

# IMMEDIATE COGNITION OF GOD. AQUINAS ON RAPTURE

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UDK 1 Thomas Aquinas  
141.31

Three ways of how one acquires cognition of God can readily be identified: First, by relying on testimony of other people who are regarded as trustworthy, competent, authoritative and reliable. A believes B that p, B believes C that p, C believes D that p and so on. It is clear that this series of testimonies cannot be an infinite regress. Relying on testimony presupposes that there is at least one person who gains the belief p in a different way than by testimony. Secondly, by forming inferences: deductive *a priori* arguments (ontological arguments), deductive *a posteriori* arguments (Aquinas's five ways), inductive *a posteriori* arguments (Swinburne's hypotheses to the best explanation).<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, immediately by being aware of God's presence, by experiencing God, by seeing God.

Aquinas is well known for his five ways and therefore for employing an epistemological approach of the second type. However, he analyses also other forms of cognition of God: cognition of God by faith, cognition of God given to specially graced persons such as prophets and apostles, Adam's cognition of God before the fall, Christ's cognition of God, the angel's cognition of God, and cognition of God which is called the beatific vision. In this paper one type of cognition of God, given to specially graced persons, is explored, namely *raptus*, rapture.<sup>2</sup> The focus here will be on epistemological questions.

## *Cases of Rapture*

The starting point for Aquinas's consideration are reports of extraordinary experiences in the Bible. There is, for example, the following report about Moses:

- 1 See: Muck, O. (1999), *Rationalität und Weltanschauung. Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Innsbruck: Tyrolia, pp. 338–340.
- 2 Aquinas deals with rapture in three writings: *De Veritate* (DV) 13; *Commentary II ad Corinthios*; *Summa Theologiae* (ST) II II 175. A summary of the history of the *tractatus* on rapture can be found in: Balthasar, U. von (1954) *Besondere Gnadengaben und die zwei Wege menschlichen Lebens*. Kommentar zu: Die Deutsche Thomas-Ausgabe, Bd. 23. Heidelberg, München/Graz, Wien, Salzburg: Kerle/Pustet, pp. 372–410.

“When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face — clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord” (Num 12: 6–8).

And St Paul writes in the second letter to the Corinthians:

“It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows — was caught up into Paradise and heard ineffable words, which are not permitted for a human being to utter” (2 Cor 12: 1–4).

Two exegetical remarks: First, Thomas and most of the exegetes agree that in the second passage quoted, Paul is speaking about himself in the third person. Secondly, Thomas assumes that Paul’s experience is of the same kind as the one of Moses. Both experienced rapture.<sup>3</sup>

### *What Is Rapture?*

Aquinas agrees with the medieval definition of rapture as an uplifting by the power of a higher nature from that which is according to nature to that which is above nature.<sup>4</sup> Rapture is something violent, not voluntary. The principle of the event lies outside, is external to, the person who experiences rapture. Furthermore, rapture is non-sensory (*cum abstractione/alienatione a sensibus*). Normally, for human beings every cognition starts with sense perception. Sensible *species* are stored by internal senses, especially by *phantasia*. As phantasms they are transmitted to the intellect. The agent intellect abstracts from the particularities of the phantasms and produces intelligible *species* by which the quiddity of things is cognised. However, in the case of rapture and some prophetic revelations, the vision happens by withdrawal from the senses. A withdrawal from the senses can be caused by different things: cognitive defects, illness, strong emotions, demons, sleep, but also by divine

3 Aquinas argues for his claim that Paul’s experience was a vision of God’s essence by interpreting the ineffable words Paul hears as pertaining to the vision of the blessed (ST II II 175, 3). Moreover, he maintains that it would not be convenient that Moses, the teacher of the Jews, saw the essence of God while Paul, the teacher of the Gentiles, did not see it (DV 13, 2; also *II ad Corinthios* 12).

4 ST II II 175, 1 *arg* 1; also: DV 13, 1.

power. In the case of rapture the withdrawal from the senses is caused by God; therefore it is called an uplifting. Finally, rapture consists in the vision of God's essence. For Aquinas Moses or Paul were not merely in a strong emotional state of loving God. There is a cognitive aspect. They see the essence of God which is an act of the intellect.<sup>5</sup>

