

## Experiencing, Sensing in Aquinas

Lonergan Institute for the “Good Under Construction” © 2020

Prior to any kind of inquiry and the asking of any questions, there has to be something to inquire about. Hence, we attend to our acts of human sensing and the reception of sense data. Something needs to be first given to us to our human experience. In Aquinas's own words, “the light of understanding...does not cause determinate knowledge of anything until some things about which we must judge are put before it.”<sup>1</sup>

As Aristotle had observed about the structure of our human psyche, “if one perceived nothing one would learn and understand nothing.”<sup>2</sup> In his *Posterior Analytics* which speaks about science and the conditions of our scientific knowledge, in both books, Aristotle speaks about the primacy of sense experience in scientific cognition.<sup>3</sup> In Book I, it is noted, for instance, that “if some perception is wanting, it is necessary for some understanding to be wanting too.”<sup>4</sup> Induction leads to a grasp of universal truths although “it is impossible to get an induction without [our] perception.”<sup>5</sup> In Book II, toward the end, it is noted that both art [technē] and science [epistēmē] “arise from sense-perception.”<sup>6</sup> In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle notes that the senses “give [to us] the most authoritative knowledge of particulars.”<sup>7</sup> All else follows in terms of memory and recollection,<sup>8</sup> as a person grows in his or her life experience and practical wisdom, as we acquire technological skill and knowhow, and as we move and grow in our scientific knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

In turn, when Aquinas comments on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, he reiterates Aristotle’s basic position when he says that, for Aristotle, our knowledge of things begins with the senses: “knowing singular things is proper to the senses rather than to any other type of knowing [power], since our entire

---

1 *De Veritate*, q. 12, a. 12, ad 6; 2, p. 169.

2 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 432a6, tr. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 210, quoted in Tim Lynch, “Human Knowledge: Passivity, Experience, and Structural Actuation: An Approach to the Problem of the A Priori,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 17 (1999): 70. This same passage is translated by J. A. Smith in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984) as “no one can learn or understand anything in the absence of sense.”

3 Tim Lynch, “Human Knowledge: Passivity, Experience, and Structural Actuation: An Approach to the Problem of the A Priori,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 17 (1999): 70, n. 31; cf. Michael P. Maxwell, Jr., “Lonergan’s Critique of Aristotle’s Notion of Science,” *Lonergan Workshop: Lonergan’s Openness: Polymorphism, Postmodernism, and Religion*, vol. 18, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Lonergan Institute, 2005): 161.

4 Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 1, 17, 81a38.

5 Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 1, 18, 81b1-6.

6 Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 2, 19, 100a5-11, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 259.

7 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1, 981b10-1; cf. William B. Stevenson, “The Problem of Trinitarian Processions in Thomas’s *Roman Commentary*,” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 621-622.

8 *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 2.

9 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1, 1, 980a22-982a2.

knowledge of singular things originates with the senses.”<sup>10</sup> The senses give us a knowledge which is proper to it and which only the senses can provide (even if, according to Aquinas, Aristotle also argues that sense knowledge *as sense knowledge* is a knowledge that is lacking in completeness and sufficiency).<sup>11</sup> Knowledge requires more than sense but because, in our human cognition, the human intellect has a natural or a connatural relation to the things of sense,<sup>12</sup> and since proper human knowing must begin with data that are derived from our sense experience, things which cannot be experienced through any act of sensing cannot be understood or known for what they are, as they exist in and of themselves, through operations which properly belong to our human cognitive activity and which only belong to the incarnate form or nature of our human cognitive activity.<sup>13</sup> Hence, if immaterial things (which cannot be sensed) are to be understood or known in some way, some other means must be employed: a means which works from the proper kind of knowledge that we already enjoy as human subjects,<sup>14</sup> and which operates in a manner which leads us as potential knowers toward a knowledge which can be suggested or intimated.<sup>15</sup> In its indirectness, analogical human knowing is accordingly always imperfect. It is not the direct knowing which works immediately from data that are initially

---

<sup>10</sup>*Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 1, 1, 30; 1, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup>Further on in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 1, 2, 45; p. 15, Aquinas reiterates this position that, with sense perception, all human knowledge begins. Later in Book 7, 2, 1302-3; p. 438, he argues, while commenting on Aristotle, that in coming to learn or to know anything, one “must proceed from those things which are more knowable to oneself” before moving to know things which are more real than what can be known of them from within the range and ambit of our sense perception.

