

Intellectus Agens and the “Empiricism” of Thomas Aquinas

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I The Problem

In his “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” Professor Quine, by showing that a belief in some fundamental cleavage between analytic and synthetic truths is ill-founded, forecloses any aprioristic attempt, such as Kant’s, to rescue the necessary truths from empiristic criticism.¹ His argument does not come as a surprise to the students of Thomas Aquinas, who have long suspected that the opposition between so called apriorism or rationalism and empiricism might not be so fundamental as usually pretended.² The conclusion empiricist Quine draws from his repudiation of the distinction, namely, a thorough pragmatism, however, does not seem to exhaust all the alternatives. The analysis of human knowledge presented by Thomas Aquinas, I submit, might constitute another alternative, left unexamined by professor Quine.³

A number of recent studies have shedded much light on an empiricist phase of thomistic philosophy, which formal and systematic exposition of his thought has tended to obscure in the past.⁴ Aquinas himself states that the proper mode of human knowledge is through

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1. Quine, W.V.O. *From a Logical Point of View*. Harvard U. Press, 1961. pp. 20—46.
 2. On the close tie between rationalism and empiricism, see : D. J. O’ Conner. *John Locke*, Penguin Books, 1952. p. 218.
 3. On this third possibility, see : Copleston, F. C. *Aquinas*, Penguin Books, 1955, p. 24.
 4. The following is only a partial list of those books and articles which make

species acquisita, and calls this kind of knowledge experimental. He opposes it to that kind of knowledge through species connaturalis and through species infusa.⁵ Thus, to the mind of Aquinas, human knowledge in a proper sense is knowledge derived from sense experience, as opposed to knowledge through some innate ideas. Again, he clearly indicates his dependence on experiential evidences throughout his works. In this sense, we may, with right, speak of an "empiricism" of Aquinas.⁶

some explicit statements on the "empiricism" of Aquinas :

Copleston, F. C., *op. cit.*

Guzie, T. W., "The Evolution of Philosophical Method in the Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Modern Schoolman*, xxxvii, 2, 1960.

Hawkins, D. J. B., *The Criticism of Experience*, Sheed & Ward, 1945.

Henle, R. J., *Method in Metaphysics*, Marquette U. Press, 1951.

Klubertanz, G. P., "The Empiricism of Thomistic Ethics," *Proceedings of American Catholic Philosophical Association*, xxxi, 1957.

——— "St. Thomas' Treatment of the Axiom *omne agens agit propter finem*," *A. Gilson, Tribute*, 1959.

Lennon, J. L., "The Notion of Experience," *Thomist* xiii, 3, 1960.

Miller, R. G., "Realistic and Unrealistic Empiricisms," *New Scholasticism*, xxxv, 1961.

Moody, E. A., "Empiricism and Metaphysics in Mediaeval Philosophy," *Philosophical Review*, Ixvii, 1958.

Owens, J., "The Causal Proposition-Principle or Conclusion," *Modern Schoolman*, xxxii, 2, 3, 4, 1955.

The interpretation in this paper is indebted in various ways to the following works :

Hoenen, P., *La théorie du jugement d'après S. Thomas d'Aquin*, Gregorian U. Press, 1946.

Rahner, K., *Geist in Welt*, Kösel, 1958.

Régis, L. M., *Epistemology*, Macmillan, 1959.

5. *Summa Theologica*, I, 94, 3 ; III, 9, 4.

6. Copleston observes that Aquinas' empiricism is in a sense more radical than that of classical British empiricists. *op. cit.* p. 26.

This "empiricism," which is not distinctively thomistic, however, seems to be radically modified by his theory of intellectus agens.⁷ Aquinas states that the sensible knowledge is not the total and perfect cause of intellectual knowledge.⁸ He observes that, since phantasms are only potentially intelligible, they are not, by themselves, sufficient to cause the formation of intellectual knowledge. Rather they require to be made actually intelligible by intellectus agens. Thus, he seems to be saying that not only sense experience but some apriori principles provided by intellectus agens⁹ are required in order to form actually intellectual knowledge. If this is so, Aquinas' position, instead of suggesting a third alternative between apriorism and empiricism (in the sense of Locke, for instance), seems to represent an attempt to synthesize apriorism with empiricism, in a manner that is fundamentally similar to Kant.