Although rapture belongs primarily to the intellect, there are some hints as to the function of the appetitive power for one's vision of God. "For from the very fact that the appetite is strongly affected towards something, it may happen, owing to the violence of his affection, that a man is carried away from everything else".<sup>6</sup> Obviously Aquinas thinks that desire or love can be a proper cause of rapture and therefore be a condition for seeing God's essence. Love makes one seeing. This claim is supported by ST I 12, 6 where Aquinas claims that among those who see the essence of God, some see it more perfectly than others. Seeing God presupposes that God elevates one's cognitive faculties, gives one participation in the light of glory. Such participation comes in degrees. The intensity of participation is a function of one's charity, "because where there is the greater charity, there is the more desire; and desire somehow makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired. Hence he who possesses the more charity, will see God the more perfectly, and will be the more beatified".<sup>7</sup> Moreover, seeing the essence of God has an effect on the appetitive power: Paul delights in that to which he is rapt.<sup>8</sup> "Hence the Apostle said that he was rapt, not only to the third heaven which pertains to the contemplation of the intellect, but also into paradise, which pertains to the appetite".<sup>9</sup> Experiencing rapture, therefore, involves an act of the beatific vision, at once cognitive and appetitive.<sup>10</sup>

5 Aquinas relies, like all medieval theologians, on Augustine who determines that "God's very substance could be seen by some while yet in this life; as by Moses, and by Paul who in rapture heard ineffable words, which are not permitted for a human being to utter" (ST II II 175, 3 *sed contra*). Furthermore Aquinas quotes the following question of Augustine: "Why should we not believe that when so great an apostle, the teacher of the gentiles, was rapt to this most sublime vision, God was willing to show him that life which after this life is to take place in eternity?" (ST II II 175, 4 *arg* 1).

6 ST II II 175, 2.

7 ST I 12, 6.

8 See: DV 13, 2 *ad* 6, where Thomas explicitly states that in rapture one experiences also the fruition of God through charity.

9 ST II II 175, 2.

10 ST II II 175, 3 *ad* 3.

### *Beatitude and Cognition of God*

It might strike us that Thomas thinks that the final aim of human life, beatitude or happiness, consists primarily in an operation of the intellect. We would rather tend to say that to be happy is to have nice feelings such as love, joy, peace, delight. Two considerations are behind Aquinas's account: First, the belief that one can love only that which one cognises. Paul cannot sensibly love God, dedicate his life to God, thank or praise God, if he does not know or believe that God exists and what God is. Peace, joy, love, delight are consequences, *per se accidentia*, or *propria*, of the cognition that the good, in this case God, is present.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, the Aristotelian position that happiness consists in the realisation of one's highest potentialities: Since human beings are rational animals their highest potentialities lie in the *ratio*, in the intellect and the will. The intellect is regarded as the highest potency. Therefore, the operation of the intellect in regard to its highest object, the divine good, is considered as beatitude.<sup>12</sup> This operation of the intellect consists in the vision of the divine essence. Aquinas makes this claim for two reasons:

“First, that a man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek. Secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object. Now the object of the intellect is what a thing is', i. e. the essence of a thing, according to *De Anima III*. Wherefore the intellect attains perfection, in so far as it cognises the essence of a thing. If therefore an intellect cognises the essence of some effect, whereby it is not possible to cognise the essence of the cause, i. e. to know of the cause what it is' [*quid est*]; that intellect cannot be said to reach that cause *simpliciter*, although it may be able to cognise from the effect that the cause is [*an est*]. Consequently, when a man cognises an effect, and knows that it has a cause, there naturally remains in the man the desire to know about the cause, what it is'. And this desire is one of wonder, and causes inquiry, as is stated in the beginning of the *Metaphysics*. For instance, if somebody, cognising the eclipse of the sun, considers that it must be due to some cause, and knows not what that cause is, he wonders about it, and from wondering proceeds to inquiry. And this inquiry does not rest until he arrives at cognising the essence of the cause. If therefore the human intellect, cognising the essence of some created effect, cognises no more of God than that he is'; the perfection of that intellect does not yet reach the first cause *simpliciter*, but there remains in it the natural desire to seek the cause. Wherefore it is not yet perfectly happy. Consequently, for perfect happiness it is required that the intellect

11 ST I II, 2, 6 and 3, 4.

12 ST I II 3, 5.

reaches the very essence of the first cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone man's happiness consists, as stated above".<sup>13</sup>

Since to be rapt is to participate for a moment in the beatific vision, we have to understand how Aquinas portrays one's epistemic position *vis a vis* God in the case of the beatific vision. But first a few words about the method of such an enterprise are apt.

