

Thomas Aquinas on the Nature of Singular Thought

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ABSTRACT

In his account of the intellectual cognition of singulars, Aquinas claims that the intellect cognizes singulars by way of mental images. Some recent commentators have claimed that Aquinas' appeal to mental images is inadequate to account for the intellectual cognition of singulars because mental images considered in terms of their qualitative character alone have content that is general and are, therefore, insufficient to determine reference to a singular. That is, if Aquinas takes mental images to refer to singulars because those singulars perfectly *resemble* the mental images, then his account is deficient. In my paper, I argue that the critical interpretation above is predicated on a misunderstanding of Aquinas regarding the intentionality of images. I investigate Aquinas' account of the intentionality of images in order to show that Aquinas understands the reference of mental images to be determined not by their qualitative character alone but also by the causal relation that obtains between the cognizer and a singular.

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Introduction

We seem to be able to think about particular things. That is, I can look at a dog lying on a rug and think about *this* dog lying on the rug. But what exactly is it that I am thinking of when I am allegedly considering the dog lying on the rug? Furthermore, how is it that my thought refers to *this* dog rather than *that* dog? In contemporary philosophical literature, these and related questions fall under the problem of *singular thought*. In this paper, however, I want to explore a much older version of the problem of singular thought—namely, the version put forward by St. Thomas Aquinas.¹ The question of how we go about thinking of particular things is an issue that appears repeatedly in Aquinas’ work as the question of whether the human intellect can cognize what he refers to as *singulars*.

Illuminating Aquinas’ account of the intellectual cognition of singulars will require answering two distinct but related questions:

Content question: What is the content of the intellectual cognition of a singular (i.e., is it the singular itself or a collection of properties possessed by the singular)?

Determination question: What determines the reference of the intellectual cognition of a singular (i.e., what makes my intellectual cognition about *this* singular rather than *that* singular)?

¹ In the footnotes, I employ the following abbreviations for Aquinas’ works:

<i>In DA</i>	<i>Sententia libri De anima</i> (Commentary on Aristotle’s <i>On the Soul</i>)
<i>In DMR</i>	<i>Sententia super De memoria et reminiscentia</i> (Commentary on Aristotle’s <i>On Memory and Recollection</i>)
<i>In Meta</i>	<i>Sententia super Metaphysicam</i> (Commentary on Aristotle’s <i>Metaphysics</i>)
<i>QDA</i>	<i>Quaestio disputata de anima</i> (Disputed Questions on the Soul)
<i>QDP</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de potentia</i> (Disputed Questions on Power)
<i>QDV</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de veritate</i> (Disputed Questions on Truth)
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa theologiae</i> (Synopsis of Theology)

The translations of the above works used in the paper are listed in the bibliography.

Expositions of Aquinas' account of the intellectual cognition of singulars have tended to focus on the Determination question rather than the Content question.² But Aquinas' answer to the Determination question is in large part conditioned by how he answers the Content question. Therefore, I will spend much of my paper attempting to tease out Aquinas' answer to the Content question. Only then will I turn to the Determination question.

However, before introducing my interpretation of Aquinas regarding the Content and Determination questions, I want to take a brief detour through some contemporary philosophical thought on the cognition of singulars. Going back to the example above involving the dog lying on a rug, you might think that the content of the intellectual cognition of the dog lying on the rug is or at least involves the particular dog *itself*. This position is called *singularism*, and the cognition of singulars considered in this way is said to be *de re* cognition.³ On the other hand, you might think that it only *seems* like the content of our cognition involves the particular dog itself, but in reality the content of our cognition consists of a unique bundle of properties that the particular dog possesses. This position is called *descriptivism* because our cognition is not directly about the things themselves but about the properties these things are described as possessing. Those who are descriptivists about the Content question tend to answer the Determination question *satisfactionally*—that is, my thought is about *this* dog rather than *that* dog because this

² The issue of the intellectual cognition of singulars in Aquinas has been pointed discussed by a number of scholars: Klubertanz (1952), Lonergan (1997), 168-186; Boulter (2006), 59-78; Pasnau (1997), 113-121; Kenny (1993), 111-117; Stump (2003), 270-273.

³ The suggestion that the content of a cognitive act just *is* a singular seems to imply that we can have singulars literally residing in our heads (e.g., dogs curled up on rugs in our skulls). This is not how the claim should be interpreted. For the singularist, talking about content just turns out to be another way of talking about reference. So, for the content of a thought to be singular is just for the reference of the thought to be determined to a singular. Since referents aren't necessarily 'in the head', neither are contents (on this view).

dog satisfies the conditions provided by the content of the cognitive act by instantiating, *in fact*, the relevant set of properties. On the other hand, those who are singularists about the Content question tend to answer the Determination question *relationally*—that is, my thought is about *this* dog rather than *that* dog because (among other things) I stand in a particular relation (e.g., causal, epistemic, etc.) to this dog and not to that dog.⁴

In this paper, I will attempt to provide an interpretation of Aquinas' account of the intellectual cognition of singulars using the framework provided by contemporary philosophical accounts of singular thought. I will argue that Aquinas is a singularist when it comes to the Content question and that he answers the Determination question relationally. In other words, Aquinas takes the content of the intellectual cognition of singulars to be *de re*. Moreover, what determines the reference of intellectual cognition to a singular is that I stand in a certain kind of relation to that singular. However, before arguing this, I will first provide some background to Aquinas' account of the intellectual cognition of singulars.⁵

⁴ There is another 'Determination Question' that we could ask about the intellectual cognition of singulars—namely, what determines the *content* of such cognition? However, this content version of the question is only distinct from the reference version of the question for descriptivists. For the singularist, since content and reference are the same, the answer to the question of how you determine content is going to be the same as the answer to the question of how you determine reference. For the descriptivist, on the other hand, since the content of a thought is a complex of properties, there is an independent question about what determines such content. So, for the purposes of this paper, we can leave the content version of the Determination question to the side. Thanks to Kelly Trogdon for helping me see the distinction.

