

INTERACTION BETWEEN TWO READINGS: THE NATURALISTIC AND THE SOCRATIC “KNOW THYSELF”

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Knowledge about Man: the possibility of two approaches

There was no great problem between the different domains of knowledge until a border was drawn between nature understood as having a soul or surrounded by a soul, and a soul which was in itself characterised by an end: this was the age of Aristotle's *Physics*, *De Anima* and *Ethics*. This border was drawn at the end of the Renaissance, which had not assimilated the originality of the thought of St. Thomas.

The problem became acute when nature became the subject of a science based on pure observation, mathematical calculation, and experimentation. This was the meaning of the Galilean and Newtonian revolution, as Kant (1787) defined it.¹ The human mind thought that it did not have access to the principle of the production of nature in itself or in something other than itself, what Aristotle called form or the formal principle as principle of operation: ‘every essence in general is called “nature”, because the nature of anything is a kind of essence’.² Therefore one can only gather natural gifts made known through their appearance in space and time and try to ‘save the phenomena – σώζειν τα φαινόμενα’, as Plato himself suggested, who in this was Galileo's mentor. This is no minor endeavour given that the field of observation is so unlimited and that the imaginative ability to form hypotheses with a mathematical formula, to enlarge and replace models, to vary the character of models, and to invent procedures of verification and falsification, is so powerful. This is no minor endeavour, also, because mathematics, which is in part a construction of the mind of the human being, corresponds to the quantity that indeed constitutes the specific matter of every individual and expresses in bodies the realisation of individuality through the parts of such material structure. There is quantity in the mind

¹ Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface to the second edition (1787). Available online at <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16p/k16p2.html>

² Aristotle, *Metaph.*, 5, 1015 a 12 f.

of man and in the corporeal structure (atoms and sub-atomic structures, molecules, cells, organs, etc.). Thus, although there is no ancient Aristotelian correspondence between the mind and reality through the notion of form, there is the modern correspondence through quantity inspired in Pythagoras of Samos and Plato – something that has been pointed out on more than one occasion by Benedict XVI in his *Magisterium*.

However, as regards phenomena relating to human beings, this asceticism of hypotheses, of the creation of models, and of experimentation, is in part compensated for by the fact that we have partial access to the production of certain phenomena that can be observed through philosophical self-reflection (and of course, for believers, through faith). Thus we are dealing with what in the praxes that are different from this scientific theory and technologies can be deemed the genetics of action that belong to fundamental anthropology and to ethics. Reflection on human praxes expresses the point of convergence because it indicates the path that leads to the end, i.e. perfect human work as fullness of the act. The success of work (ἔργον) can only be observed in the perfection of praxis itself (ἐνέργεια) in relation to its end.

Thus the action shows that every man and every woman as individuals proceeds for an end and thus that she/he himself is the principle of action: *'hic homo singularis intelligit, vult, amat'*. As will be discussed, this is the starting point of St. Thomas against Averroism which anticipates in many ways some decisive modern philosophies and of Ricœur against the “masters of suspicion” (Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) for their methodological and substantial naturalism. In the vast field of activity, the human being considers himself responsible for his own action. This means that he can go back from the observable effects of his actions to the intention that gives them meaning and even to the mental acts which create finalities that generate the intentions and the observable results. Thus the action not only exists to be viewed from the outside, like all the natural phenomena of which it is part: it exists to be understood beginning with expressions that are at one and the same time the effects and signs of the intentions that give meaning to it and with the acts that create meaning that at times sometimes produce such intentions. It follows from this that man's knowledge is not a matter of a single plane or level – that of external observation, explanation, and experimentation (as a reproduction of phenomena) beginning with his body and brain: this knowledge develops in the interface between the observation of nature and reflective understanding. Therefore the human being is simultaneously an observable being, like all the beings of nature in which he participates, and a being who interprets himself, who knows himself as Heraclitus, Socrates, Aristotle, Thomas

Aquinas, Hegel had already suggested (a 'self-interpreting being' to employ the phrase of Charles Taylor or Paul Ricœur).³

This statement on the various objective levels of knowledge and of the science of knowledge, or epistemology, and to begin with on the different levels of knowledge and self-awareness of the human being, can provide an answer of reconciliation and pacification to the question raised by the status of the human being in the age of predominance of natural's sciences, as long as, that is, positivist ideology does not claim the right to abolish the border between the sciences of nature and the sciences of man and to annex the latter to the former. Regretfully, contemporary philosophy answered this challenge by simply juxtaposing an abstract anthropology or a phenomenology of the concrete man, without articulating its discourse on the way this acting and suffering being behaves in the world with the scientific discourse. It may be difficult to ask today's philosophers or theologians to become scientists or specialists and vice versa: however, the needs of the condition of contemporary man strongly encourage us to open up to an indispensable participation in interdisciplinary research where theologians, philosophers, thinkers and scientists are willing to work together. We try to do this in our workshop.

The Neurosciences and Self-understanding

A controversial point to achieve this pacification might be the field of the neurosciences. In terms of this approach, the scientist is expected to seek at the cortical level the correlation between the observable structures and the functions where the structures are the bases, the supports, the nervous material or whatever we may want to call it. The scientist only observes quantitative and qualitative changes, the ever more complex hierarchies of observable phenomena; but the meaning of the function which corresponds to the structure is understood only by the speaking subject who says that he perceives, that he imagines, and that he remembers. These oral statements, together with behavioural signs that the human being shares to a large extent with the higher animals, fall within a type of analysis where there is no mention of neurons, synapses etc. but reference is made to im-

³ On this point we find an illuminating text in the Encyclical *Fides et ratio* which declares: 'Metaphysics should not be seen as an alternative to anthropology, since it is metaphysics which makes it possible to ground the concept of personal dignity in virtue of their spiritual nature. In a special way, the person constitutes a privileged locus for the encounter with being, and hence with metaphysical enquiry' (§ 83).

