

The Agent Intellect and the Energies of Intelligence

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The technical language of medieval scholasticism can pose a stylistic burden, especially on first encounter. The conceptual apparatus may seem heavy to carry and lacking all suppleness, and suggestive even of a certain inaccessibility. There are times the abstract verbalism dependent on precise definition insinuates almost a note of inflexibility, as though closed to nuance, insulated in its impersonality by the linguistic armor of esoteric terms. Despite the Thomistic insistence that all knowledge has its origin in the simplicity of sense experience, the prevalence of abstract terminology can indeed convey the opposite impression—a disengagement from concrete realities and a preference for complexity.

While discussing the vocabulary and language of St. Thomas Aquinas in his invaluable introduction to the Angelic Doctor's writings, M.-D. Chenu alluded to another issue in this regard—namely, the difficulty in the medieval period of translating Aristotelian conceptual categories into Latin. Simply put, the Greek texts confronted a semantic indigence in Latin philosophical vocabulary. This poverty in language combined, moreover, with the tendency of scholastic philosophical discussion to display in Latin a “disturbing deviation from the concrete to the abstract, with a consequent disappearance of realistic original meanings.”¹ A literal appropriation of terms from Aristotle was a natural option; yet this only accentuated the abstractive quality of the work. Chenu specifically invoked the *intellectus agens*, i.e., the agent intellect, as an example of an expression translated in a strictly literal manner from an Aristotelian context, but so tied down

¹ M.-D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), p. 113.

thereby by the heaviness of an abstractive association that it had "no buoyancy right from the start."²

Be that as it may, the insertion of such a concept as the agent intellect into the broader context of contemporary associations invites further reflection on its meaning. Our effort here is to reconsider the agent intellect in order to grant an epistemological value unexamined in any full manner by St. Thomas, but nonetheless consistent with his writings. In particular, Jacques Maritain's grasp of the agent intellect's catalyzing role in creative intuition is worth revisiting not only for the sake of exposing a crucial portion of Maritain's epistemology of artistic intuition as rooted in the spiritual unconscious, but more interestingly perhaps, because his ideas are corroborated in the experience of creative thinkers who have testified to the spontaneous emergence of creative intuitions into consciousness.

With that purpose in mind we will first examine St. Thomas's understanding of the agent intellect both as a preliminary function in conceptual formation and as a principle of light in the intellect, then take up Maritain's extension of St. Thomas's thought, and finally look at one striking account of creative intuition that would seem to provide an empirical confirmation for the theoretical positions of Maritain on the role of the agent intellect in creativity.

ST. THOMAS ON THE AGENT INTELLECT

St. Thomas ascribed an indispensable action to the agent intellect in the initial stage of the knowing process; this can be illustrated most simply and briefly in the case of sense knowledge. In themselves the senses are primarily passive powers acted upon by extramental phenomena. By their natural operation they are open to modification by encounter with external realities. While sensation in itself exhibits this passive aspect of receptivity, human knowledge of a sensible object requires an active power within the soul to make what is extramental become actually intelligible within the mind. There must be an active process in the mind to move from an initially receptive encounter with an external object through the senses to a grasp of that object's intelligibility within the mind.

The immediate result of the senses' passive receptivity to a sensible phenomenon is the production of the phantasm, i.e., an image of that which is encountered through sensation. The role of the agent intellect is to operate as an active spiritual power in the intellect after the phantasm has been formed. The agent intellect acts upon the initially produced phantasm of a

² Ibid.

sensible object, "lighting up the phantasm, as it were,"³ and thereby rendering it intelligible within the mind. This initial act of illumination involves taking hold of a spiritual content by abstracting an immaterial essence from the materiality of a sensible object conveyed in the phantasm.

Such a step is necessary because knowledge of extramental things filtered through the senses requires that they be received by the intellect in a manner suitable to an immaterial spiritual power. And indeed, everything known depends on an intellectual penetration into the immaterial content of things. At this point, however, the process of intellection is still prior to the formation of the concept. Yet without this initial production of a spiritual content culled from sense knowledge, no concept would eventually convey an intelligibility that reflects an exact similitude to extramental being. And it is only by the medium of the concept identified with extramental being that an act of judgment can grasp the existent actuality of an extramental object, allowing the knower to be truly assimilated to the known.

