

3. THE SENSITIVE POWERS OF THE SOUL

A. The Cognitive Senses

(1) *Introduction*

The theologian is interested especially in the intellectual and appetitive powers, because these are the powers in which the virtues reside. For our purpose, there is no need to consider the nature and functions of the vegetative and locomotive powers; as to the external senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch), the common knowledge of experience will suffice.

(2) *The Internal Senses*

Knowledge begins with the sensations of the external senses, which are in direct contact with the sensible qualities of objects. The next step in the cognitive process is the work of the internal senses. These senses are called *internal* because they do not come into physical contact with outside objects, but depend upon the external senses for the objects of their knowledge. They are four in number.

- 1) Common sense is *the internal organic power which perceives the sensations of the external senses, distinguishes them and unifies them in a single percept*. An external sense cannot attain the object of another sense, nor can it, then, distinguish between its own formal object and that of another sense. Yet we are aware that we perceive various sensations as a unified whole. Thus an apple is perceived to be at once red, smooth, fragrant and sweet. The unification of the objects of sensation into a single whole is the work of the common sense, and its product is called a percept.
- 2) Imagination is *the organic power which has knowledge of things known by the external senses and the common sense, even when these objects are not present*. The imagination retains and conserves the forms received by the senses, and is able to reproduce them. The mention of a song, tree or a

meal stimulates the imagination to produce a representation of these things, even though none of them are actually present.

The imagination is also *creative*, and can produce images of things that do not exist, such as a purple cow or a future banquet, or can conjure up events (a telephone conversation with one's ideal or idol, for example) that never really take place.

- 3) **Memory** is *the organic power which knows the past as past*. Memory differs from imagination in that it reproduces a past experience precisely *as past*. Imagination can bring up a picture of a hat, but it takes memory to recall a certain hat that you saw at the campus snack shop.
- 4) The **cogitative power** is *the internal sense which knows an object as good or bad for the individual or the species*. This power perceives something that the other senses do not, namely, the utility or harmfulness of an object. In animals, this sense is called the estimative power. A sheep, e.g., seeing a wolf, knows without previous experience that the wolf is a natural enemy; a bird gathers straw, not because it is pleasing to the senses, but because it is useful in building a nest.

This same estimative power is found in man, but it does not function in the same way as animal instinct. Man has a higher power, his reason, by which he is far better prepared to provide for himself and those in his care, and man's "estimative power" is so closely linked with reason (they are rooted in the same rational soul) that it shares something of its nature. It compares and relates the data of the other internal senses, as well as the sense information about the goodness or harmfulness of external objects they do not perceive. Thus it functions as a kind of "reason" with regard to particulars, formulating (in conjunction with the intellect) what may be called "sense judgments," the most perfect sensory products from which intellect can derive its ideas.

Because of this, the estimative power in man is called the *cogitative sense*, as if it does a kind of cogitation or thinking.

B. The Sensitive Appetite

Man is not content only to know. He desires to possess the things he knows. This inclination which follows upon knowledge is called an *appetite*. Corresponding to the different kinds of knowledge, we have two appetites: 1) the *sensitive appetite*, which follows upon sense knowledge (e.g., the desire aroused by the aroma of broiling steak); and 2) the *intellective appetite*, which follows upon intellectual knowledge, and which is called the will.

There are two sensitive appetites, the concupiscible and the irascible. The **concupiscible appetite** is *an inclination to pursue what is suitable to man's sense nature and to avoid what is harmful*. The **irascible appetite** is likewise an inclination toward sensible good and an avoidance of what is evil for sense nature; but it is *concerned with an object which has the added note of difficulty*, a good which is difficult to attain, or an evil which is difficult to avoid.

4. THE POWERS OF THE INTELLECT

A. The Nature of the Intellect

The intellect is a spiritual power. It is defined as *the cognitive faculty by which man knows the essences of corporeal things; or, in relation to its acts, as the cognitive faculty which apprehends universals, judges and reasons*.

(1) *The Spirituality of the Intellect*

The intellect is essentially different from the sensitive cognitive powers. It is not simply a superior kind of sense power, but one which has a specifically distinct nature. The sensitive powers are organic, that is, they depend on some bodily organ for their operation, as sight needs the eye and imagination needs the brain. The intellect, however, is not an organic power; it resides in the soul, and produces its acts independently of any bodily organ, even of the brain.

The intellect, then, is a purely spiritual power. This can be determined from a consideration of its object and its operation.

