Connatural Knowledge in Aquinas and Kierkegaardian Subjectivity

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For the most part, treatments of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas stress the purely speculative or abstractive side of his theory of knowledge. There is no need here to describe this aspect of Thomistic philosophy but it may well be useful to point out that this is only one side of a surprisingly rich view of human knowing. Perhaps this state of affairs can be explained partly by the emphasis that has been given to his monumental *Summa Theologiae,* which after all, is a work of *speculative* theology. Yet even in this work, St. Thomas is at pains to distinguish between speculative knowledge and another kind of cognition, called "affective", "experiential", or "connatural" knowledge.[1] Then too, medieval thinkers were quite concerned to stress and safeguard the objectivity of human knowledge, and no doubt they were quite correct in doing so. However, this concern is counterbalanced, especially in Aquinas, with the recognition that there is another, more intimately personal knowledge which involves the whole man rather than just his intellect.[2]

The distinction between these two types of knowledge does not depend chiefly on the nature of the objects known or the content of the knowledge, but is essentially determined by the relation between the knower and the known.[3] There are, to be sure, certain areas and types of object which tend to

1 An index to one edition of the *Summa Theologiae* puts it thus: "Cognitio duplex, scilicet naturalis et per gratiam. Et utraque duplex, scilicet una pure speculativa tantum, et alia affectiva sive experimentalis." Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Christianos, 1951), vol. 5. The entry then lists five *loci* for this distinction. In this paper we shall be concerned with this distinction as it applies to natural knowledge almost exclusively.

2 Of course Aquinas following Aristotle and good sense, always insisted that all human activity involves the synolon – it is *I* who think, it is *I* who walk, in the former case using my mind, in the latter using my legs. Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* Bk. I, chap. 4 (408b 10–15). The difference here is that in speculative knowledge man uses his intellect primarily and perhaps exclusively, but in connatural knowledge, man grasps the object in a unified action involving not only intellect and will but his whole personality.

3 It is on this point that it would be tempting to dwell on similar notions found in Thomas à Kempis, Pascal, John Henry Cardinal Newman, and William James.

admit of the two kinds of knowing better than others. Such, for example, would be the case with respect to the spheres of beauty and art, ethics, and theology. Thus, St. Thomas speaks of two ways of knowing the virtues, e. g., chastity. One way, the speculative sort of knowing, is acquired through the study of "moral science". The other way is through habituation, through *being* chaste.[4] These two ways of knowing are not mutually exclusive, although it is certainly possible to have one without the other. Furthermore, there is no doubt in my mind that were St. Thomas forced to make a choice, he would certainly opt for the affective rather than the speculative type of knowledge. Without denying in any way the formidable theological and philosophical intellect of Thomas, we do him an injustice if we forget that he was first and foremost a saint, a warm and deeply affective individual.

It is fortunate that neither St. Thomas nor anyone else is absolutely required to take only one or the other of these two ways of knowing, since they relate to the most important and most valuable things that concern mankind.

The talented musician or lover of music knows music in a far richer way than someone who may merely know the technique of playing an instrument or the physics of sound and acoustics without a deeply personal involvement. The artist knows beauty in a much more profound way than someone who has only an abstract or theoretical knowledge of the principles of aesthetics or the techniques and styles of painting, sculpture, etc. The poet has a grasp of reality that may elude the scientist or philosopher and which may be as full of meaning and just as valid (and possibly more so) as the more rational and structured perspectives of scientists and philosophers.[5] The great mystics seem to have had a direct, devastatingly personal identification with the Deity which in its deep

