

Introduction

What could be more familiar and yet more obscure than one's own self? Although I depend on other people's reports to know what they are thinking or feeling, I seem to have "VIP backstage access" to my own mental states, experiencing them from the inside with a sense of unshakeable certitude: "I am thinking; I exist!" Yet when I try to get a closer look, my own familiar mind is transformed into something elusive, remote, mysterious. Extramental objects dominate conscious experience to such an extent that it seems impossible to achieve an experience of myself or my mind isolated from their clamorous presence. And the very things that ought to be most intimately familiar to me – my own motivations, choices, character traits, justifications for firmly held beliefs, and especially what the mind itself is – are instead the most obscure.

This recurring tension between privileged self-access and self-opacity was cast into dramatic relief by early modern thinkers. A deeply-rooted sense of intimate presence to myself underlies, for instance, Descartes's assertion that one cannot doubt one's own existence, or Locke's claim that one need only turn one's attention inward to notice oneself and one's mental acts. But this initial confidence is shaken when one actually attempts a perception of the bare self isolated from the experience of extramental objects – hence the plausibility of Hume's claim that the self is merely posited and not experientially perceived. The tension between these compelling but conflicting aspects of our experience of ourselves is perhaps one of the most difficult problems that any theory of self-knowledge faces, and these early modern battle-lines continue to guide contemporary investigations into the very possibility of self-knowledge.¹

It is not well known, however, that this same experienced tension between privileged self-access and self-opacity inspired a lively debate

¹ For example, see the arguments for and against privileged self-access in *Self-Knowledge*, ed. Quassim Cassam (Oxford University Press, 1994).

among medieval Latin thinkers, under the innocuous guise of questions such as “Whether the mind always understands itself,” or “Whether the mind cognizes itself by itself or by a species.” These questions emerged as part of the thirteenth-century conversation between the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian psychological traditions, the former stressing that self-knowledge is natural to the human mind, and the latter asserting the dependence of self-knowledge on cognition of other things.

The flagship source for the Neoplatonic perspective on self-knowledge in the thirteenth century was Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, which describes the mind as always understanding itself even if it is not always thinking about itself. A similar line of thought was further developed in texts introduced to the Latin West from the Islamic world during the Arabic-to-Latin translation project of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One bulwark of the debate was the *Liber de anima* (translated into Latin around 1152–66), in which the great Persian philosopher Avicenna deftly blends Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thought into a single original doctrine on the soul. Another was the anonymous *Liber de causis* (translated into Latin sometime between 1167 and 1187), a work inspired by Proclus but which its Latin readers initially believed to be a report of Aristotle’s teaching on the first causes. These sources impressed upon thirteenth-century Latin minds the notion that it belongs to the nature of intellectual beings to be perpetually engaged in self-knowing. Self-opacity is thus only a superficial phenomenon, the result of inattention. The Islamic Neoplatonic perspective was perhaps especially attractive since it provided a more systematic psychological account of self-opacity, reinforcing a preexisting Latin theological interest in self-opacity as an ethical problem.

In contrast to the Neoplatonic tendency to blame self-opacity on sensory distraction, the newly translated Aristotelian commentary tradition defended a positive role for sensation and abstracted intelligibles. Expounding Aristotle’s cryptic claim that “mind is intelligible like other things” (*De anima* 430a2), Greek and Arabic commentators such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and Averroes insisted that cognition of extramental intelligibles mediates and limits human self-knowledge (or at least some kinds of self-knowledge). Sensory activity is thus not the cause of, but the cure for the mind’s native self-opacity, since sensation is a precondition for receiving the extramental intelligibles that reveal the mind to itself. Nevertheless, self-opacity can never be completely eliminated, because the mind can only understand itself within the framework provided by each specific act.

