, Aquinas adopts from Aristotle a view of intellectual cognition that is derived from his hylomorphist conception of nature and the soul. Natural objects are composites of form and matter, and a cognitive being is one whose substantial form or soul endows that being with the power to receive the forms of things, without the matter of those things, in a manner that makes that being aware of those things. Different kinds of cognitive powers—sensation, imagination, intellectual understanding—involve the reception of forms in different manners. What makes sensation different from intellectual understanding is that it is directed to particular physical individuals, while intellectual understanding is universal, common, or general.

While intellectual and sensitive powers can exist independently of each other (in angels and brutes, respectively), in human beings they not only exist together, but one (intellectual cognition) is crucially dependent on the other (sensation). Natural forms, as they exist in things, are sensible, but not immediately intelligible—they have to be made intelligible by being abstracted from all their individuating material conditions. This is the work of the agent intellect, whose role is to operate on the phantasms received in the imagination that are derived from the sensible forms received through the senses. The agent intellect isolates the universal intelligible features of the forms, thus making them available for intellectual cognition. This is the abstraction of the intelligible species.

But the intelligible species is not yet actually understood, and is not the object of intellectual cognition. It is *intelligible*, that is, *able* to be understood, but as intelligible species it is not yet *actually* understood. The agent intellect, having abstracted it from the phantasm, deposits it in the possible intellect, where it serves, in the phrase of David Braine, as a "standing intellectual capacity."[8] Informing the possible intellect, the intelligible species can serve as the formal principle for the action of the intellect that forms a concept by which an object is understood.

This last sentence is carefully phrased. The *intelligible species* can serve as the formal principle for the *action of the intellect* that forms a *concept* by which an *object* is understood. Aquinas carefully insists that we must not confuse the four elements or moments of intellectual cognition suggested by this description: the intelligible species, the act of intellect, the concept, and the object of understanding. As Aquinas puts it in the *De Potentia Dei*:

> Now the one who understands may have a relation to four [things] in understanding: namely to the thing understood, to the intelligible species whereby his intelligence is made actual, to his act of understanding, and to his intel-

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8. David Braine, "The Active and Potential Intellects: Aquinas as a Philosopher in His Own Right," in *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value in the Thomistic and Analytical Traditions*, ed. John Haldane (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 22.

lectual concept. This concept differs from the three others. It differs from the thing understood, for the latter is sometimes outside the intellect, whereas the intellectual concept is only in the intellect. Moreover the intellectual concept is ordered to the thing understood as its end, inasmuch as the intellect forms its concept thereof that it may know the thing understood. It differs from the intelligible species, because the latter which makes the intellect actual is considered as the principle of the intellect's act, since every agent acts forasmuch as it is actual: and it is made actual by a form, which is necessary as a principle of action. And it differs from the act of the intellect, because it is considered as the term of the action, and as something effected thereby.[9]

The account in this famous and difficult passage has elicited two related objections: First, that it is too complicated, involving too many entities—especially, in addition to the act and object of intellect, the intelligible species and the concept; and second, that these added entities introduce unnecessary steps of "mediation"—some of these entities seem to serve instrumentally as representations of the others. These objections are behind typical nominalist criticisms of the Thomistic picture, charging Thomism with a profligate mental representationalism in comparison with the true, economical "direct realism" of nominalism,[10] and some who would defend Aquinas's treatment of cognition would rather ignore this passage as uncharacteristic. I think that the objections can be handled without dismissing this passage.

In anticipation of the first objection, I have called the four items Aquinas discusses here "moments" or "elements" in cognition, in order to avoid making them sound like *things*. I think it is clear that these are not four *res*; they are distinct, and must not be confused, but we do not have to find here four "entities."

Now it is not controversial to say that the *object*—or what in later medieval philosophy came to be called the *objective concept*[11]—differs from the other three elements, for it is *what is understood,* while the other three are not what is understood but some part of the process of understanding. These other three elements are connected: the concept (or what is sometimes called the *formal concept*), while not identical with the act of intellect, is its terminus, since the act of intellect is the action which forms the quality of mind (the formal concept) by which the objective concept is grasped; and the intelligible species, while identical with neither the formal concept nor the act of intellect, is their formal principle.

