

Thomas Aquinas and the Debate over Introspection

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Introspection as a method of discovering truth about human beings has been a controversial practice and concept since its inception (which some have connected to the Egyptian Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus,¹ and others to the Christian Platonist Saint Augustine.)² Classic modern psychology has been divided on it, as was (to a lesser extent and for different reasons) medieval philosophy. The objective of this paper is to assess the place that introspection as a topic and tool had in the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas. The Angelic Doctor has had many modern followers who have inevitably been affected by post-medieval thinkers, especially Rene Descartes; and Descartes was sympathetic to introspection as a philosophical program.

I shall first present the spectrum of views on introspection in relatively recent psychology and philosophy; then I shall discuss the depth and manner of Aquinas's commitment to introspection; and I will conclude by educing what I see as some connections that Thomas's treatment of introspection has to the general character of his thought, and to contemporary philosophizing.

Modern views on introspection

Many of the founders of modern psychology considered the immediate awareness of our own mental states to be among the necessary data for psychological analysis. Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) touted the method of "introspection," which he interpreted as scientifically

¹ D. B. Klein, *A History of Scientific Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), p. 139-140.

² William Lyons, *The Disappearance of Introspection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 1-2.

controlled reporting of immediate data of consciousness, in his psychological “laboratory” (Lyons, *op. cit.*, p.4-6). Franz Brentano (1838-1917) was skeptical of purposeful inspection of mental states, but considered the validity of immediate subjective awareness to be self evident.³ William James (1842-1910) supported an actively introspectionist approach to psychology: “All people unhesitatingly believe that they feel themselves thinking and that they distinguish the mental state as an inward activity or passion, from all the objects with which it may cognitively deal. I regard this belief as the most fundamental of all the postulates of Psychology, and shall discard all curious inquiries about its certainty as too metaphysical.”⁴ Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) encouraged “introspective” self analysis, as long as the practitioners were trained in general psychoanalytic method and could practice detached “self observation” instead of distortive “reflection.”⁵ Freud may be said to have regarded self knowledge as the goal of psychoanalysis, wherein the patients uncover repressed experiences and feelings and discover the real determinants of their personalities.⁶

³ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed., V. I (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), p. 38-39.

⁴ *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1950), c. VII, p. 185; Lyons, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1955), II, p. 134; *A General Introduction to Psycho-analysis*, trans. Joan Liviere (New York: Liveright, 1935), p. 21.

⁶ Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, new ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1983), p. 132, 178-179; Leslie Stevenson, *Seven Theories of Human Nature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1987), p. 80; for another view, see D. W. Hamlyn, *Perception, Learning, and the Self: Essays in the Philosophy of Psychology*

More recent thought within and about psychology has generally rejected any suggestion of introspection and in the process has left self knowledge in limbo. Behaviorism has demanded public and controllable methods of psychological observation and so rejects private introspection and the fiction of the self.⁷ Later phenomenologists repudiated Edmund Husserl's turn to an idealistic constitutive ego. Max Scheler (1874-1928) exposed the "idols of self knowledge" which lead to illusion in claims about inner experience (Spiegelberg, *op. cit.*, V. I, p. 243-244). Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) dramatized the problematic of an outer-directed consciousness's awareness of itself as a type of object, although he found a reflexive consciousness with the self as its subject to be unobjectionable.⁸ And Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) battled against the traditional dualism which had separated the ego from its body and from natural engagement with the world, and he denied that self consciousness (especially in the ineffable form of the bodily sense of life) could be consciously articulated like an ordinary object.⁹ While representatives of the British tradition earlier in this century, like C. D. Broad

(London: Routledge, 1983), p. 253-255.

⁷ B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), c. XVII-XVIII.

⁸ *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1957), p. 40-41.

⁹ *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities, 1962), p. 404, 426. Merleau-Ponty gives an excellent account of many of his reasons for rejecting Husserl's idealistic brand of phenomenology in "What is phenomenology?," trans. John F. Bannan, *Cross Currents*, 6 (1956), 59-70.

and Bertrand Russell, supported introspection,¹⁰ much of analytic philosophy has either, like Ludwig Wittgenstein, indicated paradox in the claim of self reflective activity,¹¹ or, like Gilbert Ryle, reduced it to dispositions for public behavior.¹² Current philosophy seems more willing to accept the meaningfulness of reference to our own mental states, however; examples are recent positions taken by such figures as Donald Davidson, Gerald Myers, and Tyler Burge.¹³

Saint Thomas and Introspection

The main concern of this paper is whether Thomas Aquinas may be said to have believed in, or used, introspection, especially in the practice of “psychology” (that is, the “science of the soul”).

