Imagining in Aquinas

In the wake of our posing of questions which ask about why something exists or occurs in the way that it does, if we attend to the data of human consciousness that we experience within ourselves, when our asking of questions in inquiry works and plays with images in order to get an insight, or an act of understanding, which grasps how the elements and parts of an image are all related or joined by a form that is not seen but understood, the incarnate nature of how human reasoning is soon quickly revealed. As Aquinas notes: "imagining goes with thinking so long as we are in this present life."[1] The key to attaining any experience of human understanding is a necessary interaction between the data which are given to us in our experience of them and our asking of questions and inquiry which, in turn, takes received images and then freely works and plays with them in a way which reconstructs them to form a new cast, shape, or image.[2] An apt image exists as a phantasm. Within the order of our human cognition, images function as necessary points of departure if an understanding is to be grasped by us through our human understanding and if, in addition, any understanding which has been grasped by us is to be then used or applied in a way which requires that we have an understanding or a knowledge of singularly existing things.[3] The first object becomes an object that is first imagined before it is then understood: a set of images which seek to be apt through a transformation which moves from images to phantasms since apt images (as they are constructed by us through our acts of imagining) readily

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1Aquinas, *De Malo*, q. 16, a. 8, ad 3, as quoted by Thomas Gilby, ed., *St. Thomas Aquinas Philosophical Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 234 , n. 631; cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 33, a. 3, ad 3; 2a2ae, q. 175, a. 4. In the *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 180, a. 5, ad 2, Aquinas reiterates this position when he avers that "in the present state of [our] life human contemplation is impossible without phantasms, because it is connatural to man to see the intelligible species in the phantasms, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] states (*De Anima*, iii, 7)." In a less literal translation given by Gilby, *Philosophical Texts*, p. 234, n. 632, it is said that "to see meaning in the play of fancy is connatural to us."

2*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 85, a. 1, ad 3.

3*De Veritate* q. 10, a. 2, ad 7; q. 18, a. 8, ad 4; *Super Boetium De Trinitate,* q. 6, a. 2, ad 5; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 73, 38; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 7; q. 85, a. 1, ad 5; q. 86, a. 1; 3a, q. 9, a. 4, ad 2; *Quaestio disputata De anima*, a. 15; *Sentencia Libri De anima*, 1, 2, 19; 3, 8, 712-713; 3, 12, 770, 772, 777; 3, 13, 791-792; cf. Matthew C. Ogilvie, in his *Faith Seeking Understanding: The Functional Specialty, "Systematics," in Bernard Lonergan's Method in Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), pp. 72-74, for his discussion on the necessity of images for our possible subsequent acts of understanding. See also Lonergan in his *The Incarnate Word*, unpublished manuscript translated 1989 by Charles C. Hefling, Jr. from the Latin of the *De Verbo Incarnato* (Rome: Gregorian University Press *ad usum auditorum*, 1964), pp. 225-226, for a discussion on how Christ, as incarnate, must move from a perfect beatific knowledge of all things and an infused knowledge of all things to a knowing that must be expressed and applied in a very concrete way through employing all the different acts which are constitutive of our human knowing and which begin from the data of our human experience that is present in our acts of sense and consciousness. The human use of images to apply the contents of what is already understood and known serves as an analogy for grasping the significance of the transition which must occur in how Christ, through his incarnation, must move from a perfect, immediate beatific knowing of things toward a knowing that invokes the created structure of our human cognition.

suggest a relation of parts or elements which cannot be sensed but which can be apprehended by us through an act of understanding. This act emerges as soon as our acts of imagining have constructed an image which moves our understanding to apprehend a meaning which goes beyond a particular image or phantasm but which is somehow being reflected by an image which exists as a phantasm.

