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**AGENT INTELLECT AND DIVINE ILLUMINATION IN THOMAS
AQUINAS' *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE***

***INTELECTO AGENTE E ILUMINACIÓN DIVINA EN LA
SUMMA THEOLOGIAE DE TOMÁS DE AQUINO***

MARTÍN F. ECHAVARRÍA

Universitat CEU Abat Oliba, CEU Universities

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ABSTRACT

The theory of knowledge of Thomas Aquinas is strongly influenced by the Aristotelian theory of abstraction and the agent intellect. Along with this theory, Thomas Aquinas also assimilates the Augustinian doctrine of divine illumination. In our paper, we show how Aquinas articulates these two theories, that of the agent intellect and that of divine illumination, in his *Summa Theologiae*. The agent intellect is the internal formal and efficient principle of human knowledge, but God is also the efficient, exemplary and final cause of human knowledge, inasmuch as He creates the human soul with its innate light, moves it to its operation, regulates it with the Eternal Reasons, and is in whom happiness is all about. In Saint Thomas, the affirmation of the metaphysical consistency of the second causes is not to the detriment of the power of the First Cause, but

on the contrary. The causation of its own science by the created intellect, second cause, and the causation of it by God, First Cause, are strongly related and require each other.

Keywords: Agent Intellect; Divine illumination; Metaphysics of Light; Theory of Knowledge; Thomas Aquinas

RESUMEN

La teoría del conocimiento de Tomás de Aquino está fuertemente influida por la teoría aristotélica de la abstracción y del intelecto agente. Junto a esta teoría, Tomás de Aquino asimila también la doctrina agustiniana de la iluminación divina. En nuestro artículo, mostramos cómo se da la articulación entre estas dos teorías, la del intelecto agente y la de la iluminación divina, en su *Summa Theologiae*. El intelecto agente es principio formal interno del conocimiento humano, pero Dios es causa eficiente, ejemplar y final del mismo conocimiento, en cuanto crea el alma humana con su luz connatural, la mueve a su operación, la regula con sus razones eternas, y es en quien consiste la felicidad. En santo Tomás, la afirmación de la consistencia de las causas segundas no va en detrimento del poder de la Causa primera, sino por el contrario. La causación de la propia ciencia por el intelecto creado, causa segunda, y la causación de la misma por Dios, Causa primera, están fuertemente relacionadas y se requieren mutuamente.

Palabras clave: Intelecto agente; Iluminación divina; Metafísica de la luz; Teoría del conocimiento; Tomás de Aquino

I. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the agent intellect is central to explaining the psychological foundations of the abstraction of universals from experience in Aristotelic tradition (*De anima*, III, c. 5). According to this doctrine, the human being possesses a power, which is like a light that allows the extraction of the universal from the phantasm of the singular. In this way man is the agent of his own intellectual knowledge.

For his part St. Augustine argues that, due to the mutability of the sensible world, nothing stable can be found in it. On the other hand, the human mind is also mutable. Despite these mutabilities, the human mind nevertheless attains knowledge of truth. It is able to do this through divine light. Each time we know the immutable truth, we do so through the influence of Eternal Reasons—that is, through the Ideas of Things present in God’s mind. In this way St. Augustine

corrects the Platonic doctrine of Ideas, which rather than being something separate become the exemplary Reasons for all things present in God's mind. However, from an epistemological point of view, he maintains the Platonic conception according to which the human mind knows through the participation of Ideas. In the case of St. Augustine, it is about seeing things in a *sui generis* light, which is divine light or something derived from divine light. For this reason as well, God too is the only Teacher. It is God who provides the inner light that makes us know with certainty, while human teachers can only utter outward voices that are insufficient for inner illumination.¹

It is well known that St. Thomas Aquinas assumes Aristotle's theory of knowledge and is critical of Platonic epistemology. Does this necessarily lead to a rejection of the doctrine of illumination? The answer is no. The purpose of this paper is to explain how Aquinas manages to integrate the Aristotelian doctrine of the agent intellect with that of Augustinian illumination.

Indeed, Thomistic integration has important antecedents in the 13th century, among which we are interested in highlighting the case of St. Bonaventure.² In his *Commentary on the Sentences* (p. II, dist. 24, a. 1, q. 1), the Seraphic Doctor had established that in the human being there is an agent intellect and, therefore, an active internal principle for the knowledge of universals.³ However, this does not detract from the fact that the doctrine of illumination plays a central role in his thought,⁴ as exemplified by the *Disputed Questions on the Science of Christ*.