### *The Method*

The epistemology of the beatific vision is an application of Aquinas's general account of cognition to the special object of cognition, God. Such application presupposes already some cognition of God which is reached by inferential reasoning from effects to the cause. Thus, the epistemology of the beatific vision presupposes the epistemology of the five ways, of what can be shown by natural reason. By natural reason Aquinas thinks to establish that God exists and what he is not.<sup>14</sup> By the *via negativa* he gains some cognition of God: that there must be a necessarily unique, absolute simple being which is the ultimate cause of everything; that there are no passive *de re* potentialities in God, that God is not a member of a kind, that God's existence is identical with his essence and with all his properties.<sup>15</sup>

In order to explore the epistemology of the beatific vision we have therefore to give an outline of Aquinas's general account of cognition, and to see how he applies it to God. Three questions are relevant for our assessment: What is it to be a cogniser? What is the relationship between cogniser and cognised object? How are essences cognised?

### *On Being a Cogniser*

The most general necessary condition for being a cogniser can be stated thus:

13 ST I II 3, 8.

14 See the introduction to ST I 2: "*Circa essentiam vero divinam, primo considerandum est, an Deus sit; secundo quomodo sit, vel potius quomodo non sit.*" See also the introduction to ST I 3: "*Cognito de aliquo an sit, inquirendum restat quomodo sit, ut sciatur de eo quid sit. Sed quia de Deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit, non possumus considerare de Deo quomodo sit, sed potius quomodo non sit.*"

15 For an account of the doctrine of simplicity see: Hughes, G. (1995), *The Nature of God*. London: Routledge, pp. 34–63.

- (1) P is a cogniser only if P is able not just to have P's own form but also the form of other things.<sup>16</sup>

If we apply this condition to the special object of the beatific vision, we get:

- (2) P is a cogniser of God's essence only if P is able to have the form of God.<sup>17</sup>

Taking on the form of other things, however, occurs within the bounds of the nature of the cogniser. There has to be some sort of similarity between one's cognitive faculties and the object of cognition. There may be many things we do not know of because our cognitive powers are not capable to register them. A dog might smell qualities we are not able to smell or hear sounds we are not able to hear because our sense of smelling and hearing is limited. A bat might sense environmental qualities which we do not register because we are lacking the appropriate sense.

For Aquinas, the cognitive powers of human beings are not sufficient for seeing God. Human beings are composed of matter and form. It is natural for them to cognise the nature of things by the senses and the intellect. Angels are non-material beings. It is natural for them to cognise natures non existing in matter, immaterial things.<sup>18</sup> God is self-subsistent. It is natural only for God to cognise a self-subsistent being.<sup>19</sup> Since the human cognitive faculties are by their very nature not appropriate for cognising the essence of God, they require a supernatural elevation by which they are rendered capable of seeing God. "Therefore, in order to see God, there must be some similitude of God

16 ST I 14, 1: "[...] *considerandum est quod cognoscentia a non cognoscentibus in hoc distinguuntur, quia non cognoscentia nihil habent nisi formam suam tantum, sed cognoscens natum est habere formam etiam rei alterius: nam species cogniti est in cognoscente.*"

Receiving or taking on the form of other things is not considered as a physical change only. For then also stones would be cognisers when they become wet. It is taking on forms in a certain way, namely without the matter, spiritually or intentionally, that constitutes the ability to perceive and to cognise. So, if we were not speaking about the cognition of God, we would have to make the following qualification:

(1\*) P is a cogniser only if P is able not just to have P's own form but also the intentionally existing form of other things.

Compare: ST I 78, 3: "*Ad operationem autem sensus requiritur immutatio spiritualis, per quam intentio formae sensibilis fiat in organo sensus; alioquin, si sola immutatio naturalis sufficeret ad sentiendum, omnia corpora naturalia sentirent, dum alternatur.*" For an assessment of this doctrine see: Pasnau, R. (1997), *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 31–60.

17 See: ST I 12, 5 "*Cum autem aliquis intellectus creatus videt Deum per essentiam, ipsa essentia Dei fit forma intelligibilis intellectus.*"

18 ST I 54, 4.

19 ST I 12, 4.

on the part of the visual faculty, whereby the intellect is made capable of seeing God”.<sup>20</sup>

Aquinas uses the light–metaphor in order to express this thought.<sup>21</sup> In the dark we cannot see. It is the light which makes the potential colours actually visible for us. More generally, it is the effect of light that something becomes an object of sight for us. Similarly, things as presented by the senses are only potentially intelligible. They constitute only the material out of which the intellect forms concepts and judgements. It is the light of the intellect which makes the potential intelligible forms of things intelligible for us. It is the effect of the natural light of the intellect that something becomes an object of cognition. Finally, God’s essence, although intelligible *per se*, is not intelligible for us. It is the effect of the supernaturally added light of glory that God becomes an object of intellectual vision for us. Therefore we have to say: P is a cogniser of God’s essence only if P’s intellect is supernaturally heightened and has the form of God’s essence. But what does it mean “to take on the form of something”?