⁵ At this point, someone might (rightfully) raise a methodological worry about the thesis of this paper. This person might wonder whether Aquinas is really a 'singularist' or whether he really thinks 'reference' is determined relationally. On one interpretation of the question, it is, of course, anachronistic to say that Aquinas is a singularist or takes reference to be determined relationally. There were no people called 'singularists' or 'descriptivists' when Aquinas was writing, and there doesn't seem to have been anyone talking about 'reference determination.' This is, however, not what I'm claiming when I say that Aquinas is a singularist or that he takes reference to be determined relationally. Rather, what I am claiming is that if we are careful, we can, using our own philosophical paradigm, interpret Aquinas as putting forward a position that we would now call 'singularism' or 'relational reference determination.' Furthermore, such an interpretative methodology is a fruitful way of bringing Aquinas into conversation with contemporary philosophical issues.

Section 1: Background

Aquinas' account of the intellectual cognition of singulars is almost always embedded in the discussion of a potential problem generated by two theses—the first metaphysical and the second epistemological—lurking in the background of his philosophical framework. I will call this problem the Problem of Intellectual Cognition of Singulars (henceforth, the Problem). Understanding the Problem, as well as the kinds of solutions that Aquinas rejects, will help us discover Aquinas' answers to the Content and Determination questions. In what follows, I will present the theses that generate the Problem.

1.1 Hylomorphism and Material Individuation

Before expounding the metaphysical thesis, it is first necessary to provide a brief outline of Aquinas' hylomorphism. According to Aquinas, individual material things are actually compounds of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). Matter, which is pure potency, does not actually exist on its own but must be brought into existence by a form, the 'formal cause' of an actually existing thing. Neither do the forms of material things actually exist on their own; rather, they exist only as instantiated in matter.⁶ So, an actually existing material thing is brought into existence by the 'realization' of matter by a formal cause.⁷ For example, the form of a dog is what makes matter into an actually existing dog. With this rudimentary outline of Aquinas' hylomorphism in place, I can introduce the first thesis that generates the Problem.

The first thesis, which I will call the Material Individuation Thesis (henceforth, MI Thesis), runs as follows:

⁶ This is what separates the hylomorphism of Aristotle and Aquinas from that of Plato.

⁷ *In Meta* VII.17.1666-68.

Material Individuation Thesis: A singular is individuated from other qualitatively identical singulars not in virtue of its form but in virtue of the matter in which its form inheres.

Within the hylomorphic framework, the MI Thesis is essential because some principle is necessary to make numerical distinctions among material objects that share the same form. In more contemporary philosophical terms, some principle is necessary to individuate objects that share all of the same qualitative properties. To better understand what motivates the MI Thesis, consider the following scenario. Suppose that there are two dogs, Clifford and Rover, and a cat, Mittens. Obviously, Mittens is distinct from Clifford and Rover because she has the property of cat-ness rather than the property of dogness. However, let's suppose that Clifford and Rover are qualitatively identical in every respect (e.g., dogness, largeness, brownness, etc.). What, then, makes Clifford and Rover numerically distinct? It can't be any qualitative properties they possess because *ex hypothesi* they are qualitatively identical. So, it must be their material components. In other words, Clifford's properties are instantiated in one hunk of matter while Rover's properties are instantiated in another. Therefore, matter is what makes it possible for there to be many distinct things that share the same properties. It is, according to Aquinas, the 'principle of individuation' of material things.⁸

1.2 Abstraction

The epistemological thesis, one of the hallmarks of the Aristotelian empiricist tradition of which Aquinas is a part and which I will call the Abstraction Thesis, runs as follows:

⁸ *ST Ia.75.5.*

Abstraction Thesis: In order for material things to become intelligible, the intellect must abstract the nature of material things from its individualizing material conditions.

What is important about the Abstraction Thesis is not the abstractive process itself. That has its own set of problems. Rather, for the purposes of this paper, the Abstraction Thesis is important because at the end of the process of abstraction the intellect generates a representation whose content is *general* in nature. Aquinas calls the general representation produced by way of abstraction an ‘intelligible *species*’, but nowadays these kinds of representations are typically referred to as ‘concepts.’ The representational content of the intelligible *species* is general because the *species* represent the *formal* component of things abstracted from the individuating material conditions of the material thing.⁹ What this means in more contemporary terms is that intelligible *species* are representations of *properties*¹⁰ of singulars rather than singulars *themselves*. Since forms or properties are by nature the kinds of things that can be instantiated in more than one entity, a representation of the formal component of things will necessarily have content that is general.

