

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Powers and Operations of the Soul

1. INTRODUCTION

Properly speaking, and considering the things themselves, the study of the human soul, of its powers and their acts, belongs to the field of psychology. Yet these and kindred matters are given careful consideration by St. Thomas in various places in his theological synthesis. Why should this be? Is this not an intrusion by theology into alien regions? These questions are of considerable importance in the academic world. The answer is sketched very clearly by Monsignor Ronald A. Knox:

To the statistician, the mass-observer, you are one unit in a crowd. To the physicist, you are a mathematical formula, to the chemist a compound of substances, to the biologist a specimen. The behaviorist sees you as an animal modified by conditioned reflexes; the psychologist as a mental type suffering, to a greater or less degree, from morbid variations; the philosopher, as the subject of a conscious experience. You interest the historian as one of the innumerable insects that build up the coral island of human development; the economist as a bee or drone that helps to cross-fertilize the cycle of production and consumption. To the postman, you are an address; to the tradesman, a ration-card; to the politician, a voter; to the revenue, a tax-payer. . . . So significant you are, so universally relevant. But how, and by what right? Beware of asking; that way lies theology.¹

¹R. A. Knox, *Stimuli* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1951), 134 f.

How, then, is man significant? By what right is he so universally relevant? Science alone makes no pretense of answering these ultimate questions. For the Christian, the vitally important answers to these will be found in the domain of faith. But faith deals with these matters in more universal terms, in a way not easily applied with accuracy to the host of particular inquiries that arise among thinking men. To unfold the fulness of revelation, to apply it in detail to particularities—that is the work of sacred theology. But theology must learn of the particularities from the disciplines which consider them properly if she is to use them well.

Theology considers man as a creature coming forth from God and returning to him through Christ by virtue of his own responsible acts, worked out—in co-operation with God and his fellow man, as a member of Christ's Mystical Body—with the assistance of divine grace. To understand the full implications of man, his dignity as the divine image, his misery as God's enemy through sin, and his glory as God's adopted son and co-heir with Christ, it is necessary to have detailed knowledge of man himself. Such knowledge is garnered from reason under the positive direction of faith in the study of sacred theology.

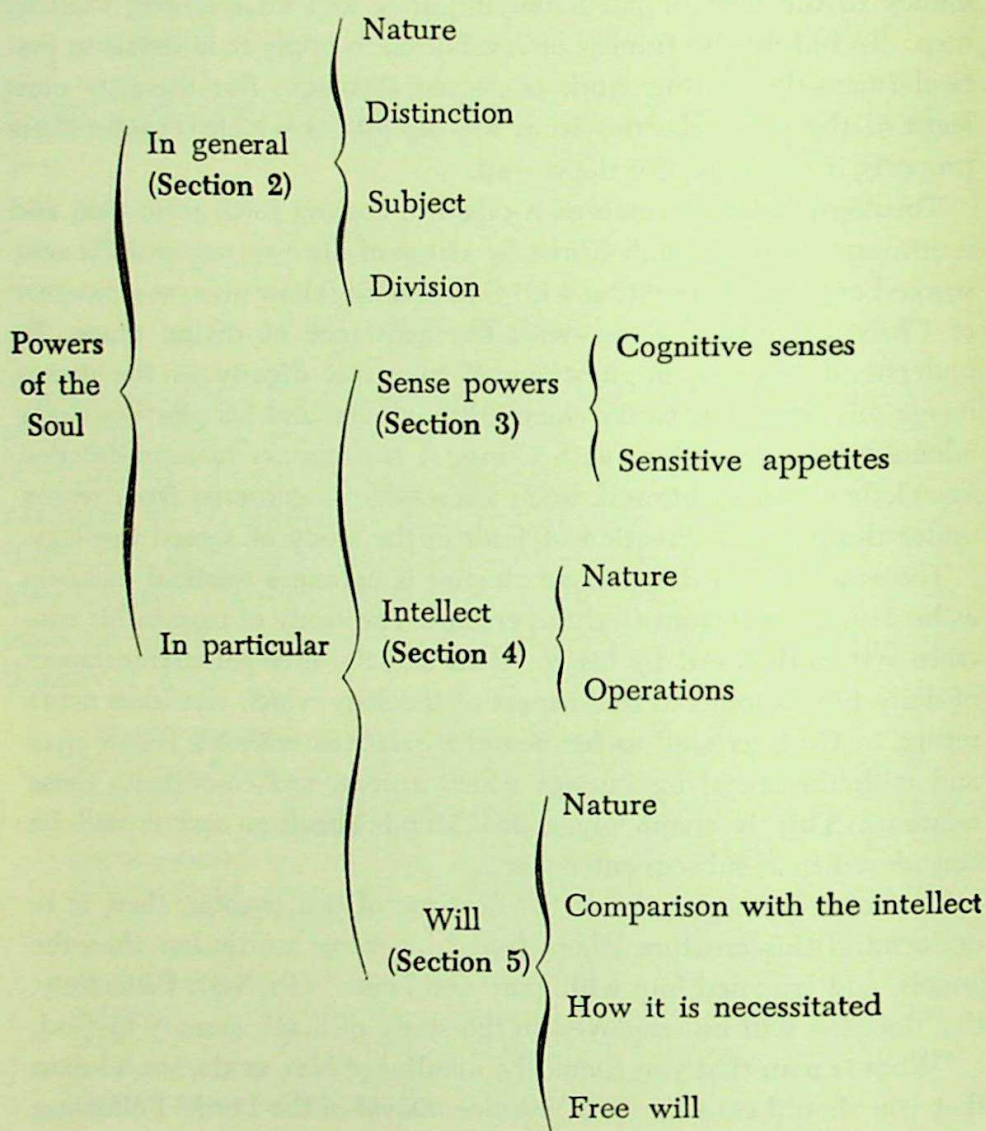
The emphasis in this present chapter is on man's spiritual make-up as he comes forth from God the creator. The study of man in his concrete acts, influenced by his emotions and the external circumstances of daily life, belongs to that aspect of theology which considers man's return to God, as well as his complex relations with his fellow man and with the social institutions which express and co-ordinate those relations. This is commonly called Moral Theology and it will be considered in a subsequent volume.