### *The Relation Between Cogniser and Cognised*

“Taking on the form of something” is specified by Aquinas by saying: “the *species* of the cognised is in the cogniser”.<sup>22</sup> This qualification poses two questions: What is meant by the word “*species*”? What is the relationship between an object, its *species* and the cogniser?

In the context of medieval cognition–theories the word “*species*” is not used in the usual meaning as a class within a genus, but in the cognitive sense. A *species* is a likeness of an object of cognition. A *species* might represent the specific nature of an object, but also its genus or an accidental feature of it, like a colour. According to the standard medieval view things in the world spread their *species*. These *species* are transported by the air or other media (*species in medio*) to a percipient (sensible *species*) and cognised by the intellect (intelligible *species*).<sup>23</sup> For Aquinas, the reason why we actually perceive or understand something is “because our intellect or sense is actually informed by the sensible or intelligible *species*.”<sup>24</sup> Suppose P is looking at a

20 ST I 12, 2; ST I 12, 5; ST I 86, 2 *ad* 1; SCG III 53.

21 For an account of the tradition of the light–metaphor in Philosophy see: Schröder, C. (1995), *Praktische Vernunft bei Thomas von Aquin*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, pp. 54–63.

22 ST I 14, 1: “[...] *nam species cogniti est in cognoscente.*”

23 See: Pasnau, p. 14.

24 ST I 14, 2: “*Ex hoc enim aliquid in actu sentimus vel intelligimus, quod intellectus noster vel sensus informatur in actu per speciem sensibilis vel intelligibilis.*”

white stone. What P is primarily perceiving is the colour white; for colours are the proper objects of seeing. Aquinas thus formulates:<sup>25</sup>

(3) P sees white, insofar as there is a likeness/*species* of white in P's sight.

Such formulations might one lead to the impression that Aquinas is a representationalist who believes that what we perceive are not the things of the world, but something in us: pictures, images, sense-data, which are caused by the things of the world and which represent them to us. However, there is the Identity-claim for proper sensibles, stating: "*sensus in actu est sensibile in actu.*" This claim suggests that Aquinas does not think the *species* to be an interface between the cognitive powers and the external world. If somebody rings a bell, in Aquinas's jargon, there is potential sound. And P's power of hearing is in potency as well. If P hears the sound of the bell, his power of hearing is actualised. The potential sound of the bell reaches its actualisation in P's act of hearing. The identity-claim has to be understood in this way that the act of perceiving is at the same time actualisation of the perceptive power and actualisation of the sensible object.<sup>26</sup> Thus, to analyse (3) in the way: "P sees x, if y is in P's sight and y is a likeness of x" would be wrong.

Normally we do not say that we see colours but things. Aquinas formulates in similarity to (3) the more familiar case of accidental (incidental) perception where it is accidental to the coloured to be a stone:<sup>27</sup>

(4) P sees a particular stone, if there is a likeness/*species* of the stone in P's sight.

In this case "similitude" or "*species*" is not used univocally to (3). The problem for Aquinas is that the substance of a material thing like a stone cannot be in P's sense-faculty, or, in the words of Aristotle, the stone cannot physically be in the mind. In cases where things are perceived, the Identity-claim seems not to work. It is controversial whether Aquinas is bound to some version of representationalism. Thus, to analyse (4) in the way: "P sees x, if y is in P's sight and y is a likeness of x" could be correct. Nevertheless, Aquinas

25 ST I 17, 2.

26 ST I 55, ad 2: "*Ad secundum dicendum, quod sicut sensus in actu est sensibile in actu, ut dicitur in 2 de Anima, non ita quod ipsa vis sensitiva sit ipsa similitudo sensibilis quae est in sensu, sed quia ex utroque fit unum sicut ex actu et potentia; ita et intellectus in actu dicitur intellectum in actu, non quod substantia intellectus sit ipsa similitudo per quam intelligit, sed quia illa similitudo est forma ejus.*"

27 ST I 17, 2: "[...] *sicut in visu est similitudo hominis.*" ST I 12, 2: "*Et in rebus quidem corporalibus, apparet quod res visa not potest esse in vidente per suam essentiam, sed solum per suam similitudinem: sicut similitudo lapidis est in oculo [...].*"



does not intend to say that what is immediately cognised is *y*, but that *x* is cognised through *y*.<sup>28</sup>

What about universals? We can think about stones without thinking of any particular stone. Aristotle and Aquinas did not believe in platonic forms, ideas or *species* existing independently of matter. For them the universal stone is the product of the agent intellect which creates actually intelligible objects by abstracting *species* from their material conditions.<sup>29</sup> Intelligible *species* are stored in the passive intellect and it is in virtue of such *species* that the intellect actually operates. Thus we could say:

- (5) P understands (*intelligit*) *x*, if there is a likeness/*species* of *x* in P's intellect.<sup>30</sup>

Aquinas does not want to say that the likeness or *species* is the object of the intellect, but rather that it is in virtue of the *species* or likeness that something actually is thought. When P thinks about stones, such thinking occurs by converting to *species*, likenesses, phantasms. However, P does not think about *species*. Moreover, the Identity-claim is applied to the intellect as well: "*intellectus in actu est intelligibile in actu.*" The claim is not that the intellect is identical with the likeness, by which the intellect thinks, but that the likeness is the form of the intellect. Aquinas's parlance of union or identity have to be understood in terms of the act-potency-relation.

Even if it is controversial whether Aquinas is representationalist or realist in mundane cases, it is entirely clear in the case of the vision of God that he is a realist; because, for Aquinas, it is not by *species* that Paul cognises the essence of God. No created likeness is able to represent the essence of God. There is direct cognitive contact with God in rapture. The essence of God is united with Paul's intellect. It is by the divine essence united with the intellect that Paul sees the divine essence. What is seen and the means by which it is seen are — in this case — identical. Aquinas writes:

"But on the part of the object seen, which must necessarily be united to the seer, the essence of God cannot be seen by any created similitude. First, because as Dionysius says (Div. Nom. 1), by the similitudes of the inferior order of things, the superior can in no way be cognised: as by the *species* of a body the essence of an incorporeal thing cannot be cognised. Much less therefore can the essence of God be seen by any created *species* whatever. Secondly, because the essence of God is his own very existence,

28 ST I 85, 2.

29 ST I 79, 3.

30 ST I 85, 2: "*Unde similitudo rei visibilis est secundum quam visus videt; et similitudo rei intellectae, quae est species intelligibilis, est forma secundum quam intellectus intelligit.*"

as was shown above, which cannot apply to any created form. Hence no created form can be the similitude representing the essence of God to the seer. Thirdly, because the divine essence is uncircumscribed, and contains in itself super–eminently whatever can be signified or understood by the created intellect. Now this cannot in any way be represented by any created *species*: for every created form is determined according to some aspect of wisdom, or of power, or of being itself, or of some like thing. Hence to say that God is seen by some similitude, is to say that the divine essence is not seen at all; which is false. Therefore it must be said that to see the essence of God, there is required some similitude in the visual faculty, namely, the light of glory strengthening the intellect to see God, which is spoken of in the Ps. 35: 10, In thy light we shall see light.’ The essence of God, however, cannot be seen by any created similitude representing the divine essence itself as it is in itself.”<sup>31</sup>

To sum up, in the beatific vision there is something created and something uncreated. What is created by God is the light of glory by which our intellect is rendered capable of being actualised by God’s essence. What is uncreated is the object cognised, the essence of God. Persons experiencing rapture are portrayed as being in direct cognitive contact with the essence of God. But what is it to cognise the quiddity or essence of a thing/of God? What does Paul see in seeing God? Is this vision ineffable?

### *Cognising Quiddities*

Following Aristotle, Aquinas maintains that faculties are specified by their operations and operations are specified by their objects. The objects of the intellect are universals which are of two types. The first type of universals are ideas, expressible by single words: triangle, humanity, water, gold. The second type of universals are propositions, expressible by sentences: “Gold is malleable.” Accordingly, Aquinas distinguishes between two operations of the intellect. In the first operation the intellect apprehends what something is, “*quod quid est*”, its essence, nature or quiddity. In the second operation the intellect forms judgements.<sup>32</sup> Since our concern is with the vision of God’s essence, we have to understand here the first operation of the intellect by which essences are cognised.

Aquinas says that “the human intellect does not immediately in its first apprehension acquire a complete cognition of a thing; but first it apprehends

31 ST I 12, 2.

32 DV 14, 1.

something about it, viz., the quiddity of the thing itself which is the first and proper object of the intellect; and then it acquires intellectual cognition of the properties, accidents and dispositions around the thing's essence. In doing so it has to compound one apprehended aspect with, or divide one from, another and proceed from one composition or division to another, which is reasoning."<sup>33</sup> Thus "cognising what something is" can be understood in different ways. When we say:

(6) Paul cognises what gold is

we might just express:

(7) Paul acquires the concept *gold*.

Having acquired the concept *gold*, Paul has an initial, pre-theoretic, grasp of what gold is; he is acquainted with it. However confused and incomplete such cognition is, it is the cognition of what something is. Let us call such cognition simple understanding. With (6) we might also express:

(8) Paul has insight into the quiddity of gold explicable by a real definition of gold.