1.3 The Problem

At this point it, it is probably already becoming clear that the above theses do not, in conjunction, obviously lend themselves to a successful theory of the intellectual cognition of singulars. What follows is a preliminary formulation of the Problem.

As I stated above, according to Aquinas, a singular thing, *x*, is a matter-form composite. In order for the intellect to cognize *x* the intellect must be able to represent *x*

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper, I’m going to be treating ‘forms’ as roughly synonymous with ‘properties.’

in a way that uniquely refers to x rather than any other singular. According to the MI thesis, x is numerically individuated from other things that are qualitatively identical to x by its matter. Therefore, in order to uniquely cognize x rather than any other actual or possible singular, the content of the cognitive act must somehow involve the material conditions that are constitutive of x . However, according to the Abstraction Thesis, the abstractive process generates an intelligible *species* whose content is general precisely because it has been *abstracted* from the material conditions that are constitutive of x . Aquinas, therefore, is in a predicament: In order to cognize a singular, the intellect needs a representation with singular content (i.e., material conditions and all), but the only representations the intellect has at its disposal have general content. Thus, Aquinas concludes that ‘since the likeness of a thing existing in our intellect is received as separated from matter and the conditions of matter, which are the principles of individuation, it follows that our intellect, of itself, does not know singulars but only universals.’¹¹

At this point, I want to anticipate a possible objection. Someone might, based on Aquinas’ statement above, conclude that the jig is up. Aquinas *says* the intellect cannot cognize singulars, so he clearly thinks we just can’t do it. However, the presupposition at the heart of this objection is that if the *intellect* cannot cognize singulars, then *human beings* cannot cognize singulars. In other words, the objection above assumes that human cognition is *solely* an act of the intellect. However, Aquinas, unlike Descartes and Plato before him, does not locate all of the human being’s cognitive acts in the immaterial, separate intellect. Rather, much of the human being’s cognitive activity occurs in the

¹¹ *ST* Ia.75.5.

external and internal senses which reside in the corporeal sense organs. When Aquinas is at his most precise he takes great pains to note that, strictly speaking, cognition is the act of the *entire composite creature*—that is, the whole human being. So, in his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Anima*, we find Aquinas suggesting that it might be ‘better to say that soul does not feel pity, or learn, or intellectually cognize, but that a human being does so, through soul.’¹² And, elsewhere, he claims that ‘properly speaking, it is neither the intellect nor the sense that knows, but man that knows through both...’¹³ In the words of Eleanore Stump, cognition, including the cognition of singulars, is a ‘systems feature; it is to be ascribed to the whole human being, and not to one of her components, not even to the fanciest component, the intellect.’¹⁴ With this objection out of the way, we can proceed to consider Aquinas’ own solution to the Problem.

¹² *In DA* I.10.152.

¹³ *QDV* 2.6 ad 3.

¹⁴ Stump (2003), 273.

Section 2: Aquinas' Objection to the Descriptivist Solution

However, before discussing Aquinas' solution, I want to at least give a preliminary sketch of Aquinas' answer to the Content question, an answer that, I think, can be gleaned from his statement of the Problem alone. One way to make sense of the Problem, as Aquinas poses it, is that Aquinas simply assumes at the outset that the content of the intellectual cognition of a singular is the singular itself. That is, Aquinas is, on *a priori* grounds, a *singularist* regarding the Content question. The Problem, then, is that, because of the Abstraction Thesis, all we appear to be able to directly cognize are the *properties* of things and, therefore, the general content the intellect has at its disposal is just the wrong kind of content to achieve the cognition of singulars. Although this is only a preliminary sketch of Aquinas' answer to the Content question, this interpretation is further supported by Aquinas' argument against what I will call the 'Descriptivist Solution' to the Problem.

2.1 *The Descriptivist Solution*

In 'Singular Thought: In Defense of Acquaintance,' Francois Recanati classifies descriptivism as the view that 'our mental relation to individual objects goes through properties of those objects.'¹⁵ Recanati goes on to describe how the descriptivist envisages such a mental relation coming about:

Objects are given to us only qua instantiators of whatever properties we take them to have. On this view, my friend John is only given to me as the *x* who has all (or perhaps most of) the properties I take him to have: being my friend, being called

¹⁵ Recanati, (2010), 141.

‘John’, having a certain appearance, having a certain history (e.g., having been my classmate in such and such years), and so on and so forth.¹⁶

The descriptivist, then, imagines that she might pick out a singular by providing a description that is uniquely satisfied by the singular in question. In Aquinas’ terminology, the descriptivist imagines that even though our intellect can only directly cognize properties, perhaps it is possible to cognize a set of properties that is uniquely satisfied by a singular. The supposition is, then, that if you could get enough general content together, you could cognize a singular.