1 Cf. Charles Boyer, *L'idée de vérité dans la philosophie de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1920); Régis Jolivet, *Dieu soleil des esprits: La doctrine augustinienne de l'illumination* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934); Fulbert Cayré, *Initiation à la philosophie de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1947); Étienne Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1949), 88-147; Rudolf Allers, "Saint Augustin's Doctrine on Illumination," *Franciscan Studies*, 12, no. 1 (1952): 27-46; Alberto Caturelli, "La doctrina agustiniana sobre el Maestro y su desarrollo en santo Tomás de Aquino," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 11, no. 2 (1955): 210-210; Joan Pegueroles, "La Formación o Iluminación en la Metafísica de San Agustín," *Espíritu* 20, no. 64 (1971): 134-149.

2 On Bonaventure's philosophy of mind, cf. Manuel Lázaro Pulido, "Aportación de San Buenaventura a una 'Filosofía medieval de la mente'. Reflexiones desde la lectura del itinerarium Mentis in Deum," *Naturaleza y gracia: revista cuatrimestral de ciencias eclesíasticas*, 3 (2010): 499-534.

3 On the agent intellect in St Bonaventure and in the Franciscan school, cf. Juan Fernando Sellés Dauder, "El intelecto agente en algunos maestros franciscanos del s. XVII: Rafael Aversa, Juan Lalemandet, Guillermo van Sichen, Buenaventura Columbo, Bartolomé de Barberis y Wolter Schopen," *Cauriensia* 12 (2017): 661-684; Tomáš Nejeschleba, "Bonaventure on the Agent Intellect," *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 4 (2017): 811-821. On the difference between the positions of Bonaventure and Aquinas, cf. Tomáš Nejeschleba, "Thomas Aquinas and the Early Franciscan School on the Agent Intellect," *Verbum* 6, no. 1 (April 2004): 67-78.

4 Cf. John R. White, "The Illumination of Bonaventure. Divine light in theology, philosophy and history according to Bonaventure," *Fides quaerens intellectum* 1, no. 2 (2001): 201-223; José Antonio Valdivia Fuenzalida, "Nécessité, certitude et illumination selon saint Bonaventure," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 73, no. 2 (2017): 229-254.

In q. 4, Bonaventure asks whether we know intellectually in the Eternal Reasons. The answer is that, although we have an agent intellect, it is insufficient for the knowledge of truth because of the mutability of every creature. A special influx of divine light would be necessary, which would differ both from the general influx of God upon all His creation (otherwise God would be no more master than farmer), and on the other hand from the bestowal of grace. The light of eternal Reasons would intervene in human knowledge in two ways: as regulator and as mover.

Although the solution of Aquinas differs from that of Bonaventure in the way in which the former understands the necessity of the divine influence on created things, which appear to have a greater causal consistency, in Aquinas some fundamental elements of Bonaventure's solution and of the Augustinian tradition of illumination are maintained: God illumines the intellect, being the first cause of our knowledge of the universals and of truth, and our knowledge is influenced by the eternal Reasons, which are, as in Bonaventure, regulating and motivating. Our intention is to show that Aquinas' main contribution is to found these theses in his metaphysics of being and participation. We shall do this by following the doctrine explained in the main work of Aquinas' maturity, the *Summa Theologiae*.⁵

II. THE ROLE OF THE AGENT INTELLECT IN HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

The agent intellect is one of the key pieces in Aquinas' theory of human knowledge. According to Aristotelian-Thomistic realism, human knowledge begins in sense.⁶ There are no innate ideas. Rather, the (possible) intellect is analogous to pure potency in the order of intellective being.⁷ To pass into act it needs to receive from material things the intelligible species, from which it will be able to understand —through the production of an interior conceptual language. Whence, the human intellect is naturally directed towards images.⁸ The external senses receive the likeness of material things and the imagination preserves these species. Therefrom, the imagination is able to produce images

5 On the doctrine of St. Thomas, see the excellent thesis of Matthew C. Cuddeback, "Light and Form in St. Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics of the Knower" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1998).

6 Cf. *Super Sent.*, lib. 3, d. 26, q. 1, a. 5 co; *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 2, cap., 37 n. 2; *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 5, co.; *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

7 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 3.

8 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 7.

from these species, even in their absence. To the activity of the imagination must be added the ulterior influence of the *cogitative* and *memorative* powers, which capture in these images the “*intentiones quae per sensum non accipiuntur*”.⁹ These are particular meanings of the things presented in the images that are fundamental in order to know their essences. The comparison of these particular meanings produces experience (*experimentum*), which is preserved in memory.¹⁰ Through experience, the particular modes of being that similar things have, connect to each other in such a way that something one can be obtained from them by abstraction and induction.¹¹

However, the activity of internal senses is by itself insufficient to attain the abstraction of essences. Phantasms, elaborated in the *experimentum*, possess particular—but not universal—likenesses of things. Because they are mixed with the potentiality of matter and with many accidental determinations, material things, as they are found both in themselves and in phantasms—which are already more immaterial and are more prepared for abstraction—are not intelligible in act. The action of an agent is needed to make the species intelligible in act. This is the task of the agent intellect.¹²

