

PERCEPTION AS AN INTELLIGENT ACT

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Abstract

We intend to demonstrate that human perception is better understood when thought from the perspective of Aristotelian-Thomistic Philosophy. After concluding for its existence, Descartes, in the 17th century, concludes that there are ideas that we all possess, such as the idea of “perfection”. This idea cannot result from experience, and it’s God the source of the idea of perfection in us, and the one who guarantees the existence not only of external reality but also of our own correct reasoning. Very far from the God of Thomas Aquinas who is *Alpha* and *Omega*, Descartes' god is a god situated and secondary between the subject and reality which, in turn, is guaranteed by God, in a vicious circle between God and the subject. It’s a subjective or logical God, such as Kant's, but not a real God. Reality is, therefore, subjectively intelligible and truth objectively achieved, and the principle of causality is, in this way, subjectively valid. Reality is intelligible not because it’s provided by intelligible forms — by intelligible (and not only sensitive matter) that we, in fact, perceive — but because it is a reality presented by extension that is nothing more than a reflection of the logical-mathematical universe, thought by Modernity and which, with this thinker, is innate to the subject. This is a pure and finished reason. The extensive reality is purged of subjective elements; it is logical-mathematical (therefore, it is thought). It’s a kind of idealism and not realism and which results in a physicalist and materialist view of reality. Materialism, called physicalism in mainstream culture, consists of the idea that there is a world out there that is not experiential. It is material, but the way the word is used here has a strict conceptual definition. Matter is something that can be specifically described by numbers. It’s a world without qualities. The world is purely quantitative and, because we are part of this world, we are also quantitative. The entire world of qualities that, deep down, constitutes our reality, is generated, according to materialism, in a not very well specified way and by a brain inside our head. The world outside has no flavors, colors, smells or sounds. We cannot see it because it has no qualities. The best we can do is imagine it as some kind of set of mathematical equations floating in the void.

Keywords: *Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, substantial form, Descartes, perception.*

1. Perception and ancient tradition: Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy

In the ancient tradition, and when we talk about philosophy of knowledge, it was believed that human beings were able to take a look at external reality. Philosophers such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas concluded that, after abstracting the accidental aspects, human being reaches the essence of an object: its substantial form. As Pedro Teixeira Zanchin writes, substantial form is not limited to

mere arrangements or dispositions of matter, to the extent that these arrangements or dispositions coincide with the essences of sensitive beings (i.e. with what is expressed in their definitions) and with their final causes, understood as articulated sets of capacities and activities that determine your way of life. [...] “εἶδος” designates one of the principles of movement and rest of natural beings. The other principle is matter, [...] all the processes of change that a natural substance goes through must be explained using the notions of matter and form. At a more specific level of analysis, the notions of matter and form correspond, in living beings, to the notions of body and soul. The soul is the principle that satisfies the conditions posed by the idea that formal and final causes designate the same thing: it is the principle of life and activities that define a living being as a member of its species (Zanchin, 2022: 27).

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In *Aquinas's Theory of Perception*, Anthony Lisska claims that

whatever Aquinas is a metaphysician, he is neither a Process philosopher nor a Platonist nor a philosopher rooted in the radical empiricism of Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and the early twentieth-century empiricists. Thomas's metaphilosophy works within the context of both an ontological realism and an epistemological realism, which assumes an ontology of individuals belonging to natural kinds (Lisska, 2016: 11).

The notion of substantial form is closely linked to *natural kinds*, and this one is linked to the purpose of a thing in a world of ends. Persons are substances with «dispositional properties — what Aquinas often refers to as ‘powers’— to have cognitions and undertake actions» (*Ibidem*: 11); to acquire or exemplify acts in a non-entitative or non-materialist manner. The “soul” of St. Thomas, as the physicist-philosopher Heisenberg writes in *Phisics and Philosophy*, is «more natural and less forced than the Cartesian concept of soul» (Heisenberg, 2000: 42). It has to do with a *telos* and much less with divisions. Werner Heisenberg saw the problem he called the «serious defects of the Cartesian partition» (*Ibidem*: 43); a partition that is still useful in natural sciences (classical physics), but breaks down with quantum mechanics.