Interestingly, Aquinas anticipates and rejects just such a descriptivist solution to the Problem. Instead, he argues that no amount of general content, however extensive, is ever sufficient to determine reference to a singular because it is always logically possible for another actual or possible singular to satisfy the qualitative conditions provided by the general content, perhaps a thing that we do not even know about. Aquinas imagines the following scenario:

If I say a human being is white, musical, and if I add any number of accidental qualities of this sort, there will still not be a singular. For it is possible that all of these qualities, even though they are found together, should belong to a number of individuals.¹⁷

In other words, one could provide a complete account of the qualitative properties possessed by some singular thing, but such a description would still be insufficient to determine reference to one singular possessing all the properties in the description rather than some other actual or possible singular that possesses all the properties. Take, for

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *QDA* un.20 corpus.

example, the case of Clifford and Rover mentioned above. Let's also imagine that you only know about Clifford—that is, you have no idea that Rover even exists. It is relatively easy to see that if Clifford and Rover are qualitatively identical in every respect, they are not, therefore, the same dog because their properties inhere in numerically distinct portions of matter. But what happens if you try to *intellectually cognize* Clifford rather than Rover? Were you to try to intellectually cognize Clifford rather than Rover and the only contents you had at your disposal were intelligible *species* representing Clifford's properties, then the reference of your cognition would not be determined to Clifford in particular. It would remain underdetermined whether you were intellectually cognizing Clifford or Rover because both Clifford and Rover would satisfy the conditions provided by the general content of the cognitive act.

To illustrate his point, Aquinas frequently uses a thought-experiment involving an omniscient astronomer predicting a future eclipse. The thought-experiment runs as follows:

...if someone were to know the total order of the heavens and the stars, their size and their movements, he would know intellectually all future eclipses, both their number and where they would take place and at what times they would occur in the future.¹⁸

He concludes, however, that the omniscient astronomer, despite the fact that his knowledge is, in some sense, fit to determine reference to an *individual* eclipse satisfying the description, does not cognize *this* individual eclipse satisfying the description rather

¹⁸ Ibid.

than some *other* actual or possible eclipse satisfying the description. That is, according to Aquinas:

...it is possible that all of these qualities, even though they are found together, should belong to a number of individuals. Hence he who knows all causes universally will never for this reason properly know a singular effect; nor does he who knows the total order of the heavens know this eclipse as it exists here and now. For even if he would know that an eclipse will occur, and all details about it that can be observed in eclipses, such as the precise location of sun and moon and the exact time of year at which it will occur, it is still possible that an eclipse of this same sort could occur several times.¹⁹

Thus, Aquinas concludes that a singular cannot be cognized by cognizing the *properties*, even *all* the properties, of the singular. But what does Aquinas' response reveal about his answer to the Content question?

2.2 *The Content Question*

Aquinas' rejection of the descriptivist solution to the Problem yields both an explicit negative answer and an implicit substantive answer to the Content question. The explicit negative answer is that the content of the intellectual cognition of a singular cannot be general in nature. It is clear from the conclusion that Aquinas draws from the thought-experiment that in order to intellectually cognize a singular it must be *impossible* for the content of the intellectual cognition to be satisfied by any other actual or possible singular. However, general content, no matter how extensive, will remain *general* in nature. That is, it will remain possible for any number of actual or possible singulars to

¹⁹ Ibid.

satisfy the conditions provided by the general content. Therefore, general content alone is *essentially* incapable of generating the intellectual cognition of a singular. If this is the case, then the Problem, as Aquinas understands it, is not a problem that descriptivism can solve because it is a problem intrinsic to accounts that take the reference of the intellectual cognition of a singular to be determined by an aggregate of general content.²⁰

Aquinas allows that general content might *constrain* intellectual cognition to a general individual but such a singular will remain a *general* individual rather than a singular. For example, we might constrain intellectual cognition to some eclipse possessing such and such physical properties and occurring on such and such a day at such and such a time. But general content will not determine the reference of intellectual cognition to *this* individual eclipse possessing the relevant properties rather than some *other* actual or possible individual eclipse possessing the relevant properties. To better understand the distinction between a general individual and a singular, consider descriptions like ‘the first child born in the 23rd century’ or ‘the tallest man on earth.’ Both of these statements have general content whose reference is determined to an individual, but this individual is general because the individual picked out is just *whatever* individual happens to satisfy the descriptive conditions provided by the general content. According to Aquinas, so long as the content of a cognitive act is general, the act is precisely *not* genuine intellectual cognition of a singular.

²⁰ Someone might object here that Aquinas’ argument is not going to be convincing to the descriptivist. A descriptivist could simply reject Aquinas’ intuition that in order for a case of cognition to count as a genuine instance of the intellectual cognition of a singular it must be impossible for the cognitive act to refer to any other actual or possible singular. However, Aquinas’ argument is not directed at such a descriptivist. Rather, it is directed at the descriptivist who (1) shares Aquinas’ intuition about cases of genuine intellectual cognition of singulars and (2) takes general content to be sufficient to determine reference to a singular.

The implied substantive conclusion of Aquinas' argument against the descriptivist is that genuine singular intellectual cognition is *de re*. That is, the content of the intellectual cognition is the singular itself, not a bundle of properties possessed by the singular thing, no matter how unique the bundle of properties may be. Therefore, Aquinas' argument against the descriptivist implicitly reveals him to be a singularist regarding the Content question. Let's turn now to Aquinas' own solution to the Problem and, by extension, his answer to the Determination question.