Nonetheless, this association of the agent intellect with a provisional role in the formation of concepts is liable to overlook a more important aspect of the agent intellect as a force of energy within the intellect. Although St. Thomas's treatment of the agent intellect is generally restricted to the rather technical operation just summarized, he also conceived the agent intellect as a primal source of energy within the very structure of intellect, a subsisting principle of light affecting the entire range of the intellect's operations. There are implications in a few allusive descriptions St. Thomas makes that can be a point of departure for further consideration. He thus affirmed as well in the *Summa Theologiae* that the agent intellect is a power which "derives from the supreme intellect"⁴ of the divine creator. It is a dynamic principle "flowing from the essence of the soul,"⁵ a power "essentially in act."⁶ From these references, it is proper to call it an active and activating presence of light within the intellect which participates in the divine light shed by the divine intelligence upon created things.

Such descriptions of the agent intellect as a basic power of illumination within the soul certainly stretches its importance beyond merely an initial phase of activity in the formation of concepts. This larger import was clearly suggested when St. Thomas affirmed the continuing activity of the agent intellect even after death.⁷ His position was that even after the sepa-

³ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 79, a. 4.

⁴ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 79, a. 4, ad 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, III, 10, 431a17.

⁷ Cf. *Quaestio Disputata De Anima*, a. 15, ad 9.

ration of the soul from the body, the agent intellect still functions as an activating impetus within the intellect, a principle of light still actualizing the intellect's potency to the act of knowing. On the other hand, after death and the cessation of bodily activity, the abstractive process dependent on the union of body and soul is no longer operative. If the agent intellect operates as a power only after the senses introduce a phantasm intramentally, the agent intellect would not function after death, inasmuch as there is no body to filter sensations of extramental reality to the mind. Clearly then, the agent intellect is not limited to a merely functional role in the formation of concepts upon contact by the senses with extramental being.

That the agent intellect operates as a power always in act, even after death, makes it akin to a type of preconscious disposition within the intellect. The metaphor of light applied to the agent intellect is therefore a fitting one not only for the agent intellect's early role in the process of forming concepts. Even more fundamental to the metaphor is the notion of a spontaneity of preconscious intelligence at work, amounting to a type of abiding disposition at the ground of the intellectual operations. For it is by a natural and spontaneous cast of light turned on the phantasms culled from sense experience that the agent intellect forges the intelligible content of an extramental thing that was only potentially intelligible prior to sensation. To the extent that the mind's penetration into the spiritual intelligibility of extramental things is piercing and sharp in this initial stage of the knowing process, a greater possibility exists for deeper knowing of extramental being in an eventual act of judgment.

The identification of the agent intellect with an intrinsic principle of light subsisting within the intellect suggests that there is a dynamic tendency in the agent intellect akin to a type of intellectual *habitus*. And this is precisely what St. Thomas argues in his *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, offering a quite subtle analogy while refuting the notion that the agent intellect could be a faculty in itself separate from the intellect, or reified as a separated substance. There he writes: "The agent intellect is to ideas in act in the mind as art is to the ideas it works by."⁸ Careful examination of this analogy can lead to the more important understanding of the agent intellect as an intrinsic power of light within the intellect.

The analogy Thomas draws is with art as an intellectual virtue, a *habitus* of the practical intellect which inheres as an abiding disposition of intelligence before it manifests itself in actual works of art. Precisely as a *habitus* of the practical intellect, art is, as it were, an abiding potency for vision.

⁸ *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, III, 10, 431a18.

Not only is the *habitus* of art the original source for the initially inchoate notion of a work-to-be-made at early moments of inspiration. The *habitus* of art also identifies the person possessed of it with every moment of artistic inspiration. From the original preconscious inspiration to a completed work, the virtue of art functions as a *habitus* of the practical intellect in transmuting inspiration from a preconscious stage of inchoate notions into a concrete object externalized in some artistic medium. Even at a preconscious stage, therefore, the identification of the artist with his original inspiration, however inchoate or unformed it may at first be, is due to the presence of the *habitus* of art in the intelligence.

Thomas continues with the analogy: "Obviously the things on which art impresses such ideas do not themselves produce the art."⁹ Thomas makes a play on the word art here. In one sense art refers to the intellectual *habitus* which is the source and continuing animator of inspiration; in the other sense, art refers to the finished artistic product. He is affirming that the ideas the virtue of art works by have no precedence or primacy over the *habitus* itself of art which inheres in the practical intellect of the artist as a disposition.

