

Reflexivity and Self-Awareness in Aquinas

The texts of the 13th century bear little trace of anything like the modern notion of the “Self,” the “Ego,” or the “Subject.” Consequently, it is sometimes assumed that medieval theories of the human person are exclusively metaphysical and incapable of capturing the richness of human personhood in the psychological sense.¹ Part of the problem is that terms like “subject” and “person” have quite a different significance in the medieval philosophical vocabulary—so medieval discussions of personhood rarely reveal how an author handles the psychological phenomena associated with selfhood or subjectivity. I suggest that on this point, some insight can be gained by looking in a rather unlikely place: namely, medieval discussions of the reflexivity of the immaterial soul, a theme of

matter is extended and therefore has parts outside of parts. This means that because of the extension of matter, the whole of *A* can never turn back upon the whole of *A*.

The soul, in contrast, is fully reflexive, capable of completely turning back upon itself, because it is immaterial. Aquinas explains that one argument for the incorporeality of an intellectual substance is that it “*returns upon its essence*, that is, that it is turned back upon itself by understanding itself, which is proper to it because it is not a body or a magnitude having one part distant from another.”⁴ Only an indivisible and incorporeal being can be made wholly present to itself since it has no parts that get in the way of each other. An immaterial being is thus wholly reflexive; it is, so to speak, like a self-seeing eye, completely transparent to itself and wholly available to itself, entirely present to itself, fully able to return upon itself and appropriate itself cognitively. This transparency should not be taken in the sense that the soul always “sees through” itself without ever actually seeing itself. The soul is not transparent to itself in the way that air is transparent, i.e., as an invisible medium for light. Rather, for Aquinas the soul’s transparency means that the entire soul, even the perceiving power or the “mind’s eye,” is within the scope of its own intellectual “vision”—it is transparent to itself, then, in the sense that its self-identity poses no obstacle to its entirely cognizing itself, when the conditions are right.

To put it another way, material powers are opaque to themselves. There is always some part of the material power itself that is necessarily excluded from that power’s potential objects: thus my eyeball can receive every visible object except itself. But *there is in principle no aspect of the human soul that is outside the range of its own intellect*, not even the perceiving intellect itself. As Aquinas explains in *SCG* II.49, “the action of no body reflects back upon the agent: for it is shown in physics that no body is moved by itself except in part, namely, insofar as one of its

⁴ *Sup. Lib. de causi*

parts is the mover and the other is moved. But the intellect is reflected upon itself by acting: for it understands itself, not only part-by-part, but as a whole (*secundum totum*). So it is not a body.”⁵

This point is of paramount importance for Aquinas’s understanding of human subjecthood. The intellectual soul is not limited merely to perceiving its acts of thinking, or perceiving some part of itself that is distinct from the perceiving part. Rather, the perceiving part can perceive itself, the perceiving part. This is true reflexivity, of which only immaterial beings are capable.⁶ And this, I would argue, is for Aquinas what allows an intellectual being to understand itself as “I” and not “it.” The intellect is not limited to perceiving things apart from itself, but it is able to reflect precisely upon itself, the perceiving agent, the very source from which that act of perceiving proceeds.

Reflexivity, then, is simply the soul’s complete transparency to itself. This self-transparency is the way that the soul fundamentally *is* and shapes the way that the soul *acts*. It is important to be very precise about what this means, for Aquinas. On the one hand, self-transparency does not mean (at least for Aquinas), that the human soul completely and thoroughly comprehends itself with a quasi-Divine knowledge. Nor does it mean that the human soul is always actually reflecting upon itself. In fact, for Aquinas, the soul engages in the act of reflexion only infrequently, when it turns its attention back towards itself and considers itself

⁵ Interestingly, whereas this argument treats the intellect’s cognition of *itself*, the next argument in *SCG* II.49 treats the ability to understand one’s own *act* as something only an immaterial power can do.

⁶ Aquinas’s position on whether the senses are partially reflexive or just not at all reflexive, is difficult to determine. In some texts, he appears to hold that the sense powers cannot reflect upon themselves at all. Sometimes he states that the senses cannot cognize their own acts (*In Sent.* I.17.5, ad 3; *In Sent.* III.23.1.2, ad 3; *ST* Ia, 87.3, ad 3; suggested in *SCG* II.49); sometimes he states that the corporeal organ blocks every sense from cognizing *itself* (*In Sent.* II.19.1.1 and *De spir. creat.* 9, ad 6; *ST* Ia, 14.2, ad 1; see also *De unit. int.* 5 and *SCG* II.49). In a handful of texts, however, Aquinas accords to the senses an “incomplete return” whereby they perceive their acts (interestingly, he describes this as perceiving “that they sense”; see *DV* 1.9 and 10.9; *Quodl.* VIII.9.1) His apparent inconsistency on this point is puzzling. For discussion, see Putallaz, *Le sens de la réflexion*. In any case, it does not affect our argument here, since the most he ever grants to the senses is the ability to reflect upon their acts, and true reflexivity requires that the intellect be capable of reflecting upon, not only its acts, but *itself*—an ability Aquinas consistently denies to any power using a material organ.

implicit self-awareness (corresponding perhaps to what is sometimes called pre-reflexive consciousness) is included in every cognitive act. The soul's self-transparency means that it cannot help but see "through" itself every time it sees anything at all.

To see how this works, let's take as an example the intellect's act of understanding spiders. The act of understanding spider-nature, according to Aquinas's identity theory of cognition, happens when the intellect receives the form of spider as matter receives form. Now, the human intellect can receive the form of spider, because the human intellect is like prime matter: it is in potency to all form, having no form of its own. Consequently, when the intellect receives spider-form, it adopts this *as its own form*. What cognition means, for Aquinas, is that in the act of cognizing spiders, spider-form *is* intellect-form. One and the same form is the formality / actuality / species of the *intellect* just as much as it is the formality / actuality / species of the *spider*.

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bare self, but always as the subject of some outer-directed act: cognizing something other, sensing something other, loving something other.¹⁰

The second implication of this view is that *every* intellectual act of cognition includes some self-awareness. The form of 'spider' that has informed my intellect, in "lighting up" the spider to me, necessarily "lights" me up to myself.¹¹ Thus whenever I am thinking about anything at all, I am implicitly aware of myself as

unique vantage point of a subject, an “I” who perceives things *precisely as being manifested to me*, and who perceives myself

But in order for implicit self-awareness to translate into a unity of consciousness across time, the second condition must also be fulfilled: namely, it is necessary for me not only to perceive myself in my act of thinking about philosophy right now, but to remember previously cognized items

remember dog-nature is to remember