Section 3: Aquinas' Solution to the Problem

In one of his statements of the Problem, Aquinas claims that intellect can cognize singulars 'indirectly, and as it were by a kind of reflection.'²¹ But what could it mean to cognize singulars *indirectly* and what is this vague notion of a 'kind of reflection'? Elsewhere, Aquinas is more forthright about the process of *indirect* cognition of singulars and he elaborates on the act of reflection involved:

...intellect has cognition of [the universal and the individual], but in different ways. For it has cognition of the nature of the species (or what-it-is) by directly extending itself to it, whereas it has cognition of the individual itself by a kind of reflection, insofar as it returns to the phantasms from which the intelligible species are abstracted. That is why [Aristotle] says that since it has cognition of flesh by what is sensory, it discerns the being that is appropriate to flesh (i.e., the what-it-is of flesh) by something different (i.e., by a different power) either by something separated (e.g., when flesh is cognize by sense and the being that is appropriate to flesh by intellect) or by the same thing differently disposed. That is, the intellective soul has cognition of flesh just as a bent line is related to itself: when it is straightened out the intellective soul discerns the being that is appropriate to flesh—i.e., it apprehends the quiddity of flesh directly, but flesh itself by reflection.²²

What Aquinas appears to be saying in this passage is that the reference of intellectual cognition is determined to a singular *not* by way of intelligible *species* but by way of

²¹ Ibid.

²² *In DA* III.8.713.

totally different set of mental representations, namely, ‘phantasms’ or mental images, the products of the imagination.

Although Aquinas regarded this as the obvious solution to the Problem, the solution is a curious one and has been received with skepticism by some contemporary interpreters. A number of contemporary interpreters have accused Aquinas of a confusion in his solution to the Problem.²³ These interpreters argue that although Aquinas rejects a descriptivist solution to the Problem, when it comes time to solve the Problem and propose an answer to the Determination question, the solution he provides is essentially descriptivist in nature. On a descriptivist interpretation of the ‘turn to the phantasms,’ Aquinas’ appeal to mental images is an attempt to determine reference to a singular by adding *more* general content to the cognitive act. In the next section, I will provide an account of the descriptivist interpretation of the ‘turn to the phantasms’, as well as show why the interpretation is premature.

²³ Pasnau (1997), 113-121; Kenny (2002), 252; Boulter (2007), *passim*.

Section 4: A Descriptivist Interpretation of the ‘Turn to the Phantasms’

In ‘Aquinas and Searle on Singular Thoughts’, Stephen Boulter claims that Aquinas’ position on singular cognition is ‘remarkable’ because of its ‘underlying assumptions about the nature of reference and mental representation.’²⁴ Boulter notes that ‘[if] we recast [Aquinas’] claims in the more familiar language of Fregean senses, Aquinas appears to be arguing that there cannot be a complete Fregean sense for proper names.’²⁵ However, on Boulter’s reading, Aquinas’ solution (i.e., the ‘turn to the phantasms’) makes the same mistake that 20th century descriptivists made when confronted with anti-descriptivist critiques along the same lines as those made by Aquinas himself. That is, supposing that the reference of a description by way of Fregean senses could be narrowed by including other kinds of intentional content, descriptivists put forward mental images as a way to determine reference to a singular. According to Boulter, however, ‘it is a mistake to think that sense images or phantasms would be of any use to the intellect in its endeavor to think of particulars.’²⁶ In other words, if Boulter’s interpretation is correct, Aquinas’ claim that we can intellectually cognize singulars by way of a ‘turn to phantasms’ is inadequate.

Boulter’s argument for his contention relies on Putnam’s Twin Earth thought experiment, which is alleged to show (among other things) that the descriptivists’ appeal to mental images is still insufficient to determine reference to a singular. In his thought experiment, Putnam imagines that there is another Earth, Twin Earth, that is identical to our Earth in every way except one: Twin Earth contains Twin Water, a substance that is

²⁴ Boulter (2007), 62.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 60.

perceptually identical to Earth Water but that has a different molecular composition. Thus, when our Twin Earth doppelgangers interact with Twin Water, they have mental images exactly like our own despite the fact that they are interacting with a different substance. So, even though our Twin Earth doppelgangers may call Twin Water ‘water’ and may have mental images of Twin Water identical to our own mental images of regular water it is clear that we are not cognizing the same substances.

According to Boulter, ‘the interesting point here for Thomists is that Putnam’s experiment shows that sense images *qua* sense images do not individuate.’²⁷ That is, while the content of mental images considered in themselves might seem to be singular, they actually have general content. In other words, if we consider the mental image in itself, the qualitative content of the image may be narrow enough to determine reference to one thing at a time, given that the one thing satisfies the conditions provided by the image, but even an image is not restrictive enough to determine the reference of the image to a particular individual. Recall the example involving Clifford and Rover. If I consider a mental image of Rover, that mental image might constrain my considerations to an *individual* dog, but it is not restrictive enough to constrain my consideration to *Rover* rather than *Clifford* because Rover and Clifford are qualitatively identical. Therefore, if mental images have general content, then Aquinas’ account of singular intellectual cognition fails.

However, Anthony Kenny, in his own critique of Aquinas’ solution to the Problem, inadvertently reveals a gap in the descriptivist interpretation of the ‘turn to the phantasms.’ In his essay ‘Intentionality: Aquinas and Wittgenstein,’ Kenny states:

²⁷ Ibid., 63.