If this helps to clear Aquinas of the charge of having too many things involved in cognition, I also think that it helps to clear Aquinas of the charge

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9. *Disp. Q. de Potentia Dei*, q. 8, a. 1.
10. Cf. Panaccio, *Le discourse intérieur*, ch. 6.
11. See Gyula Klima's contribution to this volume.

of having "mediating representations" that make the thinking subject attend to something internal, rather than to the external object of thought. Aquinas is emphatic that the intelligible species and the (formal) concept are not *what* is understood, not the *object* of intellection. We do not attend to them, and then conclude something about the world by a kind of inferential step. Instead, they are the *principles* by which we can attend to objects. Of course, in describing the "mechanics" of cognition, I may attend to these principles, and make them objects of thought—as when doing logic or philosophical psychology. But in thinking of dogs, I don't think of my (formal) concept of dog; I think about the canine nature.[12]

INTENTIO INTELLECTUS, REPRESENTATION, MEDIATION

At this point, however, more needs to be said about mediation and representation. For clearly the concept does *mediate* understanding and signification—I understand a thing *by means of* my concept of it, and I can signify that thing because a word can signify the concept immediately, and by its mediation signify the thing of which it is a concept. This does not mean that the signification of things is *indirect*, only that my directly signifying and understanding a thing cannot take place without a concept. An intellectual subject's relationship to an understood object is necessarily *mediated* by his cognitive states—by his intentions or concepts. Even nominalism's alleged "direct realism" cannot avoid *this* kind of mediation. The (formal) concept's mediation of understanding certainly does not entail that the intellectual agent only knows by inferences from introspection, that there is something that stands in the way of direct contact with the world, or that the mind is immediately occupied only with its own concepts. The mind is occupied with the things it conceives, by means of (formal) concepts. This should serve to clear Thomas of the charge of "mental representationalism" in the modern sense we associate with British empiricism.[13]

But it must be further acknowledged that Aquinas says that the concept *represents* its object. The concept "by which our intellect understands a thing distinct from itself originates from another and *represents* another."[14] What can Thomas mean by "represent" in such a claim? What sort of "representation"

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12. For a recent detailed discussion of the role of the intelligible species, see Yves Floucat, *L'intimé fecondité de l'intelligence: Le verbe mental selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Téqui, 2001), especially chap. 3. On the development of Aquinas's treatment of the concept and intelligible species, see also Lawrence Dewan, "St. Thomas and Pre-Conceptual Intellection," *Études Maritainiennes/Maritain Studies* 11 (1995): 220–233.

13. For an extended treatment differentiating Aquinas on cognition from contemporary mental representationalism, see John O'Callaghan, *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

14. "Huiusmodi ergo conceptio, sive verbum, qua intellectus noster intelligit rem aliam a se, ab alio exoritur, et aliud repraesentat." *De Pot.* 8.1. Cf. *In Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, c.; d. 8, q. 2, a. 1d, ad 1.

does he have in mind, and in what sense is it serving to represent? In "mental representationalism" commonly understood, a representation is what is directly attended to, and the representation is somehow a physical likeness or depiction of what it represents. We have already seen that Aquinas does not share the first assumption. He also does not share the second; a concept cannot represent in the way that a picture or a mental image, a phantasm, represents, for as an immaterial quality it cannot *physically* represent, or have a physical similitude to, anything at all.

Even apart from immaterial intellectual intentions, in general for Aquinas a representing thing need not physically resemble the object it represents. The representing thing may encode the represented thing in a different medium, as pits in the surface of a CD that encode but do not physically resemble the sounds that make up a song.[15] On this understanding, any instance of what Aquinas calls an "intentional" reception of a form is a "representation." Such an "intentional" reception, in Aquinas's sense, does not imply a cognitive subject; it implies the reception of a form in a mode other than that appropriate to its natural being.

