

To Be Man is to Know

by

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The evidence for the transcendent unity of religions results not only from the oneness of Truth but also from the oneness of the human race. The sufficient reason for the existence of the human creature is the capacity to think; not to think just anything, but to think about what matters, and finally, about what alone matters. Man is the only being on earth able to foresee death and to desire survival, the only being who desires to know and is capable of knowing the why of the world, of the soul, of existence. No one can deny that it is in the fundamental nature of man to ask himself these questions and to have, in consequence, the right to answers; and, further, to have access to them, precisely by virtue of this right, whether through Revelation or through Intellection, each of these sources of knowledge acting according to its own laws and within the framework of the conditions that correspond to it.

One would sometimes like to apologize for seeming to force doors which are already open, were it not for the fact that we live in a world in which doors that are normally open are now cunningly closed, and this to an ever-increasing extent through the influence of a psychological and subjectivist—even biologicistic—relativism which still dares to call itself “philosophy.” Indeed we live in an age in which intelligence is systematically undermined in its very foundations and in which it therefore becomes all the more opportune to speak of the nature of the mind if only by way of “consolation” or to furnish certain arguments for what it might be worth.

In saying this we recall a passage in the Koran in which Abraham asks God to show him how He raises the dead God answers with the question: “Dost thou not yet believe?” Abraham answers: “Indeed I believe, but I ask this that my heart may be appeased.” It is in this sense that it is, in our view, always permissible to recall truths which in themselves are quite evident, or even known by all, especially since the most widely known truths are often the most misunderstood

The distinctive mark of man is an intelligence that is total hence objective and capable of conceiving the absolute; to say that it possesses this capacity amounts, precisely, to saying that it is objective or that it is total. Objectivity, whereby human is distinguished from animal intelligence, would lack sufficient reason without the capacity to conceive the absolute or the infinite, or without the sense of perfection.

It has been said that man is a reasoning animal which is true in the sense that reason is the distinctive mark of man; but reason could not exist without the supra-rational intelligence that is the Intellect, which it prolongs in the direction of the world of sensorial phenomena. In the same way, language is the distinctive mark of man in the sense that it proves the presence of reason and a fortiori of the Intellect. Language, like reason, is proof of the Intellect, both having as their profound motivation the knowledge of transcendent realities and of our final ends.

Intelligence as such is prolonged in will and in sentiment: if the intelligence is objective, will and sentiment will equally be so. Man is distinguished from animals by free will and by generous sentiment because he is distinguished from them by an intelligence that is total: totality of intelligence gives rise, by extension, to freedom of will and to generosity of sentiment or of character. For man alone is capable of willing what is contrary to his instincts or to his immediate self-interest; he alone can put himself in the place of others and feel with them and through them; and he alone is capable of sacrifice and of pity.

The will is for realizing, but its realization is determined by the intelligence; sentiment-as regards its intrinsic and positive nature-is for loving, but its love is determined also by the intelligence, whether rational or intellectual otherwise it would be blind. Man is intelligence, therefore objectivity, and this objective intelligence determines all that he is and all that he does.

It is logical that those who rely exclusively upon Revelation and not upon Intellection should be inclined to discredit intelligence, hence the notion of “intellectual pride.” They are right when it is a question of “our” intelligence “alone,” but not when it is a question of intelligence in itself, inspired by the Intellect which is ultimately divine. For the sin of the philosophers consists, not in relying upon intelligence as such, but in relying upon their own intelligence, hence upon intelligence severed from its supernatural roots.

Two things must be understood: first, that intelligence does not belong to us, and that what does belong to us is not intelligence in its entirety; secondly, that intelligence, insofar as it belongs to us, is not sufficient unto itself, but has need of nobleness of soul piety and virtue if it is to rise above its human particularity and be reunited with intelligence as such. In fact, intelligence without virtue lacks the quality of sincerity, and the lack of sincerity necessarily limits its horizon. One must be what one wishes to become, or, in other words, one must anticipate morally—we would even say “aesthetically”—the transcendent order one wishes to know, for God is perfect in every respect. Moral integrity—and it is a question here of intrinsic morality—certainly does not guarantee metaphysical knowledge; but it is a condition for the integral functioning of the intelligence on the basis of adequate doctrinal data.

This is to say that intellectual pride—or more exactly, intellectualist pride—is excluded first of all from intelligence as such, and secondly from intelligence when accompanied by virtue, the latter implying as much a sense of our littleness as it does a sense of the sacred. It should also be said that if there is an intelligence which is conceptual or doctrinal, there is another which is

existential or moral: it is necessary to be intelligent not only in thought, but also in our being, for it too is fundamentally an adequation to Divine Reality.

Intelligence is either individual or universal; it is either reason or Intellect; if it is individual it must find its inspiration in its universal root to the extent that it seeks to go beyond the domain of material facts. From another point of view, as we have said it is either conceptual or existential and here too it needs to be extended: it must combine with its moral complement in order to be fully in conformity with what it seeks to perceive. Will for the Good and love of the Beautiful are the necessary concomitants of knowledge of the True, and their repercussions are incalculable.

Intelligence in principle is infallible; but it is so through God and not through us. Through God: through its transcendent root, without which it is fragmentary; and through its volitive and affective modalities, without which it is condemned in the last analysis to being no more than a play of the mind. Inversely and *a fortiori*, neither will nor sentiment can ever be dissociated from intelligence, which enlightens them and determines their applications and operations.