In a manner which remains mysterious, Aquinas seems to have thought that only the appropriate accompanying mental imagery would differentiate a thought about Socrates from a thought about Plato or about any other human being. Even if this is so, it seems that the same questions about individuation could arise about the mental imagery as arise about the thought, unless we relate the imagery in some way to a transaction in the world outside the imagination.²⁸

What Kenny's critique reveals is that the descriptivist interpretation of the 'turn to the phantasms' is premature. That is, the descriptivist interpretation has *not* asked the 'same questions' about mental images that were asked about intelligible *species*. Since we are now dealing with a new set of representations—namely, mental images—we have to ask the Content and Determination questions *again*, this time about mental images rather than intelligible *species*.

What I will show in the next section is that the descriptivist interpretation of the 'turn to the phantasms' has ignored Aquinas' numerous discussions of both the role of phantasms in cognition and, more importantly, the intentionality of images. That is, the descriptivist interpretation simply assumes that Aquinas understands mental images to be augmenting the general content of cognition and, therefore, assumes that he is essentially offering a descriptivist solution to the Problem. In the next section, I will argue that far from having been confused about the nature of mental images, Aquinas fully understood the problem that Kenny presents in the above quote.

²⁸ Kenny (2002), 252.

Section 5: Towards a Relational Interpretation of the ‘Turn to the Phantasms’

In this section, I will argue that Aquinas understands the content of phantasms to be the singular itself and, moreover, that he understands the reference of the intellectual cognition of singulars to be determined relationally rather than satisfactionally.

5.1 Phantasms and the Content Question

On Aquinas’ account of human cognition, phantasms are the distillates of a complex process of composing the raw data of the external and internal senses. The five external senses which reside in our corporeal sense organs (i.e., eyes, nose, skin, etc.) receive likenesses of sensible things (i.e., colors, scents, temperatures, etc.). Next, the common sense, the first of the internal senses, which Aquinas calls the ‘ground’ of the other senses, composes the data of the external senses. It has two related functions: First, it unifies the information received in the external senses so that common sensibles (i.e., size, shape, number, etc.) might be apprehended; second, it apprehends the sensitive act itself.²⁹ Therefore, the common sense seems to be the location of the act that makes *awareness* possible.

Only at this point in the cognitive process does the phantasm or mental image proceed from the common sense. The phantasm is, in Aquinas’ words, the ‘movement caused by actualized sense.’³⁰ In his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Aquinas explains the production of phantasms as follows:

...Aristotle proposes that it is possible for a certain movement to be produced by a sensory act; this is then made clear on the basis of what was first claimed—namely, that by means of what has been moved, it is possible for something to be

²⁹ *In DA* II.13.390.

³⁰ *In DA* III.6.659.

moved. But a sense is actualized as the result of being moved by its sense objects. It remains, then, that actualized sense will cause some movement. Also, it is clear on this basis that the movement will cause some movement. Also, it is clear on this basis that the movement caused by a sensory act is necessarily like the sense, given that every agent carries out something like itself.³¹

That is to say, the phantasm is the product of a sensory act, which as was said involves both cognition of the sensory *object* and cognition of the sensory *act* by way of the common sense. On this basis, Eleanore Stump has argued convincingly that the production of phantasms can be likened to ‘conscious experience.’³² Indeed, in his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Anima*, we find Aquinas comparing phantasms to ‘an appearance or illumination.’³³

The importance of the relation between sense and phantasm for the Content question is that just as sensible *species* are representations of singulars so are the phantasms. Thus, we find Aquinas claiming in the *Summa* that ‘the phantasm is the likeness of an individual thing.’³⁴ Elsewhere, he draws the contrast between phantasms and intelligible species as the difference between representations of singulars and representations of universals: ‘[P]hantasms are likenesses of particulars whereas intellections are universals abstracted from individuating conditions.’³⁵ Therefore, although the phantasms, like the sensible *species*, do not receive the matter of the object they represent—for this would mean that they literally *become* the singular—their content is singular rather than general.

³¹ *In DA* III.6.658.

³² Stump (2003), 259.

³³ *In DA* III.6.668.

³⁴ *ST* Ia.84.7 ad 2.

³⁵ *In DA* III.13.794.

5.2 Phantasms and the Determination Question

So, the question before us (again) is the Determination question: That is, how is the reference of phantasms or mental images determined? I will proceed indirectly by first exploring how Aquinas understands the reference of images *in general* to be determined.

In Question 93 of the *Summa*, Aquinas discusses two kinds of representations: traces and images. A trace, according to Aquinas, ‘represents something by way of an effect, which represents the cause in such a way as not to attain to the likeness of species’³⁶ Aquinas provides three examples, stating that ‘imprints which are left by the movements of animals are called traces: so also ashes are a trace of fire, and desolation of the land a trace of a hostile army.’³⁷ An image, on the other hand, is not only dependent on its object in the manner of an effect but, according to Aquinas, ‘represents something by likeness in species.’³⁸ That is, something is not an image unless there is at least *some* sense in which it resembles that object after which it is modelled. So, when Aquinas discusses images, he commonly provides examples involving painted pictures³⁹ and sculptures.⁴⁰

What is important about Aquinas’ discussion of the two kinds of representations above is that even in the case of images, representations that involve a likeness (i.e., resemblance) between image and object, the reference of the representation is determined by a *relation* that holds between the representation and the object. Therefore, in his

³⁶ *ST* Ia.93.6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *In DMR* 3.340-341.