Images, as phantasms, accordingly function as representative carriers of meaning.[4] They possess a different nature and they need to be sharply distinguished from the nature of any form or content that is understood by us as, at the same time, an image communicates more than what is simply given by it in terms of the kind of likeness which exists within a given image.[5] This symbolism which exists in images exists as a datum of our human consciousness which can be verified in the aesthetic experiences that are given to us and in commonly observed religious practices where believers and participants are encouraged to venerate images which function as icons to reveal an unseen, higher world of meaning and being. *Motus autem qui est in imaginem, prout est imago, non consisti in ipsa, sed tendit in id cujus est imago.*[6] "Movement to an image does not stop at the image, but goes on to the thing it represents."[7] In other words, an imagined object (as a phantasm) reveals an object which cannot be entirely imagined but which is grasped by us because it is understood as our imagination works to present an object that is understood within the content or the context of a proffered apt image or phantasm.[8] An act of understanding grasps a meaning or an intelligibility that exists immanently within a sensed image. As physically through the mediation of light, our sense of seeing beholds objects that are now seen, in the same way although in terms of an analogy, through a form of intellectual light that is manifest to us in an act of understanding, a phantasm is informed by a meaning as, at the same time, this same phantasm triggers an intellectual act which grasps a meaning within the phantasm which has been imaginatively presented to it.[9] The phantasm, as an agent object, moves us in

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4*De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 5, ad 5, ad 7; q. 8, a. 11, ad 3.

5*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 180, a. 5, ad 2.

6*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 81, a. 3, ad 3.

7*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 81, a. 3, ad 3.

8*Quaestio disputata De anima*, a. 15, pp. 198-199; Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Being: the Halifax Lectures on INSIGHT*, eds Elizabeth A Morelli and Mark D. Morelli, rev. and aug. by Frederick E. Crowe with the collaboration of Elizabeth A. Morelli, Mark D. Morelli, Robert M. Doran, and Thomas V. Daly (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 165. As Lonergan explains it so well (p. 146):

> Imagining both produces an image and [it] wants to represent some object, what is imagined. There is a distinction between the image and what is imagined. We do not produce in ourselves what is imagined, otherwise we could produce in ourselves anything sensible. But we form the image within ourselves to move to the final object.

9*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 15, a. 2; q. 85, a. 1, ad 1; cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 91; *The Triune God: Systematics*, trans. Michael G. Shields, ed. Robert M. Doran & H. Daniel Monsour (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 579. As Lonergan summarizes the matter in the *Incarnate Word*, p. 171, a phantasm produces an act of understanding, but this same act of understanding is received in our possible intellects. Acts of understanding are both produced and received, and because this is so, agents of production are to be distinguished from agents of reception. An act of understanding is, for instance, produced "by God, by a teacher, by agent intellect, [or] by a

our understanding. It moves the human intellect.[10] A relation thus which had not been obvious (to us in sense) now becomes immediately obvious to us in our understanding when, within an experience of sense data, an intelligible set of terms and relations (sometimes referred to as a "nexus of universals")[11] is grasped by us through the apprehension of an imagined object which now functions as a species of cause; hence, as a species of agent object.[12] An intelligibility is experienced as something which is related to and which is quite distinct from the experience of any apt image which exists as a phantasm.[13] In arguing that "it is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually, except by turning to the phantasms,"[14] Aquinas states his position in a way which accordingly clearly adverts to the undeniable contents of our common human experience:

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phantasm" but this same act is not received by these agents. In a kind of loose summary, in the *De Veritate*, q. 22, a. 5, ad 8, Aquinas notes that agents of production with respect to our human understanding can be identified in terms of "agent intellect, or phantasm, or something else of that nature." A form or species which exists within a thing that is first known by us through an act of sense does not itself cause an act of understanding within ourselves as knowers. To explain his thesis here, in the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 26, a. 2, Aquinas notes that every act of understanding exists as an operation, and because this is so, it cannot be caused by something which is not also an operation. Forms admittedly condition operations since their reception specifies what kind of operation can properly occur in a given subject. Cf. *In 4 Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, d. 49, q. 3, a. 2 sol, cited by Lonergan, *Triune God: Systematics*, p. 551. However, if we want to identify all the different causes that account for our acts of understanding as they occur within us as human subjects, beyond noting how the inquiries and questions of our agent intellect play a positive role in leading us toward acts of understanding and how apt images help to trigger acts of understanding within us by working through our acts and terms of imagination, we must also look for operations which are correlative for the occurrence of acts of understanding within us contingent, human beings. Like explains like. Like causes like since what is less in being or reality cannot explain what possesses more being or more reality. What exists cannot be explained by what does not exist and so, for this reason, for a complete fuller understanding of things, other acts of understanding must be postulated and identified if our human acts of understanding are to be fully accounted for: acts of understanding as these occur within teachers and instructors and the kind of understanding which already always exists within God's understanding. As Aquinas briefly states his position (in metaphysical terms): "potency is actualized by something [that is] already in act." Cf. *Sentencia Libri De anima*, 2, 11, 372. Nothing in a state of potency is able to transcend its potency through its potency. Hence, in the final analysis, since contingent acts of understanding are not able to account for themselves, a full explanation demands the postulation of an ever present non-contingent form of understanding from within which all human acts of understanding participate. Human understanding always exists as a participation in divine understanding (cited not as a "proximate cause" but as a "remote cause" in *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 4, ad 3). See Lonergan, *Incarnate Word*, p. 228, for a restatement of the differences which distinguish reception in knowing from how efficient causality exists in knowing.