The agent intellect is a power of the soul. As such, it is a proper accident—that is to say, a power that necessarily emanates from the soul.¹³ As a power it is a quality, an accidental form inhering in the soul. As a proper accident it is something that emanates from the soul.¹⁴ It is moreover an active power, or natural virtue: a power that is naturally enabled to cause its act. All it needs is for the phantasms to be adequately disposed. The foundation of the actuality of this virtue, which is the agent intellect, is the nature itself of the soul insofar as it is form and act, which is the proper mode of being of the spiritual soul. This mode of being is immaterial and intimate, ontologically reflective.¹⁵ Whence, St. Thomas says that in order to understand we need three things: phantasms, which contain the particular likeness of the differences of material things; species, which are the immaterial likeness of those differentiated essences; and

9 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 78, a. 4.

10 Cf. *Sententia Metaphysicae*, lib. 1, l. 1, n. 15.

11 Cf. *Expositio Posteriorum*, lib. 2, l. 20, n. 11.

12 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

13 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 79, a. 5.

14 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 75, a. 6.

15 Cf. Martín F. Echavarría, “El modo de subsistir personal como reflexión sustancial según Tomás de Aquino,” *Espíritu* 62, no. 146 (2013): 277-310.

the light of the agent intellect, which is the active power derived from the soul by the very fact that it is the bearer of an immaterial existence.¹⁶

III. THE METAPHYSICS OF LIGHT

Insofar as it is an inherent form in the human person, the agent intellect is “something of man”, which through this power is the true cause of its own intellectual knowledge. This has led some, such as Gilson¹⁷, to think that St. Thomas rejects the Augustinian doctrine of illumination and that, if he sometimes seems to uphold it, it is only out of respect for the authority of St. Augustine. A contrary opinion is set forth in the following discussion: namely, that although St. Thomas introduces some important corrections to the Augustinian theory, which he considers to be inspired by Platonic principles, that which is most essential of this doctrine not only remains, but is more solidly founded on the principles of metaphysics.

Aristotle compares the agent intellect to light.¹⁸ In a passage from *Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas states that in order to carry out the task of the agent intellect “the connatural light of the soul” suffices.¹⁹ What is this light and what is it, therefore, to illuminate intellectually? To answer this question the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite must be brought to bear as a mediator between Aristotelian and Augustinian conceptions.²⁰ Dionysius explains in Book 4 of the *De divinis nominibus* that the name “light” is predicated of God. In the remainder of his works he develops, as a fundamental aspect of his hierarchical conception of reality, the derivation of light from God to spiritual creatures who, invested with the divine light, illuminate each other by the action of their own virtues. In the *Summa*, St. Thomas demonstrates having assimilated the influence of Dionysius and tells us that “light” can be properly predicated of spiritual realities —not according to the original application of its name, but according to its common use.²¹ According to the original imposition of the name, “light” is *that which makes colours manifest*. Likewise, that is called “spiritual

16 Cf. Francisco Canals Vidal, “El lumen intellectus agentis en la ontología del conocimiento de Santo Tomás,” *Convivium* 1 (1956): 100-136.

17 Étienne Gilson, *Pourquoi saint Thomas a critiqué saint Augustin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1926).

18 Aristotle, *De anima*, III, c. 5, 430a 15.

19 *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I. 2, c. 77.

20 Cf. Ignacio E. M. Andereggen, *La metafísica de Santo Tomás en la Exposición sobre el De divinis nominibus de Dionisio Areopagita* (Buenos Aires: EDUCA, 1989); Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press).

21 *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 67, a. 1.

light" which produces a manifestation of the intelligible object. To illuminate, therefore, is to reveal the intelligible object to knowledge. God is Light because in him, who is pure and immaterial act, everything is intelligible. He moreover is the source of all other light participated in created spirits.

Just as light makes colours visible in act, the light of the agent intellect (*lumen intellectus agentis*) is a power of the soul that makes the essences found in phantasms intelligible in act. However, the agent intellect is not the first light and by essence: it is rather a second, participated light. This is the way in which St. Thomas's proceeds to interpret the Augustinian doctrine of the illumination of the human mind, adapting it under the influence of Dionysus' metaphysics of light and the Aristotelian doctrine of the agent intellect.

IV. THE LIGHT OF THE AGENT INTELLECT AS PARTICIPATION OF DIVINE LIGHT ACCORDING TO ST. THOMAS

The *Summa* text to be examined in order to clarify this point is I, q. 79, a. 4. It summarises the same doctrine as *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 10, which should be read in conjunction with it because they cover exactly the same arguments but more extensively, affording a better understanding. In these places, St. Thomas tells us briefly that St. Augustine followed Platonic doctrines as much as the Christian faith tolerated and that he replaced whatever opposed it with something better.