When we investigate Aquinas' theory of intellectus agens more closely, however, we discover that it is not a kind of apriorism in the Cartesian or Kantian sense. The intellectus agens supplies no innate ideas or apriori forms. Nor is it introduced in order to provide the basis for the necessity or universal validity of intellectual knowledge. It should be noted in passing that Aquinas does not assert the absolute necessity or certainty concerning the human intellectual know-

7. See: Note 38. Those authors who recognize the empiristic element in Aquinas' thought usually take this view.

Henle's work is an exception. On the other hand, Santeler rejects the thomistic doctrine of intellectus agens as incompatible with the general framework of thomistic thought, which he assumes to be basically aristotelian. He maintains that the theoretical presuppositions of the thomistic theory of intellectus agens (die Unerkennbarkeit der Materie, der all zu passive Character des Erkennens) are of platonic origin. See. Santeler, J., *Der Platonismus in der Erkenntnislehre des hl. Thomas von Aquin*, 1939.

8. S.T., I, 84, 6. (unless specified, quotations are from *Summa Theologica*)

9. I, 117, 1.

ledge, in a rationalistic sense. The necessity of our knowledge about something is conditioned by the grasp of its essence, and in the final analysis by our fundamental grasp of being. —Rather, the notion of *intellectus agens* in Aquinas is the result of his thorough reflection upon our cognitive experience. It corresponds to the notion of *ens qua ens* or *ipsum esse*, which represents the acme of his analysis of human knowledge. In other words, when Aquinas, in reflecting upon human cognitive experience, arrives at the notion of *ens qua ens*, the work of *intellectus agens* presents itself necessarily. Moreover, insofar as the being in the indefinite and confused sense is the *primum cognitum* and implicit in all of our cognitive experiences, the grasp of being is the most primary and radical of all human experiences. All human experience, from this viewpoint, is basically the experience of being.

Thus, I contend that the notion of *intellectus agens* in Aquinas is not posited *apriori*, but bears upon a definite experience, namely, that of being. In this sense, the theory of *intellectus agens* may be said to be empirical in nature, instead of representing an *apriori* element in Aquinas' theory of knowledge. It may be asked at this point how Descartes and Kant have managed to explain the nature and origin of human knowledge without a reference to the notion of *intellectus agens*. To this, among other reasons, I suggest that this is due to their failure to grasp the notion of *ens qua ens* fully, which in turn represents their failure to reflect thoroughly upon the human experience. In what follows, I shall attempt to investigate Aquinas' theory of *intellectus agens* with a view to his fundamental grasp of being, and thereby hope to cast some light upon his unique "empiricism" based on the experience of being.

II A Summary of the Thomistic Theory of *Intellectus Agens*

In this section, I shall present Aquinas' account of the nature and function of *intellectus agens*, insofar as it is relevant to the thesis of this paper. First, Aquinas explains in the following manner the

necessity of positing intellectus agens, besides intellectus possibilis which is the proper power of intellectual knowledge.¹⁰ The form or nature of natural things, which is the proper object of human intellect, does not subsist without matter. Consequently, they are not intelligible actually, but only potentially. Since nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality except by something which is already in actuality, there must be in the human intellect a certain faculty which is actually "intelligible" (that is, in the sense of being the cause of intelligibility). This faculty is intellectus agens. This faculty is said to illuminate phantasms, which are potentially intelligible, and to make them actually intelligible, by abstracting them from material conditions.¹¹ The fruit of the operation of intellectus agens is intelligible species. When this intelligible species is received by intellectus possibilis, intellectual knowledge is formed.¹²

It appears, then, that the human intellect is in twofold relationship with the actually intelligible, the object of human knowledge. On the one hand, it is in actuality in relation with the actually intelligible, insofar as it produces the latter. It is in potentiality, on the other hand, insofar as it receives the latter. The apparent contradiction, namely, that the intellect is simultaneously in actuality and in potentiality in relation with the same thing, the actually intelligible, is resolved by showing that the intellect is said to be in actuality and potentiality from different viewpoints.¹³ It is said to be in actuality insofar as, being an immaterial power, it is actually intelligible and

10. I, 54, 4 ; 79, 3 ; 84, 4 ; *Quaestio Disputata de Spiritualibus Creaturis*, 9, c; ad 14; *Quaestio Disputata de Anima*, 3; 4, c.; ad 1; *Compendium Theologiae*, 83; *In Aristotelis Librum de Anima Commentarium*, 731.