He knows its microstructure, is able to explain what will happen to it under certain conditions, is able to give a real definition of the nature of gold. This is a complete understanding of gold. For human beings such understanding is the product of a long process of studying and reasoning. With (6) we might also express some stage between (7) and (8). In every stage between (7) and (8) the second operation of the intellect is involved.

A great difficulty in Aquinas's account of the cognition of quiddities is his claim that one cannot be wrong or deceived when cognising quiddities of things; that the intellection of quiddities is always true.<sup>34</sup> The background of this claim is Aristotle's twofold concept of truth.<sup>35</sup> First and properly, truth is a property of composites, of judgements or propositions in which affirmations or negations are made. For example the proposition *Gold is malleable* is, properly speaking, a bearer of truth. Secondly, the speech of truth is also applied to sense perception of proper sensibles and intellection of quiddities. It is in this context that Aristotle maintains that the perception of proper sensibles and the intellection of quiddities is always true. Either Paul senses

33 ST I 85, 5.

34 See: ST I 58, 5; ST I 85, 6. For an account of the problems involved in the Infallibility-claim see: Kretzmann, N. (1991), "Infallibility, Error and Ignorance." In: Bosley, R. & Tweedale, M. (eds.), (1991), *Aristotle and His Medieval Interpreters*. Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Supplementary volume 17, pp. 159–194.

35 Met 1051b17–27; see also: ST I 16, 2.

white or not; either he knows what gold is or he does not. The opposition to truth in such cases is not falsity but ignorance. It is a question of not being acquainted with something.

This Infallibility–claim seems to work for what I have called simple understanding of quiddities. However, for a complete understanding of quiddities it does not seem to work. The intellect can be false about what the real nature of gold, human beings, flees or lunar eclipses are. Aquinas does concede that:

“But because falsity of the intellect is concerned essentially only with the composition of the intellect, falsity occurs also accidentally in that operation of the intellect whereby it cognises *quod quid est*, in so far as composition of the intellect is mixed up in it. This can take place in two ways. In one way, by the intellect applying to one thing the definition proper to another, as that of a circle to a man; wherefore the definition of one thing is false of another. In another way, by composing a definition of parts which are mutually exclusive. For thus the definition is not only false of the thing, but false in itself. A definition such as a reasonable four-footed animal’ would be of this kind, and the intellect false in making it; for such a statement as some reasonable animals are four-footed’ is false in itself.”<sup>36</sup>

Therefore Aquinas restricts the Infallibility–claim in the case of intellection of quiddities to simples: “For this reason the intellect cannot be false in cognising simple quiddities; but it is either true, or it intelliges nothing at all.”<sup>37</sup> And in ST I 85, 6 Aquinas concludes: “Hence as regards simple things, in which the composition through definitions cannot intervene, we cannot be deceived; but we fail by not coming into contact at all, as is said in *Metaphysics 9*.”

Aquinas applies what Aristotle says about the cognition of simples to the cognition of God’s essence.<sup>38</sup> God is simple. Concerning deception cognition of the quiddity of God is like simple seeing or simple understanding. In this act of cognition no reasoning is involved, no engaging in demonstrative syllogisms, no proposition, judgement or belief. Concerning content quidditative cognition of God is like complete understanding. One has insight into God’s nature, and what God is as cause of everything.

36 ST I 17, 3.

37 ST I 17, 3.

38 ST I II 3, 8; ST II II 2, 2 *ad* 3.

### *Seeing Other Things in God*

Although it is excluded that humans — even in the state of rapture or beatific vision — completely cognise God, that is cognise him as much as he is cognisable,<sup>39</sup> they cognise many things by seeing God. Because someone who has some insight into a cause, cognises some of its effects, and someone, who has more insight into the cause, cognises more effects. God is the cause of everything and seeing things in God is like seeing effects in its cause. But how are they cognised? Aquinas distinguishes between three ways of cognising something. The ways differ concerning the mean by which something is cognised:

(9) Paul cognises Socrates by seeing him.

Thomas would say that Socrates is cognised by means of the *species* of Socrates himself. This is to cognise something *secundum se* or *in se ipso*.<sup>40</sup>

(10) Paul cognises Socrates by seeing him in the mirror.

Socrates is cognised by means of the *species* of the mirror which bears some likeness to Socrates. This is to cognise something in *suo simili* or *in altero*.<sup>41</sup> In this way an effect may be cognised in the cause through the likeness found in its cause and *vice versa*; or a part may be cognised in the whole through the *species* of the whole.