Presumably, then, every intentional reception of a form is a representation. Something represents to the degree that it has the power to manifest or make known, not necessarily to the extent that it depicts.[16] An intentional reception of a form is an encoding of a form, and it represents to the extent that it could be decoded. The concept's "representation" of its object is due to its formal principle, the intelligible species, which directs the intellect to its object, the nature. We might say that it is an "encoding" of the species, an intentional reception of the form, in such a way as to direct the intellect to its object. Informed by the intelligible species, the intellect is able to produce an intention that directs it toward the nature of which the intelligible species is the formal principle. The concept is thus also called by Thomas the *intentio intellectus*—an *intentio*, in the sense that it is an intentional reception of a form, that is, a reception of the form in something other than the matter proper to that form's natural being; and it is an intentio *intellectus*, because in this case it is received in an intellect, and is that by which the intellect actually understands—in other words, it is the kind of *intentio* that directs an intellect to an object of understanding.[17]

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15. The example is from the more extended discussion in Klima, "Tradition and Innovation in Medieval Theories of Mental Representation," *Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* 4 (2004): 4–11.
16. This point is made very clearly in David Braine, "The Active and Potential Intellects."
17. See Max Herrera, "Understanding Similitudes in Aquinas with the Help of Avicenna and Averroes," *Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* 5 (2005): 4–17, esp. 11: "A species is a type of form that intentionally specifies and determines its subject by communicating a *ratio*, also known as an *intentio*, to its subject. The *ratio* or *intentio* is a formal characteristic that *intentionally* specifies and determines its subject."

So for Aquinas the concept mediates thought and signification because it is a representation of its object, a special kind of representation in an intellectual agent which makes that agent aware of an intellectual object—and we can say this without implicating him in the difficulties of "mental representationalism" with its mediated entities separating the knower from the world.

VERBUM MENTIS

Further indication that Aquinas considered thought to be language-like is his explicit treatment of concepts as *mental words*. In some of the passages discussed above, and many others in Aquinas, another term for the concept or *intentio intellectus* is *mental word* (*verbum mentis*)—occasionally *interior word* (*verbum interius*) or *word of the heart* (*verbum cordis*).[18] This "word" terminology is usually presented as synonymous with the other terminology of concept and *intentio intellectus*.[19] Obviously the terms "concept," "*intentio*," and "*verbum mentis*" do not have the same connotation, but for Aquinas they all pick out the same element in the analysis of cognition—indeed, all three are used not just of simple concepts, resulting from the first act of intellect, but of complex concepts or judgments, propositions formed by the second intellectual act of combination and division.[20]

In calling the concept a "verbum," the obvious connation, in addition to linguistic, is theological—in the Latin translation of the Gospel of John, "verbum" is the name for the second person of the Trinity, and Christian theologians before Aquinas—especially Augustine—had already attempted to tease out an appropriate analogy between the procession or expression of the Divine *Logos* in God and the formation of a concept or "inner word" in the human intellect. This theological inspiration might suggest that Aquinas's characterization of the concept as a *verbum* is not especially relevant to his philosophical account of cognition. So, for instance, reviewing the context and significance of Aquinas's employment of the term "*verbum mentis*," John O'Callaghan has concluded that "the *verbum mentis* plays no philosophical role in St. Thomas, but is rather a properly theological discussion. It has the theological purpose of providing

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18. On Aquinas's use of *verbum*, two classic treatments are Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) and Henri Paissac, *Théologie du verbe* (Paris: Cerf, 1951). See also Floucat, *L'intimé fecondité de l'intelligence*, and William W. Meissner, "Some Aspects of the *Verbum* in the Texts of St. Thomas," *The Modern Schoolman* 36 (1958): 1–30. Dewan, "St. Thomas and Pre-Conceptual Intellection," mentions some other relevant scholarship.

19. Aquinas occasionally distinguishes between the *verbum cordis* and an interior *verbum* which is an image of the vocal word, apparently out of greater deference to Augustine's use in *De Trinitate*. Cf. *DV* 4.1 and *Sent*. 27.2.1.