<sup>12</sup>*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 1, 1; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 88, a. 1.

<sup>13</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 88, a. 1; cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 41, 2; 47, 1. Matthew C. Ogilvie, in his *Faith Seeking Understanding: The Functional Specialty, “Systematics,” in Bernard Lonergan's Method in Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), p. 162, quotes from the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 88, a. 1, as follows: “immaterial substances which do not fall under sense and imagination, cannot first and *per se* be known by us, according to the mode of knowledge which experience proves us to have.”

<sup>14</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 1; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 93, a. 2, ad 1; 2, p. 1004 (in a context where Aquinas speaks about how it is possible for us to come to have some knowledge of God's eternal law):

We cannot know the things that are of God, as they are in themselves; but they are made known to us in their effects, according to Romans I, 20: *The invisible things of God...are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.*

In the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 93, a. 2, ad 2, Aquinas goes on to admit that our knowledge of God's eternal law will always be limited. Not only does it vary from person to person but, to no human being, is a complete knowledge of God's eternal law given in the context of this life.

<sup>15</sup>See Ogilvie, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, pp. 177-180, on how Aquinas understands how analogies can be used to move toward an understanding of things which cannot be sensed and then understood on the basis of what has been initially sensed. See also Francis Selman, *Aspects of Aquinas* (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), pp. 23-29, who argues (on p. 27) that the perfections which exist in the created order of things exist to an even higher degree in God; and, along the same lines, Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 85.

given to us through sense (our acts of sensing), and yet it is a knowing that does suggest meanings which would otherwise not be experienced and known and whose enjoyment bestows innumerable blessings on us as human beings in terms of how we can better understand how we should live our daily lives.<sup>16</sup>

In his own writings (aside from his commentaries on Aristotle), Aquinas himself also argues that all human knowing begins with our sense experience<sup>17</sup> since, in contrast with all other living things, it belongs to us as human beings alone that our senses exist for the sake of our knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Everything begins initially with sensing (“the mind’s first cognitional act is the apprehension [*apprehensio*] of sensible objects”<sup>19</sup>) and this thesis can be traced through from Aquinas’s earliest writings.<sup>20</sup> In the *Disputed Questions On Truth*, the *De ueritate* (composed from 1256 to 1259),<sup>21</sup> Aquinas argues that “our knowledge proceeds in this order: first, it begins in sense and, second, it is completed in the intellect.”<sup>22</sup> As Aristotle had also argued in the *De Anima*, the human intellect “is naturally moved by the sensitive apprehension in the way in which a potency is moved by an object.”<sup>23</sup> Understanding begins with potentiality, with our initial acts of sensing and not with any ideas that already exist innately within our human minds.<sup>24</sup> Acts of sense play an initial role in our human cognition without fully determining our subsequent activities as potential human knowers although the impaired activity of any sense organ will impede us in the workings of our human reasoning as we seek to work toward an experience of understanding. Lacking a particular act of sensing, we will not successfully move toward a scientific knowledge of that which we are not able to sense, “as a man born blind has no scientific knowledge of colors.”<sup>25</sup>

When later directly responding to a question which asks if the human mind receives knowledge from sensible things, Aquinas replies affirmatively when he argues that the senses play a vitally constitutive role when they apprehend properties which are to be identified as material co-ordinates.<sup>26</sup> More specifically, in Book 4 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (composed in 1264-65), Aquinas goes on to note that “sense grasps a thing in its exterior accidents, which are color, taste, quantity and others of this

---

<sup>16</sup>*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 8, 1.

<sup>17</sup>*Sentencia Libri De anima*, 3, 11, 758.

<sup>18</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 91, a. 3, ad 3.

<sup>19</sup>Ogilvie, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 61.

<sup>20</sup>Lynch, “Human Knowledge: Passivity, Experience, and Structural Actuation,” pp. 70-71; cf. Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros sententiarum*, 1.3.4.1 ad 4; 2.3.1.6c & ad 2, as cited by William E. Murnion, “The Meaning and Import of Aquinas’s Philosophy of Mind,” (paper presented at the Second International Lonergan Workshop, Regis College, Toronto, August 1-6, 2004), p. 19.