At one time in the not too distant past, many Thomistic commentators, Robert Brennan for example, presumed that introspection was Aquinas’s typical, and perhaps even exclusive, source of information when

¹⁰ C. D. Broad, *The Mind and its Place in Nature* (London: Routledge, 1925), c. VI; Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1929), c. VI.

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), #412-418.

¹² Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949), c. VI.

¹³ Gerald E. Myers, “Introspection and self-knowledge,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 23 (1986), 199-207; Donald Davidson, “Knowing one’s own mind,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 60 (1987), 441-458; Tyler Burge, “Individualism and self-knowledge,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 85 (1988), 649-663.

analyzing the soul and its activities.¹⁴ Others, such as Patrick Coffey, saw introspection as one source of psychological knowledge, with sense perception being the other.¹⁵ A specific instance of a Thomist assuming the validity of an introspective method was when Michael Stock, in a study of sense consciousness, assumed that one would answer the question, “Did you remember to speak to X?” by reporting a “sensible act of recollection” which one performed.¹⁶ Little or no consideration was given by these authors to the problems which, as we have seen, both philosophers and psychologists have raised regarding this process. I shall summarize the range of these critical charges as including the following: (1) The very fact that mental acts are supposed to be the objects of introspection would lose for introspection any advantage of immediate subjective access to them, which is supposed to be introspectionism’s strength. (2) If introspection really were as radically individual and private as it is portrayed to be, it would be quite unreliable as a source of information and knowledge. And some have gone as far as to say that (3) the “sphere of the

¹⁴ For example, Robert E. Brennan, *General Psychology: An Interpretation of the Science of Mind Based on Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 7-10. It is doubtful that Thomist “introspectionists” realized the debt they owed to Descartes in their interpretation of Thomas, or how close they had brought Aquinas to the Franciscan ideology of the later thirteenth century.

¹⁵ Joseph Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1965), p. 227, 230; Patrick Coffee, *Epistemology* (London: Longmans, Green, 1917), v. II, p. 1-2.

¹⁶ “Sense consciousness according to St. Thomas,” *Thomist*, 21 (1958), 453.

mental” which introspection is claimed to observe is conceptually problematic, if not a downright myth.¹⁷

Perhaps with some of these concerns in mind, but primarily out of a sense for St. Thomas’s levels of discourse and cultural context, Mark Jordan has recently discounted the place of introspection in Aquinas’s methodology.¹⁸ Jordan claims that the only method that Aquinas used, and could have used, for psychology was that of external observation and third person account; introspection can at most be a negative check against philosophical absurdities (e.g., the denial that thinking occurs), and cannot provide any evidence upon which positive theory can be constructed.¹⁹

Jordan’s claim is in a very general way correct, concerning the way in which Aquinas’s typical presentations in “psychology” are phrased. Unlike late thirteenth century Franciscan “interiorists” like John Duns Scotus, Peter Olivi, and Vital du Four,²⁰ Thomas

¹⁷ See the discussion of introspection in Gerald E. Myers, *Self: An Introduction to Philosophical Psychology* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), c. 9. Lyons, *op. cit.*, c. 1-2, presents historical versions of most of these objections.

¹⁸ Mark Jordan, *Ordering Wisdom: The Hierarchy of Philosophical Discourses in Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1986), p. 143-147.

¹⁹ Jordan’s position is supported by the remark of J. Wébert, “Reflexio”: étude sur les opérations réflexives dans la psychologie de saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Mélanges Madonnet*, I (*Bibliothèque thomiste*, v. 13), 319, that perception of one’s own soul is too “indeterminate” to serve as a basis for science.

²⁰ See, for instance, John Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense*, IV, d. 43, q. 2, n. 11; Vital du Four, F. Délorme, “Le Cardinal Vital du Four, Huit questions disputées sur le problème de la connaissance,” in *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 2 (1927), q. 4, p.