4 "... sapientia importat quandam rectitudinem judicii secundum rationes divinas. Rectitudo autem judicii potest contingere dupliciter: uno modo, secundum perfectum usum rationis; alio modo, propter connaturalitatem quandam ad ea de quibus jam est judicandum. Sicut de his quae ad castitatem pertinent per rationis inquisitionem recte judicat ille qui didicit scientiam moralem; sed per quandam connaturalitatem ad ipsa recte judicat de eis ille qui habet habitum castitatis." Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* IIa–IIae, q. 45, art. 2 *corpus articuli.* The remainder of the article goes on to apply the same distinction to the sort of knowledge we can have "circa res divinas" on the one hand through rational inquiry, and on the other hand through grace, i. e., through the gift of the Holy Spirit, wisdom. Cf. also *Summa Theologiae,* Ia, q. 64, art. 1, *corpus articuli.*

5 This is hardly the place to discourse upon the banality of positivism, but the temptation to quote William James (as against Ayer or Bertrand Russell) in this connection is irresistible: *"a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule."* William James, "The Will to Believe".

psychological resonance makes even the most detailed speculative knowledge of theology appear anemic.[6] And as has already been pointed out, the virtuous man's knowledge of virtue is of an entirely different and far richer character than that of one who has merely theoretical or speculative knowledge of ethics or morals, no matter how exact and detailed the latter may be. Finally, the person who loves another knows that other (and himself) in a far more profound and richer way than one who has an extensive, precise, scientific, but indifferent (i. e., "objective") knowledge of another.

These are all instances of the difference between connatural knowledge (concerned knowledge) and purely speculative (objective) knowledge. The latter is essentially intellectual and is characterized by objective indifference, the former involves the whole person, intellect and will fused in a singular penetration into the known, carrying with it the deepest resources of the whole human besouled body.

Thus, although in the *Summa Theologiae* St. Thomas discusses this distinction only within the context of speculative theology (because of the nature of that work), there is no reason why it cannot be applied to the areas just sketched.[7] In fact, the two contemporary Thomists, Gilby and Maritain, who most clearly discuss connatural knowledge as a development of the

6 One is reminded that St. Thomas abandoned work on the *Summa Theologiae* and several other major theological works after a mystical experience, confiding in a fellow friar, Reginald of Priverno, that "All that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what has now been revealed to me." Kenelm Foster, *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (London: Longmans, Green, 1959), pp. 109–110.

7 For example: "... duplex est cognitio veritatis: una quidem quae habetur per gratiam; alia vero qua habetur per naturam. Et ista quae habetur per gratiam, est duplex; una quae est speculativa tantum, sicut cum alicui aliqua secreta divinorum revelantur; alia vero quae est affectiva, producens amorem Dei; et haec proprie pertinet ad donum Sapientiae." *Summa Theologiae,* Ia, q. 64, art. 1, *corpus articuli.* St. Thomas then goes on to apply these distinctions to a discussion of whether and to what degree the fallen angels have knowledge of truth. A somewhat simpler application of this contrast turns up again in connection with human knowledge of God: "... duplex est cognitio divinae bonitatis vel voluntatis. Una quidem speculativa ... Alia autem est cognitio divinae bonitatis seu voluntatis affectiva seu experimentalis, dum quis experitur in seipso gustum divinae dulcedinis et complacentiam divinae voluntatis: ..." *Summa Theologiae,* IIa–IIae, q. 97, art. 2., ad 2m. In considering whether the vice of pride interferes with the acquisition of truth, Aquinas repeats the distinction: "... cognitio veritatis est duplex. Una pure speculativa. Et hanc superbia indirecte impedit, subtrahendo causam. Superbus enim neque Deo suum intellectum subjicit, ut ab eo veritatis cognitionem percipiat: ...