<sup>21</sup>Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas Volume 1 The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 334.

<sup>22</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 11; my translation; cf. q. 9, a. 4. Later, in q. 12, a. 3, ad 2; 2, p. 121, Aquinas restates his position by noting that “the senses are the first source of our knowledge.”

<sup>23</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 10; 1, p. 250.

<sup>24</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 6; David P. Lang, “Aquinas’s Impediment Argument for the Spirituality of the Human Intellect,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11 (2003): 111.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas Aquinas, Opusc. xiii, *Compendium Theologiae*, 82, as quoted in *St. Thomas Aquinas Philosophical Texts*, trans. by Thomas Gilby (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 231, no. 625 (hereafter cited as “*Philosophical Texts*”).

<sup>26</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 2; 2, p. 29.

kind.”<sup>27</sup> Through the exterior senses and from their derivative descriptions, we employ categories which are drawn from the world of our sense experience in order to describe any object which comes within the range of our experience.<sup>28</sup> As an apt example of this, Aristotle’s logical treatise, the *Ten Categories*, lists ten attributes or *predicamenta*<sup>29</sup> (predicaments) which can be used to speak about anything which engages our interest to become an object of scientific investigation. Substance denotes a subject or thing in terms of what exists in itself and not in another; it cannot be attributed to another subject or thing. It is an *ens per se* (a being by itself).<sup>30</sup> The other categories (denoted by quantity, quality, relation, action, passion, place, time, posture, and habit) are then used to speak about a thing which has been identified as a substance. These last nine categories either inhere or they exist in a substance *as a substance* and they are predicated and affirmed of it (for instance, the quantity and quality of a given thing given the matter and form of a given thing<sup>31</sup>); or they refer to external causes and circumstances that should be noted in talking about any given thing (as for instance, habit, time, and place).<sup>32</sup> These later properties come and go *as accidents* while the subject or thing to which they refer remains substantially the same. Some categories, however, refer to relations or to connections which can exist between a substance and its external environment (as in the action and passion of a given substance: what a given substance does as a subject, and what it receives from an activity which comes from another source).

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine had spoken about these categories in a way which reveals their descriptive heuristic character as this would be derived from an analysis of ordinary linguistic usage in terms on how subjects and verbs are related to each other.

The book [*The Ten Categories*] seemed to me to speak clearly enough of substances, such as a man is, and of what are in them, such as a man’s figure; of what quality he is; his stature; how many feet tall he is; his relationships, as whose brother he is; where he is placed; when he was born; whether he stands or sits; whether he is shod with shoes or armed; whether he does something or has something done to him; and the innumerable things that are found in these nine categories, of which I have set down some examples, or in the category of substance.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 11, 15; 9, p. 86.

<sup>28</sup>*Caring About Meaning: patterns in the life of Bernard Lonergan*, eds. Pierrot Lambert, Charlotte Tansey, and Cathleen Going (Montreal: Thomas More Institute Papers, 1982), pp. 65-66.

<sup>29</sup>Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 380, nn. 1-2 (hereafter cited as the “*Confessions*” followed by technical reference to the original, and if a translation has been used, by the volume and page of the English translation); Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Being: The Halifax Lectures on Insight*, eds. Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli; rev and aug. by Frederick E. Crowe with the collaboration of Elizabeth A. Morelli, Mark D. Morelli, Robert M. Doran, and Thomas V. Daly (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>30</sup>John Hardon, “Substance,” *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, p. 523.

<sup>31</sup>Aquinas, *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 5, 9, 892.

<sup>32</sup>Aquinas, *Sententia super Physicam*, 3, 5, 322; *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 5, 9, 889-894; *Confessions*, trans. Ryan, p. 380, n. 2.

<sup>33</sup>*Confessions*, 4, 28; p. 110. In his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, p. 420, Bernard Lonergan also speaks about Aristotle’s ten categories in a way which attests to their heuristic descriptive character.

