

## THE ARISTOTELIAN-THOMIST CONCEPTION OF MAN

Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose 700th death anniversary is commemorated this year, turned deliberately the whole current of thought in medieval Western Europe from a heavy philosophical reliance on Plato to a new confident reliance on Aristotle. We may well wonder why. Was it to appear up-to-date, as the works of Aristotle were then avidly read and studied in successive Latin translations, first from the Arabic and then soon from the Greek itself? But the dedicated truth-seeker he was, did not care for either antiquity or modernity. Rather, what conquered him was the philosophical satisfaction he found in Aristotle's method of enquiry and in his understanding of man. The aim of this paper is to throw some light on these two topics.

### **The Method of Enquiry**

Aristotle departed—painfully—from Plato because he had found the idealistic method of the latter and his idealistic doctrines unable to answer correctly the host of questions which his own attentive observation of man and world and his critical study of the development of philosophy from the Presocratics to his own time were urgently raising. Raising questions, establishing the problematics of a discipline, took great importance in his teaching and written notes as they would in the teaching and works of his renovator, St. Thomas. This may be shown through an outstanding example.

### **A rich problematics**

In the first chapter of Aristotle's *Peri Psychês* (Concerning the Soul), the following questions are set out :

What is 'psyche', what is meant by the word, what is its nature and essence? What attributes and events are peculiarly psychological, and what are also organic? Is any general definition of psyche, which will cover all cases and no others, in any way possible, and if so by what method is it to be attained? Is it an 'it' at all, and if so, in what senses: as an independent existent subject (as Plato had implied), or only as a component of such an existent? Or is psyche only a qualitative, or quantitative or otherwise secondary predicate of some other existent? Should

we attribute psyche only to man, or is there an animal and even a plant psyche? Wherein precisely do the human and non-human psyches converge and diverge? Should we admit a multiplicity of psyches in one individual? In what way, if any, can psyche be analysed into a number of component parts? Is psyche quantitative, divisible, localised? How is psyche related to space and time, that I can attribute to it an 'inner' and an 'outer', a 'before' and an 'after'? If intrinsically divisible, in what sense can it be analysed into parts? If only in terms of potentialities to phenomenal operations, how are these to be characterised and classified? Are we to argue a-priori from the psyche and its potentialities to their operations, or inductively from the latter to the potentialities and to psyche itself? Are all the operations and experiences attributed to psyche dependent on organic processes, and do all (as some evidently do) involve affect? How is the psychological and the physiological treatment of the same phenomenon to be distinguished? Are there also operations of psyche which can be *only* of the psyche and which, even though presupposing organic activities, can in no way be their product but are inherently independent? Must not a psyche, capable of activity independent of the corruptible body, be itself incorruptible and capable of independent existence? What should we think of attempts to conceive the psyche solely in terms of physical kinetic force, as by many of the earlier Greek thinkers? Can psyche be identified with, and limited to, consciousness, as by Democritus? Can consciousness itself be accounted for in terms of micro-macrocosmic correspondence, whether in the materialistic form of Empedocles or in the mathematical fashion of the *Timaeus*? If neither dynamic nor quantitative concepts cover all the facts, can they be combined as in the "self-moving number" of the later Plato? Or can we conceive psyche solely in terms of functional pairs of opposites, as perhaps by Heraclitus? Or as a Gestalt, a Harmony of opposites? Or as a wholly independent entity, mysteriously indwelling the body, but with no essential relation to the organism, as by Plato and the Pythagoreans?

For the sake of brevity I omit to cull from the works of St. Thomas a parallel array of the problems which the topic of the soul musters up in his mind, though it would be most interesting to compare such parallel lists. But I want to stress the non-artificial

character of their problematics. The questions they raise are not meant to fill up some oratorical or pedagogical need. They are called up by the sincerity of their enquiry which considered the whole extent of the phenomenon of psyche ( or any other phenomenon they have decided to study ) and they press upon one another like waves surging crest after crest and moving onwards till they subside in their resolution.

### **From the totality of the phenomenon to its necessary conditions**

A first characteristic of Aristotle's procedure is that he considers the whole extent of the phenomenon he tries to understand and explain. This is a rare feature among philosophers for too many of them are quickly fascinated by some particular aspect which gains prominence in their view, be it change or permanence, the cogitatum or the cogito, the sensatum or the idea, the analytical plurality or the unity, etc.