almost never uses his own experience of himself as a datum for a claim about human knowledge or affection (or for any other type of claim, for that matter). Aquinas does occasionally cite common human experience as proof, or at least as confirmation, of some psychological claim; and sometimes these appeals mention what people will presumably discover if they look “inside” themselves. For instance, his major article on knowledge of the soul in the *Disputed Question on Truth* (*De Veritate*), q. 10, a. 8, announces that “each person can have a twofold knowledge of the soul” (...de anima duplex cognitio haberi potest ab unoquoque), as if a single individual will know her or his own soul and then perhaps using this experiential knowledge as a basis) go on to the general essence of the soul. But the frequency of this type of reference in Aquinas’s writings pales in comparison to the numbers of his (1) general factual observations about human behavior, which presumably could be confirmed by all people about themselves and about others, and (2) purely conceptual analyses, as of the notions of “faculty” and “object.” And the other major treatments of knowledge of the soul do not use the *De Veritate*’s form of reference. *Summa Theologiae* (*S. T.*), q. 87, a. 1 begins by describing experience of the soul in a personal manner: “Socrates or Plato perceives that he has an intellectual soul;” but it then becomes impersonal regarding knowledge of the soul’s essence: “...we consider the nature of the human mind.”²¹ And *Summa Contra Gentiles* (*C.G.*), III, 46 speaks impersonally virtually throughout, and makes a point of contrasting what an

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²¹ *S. T.*, I, q. 87, a. 1, c.: “Uno quidem modo, particularieter, secundum quod Socrates vel Plato percipit se habere animam intellectivam, ex hoc quod percipit se intelligere. Alio modo, in universali, secundum quod naturam humanae mentis ex actu intellectus consideramus.”

individual soul can perceive of its own existence against what it can understand of the soul's nature. The place of introspection in the landscape of Aquinas's argumentation is thus not prominent; so much for the unreflective assumption that inward inspection was Aquinas's standard operating procedure for psychology.

Confirmatory to this general tendency in Thomas's texts is the theoretical point that the soul which an individual student of psychology might use as a "specimen" does not have to be his or her own. It could be the soul of some other person, or the souls of a number of people, or even an imaginary soul (as in a thought experiment). While the individual's own soul seems like the most natural candidate because of its accessibility, an excessive reliance on one's own soul, without comparison to the cases of others, runs the severe risk of narrowness and distortion. An observation of the vital activities of (a representative group of) others has the added advantage of avoiding self interest in making psychological claims.

Yet it should not be thought, as apparently Mark Jordan does (*op. cit.*, p.144-145), that Aquinas intentionally refrained from introspection or sought systematically to eliminate or reduce its occurrence in his psychological methodology. He had no theoretical motive for doing so, for the brand of introspection against which philosophical objections like the three mentioned previously are generally mounted incorporates a strong epistemological dualism which would have been foreign to Thomas's mentality. The first objection (that introspection objectifies and thus loses immediate access to one's mental acts) would be muted by the fact that even the intentional objectification of mental acts would not remove the directness of our knowledge of them. That mental acts become "objects" of knowledge does not mean that they are now external objects, but simply that they are entities knowable by a cognitive faculty; and they are directly knowable, as the primary objects and concern of self-reflection (even if; as Aquinas insists, they are

knowable only as related to, and in the midst of; external objects). He could easily have rebutted the second objection (which denied the value of the introspective process because of its radical privacy) from within his own philosophy, by denying that introspection is purely subjective, as witness the mutually confirming results of individual “self-awarenesses.” The final “objection,” which denies mentality itself; may be summarily dismissed as contradicting, of all things, “common human experience,” and the very intelligence which must be used to perform such a denial.²²

Besides these answers to objections, there are good positive theoretical reasons for including first-person introspection as part (even if a minor part) of one’s arsenal in psychological argument. The experience of one’s own soul is necessary to psychology, in the sense that it demonstrates irrefutably the existence of a soul, and provides a consistent referent, and controlling instance, for one’s general claims about the human soul. It is also a necessary motivator for carrying on psychology, because a natural interest that we have in this study is that it concerns us, and, there is no recognition of us without the affirmation that I am part of us. In theory, a purely objective psychology, loosed from any ties to oneself (or any other individual), could be launched, and could be carried out as if a nonhuman class like snails or cosmic dust were being investigated. But the practical justification for such an approach might

²² *De Unitate Intellectus*, c. 3, n. 216: “Virtus autem huius demonstrationis et insolubilitas apparet, quia quicumque ab hac via divertere voluerint, necesse habent inconveniens dicere. Manifestum est enim quod hic homo singularis intelligit: numquam enim de intellectu quaereremus nisi intelligeremus; nec cum quaerimus de intellectu, de alio principio quaerimus quam de eo quo nos intelligimus.”

be hard to discover, as Michael Polanyi has pointed out;²³ indeed, the motives for an exaggerated and uncaring impersonality on a topic of such great moment to ourselves might actually turn out to be cruel, and thus “human, all too human,” after all.