By applying this schema then to the study of St. Augustine as a substantively existing being, as an autonomous subject, a combination of the following details emerges:

Thus Augustine himself through the course of his life grew in size: an instance of the category of quantity. He acquired certain vicious habits that were in time replaced by virtues. He acquired great skill as a writer and great learning: virtues, vices, skill, and the like come under the heading of quality, as do colors and certain other aspects of our being. Augustine was taught by other men (passion) and he in turn instructed students (action). He existed at different moments (time) and in many places (place). He had countless relations with others; men and other things. He was a son, a brother, a father, a disciple, a master, a priest, and a bishop (relation). He was clothed in various ways and equipped with tools or armor at different times (habit, in the sense of wearing a monk's habit or a soldier's uniform). He assumed various positions, such as kneeling in prayer (posture).<sup>34</sup>

---

A naturalist will assign the genus, species, and instance (substance) of an animal, its size and weight (quantity), its color, shape, abilities, propensities (quality), its similarities to other animals and its differences from them (relation), its performance and susceptibilities (action and passion), its habitat and seasonal changes (place and time), its mode of motion and rest (posture), and its possession of such items as claws, talons, hooves, fur, feathers, horns (habit).

Later, in his *Understanding and Being*, p. 199, Lonergan speaks about Aristotle's categories in the following terms:

We arrive at Aristotle's categories most simply by going into the woods, meeting animals, and asking, What kind of an animal is this? How big is it? What is its color? What relations does it have? and so on. They are categories of descriptive knowledge, and descriptive knowledge is science in a preliminary stage. It is something entirely different from science that has reached its explanatory stage. Aristotle himself had a very clear idea of the difference between these descriptive categories, which he sets up in an elementary work, and causes; consequently, he thinks of science as knowledge through causes. However, there has been a tendency to conceive of metaphysics as knowledge, not through causes, but through the predicaments. On the other hand, if one conceives metaphysics as concerned with the total heuristic structure of proportionate being [being defined as what of reality can be known by human acts of experiencing, understanding, and judging], one must be concerned with causes and not at all with predicaments, because a heuristic structure aims at what is known through understanding.

<sup>34</sup>*Confessions*, pp. 380-381, n. 2.

However, as Aquinas goes on to argue, descriptive conjugates, which he refers to as “external accidents [*exteriorum accidentium*],”<sup>35</sup> do not reveal why a thing exists as it exists with the descriptive conjugates that it happens to have. They fail to reveal a thing’s inner essence or nature (its quiddity [*quidditatem rei*] or its “whatness”): what a thing is with respect to its inherent intelligibility, its meaning or form, why it is what it is. “When sense knows a thing through a form received from things, it does not know it as effectively as the intellect. Sense is led through it to a knowledge of external accidents but the intellect reaches to the essential quiddity of a thing.”<sup>36</sup> But, as Aquinas goes on to note in the *De veritate*, sense does perform a necessary and essential task which only it is able to do. Without its presentations of sense data to the data of our human consciousness, it would be impossible for us or anyone to have anything to think about or to ask questions about. Reiteratively: “understanding...does not effect a determinate knowledge of anything until some things about which we must judge are put before it.”<sup>37</sup>

Later, in the *Disputed Questions on the Soul*, the *Quaestio disputata De anima* (composed probably in 1265-6 as a preparatory preliminary reflection on the human soul before Aquinas tackled this issue in *QQ 75-89* of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*<sup>38</sup>), Aquinas similarly argues that the senses and the data of the senses are indispensable for us as cognitional preconditions. “The sensible is ordered to the intelligible...sentient power exists for the sake of the intellective.”<sup>39</sup> In contrast with God and angels, human understanding “by its very nature, must acquire its immaterial knowledge from the knowledge of material things attained through the senses.”<sup>40</sup> Something extrinsic is required for

---

<sup>35</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 2; 2, p. 29; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 11, 15.

<sup>36</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 2; my translation. In the *Summa Theologiae* 2a-2ae, q. 8, a. 1 & ad 3; 3, p. 1198, Aquinas reiterates this thesis when he argues that “sensitive knowledge is concerned with external sensible qualities” while “intellectual knowledge penetrates into the very essence of a thing.” To understand, *intelligere*, is to “read within” or to “read inwardly” (J. Michael Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, p. 304, n. 22), or to “gather inwardly” (Bernard Lonergan, *Triune God: Systematics*, p. 595, *intus legere*. See Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, p. 48 who argues and cites evidence to the effect that, although Aquinas does not speak of *intelligere* as only meaning understanding, *intelligere* as understanding is its principle meaning.