God knows other things not in themselves but in himself insofar as his essence contains the similitude of other things. God cognises them in the way stated in (10).<sup>42</sup> And Paul cognises other things in God also in this way. For a better understanding the following example might be helpful. A mirror is seen by means of the *species* of the mirror. And what is seen in the mirror is also seen by means of the *species* of the mirror. God is like the mirror. Seeing God and seeing things in God occurs always by means of God's form. However, since God is not cognised by any *species* — as we have seen — both seeing his essence and seeing other things in his essence occurs by means of his essence. Let's say: Paul cognises Socrates in God. In this case, Paul does not cognise Socrates by means of the *species* of Socrates (9), but by means of the divine essence.<sup>43</sup> Since other things, that are cognised in God, are not cog-

39 ST I 12, 7.

40 ST I 12, 9; ST I 14, 5; DV 8, 5.

41 Again: ST I 12, 9; ST I 14, 5; DV 8, 5.

42 ST I 14, 5.

43 ST I 12, 9: "*Respondeo dicendum quod videntes Deum per essentiam, ea quae in ipsa essentia Dei vident, non vident per aliquas species, sed per ipsam essentiam divinam intellectui eorum unitam.*"

nised by many *species* of them but by the one essence of God alone, it follows also that to see God and to see other things in God occurs simultaneously.<sup>44</sup> It is all seen in a flash.

But what about Paul's memory? He will have remembered some things he has seen during rapture. How could he remember something, if no *species* were involved? Aquinas answers:

“There are some cognitive faculties which can form other *species* from those first conceived. Thus the imagination from the preconceived *species* of a mountain and of gold forms the *species* of a golden mountain; and the intellect, from the preconceived *species* of genus and difference, forms the *ratio* of *species*. In like manner from the similitude of an image we can form in us the similitude of the one of which it is an image. Thus Paul, or any other person who sees God, by the very vision of the divine essence, can form in himself similitudes of the things that were seen in the divine essence: which remained in Paul even when he had ceased to see the essence of God. Still this kind of vision whereby things are seen by *species* thus conceived, is not the same as that whereby things are seen in God.”<sup>45</sup>

Aquinas introduces here a third type of cognising something. Paul has seen Socrates in a mirror. He has seen him by means of the *species* of the mirror. From that he forms in himself a *species* which is not of the mirror but of Socrates himself. Now he can cognise Socrates by means of this formed *species*.<sup>46</sup>

(11) Paul cognises Socrates by means of a species formed according to the likeness of Socrates he has seen by means of the *species* of the mirror.

Aquinas obviously thinks that Paul can form *species* of what he cognised during rapture, even though he did not cognise things *via species*.

44 ST I 12, 10.

45 ST I 12, 9 *ad* 2.

46 DV 8, 5: “*In huiusmodi ergo potentiis quandoque una res cognoscitur per similitudinem alterius rei, quando contingit quod praeter similitudinem illam formatur alia species, quae est rei immediate; sicut ex statua Herculis visa possum formare quamdam aliam similitudinem, quae sit ipsius Herculis immediate; sed haec cognitio jam est alia ab illa quae cognoscebam Herculem in statua sua.*”

## *Ineffable Cognition*

In Paul's report of rapture we read that "he heard ineffable words which no human being is permitted to utter." Aquinas comments on this sentence in two ways:<sup>47</sup> First, since the divine essence is not seen by a created likeness but by the divine essence itself, it is clear that what Paul saw cannot be said in any human language. Here we have the claim that quidditative cognition of God is ineffable. Behind this claim is the theory of how words refer to reality. Since Aquinas thinks that words refer to things *via* concepts which are similitudes of things, and God is not cognised by any similitudes, no word applies to what is seen during rapture. For what Paul remembered after the rapture things are different. Paul can form similitudes or *species* of what he has seen, put them together, express them in analogical or metaphorical speech. At this point the second comment might be relevant: It is not permitted for Paul to disclose what he had seen to people who are simple minded and not perfect.<sup>48</sup>

## *Summary*

I shall now try to summarise the main points of this exploration of the epistemology of rapture:

1. Aquinas believes that some people have extraordinary experiences of God during their lifetime. He relies on reports in Scripture. Since he takes the Scripture to be true he does not ask whether the reported experiences are veridical or not. He presupposes that the experience of Moses or St. Paul, when they were rapt, was caused by God. Their cognitive faculties were not lowered by disease, demons, sleep etc., but supernaturally heightened and aimed to cognise truth.
2. The reported experiences are interpreted as transitory acts of the beatific vision.
3. Vision of God consists in one's cognising the essence of God.
4. Cognising the essence of God is in some way like seeing white. It is a matter of being acquainted, being in contact with a simple reality.