It can be shown textually that St. Thomas actually did make introspective references, and his appeal to introspection took several forms. Some of these references simply point to or assume our acquaintance with basic facts about ourselves, which we know about through common reflective awareness. One such fact would be our sensations: “From the fact that the senses report as they are affected, it follows that we are not deceived in the judgment by which we judge that we are sensing something.”²⁴ Another fact we know about ourselves is the actions of our interior faculties: “Those things which are in the soul by their essence are known by an experimental knowledge, insofar as a person experiences his interior principles through his acts; thus, by willing we perceive the will, and we perceive life in our operations of life.”²⁵ And we know that our intellects understand: “Man himself is intelligent, for we would not

²³ See the criticism of “value free” psychology in Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). p. 3.

²⁴ S. T., I, q. 17, a. 2, ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod sensum affici, est ipsum eius sentire. Unde per hoc quod sensus ita nunciant sicut afficiuntur, sequitur quod non decipiamur in iudicio quo iudicamus nos sentire aliquid.”

²⁵ S. T., I-II, q. 112, a. 5, ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod illa quae sunt per essentiam sui in anima, cognoscuntur experimentaliter cognitione, in quantum homo experitur per actus principia intrinseca: sicut voluntatem percipimus volendo, et vitam in operibus vitae.”

speak of intellect unless through this fact, that we perceive that we understand.²⁶ And finally, an introspective process is mentioned in connection with intellectual abstraction: “For a man abstracts from phantasms, and receives in his mind intelligibles in act; for we would not otherwise come into knowledge of these actions unless we perceived that we understand.”²⁷ Yet these references are so general and concern such (to Aquinas) incontrovertible matters that they could hardly be regarded as offering evidence for some thesis -- the “thesis” of our conscious life is already obvious. Also, the introspective activities mentioned are not appealed to as evidence for some wider conclusion, but simply described ab extra as occurrences.

Other introspective references seem to play the stronger role of citing evidence for or against some inferred psychological claim. “We know from experience of ourselves” that we form examples in the effort to understand concepts; this helps demonstrate the process of “return to phantasms” or retained images as the

²⁶ *Quaestio de immortalitate animae*, in Leonard Kennedy, “A new disputed question of St. Thomas Aquinas on the immortality of the soul,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 45 (1978), 217-218; “Constat enim quod ipse homo est intelligens; non enim loqueremur de intellectu nisi per hoc quod percipimus nos intelligere.”

²⁷ C. G., II, 76, n. 1577 (#17): “...homo enim abstrahit a phantasmatis, et recipit mente intelligibilia in actu; non enim aliter in notitiam harum actionum venissemus nisi eas in nobis experiremur.”

normal human mode of idea formation.²⁸ “We perceive that we abstract universal forms,” and this aids in establishing the existence of an agent intellect in each individual soul.²⁹ “Each one is conscious that it is he himself who understands,”³⁰ thus demonstrating that the soul is form of the body and a constituent of the whole person. “Anyone can experience in himself that reason can diminish or increase anger and fear; thus the passions can be said to obey reason.”³¹

In summary, St. Thomas seems to assume that introspection is an actual (and therefore possible) process which conveys genuine information. The process is not typical of human cognition, however, which is geared to inspection of external events and behavior, and to rational categorization of; and conclusions about, that behavior. Despite the presumptions of many Thomists, introspection was not, according to Aquinas, a systematic basis for pursuing psychology; but it can confirm claims

²⁸ S. T., I, q. 84, a. 7, c.: “Secundo, quia hoc quilibet in seipso experiri potest, quod quando aliquis conatur aliquid intelligere, format aliqua phantasmata sibi, per modum exemplorum, in quibus quasi inspiciat quod intelligere studet.”

²⁹ S. T., I, q. 79, a. 4, c.: “Et hoc experimento cognoscimus, dum percipimus nos abstrahere formas universales a conditionibus particularibus, quod est facere actu intelligibilia”; Disputed Question *De Anima*, a. 5, c.: “utramque autem harum operationum experimur in nobis ipsis. Nam et nos intelligibilia recipimus et abstrahimus ea.”

³⁰ S. T., I. Q. 76, a. 1, c.: “...experitur enim unusquisque seipsum esse qui intelligit.”