With regard to the particular field of psyche, Aristotle multiplies his observations, avoiding the premature intrusion of any interpretative concept, and explores it in all its dimensions, physiological, biological, affective, mental, intellectual, volitional, linguistic and historical. The results of this total observation are recorded not only in *Peri Psychês* but in his treatises about *Sensus and Sensatum*, *Memory and Recollection* and many of his other writings.

His observation is analytical and implies a certain amount of classification but he never breaks up the given unity of the phenomenon and keeps in view its totality. This totality defines the field to which he applies the exact method of empirical observation, induction and deduction which he has described and worked out in detail in his *Analytics*.

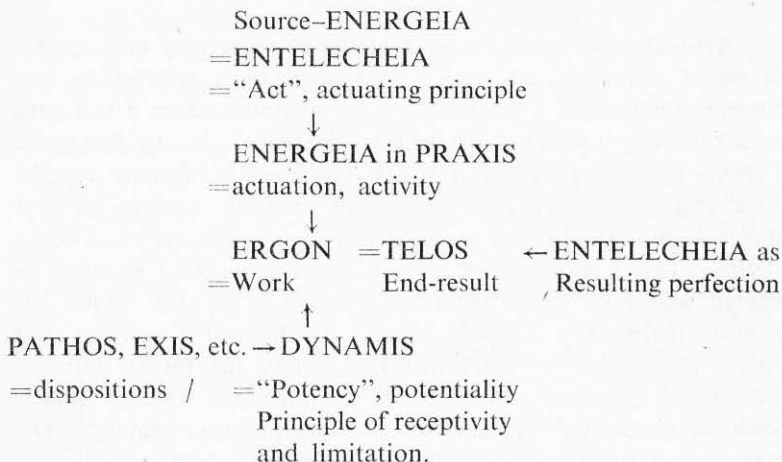
What is the unitary field of psyche ? Aristotle insists ( e.g., in Book Delta of *Metaphysics* ) that the scientific definition of words must be based on common experience and common speech. Now, common speech ascribes ' psyche ' to the living as distinct from the dead. The most elemental of human experiences—life and death—this is what gives rise to the everyday ascription of psyche to what is alive, and the denial of psyche to what is dead. And what distinguishes the ' live ' body from the ' dead ' body is movement,

change, process. Not any movement, but spontaneous, immanent, self-produced movement. The living being moves or changes not only when acted upon by other agents or forces, but by its own forces it at least nourishes, conserves, repairs and reproduces itself, as in the vegetable kingdom. In the higher forms of life, the animals, come higher forms of self-transmutation—locomotion, sensation, memory, phantasy and corresponding forms of appetites. In man there is also *nous* (approximately, the intellect)—the power of transcending his own mechanically conditioned organism, of forming conceptions which likewise transcend material spatio-temporal limitations, and the conceiving, and arguing to, reality which lies beyond sense-perception entirely—and the forms of desire, volition and conation which correspond to it. All this constitutes the psyche phenomenon, the rich field of self-immutation through activities and passivities; as such it is unitary despite its great qualitative variety.

The second important characteristic of Aristotle's method consists in the kind of rational explanation which he devises to account for the well-observed phenomenon. First of all, a rational explanation is demanded because we have no intellectual intuition of the inner nature of any reality. And it is possible because we have at least an intuitive apprehension of those of our activities and passivities which fall under the purview of our sensitive-intellectual consciousness. As St. Thomas will say, "whenever I know an object, say a stone, I simultaneously know this knowing as performed by me, and the nature of this activity." On the basis of undeniable similarity, I can then extend the knowledge thus gained directly and internally to other activities known only through their external phenomenon or their effects. It is in this two-way fashion that I know, for instance, the whole phenomenon of psyche as related to me and not only as conditioned by objects. And I know more than that for I thus apprehend myself as the subject of that phenomenon which is at least partially intuited. Thus, even though I have no pure intuition of the self, I at least know its existence and somehow its nature as subject of the psyche-phenomenon. From this can be formulated the first gnoseological principle: The self is known through its activities (and passivities), and, in general, every being is known (by us) from what it does (actively) and undergoes (passively). *Yatha kriya*

(*bhogaś ca*) *tathā kartā* (*bhoktā*), thus may this formula be rendered if we accept to understand *kriyā* as extending even to cognitive activities.

