

# THE BEATIFIC VISION OF GOD

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## I. THE PROBLEM STATED

"THIS is eternal life," says Christ, "to know Thee, O Father, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent"; even more explicitly St. John: "We shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is"; and St. Paul: "We see now through a glass in a dark manner, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I am known." Here are the plain statements of revelation, and, since truth is one, they cannot be in conflict with reason, though they may be beyond reason's comprehension. Moreover no theory of knowledge which excludes such ultimate vision of God on the ground that it is impossible can be valid. Yet the initial difficulty will be patent to all: how can the human intellect, which functions in dependence on material things through the senses and imagination, grasp a purely spiritual immaterial Being, namely God Himself? We propose to show how the Scholastic philosophers faced the problem; and we shall have to begin by stating briefly the Aristotelian and Scholastic theory of human knowledge.

Man is compounded of an intellectual, spiritual, immaterial soul working in and through a material corruptible body. Hence he has a double principle of knowledge, the senses and the intellect. Sense-perception is the act of a bodily organ—I see or touch this individual book or man. Intellectual knowledge, on the contrary, is not the act of a bodily organ but of a spiritual or immaterial faculty. Hence it is solely concerned with what is immaterial and therefore universal, that is with genera, species, natures, essences, substances if you will, but not with individuals. It is concerned solely with the universal, with the immaterial natures or essences lying behind the sensible phenomena of individual material things. But precisely because these latter do shroud immaterial natures man's intellectual knowledge must be conditioned by its relation to the senses. How, then, is the gap between mere sense-impressions and intellectual perceptions bridged over? It can hardly be questioned that the imagination serves as the bridge, for it seems in some way to share the characteristics of both sense and intellect, to be partly material, partly spiritual. Thus Aristotle taught that the sense-impression, the image on the retina of the eye for instance, produced a similar image in the imagination, and that this latter image served as the connecting link between the senses and the intellect. To the intellect he attributed two functions which he named the *active* and *passive* intellects or the *intellectus agens* and the *intellectus possibilis*. The function of the former was to consider apart from their material veils the actual nature or essence of the thing thus presented by the senses to the imagination. The eye, for example, sees a triangle—in other words a material representation of a triangle is impressed on the retina. If we now close our eyes we can, without further recourse to the sensible image, call up an imaginary triangle of shadowy and blurred outline and only less clear than the concrete sharply outlined picture on the retina. The "active" intellect now comes into play. Its sole object is the spiritual or immaterial; hence in the presentation of the object by the imagination the active intellect considers solely the immaterial nature of a triangle whether equilateral, isosceles, or what. The image thus acquired or "abstracted" is termed the impressed image or *species impressa*. From the active intellect it passes to the passive intellect which is thus rendered actually and no longer merely potentially, understanding. The clear-cut idea thus formed of a triangle is the universal—because spiritual and immaterial—concept of a triangle. It is "universal" in the sense that it carries with it no determinations or limitations as to size or any particular qualifications of triangles in general. This image or universal concept is known as the *species expressa* and as such is stored up in the passive intellect for future use. From the fact that the reception of the impressed image made the intellect no longer potentially but actually understanding, this image is termed the "form" as being the "informing" principle of such actual understanding. This is summed up in the phrase: "*intelligibile in actu est intellectus in actu.*"

Certain consequences of this doctrine will be manifest:

(a) Since the intelligible truth in question is received into a faculty it can only be there in proportion to the capacity of the recipient. Hence, though all truth is of its nature intelligible, it will not follow that our intelligence of it will be

proportioned to its intelligibility; nor does it follow that every individual human intellect will grasp equally the same intelligible truth.

(b) While the human intellect is itself immaterial and spiritual it is yet compelled to function through the senses and imagination. Hence no purely spiritual nature, no nature, that is, which cannot by reason of its immaterial character be presented in a form which appeals to the senses and imagination, can as such be within the scope of the human intellect. The intellect can, for instance, argue to the existence of such a nature, but cannot know that nature in itself. Thus we can argue that God must exist and that He cannot be this or that because of the imperfections such ideas connote; but we cannot know that His essential nature is precisely this or that.

These principles seem at first sight to exclude the possibility of man's attaining to the intellectual vision of the nature of God Who is pure Intelligence and Who consequently has no relationship to material things save as their Creator.