Due to the mutability of material things, ancient philosophers thought that no knowledge was certain, St. Thomas explains that Socrates himself, having lost all hope of attaining theoretical truth, took refuge in the cultivation of moral philosophy. Plato, on the other hand, upheld the immutability of science by separating the sensible world, which is subject to change, from the intelligible world of Ideas, which would be immutable. According to him, scientific knowledge would derive from a participation of Ideas. St. Augustine rejected Plato's separate Ideas, replacing them with the Reasons of things, present in God's mind, through which He created things. Since both the mind and material things are changeable, he held that we know the immutable truth through the participation of the light of eternal reasons.

Aristotle, St. Thomas continues, would have followed another path, for even in material things there is something that does not change, according to the Stagirite, which is why the essences of things can be abstracted from them. Wherefrom, it can be stated that there is an inherent form in man, which is the

cause of his knowledge. That Aristotle is right would be known from experience, since the abstraction of forms, from particular images, is perceived by us.

According to Aquinas, “it does not matter much if we say that intelligible notions themselves are participated in from God, or that the light which makes them intelligible is participated in from God” (“*non multum autem refert dicere, quod ipsa intelligibilia participantur a Deo, vel quod lumen faciens intelligibilia participetur*”).²² This “*non multum refert*” was interpreted by Gilson as the pious way in which St. Thomas saved St. Augustine’s position while adhering to Aristotle, despite the lack of a systematic treatment of illumination in his own metaphysics of creation. In contrast, it is argued here that St. Thomas explains in this passage what he considers essential to a Christian doctrine of illumination, despite the differences in the psychology of illumination of both authors, insofar as Augustine is more imbued with Platonism and St. Thomas prefers Aristotelian realism. What is essential is that our knowledge is a participation of divine light, regardless of whether intelligible objects are directly derived from that light into the human mind, as Augustine seems to think, or there is something like a light printed in the human mind: a power that can make the intelligible forms in act. On the other hand, it is necessary to clarify that, while Aristotle’s doctrine of the agent intellect remains in a psychological plane, that is to say in a second philosophy, St. Thomas’ doctrine of illumination moves in the plane of first philosophy, of metaphysics in its ultimate foundational level.

St. Thomas’ thesis is as follows: The light of the agent intellect is a participation of divine light.²³ He even distinguishes in some places the word “*lumen*”, used to refer to the agent intellect, from the word “*Lux*”, which he uses to refer to divine light: “*lumen*” is participated light, while “*Lux*” is light by essence. St. Thomas puts forward three arguments to show that the natural light of the intellect, or agent intellect, depends on the divine light:

1. We do not understand according to our whole being, but only according to the superior part of the soul. This implies that there is in us a composition of intellect and soul and, therefore, a participation. That which is by participation derives from that which is such by essence. Therefore, the light of the intellect is participated from a higher Light.

²² *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 10, ad 8. We used the edition translated by Mary C. Fitzpatrick and John J. (Wellmuth Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1949).

²³ On the agent intellect as a participation in the divine light, cf. Wayne J Hankey, “Participatio divini luminis, Aquinas’ doctrine of the Agent Intellect: Our Capacity for Contemplation,” *Diomysius* 22 (2004): 149-78.

2. Human intelligence does not attain truth immediately, but through a motion: that of reasoning. That which is in motion depends on that which is immobile. Therefore, it is necessary to posit a superior intellect —upon which our own understanding depends— that understands without discourse. This seems to be an Aristotelized version of the Augustinian argument that our mind, due to its mutability, is in need of divine illumination.
3. Our intellect passes from potency to act. However, strictly speaking, act is prior to potency. It is necessary, therefore, that prior and above those intellects that pass from potency to act, there be a superior intellect that is “wholly perfect in its understanding of truth”.

These three arguments imply a relationship of dependence of the participated in respect of the perfection by essence, of the moved, with respect to the one that moves, and of what is in potency regarding the act itself, according to the mode of efficient cause: God is the efficient cause of the natural light of our intelligence. The existence of the light by participation depends on Light by essence. Aristotle said that our intellect is like light, while Plato held that there is a separate light, the Sun of the Intellects. The light of our intellect is connected with the separate Light in the same way as that- which-is-by-participation is connected with that which-is-by-essence, which is the same perfection according to all its power. Wherever St. Thomas deals with the subject, he supports this affirmation quoting from Psalm 4: “The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us” (“*Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine*”). The intellects’ natural light is a seal in our mind of the Light that God is by essence.

Divine Truth, the Final Cause of Illumination

In q. 79, a. 4, St. Thomas holds that “the separate intellect, according to the teaching of our faith, is God Himself, Who is the soul’s Creator, and only beatitude”. This statement is difficult to understand if not compared to its parallel in *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 10. The first part is fully justified in the text, because by establishing that the light of the agent intellect is a participation of divine Light, it has been established that God illuminates us insofar as He is the Creator of our soul and of the properties that emanate from it.