³¹ S. T., I. Q. 81, a. 3, c.: “hoc etiam quilibet experiri potest in seipso: applicando enim aliquas universales considerationes, mitigatur ira auto timor aut aliquid huiusmodi, vel etiam instigatur.”

about human nature which general observation has, usually, established first.

Implications and Connections

Thus we have seen that, while the concept of introspection excited devotion in some Franciscans, Cartesian-influenced Thomists, early empirical psychologists), Aquinas's naturalistic tendencies ruled out anything more than a secondary function in our knowledge for this process. But his Aristotelian emphasis on the body and external environment did not extend to a behavioristic-style elimination of introspection as inherently suspect, worthless, or impossible. Such a reduction would have been impossible in the medieval period anyway, because of (among other things) its religious commitment to knowledge of the soul as the image of God, and the pervading belief in a conscious soul, including its consciousness of itself. An eliminative methodology would also have been unlikely for Aquinas's balanced intellectual temperament, which found value in, and attempted to synthesize, a multitude of legitimate approaches and sources.

The other side of this balance is that, while Thomas did appeal to the evidence of introspection on occasion, these appeals were moderated and relatively infrequent. While he finds internal evidence valuable, he never appeals just to himself but makes his appeals applicable to everyone; also, he establishes no systematic program of inspecting his own consciousness but makes such appeals only when convenient or necessary. This seems to be much like his approach to logic: while he obviously finds much value in logic and can become absorbed in it when appropriate (as he obviously would in a commentary on one of Aristotle's logical works), Thomas performs argument analysis only when pragmatically necessary and with as much comment as the context

demands.³² Another example of his “contextualism” concerns the initial step of metaphysical thinking: although many Thomists, such as Herman Reith and Charles Boyer, have assumed that awareness of our own spirituality constitutes a “proof” which legitimizes the negative metaphysical judgment that not all things are material,³³ apparently no such proof is actually extant in Thomas’s texts.³⁴ The expectation of a formal proof in this matter could well involve the taint of a Cartesian-type hypercriterion and penchant for formalized foundationalist systems, which are foreign to Aquinas’s thought (although not entirely to medieval thinking); instead, Thomas gives us informal and indirect references to evidence which is presumed to provide sufficient justification for proceeding with metaphysics.

As a general and speculative conclusion, I shall suggest that, at least on our topic of discussion and perhaps somewhat generally, Thomas Aquinas was consistent with four important features that have

³² This fits in with Aquinas’s conception (following Aristotle) of logic as an art or “organ” of the sciences, not itself a substantive science with an independent subject matter (*In Boethium de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 2); see Robert W. Schmidt, *The Domain of Logic according to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), p. 25-27.

³³ Herman Reith, *The Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1958), p. 30; Charles Boyer, “le rôle de la connaissance de l’âme dans la constitution de la métaphysique,” *Doctor Communis*, 1 (1948), 219-224.

³⁴ John Wippel, “Metaphysics and separatio in Thomas Aquinas,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Catholic University, 1984), p. 89-90 fn.; and Mark Jordan, op. cit., p. 160, confirm this, even to the point of saying that there is no proof of immaterial being, from whatever source, in Aquinas.

gradually evolved in twentieth-century thinking. First, he makes no dalliance with a subjectivization of knowledge; like many of our contemporaries, he insists that, to be legitimate, claims and methods be placed in the public realm of verification and/or discussion. An exclusive reliance on a purely personal introspection, by contrast, would have laid his approach open to all the problems of subjectivism. Second, Thomas avoids both constrictive ideology and philosophical systematization by the simple use of introspective methods, without spelling them out as parts of an explicit, exclusive, and comprehensive conceptual program. This avoids an elaborate methodology and a concentration on procedural rather than substantive matters. Connected to this is the third similarity to the late twentieth century: Aquinas is not a “foundationalist,” in that, while he subscribes to fundamental truths, substantive facts like one’s own existence are not among them; regulative principles like that of noncontradiction act as negative checks on error rather than axioms from which all other truths can be deduced.³⁵ And the last contemporary-sounding feature of Aquinas’s approach is that he is a pragmatist, using without apology what he sees as appropriate methods at opportune times for fruitful argumentative results. While he was obviously not a full blown pragmatist (thankfully, since this could well be an oxymoronic combination anyway) and had immovable bedrock commitments, he did somewhat foreshadow pragmatism in his use of multiple conceptual tools to accomplish the jobs of defending the faith and explicating truth.

³⁵ F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Hammondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1955); Ralph McInerny, “Analogy and foundationalism in Thomas Aquinas,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1986), p. 282.