As these newly translated texts gained in popularity during the first half of the thirteenth century, a number of prominent thinkers at the University of Paris took the Neoplatonic route of emphasizing the mind's privileged self-access over its self-opacity. For mid-century thinkers such as the theologian and bishop of Paris William of Auvergne (*c.* 1180/90–1249), the Franciscan thinker Jean de la Rochelle (d. 1245), and Aquinas's own teacher Albert the Great (d. 1280), it is *a priori* impossible for a mind to be ignorant of itself. Self-opacity is merely a failure to attend to a more basic condition of self-knowing. For these thinkers, the Aristotelian proposal that self-knowledge depends on acts of cognizing extramental objects is either absurd (Jean de la Rochelle, William of Auvergne), or restricted to one specific kind of self-knowledge that does not conflict with the soul's more basic condition of perpetual self-knowing (Albert).

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) challenges this trend with a theory that ignited considerable controversy among his contemporaries. Of any thirteenth-century thinker, Aquinas appears to be most impressed by the phenomenological experience of self-opacity: the indissociability of self-awareness from cognition of extramental objects, the difficulty of grasping the mind's nature, and the frequency with which we misidentify our true motivations and impulses. For him, these phenomena suggest that the human mind is naturally ignorant of itself, a condition that can only be relieved when the mind is actualized by thinking about something else. Nevertheless, he is also keenly aware of the need to account for privileged self-access: the feeling of comfortable self-familiarity, the awareness of oneself as subject that seems to frame all our acts of thinking, the certitude that I am the one thinking my own thoughts.

Aquinas thus sets himself the task of grounding both an ineliminable self-opacity and a limited privileged self-access in the structure of human cognition. With Augustine and other Neoplatonic sources, he argues that the mind has special, intimate self-familiarity, while rejecting their view of the human mind as pure self-thinking in favor of a (broadly) Aristotelian concept of the human intellect that makes all our self-knowledge depend on the senses. Careful to protect privileged self-access, however, he denies that the latter should be interpreted as implying that everything we know about ourselves is derived abstractively or discursively from sensory experiences of our bodies.

The result is the strikingly sophisticated theory of self-knowledge that is the topic of this book. Three key features of this theory stand out as

particularly noteworthy; indeed they are not features that one might have expected to find in a medieval thinker:

- *A layering of self-opacity in the mind.* For Aquinas, there are certain things that the mind can grasp about itself prephilosophically when it glimpses itself acting (i.e., its own existence, its singular self, the fact that it *is* acting), and other things that it can only understand about itself after a tedious process of reasoning (its own essential properties, or what kinds of acts it is performing and why). His account suggests an intriguing way of accommodating rich descriptive content in prephilosophical self-knowledge without having to explain away self-opacity.
- *The first-person subject-as-agent.* As de Libera has noted, Aquinas's theory of soul is partly responsible for the thirteenth-century shift towards the notion of subject-as-agent.² A parallel development, however, takes place in Aquinas's account of the way in which I experience myself, not as a pure "mind" or "self," but as a first-person agent-in-act. Consequently, for Aquinas, self-awareness is neither the Cartesian introspection of a transcendent, self-seeing "I," nor the Humean positing of a cause of impressions, but an experience of oneself-thinking-about-something.
- *A linking of intentionality, conscious thought, and selfhood.* At the heart of Aquinas's account of intellectual cognition is his view that self-awareness is intrinsic to every intellectual act. To think about myself is always to apprehend myself as a first-person agent actually engaging with the extramental world. Conversely, to think about something is to apprehend it as manifested to me, the cognizing subject. This position (anticipating the views of Franz Brentano and recently, Uriah Kriegel³) provides Aquinas with a mechanism to account for the ephemeral yet privileged character of self-awareness. We will also find in it the key to Aquinas's little-known accounts of certain phenomena typically associated with human selfhood, such as unity of consciousness, first-person perspective, and subject-object duality.

In light of its sophistication and its overlap with themes of interest to contemporary philosophy of mind, it is surprising that Aquinas's theory of self-knowledge has received so little scholarly attention. In fact, self-knowledge in Aquinas is generally treated – when it is mentioned at all – either as an insignificant appendage to his account of cognition, or as an isolated curiosity. Hardly any of the twentieth century's monographs on

² See Alain de Libera, *Archéologie du sujet*, vol. 1, *Naissance du sujet* (Paris: Vrin, 2007), ch. 4.