11. I, 84, 2; 85, 1; ad 3.

12. I, 79, 2.

13. *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, II, d. 17, q. 2, a. 1; *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, 10, 6; *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 77; I, 79, 4, ad 4; *De Spir. Cre.*, 10, ad 4; *De Anima*, 5; *Com. Theol.*, 88; *In De Anima*, 737.

consequently can make phantasm, which is potentially intelligible, actually intelligible (*intellectus agens*). It is said to be potential insofar as it does not possess determinate forms or natures of sensible things (*intellectus possibilis*). Such forms can be derived from phantasms, which are similitudes of determinate sensible things.¹⁴ Here Aquinas seems to be saying that *intellectus agens* is the human intellect insofar as it is an immaterial, hence actually "intelligible" faculty. The so called light of *intellectus agens*, in that case, may be identified with the immateriality itself of human intellect.

The *intellectus possibilis*, the cognitive faculty in the proper sense, is said to be *quodammodo omnia*,¹⁵ that is, its object is not limited to any particular being or particular kind of being, but is *ens universale*, is infinite in a sense. More precisely, however, *omnia* means here that which falls within the range of the light of *intellectus agens*. In other words, the *intellectus possibilis* is not in potentiality to what is intelligible in itself, but to what the *intellectus agens*, by its light,¹⁶ makes actually intelligible.¹⁷

Aquinas observes that whereas the *intellectus agens*, insofar as it makes the potentially intelligible actual, is the proximate first principle of human intellectual cognition, its ultimate first principle is God Himself, who has created the intellectual soul. Thus, the light of *intellectus agens* is a participation of the divine light.¹⁸ This statement is significant in the understanding of the historical thomistic theory of *intellectus agens*. In this paper, however, I shall not dwell

14. *S. c. G.*, I, 77 ; I, 79, 4, ad 4.

15. I, 84, 2, ad 2, et passim.

16. I, 5, 2 ; 79, 7 ; *S. c. G.* II, 83; especially, I, 76, 5.

17. *De Verit.*, 8, 4, ad 4 ; 18, 2 ; *S. c. G.*, I, 76 ; *De Spir. Cre.*, 10, ad 7.

I differ, in this interpretation, from Professor Matsumoto. (See, note 55. He does not seem to recognize any such qualification in the human intellect's capacity to know all things.

18. I, 79, 4 ; 84, 5.

on it. Rather I shall limit myself to the consideration of the empiricist aspect of the theory.

III The "Light" of Intellectus Agens

What is, then, this "light" of intellectus agens, which, Aquinas says, is connatural to man? Its function is said to "illuminate," "abstract," or sometimes "decloth"¹⁹ phantasm. These more or less figurative terms, by themselves, are not of much help in understanding how it makes the potentially intelligible actual.

Aquinas maintains, however, that the operation of intellectus agens is experienced by us, just as that of intellectus possibilis²⁰ is. It should be possible, therefore, to acquire some insight as to the nature and function of intellectus agens. On this particular point. Maritain appears to differ from Aquinas. He states, for example, in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* as follows:

.....philosophical reflection is able to establish, through the logical necessities of reasoning, the fact of their existence (illuminating intellect, intelligibilia in actu), but they totally escape experience and consciousness..... And this primal source of light (intellectus agens) cannot be seen by us; it remains concealed in the unconscious of the spirit. Thus it is that we know what we are thinking, but we don't know how we are thinking.²¹

Maritain's view cannot escape, it seems, Henle's criticism, though the latter is primarily directed towards more conventional presentations of the theory of intellectus agens. Henle says that conventional scho-

19. *S. c. G.*, I, 65; I, 84, 2; 84, 6; 85, 1. As to the relationship between abstraction and illumination, see: 85, 1, ad 3.

20. *Et hoc experimento cognoscimus, dum percipimus nos abstrahere formas universales a conditionibus particularibus, quod est facere actu intelligibilia.* I, 79, 4.