pressions, intentions, dispositions, wishes, choices, ideas etc. We again find here a certain semantic dualism, if we can use this phrase, which does not, however, jeopardise the integral knowledge about the human being. An important corollary of such semantic dualism lies in the fact that we speak in similar terms of the body, of the same body, in both analyses: there is the body-object, of which the brain is the guiding force with its marvellous architecture, and the body proper, this body that is the only one that is mine, that belongs to me, which I move, which I suffer; and there are my organs, my eyes 'with' which I see, my hands 'with' which I grasp. And it is on this body proper that all the architecture of my powers and my non-powers is built: the power to do and not to do; the power to do this or that; the power to speak, to act, to attribute to myself my own actions, given that I am their real author, and thus free. In short, I find in my body something radical which is my free capability to act, which in Latin may be defined as *capax*, the human being as capable to act and to be aware and free of it through his body and brain.

There is thus raised the question of the relationship between the two analyses or approaches – that of the neurologist and that of the philosopher and metaphysician. And it is here that the analyses cross over without ever dissolving each other. The scientist and the philosopher can agree on calling the body-object (and its marvel, the brain), the 'reality without which we cannot speak, or think or decide or feel or live or act'. The scientist can continue to have a naturalistic viewpoint in his analysis which enables him to work without direct metaphysical perspectives. The philosopher speaks about the brain in terms of recipient structure, of support, of substrata, of basis, of potency, of encephalic matter, of part of the person. It must be accepted that, for the moment, we do not have a sort of third analysis where there is awareness that this brain-body and my living body are one and the same being. However, the analysis of the brain-body must have a certain opening towards the analysis of my living body and vice versa, namely that while the analysis of my living body gives to me in itself my experience and philosophical reflection, it must be open or enable indirectly or *per accidens* the analysis of the mind-body and vice versa.

We notice here that we do not have direct access to the very origin of the being that we are, in other words we do not have a sort of self-transparency of ourselves and of our selfhood and, starting from this centre, a self-transparency also of all of our actions. In this sense we cannot understand ourselves immediately through our being and essence by essence. On the contrary, our being attests to its existence in the concrete and current exercise of our life. In a realistic clime and vision, St. Thomas indicates this

clearly: 'For one perceives that he has a soul, that he lives, and that he exists, because he perceives that he senses, understands, and carries on other vital activities of this sort' (*In hoc enim aliquis percepit se animam habere, et vivere et esse, quod percepit se sentire et intelligere et alia huiusmodi opera vitae exercere*).⁴ For this reason Aristotle declares: 'We sense that we sense, and we understand that we understand, and because we sense this, we understand that we exist'.⁵ In the perception of our praxis or activity there is the co-perception of the beginning: 'from a perception of the acts of the soul we perceive the principle of such acts' (*perceptis actibus animae, percipitur inesse principium talium actum*).⁶ St. Thomas assures us that our soul, since it grasps universals, perceives (*percepit*) that it has a spiritual form; he argues that we are aware of the very becoming of the universal in the soul and even that the very light of intelligence makes its presence known to us by means of the soul. This signifies affirming in an explicit manner a perception proper to the spiritual reality in a positive way but by means of the spiritual operation of implementing the intelligible: 'And we know this by experience, since we perceive that we abstract universal forms from their particular conditions, which is to make them actually intelligible' (*Et hoc experimento cognoscimus, dum percipimus nos abstrahere formas universales a conditionibus particularibus, quod est facere actu intelligibilia*).⁷

The ultimate originality of this perception of our spiritual reality is the absolutely original fundamental situation which we may call the genetics of the act or 'the emergence of freedom' as a move from potency to the act or the capability to free act' or the capability of acting or of non-acting and our awareness of it. Quite rightly Christian thought, long before, and with more precision than, the moderns, when considering this reality of the spiritual subject called freedom the '*motor omnium*' of the activity of the person, and the protagonist of the person, the 'I', the self (selfhood), the human subject that we discover through praxis. This perception is so radical that it is more than an opinion and it is prior to every science, whether theoretical or prac-

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Q. d. De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 8.

⁵ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, IX, 9, 1170 a 30.

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Q. d. De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 9.

⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I, q. 79, a. 4. Available online at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth1077.html> He also states: 'The human soul understands itself through its own act of understanding, which is proper to it, showing perfectly its power and nature' i.e. '*Anima humana intelligit seipsam per suum intelligere, quod est actus proprius eius, perfecte demonstrans virtutem eius et naturam*' (*Ibidem*, I, q. 88, a. 2 ad 3; available online at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth1084.html>).

tical; indeed it is converted into the principle of the foundation of the different praxes. We can say that it is a form of belief, a *Glauben*, in the non *doxic* sense of the term, if we reserve the term *doxa* for a degree lower than *episteme* and in the order of the phenomena of nature and also in that of human phenomena liable to being treated they themselves as observable. The belief proper of attestation of our freedom is of another order; it is of the order of conviction and confidence; its opposite is suspicion, not doubt, or doubt as suspicion (P. Ricœur); it cannot be denied, but refused; it cannot be re-established and strengthened if not through resorting again to attestation, and is rescued by the approval of the other, indeed thanks to some kind of gracious divine support. In this context to which fundamental anthropology refers, one can observe that one is dealing with a truth that is closely connected with the fundamental conviction that the human being has of himself and which is not temporary as is the case with the acquisitions of the arts and sciences and philosophy itself with which, however, it has a close relationship, and thus one speaks of 'philosophical anthropology' to refer to its specific genre of knowledge through reflection that takes place by stages.