However, what is the relevance of his reference to the beatification of the soul? This, which remains an enigma in the *Summa*, is explicitly developed in *De spiritualibus creaturis*, which states:

[...] the ultimate perfection of each individual agent is that it can attain to its own principle. Now the ultimate perfection or beatitude of man is based on intellectual activity, as the Philosopher also says in *Ethica* X. If, then, the principle and cause of the intellectuality of men were some other separated substance, it would have to be the case that the ultimate beatitude of man would be situated in that created substance; and those who hold this view clearly assert this: for they assert that the ultimate felicity of man is to be connected with the agent intelligence. Now the true faith asserts that the ultimate beatitude of man is in God alone, according to this quotation from John XVII: “This is the eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God”.²⁴

Amongst those who claimed that we are illuminated by a superior intellect were not only Christian authors inspired by St. Augustine, but also Neo-Platonising Arab authors such as Avicenna. According to these Arab authors, the agent intellect would not be a power of the soul, nor indeed would it be God. Rather, the agent intellect would be the last of the spiritual substances emanating from God, and the closest to man, with whose possible intellect it would be connected. This is a thesis that St. Thomas rejects forcefully in many works, not only upholding the consistency of positing an agent intellect that exists in man and has causal power, but also asserting its dependency on a higher intellect—not that of an angel, but of God. For this purpose, St. Thomas resorts to three arguments taken from efficient, final and exemplary causality. The first one refers us to the topics discussed in the preceding section: namely, that God is the only Creator of the soul and of its connatural light. The third argument refers us to the topic that will be touched upon in the next section: that the mind is an image of God and not of the angel. The second argument, that of the final cause, is examined here.

God is the final cause of intellectual illumination. What does this end consist in? Each thing tends to return to its cause, that is, the perfection of each thing consists in attaining in itself a perfection similar to that of its principle. God is the principle of man and, therefore, man’s perfection consists in being like God. This is attained through the deployment of man’s intellectual capacity, since the perfection of each thing consists in the utmost deployment of its chief power. By fully developing the soul’s capacity to know the essences and order of things, the mind resembles God and remedies its natural imperfection.²⁵ Manifesting in his own interior the truth, through the light of the intellect, participated from God, man turns to his cause, which is the Light of the

24 *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 10, co.

25 Cf. *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 2, co.

subsisting Truth. However, to attain its principle in the way that faith teaches that it can be attained, other ulterior illuminations are needed in addition to the natural light of reason: in this life, the light of faith and of intellectual gifts; in eternal life, the “*lumen gloriae*”, which empowers the intellect for a face-to-face vision of divine essence.²⁶

V. ETERNAL REASONS, THE EXEMPLARY CAUSE OF THE LIGHT OF THE AGENT INTELLECT

In I, q. 84, a. 5, Aquinas resumes his interpretation of the theory of illumination, discussing another aspect of the Augustinian doctrine, namely the role of Eternal Reasons.²⁷ The question is whether we know all things in the Eternal Reasons. In the article's body, having reviewed the Christian correction of Platonism made by St. Augustine, St. Thomas sets forth his doctrine on this subject:

And thus we must need say that the human soul knows all things in the Eternal Reasons, since by participation of these Reasons we know all things. For the intellectual light itself which is in us, is nothing else than a participated likeness of the uncreated light, in which are contained the Eternal Reasons. Whence it is written (Ps. 4:6,7), “Many say: Who showeth us good things?” which question the Psalmist answers, “The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us,” as though he were to say: By the seal of the Divine light in us, all things are made known to us²⁸.

²⁶ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 5, co.

²⁷ Although “*rationes*” and “*ideae*” are not necessarily synonyms when St. Thomas refers to divine knowledge (since Ideas are a special type of Reason), cf. Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), XV: “Thomas presents these divine ideas as serving three principal roles: (1) They are epistemological principles, for in knowing them God knows creatures; (2) they are ontological or causal principles, for it is in their likeness that God creates all things; and (3) inasmuch as they fulfil the first two roles, they are veridical principles for human knowledge, since the truth of our judgments must ultimately be in accordance with them”. The issue of divine Ideas also tends to be one of the controversial issues regarding the influence of St. Augustine on St. Thomas. Again, Gilson is of the opinion that it is a superfluous doctrine that Aquinas maintains out of reverence for St. Augustine. Doolan on the other hand defends with solid arguments that it is essential to the Thomistic doctrine of Creation for a Creator who knows creatures (*ibidem*, 112-122). Mark D. Jordan, “The Intelligibility of the World and the Divine Ideas in Aquinas,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 38, no. 1 (1984), 17-32; 18, is of the same opinion. Jordan, moreover, highlights the importance of Dionysius as a complement to Augustine in the concept of divine Ideas (*ibidem*, 22).

²⁸ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 5. We used, with certain corrections, the Benziger Bros. edition (New York, 1947).