20. E.g *Quod. Quest.*, Quod. 5, q. 5, a. 2, c.

nothing more than an image or metaphor for talking about man, made in the image and likeness of God as Trinity."[21]

O'Callaghan is moved to argue for this against several thinkers who have treated the notion of *verbum mentis* as if it were the key to Aquinas's philosophical psychology. O'Callaghan is right that we have no reason to take the notion of *verbum mentis* as the starting point, or central feature, of Aquinas's account of intellectual cognition, especially since, as O'Callaghan notes, the "*verbum mentis*" terminology does not appear in Aquinas's most developed philosophical treatments of cognition: *Disputed Questions on the Soul*, the *De Anima* and *De Interpretatione* commentaries, and questions 75–89 of the *Summa Theologiae* (*prima pars*). Instead, the term "*verbum mentis*" tends to appear in explicitly *theological* contexts and, given its relation to the divine *Verbum*, it is reasonable to infer that the notion of "*verbum mentis*" always retains for Aquinas some of its Christian theological connotations.

Nonetheless, it does not follow that the phrase "*verbum mentis*" is an item of purely theological, *as opposed to* properly philosophical, discourse, and we do not have to conclude with O'Callaghan that the notion of the *verbum* plays *no* properly philosophical role, and serves *only* as a theological metaphor. First of all, a theological metaphor (or analogy) still depends on the natural meanings of terms—or else there is no way to connect revelation to what is known from natural knowledge.[22] Calling God a "Word" does not reveal anything to us unless we can already import something of what we know of the *word* (or *ratio* or *logos*) apart from revelation, as well as import something of what we learn from revelation to enlighten what we naturally know of *words*.

Second, the "theological" connotation of "*verbum mentis*" is not solely a matter of Christian *sacra doctrina* but also of natural theology. In addition to the obvious connection to the Second Person of the Trinity, there is an important connection to the classical philosophical notion of a divine mind that conceives ideas. The extended treatment of the *verbum mentis* in *De Veritate*, q. 4, for instance, seems at least as indebted to the Neoplatonic desire to describe God as a divine mind with ideas as it is to the properly Christian interest in finding an image of the divine Trinity in man.

Furthermore, it seems worthwhile to pay attention to the direction in which the metaphor (or analogy) of human concept and Divine *Verbum* is supposed

21. John O'Callaghan, "Verbum Mentis: Philosophical or Theological Doctrine in Aquinas?" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 74 (2000): 103–119. O'Callaghan's thesis and arguments are explored further in subsequent exchange: James C. Doig, "O'Callaghan on Verbum Mentis in Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (2003): 233–255, and John O'Callaghan, "More Words on the Verbum: A Response to James Doig," ibid., 257–268.

22. Many articles on analogy could be mentioned here, but I will cite a more subtle and lesser known one: Alasdair MacIntyre, "Which God Ought We to Obey, and Why?" *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 359–371.

to move. From O'Callaghan's critique, we might assume that we know first that God has/is a "Word" which God conceives and expresses, and it is only by comparing our mind and its concepts with this that we may call our concepts "words." However, Aquinas seems to think that the analogy stretches in the other direction: "Our intellectual word . . . *enables us to speak about* the divine Word by a kind of resemblance."[23]

Why do we call the inner word a "word," according to Aquinas? Not because it is like the Divine Word, since the Divine Word is called a "word" because of its resemblance to the inner word. The inner word, it turns out, is so called because of its relation to the exterior, vocal word:

> We give names to things according to the manner in which we receive our knowledge from things. . . . Consequently, since the exterior word is sensible, it is more known to us than the interior word; hence, according to the application of the term, the vocal word is meant before the interior word, even though the interior word is naturally prior, being the efficient and final cause of the exterior.[24]

In other words, by order of imposition, the term "word" belongs first to the vocal word and is extended then to the interior word or concept, which is more primarily a word in the order of nature (and so from it the term "word" can be extended to the Divine Word—which, presumably, is even more primary in the metaphysical order, but remains last in the order of imposition).[25]

This position in *De Veritate* is consistent with what we learn from the *Summa Theologiae* about the notion of "word," its order of imposition and natural order. First, the notion of *word* is extended from vocal word to concept, insofar as the concept *issues from* a power (the intellect) and directs us *toward* something else (the object of understanding):

> whenever we understand, by the very fact of understanding 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 thing. This conception is signified by the spoken word, and it is called the word of the heart signified by the word of the voice.[26]

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23. *DV* 4.2. Presumably this, and not something heretical, is what John Poinsot (John of St. Thomas) means when he says that the mental word is the principal reason that explains (*praecipuam rationem explicandi*) the Divine Verbum (cited in O'Callaghan, "Verbum Mentis"). That is, the mental word is not a rational principle that makes possible a philosophical demonstration of a mystery, but a rational principle by reference to which the mystery of the Second Person of the Trinity can be expounded.