Thus, in the statement just quoted the term "things" refers to the artistic medium for the artist's imaging. A block of stone, or a canvas, or language itself, receives the external expression of an interior drive toward capturing in a concretized image some inchoate inspiration whose original source is due to the *habitus* of art. But the finished product objectified in an external work of art is the result of an internal *habitus* of intelligence that has animated an ongoing process from some original notion of a work-to-be-made to the completed work. In rejecting the notion that art could be some thing separate from the personhood of the artist, St. Thomas is emphasizing that it is the artist who is the source of the work through a process internal to the artist's very being.

"Hence," writes Thomas in reference now to the agent intellect as a *habitus* analogous to art, "even granted that we were the subjects of ideas made actually intelligible in us, it would not follow that it is we who produce them by means of an agent intellect in ourselves."¹⁰ The suggestion here is that the agent intellect functions in a similiar manner to the *habitus* of art. Like the inspiration that flows from the intellectual *habitus* of art, the agent intellect is an internal animator of intelligent operations from the beginning to the end of the knowing process. This power known as the agent intellect is not to be reified as though it functioned as an independent and

⁹ *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, III, 10, 430a18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

autonomous faculty in itself which the subject of ideas would then make use of. Rather, the agent intellect inheres as a dispositive quality of the intelligence animating the natural tendency of intelligence to seek intelligibility in extramental being. While the agent intellect is a power intrinsic to the intellect, its existence as a primal energy underlying all intelligent operations resembles a type of *habitus* inhering in the very nature of the intellect.

Some reflections on St. Thomas's link between the agent intellect and the *habitus* of art may be useful for a moment. In light of his analogy between the agent intellect as an intellectual *habitus* and the intellectual *habitus* of art, one can arguably posit a dynamic ordination in the agent intellect similar to the appetitive desire for making things inherent in the artistic *habitus*. The dynamic ordination in this case would involve a constitutive drive toward the illumination of extramental being. As noted earlier, the agent intellect activates the knowing process by dispensing a kind of immediate light on phantasms culled from sense experience. But it does so as a principle of spontaneous light intrinsic to the intellect and "ceaselessly in act." In this manner the agent intellect not only provides a particular intervention necessary for the intellective process to "jump-start," so to speak. The operative illuminating energy of the agent intellect manifests as well a dynamic tendency in the intellect toward the grasp of intelligibility in extramental things. This essential ordination toward the grasp of intelligibility can be conceived as a primary condition for the rational intelligence of the human subject.

MARITAIN'S MORE EXTENSIVE NOTION OF THE AGENT INTELLECT

Maritain will affirm this understanding of the agent intellect as a pervasive power of active energy underlying human intelligence. In *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, for example, Maritain referred to the agent intellect as "an inner spiritual light which is a participation in the uncreated divine light, but which is in every man, through its pure spirituality ceaselessly in act, the primal quickening source of all intellectual energy."¹¹ This conception of the agent intellect disposed to act as a primordial energy within the hidden structure of the intellect is consistent with St. Thomas's view of the agent intellect as analogous in operation to a type of intellectual *habitus*. But Maritain adds an original dimension to St. Thomas's treatment

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 71.

26 DONALD HAGGERTY

by positing a vast substratum of active intelligence in the so-called spiritual unconscious. In Maritain's treatment the abiding energies of the agent intellect can be understood only in tandem with the existence of the spiritual unconscious. Some reflections on Maritain's notion of the spiritual unconscious are therefore of importance inasmuch as Maritain's idea differs from the description of the unconscious commonly assumed in the literature of clinical psychology.

For Maritain, then, the spiritual unconscious is a subliminal locus of pre-conscious activity marked by purposive movements and an implicit intelligence. In this sense it is clearly distinct from the Freudian unconscious of uncontrolled instincts and irrational drives, of fears and complexes linked to repressed memories. Rather than envisioning the unconscious as chaotic and turbulent in its vitality, Maritain's idea is that there is a primordial capacity of active intelligence within the undercurrents of the spiritual unconscious which shapes consciousness prior to the reflexive grasp of knowledge. By positing the spiritual unconscious as a primal source of intelligent operations beneath consciousness, the very notion of rational intelligence is broadened and stretched, extending now into activity taking place within the enclosed world of the unconscious. As Maritain writes:

Reason does not only consist of its conscious logical tools and manifestations, nor does the will consist only of its deliberate conscious determinations. Far beneath the sunlit surface thronged with explicit concepts and judgments, words and expressed resolutions or movements of the will, are the sources of knowledge and creativity, of love and supra-sensuous desires, hidden in the primordial translucid night of the intimate vitality of the soul. Thus it is that we must recognize the existence of an unconscious or preconscious which pertains to the spiritual powers of the human soul and to the inner abyss of personal freedom, and of the personal thirst and striving for knowing and seeing, grasping and expressing: a spiritual or musical unconscious which is specifically different from the automatic or deaf unconscious.¹²

More importantly for our own discussion, the spiritual unconscious is a locus of rational tendencies precisely because it is animated by the energies of the agent intellect. Active intelligent operations can be posited below the threshold of consciousness due to the existence of an activating light within the hidden structure of the spiritual unconscious. Inasmuch as the agent intellect triggers the intellect's natural dynamism toward the grasp of intelligibility in things, it reflects a constitutive ordination pervading the intellect even at a preconscious level, "ceaselessly radiating," as Maritain writes,

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

“which activates everything in intelligence, and whose light causes all our ideas to arise in us, and whose energy permeates every operation of our mind.”¹³ As a power rooted in the spiritual unconscious of the intellect, the agent intellect is therefore less a function than the primordial energy behind every tendential movement toward intelligent activity.

The impact of this hidden power of illumination upon the interior dynamisms of the spiritual unconscious persists at all times, but always beneath consciousness. While inhering in the very structure of the intellect as the catalyzing source of all intelligent activity, the agent intellect remains always an energy within the spiritual unconscious and operates within a realm of preconscious activity. This activating spiritual light remains therefore always inaccessible to observation, cut off from a reflexive grasp of consciousness. “This primal source of light cannot be seen by us,” writes Maritain, “it remains concealed in the unconscious of the spirit.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, despite its hidden presence within the spiritual unconscious, it energizes the intellect’s natural dynamism toward all intelligent activity. It is an ever-present impetus for the natural dynamisms of all intelligent operations, inhering in the very structure of the intellect as a “perpetually active intellectual energy.”¹⁵

It should be remarked that such a stress on the hidden activity of the agent intellect in the spiritual unconscious moves us beyond the common conception that knowing is a process which begins only when conceptual formulations commence. On the one hand, Maritain noted that the concept once formed does not necessarily lead to an act of explicit knowledge self-consciously achieved by the intellect. There can be incomplete or half-realized acts of knowing that do not cross the threshold of consciousness even when such an object of thought is potentially realizable. As a consequence, “there can exist,” argues Maritain, “unconscious acts of thought and unconscious ideas.”¹⁶ On the other hand, some degree of knowing engagement with the intelligible content of extramental being occurs even below the threshold of consciousness. This statement may appear to contain a self-contradiction in description. On the contrary, while it acknowledges an absence of reflexive grasp by the intellect of its own preconscious formulations, it affirms another critical point. The process of knowledge displays concealed aspects of intermediate activity, intelligent in operation, which

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

do not always lead to an act of conceptual apprehension. Maritain's position on this is quite clear:

Thus it is that we know (not always, to be sure!) what we are thinking, but we don't know how we are thinking: and that before being formed and expressed in concepts and judgments, intellectual knowledge is at first a beginning of insight, still unformulated, a kind of many-eyed cloud which is born from the impact of the light of the Illuminating Intellect [the agent intellect] on the world of images, and which is but a humble and trembling inchoation, yet invaluable, tending toward an intelligible content to be grasped.¹⁷

Maritain thus most typically calls the agent intellect "the *activator* of intelligence in all its operations."¹⁸ This raises the question of the agent intellect's role in creative thought. Creative activity amounts to a particular instance of the intellect tending toward a grasp of intelligibility in the encounter with extramental being. Clearly, all creative inspiration assumes at its origin some level of preconceptual activity taking place within the unconscious. And indeed, the creative artist's or thinker's experience of being sparked into sudden moments of recognition at unexpected junctures suggests a definite triggering of intuition whose source lies beneath conscious awareness. Necessarily, then, from what we have proposed thus far, the agent intellect must exercise a key role in such creative moments, inasmuch as the agent intellect is associated with a pervasive energy inhabiting the spiritual unconscious.