This text is crucial in understanding the way in which Aquinas incorporates the Augustinian doctrine. According to St. Thomas, the light of our intellect is a likeness of divine Light, in which the Reasons of all things are contained. The doctrine of illumination places us in the line of God's exemplary causality with respect to the human agent intellect, and also in that of the doctrine of the image of God. In his commentary on St. John's Gospel, the Angelic Doctor even appropriates the seal of divine Light to the Second Person of the Trinity.²⁹ Eternal Reasons are common to the whole Trinity. However, Aquinas also holds that God knows those Reasons by expressing them—together with all his essence—in the *Verbum interius*.³⁰ Thus, St. Thomas adopts St. Augustine's doctrine, but introduces a clarification. He states that Eternal Reasons influence us through the agent intellect, an inherent form and virtue that is not only a participation but also—consequently—a likeness of divine Light that contains the Eternal Reasons. This consequence follows because every agent produces its like according to its form, for every being operates through its form.

Delving more deeply, the Thomistic interpretation, both of the influence of Eternal Reasons and of the immutable truth, involves three fundamental factors: the differences of things present in experience; the light of the agent intellect; and the first principles that regulate knowledge. Firstly, St. Thomas maintains that experience is an important principle not only for Aristotle but also for Augustine, who states that Eternal Reasons are insufficient without historical knowledge of the differences of things.³¹ The particular differences of things, however, are insufficient as a principle of knowledge. Hence, secondly, we moreover need the light of the agent intellect, which makes them intelligible in act.³² Thirdly, first principles are needed, both the first non-complex principles (*ens, unum, verum, bonum*) and the complex principles (first propositions contained in the natural habits of intellect and *synderesis*). Often, when St. Augustine makes reference to knowledge in Eternal Reasons or in Eternal Truth, St. Thomas redirects these statements to the regulation of knowledge by the first principles.³³ Nevertheless, the proximate regulation of the mind by the first principles does not negate that the mind attains in some way the Divine Truth in each true judgment; nor, therefore, that all created truth is based on the Divine Truth, because these principles are a participation of Eternal Truth.³⁴

29 *Super Io.*, cap. 1, l. 3.

30 Cf. Jordan, "The Intelligibility of the World," 30-31.

31 *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 5.

32 *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6, co.

33 *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 93, a. 2, co; *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 4, ad 5.

34 *Compendium theologiae*, lib. 1, cap. 129.

In conclusion, Eternal Reasons regulate knowledge through these three kinds of created forms: the individual forms of material things, present to the soul with their individual conditions by means of phantasms; the light of the agent intellect, which makes objects intelligible in act; and first principles, a reflection of Eternal Truth. All three are likenesses of Eternal Reasons in their own way, and through them Eternal Reasons are regulators of human knowledge. It must be made clear, however, that there are two elements of the Thomistic solution concerning divine influence on knowledge that must be held simultaneously in order for the solution to be true. The first element is that we know by means of forms inherent to our own mind (agent intellect, phantasms, species, mental verb, first principles, etc.). The second element is that God is the first, efficient, exemplary and final cause of all knowledge.³⁵

VI. ILLUMINATION AND THE METAPHYSICS OF *ESSE*

The last place in the *Summa* that should be analysed in order to attain a fundamental vision of St Thomas' theory of divine illumination of the mind is his treatise on Divine Government, and particularly I, q. 105, a. 3. In this place the idea that God is the first cause of all human intellection reaches its ultimate development, insofar as He is the Creator of the form inhering in the soul, the agent intellect, which is the proximate (second) cause of intellection; and is also the origin of the forms of known things, which He preserves in existence. This text contains a summary of central theses of St. Thomas' metaphysics. God is the cause of the intellect's motion insofar as He is the first cause of the two principles necessary for intellection: the intellective power and the intelligible species. Why is He a cause of the intellective power? Because God is the First Immaterial Being, and intellectuality follows upon immateriality. Wherefore, God is also the First Intelligent Being. It is important to note that the argument by which it is held that God is intellectual is similar to the argument on which the existence of an agent intellect in man is founded: immateriality. St. Thomas argues that God is the cause of the intellectuality of our intellect, because He is the First Intelligent Being, and this is so because He is the First Immaterial Being. That which is first in the order of existence is also first in understanding, because He who is Existence (*Esse*) itself, according to all the power of existence (*virtus essendi*), is also Subsistent Understanding itself on account of His utter immateriality and absence of act-potency duality. Precisely because

35 Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione a San Tommaso. La metafisica tomista e il pensiero moderno* (Milano: Ares, 1983), 104-106.