³ See Chapter 6.

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Aquinas's theory of cognition even mention self-knowledge (with the notable exceptions of Kenny's *Aquinas on Mind* and Pasnau's *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*).⁴ As for articles, after a brief flurry of interest in France in the 1920s and 1930s,⁵ subsequent decades have seen only a few publications, usually aimed at specific aspects of his account.⁶ Putallaz's 1991 monograph *Le sens de la réflexion en Thomas d'Aquin* took strides toward rehabilitating Aquinas's theory of self-knowledge.⁷ Despite these efforts, Aquinas's thought on self-knowledge – like that of medieval thinkers generally – remains woefully understudied and generally not well known.

One reason for this neglect is that self-knowledge is still widely considered to be a “modern” problem, to such an extent that even dedicated followers of Aquinas have assumed that he could have little of interest to say about it. In fact, a tendency among many early twentieth-century

⁴ See Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 119–27; and Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa theologiae IA 75–89* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 330–55. For instance, self-knowledge or reflexion upon oneself is mentioned in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* and more recently in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas* only briefly in connection with the verification of judgments, and not at all as a theme in its own right. It is entirely absent from such older classic Thomistic studies of cognition theory as Robert Edward Brennan, *Thomistic Psychology: A Philosophic Analysis of the Nature of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1941); Joseph Moreau, *De la connaissance selon S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976).

⁵ For references, see pp. 92–3, note 2.

⁶ To mention a few noteworthy examples: John D. McKian, “The Metaphysics of Introspection According to St. Thomas,” *The New Scholasticism* 15 (1941): 89–117; Joseph de Finance, “Cogito cartésien et réflexion thomiste,” *Archives de philosophie* 16.2 (1946): 3–185; John Ruane, “Self-Knowledge and the Spirituality of the Soul in St. Thomas,” *The New Scholasticism* 32 (1958): 425–42; Jaume Bofill y Bofill, “Para una metafísica de sentimiento,” in *Obra filosófica* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1967), 107–61; James Reichmann, “The ‘Cogito’ in St. Thomas: Truth in Aquinas and Descartes,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1986): 341–52; Deborah L. Black, “Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Aquinas's Critique of Averroes's Psychology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993): 349–85; and most recently, Susan Brower-Toland, “Self-Knowledge, Self-Consciousness, and Reflexivity,” in *Companion to Cognitive Theory in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Russell Friedman and Martin Pickavé (Leuven University Press, forthcoming). Two insightful dissertations on the topic are: Mariasui Dhavamony, *Subjectivity and Knowledge in the Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Typis Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae, 1965); and Carl N. Still, “Aquinas's Theory of Human Self-Knowledge” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, Centre for Medieval Studies, 1999). Finally, parts of the following works treat self-knowledge or selfhood in Aquinas: Estanislao Arroyabe, *Das Reflektierende Subjekt: zur Erkenntnistheorie des Thomas von Aquin* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1988); R. Fetz, *Ontologie der Innerlichkeit: Reditio completa und processio interior bei Thomas von Aquin* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1975); and Stephen Wang, *Aquinas and Sartre on Freedom, Personal Identity, and the Possibility of Happiness* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

⁷ François-Xavier Putallaz, *Le sens de la réflexion chez Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1991), followed by *La connaissance de soi au XIIIe siècle: De Matthieu d'Aquasparta à Thierry de Freiberg* (Paris: Vrin, 1991). There is also Richard T. Lambert's *Self Knowledge in Thomas Aquinas: The Angelic Doctor on the Soul's Knowledge of Itself* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2007), but this work has significant deficiencies.

neo-Thomists to overstate Aquinas's differences from Kant and Descartes resulted in a preference for treating intellectual self-knowledge as exactly parallel to cognition of extramental objects. This preference was bolstered by the Aristotelian maxim that "The intellect is intelligible like other things" and the scholastic maxim that "Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses."⁸ Aquinas was even said to hold that one perceives one's own existence "superficially, and by non-intellectual means" (Sertillanges)⁹ or that one infers one's own existence from one's acts (Roland-Gosselin and Grabmann).¹⁰ While such interpretations were later disproven, their atmospheric influence has been remarkably persistent, leaving a lingering impression that Aquinas's theory of self-knowledge is crude, primitive, and insensitive to the phenomena.