It has been said that reason is an infirmity, which is true if one compares it with the direct vision that is Intellection. If contingency is an infirmity, so is reason, but not in its positive aspect of adequation; this discursive adequation is necessary to man inasmuch as he finds himself situated between the outward and the inward, the contingent and the absolute. The whole debate regarding the capacity or incapacity of the human mind to know God resolves itself thus: our intelligence can know God only “by God” and therefore it is God who knows Himself in us. Reason can participate instrumentally and provisionally in this knowledge insofar as it remains united to God. It can participate in Revelation on the one hand and in Intellection on the other, the first relating to God “above us” and the second to God “within us.” If by the “human mind” one understands reason divorced from Intellection or from Revelation—the latter being, in principal necessary to actualize the former—it goes without saying that this mind is capable neither of illuminating us nor, *a fortiori*, of saving us.

For the fideist, only Revelation is “supernatural”; Intellection, of whose nature he is ignorant and which he reduces to mere logic, is in his eyes “natural.” For the gnostic, on the contrary, both Revelation and Intellection are supernatural given the fact that God—or the Holy Spirit—operated in the one as in the other. The fideist has every interest in believing that the convictions of the gnostic result from syllogisms, and he believes this all the more readily in that a logical operation, like any symbolism, can provoke a flash of Intellection and remove a veil from the mind. Moreover, the fideist cannot totally deny the phenomenon of intellectual intuition, but he will refrain from attributing it to the “naturally supernatural” and indwelling Revelation that is the Intellect; he will attribute it to “inspiration” and to the Holy Spirit, which is basically the same thing but safeguards the axiom of the incapacity of the “human mind.”

Thomism distinguishes the knowledge “obtained by natural reason” from that “obtained by grace,” which suggests that metaphysical certitudes would be gifts granted incidentally,¹ whereas in reality there is also in man what we would paradoxically call a “naturally supernatural grace, namely the Intellect. For a light that comes to us by sudden inspiration is one thing, and a light to which we have access through our “supernatural nature” is another; nevertheless, we could call this nature a “divine immanence” and thus dissociate it from the human. as indeed we do when we affirm that God alone can know God, be this within us or outside us. However that may be, the “natural” receptacle proportionate to the “supernatural”, has already in itself something supernatural or divine.²

The essence of epistemology is what constitutes the sufficient reason and very possibility of intelligence, namely adequation, or in other words “knowledge,” whatever agnostics may say; and to say adequation is to say prefiguration and even immanence of the knowable in the subject that knows or is destined to know.

The root of the polarization of the real into subject and object is situated in Being; not in the pure Absolute, Beyond-Being, but in its first self-determination. The divine *Maya* is the “confrontation,” if one may say so, of God as Subject or Consciousness and God as Object or Being; it is the knowledge that God has of Himself, of His Perfection and of His Possibilities.

This principal polarization is refracted endlessly in the universe, but it does so in an unequal manner-according to the requirements of manifesting Possibility-and the subjectivities as a result are not epistemologically equivalent. But to say that man is “made in the image of God” means precisely that he represents a central and not a peripheral subjectivity, and consequently a subject which, emanating directly from the Divine Intellect, participates in principle in the power of the latter; man can know all that is real and hence knowable, otherwise he would not be the earthly divinity which in fact he is.

Relative knowledge is limited subjectively by a point of view and objectively by an aspect; since man is relative, his knowledge is relative to the extent that it is human, and it is human in the reason, but not in the intrinsic Intellect; it is human in the “brain,” not in the “heart” united to the Absolute. And it is in this sense that, according to a *hadīth*, “Heaven and earth cannot contain

¹ From the point of view of the theory of knowledge, St. Thomas is a sensualist, thus almost a rationalist and empiricist; and yet, according to him, the principles of logic are situated in God, so that a contradiction between our knowledge and Divine Truth is impossible; and this is one of the axioms of all metaphysics and all epistemology.

² By analogy, we could say that Mary is “divine” not only through Jesus, but also, and a priori, by her receptivity proportionate to the Incarnation, whence the “Immaculate Conception,” which is an intrinsic quality of the Virgin. This being so, the Logos “was incarnated” in her already before the birth of Christ, which is indicated by the words *gratia plena* and *Dominus tecum*, and which explains why she could be represented—by Moslems as well as Christians—as the “Mother of all the Prophets.” The Lotus (*Padma*) could not be the bearer of the Jewel (*Mani*) if it were not itself a theophany.

Me [God], but the heart of the believer containeth Me”—this heart which, thanks to the miracle of Immanence, opens onto the Divine “Self” and onto the infinitude, both extinctive and unitive, of the knowable, hence of the Real.

Why this detour—one may ask—by way of the human intelligence? Why should God, who knows Himself in Himself, wish to know Himself also through man? Because, as a *hadīth* tells us, “I was a hidden treasure, and I wished to be known; hence I created the world.” Which means that the Absolute wishes to be known from the starting point of the relative. And why? Because this is a possibility pertaining, as such, to the limitlessness of Divine Possibility; a possibility, and thus something that cannot but be, something whose “why” resides in the Infinite.