1. **Proof from the object of the intellect.** If the object of a faculty is totally immaterial, the faculty itself must be totally immaterial or spiritual, for there must be a proportion between a faculty and its object.

But the object of the intellect is totally immaterial, removed from all the limitations of individual matter, such as time, space and bodily qualities. Our concepts are not concrete and singular, as are the images of sense knowledge; on the contrary, they are abstract and universal. The idea of man, for example, is so all-embracing as to include all men *because* it does not contain any of the individual characteristics of particular men. This universal idea is not concerned with the fact that man is white or black, tall or short, old or young; it represents the nature of man—a rational animal, a nature which is common to all men.

2. **Proof from the act of the intellect.** Likewise, the operation of the intellect does not depend on a bodily organ.⁴ True, we get our ideas from material things, which must be first made known by the senses. Consequently, the intellect depends on the senses for its object—as Aristotle and St. Thomas teach, all our knowledge begins in the senses. But in the *act* of knowing, the intellect has no need of the external senses or the brain. The intellect knows the essence of a thing, but sense images are always particular and concrete, representing only the accidents of a thing, such as its color, size, shape, etc.

(2) *The Receptivity of the Intellect*

The intellect is essentially a *passive* power. A power is called active or passive in relation to its object. An active power is one which *acts on* its object and changes it. The vegetative powers are all active. For example, in nutrition, food is converted into the organism.

A passive power, on the other hand, is one which is *acted on* by its object. Now the intellect is not always actually knowing. We are

⁴A more detailed study of this point and with specific reference to the result of brain injuries and organic malfunctions is available in R. E. Brennan, O.P., *Thomistic Psychology* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941), 193 f.

not born with ideas, but must receive them from the things in the world about us. In the beginning, as Aristotle says, the intellect is like a blank slate on which nothing is written. The intellect, then, is in potentiality to receive its ideas. Since the intellect is in receptivity to the form which makes it actually knowing, it is a passive power.

But the intellect does not receive these forms like an image impressed on a film. Cognition is a *vital* operation, the functioning of a living thing. The intellect not only *receives* intelligible forms, but it *produces* its own act of understanding. From this point of view, the intellect is an active power.

(3) *The Activity of the Intellect*

The intellect which produces the act of knowledge is called the **possible** or **receptive intellect**. Receiving an idea or intellectual representation of a thing, it actually understands the thing so represented.

Besides the possible intellect, there is another faculty in the soul called the **agent** or **active intellect**. This is the bridge between sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge. The object of sense knowledge, while somewhat removed from matter, is still material. How does it become immaterial, so as to be an object of intellectual knowledge? This is the work of the agent intellect. The agent intellect is like a strong light which focuses on the sense image and penetrates beyond the covering accidents to the essence of the thing. It then abstracts that essence, elevating it and leaving behind all individuating notes, and presents that abstract form to the possible intellect as an object now capable of being understood. The agent intellect is not a knowing faculty, but illuminative and abstractive; it does not itself understand, but makes understanding possible.

(4) *Functions of Man's Intellect*

1. **Memory.** Just as there is memory in sense cognition, there is also intellectual memory. The intellectual memory is not a separate intellective power, but is the intellect itself precisely as it has the capacity to retain the ideas it has acquired. It does not know these species directly as past, but as they abstract from time.

2. **Knowing and doing.** The intellect is both *speculative* and *practical*. The "speculative intellect" apprehends truth and contemplates it for its own sake; the "practical intellect" is concerned with practical knowledge, which is ordained to doing and making things. Thus, metaphysics is studied for its own sake; art is studied for the sake of producing a work of art, like a statue or a dress. The speculative and practical intellect are not two separate faculties, but the one intellectual power whose knowledge is ordained to different ends.

3. The notion of conscience.

What men call *conscience* is, as the Angelic Doctor explains, an act of the intellect, a practical judgment:

Properly speaking, conscience is not a power but an act. And this is clear both from the very word itself, and also from the things attributed to conscience in common parlance.

According to the meaning of the word, conscience implies the relation of knowledge to something, for conscience (Latin, *conscientia*) is from *cum alio scientia*, i.e., the application of knowledge to a particular situation. Now such an application of knowledge to a particular case is made by a definite act. From this explanation of the term, it is clear that conscience is an act.