Aquinas complicates matters by scattering discussions of self-knowledge throughout his corpus in a way that makes consolidation difficult.¹¹ Although he discusses human self-knowledge obliquely or directly nearly a hundred times in twenty-two works (not counting passing references, or texts on divine or angelic self-knowledge), most of these references highlight only parts or implications of his theory. In addition, it is hard to evaluate how well Aquinas's account lines up with ordinary experience, because it is not always evident what kinds of phenomena he is trying to explain in the first place. Does an assertion like "the soul perceives itself by its act" refer to a sensory consciousness, or to a unitary perception of the self as the subject of all one's actions, or to conscious reflection on one's own actions and motivations, or to some other experience altogether?

My hope is that the present study will dispel these lingering misperceptions and textual ambiguities.¹² Over the course of the next few chapters,

⁸ This scholastic maxim is often wrongly taken as the structuring principle of Aquinas's theory of cognition, but he uses it only once, in *DV* 2.3, ad 19, where it appears as a rule about cognizing essences of material objects, not as a general rule. He prefers the weaker and more ambiguous "formulation principle of all our cognition is in the senses"; see for instance *SBDT* 6.2; *DV* 12.3, ad 2; *DV* 18.2, ad 7; and *ST* 1a.84.6.

⁹ A. D. Sertillanges, *Foundations of Thomistic Philosophy*, trans. Godfrey Anstruther (St. Louis: Herder, 1931), 34. A recent proponent of this reading is Lambert, *Self Knowledge in Thomas Aquinas*, 133–52.

¹⁰ Marie-Dominique Roland-Gosselin, "Peut-on parler d'intuition intellectuelle dans la philosophie thomiste?" in *Philosophia Perennis*, ed. F.-J. von Rintelen, vol. II (Regensburg: Habel, 1930), 729–30; and Martin Grabmann, *Thomas Aquinas: His Personality and Thought*, trans. Virgil Michel (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1928), 148.

¹¹ Once one begins to look for references to self-knowledge, one finds them everywhere, even in unexpected contexts, such as in questions on the cognition of singulars, divine and angelic modes of knowing, reflexive cognition of second intentions, knowledge of one's moral state, the presence of God to the soul, the metaphysics of immaterial being, the problem of multiple intellects, prelapsarian life, truth-judgments, and Trinitarian processions.

¹² I thus adopt the practice of "clarification before resolution" recently proposed by Jeffrey Brower and Susan Brower-Toland: "Although Aquinas's commentators often make bold claims about how

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it will become evident that Aquinas has left us, not a primitive account of self-knowledge, but a sophisticated and compelling theory attuned to the phenomena, which grapples with many of the issues that continue to occupy contemporary philosophers. One of the main contentions of this book is that self-knowledge is central to Aquinas's conception of human cognition and personhood, to a degree that is unexpected for a medieval thinker. One cannot make complete sense of his views on intentionality, attention, personal identity, the "identity" of intellect and object in cognition, or even the nature of the human soul, without reference to his theory of self-knowledge.