10Lonergan, *Verbum*, p. 150; Patrick H. Byrne, "The Thomist Sources of Lonergan's Dynamic World-view," *The Thomist* 46 (1982): 134.

11Byrne, "Thomist Sources," *Thomist*: 135.

12In his *Verbum*, p. 42, Bernard Lonergan gives a brief example which illustrates the transition which occurs as we move from our acts of sensing, through our acts of imagining, toward our acts of understanding.

> Anyone can experience this for himself, that when he tries to understand something, he forms certain phantasms to serve him by way of examples, in which as it were he examines what he is desirous of understanding. For this reason it is that when we wish to help someone to understand something, we lay examples before him, from which he forms phantasms for the purpose of understanding.[15]

Between the passive receptivity of sense and the activity of our inquiry which, in understanding, successfully grasps a possibly relevant intelligible relation within a set of data, the arts of the human imagination play a critical, intermediary role in forming images to find a suggestive juxtaposition of

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> To understand circularity is to grasp by intellect a necessary nexus between imagined equal radii and imagined uniform curvature. The terms to be connected are sensibly perceived; their relation, connection, unification is what insight knows in the sensitive presentation.

Years later, in 1982, in his *Caring About Meaning: patterns in the life of Bernard Lonergan*, eds. Pierrot Lambert, Charlotte Tansey, and Cathleen Going (Montreal: Thomas More Institute Papers, 1982), pp. 1-2, Lonergan gives a more precise example which illustrates how inquiry works with our sensing to trigger an act of understanding which reveals the nature or form of a thing within a given sensible presentation of things. When speaking about the pedagogy of one of his teachers in mathematics, Fr. Charles O'Hara S.J., who had taught coordinate and projective geometry to Lonergan, Lonergan describes one of his methods that Fr. O'Hara had promoted among his students:

> Flag the diagram. Draw a diagram; mark all the values you know on it. You should be able then to see an equation or two equations - - whatever you need - - and get the solution. Don't learn the trigonometrical formula by heart; just flag the diagram and read off the formula.

The understanding that is suggested by an appropriate, representative image suggests itself with a kind of necessity which is to be clearly distinguished from any purely logical or abstract kind of necessity that refers to how one concept is implied by another. The meaning of a given concept suggests the meaning of second concept which already exists within the first meaning that one is possibly considering. See Bernard Lonergan's discussion in "A Post-Hegelian Philosophy of Religion," *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe, S.J. (New York/Mahweh: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 206. The necessity of grasping a form within an image is defined by the concrete aptness of an image which suggests why a particular intelligible relation exists within the data of a given image. Logical necessities, as specified by rules of deductive logic, are grasped as, in our analysis, we work with meanings which are somehow already known. Logical necessity, as a form of necessity, is experienced at a later stage in our human cognition since, in order first to grasp a meaning which can later become a subject of logical analysis, we must experience an intelligible or a rational necessity which comes to us when an act of understanding grasps why an arrangement of data possesses an inherent meaning which is too obvious for anyone to overlook or to gainsay.

13J. Michael Stebbins, *The Divine Initiative: Grace, World-Order, and Human Freedom in*

terms and relations which can act as a clue to trigger an insight which exists as an act of understanding.[16] All images or phantasms initially derive from the contents of our sense reception but, from these materials, images can be also formed of things which have never been sensibly received or which have never even existed. Creative human fancy, or the activity of our fertile imagination, creates conditions which enhance the potential fruitfulness of our inquiries since it, in an obvious way, it belongs to human consciousness to have images which vary in power and in their connotative significance.[17] In different ways, they can suggest different things to different people at different times, and this variation explains why it is often a struggle to find the right image that will suggest a particular meaning to a given person within a given situation. Some persons have more imagination than others and they can create images which others are not able to do or to use. As a symbiotic relation develops

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the Early Writings of Bernard Lonergan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 11.