Brain, Mind, Soul and Being

Aware of the lack of a direct and perfect self-transparent knowledge of such a founding origin, scientists and philosophers should aim to seek an increasingly precise adjustment between a neuroscience which is increasingly expert in material architecture and phenomenological and anthropologic descriptions centred on human operations (seeing, understanding, living well, acting) where praxis is subject to philosophical analysis. So, the point of departure and turning point to both approaches is human praxis. In Aristotle, the act that achieves a human praxis is clearly dissociated from the act of movement (*κίνησις*) and is, instead, associated in a privileged way with that of action, in the sense of praxis (*πρᾶξις*): 'Since no action which has a limit is an end, but only a means to the end, as, e.g., the process of thinning; and since the parts of the body themselves, when one is thinning them, are in motion in the sense that they are not already that which it is the object of the motion to make them, this process is not an action, or at least not a complete one, since it is not an end; it is the process which includes the end that is an action. E.g., at the same time we see and have seen, understand and have understood, think and have thought; but we cannot at the same time learn and have learnt, or become healthy and be healthy. We are living well and have lived well, we are happy and have been happy, at the same time; otherwise the process would have had to cease at some time, like the thinning-process; but it has not ceased at the present moment; we both are living

and have lived. Now of these processes we should call the one type motions, and the other actualisations. Every motion is incomplete – the processes of thinning, learning, walking, building – these are motions, and incomplete at that. For it is not the same thing which at the same time is walking and has walked, or is building and has built, or is becoming and has become, or is being moved and has been moved, but two different things; and that which is causing motion is different from that which has caused motion. But the same thing at the same time is seeing and has seen, is thinking and has thought. The latter kind of process, then, is what I mean by actualisation, and the former what I mean by motion'.⁸ What makes this text remarkable is that the disjunction between action and movement is upheld by a criterion that involves a phenomenology of a metaphysical character, namely the possibility of saying, 'at the same time', we are seeing and we have seen, we are living well and have lived well, we are happy and we have been happy. The interaction of the tenses of verbs, and in a certain sense its overcoming which is arranged around the difference between movement and human praxis, reveals a fundamental phenomenon that bears upon the temporality of human acting. The fact that the perfect and the present are 'together' implies that everything that the perfect contains of the past is recapitulated in the present and *vice versa*. The human being, therefore, not only is capable of measuring temporal succession according to a first and then but is also, after a certain fashion, above time and the foundation of its succession which is matter. In spiritual operations the human being transcends the movement of nature and lastly matter itself, and is directed, according to the suggestive statement of St. Thomas, towards the Infinite: '*Simpliciter quidem, sicut intelligere, cuius obiectum est verum, et velle, cuius obiectum est bonum, quorum utrumque convertitur cum ente; et ita intelligere et velle, quantum est de se, habent se ad omnia*'.⁹ If this kind of praxis transcends pure movement it is because it is a more perfect kind of act, that is to say it has all the perfection of the act of movement but its imperfection is not linked to the succession of matter.¹⁰

This connects the investigation of the being of the self to the interpretation of one of the four primordial meanings of being, which Aristotle

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaph*, IX, 6, 1048 b 18-35.

⁹ *S. Th*, I^a, q. 54 a. 2 co.

¹⁰ Cf. Paul Ricœur, 'Tenth Study: What Ontology in View?', in *Oneself as Another* (Chicago-London, 1992), pp. 302-308; 'Que la science s'inscrit dans la culture comme "pratique théorique"', in *The Cultural Values of Science* (The Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Vatican City, 2003), pp. 14-23, available online at <http://www.pas.va/content/accademia/en/publications/scriptavaria/culturalvalues.html>

placed under the distinction of act and of potency.¹¹ Now, it is essential for an ontological exploration of human acting, understood as being different from the movement of nature, that the same examples taken from human praxis appear at the same time as *centred* and *decentred*. In other words, if the meanings of being such as *dynamis-energeia* were only another way of saying *praxis*, the metaphysical lesson would be meaningless. And rightly to the extent that *dynamis-energeia* can irrigate other fields of application different from human action that manifests its analogical fecundity. The essential is the decentring itself towards the bottom and towards the top, in Aristotle, (and in St. Thomas during the Middle Ages and in Ricœur in our contemporary time), in virtue of which the *dynamis-energeia* indicates a basis of being, at one and the same time powerful and effective, on which human acting stands out. In other terms, it appears equally important that human acting is the privileged place of the readability of this meaning of being because it is distinct from all the acts of physical nature, and that being as act and potency has other fields of actuation that are different from human acting. Centrality of acting and decentring or better *re-centring* in the direction of a basis of act and potency which Aristotle himself defines as ‘first act’ because it is distinct from all the others, when it is a matter of explaining the soul as form. This analogy attests that for Aristotle the being of man is that basis of being as first act starting with which he can be an agent and receiver that transcends matter and is capable of measuring time.

And it is here, in that higher sphere of human praxis which is knowing, that Aristotle distinguished in a new way for the first time two acts and two potencies: the quiescent act, which is acquired science, and the working act, which is the exercise of science by he who possesses it: ‘he who has science thinks’ (θεοροῦν γὰρ γίγνεται τὸ ἔχον τὴν ἐπιστήμην – 417 b 6). The second is a special process, different from the first which is from ignorance to science (said in its own way to be an alteration), but it presents itself as an increase in itself and in the act: ‘For it is by exercise of knowledge that the possessor of knowledge becomes such in act: and this is not an alteration – for the thing develops into its own perfection and act’ (εἰς αὐτὸ γὰρ ἢ ἐπίδοσις καὶ εἰς ἐντελέχειαν – b 7). And this must be another kind of act and thus another kind of process; certainly not a process from potency to active potency, but from act to act. Here, then, the dynamic of acting expresses the intertwining of the act as first act and the second act, which is the point of departure of the metaphysical approach of St. Thomas.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaph.*, V, 7 and 12; and IX, 1-10.