21. Pantheon, New York, 1956, pp. 98-99.

lastic accounts of intellectus agens consider only metaphysical moments of intellectual cognition, namely sense experience as its starting point and concepts as its end product.²² Since inferior cause (sense experience) can never produce superior effect (intellectual concepts), the necessity of positing intellectus agens as an efficient cause is established. This explanation of the process of intellectual cognition in terms of the efficient causality (of intellectus agens), according to Henle, is unsatisfactory. Henle insists that the nature and function of intellectus agens should be understood in the context of a phenomenological analysis of the knowing process.²³ Henle assumes, however, that the operation of intellectus agens does not become itself an object of experience.²⁴ Neither does he develop fully, I submit, the metaphysical implications of his phenomenological analysis.

How can we grasp, then, the light of intellectus agens through experience? Aquinas says that the light of intellectus agens can be understood in itself by us, insofar as it is the ratio of intelligible species, making them actually intelligible.²⁵ He also says that intellectus agens makes the intelligible species like itself.²⁶ It follows from this that we can understand the nature of the light by considering how the intelligible species is made actually intelligible. The intelligible species, which actualizes the intellectus possibilis in being received by the latter, according to Aquinas, is the intelligibilitas itself of an object. For, in an intellectual cognition, the intelligible in act and the intellect are one.²⁷ The intellectus agens has no innate or connatural species

22. Henle, *op. cit.*, p. 13, 40.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

24. Henle explains the process of reduction of the potentially intelligible to actually intelligible in terms of "inductive insight" or "purifying reflection". The function of intellectus agens in this process is not clearly recognized.

25. *De Verit.*, 10, 8.

26. *S. c. G.*, II, 76.

27. *In Libros Metaphysicorum Expositio*, Prooem.; intellectus et intelligibile in actu sunt unum. *S. c. G.*, II, 99 intellectus in actu perfectio est intellectum in actu. I, 87, 1, ad 3 idem est intellectus et quod intelligitur.

through which it knows its objects. If it did, the human intellect would know actually from the beginning all things which can be known by it. This would make intellectus agens the object of knowledge, rather than that which makes objects actually intelligible.²⁸ The intellectus agens, Aquinas insists, makes the intelligible species actually intelligible. The species or intelligible content of the object is in the phantasm, but it is there potentially. It is made actual, through being "abstracted from its material conditions." This immaterialization is realized by intellectus agens, which is an immaterial power. What is, then, this abstraction from material conditions or immaterialization, and how is it realized ?

IV Intellectus Agens and the Notion of Being

In order to answer the question raised at the end of previous section, we have to investigate the first fruit of intellectual cognition, which is the most elementary of all intellectual knowledge and lies at the root of all intellectual knowledge. According to Aquinas, that which is grasped by the intellect first, and to which all other knowledge may be reduced, is being (ens).³⁰ Being, as primum cognitum, however, upon reflection, reveals two aspects or principles from which it is composed. The one is that it is something, which is called quidditas or essence. The other is the actuality or perfection, which is limited by some essence, but which, in itself, involves no limitation. This is called esse.³¹ We grasp a thing as something in virtue of its essence. But that this something, which is grasped by us, is established in being at all, is due to esse. In other words, the human intellect always grasps a thing as something, which implies limitation, namely, that it is this (or this kind of) thing and not that. But the very fact

28. This is the case with the angelic intellect. See: I, 79, 2.

29. I, 79, 4, ad 3; *De Anima*, 5, ad 6 et 9; *De Spir. Crea.*, 9; 10, ad 15.

30. I, 5, 2; *De Verit.*, 1, 1.

31. *In Sent.*, I, 38, 1, 3, sol.; *In Librum Boethii De Trinitate*, 5, 3; *De Ente et Essentia*, c. 4; I, 4, 1, ad 3.

that it grasps a thing as something limited reveals that it is capable of penetrating into being beyond this limitation.³² This is what Aquinas means when he says that the human intellect can know being as being (*ens qua ens*). This grasp of being as being is made possible by the human intellect's capacity to penetrate to that actuality or perfection (*esse*) beyond the realm of essence. Just as this actuality, in actualizing essence, establishes an actual being or reality, the grasp of this actuality, in making species actually intelligible, makes the grasp of being possible.