24. *DV* 4.1.

25. Cf. *DV* 4.1 ad 5.

26. *ST* Ia.27.1, *corpus*.

But the concept, while called a "word" later in the order of imposition, by its nature deserves the name more properly, as being cause of the vocal sound's being a word:

> The vocal sound, which has no signification, cannot be called a word; where-fore the exterior vocal sound is called a word from the fact that it signifies the interior concept of the mind. Therefore it follows that first and chiefly, the interior concept of the mind is called a word.[27]

To be sure, the larger context of both of these quoted passages is Trinitarian theology (q. 27 treats the Procession of the Divine Persons, q. 34 the Person of the Son). But within this larger theological context, the immediate dialectical context of the quoted passages is dedicated to articulating why the different things that we call words, vocal and mental words, are so called; and that is not done by reference to revealed Trinitarian doctrine but, in typical Aristotelian fashion, by reference to the order of natural knowledge.[28]

If we look at another passage, as well, its larger theological context should not blind us to the immediate dialectical trajectory. Treating the notion of Eternal Law, Aquinas responds to an objection that law, which must be promulgated by word, must be related to one Person of the Trinity rather than to the essence of God as a whole. Aquinas's response begins by clearing up why we call different things words:

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27. *ST* Ia.34.1 *corpus*.

28. Consider Aquinas's reflections in another undeniably theological context, commenting on the Gospel of John (chap. 1, lect. 1, sections 25–29 of *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*). Aquinas begins by saying that to understand the name "verbum" as it occurs in the first verse, we need to understand its natural sense. Citing Aristotle's account of words as signs of "passions in the soul," Aquinas explains that naturally speaking "word" refers to both the external (vocal) word and to that of which the external word is a sign, namely the internal word (*verbum interius*, also called here *conceptio mentis*, or even simply *ratio*) formed by the act of understanding. Thus, even if the external word is what is called "word" first in the order of imposition, the internal (mental) word is prior in the order of causality, as providing that which gives the external word its signification. The interior word is what is formed by an intellect when it understands, including both the first and second acts of intellect—that is, not only simple concepts but also judgments are a kind of interior speech. Aquinas can thus establish that an interior word is necessarily linked to an intellectual nature, and not as the *activity* of that nature but as *what intellectual activity forms* in the act of understanding—the word is not that *by which* the intellect understands but that *in which* it understands. Interestingly, Aquinas's first illustration of the divine word is not an explicit reference to the second Person of the Trinity as such, but to the creative act of God in Genesis, by speech; and Aquinas only begins to approach what looks like the recognizably Christian notion of the divine Word as the second Person of the Trinity through subsequent reflections on how the divine Word must differ from words uttered by other intellectual natures, given the uniqueness of the divine nature. At no point in this discussion does Aquinas take something that we know by faith about the Son to illuminate what we mean by "mental word"; rather, he reflects on the nature of the mental word to establish the appropriateness of speaking of a divine *Verbum*.

With regard to any sort of word, two points may be considered: viz., the word itself, and that which is expressed by the word. For the spoken word is something uttered by the mouth of man, and expresses that which is signified by the human word. The same applies to the human mental word, which is nothing else than something conceived by the mind, by which man expresses mentally that which he thinks about.[29]

Aquinas does continue by clarifying the sense in which what is conceived by the intellect of God is a Word, but this does not imply that when we speak of mental words we are working with a merely "theological" metaphor that extends to the realm of the human mind a revealed name of the Second Person of the Trinity. Rather, the logic here, as elsewhere, seems to present talk of the Divine Word as (at least in part) a semantic or psychological metaphor (or analogy) relating the Son to intellectual conceptions. In short, these passages suggest that a concept is not called an inner word because it is somehow like the second Person of the Trinity, but because it is like an exterior word, in being expressed by something and in turn expressing something else.[30]

On the basis of these reflections, it is fair to say that in characterizing the concept as a "verbum," Aquinas wants to highlight the following things about human thought: first, concepts behave like words in that they *represent*, and second, that they are a kind of *utterance* or "expression" by the mind that remain within the mind.