The immediate purpose of the doctrine of this chapter, then, is to understand this creature whom God “. . . made a little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor” (Ps. 8-6). Ultimately, this doctrine will be employed in the study of man's journey to God.

“What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him?” inquires David of the Lord.² Following upon and presupposing our previous consideration of man's nature (Chapter Fourteen), the doctrine of this chapter marks the beginning

²Ps. 8:5.

of a more explicit and particularized unfolding of the theological answer to that question. It will be developed along the lines indicated in this outline:



2. THE POWERS OF THE SOUL IN GENERAL

A. The Nature of a Power³

A power of the soul is defined as *the proximate and immediate principle by which the soul operates*. A power is thus distinguished: 1) from the soul itself, which is the *remote* principle of operation; and 2) from the subject *which* acts, i.e., the composite, man.

There is a real distinction between the soul and its powers. If they were identical, the soul would always be performing vital operations, for as the substantial form, the soul is always in act. The powers of the soul, however, are in potentiality to their actions. These actions (such as sensation, understanding and volition) are *accidents*. The immediate sources of these actions, then, must also be accidents, for the nature of powers is manifested by their acts. The soul, on the contrary, is a *substance*. Thus it is distinguished from its powers as substance from accidents.

The soul may be compared to the trunk of a tree, its powers to the branches. The branches spring from the trunk, and the tree produces fruit by means of the branches. So the powers of the soul flow from the soul's essence, and the soul produces its vital actions by means of its powers.

B. The Specification of Powers

A principle of specification is *that principle which constitutes a thing in its species*. To determine the *nature* of a power—i.e., that which determines the different kind of thing it is and the kind of act it can produce—we must look to the acts which are produced by that power. These acts, in turn, are specified and distinguished by their *formal objects*, to which they are ordained by their very nature.

There is an important distinction here which can be represented in a division:

³What we here call "powers" are also known as "faculties" of the soul (from the Latin *facultas*, "the ability to act or do") or "potencies" (from the Latin *potentia*, which has basically the same meaning, and is frequently translated as "power").

Object of an Act	{	<i>material</i> —the <i>thing</i> attained by the act of a certain power; e.g., the apple attained by the powers of sight, smell, taste, etc. The same material object, the same thing, may be attained by many different acts and powers.
		<i>formal</i> —the particular aspect under which a power attains its material object; e.g., the eye attains the apple under the aspect or formality of color. The apple as savory is the formal object of taste; as odorous it is the formal object of smell.

Sight and hearing are different powers. What makes them different? The first thing we note is that they produce different actions: by sight we are able to *see*, by hearing we are able to *hear*. Then we note that these actions belong exclusively to the powers which produce them. The eye cannot hear, the ear cannot see. Why? Because these actions of sight and hearing are directed to different objects, i.e., to color and to sound. Each power elicits its act in reference to its own formal object. The powers of the soul, then, are specified and differentiated *immediately* by their acts, *ultimately* by their formal objects.

C. The Subject of the Powers

Since the powers of the soul are accidents (i.e., modifications of a thing rather than things themselves), they must inhere in and be supported by some substance, some thing of which they are modifications. This "thing" or substance is known as their subject.

The spiritual powers of the soul, intellect and will, are found in the soul itself as their subject, because they do not require corporeal organs for their operation. Even when separated from the body, the soul, through intellect and will, produces acts of intellection and volition. But the vegetative and sensitive powers, since they operate through corporeal organs, are found in the composite of body and soul. They need both body and soul to produce their acts. Thus, a dead man cannot see, because his soul is separated from his body—the *subject* of the accident which is the power of seeing has been dissolved. A blind man cannot see, not because there is no subject but because the organ of sight itself is impaired.

D. Division of the Powers

There are five kinds of power in the soul: vegetative, sensitive, locomotive, appetitive and intellectual.

Their functions and subdivisions are indicated here in outline form:

