

THE FOUNDATIONS OF WISDOM

VOLUME 3

PHILOSOPHY OF MAN

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TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

CHAPTER 10

The Agent and Possible Intellect

It is a fact of human experience that we go from a state of ignorance to knowledge. As small children we have very little knowledge, and what memories we have are vague. As we grow older, our knowledge grows and becomes more and more explicit. Thus, in human knowing, we move from a condition of potency (what Aristotle called a blank tablet) to a condition of actuality.⁶¹ Even in a given day we experience going from a state of not actually knowing or considering what we know to actually knowing or considering what we know. So this movement from potency to act is characteristic of human knowing.

What is the explanation for this change, and how does it come about? One thing is certain: it is through sense experience that we first begin to form universal concepts and ideas and to order our thoughts according to the order of our experiences. Aristotle called this process of pulling out universal concepts from particular sense experiences “abstraction.”

The Agent and Possible Intellectual Powers

To explain how we go from potency to act in our knowledge, it is necessary to posit both an active principle and a potential principle among our intellectual powers. Nothing moves from

⁶¹ See *De Anima*, Book III, chap. 4.

potency to act on its own, but only when some agent acts upon it.⁶² This shows that there must be some agent intellectual principle at work in human knowing. Not only that, but experience teaches us that it is within our own power to come to know new things. Therefore, this agent intellectual principle must be an intrinsic principle, a power belonging to each individual man. We will call this intrinsic active intellectual principle the “agent intellect.”

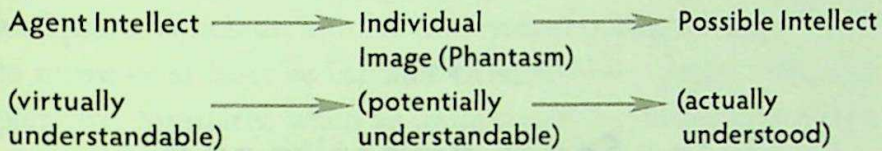
The agent intellect acts in such a way as to bring the potential principle in our intellectual power (the “possible intellect”) from a state of not actually knowing to a state of actually knowing.⁶³ But how does it do this? By the mediation of images (also called “phantasms”) in our internal senses. An analogy will help here.

When a projector shines light upon a screen, the screen is blank, having a plain white surface. But once a slide with some image is interposed between the light and the screen, then the picture in the slide can be seen as an image on the screen. The screen is no longer blank but contains some image. In this analogy, the light of the projector is like the agent intellect, the screen is like the possible intellect, the slide is like the phantasm in the internal senses, and the image on the screen is like the universal concept abstracted from the individual phantasm. The individual phantasm, being mixed up with and embedded in individuating conditions, is not of itself understandable (just as the image in a slide upon which no light is shining cannot be seen). But once the agent intellect acts upon it to abstract what is common from

⁶² Recall that this was demonstrated in natural philosophy when we considered the definition of motion; if needed, the discussion of this can be found in chapter 4 of *Natural Philosophy*.

⁶³ Remember that the “agent intellect” and the “possible intellect” are not two intellects within the rational soul, but are *principles* of the rational soul. There is only one intellect as such—these two, the agent intellect and the possible intellect, are powers of the intellect.

what is individual, the universal nature included in the phantasm can now be actually understood in the possible intellect. This is represented in the schematic below:



Before any image is present in the internal senses, the agent intellect contains virtually all universal concepts, but does not actually have any one of them. It is like a potential whole which contains many things in its power, like white light which virtually contains many colors, but does not actually have any one of them until passed through a prism.⁶⁴ That is why we do not actually form concepts of natural things until those natural things have been presented to our senses. Therefore, nothing is in the intellect which has not first passed through the senses.

Summary

- The rational soul includes an active and a potential power, called the agent intellect and the possible intellect.
- We reason to the existence of these two powers from the fact that we move from potency to act in our knowledge.
- We know the agent intellect must be a power intrinsic to each man because he is able to exercise it at will.

⁶⁴ See *Disputed Questions on the Soul*, a.5, resp.6.