Thomas is even willing to say that these representing expressions *signify*, and so they deserve to be called *signs*—as in this passage from *De Veritate*:

The nature of a sign belongs more properly to an effect than to a cause when the cause brings about the existence of the effect but not its meaning, as is the case in the example given. But when the effect has derived from its cause, not only its existence, but also its meaning, then this cause is prior to the effect both in existence and in meaning. Hence, *signification and manifestation belong more properly to the interior than to the exterior word* [*verbum interius per prius habet rationem significationis quam verbum exterius*], for

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29. *ST* Ia–IIae 93.1 ad 2.

30. Of course, it may still be the case that the notion of the Son of God as the Divine Word gives the Christian a particular reason to make and exploit this comparison of mental and vocal word. Aware that we will try to understand the Divine Word by its comparison with the human mental word, the notion of the *verbum mentis* might always retain, for a Christian theorist, a theological connotation. (In clarifying the distinction between formal and objective concept, Cajetan admits that calling the formal concept a "word" is more a theological than philosophical way of talking: "Conceptus formalis est idolum quoddam quod intellectus possibilis format in seipso repraesentativum objectaliter rei intellectae: quod a philosophis vocatur intentio seu conceptus, a theologis vero verbum." *Commentaria in De Ente et Essentia*, §14.) But that does not make the content of this notion theological as opposed to philosophical.

whatever meaning the exterior word has been adopted to convey is due to the interior word.[31]

Aquinas's point in this passage is that thoughts or concepts have *semantic properties* (they are signs) and are appropriately—even more primarily—called "words" insofar as they *represent* or *signify* objects and are the *foundation* or *cause* of the representation or signification of uttered words. The priority of the signification of the mental word over the spoken word is manifest in a similar passage from the same work, where we learn that even angels (who have no uttered speech) can be said to know by means of signs:

> A thing cannot be called a sign in the *proper* sense unless one can come to know something else as if by reasoning from it. In this sense, signs do not exist among angels, because, as we proved in the previous question, angels' knowledge is not discursive. The signs we use are sensible, because our knowledge, which is discursive, has its origin in sense-objects. But we *commonly* call anything a sign which, being known, leads to the knowledge of something else; and for this reason an intelligible form can be called a sign of the thing which is known by its means. It is in this sense that angels know things through signs; and thus one angel speaks to another by means of signs, that is, through a species which actuates his intellect and puts it perfectly in relation to the other.[32]

We might summarize the further point made in this passage by saying that formal concepts are not just signs but *natural* signs. For Aquinas words of mental language naturally, that is, essentially or by their very intelligible content, signify their objects—for angels, and for human beings. There does not need to be some further account of how the conceptions expressed by the intellect correspond to, signify, or represent their objects, for they bear the same form as their objects.[33]

COMPOSITIONALITY, SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC

It seems clear that Aquinas is not just calling the concept a "word" because of some extraneous theological consideration, but that he regards the concept as having language-like properties—formal concepts are intellectual utterances or expressions that naturally represent or signify their objects. Still, by the standards of Claude Panaccio, who expects a mental language theory to consist

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31. *DV* 4.1, ad 7.
32. *DV* 9.4, ad 4.
33. The natural or essential connection between thoughts and their object is the crucial point of Thomistic realism, as opposed to nominalism: not whether or not universals or natures are "real," but the role that natures play in guaranteeing a formal identity between knower and known. On this see Gyula Klima, "Ontological Alternatives vs. Alternative Semantics in Medieval Philosophy," *S. European Journal for Semiotic Studies* 3 (1991): 587–618.

in a transposition of grammatical and semantic terminology to the analysis of thought,[34] Aquinas seems not to have developed a mental language theory, as far as formal concepts, the simple qualities of the mind whereby it conceives of its objects, are concerned.