The same thing is evident from those things which are attributed to conscience. Conscience is said "to witness," "to bind," "to incite," or even "to accuse," "to torment" or "to rebuke." And all of these follow upon the application of some knowledge or science of ours to what we do. Application of this kind may be made in three ways:

- 1) Inasmuch as we recognize that we have done something or not done it: "Thy conscience knows that thou hast often spoken evil of others" (Eccles. 7:23); and thus conscience is said *to witness*.
- 2) Inasmuch as through our conscience we judge something is to be done or not done; and thus conscience is said *to bind* or *to incite*.
- 3) Inasmuch as through conscience we judge that something already done is done well or badly; and thus conscience is said *to excuse* or *to accuse* or *to torment*.

It is clear that all these things follow upon the actual application of knowledge to what we do, and hence, properly speaking, conscience means an act.

But because habit is a principle of acts, the term conscience is sometimes employed primarily to signify the natural habit called *synderesis*, i.e., the natural habit of first moral principles. St. Jerome, in his *Com-*

mentary on Ezechiel, 1:6, calls synderesis "conscience," St. Basil in his *Homily on the Beginning of the Book of Proverbs* calls it "the natural power of judgment." St. John Damascene in his *On the True Faith*, Bk. IV, Chap. 23, says that it is "the law of our intellect." For it is customary for causes and effects to be named after one another.⁵

It is clear from this breakdown that conscience is not a separate power of the intellect, but rather an act of the practical intellect as it applies its knowledge to concrete and singular human actions. *Conscience* is an act of judgment.

B. The Process of Knowing

The intellect is able to know all kinds of beings, spiritual and material. It can know the natures of material bodies, it can know itself, the angels and God. Each of these is specifically distinct, but each can be known insofar as it exists, i.e., has *being*. Being is the most universal aspect under which the intellect is able to know all things. Being, for this reason, is called the *common formal object* of the intellect. This does not mean that the intellect knows only being in general, but that it knows a thing inasmuch as it is being, an existing thing.

The intellect attains its object in different ways, depending both on the nature of the object and the condition of the knowing subject. There are two conditions under which the intellect is found: 1) as it exists in a soul united to the body; and 2) as it exists in a separated soul. The object which the intellect attains first and foremost in a given state is called its *proper formal object*. We shall consider the first condition of the intellect now, and the proper formal object of our minds in this state.

(1) *The Conquest of Reality in This Life*

1. **The proper object of our knowledge.** In the state of union with the body, the proper formal object of the intellect is the essence of material things. This fact does not imply an exclusion of the knowl-

⁵St. Thomas, *Summa*, I, q. 79, a. 13. This only establishes the *nature* of conscience. Its *operation* will be studied in a subsequent volume.

edge of spiritual things in this life; it simply means that the object which is primarily attained by the intellect is the essence of corporeal beings. All other things which are known are attained **through the medium of the proper object.**

That the intellect has for its proper object the essences of material things follows from man's nature. Man is a *composite* of body and soul. Between the knowing subject and the thing known there must be a proportion, for knowledge consists in a union of the knowing subject with the object known, in such a way that the knower becomes the thing known by receiving its form immaterially. Now the soul is not a disembodied spirit, like an angel, but a spiritual form existing in a material body. Since it is immaterial, the soul's knowledge must also be immaterial. But since it is united to matter the soul's first knowledgeable contact with reality is through the senses. Between man the knower and the object which he knows there is a proportion: both are composed of matter and form. The intellect penetrates beyond the material data supplied by the senses to grasp the form or the essence of the object. **The essences of material things, then, are the proper object of the human intellect in this life.**

2. **The origin of ideas.** How is it possible for the intellect to know the essence of a material thing? Essences exist in the mind as *abstract* and *universal*, but in the material thing they are *concrete* and *singular*. How does the concrete become abstract, and the singular become universal? How is the gap between the sensible and the intellectual to be bridged? This is the problem of the origin of ideas.

To solve the problem, St. Thomas, following Aristotle, postulates two intellectual faculties, the possible intellect and the agent intellect. The possible intellect is the power that produces *the act of knowledge*, but it cannot do this without the aid of the agent intellect, which performs *the work of abstraction*.

Intellectual cognition requires that the object known be present to the intellect in an immaterial way. This is done by means of a representation or similitude of the object. This similitude is called the **impressed intelligible species**: *impressed*, because it is stamped or impressed, as it were, on the receptive intellect; *intelligible*, because as elevated to the immaterial order it is capable of being known

intellectually; *species*, because it is the form (which determines a thing's *specific* nature) of the thing known.