If the agent intellect exists in a way consistent with these descriptions, it will exercise itself in creative thought as an active power which lights up with intelligibility some inchoate idea which remains initially preconceptual in mode. According to Maritain, this triggering action in the psyche occurs precisely where the powers of the soul are mutually interpenetrating. What he meant was the necessity of appetitive desire and sense experience accompanying the movement toward creative insight. Creative intuitions have their source in the intelligent preconceptual life of spiritual unconscious, and thus they flow "from the totality of man, sense, imagination, intellect, love, desire, instinct, blood and spirit together."¹⁹ While the spontaneity of creative moments indicates a certain effect of affectivity on preconceptual activity in the depths of the spiritual unconscious, the suddenness of their breaking through into consciousness should not be identified with an absence of all guiding direction at their origin. Rather, the fol-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 308, n. 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

lowing statement of Maritain on the vital intelligence present within the spiritual unconscious should be read in light of the agent intellect's purposive energies dynamically orienting the intellect to the grasp of intelligibility in creative moments.

There is still for the intellect another kind of life, which makes use of other resources and another reserve of vitality, and which is free . . . from the engendering of abstract concepts and ideas, free from the workings of rational knowledge and the disciplines of logical thought. . . . This free life of the intellect is also cognitive and productive, it obeys an inner law of expansion and generosity, which carries it along toward the manifestation of the creativity of the spirit; and it is shaped and quickened by creative intuition.²⁰

The essential implication, then, of Maritain's position is that the spiritual unconscious, where the agent intellect stirs and activates the intellectual appetite of the soul, cannot be simply an inert "holding station" in the structure of the intellect. It rather possesses a life of its own which is animated by the energies inherent in the agent intellect. The existence of the agent intellect as an "uninterrupted irradiation"²¹ within the spiritual unconscious not only energizes the active thrust of the intellect toward conceptual knowledge. This pervasive force of light tending to the grasp of intelligibility is "the highest point of spiritual tension naturally present within us."²² While it is impossible to attain a reflexive grasp of the agent intellect's energies, this inaccessibility merely signifies that the illuminative activity ascribable to the agent intellect is preconceptual in mode, rather than without rational direction. Despite its concealment below the threshold of consciousness, the power of illumination intrinsic to the agent intellect is the fundamental directive cause of all intelligent movements within the spiritual unconscious, including that of creative intuition. Maritain writes about poetic creation in such terms:

Thus, when it comes to poetry, we must admit that in the spiritual unconscious of the intellect, at the single root of the soul's powers, there is, apart from the process which tends to knowledge by means of concepts and abstract ideas, something which is preconceptual or nonconceptual and nevertheless in a state of definite intellectual actuation: not, therefore, a mere way to the concept . . . but another kind of germ, which does not tend toward a concept to be formed, and which is already an intellectual form or act fully determined though enveloped in

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 126.

²² *Ibid.*

the night of the spiritual unconscious. In other words, such a thing is knowledge in act, but nonconceptual knowledge.²³

EXPERIENTIAL CONFIRMATION

We move now to an empirical testimony that would seem to support aptly the previous philosophical descriptions. It is our contention that the existence of preconscious intelligent activity triggered by the action of the agent intellect is implicit in the mathematician Henri Poincaré's account analyzing the process of creative discovery in mathematics. He relates that in a number of instances, after a period of strenuous effort and no gain of insight, usually followed by some degree of frustration, an answer to a mathematical problem arrived in a sudden burst of intuitive certainty while engaged in an activity of relaxation far removed from the work that preceded it. This assertion offers a concrete substantiation for the reality of preconscious intelligent activity in the spiritual unconscious. It supports Maritain's position that the spiritual unconscious "does not necessarily mean a purely unconscious activity. It means most often an activity which is principally unconscious, but the point of which emerges into consciousness."²⁴ The following description by Poincaré emphasizes both the immediacy of the creative inspiration, which flows with apparent ease into awareness, and on the other hand its link to prior conscious work which has thus far proven unavailing:

Most striking at first is this appearance of sudden illumination, a manifest sign of long, unconscious prior work. The role of this unconscious work in mathematical invention appears to me incontestable, and traces of it would be found in other cases where it is less evident. Often when one works at a hard question, nothing good is accomplished at the first attack. Then one takes a rest, longer or shorter, and sits down anew to the work. During the first half-hour, as before, nothing is found, and then all of a sudden the decisive idea presents itself to the mind. It might be said that the conscious work has been more fruitful because it has been interrupted and the rest has given back to the mind its force and freshness. But it is more probable that this rest has been filled out with unconscious work and that the result of this work has afterward revealed itself.²⁵

²³ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 80.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁵ Henri Poincaré, "Mathematical Creation," in *The Creative Process*, ed. Brewster Ghiselin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), p. 27. The article is translated by George B. Halsted. The book was re-published by the University of California Press in 1985.