14*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 7; 1, p. 429; cf. *Scriptum super libros sententiarum*, 1.4.3.1c, cited by William E. Murnion, "The Meaning and Import of Aquinas's Philosophy of Mind," (paper presented at the Second International Lonergan Workshop, Regis College, Toronto, August 1-6, 2004), p. 19; *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 2, ad 7; q. 18, a. 8, ad 4); *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 60, 18; *Sentencia Libri De anima*, 3, 12, 777; 3, 13, 791. This turning of the intellect toward phantasms has traditionally been referred to as the "conversion of the intellect to phantasm," or, more simply as "conversion to phantasm," a wording which more closely adheres to the original Latin. As Lonergan avers in *Verbum*, p. 169, "intellect must convert to phantasm to know its proper object." If particulars are only directly known through our acts of sense and imagination, for a knowledge of any universal (a universal meaning or significance which transcends differences in data that are accounted for by varying spatial and temporal determinations), the conversion of phantasms emerges with with a kind of cognitive necessity (cf. Frederick E. Crowe, *Three Thomist Studies*, p. 214). When speaking about Kant's understanding of human cognition, in "The Metaphor of the Judge in the Critique of Pure Reason (B xiii ff): A Key for Interpreting," *Universitas: Monthly Journal of Philosophy and Culture*, v. 31, no. 2 (2004), p. 33, n. 23, Giovanni Sala neatly summarizes Aquinas's understanding of understanding in the following terms:

> For St. Thomas Aquinas the human understanding is by its nature "*conversus ad phantasma* [turned toward the phantasm]," i.e., toward the sensibility (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 7 with reference to Aristotle, *De anima* 3, 7). Thus it appears that the transition between the understanding and sensibility that Kant vainly searched for, a) is made possible by this constitutive orientation of the human understanding, which is a faculty of a substance composed of spirit and matter, and b) in fact occurs every time we understand something, since our act of understanding is an "*intelligere in sensibili* [insight into the sensible, or understanding in the sensible]" (which Aristotle in the cited place calls "*noein en tois phantasmasi*"). This "*intelligere in sensibili*" serves as a hinge connecting the content of the sensible and intellectual at the same time, since understanding is the act that mediates between the concrete and abstract, between the singular and the universal.

15*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 7. Later in q. 88, a. 1, after invoking the teaching authority of Aristotle, Aquinas again refers to cognitive self-experience as proof of the fact that our human cognition is so configured that we can only understand something if we begin with images, if we first

between our imagining and our thinking or reasoning which occurs within cognitional human life, not only does the acuity of our intellectual activity grow but, by the same token, the powers of our imagination increase in scope, range, and effectiveness. The imaginative arts more fully serve the purposes and ends of our human inquiry and any desires which seek for increments and additions to the kind of acquisition which exists in our human understanding.[18] Diligent human inquiry can give our acts of imagination a life and power that they would not otherwise have. Without purpose, desire, and intent, our imagination would quickly loses its effectiveness and even its vigor.[19] It would degenerate if images merely or haphazardly come and go to suggest meanings and interpretations that could conflict with each other in a way which hinders growths in understanding which could be possibly given to us.

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turn to images or phantasms and then go from there. Here Aquinas does not cite any passages taken from Aristotle's writings although, earlier in q. 84, a. 7, he had prefaced his own discussion by quoting a key text from Aristotle's *De Anima*: "the soul understands [*intelligit*] nothing without a phantasm" (3, 7, 431a16) which has also been translated as "the soul never understands apart from phantasms" (*Sentencia Libri De anima*, 431a17) although a more direct translation of Aristotle's text says that "the soul never thinks without an image" (*Complete Works of Aristotle*; 1, p. 685). Later, in the same text, 431b 2, Aristotle concludes that "the faculty of thinking then thinks the forms in the images" (p. 686). "Intellect grasps forms in images" (Giovani B. Sala, *Lonergan and Kant: Five Essays on Human Knowledge,* p. 161, n. 72). In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* 2, c. 76, n. 17, Aquinas had made the same argument.