Now we may ask, what is there in the subject-agent which links it so intimately with its activity. This obviously is not a passive or static disposition but a dynamic force, an energy, what Aristotle, indeed, calls *energeia*, from *en* (in) and *ergon* (work, from the same IE root *werg-*). According to him, this *energeia*, which characterises the agent acts through the operation (*praxis*, the working process) upon the potency or potentiality (*dynamis*). It actuates this potency according to the latter's limiting dispositions (*pathos*, *exis*, *proairesis*) so that, as a result (*en telei*), there is found in the work (*ergon*) a received perfection similar to that of the *energeia*. As resulting at the end of the process, this perfection is called *entelecheia*, entelechy. But since it derives from the *energeia*, it a fortiori pertains to the latter which is, therefore, with even more right called *entelecheia*. The following diagram presents the conceptual field of ENERGEIA and DYNAMIS :



The ENERGEIA-DYNAMIS couple is inferred by Aristotle through a rational process meant to discover the ontological *necessary* conditions immanent in every type of activity wherever activity results in a positive change. We may throw light on it if we notice that it reconciles *satkāryavāda* with *asatkāryavāda*.

It explains, indeed, that the *sat* of the result, its perfection or entelechy, was causally present in the *energeia* or actuating principle viewed as *entelecheia*, and that the *asat* of the result, its limitation which makes it new, non-identical to its actuating principle, is due to a receiving and limiting co-principle, the potency or *dynamis*. *Dynamis* is not logical possibility and it is not an ontological nothing though it is a no-thing, a not-yet-thing apart from its actuation by an 'act' or *energeia*. It is the ontological receiving principle in every change, the co-principle of *energeia*. On the lowest and most primordial level of change, it is *pure dynamis* which may be called prime matter (*prôtê hylê*). This is distinct from concrete matter which is already a synthesis of 'act' and 'potency' and, therefore, full of energy and forces (in act) but unstable and liable to change (in potency). *Energeia* and *dynamis* are the contrary but synthesizing co-principles necessarily immanent to any change. The actuality or perfection (entelechy) of the *energeia* is found in the result only in the measure of the receiving *dynamis*. This is why effects are not identical to, but similar-and-dissimilar to, their cause. They only participate in its perfection.

Aristotle's inference of *energeia* and *dynamis* may now appear to be of the *arthāpatti* type. This consists in reconciling two contrary features of a given reality by assuming either a sufficient or a necessary condition of their co-existence. In the first case, a choice between a variety of possible sufficient conditions imposes itself and the principle of parsimony generally determines that choice resulting only in a more or less high probability and revisability. This is the case of all the positive, whether physical or human, sciences. In the second case, there is no such choice but a most penetrating dialectic helped by discerning acumen and insight endeavours to determine not simply the formal but the ontological necessary conditions of the observed state of affairs. Such an endeavour characterises the metaphysical enquiry. The measures of its success are the intelligibility, coherence and adequacy of its conclusions. Being concerned only with necessary and not sufficient conditions, it cannot claim self-sufficiency in accounting for the state of affairs. It only accounts for the radical possibility of the facts and the solution of their apparent antinomies whereas it yields to the scientific enquiry the task of explaining their particular how and contents.

Applying this method to the psyche-phenomenon which is the field of all life-activities and passivities from the organic to the noetic, Aristotle determines that its most radical necessary condition must be a first entelechy whose actuating energy synthesizes with the pure potency of prime matter so that their very synthesis is an organic body endowed with whatever degree of life (cf. his definition of psychê in *Peri Psychês*, 412a20 : "The first entelechy of a natural body in potency to possess life.") This then is the soul in general and there are various types of souls (and organic bodies) from the vegetable to the human since there are distinct levels of bodily life.

By naming this entelechy a soul we seem to hypostatize it and to fall back into Platonism. But no Aristotelian 'soul', not even the human one, is a substance; for what Aristotle's *arthâpatti* led him to assume is not a separate entity mysteriously indwelling and animating a living body, but a co-principle, the life-providing *energeia*, essentially synthesizing with another co-principle, the prime *dynamis*, equally a non-substance. It is still the *raison d'être* of the body-subjectivity, of its vitality, centrality, and eventually of its interiority and consciousness, but it has no nature of its own apart from these functions. It is not an *âtman*, a *jîva* or a *puruṣa* and neither is it a pure *sākṣin*, *dṛṣ* or *jñā*.