Alia autem est cognitio veritatis affectiva. Et talem cognitionem veritatis directe impedit superbia." *Summa Theologia,* IIa–IIae, q. 162, ad 1 m.

teaching of Aquinas have done so precisely in the areas I have suggested above rather than in the context of strictly speculative theology.[8]

The important point for our present purposes, however, is that St. Thomas does differentiate between two modes of knowing: one, an affective, concerned, committed type, commonly called "knowledge by connaturality", and the more familiar abstract, "scientific", speculative type of intellectual cognition. Furthermore, these two ways of knowing are not necessarily incompatible or mutually exclusive. Without suggesting that there is any direct or even indirect connection between Aquinas and Kierkegaard, it is my contention that there is a very close parallel between these two types of cognition in the writings of Aquinas and Kierkegaard's distinction between subjectivity and objectivity.[9]

Subjectivity was, of course, a central theme for Kierkegaard, a theme which pervades both his works and his *Papirer* from beginning to end.[10] At the very beginning of his intellectual career, Kierkegaard distinguished between subjectivity and objectivity in a ringing declaration which lays out the course he proposes to follow. He sees that what he needs

> is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true *for me,* to find *the idea for which I can live and die.* What would be the use of discovering so-called objective truth, of working through all the systems of philosophy and of being able, if required, to review them all and show up the inconsistencies within each system; – what good would it do me to be able to develop a theory of the state and combine all the details into a single whole, and so construct a world in which I did not live, but only held up to the view of others; what good would it

8 See, for example, Thomas Gilby, *Poetic Experience* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), especially chapter 5, "Love-Knowledge", pp. 39–45. Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952); Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962); Jacques and Raissa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955).

9 Kierkegaard probably never read Aquinas, although he owned the works of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, and a number of other "Catholic" works, including some theology manuals (but no works by Aquinas). Cf. *Katalog over Søren Kierkegaards Bibliotek* (Copenhagen, 1957) and Heinrich Roos, *Søren Kierkegaard and Catholicism* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1954).

10 According to a reliable recent account, there are 243 instances of S. K.'s use of the word "subjectivity" (and its variants) in the *Samlede Værker* alone (not including the *Papirer*), over half of them (154) in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript.* Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard's Remarks on Philosophy" *Journal of the History of Philosophy,* XI, no. 4 (October, 1973) pp. 513–522.

> do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity if it had *no* deeper significance *for me and for my life;* what good would it do me if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized her or not, and producing in me a shudder of fear rather than a trusting devotion? I certainly do not deny that I still recognize an *imperative of understanding* and that through it one can work upon men, *but it must be taken up into my life,* and *that is* what I no recognize as the most important thing.[11]

This statement, written on August 1, 1835, when Kierkegaard was only twenty-two years old, became a guiding light for the remainder of his life and for the literary production which so brilliantly reflected his deep interiority. It is a declaration of vocation from which he never wavered, and only developed in its manifold ramifications in all his later writings. There is, of course, no possibility of doing a thorough study of S. K.'s notion of subjectivity vs. objectivity, or even of the full meaning of subjectivity within the scope of this paper. Only the more modest goal of indicating briefly and, I hope, accurately what Kierkegaard meant by this distinction, and how it may be taken to be a legitimate, albeit independent extension and development of St. Thomas' notion of connatural knowledge can be attempted here.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity as against what I call the "illusion of objectivity" is to a large degree a part of his opposition to Hegel and to Hegelianism.[12] Since this is the case, Kierkegaard tends to stress subjectivity to the virtual exclusion and even to what might be taken as the denial of any validity to objectivity. Yet it would be a serious mistake to interpret Kierkegaard in this way. The fact is that although Kierkegaard recognized the legitimacy of claims to objective knowledge, at least in certain areas,[13] in connection with what is most important, subjectivity is what is needed. He was

11 *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer,* 2. udgave (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968) I A 75. Emphasis Kierkegaard's. The whole entry fills eight pages in the original Danish. A convenient English translation of this remarkable statement of position may be found in Alexander Dru, *The Journals of Kierkegaard* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), pp. 44–48.

12 Aside from what I take to be the rather obvious references to Hegelianism in the portion of I A 75 just cited, the fact that most of Kierkegaard's use of the word "subjectivity" (and related words) occurs in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* and that much of that work is devoted to a fusillade against Hegelianism would tend to support this claim. How accurate or extensive Kierkegaard's knowledge of Hegel's writing was, is, of course, another question. That question has been as thoroughly answered as it is ever likely to be by Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaards Forhold til Hegel* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1967).