1.1. Philosophy of St. Thomas

If we establish a roadmap for the philosophy of St. Thomas, we may say that this thinker follows the essentials of Aristotle, which includes his perspective of causality. Nevertheless, when it comes to the formal cause, he «found a place for Plato's exemplars» (Doods, 2002: 13). If the ontological and epistemological realism of St. Thomas derived from Aristotle, we settled with Sertillanges that, «although criticizing the master, [Aristotle] fundamentally re-edited Platonism» (Sertillanges, 1951: 25). The relationship between universal and concrete-particular is something evident in both Plato and Aristotle – the notion of form. When Aristotle ask, «why is this individual thing, or this body in this state, a human being», here is the answer: «therefore what we seek is the cause, the form, in terms of which matter is a defined thing, and that is the substance of each thing» (Arist., *Met.*, Z17,1041 b5-9).

Unlike Plato, St. Thomas did not see these *exemplars* «as subsistent forms, but as ideas in the mind of God» (Doods, 2002: 13). Universe and human being are seen as creations of God. Because of the natural ability to perceive the essence of reality — which includes a natural moral law —, human occupies a special place in Creation; he is made in the image and likeness of God; substantially and not accidentally different from other animals and things in nature; qualitatively and not just quantitatively different².

Knowledge results in the union between the human intellect and the object, and/but the entity of the thing is a condition for the intellect to conform to it. «Reality and intelligibility correspond, but a thing must first be, to be intelligible», writes Chesterton in *St. Thomas Aquinas*: «the Thomist places himself firmly in the clear light, common to all man, his brothers, that eggs are not chickens, nor dreams, nor simple hypotheses of a practical nature, but things certified by the authority of the senses, which comes from God» (Chesterton, 2012: 200).

Truth is not a construction or projection of human intellect, and this last one is also not passive in this process. He has an active role³; makes present the form of the object (in what we call realism). «Truth [For St. Thomas], is the adequacy of the thing and the intellect» (Aquino, *Sth.*, I, q. 16, a. 1), but we have to be careful with the meaning we give to this *active role*. Active intellect doesn't mean building the object. Intellection is a change; there is «a modification of the subject to conform to the object» (Sertillanges, 1951: 31); this is how we should understand the author of *The Great Thesis of Thomistic Philosophy*, when he writes that «in the fact of knowledge I am passive; the attack comes from outside» (*Ibidem*: 29):

Now what does intuition reveal to us in the first place? Is it our “self” or is it not rather the external reality, as children's knowledge clearly demonstrates to us and adult knowledge confirms to us? It is the non-self, as philosophers say in their own slang, that immediately manifests itself to consciousness, and not the internal conditions of this representation. Therefore, what is known is the object and not the image or support of the image of the object (*Idem*: 28-29).

This is realism, not physical “realism” (that involves a human theory⁴); in fact, this is real realism; it includes a foundation (that is) metaphysics, very different from what happened with the thinking of pre-Socratic philosophers. For Democritus, «[...] according to the convention of men, there are colors, sweets, bitters; in truth, however, there are only atoms and emptiness [...]» (Demócrito, 2000: 112); different aggregates of things that do not generate qualitative differences; there is no intelligent cause behind natural phenomena — everything is bay chance.

² Peter Eardley describes *synderesis* as a kind of «link between human intellect and divine wisdom». Eardley, Peter, "Medieval Theories of Conscience", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.).

³ The step that is taken beyond other animals

⁴ Modern science has its own language, its cosmology, worldview, metaphysics; it also has its myth and relies on it: the materialist myth.