In this grasp of being, it is clear that the intelligible content of its quidditative aspect or essence is derived from sense experience or phantasm. Aquinas states that phantasm is a similitude of a determinate nature.³³ In other words, the intelligible content in the grasp of being is derived wholly from phantasm. It is not in itself, however, intelligible actually yet, that is, it cannot be grasped actually as an essence or quiddity. In order that it can be grasped as an essence, and make the grasp of being possible, it has to be actualized by a higher actuality, which is beyond essence and is limited by the latter, namely *esse*. In other words, a determinate essence is grasped as such precisely and only because the human intellect is capable of reaching a higher actuality, which actualizes the essence. The contact with this higher actuality (*esse*), however, cannot be sought in phantasm, but in the intellect itself. It is this contact that makes the intelligible content derived from phantasm actually intelligible, thus making the grasp of being possible. The so called light of intellectus agens is then, nothing else than this contact with an actuality or perfection beyond essence. This contact, moreover, belongs to the nature of human intellect itself, namely its immateriality.

The abstraction of intelligible species from the material condi-

32. I, 44, 2. In this article, Aquinas describes the gradual evolution of the grasp of being in the history of philosophy.

33. I, 79, 4, ad 4; *De Spir. Crea.*, 10, ad 4.

tions of phantasm by the operation of intellectus agens can now be explained in terms of this actuality or perfection, namely esse. To abstract the nature or form of sensible-material things, which is the proper object of human intellect, is to know the nature or form which is in individual matter, not as existing in such matter.³⁴ To abstract means, in other words, to consider the nature of species apart from its individual qualities represented by phantasms.³⁵ The fruit of this abstraction is the intelligible species, which represents, as to its specific conditions only, the thing reflected in the phantasm.³⁶

To abstract from material conditions means, however, that these material conditions are grasped as a limit, that is, as limiting the form or nature which exists in these conditions. By this abstraction the form or nature itself is freed from material conditions which limit it and made intelligible actually. But that which has freed it from material conditions of phantasm, namely the cause of intelligibility, is not to be found in the determinate form or nature itself. It is to be sought in an actuality higher than the form or nature. This actuality is limited by the nature or form as potential principle. This actuality does not become the object of knowledge, nor is it "intelligible" in a strict sense.³⁷ Rather it makes the object intelligible. The intellect's contact with this higher actuality, then, is what makes the abstraction possible in the final analysis. This contact is made by the human intellect insofar as it is actually "intelligible" (that is, in the sense of being the cause of intelligibility) or immaterial, namely the intel-

34. I, 85, 1.

35. *Ibid.*, ad 1.

36. *Ibid.*, ad 3.

37. Intelligibility, it should be noted, is the fruit of the joint work of phantasm and intellectus agens. The actuality in question is rather the "cause" of intelligibility, not the intelligibility itself. Some authors prefer to call it "supra-intelligibility." When the intellectus agens or its light is said to be intelligible, in this paper, it should be understood in the sense of being the cause of intelligibility.

lectus agens. It is to be understood in this manner that the nature or form of natural things is abstracted from material conditions in the light of intellectus agens.

V Intellectus Agens and the First Principles

Aquinas makes the following observation concerning our grasp of first principles, for instance, the principle that every whole is greater than its part :

What is a whole, and what is a part—this he (man) cannot know except through the intelligible species, which he has received from phantasms; and for this reason, the Philosopher at the end of the Posterior Analytics shows that knowledge of principles comes to us from the sense... it is owing to the very nature of the intellectual soul that man, having once grasped what is a whole and what is a part, should at once perceive that every whole is larger than its part: and in the like manner with regard to other such principles.³⁸

He is saying here that in order to come to the knowledge of the first principles, which are expressions of our fundamental grasp of being, it is necessary to have both the concepts of a whole and a part, which are derived from phantasms, and another principle of knowledge which enables us to make some assertions as to the nexus between these two concepts. This principle, which is said to derive from the very nature of the human intellect, is the light of intellectus agens.

The text may be interpreted in this manner. Prior to the making of assertion that every whole is larger than its part, the quiddities involved, namely a whole and a part (or more precisely "that which is larger than a part") are grasped in virtue of that higher actuality (esse), which the human intellect has the capacity to reach. The intellect, however, does not advert explicitly to this actuality yet. When it reflects upon these quiddities, to find some nexus between them, it realizes that they are actualized by the one and the same esse, and

38. I, 117, 1 ; I—II, 51, 1,

they are identical in re. In realizing this, it asserts that they are identical.³⁹ In other words, in the act of judgment, the human intellect, through a reflection upon the intelligible content of concepts, explicitly recognizes the light of intellectus agens, which has made the apprehension of quiddities possible. This is the "experience" of the operation of intellectus agens, which I have referred to before. It is through this experience that we can get some insight into the nature of intellectus agens.