God is first in the order of existence (*esse*) He is also the cause of all beings. As the cause of all beings, He must intelligibly precontain them in Himself. These are the Divine Ideas, which are the models of all things in God's Mind. It is the knowledge that God has of the finite ways in which He can be participated. These ideas of the things present in God's mind are a cause both of knowing and of the existence that is given to subsistent things by means of their substantial forms. Intelligible species derive from these forms, abstracted by the agent intellect. In this way God is the cause of knowing, insofar as He infuses the intellective power and causes the different known natures. And of this, God is the first cause and the creature a true, but secondary, cause, for "the intellectual operation is performed by the intellect in which it exists, as by a secondary cause; but it proceeds from God as from its first cause".³⁶

However, St. Thomas does not only say that God is the cause of the forms by which intellection is produced, inasmuch as He is the Creator of both the known beings and the cognitive power, but also insofar as He preserves and moves things to their ends. That is to say, His action of illuminating is something continuous and does not end with the first production of forms. It is important to point out, however, that He does this without any detriment to the secondary causality of creatures, which act through their own forms. This is so because God creates, conserves, and moves by acting from what is most intimate in the creature, that is, without violence, precisely because He does so through the creatures' intrinsic forms themselves. For this it is necessary to proceed to q. 105, a. 5, where the explanation of this deep action of God in created things is concluded, rejecting occasionalism and upholding at the same time the consistency of the creature's action and the radicality and depth of divine causal influence. This ultimately clarifies the metaphysical concept that underlies the way in which St. Thomas appropriates the doctrine of divine illumination.

The doctrine is this: It is not acceptable to say that the rational creature is not the cause of its own intellectual knowledge. On the one hand, this would make God impotent, because He would not be able to create beings that could be true causes of their knowledge. On the other hand, it would be in vain to attribute to them their own powers because everything would be God's action, which amounts to falling into occasionalism. God is the cause of intellectual knowledge, but in such a way that rational creatures are also a causes of that knowledge —God as the first cause, creatures as secondary causes. God is a cause of knowledge according to the three kinds of causality that are a true cause

36 *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 105, a. 3, ad 1.

of the action, and not in the mode of the material cause, which is the recipient of the effect of the other causes. God is not an intrinsic formal cause of knowledge. The intrinsic formal causes of knowledge are, instead, the created forms and virtues imprinted in the mind of man, and primarily the agent intellect. However, God is the extrinsic formal—or exemplary—cause, as discussed in the preceding section, although St. Thomas does not touch upon this topic here. God is a final cause of knowledge insofar as every cause tends to attain its principle, as explained above. He is also an efficient cause of the act of the intellect insofar as—in an ordered series of causes—second causes act only in virtue of the first. God is a first agent cause of intellectual illumination, while the human intellect is a second cause, and is therefore dependent on the first. This causality consists in applying the forms to their acts. God not only gives the form but is also the first cause of its operation. However, God is a first agent of knowledge in an even more radical way. He gives the mind the forms and virtues by which it knows intellectually (fundamentally, the intellectual power and the species, as stated in a.3), and preserves and sustains them in existence. St. Thomas returns to the example of the Sun. Just as the Sun gives and preserves the light by which colours are made visible, God gives and preserves the form—in this case the light of the intellect—by which intelligible forms are made “visible” to the human mind. And here St. Thomas leads the development of this theme to its ultimate metaphysical root, the act of existence (*actus essendi*), for forms are closely linked in Thomistic metaphysics to the participation of *esse*. The form is something innermost in things, insofar as it is the determining constituent of their own essence. But that which is most formal and innermost in things is their *esse* itself. Since God is the cause of *esse*, it follows that His operation in the mind is innermost and radical, because He operates in it from the first inner principle of the thing’s perfection, its *actus essendi*.³⁷ In this way St. Thomas integrates created causality and divine causality in the same intellectual operation, preventing either of them from hindering the other.

VII. CONCLUSION

Aristotle and St. Augustine are two great geniuses of the history of thought, with very strong intellectual personalities, and doctrines that were developed along very different paths. Both are extremely important sources for Aquinas’

³⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 105, a. 5, co: “Et quia forma rei est intra rem, et tanto magis quanto consideratur ut prior et universalior; et ipse Deus est proprie causa ipsius esse universalis in rebus omnibus, quod inter omnia est magis intimum rebus; sequitur quod Deus in omnibus intime operetur.”

thought in many subjects, including the doctrine of the agent intellect and that of divine illumination, discussed here. Taken too literally, these doctrines turn out to be incompatible. Augustine follows the Platonic line, according to which nothing is stable in material reality (or even in human souls), so that true knowledge can only come from the illumination of eternal Truth. On the other hand, for Aristotle there is something permanent in sensible things, and man, through abstraction, can attain knowledge—with certainty—of some things. The merger of both doctrines, therefore, might suggest a flavour of eclectic compromise. Such could be the case of the Bonaventurian solution, in spite of having some merit. This solution upholds the existence of both the agent intellect and divine action, which becomes necessary because the human intellectual power is insufficient to attain true knowledge. This seems to be in line with the Thomistic argument against positing a divine impotence to create a substantial and actively consistent reality. However, the statement of St. Bonaventure according to which Eternal Reasons are regulating, mover, and final causes of intellection,³⁸ is also found in St. Thomas, although formulated in the terms of his own metaphysics of Creation without eclectic compromises. In this solution, the ontological and causal consistency of the created intellect and its radical dependence on God are clearly affirmed at the same time.