### The Conception of Man

We may now ask, why was Aristotle so concerned to formulate the psychê in terms of pure reason? Why, more precisely, in terms of *energeia* and *dynamis* (act and potency)? What theoretic or practical value is to be found in this insistence, as against Plato, that psychê is not a complete "it" but that "by which we live" (*ibid.*, 414a5), not an independent entity but the energetic, determining, constituent principle of a living compositum?

The answer to these questions lies in his historical situation. As a Greek of the fourth century B.C., he felt himself claimed and challenged by two opposing worlds: the changeless world of *nous*, of Pure Thought, of Being, of Changeless Certainty, of "Is"; and the world of sense-perception, of *Aisthêsis*, of Becoming, Instability, Change, of "Seems". On the one side, the world of Parmenides in which man was dissolved into the indivisibility of Being; on the

other side, the world of Heraclitus in which man is a mere wave of the flux of change. The strife between the two worlds was no mere academic discussion : it was the initial struggle for the wholeness of man. Was man *nothing but* a field of opposing forces, and was his aspiration to transcend spatio-temporal processes an illusion ? Or was he, contrariwise, *nothing but* the one Being, strangely involved in the unreal, weary wheel of purposeless becoming, from which his sole aspiration should be liberation ?

Plato had inclined heavily towards the latter alternative. Somehow, unaccountably, man was involved in the world of sense-perception but his true home was the realm of pure thought and eternal ideas. Man, in short, was not soul and body. Man was soul, and soul was the godlike *Nous*. The body was his unfitting prison-house or, at best, his steed.

*Energeia* and *dynamis* was Aristotle's rational answer to the dilemma of *Nous* or *Aîsthêsis*, of Being or Becoming. It alone provided the terms of reference without which change remained unintelligible. Assumed first of all to make intelligible the changeful psychê-phenomenon, act and potency substituted "Both-And" for the previous "Either-Or" and preserved its complex integrality. They enabled Aristotle to see psychology on the one hand, and biology and physiology on the other, as concerned, neither with two disparate fields of enquiry, nor yet with two purely subjective aspects of the same reality, but as concerned respectively with the determining and the potential constituents of the integral *humanum*. The explanation they command can still enable us to avoid the pitfalls of psychophysical parallelism, of psychological epiphenomenalism, those of a psychology which would restrict psychê to conscious mentation, and all a-priori limitations which would banish the irrational and the unconscious from psychological consideration. As Wundt remarked in his *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie* (4th edn. p. 633,) "it is only the psychê conception of Aristotle, in which psychology is combined with biology, that issues in a plausible metaphysical conclusion for experimental psychology." Indeed, it enables us to see psychology as concerned with the whole man—as soul and body.



It was this vigorous affirmation of the flesh as being of the very essence of man which finally recommended the Aristotelian formula to Catholic Christianity. It was accepted notwithstanding Aristotle's hesitations concerning immortality, the denial—at least by most of his school—of the individually of *Nous*, and the absence from his later work of the "other-worldly", "religious" qualities of Platonism which made the latter more congenial to Christian faith. Already Tertullian (160–230) in the *De Anima* (esp. ch. 4, 12) and others had in early times seen the incompatibility of Platonic "spiritualism", and the relative compatibility of Aristotle's hylemorphism, with the Gospel whose central message was that of man's psycho-physical integrity—the message of health or salvation (*salvus* comes from the same root as Skt *sarva* and Gk *holos*, entire, intact, whole, wholesome, healthy, integral) wrought in and through the flesh and the hope of glory through the full reintegration of man, soul and body. It was finally St. Thomas with the Gospel in one hand and Aristotle in the other who could give both their due and show how the former could supply the insufficiencies of the latter.

He retained and secured even more firmly the holism of Aristotle's conception of man but completed it by establishing the "other-worldly" dimensions of the human soul. Already Aristotle had been compelled by his very principles of Act and Potency to the conclusion, "summing up all that has been said about the psychê," that "the human psyche is in a sense the whole existing universe" (*Peri Psychês*, 431b20). St. Thomas expressed the rationale of this in his statement that "the intellect (*nous*) in act is the known in act" (*Summa Theologica*, I, 87.) In the actuation of thinking both the thinking 'I' and the things 'known' emerge, on reflection, as potencies to one unique and identical act of knowing and being known. Thus by passing from potency into act, the intellect (*nous*) opens up the limited individuality of man to the reality of the universe. And Aristotle consequently places the highest end of man in the perfect understanding and contemplation (*theoriâ*) of this reality. Man's bliss, he thinks, must consist in the highest activity of the soul's highest power, the *nous*, exercised on the highest objects and with the maximum of perfection and permanence "so far as this is possible" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7 *passim*). But this seems to be a very aristocratic and seldom practicable ideal.