⁴⁰ *ST* Ia.93.2.

discussion of the distinction between ‘likeness’ and ‘image’, Aquinas makes the following interesting remark:

As Augustine says (Questions. 83, qu. 74): "Where an image exists, there forthwith is likeness; but where there is likeness, there is not necessarily an image." Hence it is clear that likeness is essential to an image; and that an image adds something to likeness—namely, that it is copied from something else. For an "image" is so called because it is produced as an imitation of something else; wherefore, for instance, an egg, however much like and equal to another egg, is not called an image of the other egg, because it is not copied from it.⁴¹

On Aquinas’ analysis, what determines the reference of an image is the relation the image bears to the object after which it is modelled. An image comes to represent an object not (or, perhaps, not *only*) because it bears a qualitative likeness to (i.e., resembles) the object but because it stands in a particular relation to that object. If the only condition on being an image were a qualitative likeness condition, then, to use Aquinas’ example, one egg would be an image of another. Consider an example involving the qualitatively identical dogs, Clifford and Rover. If I look at a photograph of Clifford, based on resemblance alone, the photograph represents Rover just as much as it represents Clifford. But the photograph is *of* Clifford because the reference of the photograph is determined by the relation it bears to Clifford—namely, a capturing relation. Therefore, a particular object is not the reference of an image because it satisfies the qualitative likeness conditions given in the image but because it stands in a particular kind of relation to that after which it is modeled.

⁴¹ *ST* Ia.93.1.

However, this relation is not a *mutual* relation. If it were a mutual relation a man would be just as much a representation of his painted image as his painted image is a representation of *him*. Rather, images stand in an asymmetrical relation to their object. According to Aquinas, ‘there is not a real relation either in a man to his image, or in money to the price, but vice versa.’⁴² In his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Aquinas further elucidates the asymmetry in the relation that holds between an image and its object:

...measure and what is measurable are not said to be related to each other reciprocally...but only what is measurable is related to its measure. And in a similar fashion too an image is related to that of which it is the image as what is measurable is related to its measure. For the truth of an image is measured by the thing whose image it is.⁴³

Elsewhere, Aquinas claims that the evaluation of the image is in terms of the likeness it bears to its object. He states, ‘[likeness] may be considered as subsequent to image, inasmuch as it signifies a certain perfection of image. For we say that an image is like or unlike what it represents, according as the representation is perfect or imperfect.’⁴⁴ What is important to note here is that the likeness the image bears to its object only comes into play in the context of evaluation—that is, *after* the reference of the image is already determined. In fact, if the reference of the image were determined satisfactorily, the image could not be evaluated.

⁴² *QDP* 7.10.

⁴³ *In Meta* V.17.1003.

⁴⁴ *ST* Ia.93.9.

But does Aquinas take the reference of *mental* images to be determined relationally? That Aquinas takes mental images to be analogous to ordinary images is clear from his explanation of the formation of mental images by way of comparison to the formation of ordinary images. In his commentary on Aristotle's *On Memory and Recollection*, Aquinas claims that a phantasm is an 'affectation of the common sense.'⁴⁵ Further down, he explains what he means by 'affectation':

...we say that memory belongs to the soul of this body as a habit, and that this affectation is, so to speak, a sort of picturing, since the sensible object imprints its likeness upon the sense, and since this sort of likeness persists in the imagination even when the sensible object goes away. This is why [Aristotle] adds that the motion that is engendered by the sensible object upon the sense-power impresses upon the imagination as it were a sensible figure that remains when the sensible object goes away in the same way as that whereby those who seal things with their signet rings impress within the wax a figure that remains even when the seal or the ring has been removed.⁴⁶

Clearly, Aquinas takes the process by which mental images are formed to be analogous or perhaps even identical to the process by which ordinary images are formed. But, as we have already seen, the reference of ordinary images is determined relationally. So, it stands to reason that the reference of mental images is determined relationally. But is there any other more explicit evidence that this is the case?

⁴⁵ *In DMR* 2.319.

⁴⁶ *In DMR* 3.328.

In the thought experiment involving the astronomer and an eclipse, Aquinas gives us reason to think that the reference of mental images is determined relationally. In this version of the thought experiment, he states:

...to know a singular, merely in its universal causes, is not to know it as singular, that is, as it exists here and now. The astronomer, knowing from computation of the heavenly movements that an eclipse is about to happen, knows it in the universal; yet he does not know it as taking place now, except by the senses.⁴⁷

Whatever Aquinas means by ‘here and now,’ it cannot be third personal (or ‘universal,’ to use Aquinas’ terminology) because Aquinas has already stipulated that the omniscient astronomer knows every observable detail of the eclipse, including when and where it will occur. What this suggests is that ‘here and now’ indicate an immediate relation we stand in to the object under consideration. Aquinas uses similar relational language elsewhere when he describes the difference between universal knowledge and particular knowledge as the difference between cognizing ‘wood’ in general and cognizing ‘this piece of wood as it is this piece of wood.’⁴⁸ It seems, then, that Aquinas understands the reference of phantasms to be determined by the relation I stand in to the object I am cognizing.