A central element of any mental language theory is the position that mental propositions exhibit compositionality—they are subject to linguistic analysis just insofar as they can be analyzed into their semantic and syntactic components. It is reasonable to ask whether Aquinas's mental language has this feature. Perhaps, given Aquinas's reliance on the notion of a *word*, one might think that what held Aquinas from applying semantic and grammatical analysis to mental language is that the analogy of thought and language did not extend beyond *individual* words and simple concepts. But as we noted earlier, for Aquinas a mental "word" is not just a simple concept; a mental proposition is also a "word."

Indeed, it is at least clear that Aquinas's mental language exhibits *semantic* compositionality: the semantic values of mental propositions (second acts of intellect) are "complex" and can be analyzed in terms of the simpler semantic values of (non-propositional) mental words (first acts of intellect), and similar considerations apply to the operation of reasoning (third act of intellect). Aquinas did not hesitate to offer such analysis—this is, for him, part in the proper business of logic.[35] But note that semantic compositionality concerns the *information content* of mental language—which in this case is the objective concepts, that which is understood by means of the formal concepts that are the mental language. Given that the information content or semantic value of the mental word (or formal concept) just is what that mental word signifies (or the *objective* concept), to say that mental language exhibits semantic compositionality for Aquinas is just to say that the complex objective concept that is a mental proposition, grasped by a second act of intellect, can be analyzed in terms of simpler objective concepts that are grasped by first acts of intellect.

But given the distinction between objective and formal concepts, this *semantic* compositionality does not have to be reflected on the level of the *syntax* of mental language, on the level of formal concepts. If formal concepts exhibited *syntactic* compositionality, it would mean that the structure of a second act of intellect, considered as a quality of mind, could be analyzed in terms of component parts, simpler qualities of mind out of which a complex formal concept is made. Given Aquinas's conception of formal concepts, he is not committed to, and has principled reasons that count against, the idea that formal concepts could exhibit such syntactic compositionality. As immaterial intellectual qualities, formal concepts cannot strictly speaking have structure or sequence or

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34. Panaccio, "Mental Language and Predication," 184–185.

35. For a thoroughgoing account of Aquinas's conception of logic along these lines, see Robert W. Schmidt, S.J., *The Domain of Logic According to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).

parts; and if they could not have any structure or sequence or parts, then it would seem to be a category mistake to subject them to syntactic analysis.[36] Aquinas is clear that the mental act by which a proposition is apprehended is a single act, not a combination or composite of many acts.

It may sound odd to insist that the formal concepts that constitute Aquinas's mental language exhibit semantic, but not syntactic, compositionality. But, as Gyula Klima has explained, it is possible to attribute semantic complexity to ontologically (and so syntactically) simple mental acts, if and insofar as one can analyze the semantic value of the simple mental act as dependent on more simple semantic values, which more simple semantic values could be attributed to other mental acts which are not parts (ontologically, syntactically) of the original mental act.[37] Consider the mental word that is the result of a second act of intellect (judgment, or composition and division), such as "Socrates is white." The formal concept by which it is understood that Socrates is white need not, as a quality of the mind, exhibit a structural (syntactic) compositionality in order to have as its object (semantic content) the relevant judgment.

To be sure, there may be rules that govern how simple formal concepts can be "combined" to create well-formed complex formal concepts; but such rules would not be based on the ontological structure of the formal concepts as qualities of mind, rather they will be based on the *objects* of those formal concepts, the semantic values of the item in mental language. One might apply "syntactic" (structural) analysis to a signified complex *object* (for example, Socrates' being white), but that would in turn lead to an account of the truth conditions of the mental act in familiar metaphysical terms (for example, the inherence of the form of whiteness in Socrates), not to some further linguistic analysis of the formal concepts by means of which Socrates being white is understood. In other words, the mental word (formal concept) is just not subject to syntactic analysis in its own structure, apart from the object that it (naturally) represents. To the extent that the immaterial intellectual quality that is the *formal* concept has an "ontological structure," it would be analyzed in terms of forms inhering in the mind—which would lead to the kind of metaphysical analysis included in Aquinas's philosophical psychology, not to a linguistic analysis that looks like a "theory of mental language" or of a "language of thought."