Aquinas rejects the view current in his time which identifies intellectus agens with the habit of first principles, in the light of which all other principles and conclusions of sciences are known.⁴⁰ He states that in order to come to the knowledge of first principles, the primary conceptions, the components of first principles, must be grasped first.⁴¹ In order to know these conceptions, however, the operation of intellectus agens, which makes the intelligible content of these concepts actually intelligible, is required. Once these principles are known in the light of intellectus agens, on the other hand, they partake of the light of intellectus agens, and make the intelligible content of other things actually intelligible.⁴² In other words, these principles serve, as it were, as the instruments of intellectus agens.⁴³ Ordinarily we do not attend explicitly to the first principles, in virtue of whose light assent is given to all other propositions. When we do attend to them, reflecting upon the intelligible content of our knowledge, we shall recognize, or indeed "experience" the operation of intellectus agens, which is at the basis of the intelligible content of all knowledge.

VI Intellectus Agens and the Complete Self-Return(Reditio)

39. I, 13, 12; 85, 5, ad 3.

40. *In Sent.*, II, 17, q. 2, a. 1; *De Verit.*, 16, 1, ad 13; *S. c. G.*, II, 78; *De Anima*, 5; *In De Anima*, III, c. v, 1, 10, 729.

41. *De Verit.*, 10, 6; 11, 1; *De Anima*, 4, ad 6.

42. *De Verit.*, 9, 1, ad 2.

43. *Ibid.*, c.; *De Anima*, 5.

In the previous sections, the light of intellectus agens has been explained as human intellect's contact with esse. Insofar as we can, in reflecting upon the intelligible content of our knowledge, recognize that higher actuality, esse, we can get some insight into this light. Aquinas observes, on the other hand, that intellectus agens is the human intellect insofar as it is actually intelligible, in virtue of its immateriality. I shall try to elaborate, in this section, on the nature of that light from the viewpoint of human intellect's immateriality.

Aquinas identifies the notion of immateriality with the highest grade of the immanence of activity. He observes that the more immanently a thing expresses its essence, the higher in the scale of being. He starts with lifeless bodies, which are lowest in the grades of being because they express their essences merely through transient action, ascends through vegetative and sentient or animal lives, towards the immaterial or spiritual life, which is the highest kind of life, because its activity is most immanent, thus most self-perfecting. In other words, its activity always returns to itself. This self-return, it should be noted, is, according to Aquinas, what preserves the spiritual or immaterial being in its being. For, it actualizes or perfects its being, in returning to itself. Thus, he says that to return to itself means that a being exists in itself.⁴⁵ Hence the more complete the self-return, the higher in the grades of being. This self-return is realized in way of cognitive act. Hence, Aquinas sees the essence of cognitive act precisely in knower's return to itself.⁴⁶

The human intellect, according to Aquinas, however, cannot return to itself from the beginning. As the lowest faculty in the realm of spiritual or immaterial beings, its self-return is conditioned by external principles.⁴⁷ Thus, at first it goes out of itself in knowing external

44. *S. c. G.*, VI, 11.

45. *De Verit.*, 2, 2, ad 2.

46. *Ibid.*, 1, 9.

47. *Ibid.*, 10, 8,

reality. It begins to return to itself as soon as it becomes aware that it knows, which begins already at the level of senses. Its complete self-return is achieved, when it understands not only its acts, but the nature of the principles of these acts. At this point, it understands⁴⁸ the root of intelligibility, which has made the cognitive activity possible from the beginning. The contact with esse mentioned in the previous sections, is achieved through human intellect's complete self-return to itself, its own esse. Since the human intellect as an immaterial faculty can return to itself completely, its highest actuality (esse) is wholly present to it, or, as it were, transparent to it. In virtue of this actuality it can make the intelligible content of phantasm actually intelligible.