Indeed, being, the mode of being, is revealed by operating, that is to say by the mode of operating. Thus from the point of view of the *via inventionis* one can say: *esse sequitur operari*. If we decentre, therefore, the activity of man towards the bottom and towards the top of each one of us, we find with a base of being, which is potent and effective, a first act for Aristotle that is not immersed in matter and is of a different kind from the rest of nature. Each man has the capacity to act according to what he is, and thus if our actions attest to the just, good and the true, it is necessary that the being of this capacity that works spiritually, which makes man in part a being heterogeneous with nature, is a being (*esse, actus essendi*) that has an emergent form above corporeal matter and not dependent on the body or the composite. Thus this being belongs inseparably to the intellective soul, like the rotundity of a circle. The human soul is a 'subsistent form' because it has the being in itself that transmits to the body and conserves it in itself when the body with death is no longer able to receive the life of the soul. The reasoning of St. Thomas is rather convincing: 'the most perfect of forms, the human soul, which is the end of all natural forms, has an activity that goes entirely beyond matter, and does not take place through a corporeal organ; namely, understanding. And because the actual being of a thing is proportioned to its activity, as has been said, since each thing acts according as it is a being (*ens*), it must be the case that the actual being of the human soul surpasses corporeal matter, and is not totally included in it, but yet in some way is touched upon by it. Inasmuch, then, as it surpasses the actual being of corporeal matter, having of itself the power to subsist and to act, the human soul is a spiritual substance; but inasmuch as it is touched upon by matter and shares its own actual being with matter, it is the form of the body'.¹²

This appears clearly even if one considers the specific activity capable of developing the human being. The perfection of understanding and willing as such lies in the possession of what is understood as intelligible in the intellect and what is loved as love in he who loves. It corresponds therefore to the human capacity to have a potentiality such as to be proportionate to

¹² 'Perfectissima autem formarum, id est anima humana, quae est finis omnium formarum naturalium, habet operationem omnino excedentem materiam, quae non fit per organum corporale, scilicet intelligere. Et quia esse rei proportionatur eius operationi, ut dictum est, cum unumquodque operetur secundum quod est ens; oportet quod esse animae humanae superexcedat materiam corporalem, et non sit totaliter comprehensum ab ipsa, sed tamen aliquo modo attingatur ab ea. In quantum igitur supergreditur esse materiae corporalis, potens per se subsistere et operari, anima humana est substantia spiritualis; in quantum vero attingitur a materia, et esse suum communicat illi, est corporis forma' (St. Thomas Aquinas, *De spiritualibus creaturis*, 2).

the taking on of intelligible and lovable reality. Now, 'the potency of prime matter is not of this sort, for prime matter receives form by contracting it to the individual being. But an intelligible form is in the intellect without any such contraction; for thus the intellect understands each intelligible as its form is in it. Now the intellect understands the intelligible chiefly according to a common and universal nature, and so the intelligible form is in the intellect according to its universality (*secundum rationem suae communitatis*). Therefore, an intellectual substance is not made receptive of form by reason of prime matter, but rather through a character which is, in a way, the opposite (*sed magis per oppositam viam*)'.¹³

Dual Act and Dual Potency from the Operative to the Ontological

And more precisely, in analogy with the statement of Aristotle about the dual potency and dual act in the analysis of the human praxis of knowledge, both as habit and as *theoresis*, St. Thomas in going towards the depths of our

¹³ *Ibidem*, 1 co. In a parallel passage of *The Treatise on Separate Substances*, the Angelic Doctor expressed himself in an analogous way: 'The matter of corporeal things, however, receives the form in a particular way, that is, not according to the common nature of form. Nor does corporeal matter act in this way insofar as it is subject to dimensions or to a corporeal form, since corporeal matter receives the corporeal form itself in an individual way. Accordingly, it becomes clear that this befits such a matter from the very nature of the matter which, since it is the lowest reality, receives form in the weakest manner; for reception takes place according to the mode of the receiver. Thereby matter, by receiving that form in a particular way, falls short in the greatest degree of that complete reception of form which is according to the totality of the form. Now it is clear that every intellectual substance receives the intellected form according to its totality, or otherwise it would not be able to know it in its totality. For it is thus that the intellect understands a thing insofar as the form of that thing exists in it. It remains therefore that if there be a matter in spiritual substances, it is not the same as the matter of corporeal things, but much nobler and finer, since it receives form according to its totality' i.e. '*Materia autem corporalium rerum suscipit formam particulariter, idest non secundum communem rationem formae. Nec hoc habet materia corporalis in quantum dimensionibus subiicitur aut formae corporali, quia etiam ipsam formam corporalem individualiter materia corporalis recipit. Unde manifestum fit quod hoc convenit tali materiae, ex ipsa natura materiae, quae quia est infima, debilissimo modo recipit formam: fit enim receptio secundum modum recipientis. Et per hoc maxime deficit a completa receptione formae, quae est secundum totalitatem ipsius particulariter ipsam recipiens. Manifestum est autem quod omnis substantia intellectualis recipit formam intellectam secundum suam totalitatem; alioquin eam in sua totalitate intelligere non valeret. Sic enim intellectus intelligit rem secundum quod forma eius in ipso existit. Relinquitur igitur quod materia, si qua sit in spiritualibus substantiis, non est eadem cum materia corporalium rerum, sed multo altior et sublimior, utpote recipiens formam secundum eius totalitatem'* (*De substantiis separatis*, c. 7)

self itself can speak about a dual act and a dual potency that are ontological: 'in composite things there are two kinds of act and two kinds of potency to consider. For first of all, matter is as potency with reference to form, and the form is its act. And secondly, if the nature is constituted of matter and form, the matter is as potency with reference to existence itself, insofar as it is able to receive this. Accordingly, when the foundation of matter is removed, if any form of a determinate nature remains which subsists of itself but not in matter, it will still be related to its own existence as potency is to act. But I do not say, as that potency which is separable from its act, but as a potency which is always accompanied by its act'.¹⁴