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36. To be sure, the objective concepts (the objects of understanding) may exhibit "syntactic" compositionality—after all, the structure of the object of complex propositional understanding may be analyzable into its component parts, such as subject copula, predicate, as the notion of propositional thought as "composing and dividing" implies. But such an analysis of objective concepts is not a syntactic analysis of *mental language*, understanding mental language as the representational system of *formal concepts*.

37. See the introduction to Gyula Klima, *John Buridan, Summulae de Dialectica: An Annotated Translation, with a Philosophical Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xxxvii–xxxix.

This clarification should help to account for what Robert Pasnau noticed when he examined Aquinas's treatment of thought's linguistic nature. Pasnau distinguished two theses about the language-like character of thought, one semantic (that is, the content of thought is linguistic), the other syntactic (that is, the structure of thought is linguistic); for Pasnau, it is especially an affirmation of the latter that implies a full-fledged theory of mental language. Pasnau found that Aquinas accepted both the semantic and syntactic theses in only very limited ways,[38] and we are now in a position to see why. Aquinas's (implicit) distinction between formal concept (mental word) and objective concept (the *ratio* of the formal concept, the object of awareness signified by the formal concept, or in other words, the information content of the formal concept)[39] means that for Aquinas there *is* a semantics of mental language (taking mental language to be representational system of *formal* concepts) realized on the level of *objective concepts*, a kind of "concepts" not admitted by Ockham (in his mature theory, having abandoned *ficta*) and his followers. On the level of the *formal concepts* themselves—the only kind of concept allowed by nominalist semantics—there is no relevant *syntactic* analysis of mental language, considered just in itself without reference to *objects* of thought they naturally signify.

A THOMISTIC THEORY OF MENTAL LANGUAGE

We are now in a better position to characterize the sense in which Aquinas did have a conception of mental language, and at the same time why this conception is not developed in the direction that more recognizable theories of mental language take.

Aquinas undoubtedly considered thought as language-like in relevant ways—he considered thought (formal concepts) as *internally uttered natural signs exhibiting semantic compositionality*.

But if Thomas had found the notion of "mental language" perfectly acceptable, a Thomistic "theory of mental language" would have to be crucially different from the kinds of theories described at the beginning of this chapter. For one thing, unlike certain contemporary versions of mental language, for Aquinas mental language is not innate. Mental words or concepts may signify their objects naturally, but as qualities of the mind they are, like habits, innate only potentially; their actuality is acquired, thanks to the process of abstracting the intelligible species and the further activity of the possible intellect.
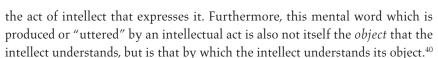
Furthermore, as we have seen, while for Ockham a mental proposition can be identical to both an intellectual act and an object of understanding, for Aquinas a word in the mental language is identical with neither. While an actuality in its own right, the mental word is described by Aquinas as the terminus of

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38. Robert Pasnau, "Aquinas on Thought's Linguistic Nature," *Monist* 80 (1997): 558–575.

39. For this interpretation of Aquinas's notion of *ratio*, see again Gyula Klima's contribution to this volume.

the act of intellect that expresses it. Furthermore, this mental word which is produced or "uttered" by an intellectual act is also not itself the *object* that the intellect understands, but is that by which the intellect understands its object.[40]

Thus, what we in fact find in the way of Aquinas's own conception of mental language is a realist semantics explaining the meaning and truth value of propositions in terms of the forms signified by predicates inhering in the objects supposited for by the subject terms. The formal concepts that make up mental language are *signs*, but to the extent that one would feel a need to provide a semantic analysis of mental language, it is enough for such analysis to occupy itself with an analysis of the objective concepts (and to coincide therefore with the logical semantic analysis of uttered speech).

More commonly recognizable and explicit "theories of mental language," involving the semantic and (some sort of) syntactic analysis of (formal) concepts in their own right, are not only more appropriate but more necessary within an alternative, nominalist approach to language and thought. A Thomistic theory of language of thought, however, would have to be firmly placed within the realm of objective concepts, an ontological realm that Ockham and his fellow nominalists completely abandoned.

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40. This is thus consistent with O'Callaghan's treatment of Aquinas in *Thomistic Realism and the Linguistic Turn*, which is critical of the mental language hypothesis, esp. in chap. 4.