> Man abstracts from phantasms, and receives in his mind things actually intelligible. For, indeed, we should not have become aware of these actions had we not experienced them in ourselves. It follows that the principles to which we ascribe these actions, namely, the possible and agent intellects, must be powers formally existing in us.

In conclusion, it is to be noted that Aquinas frequently refers to self-conscious human experience as the basis, or litmus text, for his arguments about the structure of our human cognition and how our human cognition (our intellect) functions. To cite one example found in both the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, in order to disprove the claim that the human intellect is somehow separate from the human body or that it functions apart from the body, Aquinas adverts to the obvious experience that each person has of his own thinking and knowing (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 79, a. 4; *Sentencia Libri De anima*, 3, 7, 690).

> For it is clear that the actually intelligent being is this particular man. Whoever denies this implies that he himself understands nothing.

16*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, a. 6, ad 2; q. 85, a. 2, ad 3.

17Michael Novak, "St Thomas in Motion A Study in St Thomas's Method," *Downside Review*, v. 78, no. 253 (Autumn 1960), p. 294:

> The human key to intelligence is a flexible imagination, or what is called a creative imagination, for men understand nothing except what they capture in their imagination and arrange there, not as madmen or dreamers but in line for understanding.

In emphasizing the importance of a "flexible imagination" as key to provoking deeper understanding and insight, an understanding which encompasses a broader range of data, Novak points to a change of mind which had occurred in Aquinas in his theology of grace as he deals with a question which asks if, without grace, man is able to avoid sin. Earlier, in the *In 2 Scriptum super libros sententiarum*, d. 28, q. 1, a. 2, Aquinas had argued that man can avoid every future sin without needing grace in the soul. But, later in the *De Veritate*, q. 24, a. 12, he admits that, without grace, sin cannot be avoided at some point. For a time, it can be successfully evaded but, in the long run, without grace, it cannot be avoided.

In the shift which has occurred, Aquinas's arguments given in the *Scriptum super libros sententiarum* speak of sin as an act and, when we sins, we perform an evil deed. In a life of sin, we perform evil deeds consecutively, one after the other. But, if sin is seen as not merely or simply a deed or act but if it also exists as an orientation or disposition, we soon discover that our human willing is not as free as it would appear to be if we limit our examination of it to an inquiry which attends to an essentially formal structure that talks about deliberation and about how deliberation exists as a internal condition within our willing to account for its freedom. Moral sin always requires a prior deliberation of some kind; hence, it is an intended consequence; it is "sinning from malice" (*peccare ex malitia*) or sinning as "intentional wrongdoing" (*peccare ex industria aut ex certa scienta*). Cf. Gregory M. Reichberg, "Beyond Privation: Moral Evil in Aquinas's De Malo," pp. 750-751, as cited by Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 94, n. 72. But, if the influence of an earlier history of sin is to be also attended to and accounted for in our lives as human beings, our human willing cannot be seen as an activity which functions in an unconnected way, as if it were independent or autonomous in its activities. Our human willing exists as not only a proactive power or action which works from within us as human beings but, as an action or proaction, it has also been acted upon by external conditions. It is an action which exists also as a passion. It exists in a context of external factors which, in some way, impinge upon us in our willing and so exert an influence upon it and us. Hence, as Aquinas attends to the structure of our human willing in a way which now also attends to its psychology (its habits, dispositions, and patterns which contextualize the doing of our individual human acts), he cannot continue to argue in a plausible way that, without grace, future sins can all be successfully avoided. In fact, as we live out our human lives and as we engage in different acts now at one time and now at another, we live in a context of dispositions and habits which we have been inherited in the course of time and which have formed and often arisen in ways that are not too well understood and known. Prior to any specific acts of sin, sinful orientations within us encourage these specific acts, and if the role of these orientations is not adverted to, if they are not directly questioned or censured, sin will not be fully understood with respect to the range of its privative character and influence. Ways of living

will not be considered by us and, as a result, creaturely goods will be confused with goods which transcend the created order of things. Created goods will not be recognized as limited specifications of good and more willingly will we, as human beings, give ourselves to pursuing goods which possess less goodness and value than what we might otherwise pursue and seek.

18*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 89, a. 5, as quoted by Gilby, *Philosophical Texts*, p. 235, n. 635.

19*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 53, a. 3; 2, p. 813.