An explorer of these metaphysical sublimes, St. Thomas manages to affirm something that is surprising as regards the very high dignity of the human being: 'we see a certain gradation of infinity in things. For a material substance is finite in a two-fold manner, namely, on the part of the form which is received in matter and on the part of the "to be" itself, in which it shares according to its own mode, as being finite from below and from above. A spiritual substance – the Angel and the human soul –, however, is finite from above, inasmuch as it receives "to be" from the First Principle according to its proper mode; it is infinite from below, insofar as it is not received in a [material] subject. But the First Principle, God, is infinite in both'.¹⁵

¹⁴ *In rebus compositis est considerare duplicem actum, et duplicem potentiam. Nam primo quidem materia est ut potentia respectu formae, et forma est actus eius; et iterum natura constituta ex materia et forma, est ut potentia respectu ipsius esse, in quantum est susceptiva eius. Remoto igitur fundamento materiae, si remaneat aliqua forma determinatae naturae per se subsistens, non in materia, adhuc comparabitur ad suum esse ut potentia ad actum: non dico autem ut potentiam separabilem ab actu, sed quam semper suus actus comitetur* (De spiritualibus creaturis, a. 1 co.).

¹⁵ *Sic igitur apparet gradus quidam infinitatis in rebus. Nam materiales substantiae finitae quidem sunt dupliciter: scilicet ex parte formae, quae in materia recipitur, et ex parte ipsius esse, quod participat secundum proprium modum, quasi superius et inferius finita existens. Substantia vero spiritualis est quidem finita superius, in quantum a primo principio participat esse secundum proprium modum; est autem infinita inferius, in quantum non participatur in subiecto. Primum vero principium, quod Deus est, est modis omnibus infinitum* (De substantiis separatis, c. 8). Cf. also the general principle: 'According to the Philosopher (*Phys.* ii) there is an order of precedence even in formal causes: so that nothing prevents a form resulting from the participation of another form: and thus God who is pure being, is in a fashion the species of all subsistent forms that participate of being but are not their own being' i.e. 'secundum philosophum, etiam in causis formalibus prius et posterius invenitur; unde nihil prohibet unam formam per alterius formae participationem formari; et sic ipse Deus, qui est esse tantum, est quodammodo species omnium formarum subsistentium quae esse participant et non sunt suum esse' (De Pot., q. 6, a. 6 ad 5).

The Metaphysical Unification of Being and Human Activity

Now Averroes and many neo-Aristotelians, who in some sense anticipate Cartesian modernity, differently from Avicenna and the neo-Augustinian theologians, agree on the idea that thinking is the action of a spiritual substance, but they deny that this is united to the body as its substantial form. St. Thomas, instead, begins from the incontestable fact that this human praxis of thinking and willing is achieved by every man and every woman as individuals: ‘*hic homo singularis intelligit, vult, amat*’.¹⁶ The ‘*cogito*’ – in inverted commas – of St. Thomas does not finish in the separate intellect of Averroes and not even in the impersonal transcendental of the Kantian self like the modern *cogito* of Descartes because ‘no one can assent to the thought that he does not exist. For, in thinking something, he perceives that he exists’.¹⁷ There is an inseparable belonging between the thinking and the being of each human being. If, then, understanding is to the advantage of every human being and ‘as an individual man’, ‘because it is obvious that understanding belongs to “this particular man” (as, for instance, Socrates or Plato)’, one should say that it proceeds from a present principle that determines the human being as rational nature. This principle is the spiritual soul which is thus the substantial form of the human being: ‘Accordingly, it must be the case that the principle of that activity which is understanding should be in “this man” in the way of a form. Now the principle of this activity is not a form whose actual being is dependent on matter and tied down to or immersed in matter, because this activity is not effected by means of the body, as its proven in III *De Anima* [4, 429 a 24]; and hence the principle of this activity possesses an activity that has nothing in common with corporeal matter. Now, the way in which each thing acts is a consequence of its being. Hence the actual being of that principle must be an actual being which is raised above corporeal matter and not dependent on it. Now this is characteristic of a spiritual substance. It is necessary to say, therefore, if the preceding considerations are put together, that some kind of substance is the form of the human’.¹⁸

¹⁶ The principle *hic homo singularis intelligit* is repeated 14 times, cf. *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, capp. 3 e 4. For *vult* cf. *De Malo*, q. 6 art. un.

¹⁷ ‘*Nullus potest cogitare se non esse cum assensu: in hoc enim quod cogitat aliquid, percipit se esse*’ (*De veritate*, q. 10, a. 12 ad 7).

¹⁸ ‘*Oportet igitur principium huius operationis quod est intelligere, formaliter inesse huic homini. Principium autem huius operationis non est forma aliqua cuius esse sit dependens a corpore, et materiae obligatum sive immersum; quia haec operatio non fit per corpus, ut probatur in III de anima; unde principium huius operationis habet operationem sine communicatione materiae corporalis. Sic*

Having rejected this *Averroist* opinion as impossible, St. Thomas takes into consideration that opinion that most seduced Patristic thinkers and the neo-Augustinians theologians who, following Plato, argued that the concrete individual thinks but nonetheless the spiritual substance is not united to the body as its form but has the same function as that of a sailor for a ship. Now, if the soul were not the form of the body, it and its parts would not obtain from the soul its specificity and identity, which appears evidently false, because, on separating from the soul the eye, the brain, the heart, the flesh and bone can longer be said to be such 'except equivocally, like an eye in stone or in a picture'.¹⁹