Democritus cannot be right (according to Aristotle), in identifying the form with the external configurations of living beings apprehensible by the senses. We can read in the Book I of the *Parts of Animals* Aristotle's sentence:

If each of the animals and their parts were by figure and color, Democritus would have pronounced correctly: for it seems that he thought so. In any case, at least, he affirms that it is clear to anyone what quality man is in his form, when he is recognized by figure and color. However, the dead man also has the same form of configuration, but, nevertheless, he is not a man. Furthermore, it is impossible for there to be a hand arranged in any way there is, for example, a bronze one or a wooden one, except by homonymy, such as the doctor drawn. Because it would not be able to carry out its proper function [...]. And similarly, to these cases, none of the parts of a dead person would be exactly such, I mean, for example, eye, hand (Arist., *P.d.A.*, I.1, 640b29-641a5).

1.2. Matter according to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas

Matter is the principle of potency which allows something to come to be — not from non-being, but from being in potency. Contrary to the view held by Democritus, matter is not exactly a ‘thing’. In its most fundamental sense, it is a possibility-of-being, an indistinct power or *potentiae* to be determined by the substantial form. Aristotle describes primary matter only in terms of the substantial change in which it is recognized: «my definition of matter is just this — the primary substratum of each thing, from which it comes to be without qualifications, and which persists in the result» (Arist., *Phys.*, I, 9 (192^a 31)). Persists as a substance of matter and form. Hence the importance of the metaphysical concepts of act and potency, which explain not only movement and change but also the substantial difference between (different) things.

If we think that today's physicists cannot tell us about the ontological status of matter — a wave packet or a field does not seem to be something very concrete and we know that things get really abstract in physics: if we really think about Democritus' vision of cutting and crushing everything into small, defined parts, the smallest levels of reality or microscopic levels of blocks as being some “simple” ones; clearly, today, this is a view in question. Aristotelian notions of prime matter and power seem to fit into Schrödinger's wave of probabilities.

From the last product of Newtonian physics (that is Einstein's relativity) to this day, there is no perfect articulation between relativity and quantum mechanics (QM). Einstein didn't like QM, but it seems that God really does “play” with dice. The idea that everything should obey inflexible and eternal mathematical laws is contradicted by quantum mechanics experiments, repeated millions of times and which have proven that things are not like that. Not only is there variability and unpredictability but we know that certain phenomena only occur when there is a measurement. Seems that the act of measurement brings out physical properties.

Aristotle seems not to have been wrong, he just did not have the mathematical tools to express, in quantitative language, the probabilistic universe. Interestingly, it was modern science that created these tools, precisely the one that rejected Aristotle's physics, the one philosopher that seems to give meaning to QM.

We need metaphysics to understand physics; that is Heisenberg's point. That's why he reminded us of the concept of potency.

1.2.1. Primary matter and substantial form. Chesterton understood Aquinas. Against Kant's transcendental idealism (his transcendental forms and general empiricism and materialism) he writes: «"formal", in Thomist language, means true, or that it has the real and decisive quality that makes one thing be it and not another» (Chesterton, 2012: 200). The substantial form is, according to Michael Doods, «a physical principle of each material substance which makes the substance to be the kind of thing it is which actualizes or determines the possibility-of-being to be a particular kind of substance» (Doods, 2002: 21). The cat is a cat because it has the substantial form of a cat; Human is a human being because he has the substantial form of a Human. When a man dies it ceases to be the one organically unified substance we call “man” and becomes something else — a carcass. *Hilé* or primary matter is what remains in substantial change; *morphé* or substantial form is that which changes. There is no matter without form.

We speak of a non-deterministic, non-blind and non-casuistic reality; but a reality with a *telos*, a Creator, an interdependent and organic reality with a God that is provident. Matter and form are thus physical principles of reality without which it would not exist, and yet they are not things strictly speaking — they are not directly perceived but they are necessary to any human perception to the extent that what we perceive are forms.