<sup>37</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 12, a. 12, ad 6; my translation.

<sup>38</sup>Torrell, *Aquinas Vol. 1*, p. 335.

<sup>39</sup>*Quaestio disputa De anima*, a. 13, para. 7, p. 172. Aquinas reiterates this thesis early in the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 1, a. 9; 1, p. 6, when he says that “it is natural to man to attain intellectual truth through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense.” Because of the ordering which exists within our human cognition as sensible knowing is ordered to an intellectual knowing of things, it can be argued that acts of sensing not only give us a concrete knowledge of singular things (a knowledge of things in their individuality and particularity) but, at the same time too, it can be argued that sensing also gives us a knowledge of things in terms of an implicit kind of universality, a universality that encompasses a group of distinct, concrete individuals and which allows us to know that a given individual belongs to a distinct group. As Aquinas argues this thesis, sense “knows Callias, not only as Callias, but also as *this man*; and similarly it knows Socrates as *this man*.” Italics mine. Cf. *In Aristotelis libros Posteriorum analyticorum*, 2, 20, as cited by Lonergan, *Triune God: Systematics*, p. 587. Through acts of inquiry and reasoning, an implicit universality that is first known in our sensing prepares the way for an apprehension of universality as this exists for us in our acts of understanding.

<sup>40</sup>*Quaestio disputata De anima*, a. 1, p. 11.

something intrinsic to occur in term of our having an experience of understanding.<sup>41</sup> When a sense is acted upon by an external object (this object being both an agent or actor and the object of our human sensing as an activity), a phantasm or sense image is produced and this phantasm or immaterial sensible image exists within a bodily organ as an immaterial sensible trace, impression, or likeness that cannot exist apart from the receptivity of an incarnate, embodied sensing organ.<sup>42</sup> But, as Aquinas goes on to argue in the *Summa Theologiae*, phantasms (*phantasmata*) produced by our senses as receptors are to be distinguished from phantasms which are not produced by our acts of sensing but by activities which transcend sense and which are not essentially passive but active.<sup>43</sup> Hence, “phantasm” has meanings which vary since the word can refer to something that has been only imagined, fantasized, or

---

41 *Quaestio disputata De anima*, a. 5, para. 6, p. 64.

42 *Quaestio disputata De anima*, a. 1, para. 11, p. 14; *Sententia Libri De anima*, 2, 24, 551.

On the meaning of phantasm, when Aristotle talks about the meaning of *phantasia* [φαντασία], fantasy, or imagination in the *De Anima*, 3, 3, he notes that it is a word which derives from *phaos*, the Greek word for light since, of our five senses, sight is the “most highly developed.” Hence, when we think about our five external senses (our seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling), we tend to think that seeing is paradigmatic and, so, we tend to take the words which aptly refer to our seeing and we apply them to our other acts of sensing. In this context, “phantasm” immediately suggests an image that is derived from something that is seen although, subsequently, this term has been used to refer to any impression that has been created by the receptive activity of all our other acts of sensing. However, as Aquinas had argued in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 11, 4 and in the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 78, a. 4, this sensible impression does not remain in the senses, within the organs of our sensing. Through the impact that it makes, it touches our human imaginations and, as a consequence, it passes from our imaginations into our recollections of things past which belong to the remembering of our memory.

43 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 6, ad 2. Similarly, later in *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 85, a. 2, ad 3 and later in 2a2ae, q. 173, a. 2, Aquinas distinguishes between images or phantasms that are merely received and those which are formed by persons who picture or imagine something that is no longer being experienced or something which has never been experienced. Previously in 1a, q. 77, a. 3, Aquinas had distinguished between a passive or receptive potency and an active or efficient potency. See also Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 16, a. 1, ad 13; *Sententia Libri De anima*, 2, 6, 305; *Quaestio disputata De anima*, a. 1; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 18, a. 2, ad 3. The pure receptivity of sense distinguishes it as a passive or receptive potency (*potentia passiva*). Human sensing is acted upon by an external object. As a mover, an object, an agent object, produces or elicits an act in us. Within or from a potency, it “brings about an act.” Cf. Lonergan, *Triune God: Systematics*, p. 561. But, an active or efficient potency refers to a power or a faculty that can move toward a specific term or goal. Here, an act produces an object as its proper term. For this reason, our human imagination is to be regarded as an active, efficient potency. Cf. Patrick H. Byrne, “The Thomist Sources of Lonergan’s Dynamic World-view,” *The Thomist* 46 (1982): 126-128, for an analysis which argues that Aquinas employed two distinct meanings for *potentia activa* (literally, “active potency”). One refers to efficient potency. It is an active principle of movement within things (versus the operation of a passive principle of movement), and it exists within nature (*natura*) as a subdivision within the general principle of nature. Nature (or natural potency) refers to a general principle of motion and rest which exists within all things as a constitutive principle of who and what things are and what they can do and experience as a consequence of who and what they happen to be. Cf. Aquinas, *Sententia super Physicam*, 1, 1, 3; 2, 1, 145 and *Quaestio disputata De unione verbi incarnati*, 1, as cited by Thomas Gilby, *Theological*