This metaphysical union of human activity, and thus of individuality and personality themselves constitutes a 'new event in thought', that is to say an absolute innovation in Christian thought that was unknown to Patristic thought, which St. Thomas managed, however, to develop thanks to the principle of the ontological continuity of the species of the Pseudo-Dionysius '*Supremum infini attingit infimum supremi*'. Thus: 'the human soul, which is the lowest in the order of spiritual substances, can communicate its own actual being to the human body, which is the highest in dignity, so that from the soul and the body, as from form and matter, a single being results'.²⁰ And, concluding in a masterful way, St. Thomas demonstrates to his neo-Augustinian colleagues of the Faculty of Theology, with an extraordinary beat of his intellectual wings, the defeat to which their theory exposed them in relation to the followers of Averroes of the Faculty of Philosophy: 'But if a spiritual substance were composed of matter and form, it would be impossible for it to be the body's form: because it is essential to matter that it be not in anything else, but that it should itself be the primary subject'.²¹

autem unumquodque operatur secundum quod est; unde oportet quod esse illius principii sit esse elevatum supra materiam corporalem, et non dependens ab ipsa. Hoc autem proprium est spiritualis substantiae. Oportet ergo dicere, si praedicta coniungantur, quod quaedam spiritualis substantia, sit forma humani corporis (De spiritualibus creaturis, a. 2 co.).

¹⁹ Aristotle, *De Anima*, II, 1, 412 b 20 f.

²⁰ '*Attingitur autem a materia corporali ea ratione quod semper supremum infimi ordinis attingit infimum supremi, ut patet per Dionysium VII cap. de Divin. Nomin.; et ideo anima humana quae est infima in ordine substantiarum spiritualium, esse suum communicare potest corpori humano, quod est dignissimum, ut fiat ex anima et corpore unum sicut ex forma et materia* (De spiritualibus creaturis, a. 2 co).

²¹ '*Si vero substantia spiritualis esset composita ex materia et forma, impossibile esset quod esset forma corporalis: quia de ratione materiae est quod non sit in alio, sed quod ipsa sit primum subiectum*' (loc. cit.). Averroism, together with *Alexandrinism*, were expressly condemned by the Fifth Lateran Council under Leo X with the Bull *Apostolici regiminis* (1513): 'Now,

Freedom of Will and the Divine Conatus

It appears that during this same period St. Thomas was the first to grasp the corollary that was most destructive of the Averroist position on the basis of which the human being does not specifically have free choice in his acts but, rather, his will is moved to choosing out of necessity, although it is not subjected to coercion. Indeed, not every necessary thing is violent but only that which has an external principle, and it follows from this that the will is necessarily moved without violence by an internal principle such as the intellect. For St. Thomas ‘this opinion is heretical. For it takes away the reason for merit and demerit in human acts, as it does not seem meritorious or demeritorious for persons to do necessarily what they could not avoid doing. It is also to be counted among the oddest philosophical opinions, since it is not only contrary to faith but also subverts all the principles of moral philosophy. For if nothing is within our power, and we are necessarily moved to will things, deliberation, exhortation, precept, punishment, and praise and blame, of which moral philosophy consists, are destroyed’.²² For St. Thomas, instead, if it is true that the intellect as a faculty of the true precedes the will and guides it, and he indeed states that ‘*primum principium motionis est ex intellectu: hoc enim modo bonum intellectum movet etiam ipsam voluntatem*’, however in the order of the exercise of the act, which is that of the real actuating itself of the freedom of the person, the relationship is overturned and it is the will which has as an object the end, or the good, that decides the action and confers a moral quality on the exercise of the intelligence and all the other faculties and habits. St. Thomas managed to demonstrate the freedom of the will which is another new ‘event of thought’ or an absolute innovation in the history of philosophy and he found for it the formula: ‘*Intelligo enim quia volo; et similiter utor omnibus po-*

the sower of tares has dared to sow and multiply extremely dangerous errors...above all on the nature of the rational soul, according to which it is mortal or unique for all men...we condemn and rebuke all those who state that the intellectual soul is mortal or unique for all men...in fact the soul is not only truly, of itself and essentially, the form of the human body...but it is also immortal, and, given the multitude of bodies in which it is individually infused, it can be, must be and is multiplied’ (*Doctrine on the Soul, against the Neo-Aristotelians*, Denzinger–Huenermann, 1440, p. 621).

²² ‘*Haec autem opinio est haeretica: tollit enim rationem meriti et demeriti in humanis actibus. Non enim videtur esse meritorium vel demeritorium quod aliquis sic ex necessitate agit quod vitare non possit. Est etiam annumeranda inter extraneas philosophiae opiniones: quia non solum contrariatur fidei, sed subvertit omnia principia philosophiae moralis. Si enim non sit liberum aliquid in nobis, sed ex necessitate movemur ad volendum, tollitur deliberatio, exhortatio, praeceptum et punitio, et laus et vituperium, circa quae moralis philosophia consistit*’ (*De malo*, q. 6 co).

tentiis et habitibus quia volo’, clearly bringing out – against any rationalist determinism – the real dominion of freedom and this of the end, which is the good, in the behaviour of a person. And here St. Thomas with sophistication that is specific to him brings out the contradiction of his Averroist colleagues by referring to the authority of their mentor, Averroes: ‘And so also the Commentator in his *Commentary on the De anima* defines habit as what a person uses at will’.²³