Where does this species come from?

- 1) The impressed species are not *innate ideas*, infused into the soul by God. If this were so, the soul would have no need of the body and its senses in producing ideas; there would be no reason why an infant could not lead a highly intellectual life—which is contrary to experience. The intellect is rather in potency to its knowledge. Therefore, it must be in potency to the principle of knowledge, which is the impressed species.
- 2) Nor can *the object alone* be the cause of the impressed species, because the species is universal, whereas the form exists in the object as singular. Humanity, for example, is universal, but Joseph's humanity is his own individual, singular humanity.
- 3) The cause of the impressed species must therefore be *some power of the soul*. But it cannot be any of the sensitive powers, for these are limited to sense knowledge and their objects remain clothed in materiality, nor can it be the possible intellect. This is a passive power which is in potency to the act of knowledge; because it is passive or receptive, it cannot create its own object, but must depend on something else to provide that object. There must be, then, another power of the soul which causes the impressed species, and we call this power the *agent or creative intellect*.

2. **The cognitive process.** Sense knowledge may be described as surface knowledge. It tells us something about an object, but does not tell us what that object is. To know the *nature* of a material object belongs to the intellect. In order for a material object to become *intelligible* (that is, capable of being understood by the intellect), its form or nature must be drawn out of its material conditions. Divested of all its accidents, the nude essence becomes the object of intellectual knowledge. This separation of form from material conditions is accomplished by the agent intellect.

The image in the internal sense is called a *phantasm*. The agent intellect illumines the phantasm, and, like an X-ray, penetrates beneath

the material conditions of the sense object and exposes its very essence. It then abstracts this essence or nature by leaving behind all its singular, individuating notes, thus producing the impressed species.

The possible intellect, upon receiving the impressed species, produces its own species, called the **expressed species**, or **idea**. This idea is the object known as it exists in the intellectual order. In the idea, the intellect understands the nature of the material object. At first the essence may be grasped only very imperfectly, in a vague and confused manner; only after years of study, perhaps, may a clear and distinct knowledge be obtained. By an elaborate learning process of analysis, reasoning, synthesis, judgment, comparison, analogy, etc., the first initial contact of the mind with some extramental reality is brought, after much effort and time, to a more perfect knowledge of the nature of a material thing, a knowledge which can be called "scientific."

3. **An example of man's cognitive grasp of reality in this life.** This complicated process of knowledge may be clarified by an example. Take a man and an apple. The man's first knowledge of the apple comes through his exterior senses. As to sight, it is red; to touch, it is smooth; to smell, it is fragrant; to taste, it is sweet. The data of the external senses are unified into a single percept by the common sense, and images of the apple are stored up by the other internal senses. The imagination produces an image of the apple; the memory can recall that particular apple long after it has been eaten; the cogitative sense knows that the apple is good and useful for the organism.

So far, the man knows many things *about* the apple, but he still does not know *what* the apple is. He knows only its accidents, but knows nothing about the nature of the apple, a nature which belongs not only to this particular apple but to all apples.

What makes an apple to be an apple, and not an orange or a banana? Its form. To know the nature of the apple, then, the man must know its form. But the form is, as it were, hidden in matter; it must be revealed. This is done by the light of the agent intellect, which shines on the phantasm (i.e., the image of this apple) and reveals the form hidden beneath the accidents. The agent intellect then abstracts the form of the apple by leaving behind all its accidents—

its redness, smoothness, fragrance and sweetness. (At this point our analysis considerably oversimplifies the process to lay bare its essential elements.)

This abstract form, now made present to the possible intellect, is the seed from which the idea is born. When this form (*impressed species*) is received by the possible intellect, the latter power produces the idea (*expressed species*) in which the nature of the exterior object is known. The man now knows, over and above what his senses tell him of this particular, concrete apple, the abstract nature of the apple—he now knows what an apple is.

(2) *The Objects Man Knows in This Life*

1. **The knowledge of singulars.** Singular material things are known by sense cognition. But they are also known intellectually. Universal concepts would not be much help in coming to a knowledge of the existing universe, which is made up of singular entities. Our will, too, often seeks after singular, material objects. Because the will takes its object from the intellect, the intellect must know the singular objects which the will desires.