1.2.2. Intelligent perception. Whenever we perceive something, such as a color or a sound — we can think of a certain animal like a frog — we know that we perceive a set of sensitive forms (color, sound or taste⁵) that nevertheless belong to an intelligible or essential form of frog. This means that human perception is already intellectual in its own way, an intelligent act as it is a rudiment of intelligence that understands the intelligible form of the frog. The spatial form of the frog would not exist if it were not for the intelligible form of the frog that is directed towards human intelligence — a spiritual activity that grasps the immeasurable things in the world. Back to Lisska,

object of sense is an *intentio non sensata* known through the intentional activity of the *vis cogitativa*. Given this analysis, the *vis cogitativa*, [...] provides the possibility for the awareness of an individual of a natural kind on the level of perception. This in turn renders the entire abstraction process, which is part of the intellect, more coherent. This analysis has argued that, for Aquinas, the *vis cogitativa* is a necessary component between sense perception of individual sensible qualities and conceptual thought of sortal properties by means of abstraction (Lisska, 2016: 327).

2. What changes with modernity. Descartes' deviation

We already talk of Descartes and Democritus. Descartes presents a philosophy that, in many aspects, does not differ from Democritus. Both argue that what we ordinarily perceive is not reality. Reality is from a non-experienceable domain; is made of atoms (Democritus) and extensive things (Descartes). This is a quantitative and not a qualitative domain. Democritus' physicalism is repeated with Descartes. Physicalism is an ideology that argues that reality comes down to the domain of quantity or what can be measured. Although Descartes' philosophy incorporates concepts such as those of God and the soul, the practical result or the consequence of his thought results in an external and quantitative reality without further ado.

What is eliminated is the concept of substance as a compound of matter and form, the concept of substantial form but also the concept of primary matter and, at the same time, the philosophy of Descartes is not exactly a realistic philosophy like that of Thomas Aquinas. Reality is reduced to what can be measured; deep down, Descartes reduces reality to the subject who measures it. It is more about subjective idealism than realism and hence the focus on the subject and the idea of subjective representation – typical concepts of Modernity that seems to forget that reality also has intelligible forms.

What is known is the object and not the image or image support of the object, for St. Thomas, returning to Sertilanges, «it is the form of existence of the known object that communicates; not as a natural form incarnated in matter, but intentionally, that is, as an idea or intention of nature» (Sertilanges, 1951: 33). That's why we can say that in St. Thomas there is a moderated idealism.

What remains of Descartes' philosophy is that the universe is made up of things that can be measured. The concept that disappears is the substantial form (this cannot be measured), the concept of intelligence as spiritual activity and that of purpose (*telos*) for reality also disappear. Even though it might not have been this philosopher's intention, the truth is that Descartes' philosophy prepares physicalism, that is, it prepares materialism.

With the Enlightenment philosophy, the universe no longer has a greater purpose and so does the human being. The causal powers of different substances are replaced by abstract laws of nature — ontology as an integral part of a metaphysics is replaced by phenomenology — *noumenon* gives way to *phenomenon*. Happens that, as Anthony Lisska writes, there is «no epistemology without ontology» (Lisska, 2016: 11). And we can say, there is no rationality without finality. Human knowledge results from one typical knowledge of essences. This is what we can call intellectual conscience— typically human – of being.

Anthony Lisska writes that Thomas Aquinas' realism «is opposed both to a representational philosophy of mind and to a foundationalist epistemology as well as a rejection of Kantian transcendental idealism» (Lisska, 2016: 13); «Kant's method leads directly to idealism, and this is opposed to the metaphysical realism found in Aristotle and Aquinas» (*Ibidem*: 14). Back to Chesterton and against empiricist philosophers, «the understanding is certain of an external object, and not simply of an impression of that object» (Chesterton, 2012: 202). Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas are not anthropocentric, their philosophies are not centered on the subject, but on essences, reality; being. This is conscious in the sense of being conscious is being aware that we are in being.

⁵ To those who want to taste de frog.

3. Conclusion

With 19th century psychology, the concept of perception is markedly associated with this physicalist (a different way of saying materialist) and psychologist or subjectivist view of reality. Although very well designed and with considerable advances in neuroscience, what is certain is that the concept of intelligence as a spiritual activity is lost. We are unable to explain how an exclusively quantitative world can generate the qualities that we all experience. Possibly, this world of ours is not limited to quantity, but, as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas argued, is full of metaphysical meaning. It is a qualitative world.

We finish with one of Alisska: «our experience is of things rather than of sense data» (Lisska, 2016: 326).

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