Now, because it is not possible to dwell on this subject *ad infinitum*, one should necessarily state that, as regards the first movement of the will, that is to say the move from potency to act or the placing in act of freedom, the will of every human being is moved by an agent by impulse of which it begins to will freely. This agent cannot be a celestial body nor anything material or of the organism such as the genes, as some affirm today, because the will is not corporeal potency. ‘Therefore, we conclude’, St. Thomas observes, ‘as Aristotle concludes in the chapter on good fortune in the *Eudemian Ethics*, that what first moves the intellect and the will is something superior to them, namely, God’.²⁴ We owe to Aristotle the introduction of the divine conatus as the founding basis of human freedom, which St. Thomas read in *Eudemian Ethics* where an instinct is affirmed, that is to say a ‘starting-point of motion in the soul’²⁵ which passes by way of Spinoza and reaches P. Ricœur.²⁶

The Existential and Metaphysical Aristotelian-Thomistic Approach: the Circularity of Science and Knowing Yourself

We can recapitulate by observing that the approach of Aristotle, in this determining of the human being in the two moments of potency and act, of the first act and the acts of the faculties and habits, and of act as the habit of science and as exercise of it, followed by St. Thomas with the act of form and the act of being, is very acute, existential and metaphysical at one and the

²³ ‘Unde et Commentator definit habitum in III de anima, quod habitus est quo quis utitur cum voluerit’ (loc. cit).

²⁴ ‘Relinquitur ergo, sicut concludit Aristoteles in cap. de bona fortuna, quod id quod primo movet voluntatem et intellectum, sit aliquid supra voluntatem et intellectum, scilicet Deus (loc. cit.).

²⁵ τὸ δὲ ζητούμενον τοῦτ’ ἐστὶ, τίς ἢ τῆς κινήσεως ἀρχὴ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ. δηλον δὲ ὡσπερ ἐν τῷ ὄλῳ θεός, καὶ κἀν ἐκείῳ. κινεῖ γάρ πως πάντα τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖον: λόγου δ’ ἀρχὴ οὐ λόγος, ἀλλὰ τι κρείττον: τί οὐδ’ ἂν κρείττον καὶ ἐπιστήμης εἴη καὶ νοῦ πλὴν θεός; (*Eth. Eudem.*, VIII, 1248 a 25 ff.). Cf. C. Fabro, ‘Le liber de bona fortuna chez Saint Thomas’, *Revue Thomiste*, 1988, p. 356 ff.

²⁶ P. Ricœur, *Sé come un altro* (Milan, 1993), pp. 429–431.

same time: existential because it comes drawn from the analysis of human praxis as increase of the life of the spirit (intelligence and freedom in St. Thomas), and at the same time metaphysical because it draws on the being as being as potency and act, and then as act in act in its foundation which is Logos and Principio at one and the same time. The essential in this anthropological legibility of being is the analogical decentring towards the bottom, that is to say the self of each human being, and the re-centring towards the top, that is to say God; this is what the late St. Thomas does: ‘*Deus est et tu: sed tuum esse est participatum, suum vero essenziale*’ (In Psal. 34, 7).

Therefore, neuronal and philosophical centrality in acting and decentring in the direction of a foundation of act and potency are equally and jointly constitutive of an ontology of the human being in terms of act and potency. Therefore only the human being has this double legibility: the external objective reading, common to all the beings of nature, which is the subject of the sciences (*epistémê*), and the approach of auto-reflection, which belongs to philosophy (*sophia*), according to the Socratic precept ‘know yourself’, which understands being as an act of an active potency which we call the ‘soul’.²⁷ Thus only a human being is able to create a circularity between this double legibility, seeing, so to speak, externally, the functioning of his brain with new sensors that portray it in film-like fashion, and interpreting from the inside this film-like portrayal starting from auto-reflection on himself.

There is nothing that is more ours than our brain yet there is nothing that we know less about. The ancients thought that the heart was the centre of life because it beats constantly like a pump and tells us ‘I am here’.²⁸ On

²⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Q. d. De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 1.

²⁸ Indeed, St. Thomas says: ‘*Secundum igitur quod anima est forma corporis, non potest esse aliquid medium inter animam et corpus. Secundum vero quod est motor, sic nihil prohibet ponere ibi multa media; manifeste enim anima per cor movet alia membra, et etiam per spiritum movet corpus*’ (*Q. d. De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 3 co.). Also: ‘*unumquodque operatur in remotiora per id quod est maxime proximum. Sed vires animae diffunduntur in totum corpus per cor. Ergo cor est vicinius quam ceterae partes corporis; et ita mediante corde unietur corpori*’ (*Q. d. De Anima*, a. 9, arg. 13). Also: ‘*cor est primum instrumentum per quod anima movet ceteras partes corporis; et ideo eo mediante anima unitur reliquis partibus corporis ut motor, licet ut forma uniatu unicuique parti corporis per se et immediate*’ (*Q. d. De Anima*, a. 9, ad 13). Again, from a general point of view: ‘*cum anima rationalis sit perfectissima formarum naturalium, in homine invenitur maxima distinctio partium propter diversas operationes; et anima singulis earum dat esse substantiale, secundum illum modum qui competit operationi ipsorum. Cuius signum est, quod remota anima, non remanet neque caro neque oculus nisi aequivoce. Sed cum oporteat ordinem instrumentorum esse secundum ordinem operationum, diversarum autem operationum quae sunt ab anima, una naturaliter praecedat alteram, necessarium est quod una pars corporis moveatur per aliam ad suam*

the contrary, the brain was, so to speak, the great silence or the sealed box of our body.²⁹ Today however the brain opens itself up and shows itself, in part because of the neurosciences, as being the centre of the body, and this may turn out to be a turning point for a new beginning where external experience can be joined to internal experience and science can be joined to philosophy, each in their respective functions and consistencies and in their mutual circularity. This was not present in ancient philosophies, or in Medieval, modern or contemporary thought, and if the human being is analysed, he is analysed from a formal point of view without these dynamic and circular links with scientific knowledge and auto-reflective knowledge of my body and my brain. In truth, it is not that I am my body, not even its masterpiece, the brain: I am neither my brain nor my body; I have a brain