In order to complete the present consideration on the light of intellectus agens, it is necessary to elucidate the nature of human intellect as an immaterial nature or form. I shall not treat this question fully in this paper, but limit myself to making some suggestions towards its solution. Aquinas says that in the hierarchy of forms, the higher contains, in its own mode, the perfection of all lower forms⁴⁹ virtually. Thus, the human intellect as an immaterial form contains by nature the perfection of all material forms, without being determined to any one of them. It is universal in the sense that it is virtually all of these perfections without losing its own identity. It is in virtue of this that it can acquire the perfection of all material forms actually through its cognitive act. In other words, it is because the human intellect, as a form, is virtually all things that it can become actually all things, accidentally to be sure, when it receives their forms absolutely, that is, without their individual-material conditions.⁵⁰

A question may be raised here that if the human intellect is an immaterial power, and if the intelligibility follows immateriality, why do we need the intellectus agens in addition to the intellectus

48. *Ibid.*, 1, 9.

49. I, 76, 3; 4.

50. I, 75, 5, ad 1.

possibilis, which is the proper power of knowing. Since the intellectus possibilis is an immaterial power, it may be argued, does not its immateriality suffice for forms to be received into it immaterially?⁵¹ To this Aquinas answers that which is to be received by the intellectus possibilis, namely the intelligible in act, does not exist in nature. Rather it has to be made actually intelligible by the intellectus agens. Thus, for the intellectual cognition, the immateriality of intellectus agens as well as that of intellectus possibilis are necessary.⁵² In other words, for Aquinas, the intellectual cognition is nothing else than the immaterial power's complete return to itself, which is the intellect's understanding of itself.⁵³ The human intellect, however, while possessing in itself the power to understand (the immateriality of intellectus possibilis), does not possess the power to be understood, that is, it is not actually intelligible. Hence it has to receive the intelligible forms or species from outside, and it is precisely in the production of these intelligible species that the immateriality of intellectus agens plays its essential role. That such complexity of function is required for the intellectual cognition is due to the imperfection of human intellect.⁵⁴

VII Self-Return and Self-Transcendence

The interpretation of the thomistic theory of intellectus agens presented in the previous sections can be made more intelligible by comparing it with its aristotelian source, the so called theory of illumination in Augustinus and Bonaventura,⁵⁵ the theory of intellectus agens as expounded by Aegidius Romanus,⁵⁶ the doctrine of being in

51. I, 79, 3, ad. 3.

52. I, 79, 3, ad. 3.

53. I, 87, 1, ad. 1.

54. I, 87, 1.

55. On this problem, See: A. Yamada, "Lumen Naturae and Lumen Gratiae," *Studies in Mediaeval Thought* I, pp. 47-64.

56. cf. Carey, L. J., "A Thirteenth Century Notion of the Agent Intellect: Giles of Rome," *New Scholasticism*, 1963, 327 ff.

Duns Scotus, the epistemologies of Descartes and Kant, which attempt to explain the formation of intellectual knowledge without introducing the notion of intellectus agens.⁵⁷ This study will not be taken up in this paper. Here, I shall limit myself to making few comments on the interpretation of intellectus agens in Professor Matsumoto's recent paper "The Metaphysical Significance of Analogia Entis."⁵⁸

Professor Matsumoto maintains that the connatural act of anima creata is self-transcendence (excessus), that is, the human intellect naturally goes out of itself first. Then, as the human intellect progresses towards its perfection, in acquiring new habits, the conscious self-return to itself (reditio) is gradually realized. Intellectus agens is identified with this conscious self-return, realizing itself in the form of acquired habits. In other words, intellectus agens is generated after the initial excessus connatural to the human intellect as anima creata. Thus, intellectus agens, according to this interpretation, belongs to the category of habit, rather than that of connatural power. Professor Matsumoto criticizes the view which makes the self-return (of intellectus agens) the natural and transcendental structure of the human intellect as subjectivism which involves the primacy of knowledge over being.⁵⁹

According to the interpretation adopted in this paper, on the contrary, the human intellect insofar as it is immaterial, thus actually "intelligible," is intellectus agens. The light of intellectus agens, that is, the intellect's complete return to itself, is connatural to it, not something acquired. In other words, it belongs to the very nature of human intellect *as intellect* to return to itself and to reach to esse. The human intellect *as human*, that is, as lowest among intellectual beings and joined to matter, has to go out of itself first, because at first it is completely devoid of intelligible content (tabula rasa). Thus,

57. cf. Régis, *op. cit.*, p. 225 ff.