fancied and so the term has been translated as “imagination” or “fancy.”<sup>44</sup> Aquinas quotes Aristotle’s definition to the effect that the first type of phantasm should be understood as “a movement produced in accordance with sensation.”<sup>45</sup> Phantasms or sensible images are needed at the very beginning if our human cognition is to occur since, through our sense receptions, as human beings, we can receive a likeness or a sensible form which effects an internal change within a sensing organ and which directly relates a person to what is being sensed and given in a sensible experience.<sup>46</sup> Sense or sensation, as an act or activity, is essentially passive.<sup>47</sup> “Sensation is a being acted upon and altered in some way”<sup>48</sup> by an external sensible object.<sup>49</sup> It is a passion (a reception) where “to suffer [i.e., to be acted upon] is nothing else than to receive something from an agent.”<sup>50</sup> One act is common to both patient and

---

*Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 286-287, n. 507 on nature, and Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. 1, a. 1 and the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 23 on active and passive potencies as constitutive of nature or natural potency. With respect to efficient potency, something can act as a form of efficient causality to produce a change in something else or in ourselves as other, as in an act of understanding which changes a knower who now becomes someone who understands something which before had not been understood. However, with respect to the other, second meaning of *potentia activa*, *potentia activa* refers here to a passive principle of movement because it is an act which can receive an effect or an action. It is an active potency which is to be understood as a reception. It is an act which exists as a passion. When an act is to be understood thus as a reception and not as an action or pro-action, a less misleading designation refers to it as a “passive potency” or as a “receptive potency.” Cf. Lonergan, *Verbum*, pp. 121-128 for an extended discussion of this complex issue. See also Robert Doran, “Preserving Lonergan’s Understanding of Thomist Metaphysics: A Proposal and an Example,” *Lonergan Workshop*, vol. 21, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Boston College, 2009), p. 89, where it is said that, in Lonergan, passive potency and active potency respectively refer to “sublated and sublating operations in intentional consciousness.” See also Lonergan, *Triune God: Systematics*, p. 561 where Lonergan speaks about three notions of object in Aquinas: “an object can be either a mover that brings about an act in a potency, or a term produced by an act, or the end to which a potency tends through acts.”

44Compare the English translation of *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 6, ad 2 in Thomas Aquinas, *On Human Nature*, ed. Thomas S. Hibbs (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), p. 150, with the translation provided in Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1981), p. 429.

45*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 6, ad 2; 1, p. 429; cf. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3, 3 (429a1). This definition is translated by J. A. Smith in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, rev. Oxford translation, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 682, as a “movement resulting from an actual exercise of a power of sense.”

46*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 14, a. 2; q. 78, a. 3.

47*Sententia Libri De anima*, 2, 6, 305.

48*Sententia Libri De anima*, 2, 13, 393.

49Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, p. 109; cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 17, a. 2, ad 1: “for a sense to be affected is the very sensing of the sense.” As evidence to argue that Aquinas regarded sensation as an act that is produced by a sensible object (and so it is not produced by a sensible, sensing subject), Stebbins, *Divine Initiative*, p. 329, n. 68, cites ten different texts taken from the writings of Aquinas to which we may refer. Similarly, in the *Triune God: Systematics*, p. 549, Lonergan refers to nine texts taken from the various writings of Aquinas which can all be cited to the effect that an agent object,

agent.<sup>51</sup> Sense in act is the sensible in act. For instance, as an ear hears a sound coming from some source, its hearing as a reception coalesces with an external sound that is sounding within our ears.<sup>52</sup> Within the ear, hearing and sounding merge into a unity (to form one objective reality)<sup>53</sup> although, in the passive receptivity of our senses, it has to be also admitted that the passive powers of sense are endowed with an orientation or an intentionality which, from within, unites them as senses and which also inclines them to receive the sensible data that are normally given to the different senses of our seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling.<sup>54</sup> The successful functioning of the five external senses (our seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling) presupposes a common consciousness of them that is shared since, without a sense of the difference between the datum of one sense and that of another, co-ordinate sensing activity would not be possible for any sensing being (whether we refer to ourselves or other sensing subjects which exist as animals).<sup>55</sup> Confusion would necessarily reign in any responses that are given and, so, the absence of this confusion in the life of living beings argues for the necessary presence of an integrative perceptive awareness which is the work of a common sense type of consciousness (a *sensus communis* which is not to be confused with another, distinct notion of common sense which refers to a form of human understanding and judgment which exists as a habitual and pragmatic understanding of things in terms of how we, as human beings, should immediately deal with problems and difficulties as these arise in varying concrete conditions and circumstances).<sup>56</sup> While the “common sense consciousness” that we share with animals is not reflective (while it does not know itself), its awareness is cognitive to the degree that it is able to distinguish differences between the different types of datum which are given to us as sensing, experiencing, human subjects.

The sensible world or a sensible thing (for want of a more precise term) is accordingly that which can be sensed. An initial correspondence emerges between a potential human knower and the world which

---

external to our acts of sensing, acts on us to effect an act of sensing in us as sensing subjects. Sensing exists as a reception.

<sup>50</sup>*Sententia super Physicam*, 3, 5, 322, quoted by Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St Thomas Aquinas*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 266, n. 23; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 41, a. 1, ad 2. In the context of Aquinas’s moral philosophy, in *Does God Change? The World’s Becoming in the Incarnation* (Still River, Massachusetts: St. Bede’s Publications, 1985), p. 79, Weinandy refers to passion as “the arousal of the appetite by a loved, known good.”

<sup>51</sup>*Sententia super Physicam*, 3, 4, 306. As Aquinas goes on to explain in the *Sententia super Physicam*, 3, 5, 320 and 3, 5, 322, movement or motion is called action when it is understood as something that comes from an agent cause, but it is called passion when it refers to a movement or motion that acts upon another in terms of an effect or an act that is received by another who is known as a patient or receptor. Hence, when a movement or motion is a passion, it occurs within something else that is somehow other. Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Method*, unpublished manuscript translated 1990 by Michael G. Shields from the Latin of the *De Intellectu et Methodo*, MSUM1, p. 61: “action is the motion of a thing as to that from which it comes, and passion is the motion of a thing as to that in which it occurs.”

<sup>52</sup>*Sententia Libri De anima*, 3, 2, 592.

<sup>53</sup>Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, p. 264.

<sup>54</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 78, aa. 1, 3; *Sententia Libri De anima*, 2, 13, 384.

<sup>55</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 78, a. 4 & ad 2.

<sup>56</sup>*Quaestio disputata De anima*, a. 13, p. 167. See also Edward M. Mackinnon, “Understanding according to Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.,” *The Thomist* 28 (1964): 352.

the knower senses, and the point of connection is this sense image or phantasm which is not itself the action of an external cause but an effect produced by that cause when objects of sense perception act on our human sensing in a way which creates an impression or leaves a trace. Hence, through our senses, through an awareness which we each have of our sensations and of what our senses are receiving, sensible experience enters into our human consciousness. Sensible experience has an awareness of itself even if, of itself, this experience cannot reflect on itself to move toward a knowledge of itself.<sup>57</sup> Sense is sense and not some other kind of act or activity.<sup>58</sup> Hence, sense can have true sensible perceptions without knowing that it is functioning as it should.<sup>59</sup>