This book adopts a two-pronged approach to the problem of self-knowledge in Aquinas's thought. Part I narrates the tale of the mid-thirteenth-century debate on self-knowledge, tracing the concepts and problems that it generated, together with Aquinas's appropriation and modification of these concepts throughout his career. One of the biggest challenges facing the modern reader of scholastic texts is that in the larger scheme of things, whole treatises are scarcely more than a sentence overheard from the middle of a conversation into which we are just entering. These texts were composed amidst vibrant, ongoing discussions (many of them originated from day-to-day university instruction and disputation), and they assume their audience's familiarity with a certain set of concepts, vocabulary, and problems. And despite scholasticism's legendary systematicity, a thinker's views were not set in stone, but often developed over time – or even changed completely – in response to new challenges, new insights, and newly translated sources. Thus for hermeneutic purposes, the reader must be able to distinguish cases of internal development from cases of inconsistency and from normal contextual or terminological variation.

This first part, then, aims to familiarize the reader with the "skeletal structure" of Aquinas's theory of self-knowledge – his basic assumptions, the concepts he inherits, the concerns that motivate his reshaping of the existing medieval debate, the views against which he defines his own position, and the overarching structure and development of his own theory. Chapter 1 sketches the mid-thirteenth-century Parisian debate about

his views can be used to resolve long-standing difficulties in contemporary philosophy of mind, our own view is that any such assessment is premature and must await further clarification of the views themselves" ("Aquinas on Mental Representation: Concepts and Intentionality," *Philosophical Review* 117 [2003]: 195). Consequently, I do not intend to argue for using Aquinas's theory to resolve problems in contemporary theories of self-knowledge – a project that could occupy an entire study in itself – although I will highlight relevant connections to themes in contemporary debates on self-knowledge as reference points.

self-knowledge that Aquinas inherited, with the key themes and sources that shape the landscape of debate. Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for Part II with an overview of Aquinas's theory of self-knowledge as it develops over a twenty-year period, tracing how he works through the issues raised by his predecessors and reshapes their conceptual frameworks for his own purposes.

In contrast, Part II is thematically organized around the phenomena of self-knowledge that Aquinas addresses and the problems that his explanations raise. In order to create a theory of human self-knowledge that is responsive both to the phenomena and to the constraints of a hylomorphic anthropology, his strategy is to distinguish different kinds of self-knowledge and trace each back to the nature of the human intellect. Part II thus unpacks each of these kinds of self-knowledge with reference to the philosophical problems and phenomena they are designed to address. Chapter 3, on the content of actual self-awareness, examines what is included in a "perception of one's own existence" and why day-to-day self-awareness nevertheless leaves the mind largely opaque to itself. Chapter 4, on the mode of actual self-awareness, argues that for Aquinas, prephilosophical self-awareness is a genuine intuition of myself, i.e., a direct and immediate perception of myself in my acts. Chapter 5, on habitual self-awareness, explores how the fact that *the mind already is itself* affects its self-knowledge. Chapter 6, on implicit and explicit self-awareness, argues that, for Aquinas, self-awareness is integral to the very structure of intellectual cognition, and discusses how he handles the Humean problem of the imperceptible self. Chapter 7, on quidditative self-knowledge, explores the degree to which self-opacity can be overcome by philosophical inquiry. In Chapter 8, we step back to explore the implications of Aquinas's theory of self-knowledge for his view on human personhood, focusing on three problems: subjectivity, first-person perspective, and diachronically unified consciousness.

Now one might question the practicality of combining in a single volume these two approaches, namely, the historical narrative of Part I and the problem-centered analysis of Part II. Could not the task of historical and textual contextualization have been reserved for a history-of-ideas study, in order to proceed directly to a consideration of Aquinas's arguments? In my view, this kind of methodological segregation, although commonly practiced, is risky when attempting to retrieve the philosophical insights of medieval thinkers, who were often operating under paradigms very different from our own. By setting Aquinas's arguments in the context of a historical narrative (both the broader narrative of the mid-thirteenth-century debate and the more specific narrative of the development of his own thought

in response to changing conceptions of the human soul), we get a much “cleaner” portrait of the theoretical concerns that guided his treatment of self-knowledge. The historical narrative in Part I, then, makes the arguments in Part II easier to follow by clarifying these theoretical concerns, together with the terminology and conceptual framework that would have been familiar to Aquinas’s audience. Likewise, it prevents us from importing foreign paradigms into his arguments or getting bogged down in false problems originating in unfamiliarity with the context.