For one thing, then, he affirms that dedicated effort and conscious work is a necessary condition for the emergence of such creative ideas:

These sudden inspirations never happen except after some days of voluntary effort which has appeared absolutely fruitless and whence nothing good seems to have come, where the way taken seems totally astray. These efforts then have not been as sterile as one thinks; they have set agoing the unconscious machine and without them it would not have moved and would have produced nothing.²⁶

Nonetheless, the arrival of the decisive idea is independent of work. Conscious work in and of itself "plays at most the role of excitant as if it were the goad stimulating the results already reached during rest, but remaining unconscious, to assume the conscious form."²⁷ Finally, he makes mention of a further critical element at work in preconscious activity, the link between affectivity and the particular ideas that eventually cross the threshold of consciousness, as decisive for the realization of one idea rather than of another:

What is the cause that, among the thousand products of our unconscious activity, some are called to pass the threshold, while others remain below? Is it simple chance which confers this privilege? Evidently not; among all the stimuli of our senses, for example, only the most intense fix our attention, unless it has been drawn to them by other causes. More generally the privileged unconscious phenomena, those susceptible of becoming conscious, are those which, directly or indirectly, affect most profoundly our emotional sensibility.²⁸

Poincaré's account would seem to illustrate well Maritain's position that from the depths of the spiritual unconscious emerge insights that had their gestation in a preconceptual life of active intelligence beneath the threshold of consciousness. Maritain's stress on the dynamic presence of the agent intellect within the spiritual unconscious seems more than justified in the light of such a testimony to creative intuition. For a creative gestation in the unconscious as described by Poincaré is understandable in light of the dynamisms implicit in the activity of the agent intellect. Creative intuitions arising out of preconceptual activity require some activating catalyst, of which the natural energy of the agent intellect is a plausible explanation. Insofar, then, as creative intuition has its gestation in the active preconceptual life of the spiritual unconscious, the agent intellect or some capacity akin to it would seem a necessary component in all creative inspiration.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

CONCLUSION

While the term agent intellect may always retain something of an abstract scholastic association, it is to be hoped from these reflections that something of the dynamic implication inherent in discussing energies and orientations within the intellect has enlivened the expression. Whatever choice of terminology is employed, it would seem important to acknowledge an essential ordination to the grasp of intelligibility within the intellectual power. Indeed, much of what has been proposed in regard to the agent intellect is consistent with any observation of basic intellectual desire. For it is experientially evident that the mind has a natural desire to take hold of and assimilate all that confronts it, and even to hurl light on objects with redoubled vigor when some complexity leaves the conscious mind stammering in frustration. Whenever extramental reality confronts the human person, an interior intellectual urge is initiated which will find its completion only in the attainment of insight and clarity. Even prior to a conscious act of knowledge, then, the intellectual life is animated by a natural inclination to reach out spontaneously toward a grasp of intelligibility in things. The identification of the agent intellect as a kind of fulcrum of energy within the intellect offers an explanation for such spontaneous drives to the grasp of intelligibility experienced by the intellectual power.

One parting question that might be asked is the value of an exposition that defies verification. The stress on the hidden dimension of the agent intellect's existence in the spiritual unconscious suggests an obscurity in activity that parallels the abstractive inaccessibility of it as a scholastic term. But the emphasis here has been that the preconscious intelligent movements stirred by the energies of the agent intellect reflect a vital tendency of the intellect toward the grasp of intelligibility. While the agent intellect is not a power capable of being consciously cultivated, one reason for the variation of intelligence among individuals is due to intrinsic differences in such a power residing within the intellect. If it is true that the possibility for discovery of new and richer aspects of reality is linked to the light emitted by the agent intellect, then the most common function of the agent intellect to cast light on phantasms culled from sense experience should encourage us to cultivate precisely what can be a deliberate endeavor—a sensitive engagement with concrete realities experienced through the senses. The interior energies of intellectual life exercise themselves and flourish to the degree extramental reality is engaged in a fuller way.

In sum, we should affirm that the epistemological realism long defended by Thomist thinkers has its salutary justification in the sound development

of human faculties. The acknowledgement of the agent intellect as an abiding energy orienting the human intellect to extramental being is not so important for the terminology it presents, as much as for the recognition of a power within human intelligence thrusting the human person in a natural orientation beyond self to what is other than self. If the energy descriptive of the agent intellect leads us to discern this truth more readily, the term itself is a more than useful legacy of scholastic technical language.