<sup>47</sup> *II ad Corinthios* 12, 2.

<sup>48</sup> *II ad Corinthios* 12, 2: "*Et quia huiusmodi spiritualia non sunt pandenda simplicibus et imperfectis [...] ideo, secundo modo, exponitur quod secreta, quae ibi audivit, non licet mihi loqui homini, id est imperfectis, sed spiritualibus, inter quos loquimur sapientiam.*"

5. Concerning the beatific vision Aquinas is realist. There are no intermediaries between cogniser and cognised.
6. Quidditative cognition of God is not the product of judgement, reasoning or demonstrative syllogisms. It is not based on other propositions one holds.
7. Such cognitive contact in itself is not propositional. However, having seen God, one can form propositions, judgements about what was seen. Thus the cognitive contact could be interpreted as the basis on which propositions can be grounded.
8. Although what is seen during rapture is ineffable, propositions formed afterwards can be expressed in analogical or metaphorical speech.

### *A Gap and a Bridge to the Contemporary Debate*

One lively disputed branch of contemporary religious epistemology focuses on immediate cognition of God.<sup>49</sup> In the background of the discussion stands a definition of propositional knowledge as justified/warranted true belief: Somebody, say Paul, knows that p if and only if p, Paul believes that p, and Paul is justified in believing that p (plus some clause for excluding Gettier-cases). On this account, whether Paul believes that p mediately or immediately, is a question of whether Paul is inferentially or non-inferentially justified in believing that p. This question presupposes a particular theory of justification — foundationalism — according to which the belief that p is justified for Paul either by virtue of some relation this belief has to other justified beliefs of Paul, or by virtue of something other than some relation this belief has to some other justified beliefs of Paul. Such non-inferential, immediate justifiers are for example experiences of what the belief is about, self-evidence of the proposition believed, one's current conscious state etc.

The claim about immediate knowledge might be stated thus: Paul, to whom X appears as is *prima facie* justified in believing that X is. His belief that X is is not based on other beliefs he holds, is not the product of inferential reasoning, but is based on his experience. When it appears to Paul that there is a tree he is *prima facie* justified in believing that there is a tree. When it

49 See for example: Alston, W. P. (1991), *Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. Plantinga, A. (1983), "Reason and Belief in God." In: Plantinga, A & Woltersdorff, N. (ed.), (1983) *Faith and Rationality. Reason and Belief in God*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame. Plantinga, A. (2000), *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



appears to Paul that God is consoling him then he is *prima facie* justified to believe that God is consoling him.

There is a gap between Aquinas's epistemology of the beatific vision and contemporary religious epistemology. Aquinas's concept of cognition is broader than our contemporary concept of propositional knowledge. Cognition covers the non-propositional apprehension of quiddities, the formation of first principles, *scientia*, opinions. Since the beatific vision is analysed in terms of non-propositional apprehension of the quiddity of God, there is a big gap in modern thought, which is concerned with whether one's beliefs are true and how they are justified.<sup>50</sup>

There is also a bridge between Aquinas and us. Aquinas's view has some similarities to epistemological externalism. Externalists often speak in terms of reliable processes of belief-production or in terms of cognitive faculties functioning properly and aimed at the production of true beliefs. If Paul's belief that there is a tree is produced by cognitive faculties or processes that are working properly in an appropriate epistemic environment according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth, then Paul knows that there is a tree.<sup>51</sup> Aquinas could be seen as theological externalist. For him human beings are created in the image of God and their cognitive capacities are designed to cognise truth reliably. "On Aquinas's account, the reliable method or process whose functioning constitutes our knowledge is just the natural operation of our cognitive capacities."<sup>52</sup> Error and deception are considered as consequences of the fall. Innocent Adam could not be deceived.<sup>53</sup> When we consider Aquinas's account of the beatific vision in terms of externalism, we could say: Since Paul's cognitive state in rapture is produced by cognitive faculties supernaturally heightened, therefore working properly in the epistemic environment for which these faculties are designed, and aimed at cognising the truth, true cognition results.<sup>54</sup>

50 It is also controversial whether Aquinas is the sort of "classical foundationalist" some philosophers think him to be. See: Stump, E. (1991), "Aquinas on the Foundations of Knowledge". In: Bosley & Tweedale (1991), 125–158.

51 This view of externalism is taken from Plantinga, A. (1993), *Warrant and Proper Function*. New York: Oxford University Press.

52 Stump, 1991, p. 148.

53 ST I 94, 4.

54 I am grateful to David Meconi SJ, Otto Muck SJ and Edmund Runggaldier SJ for comments on earlier drafts.?

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