As a result of our sense experience, individuals experience shifts in the awareness which now belongs to us and them and to which any number of different responses are possible. The variety obviously depends on the differences that distinguish persons from one another and also on the different kinds of experiences which persons can have. Sensible performance varies in direct proportion with how well given persons engage in the different acts of sense.<sup>60</sup> Normally, human sensing is not deceived if full functioning is presumed and if there is no interference (even if it is true that sensing *per se* does not know that it is not being deceived).<sup>61</sup> However, some persons will perceive more than others because they are better disposed to receiving whatever is being presented to them in their sensation; acts of sense can be more finely attuned in one person than another. It is also the case that sensing always occurs in particular configurations of sense which differ from person to person (as slight as these differences might be).<sup>62</sup> The contexts within which sensing occurs possess a circumstantial character since these are always constituted by parameters pertaining to space and time (commonly referred to as the so-called “here and now”<sup>63</sup>). To some degree, also, it has to be admitted that the vantage point of

---

<sup>57</sup>*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 11 cited by Gilby, *Philosophical Texts*, pp. 182-3, n. 497.

<sup>58</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 16, a. 2.

<sup>59</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 17, a. 2.

<sup>60</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 85, a. 7; partially cited by Gilby, *Philosophical Texts*, p. 203, n. 549. On the same page, n. 550, Gilby goes on to cite a text from Aquinas’s Commentary, *II de Anima*, lect. 19 which shows the Aristotelian origins of Aquinas’s thesis which avers that bodily disposition plays a key role in our human cognition even if it is argued that the acuteness of our human cognition is directly related to the refined, superior sense of touch which is only possessed by us as human beings and by some human beings more than others amongst us. Aquinas makes the same point in q. 6, a. 1 in the *De Malo* when he notes that changing the bodily disposition of our eyes either causes them to see more clearly or it causes them to see less clearly than what would otherwise be the case.

<sup>61</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 17, a. 2.

<sup>62</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 5.

<sup>63</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Libri Peryermenias*, 1, 2, 2; trans. as *Aristotle: On Interpretation Commentary by St. Thomas and Cajetan* by Jean T. Oesterle (Marquette, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1962), p. 24 (hereafter cited as the “*Peri Hermeneias*” followed by technical reference to the original, and if a translation has been used, by the volume and page of the English translation). In “The Thomist Sources of Lonergan’s Dynamic World-view,” *The Thomist* 46 (1982): 134-135, Patrick Byrne refers to the circumstantial character of our sense experience as “statistical” or as “external pre-motions.” Before human inquiry can begin, it must begin from experiences of sense and sensing which are simply given to us and which initially are not subject to our human control even if these same experiences can be controlled in a way which turns them into presentations of sense which move us, moving our cognition toward experiences of understanding which have not been had prior to the asking of any questions that are now seeking an understanding of

one person's sensing will commonly differ from another's and, because of this difference, what one person senses will not necessarily be what another will sense. What feels cold, for instance, to one person might feel warm to another and, as a result of this relativity at the level of sense, a like relativity can exist with respect to the data or the contents of our experience. Objects that are sensed present themselves not only in a circumstantial manner (for instance, now at one time and then not at another; or, here to this person but not to another) but, more importantly, they also present themselves with a content where the specific differences which distinguish individuals from each other are all explained by differences grounded in an assembly of spatial and temporal co-ordinates.<sup>64</sup> Knowledge gained exclusively through the senses thus possesses a particularity or an individuality which properly belongs to acts of sensing as a specific type of cognitive act,<sup>65</sup> and which sensing, through its own operation, is not able to avoid, sidestep, or overcome. Sense cannot explain why individuality exists or why experiences of individuality belong to our sense perception in a way which cannot belong to anything else since the desired explanation is not itself a datum of sense. Hence, beyond sense and the activities of our sensing, some other kind of activity must be identified if potential human knowing is to move toward a knowledge that is not subject to vicissitudes that are conditioned and effected by the influence of external causes and the operation of these causes.

---

something.

<sup>64</sup>*De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 5; 2, pp. 22-3.

<sup>65</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *In Aristotelis libros Posteriorum analyticorum*, 2, 20, trans. as *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics of Aristotle* by F. R. Larcher, O.P. (Albany, New York: Magi Books, Inc., 1970), p. 239 (hereafter cited as "*In Aristotelis libros Posteriorum analyticorum*" followed by technical reference to the original, and if a translation has been used, by the volume and page of the English translation); *Sentencia Libri De anima*, 2, 12, 377; *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 8, ad 8; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 57, a. 2; cf. Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 18.