Singular objects, however, are not known by the intellect immediately. These objects are attained directly by the senses as their proper object. The intellect knows singulars *indirectly*, by reflecting on the phantasm, whereas it directly discerns, for example, the universal nature of man, concretized in the individual, John Doe.

2. **Knowledge of self.** The soul does not know itself through its own essence, as the angel knows himself. Otherwise, we could make no error in regard to the nature of the soul. Because it is joined to matter, the soul is potentially understandable, not actually understood. The soul knows itself *through a knowledge of its acts*.

The soul knows its existence by simple reflection. When a man is conscious that he is performing a vital function, such as sensation or intellection, he perceives that he has a principle of these actions, which is the soul.

The soul knows its essence in an obscure manner by knowing its own existence. But the soul cannot acquire a clear and distinct knowledge of itself except through diligent and studious inquiry. This is

evident from experience, from the fact that we have to study psychology in order to discover the nature of the soul and the manner in which it operates.

3. **The knowledge of spiritual beings.** In this life the intellect cannot know purely spiritual beings in themselves. We can know God and the angels imperfectly and *analogously*—that is to say, by way of comparisons. This is because spiritual beings are completely free of matter, and thus are not objects proportionate to the human intellect, existing as it does in union with the body. The angels (presupposing their existence has been revealed) are known by comparison to material substances; God is known by our natural powers only from his effects. Even faith must make use of this imperfect knowledge of spiritual things; hence, certain though it is because revealed by God, the knowledge of faith is always obscure.

(3) *The Acts of the Mind*

The intellect does not have perfect knowledge of a thing in its first act of apprehension. Our knowledge is perfected gradually by three distinct intellectual operations: simple apprehension, judgment and reasoning.

The human intellect must of necessity understand by composition and division. For since the intellect passes from potentiality to act, it has a likeness to things that are generated, which do not attain to perfection all at once but acquire it by degrees. So also the human intellect does not acquire perfect knowledge by the first act of apprehension.

First it apprehends something about its object, such as its essence (and this is its primary and proper object). Then it understands the properties, accidents and the various relations of the essence. Thus, it necessarily compares one thing with another by composition or division [judgment]. And from one composition and division it proceeds to another, which is the processing of reasoning.^{5a}

(4) *Knowledge of the Separated Soul*

The mode of knowledge is determined by the mode of existence. When separated from the body, the soul understands in the manner of a separated substance. In the state of separation, only the spiritual

^{5a}St. Thomas, *Summa*, I. q. 85, a. 5.

powers of intellect and will remain actually. The sensitive powers perish with the body, and remain in the soul only radically. The separated soul does not understand by way of abstraction from phantasms, but in the manner proper to separated substances. The separated soul, then, knows both through its own substance and through species infused by God. This mode of knowledge, although not natural to the human soul, nevertheless is *not* supernatural; it is rather *preternatural*.

With these facts in mind we can formulate some specific conclusions relative to the objects known by the soul in a state of separation from the body.

1. The separated soul, like an angel, knows itself through its own substance. Unencumbered by the body, the soul has that actual immateriality which is the requisite condition of intelligibility; it no longer has to reflect upon itself or laboriously analyze its acts to know its nature. Completely separated from matter, the spiritual soul becomes the proportionate and proper object of its own knowledge.

2. The separated soul knows the nature of other separated souls and of the angels. The medium of this knowledge is the soul's own substance. In knowing its own purely spiritual nature, the separated soul is able to know other spiritual *natures*. Since it is on the same level as other separated souls, it knows their nature perfectly. But because the angels are of a higher spiritual nature, they are known imperfectly.

The angels and the souls of other men are known as *individuals* (e.g., the archangel Michael, St. Peter) by means of species infused by God.

3. The separated soul has some knowledge of all natural things, but not with the perfection of angelic knowledge. This is due to the fact that, whereas such knowledge is natural to the angels, it is not the natural mode of human knowledge. The separated soul has such knowledge in a general and confused way, much as a child knows something of the world of nature, but without depth and clarity.

4. The separated soul knows some singular things, but not all. It retains the knowledge of those things which it had in this life, and knows other things through infused species. An angel knows all the

singulars contained in an infused species, but the separated soul knows only those singular things to which it was disposed by knowledge or love while in this life, or is now disposed by the special ordination of God.

5. By natural knowledge, the separated soul does not know everything that takes place on earth, for it is now withdrawn from contact with mundane reality. In the *supernatural* knowledge of the beatific vision, however, the blessed can, according to God's disposition, know what goes on in the world.