Nevertheless, those who must go straight to Part II should at least familiarize themselves with the concepts outlined in the final sections of Chapters 1 and 2. In particular, only in the final section of Chapter 2 will the reader find a sketch of Aquinas’s entire theory of self-knowledge all in the same place. One should have this sketch in hand before embarking on Part II.

Aquinas’s general cognition theory

For those unfamiliar with Aquinas’s cognition theory, the following summary provides a brief overview of its main points, by way of background to his theory of self-knowledge. Many aspects of this theory remain the subject of considerable debate, and I shall attempt to present them in the least controversial form possible, but it is impossible to summarize an author who has received as much scholarly attention as Aquinas without making at least a few disputed claims. So the reader should keep in mind that the following summary is an interpretation, and refer for further discussion to the extensive scholarly literature.

Aquinas’s theory of cognition is grounded in an anthropological theory sometimes known as “Thomistic hylomorphism”: namely, the human individual is a matter–form composite in which soul and body constitute a single substance with a single act of existing. Like plant and animal souls, the human soul is the substantial form or life-principle of an organic body. But unlike them, it survives physical death because, as an intellectual being, it is immaterial and self-subsistent. For Aquinas, the hylomorphic character of human nature is reflected in the mode of human cognition: The embodied human intellect is naturally directed toward the quiddities or essences that are in material objects, and it depends on the senses for access to such objects. Thus the senses are not the obstacle, but the vehicle, for human intellectual cognition.

But the intellect cannot simply receive raw data from the senses without some process of translation, as it were, because an enmattered

essence cannot be received into an immaterial entity like the intellect (similarly, I cannot hear light because my eardrums are not structured as light-receptors). In order to bridge the gap between immaterial intellect and material realities, Aquinas posits a complex psychological process of dematerialization. This process is accomplished by a hierarchy of cognitive powers, each grasping a different aspect of experienced reality, with higher powers receiving content from lower powers in an increasingly dematerialized way.

For example, suppose that as I am walking down the street, a barking dog rushes out of a yard at me. Information about the dog's sensible attributes, such as color and the pitch of bark, are "received" by the bodily organs (eyeball, eardrum, etc.) of my external senses. Each sense relays this impressed sensory data, known as "sensible species," to the brain, which is the organ of the four internal senses: common sense, imagination, estimation, and memory. The common sense perceives the acts of the external senses and bundles their disparate species, allowing me to recognize the barking and the bristling brown fur as belonging to a single perceptual object.¹³ From this unified bundle of sense impressions, the imagination produces and stores a mental image or "phantasm" of *this particular dog*. The remaining two internal senses detect additional content in my sensory experience of the dog, which they add to the stored phantasm. Memory tracks the temporal order and duration of perceptions, so that I can later recognize this dog as the one that *previously* attacked me. And estimation (i.e., animal instinct, which Aquinas calls the "cogitative sense" in humans) perceives harmfulness or beneficence, impelling me either to run away or to stop and pat the dog.

So far, we have only described what Aquinas would call sensory cognition, which takes place in material cognitive powers using bodily organs (the exterior sense-organs and the brain), and which humans and animals share. But in humans, a further step occurs, in which I understand something universal and intelligible about the furry thing rushing toward me: its nature, dogness. Now for Aquinas, my understanding of dogness has an

¹³ The common sense thus is responsible for sensory consciousness, i.e., the state of communication between senses and brain. We might be tempted to see in the common sense some sort of self-awareness, but for Aquinas, although it provides the most basic form of consciousness, one which we share with animals, the common sense is only a sensible power of a material organ (the brain). Therefore, it cannot fully bend back upon *itself*, which, for Aquinas, is what is properly required for self-awareness. For further discussion, see Putallaz, *Le sens de la réflexion*, 53–4; and Michael Stock, "Sense Consciousness According to St. Thomas," *The Thomist* 21 (1958): 415–86, esp. 418–22.