CHAPTER 11

The Sense Appetite and Rational Appetite

Both the sentient and rational powers of the soul discussed above are knowing powers which involve taking in or receiving things from outside of us. They are passive powers that do not, of themselves, cause us to move toward any goal. Yet it is an undeniable fact that sometimes we are inclined or moved from within toward some goal. When we acquire some new knowledge, whether it be sense knowledge of something particular or intellectual knowledge of something universal, this new knowledge brings with it the possibility of being inclined toward or away from something based upon that knowledge. When I smell pizza, there arises an inclination toward pizza. When I see a mountain lion, there arises an inclination away from the mountain lion. When I know that animals and plants act intelligently, but not from themselves, there arises an inclination to know why and how this can be so. Therefore, we must posit that, in addition to these knowing powers in the sentient and the rational soul, there must also be powers which incline and move us toward some goal. We call these powers the sense and rational appetites.

The Sense Appetite

Wherever we find sensation, we also find a sense appetite. The evidence for this is that in all things that sense, there is pleasure and pain. When an animal experiences pleasure, it continues to move or at least be inclined towards the object causing the pleasure. Similarly, when an animal experiences pain, it moves away or at least is inclined to move away from the object causing the pain. Sensation gives knowledge of some object, but pleasure and pain indicate whether or not the object is good for the animal. Therefore, the object of the sense appetite is the sensible good.

But doesn't it sometimes happen that animals experience what is painful and still continue to act for some goal in spite of the pain associated with it? For example, when salmon swim upstream against the current for miles to return to their spawning ground, or when males fight over females, these animals are pursuing something involving pain. These facts force us to admit that there must be within the sense appetite two distinct principles inclining to two distinct objects: one inclination for acquiring what is agreeable and fleeing what is harmful; and a second inclination for resisting the things that prevent the acquiring of what is agreeable. The first inclination is called the concupiscible appetite and the second inclination is called the irascible appetite. For example, a lion may be seeking a mate for reproduction. He is acting according to his concupiscible appetite to acquire something pleasant and agreeable. But then he runs into another lion seeking the same female as a mate. So the two lions fight for the female. Here they are acting according to the irascible appetite to overcome an obstacle to mating.

Human beings also have these two principles in their sense appetite. These powers are exercised through various emotions. The emotions of the concupiscible appetite are love, hate, desire,

aversion, joy, and sorrow. The emotions of the irascible appetite are hope, despair, fear, daring, and anger. The emotions of the irascible appetite all have objects involving some special difficulty. We will consider each of these emotions in detail when we consider ethics in the last quarter.

The Rational Appetite

Similar to the inclination arising from sense knowledge, there is an inclination arising from intellectual knowledge. Hence, there is a rational appetite besides the sense appetite. The rational appetite is called the will. The object of the rational appetite is not a sensible good, but rather a reasonable good. Even children recognize the difference between these two appetites when they make jokes like: "Do you love your ice cream?" "Yes." "Well, why don't you marry it?" Children see that the love for a sensible good like ice cream is essentially different from the love for a reasonable good like marriage, even though we give the same name "love" to our inclination toward both sensible and reasonable goods.

The will does not have a concupiscible part and an irascible part like the senses because the reasonable good is not particular and limited in the way that the sensible good is. Hence, reasonable goods do not come into opposition in the way that sensible goods do. However, it does often happen that a reasonable good comes into conflict with a sensible good. For example, the man who has diabetes sensibly desires the chocolate cake, even though he knows that it is not reasonable to eat it. The greater part of moral training involves bringing the sense appetite into conformity with the rational appetite. This is something very difficult for man, since man knows sensible goods better than he knows reasonable goods, even though reasonable goods are better for him than

sensible goods. We will consider this more at length in our course on ethics next quarter.

Knowledge Is Before Appetite

Although the appetite is a mover in relation to the body and the other powers of the soul, it is itself moved by knowledge.⁶⁵ Unless something is in some way known, it will not be desired. Therefore, knowledge is before appetite, both in sensation and reason. By “before” we mean primarily in being and causality (the 2nd and 5th senses of “before” from the Categories), though sometimes knowledge is also before appetite in time.

Summary

- In addition to the knowing powers of the soul there are also appetitive powers whose proper object is some good.
- There are sense and rational appetites corresponding to sense and rational knowledge.
- The sense appetite has two principles: the concupiscible appetite and the irascible appetite.
- The rational appetite is a single principle which ought to rule over the sense appetite in man.
- Since nothing is desired unless it is known, knowledge is before appetite.

⁶⁵ The appetite moves the body and the other powers of the soul as an agent cause, but knowledge and the thing known moves the appetite as a final cause.