

God's Understanding: Aquinas on How to Think about It; Where are We to Begin?

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Since our human understanding exists as a datum or a phenomenon that is directly experienced by us as human beings if we attend to our inner experience of self that is given to us through the data of our human consciousness, and since our human understanding exists as an experience that we can only begin to understand if we experience and attend to our own acts of understanding as, hopefully, we try to move toward any increments that we can possibly have with respect to in the depth and extent of our self-inquiry, understanding, and knowledge, divine understanding or God's understanding is understood or we say that it is best understood if, primarily, we can work from an analogy that works from what we can understand about the meaning of our own human understanding (which, at times, Aquinas refers to in metaphysical terms when he speaks about the being of our human “intellectual soul”).¹ Understanding possesses a generic meaning *qua* understanding if we note that “all intelligent knowing is an activity of spirit.”² It exists as an activity of spirit. And so, as we join two principles together (first, a specific principle about the meaning of our human understanding and then, secondly, an emergent general principle about the meaning of understanding in general), and as we advert to the fact that, as human beings, to some degree, we exist and are made in God’s image and likeness,³ a fruitful understanding about the meaning and act of divine understanding can begin to emerge in us as we work from a direct understanding about the kind of understanding which belongs to us though this understanding exists in an embodied form and though it exists in a manner which is surrounded and which is conditioned by the influence of many concrete conditions. Even if no strict proportion exists between ourselves in our contingent, created acts of understanding and any object which transcends the material order of existing things (God, for instance, not being a proper object of our incarnate, human acts of inquiry and cognition),⁴ a less strict notion of proportion can still be used as an explanatory principle if we advert to the kind of relation which always exists between a cause and an effect,⁵

¹*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 77, a. 2, ad 1; q. 87, a. 3, ad 1. See also *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, 10, 10, 2083, where Aquinas speaks about a certain “natural affinity” or a connaturality which joins our human intellect with the being of “divine things.” See also William E. Murnion, “Intellectual Honesty in Aquinas and Lonergan,” (paper presented at the Third International Lonergan Workshop, Erbacher Hof, Mainz, Germany, January 2-7, 2007), pp. 1-2.

²Frederick E. Crowe, *Three Thomist Studies*, supplementary issue of *Lonergan Workshop*, vol. 16, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Lonergan Institute, 2000), p. 233. See also *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 46, 9-10; *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 5; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 14, a. 1; and Aquinas’s commentary on John’s Gospel, in the *Lectura super Ioannem* 14, 25, lect. 6, nn. 1958-1959 (cited by Robert Torrell, *Aquinas, Vol. 2*, p. 223) where Aquinas argues that “whatever a man learns from outside himself, if the Spirit, from within, does not give him understanding, it is lost effort.” A connatural relation obtains between an internal movement within us as human knowers which leads us toward understanding and knowledge and the movement of a spiritual principle which also acts from within us as human subjects to lead us as potential knowers toward an understanding and a knowledge of things that cannot be achieved in a purely human way.

³*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 93, a. 4.

⁴*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 12, aa. 2 & 4. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 88, aa. 1 & 3.

⁵*Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 1, aa. 2-3; Crowe, *Three Thomist Studies*, p. 222. See also *De Veritate*, q. 8, a. 1, ad 6; q. 26, a. 1, ad 7; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 54, 13; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 4, a. 3; q.12, a. 1, ad 4.

although admittedly, within a context which should also advert to the distinct species of causality which only exists within our experience of intellectual and rational consciousness when we advert to how, from our understanding, an emanation or a proceeding of terms exists (although an emanation which points to how intimately acts and terms of understanding are linked to each other).⁶ No real distinction exists if acts and terms cannot exist apart or be separated from each other although, from the context of our inquiry and understanding, we can refer to conceptual or mental kinds of distinction.

First, with respect to the relation which exists between a cause and an effect, it is an obvious fact that an effect cannot be unrelated to its originating cause. To some degree, within an effect, through the instrumentality of its form, a likeness to its cause exists.⁷ And so, from an effect, we can move toward some understanding, however partial, of the originating cause: especially in a situation where a particular effect enjoys a degree of conscious life that is able to reflect on itself and to ask questions about why it exists in the way that it happens to be and exist. Traits, or characteristics, or perfections which exist in a limited way in an effect suggest analogous traits, characteristics, or perfections which exist in an originating cause even if, in fact, the disproportion between a cause and an effect is such that it transcends any proportion which can talk about the existence of similarities and resemblances.⁸ A perfection which exists in a partial and limited way within a creature can then be regarded as a divine attribute when it can be conceived to exist in an unknown, unlimited way in the divine, infinite being which or who alone properly refers to God.⁹ In any case, despite the prevalence of significant differences which distinguish the type of being who is God (or any pure spirit) from the type of being which belongs to us in our human life, at the same time and to some degree, an act of understanding can move from a creature toward its maker and creator.¹⁰ Some effects, as creatures, can know that they have been caused (since they know that they have not caused themselves); and so the various orders of relation which exist as proportions among created things and which reveal intelligible principles or laws among the being of created things can be used as analogies for talking about other types of being which transcend the created, incarnate order of things and which have their own order of relations: both among themselves and with beings that exist within the created, contingent order of existing things.¹¹ By employing proportionality as a principle and as an interpretive device, we can use proportions which are already known within the material order of things in order to grasp how like relations or proportions can possibly exist in orders of being or reality which, normally, are not a

⁶*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 11, 1-5. See Frederick E. Crowe, "For Inserting a New Question (26A) in the *Pars prima*," *Developing the Lonergan Legacy: Historical, Theoretical, and Existential Themes*, ed. Michael Vertin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 343.

⁷*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 98, 4; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 4, a. 2; a. 3; 1a2ae, q. 18, a. 2, ad 3.

⁸*De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 11; Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 85.

⁹*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 4, a. 2.

¹⁰*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 54, 9.

¹¹*De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 4. See also *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 13, a. 5; a. 12, ad 3. As, in Bernard Lonergan's *De Deo Trino*, p. 266 (cited by Leo Serroul in his dissertation, "*Sapientis est Ordinare*": *An Interpretation of the Pars Systematica of Bernard Lonergan's De Deo Trino from the Viewpoint of Order*, p. 47), Lonergan explains how Aquinas understands analogies as "a mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation" (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 13, a. 5), Lonergan notes that "the univocal posits the same in many cases, the equivocal posits the diverse; the analogous, finally, denotes the same which is nonetheless differently verified in different cases."

proper object of our human understanding.¹² As, within the created material order of things, we move from the known to the unknown in understanding things which exist within the created material order of things, the same principle operates as we try to understand things which exist outside and beyond ourselves and the kind of being which belongs to the created, material order of existing things.

Second, in turning now to the species of causality which exists in our intellectual, rational consciousness, a contrast between material emanations or processions and spiritual or intellectual emanations or processions sets the stage for moving toward an understanding that comes closest toward an understanding of divine understanding as this exists in divine knowing and willing in connection with the term of this knowing and willing which exists as the normativity of an unchanging, eternal law or which exists, in other words, as God to the degree and as God exists in Himself (apart from the being of anything else).¹³ In the physical order of things, one thing can come from another as an extrinsic cause: as a proximate mover causes an effect. A batter hits a ball and it moves in a particular direction.¹⁴ However, as we turn to the life of plants, a fully grown plant emerges from a seed whose germination ends a seed's existence. The seed has turned into a plant. The change or movement which occurs ceases to be purely extrinsic. But, as we turn to the life of animals and their lives of sense, an even closer relation exists between the empirical consciousness of an animal and its terms (as, in a generic sense, an image proceeds from an act of sensation as its proper correlative). In the different acts of sensing that belong to an animal, what is sensed exists within an animal's conscious life even if an animal's lack of self-knowledge precludes the possibility of a knowledge that can come to know about itself in terms of its identity. However, as we turn toward the data of our human self-reflection and human self-knowledge as this initially and implicitly exists with respect to our understanding and knowledge of things which are other than ourselves (as we move toward an understanding and knowledge of our own acts of understanding and knowledge in a way which points to its self-transcendent orientation; hence, its transcendent origins, purpose, and direction), we encounter a more intimate unity or identity which serves as our best analogy that we can find and employ for our possibly moving toward an understanding of any kind of understanding which transcends the limitations of our understanding and the form which belongs to the order of our understanding. From our human self-understanding comes a self-understanding which is identical with ourselves in the actuation of our self-understanding even if or as this human understanding must begin initially with our different acts of human sensing.

The kind of liberation which accordingly exists in our understanding (as we move beyond the being of material conditions) points to a kind of larger autonomy which exists in our self-understanding and this kind of freedom points to greater measures of autonomy and freedom which would have to exist if we can think about other forms or kinds of understanding which exist in a way that would not be

¹²*Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 7, 17, 1671.

¹³*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 11, 1-5; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 27, a. 1. In q. 27, a. 1, Aquinas distinguishes between bodily and intellectual substances in order to argue that, if we attend to intellectual being or intellectual reality in terms of its characteristic properties and attributes, we would have analogies which exist within the created order of things that, in turn, best suggest how the uncreated character of divine understanding should be understood by our created, contingent acts of understanding even if "the similitudes [that are] derived from these fall short in the representation of divine objects."

¹⁴Crowe, "For Inserting a New Question (26A) in the *Pars prima*," *Developing the Lonergan Legacy*, p 343.

dependent on any kind of given which could exist as an act and a datum which belongs to an act of sensing. Try to understand or make meaningful statements about a kind of understanding that exist apart from our acts of sensing though it exists as a created or as a contingent kind of understanding and then, from there, move toward possibly thinking and understanding what can be said about a further or another act of understanding which would also be disjoined from any connection to acts of sensing but which would be bereft of any kind of createdness (or, in other words, every kind of contingency). Instead of acts of understanding which would exist as receptions, how can we think or what can be said about acts of understanding which would exist without any kind of receptivity or passivity?