13 Such as mathematics, the sciences, and history. See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 173.

writing as a corrective against what he took to be an exaggerated fascination with objectivity, and furthermore, he simply was not interested in the areas where objectivity would be appropriate. As Kierkegaard saw it, the crucial task, the one which takes precedence over all others, is to take seriously the things that count the most.

> Thus it is I have sought to understand myself. If the understanding I have reached is meager and the outcome slight, at any rate, to make up for that deficiency, I have resolved to act with all my passion in virtue of what I have understood. In the long run perhaps it is also a more wholesome diet to understand little but to possess this little with the infinite responsibility of passion in the context of infinity, rather than to know more and possess nothing because I have myself fantastically become a fantastic 'subjective-objective' something or other.[14]

In a variety of ways Kierkegaard insists repeatedly that there is more to life than logic, there is more to reality than can be stuffed into a Hegelian (or any other) system, that abstract knowledge can only leave out existence. As soon as any "Professor or Privatdocent" or world-historical engineer thinks that he has organized reality into an objective system, it immediately turns out that reality in its full richness has escaped him.

Abstract, objective, speculative knowledge is essentially indifferent to the existing subject, and totally lacking in passion. Subjectivity is essentially personal, characterized by passion, and is virtually identical with interiority or "inwardness" (*Inderligheden*). "Subjective truth is interiority, and truth is subjectivity."[15]

It would, however, be a serious misunderstanding of Kierkegaard to assume that this means that "anything goes", or to say with Nietzsche's Zarathustra that "Nothing is true, everything is permitted."[16] As a matter of fact, we do not and cannot make an untruth true simply by holding to it firmly and with the intensity of unbridled passion. Genuine subjectivity is the truth and truth is subjectivity only inasmuch as the existing individual locks on to the Absolute (God) in objective uncertainty but with the most passionate intensity of con-

14 *Ibid.*, p. 162. Translation slightly modified.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 169. The whole of chapter 2, Part II is devoted to a treatment of this theme.
16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, "Der Schatten", Vierter Teil (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1960), p. 511.

viction. It involves among other things, the conviction of the eternal difference between good and evil, and an absolute relation to the Absolute.[17]

Thus, Kierkegaard's insistence upon the legitimacy of the subjective is not a crude (or even occult) subjectivism. Kierkegaard insists that whenever we yield to the temptation to objectivize, humanize, or reduce to neat little rational packages the most important truths, we have thereby made them trivial and probably untrue. As Kierkegaard saw it, the rationalistic *hubris* which infected European thought from the seventeenth century to his own day was tantamount to blasphemy. Perhaps he goes too far in this direction, but his insistence that the answers to the most important questions of life will not be found in neat little objective pillboxes was a badly needed corrective in his time and perhaps also in ours.[18]

And so it seems that Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity and his distinction between the subjective and the objective is very close to St. Thomas Aquinas' distinction between connatural knowledge and purely speculative knowledge. If this is the case, then as Louis Mackey has claimed in another connection, "in parting company with modern philosophy, Kierkegaard rejoined the *philosophia perennis.*"[19]

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17 "Subjectiviteten er Sandheden, ... betyder i første Omgang, at Sandheden er i den subjective Lidenskab at vælge at tro paa Evighedens Forskel paa godt og ondt og at lade sig bestemme af det absolutte gode. At forholde sig absolut til det absolutte Telos, at være reddet ud af Fortvivlelsen ved at have mødt Evighedens *Du skal.*" N. H. Søe, *Subjektiviteten er Sandheden* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1949), p. 51.

18 Valter Lindström, "Problemet objektivt-subjektivt hos Kierkegaard" in *Nordisk Teologi: Idéer och Män* (Lund, Sweden: C. W. K. Gleerups Förlag, 1955), pp. 86–87.

19 Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) p. 268.

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