The central theses posited by St. Thomas are as follows:

1. The human mind has a consistency such that it is able to cause its own intellectual knowledge through a process of abstraction in which its sensitive powers participate first, and from which the intelligible species or likenesses of material things are abstracted through the work of the natural light of the agent intellect.
2. This agent intellect emanates as a property of the spiritual soul by virtue of its own immaterial mode of existence. From this point of view the immediate cause of this light is the immaterial actuality of the mind itself, which by its spirituality is not completely immersed in matter but emerges with a surplus of perfection. It is this surplus of perfection that will allow it to have a power that can illuminate the phantasms and abstract the intelligible species.
3. However, it is necessary to uphold, above the light of the agent intellect, the causal action of a superior—divine—intellect, of which the agent intellect is a participation. The human spiritual soul is necessary but insufficient to provide the ultimate foundation of

38 *Quaestiones disputatae de scientia Christi*, q. 4

its intellectual light. Since neither man nor the soul are intellectual according to their whole being but only according to the superior part, there needs to exist something that is intellectual according to its whole being that is, intellectual according to all the virtue of the intellectual existence (*esse*), which is God. This is so because God is first in the order of immaterial beings, and intellectuality derives from immaterial existence. Therefore, God is the first intellectual Being; is intellectual by essence; and is the cause of all that is intellectual by participation. The word "light" is used for everything that causes the manifestation of something. For this reason "light" is applied to spiritual beings, and above all to God who, being intellectual by essence, is Light by essence. Participated light is called "lumen", which is why St. Thomas calls the agent intellect "lumen" insofar as it is a participation of divine Light.

4. God is a cause of intellectual illumination for man: that is, of the manifestation of truth to the human mind, as a final, exemplary, and efficient cause. God is a final cause because the finality of illumination is to know truth, and especially divine truths, since every effect tends to return to its cause. God is an exemplary cause because eternal Truth is a regulator of created truths. This regulation occurs for two reasons. First, because created things have forms that derive from the Ideas present in God's mind and, therefore, by knowing them and being measured by them, they are also measured by their source, which is divine Truth. Secondly, on account of the light of the agent intellect, which is a participation of that same divine Light, that is, the Truth that God himself Is, in which the Eternal Reasons of things are contained. This is so because the forms of material things are not intelligible in act but in potency and, therefore, cannot be the measure and rule of our intellect, except through the intervention of the light of the agent intellect, which is a likeness of divine Light. And this is so, finally, because the principles that regulate our theoretical and practical intellection are a likeness of divine Reasons. Although, in turn, these principles derive both from sensible experience and from the action of the agent intellect, through them the eternal Truth is revealed to us and in it, in some way, we touch the divine.
5. God is an efficient cause, first of all, of the forms by which we know: the intellective powers, especially the light of the agent intellect; and the intelligible species that actualize the possible intellect. And He is also a cause of the preservation of these powers

and of their application to their operations. This application is not a mere activation of an extrinsic and violent agent. Rather, God acts from what is innermost. This is so because God is the giver of form and, with it, of the very *esse* through which the mind subsists and possesses all its perfections; and amongst these perfections, radically, is the connatural light that makes it an intellectual being. “God”, St. Augustine said, “is more inner than my innermost” (*interior intimo meo*);³⁹ consequently, He illuminates, reveals the truth, from the innermost, through an operation that does not cease to be from God himself as the first cause, while being also of the creature.

God as the intellectual *esse* by essence is also the Light and the Truth by essence, which reveals to any other intelligence the theoretical and practical truth. Whence St. Thomas, rightly, resorted to the text of Psalm 4 to support this doctrine of illumination: “Who showeth us good things? The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us”. This is why, although it can be said that St. Thomas adopts St. Augustine’s doctrine of illumination while making important modifications (through the influence of Aristotle and Dionysus) that allow him to substantiate it from his own metaphysical framework, we consider it a mistake to think that this doctrine is superfluous and a mere act of homage to the authority of St. Augustine, whose doctrine would have become irrelevant due to the assumption of the Aristotelian concept of the agent intellect. On the contrary, the doctrine of illumination is fundamental to the development of a metaphysics of intellection, inasmuch as the manifestation of truth is what is proper to an intellectual being. And this is precisely what light does and, therefore, the divine action of illumination consists in exactly this.

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39 *Confessions*, 3, 6, 11.

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Martín F. Echavarría
Facultad de Comunicación, Educación y Humanidades
Universitat CEU Abat Oliba
Bellesguard 30
08022 Barcelona (España)
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3398-8134>