St. Thomas preserves and amends the truth of Aristotle's view. There is, he shows, in the dynamic intellect an essential, natural desire (*jijñāṣā*) for the perfect intuition of the highest Intelligible and in it of all others. This ineluctable desire plays even the chief role in his best argumentation that this supreme Intelligible exists as the *Deus simplex* (*nirguna*), Fulness of Being, Life, Knowledge and Happiness, and free, independent and total Cause of all other realities, whether spirits, or matter. Man's highest end, therefore, can only reside in the fulfillment of that desire for the Absolute which imbues the intellect and impells it to ever higher and higher intellections. But Thomas also shows that this fulfillment escapes the unaided power of man's intellect. Not because its potentiality would fall short of the Absolute but because the Absolute cannot be conquered by a finite intellect. Indeed, it is a constant datum of our experience that our finite intellect cannot pass into act unless it be informed (through the *pramāṇas*) about the objects to be known (*jñeya*). But with regard to the supreme *Jñeyam* (Intelligible) no *pramāṇa*, no worldly source of valid knowledge, can provide adequate information. They may provide correct pointers but these remain apophatic. God's Absolute remains the complete Mystery and man's most radical and co-essential desire seems destined to be ever frustrated.

Is this the ultimate answer? Is there no other possibility? There is, says St. Thomas, the possibility of receiving gratuitously what we cannot conquer. Since the potentiality of the intellect for the intelligible is unlimited, it is thinkable that the Absolute itself, which is all intelligibility, may through a free and magnanimous self surrender inform directly our intellect about Itself. In such an event, he says, God's very Infinite Essence would be communicated to our finite intellect not only as the Known of a blissful intuition but as that *by which* it is known. We would know the Absolute through its own Essence of Consciousness. And since "the intellect in act and the intelligible in act are one," we would truly become, not ontologically but epistemically, namely, through this perfect actuation of our intellect, God the Absolute itself.

As a Christian believer, St. Thomas held that this God-dependent possibility was the supreme promise warranted by Christ. It supported his whole life as a scholar, a mystic and a saint and, we may believe, he at last reached its fulfilment.

### Conclusion

This paper is only a bird's eye view of the method devised by Aristotle for investigating the psyche-phenomenon and of some important features of his conception of man as completed by St. Thomas. His method is phenomeno-philosophical. Its problematics is not artificial but arises from an extensive observation and analysis of the phenomenon. This analysis does not result in mere units of description, classifications and valuational hierarchisation: it never loses sight of the field-unitariness of the phenomenon. Consequently, it is followed by a philosophical re-synthetization of the analyzed data around an arthapattic discovery of their immanent necessary conditions. The formulation of the theory of Act and Potency ( *Energeia* and *Dynamis* ) does not precede but emanates from this endeavour. It yields the important result that the psyche is to be viewed as the first entelechy in any life-manifesting body. Thus it cancels the myth of the soul imagined as an eternal, free substance mysteriously incarcerated in a body and alienated by the vicissitudes of the world of space and time.

Through his further special study of the human psyche, Aristotle arrived at a holistic understanding of man. It bridged over the gap between the intellect with its space-and-time transcending activities and the senses bound to time and space. Yet he remained uncertain about the capacity of the intellect to reach the fully transcendent Absolute. This uncertainty was overcome by Thomas Aquinas. Adopting and expanding both the method and the holistic psychology of Aristotle, he went on to explore more deeply the *nous*-phenomenon and discovered as pertaining to the very essence of the noetic dynamism a desire for intuiting the very Absolute of Godhead. He showed this desire to be constitutive of the intellect and, therefore, preconscious but at work at every point of the noetic activity. By itself alone this desire can only tend towards an achievement which it cannot conquer due to the very transcendence of the Absolute. Yet where conquering is impossible, receiving may achieve its goal. The One supremely free may surrender freely to man's desire.

## NOTE

I am very conscious that this paper has omitted so much that the picture it gives is quite incomplete and somewhat lopsided. It has stressed certain features at the expense of others. But this was intended to suggest that a holistic understanding of man is possible and that psychology need not be alienated from philosophy.