58. *Philosophy* XLI, 1961, pp. 1-47.

59. "transcendental" is used here in the Kantian or Neo-Kantian sense.

the self-transcendence does not belong to the nature of intellectual cognition, but is its human conditions. I also distinguish the *reditio* as the ontological structure of an immaterial being from the conscious *reditio*. I concur fully with Professor Matsumoto in considering the latter as acquired. I submit that this interpretation is more in accord with the view of Aquinas himself, who repeatedly speaks of "the connatural light" of *intellectus agens*, and who clearly distinguishes the light of *intellectus agens* itself from the habit of first principles.⁶⁰

As to Professor Matsumoto's criticism that our position falls into a kind of subjectivism, I suggest that, in insisting that the complete self-return of the human intellect (the light of *intellectus agens*) belongs to its very nature, we are pointing out the ontological presupposition or basis of intellectual cognition. We are saying that, without taking this ontological structure of the human intellect, namely its immateriality or complete return to itself into account, it is impossible to explain how we come to know any object. Since our view does not involve any positing of *apriori* forms required for the construction of the object of knowledge, it cannot be identified as subjectivism in a Kantian sense.

VIII Conclusion

From the foregoing considerations on the thomistic theory of *intellectus agens*, we may draw the following conclusions concerning the "empiricism" of Aquinas.

First, according to Aquinas, *intellectus agens* contains no intelligible species, neither in way of Cartesian innate ideas nor Kantian *apriori* forms. Rather, it is a faculty which makes the intelligible content represented by phantasms actually intelligible. The intelligible contents are derived wholly from phantasms, the form as well as matter, and *intellectus agens* has nothing to add as far as the intelligibility of the object itself is concerned. The light of *intellectus agens* makes actual that which is potentially intelligible, but it does not

60. *S. c. G.*, II, 76. See: note 17.

constitute the intelligibility. Indeed, in order to actualize intelligibility, intellectus agens cannot be itself a part of intelligibility, but must be something beyond it. In short, the content of our intellectual knowledge is derived entirely from sense experience. Thus, Aquinas categorically states that "it is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually, except by turning to the phantasms."⁶¹ Intellectus agens in Aquinas, I submit, is not to be considered as an a priori element which is opposed to and modifies his empiricism.

Secondly, we should say that the thomistic theory of intellectus agens has the same root with and is inseparable from his empiricist outlook. If the human intellect is to understand what is intelligible in itself, as Platonists maintain, there is no need for intellectus agens. Aquinas insists, however, that the human intellect knows that which have been made intelligible by intellectus agens, namely the objects of our sense experience. Thus, it understands better, not that which is most intelligible in itself, but those which are closer to the senses.⁶² In other words, if the actually intelligible in itself is the object of human intellect, it will be known either through innate intelligible species or infused species. In neither case, is there need for intellectus agens. Actually, since the object of human intellect is the form or nature of material-sensible things, it has to be made actually intelligible first. In other words, it has to be known through acquired species. And precisely for the acquisition of intelligible species, intellectus agens is required. Thus, no less than the unconditional dependence on the sense experience, the necessity of the operation of intellectus agens, according to Aquinas, constitutes the human, namely experiential condition of intellectual cognition.

Finally, the operation of intellectus agens itself falls into our experience. It is experienced when we, in order to make judgment, reflect on the intelligible content of the concepts. It is experienced as

61. I, 84, 7.

62. S. c. G., II, 76.

that which makes the intelligible content actually intelligible, by revealing that higher actuality, esse. Insofar as we cannot make a single judgment without reflecting on the intelligible contents of the concepts, the experience of the operation of intellectus agens may be said to be most common. It is the same with the grasp of being. Precisely because it is so common, it escapes the attention of most men. To be sure, intellectus agens is not experienced by senses. But we cannot limit the scope of experience to sense experience. For, in the final analysis, what is experienced in all experiences, if not "being"⁶³? To realize this, again, some reflection upon the intelligible content of experience is necessary. If we take the thomistic "empiricism" in the sense of the experience of being, then the thomistic theory of intellectus agens certainly constitutes its essential element.

63. On this I am indebted to Hawkins, *op. cit.*