However, if the reference of mental images is determined relationally, then how can we intellectually cognize singulars to which we have not stood in any kind of direct epistemic relation? That is, how can I intellectually cognize Aristotle, given that I have never received knowledge of him through the senses? Aquinas never directly answers this question. However, I think that some of Aquinas’ considerations regarding ordinary

⁴⁷ *ST Ia.57.2.*

⁴⁸ *In DA II.13.398.*

images can be extended in order to answer the above questions. So, let's explore further the nature of the relation that holds between an image and its object.

What is it about the relation that holds between an image and its object that makes it asymmetrical? One possibility is that the relation is asymmetrical because it is a causal relation. That is, the reference of the image is determined to a singular (but not the other way around) because the singular played a causal role in producing the image. So, a painting of Obama is *of* Obama because Obama posed for the painter. This version of the causal explanation is certainly *sufficient* to account for the singular content of an image. In fact, Aquinas (utilizing an example from Aristotle) claims that when a signet ring is pressed into wax, the wax acquires the *image* of the seal on the ring.⁴⁹ However, this kind of direct causal relation between the image and its object is not *necessary*. To use Alva Nöe's apt phrase, whatever causal relation is involved in the relation between an image and its object, it is 'of a historical, narrative sort, rather than of the billiard-balls-knocking-together sort.'⁵⁰ So, while Aquinas often sounds as though he is explaining the relational determination of the reference of images in terms of efficient causation alone (i.e., billiard balls knocking together), when he is most careful, he uses a less restrictive version of causation. In *De Veritate*, he states:

...an artist makes his painting imitate someone whose portrait he is making. It happens at times, however, that such an imitation is not intentional, but happens by chance or by accident. For example, painters frequently paint something resembling someone when they have not intended to do so. Now, what imitates a

⁴⁹ *In DA* III.24.553-554.

⁵⁰ Nöe (2012) 107.

form by chance is not said to be formed according to that form, because *according to* seems to imply direction to an end.⁵¹

Elsewhere, Aquinas claims that ‘a figure represents its original as its principle, because a figure and an image are drawn from the archetype as from a principle.’⁵² These statements suggest that Aquinas takes the causal relation to be of the ‘historical, narrative sort.’ That is to say, the thing itself figures in an *explanatory* account of the image.⁵³

With the above considerations in mind, let’s return to the question of how we can intellectually cognize a singular to which we have not stood in a direct epistemic relation. Given that Aquinas’ considerations about images can be applied to mental images, it seems that we do not need to stand or to have stood in any immediate relation to a singular (say, Aristotle) in order to intellectually cognize it as singular. Rather, it is only necessary that I have a mental image of the singular and that the singular *somehow* figures into an explanatory account of my mental image. So, for example, as long as Aristotle is, at some point in the causal-historical chain, responsible for my mental image of him, then my mental image of Aristotle is sufficient to allow me to have intellectual cognition of Aristotle.

5.3 A Descriptivist Objection

Before concluding my paper, I want to raise a possible objection against the claim that the reference of mental images is determined relationally. In *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, Robert Pasnau claims that Aquinas rejects a relational account of reference determination because:

⁵¹ *QDV* 3.1.

⁵² *QDV* 7.5.

⁵³ Nöe (2012), 108-109.

...he refuses to allow the causal facts themselves to determine the content of our cognitions. If it were the causal facts themselves that determine content, then the question of whether I am seeing one individual or another, or thinking about one thing and not another, might not be answerable in terms of my intrinsic state alone.⁵⁴

Boulter's critique is motivated by similar considerations, and both Pasnau and Boulter support the claim that the content of cognition must be determined solely by intrinsic states by appealing to Aquinas' statement in the *Quodlibetal Questions* that '[for] something singular to be cognized its likeness insofar as it is particular must be in the cognitive power.'⁵⁵

However, this statement by Aquinas is not incompatible with a relational interpretation of reference determination. Aquinas' statement is embedded in a critique of accounts of singular intellectual cognition in terms of general content alone. Thus, he goes on to argue, 'But every form is common considered in itself. Hence the addition of form upon form cannot be the cause of individuation.'⁵⁶ That is to say, the contents of intelligible *species* are general, and therefore, piling up *species* is insufficient for singular intellectual cognition. So, in order to cognize a singular, you need a representation with singular content. But this is just the mental image whose content is the singular, material thing itself. Therefore, it is far from obvious that the above statement motivates a descriptivist interpretation of Aquinas regarding singular intellectual cognition.

⁵⁴ Pasnau (1997), 115.

⁵⁵ Pasnau's Translation, *Theories*, 114.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

I hope to have provided good reason to reconsider the plausibility of an account of the ‘turn to the phantasms’ in which the reference of the intellectual cognition of singulars is determined by relations holding between cognizers and singulars. The alternative reading, the descriptivist interpretation of the ‘turn to the phantasms,’ leaves Aquinas with a highly implausible theory of singular cognition. My reading, however, suggests that Aquinas was not only aware of the potential problems involved in determining the reference of singular cognition by purely descriptive means, but that he took steps to avoid such problems by providing a relational account of reference determination.

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