operationem. Sic ergo inter animam secundum quod est motor et principium operationum et totum corpus, cadit aliquid medium; quia mediante aliqua prima parte primo mota movet alias partes ad suas operationes, sicut mediante corde movet alia membra ad vitales operationes: sed secundum quod dat esse corpori, immediate dat esse substantiale et specificum omnibus partibus corporis. Et hoc est quod a multis dicitur quod anima unitur corpori ut forma sine medio, ut motor autem per medium. Et haec opinio procedit secundum sententiam Aristotelis qui ponit animam esse formam substantialem corporis. Sed quidam ponentes secundum opinionem Platonis animam uniri corpori sicut unam substantiam, alii, necesse habuerunt ponere media quibus anima uniretur corpori; quia diversae substantiae et distantes non colligantur, nisi sit aliquid quod uniat eas. Et sic posuerunt quidam spiritum et humorem esse medium inter animam et corpus, et quidam lucem, et quidam potentias animae, vel aliquid aliud huiusmodi. Sed nullum istorum est necessarium, si anima est forma corporis; quia unumquodque secundum quod est ens, est unum. Unde cum forma secundum seipsam det esse materiae, secundum seipsam unitur materiae primae, et non per aliud aliquod ligamentum' (Q. d. De Anima, a. 9 co.).

²⁹ However, St. Thomas had already acutely observed the absolute necessity, for the working of the mind, of the state of perfection of the body: '*naturale est animae quod indigeat phantasmatibus ad intelligendum; ex quo tamen sequitur quod diminuat in intelligendo a substantiis superioribus. Quod autem dicitur, quod anima a corpore praegravatur, hoc non est ex eius natura, sed ex eius corruptione, secundum illud Sapient. IX: corpus quod corrumpitur aggravat animam. Quod vero dicitur quod abstrahit se a nexibus corporalibus ut se intelligat, intelligendum est quod abstrahit se ab eis quasi ab obiectis, quia anima intelligitur per remotionem omnis corporaeitatis; non tamen ab eis abstrahitur secundum esse. Quinimmo, quibusdam corporeis organis laesis, non potest anima directe nec se nec aliud intelligere, ut quando laeditur cerebrum' (Q. d. De Spiritualibus Creaturis, a. 2 ad 7). Also: '*Hanc igitur oportet esse dispositionem corporis cui anima rationalis unitur, ut scilicet sit temperatissima complexionis. Si quis autem considerare velit etiam particulares humani corporis dispositiones, ad hoc inveniet ordinatas, ut homo sit optimi sensus. Unde, quia ad bonam habitudinem potentiarum sensitivarum interiorum, puta imaginationis et memoriae, et cogitativae virtutis, necessaria est bona dispositio cerebri. Ideo factus est homo habens maius cerebrum inter omnia animalia, secundum proportionem suae quantitatis; et ut liberior sit eius operatio habet caput sursum positum; quia solus homo est animal rectum, alia vero animalia curva incedunt' (Q. d. De Anima, a. 8 co.).**

and a body but – as I have tried to show – in order to understand my ‘being’ I must know what to have a brain means, to have a body means, through that knowledge of them that experience and science offer to me.

Philosophy follows its own synthetic method: it acts with the experimental data provided by science and neuroscience and the principles of reason but moves them within the transcendent reality of the soul as a spiritual free subject³⁰ and of God the Creator. Thus experience, science and philosophy are fused in their respective functions and consistencies and a ‘breach’ of movement is made towards the limit that always keeps the consciousness of a person alert and vigilant.

³⁰ The fact that sensitive knowledge precedes intellectual knowledge in the human being, the sensitive origin of human intellectual knowledge and the affirmation that the soul (the profound self of each of us) can come to know itself as spiritual only through the intellectual species that are abstract from the sensitive one, have prevented most of the time not only the understanding but also the actual reading of the texts of St. Thomas who focuses on the real issue in question and shows that “the principle of human knowledge comes from sense. However, it is not necessary for everything that man knows to be submitted to sense or that it is immediately known only by means of a sensitive effect”. Indeed, he affirms what we may call the decisive epistemological position of the Socratic principle of “know yourself”: “The very intellect knows itself by means of its own act, which is not submitted to sense. In the same way, it also knows the interior act of will, since will is somewhat moved by the intellectual act and since intellectual act is caused in another way by will, like the effect is known by means of the cause and the cause by means of the effect” i.e. “principium humanae cognitionis est a sensu; non tamen oportet quod quidquid ab homine cognoscitur, sit sensui subiectum, vel per effectum sensibilem immediate cognoscatur; nam et ipse intellectus intelligit seipsum per actum suum, qui non est sensui subiectus: similiter etiam et interiorem actum voluntatis intelligit, in quantum per actum intellectus quodammodo movetur voluntas, et alio modo actus intellectus causatur a voluntate, ut dictum est, sicut effectus cognoscitur per causam, et causa per effectum” (*De Malo*, q. 6, a. un. ad 18). This is a decisive point because St. Thomas also states that ‘we would not be able to obtain knowledge about separate intellectual substances either through reason or through faith, unless our soul knew on its own to be an intellectual being’: “*Cum enim de substantiis separatis hoc quod sint intellectuales quaedam substantiae cognoscamus, vel per demonstrationem vel per fidem, neutro modo hanc cognitionem accipere possemus nisi hoc ipsum quod est esse intellectuale, anima nostra ex seipsa cognosceret*” (*Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 46). Thomas also accepts that is it because of the spiritual soul that the human intellect can raise itself to God: ‘the soul itself, through which the human intellect ascends to knowledge of God’: “*etiam ipsa anima per quam intellectus humanus in Dei cognitionem ascendit*” (*Ib.*, I, 3).