## II. INTELLIGENCE, DIVINE AND HUMAN

When we pass from the human intelligence to the divine we can argue that God must needs be an Intelligence, indeed the Supreme Intelligence; further, that since His nature is identified with His existence— else He would not be the First Cause and would be only potentially existing, at least at some conceivable moment prior to His actual existence. He must therefore be His own act of intelligence. Moreover He must understand Himself by Himself, since any other way of understanding Himself would involve a transition from potentiality to actuality, and that is inconceivable in the Supreme Being or First Cause.

Such philosophical positions may seem, at first sight, to contradict St. Paul's statement: "Then I shall know even as I am known," and St. John's : "We shall see Him as He is." Yet the Schoolmen, who accepted the declarations of revelation, also accepted the epistemological principles of the Stagirite. Is their reconciliation of these opposing factors a mere *tour de force*, a magnificent piece of intellectual hair-splitting, or is it an absolute triumph of genius? If the former, it is hard to understand how the mightiest of intellects down the subsequent ages have been unable to detect any flaw in their reasoning.

Nor must we imagine that the Schoolmen's difficulty lay simply in reconciling their theory of knowledge with the data of revelation. That difficulty was grave enough, but it was immensely increased by certain other speculations of which the modern world has totally lost sight, but which are of the profoundest importance for the right understanding of the problem we are discussing.

## III. ANGELIC INTELLIGENCES

The divine and human intelligences may be regarded as the two extremes in the scale of intelligent beings. The one is His own existence and His own intelligence, and therefore purely immaterial or spiritual; the other is an intelligent being functioning through and in a material organism and receptive of existence rather than actually being its own nature. Now it is at least conceivable that between these two extremes there exist intelligences which (a) are caused and not self-produced, and which are therefore not their own existence but receive it and thus are distinct from God the Uncaused Being, while (b) they are distinct from men in that they are pure intelligences having no relation to matter.

The whole of antiquity as well as the whole of revelation demands the existence of such intermediate beings. Revelation knows them as "angels," Greek philosophy as "separated substances"—"separated," that is, as having no relation to matter. Among the Jews the Sadducees stood alone in repudiating the idea of angels; among Christian thinkers Origen alone claimed a material character for them. Here we shall take the existence of such "separated" substances for granted, partly because of revelation, partly because, while reason may not be able rigidly to demonstrate their existence, it can at least bring forward arguments which have satisfied the greatest thinkers of all ages. It is the angels who are referred to in the "*visibilium et invisibilium*" of the Nicene Creed. As regards their nature it will be sufficient to point out here that since such "separated" substances are immaterial there is no room in them for numerical apart from specific distinction; hence all angels must be specifically distinct from one another; further, since they are purely immaterial they

must be incomparably more glorious than the most glorious material sun or constellation; lastly, in opposition to Aristotle's view, they are a vast multitude.

We have, then, three grades of intelligent beings: God, angels and men. But we must of course understand the word grades cautiously. For it would obviously be wrong to suppose that there is only a difference of degree between the Supreme Intelligence and the intelligences which He has created. If there were only a difference of degree there would be no difficulty in the idea of beatific vision, for we could readily imagine that a gradual purification of the human intelligence would finally result in a comprehension of the Supreme Intelligence. But no clear thinker could suppose that we can predicate of God and His creatures being and its attributes in any univocal sense; what His creatures are God is in a super-eminent fashion, since He is the Cause of all they are and possess. A man is not the picture he produces. This will become clearer if we examine by the light of reason how each of these intelligences—the divine, the angelic and the human—understands.

God knows all things by His own self-subsisting nature which is identified with His actual understanding, and this latter is, in conjunction with His will, the cause of all things. In Himself He knows Himself and all things possible and actual intuitively. At the other extreme men know through the two-fold medium of sense and intellect, and these two work together so that human understanding is conditioned by the material organism in which the intelligence dwells and through which it functions. Angels know by their very nature, which is pure intelligence totally independent of matter. They are subsisting—though not self-subsisting or self-produced—intelligences. Consequently they can have no such things as sense impressions, nor can they have the imagination's concepts. Hence in them there is no place for the work of abstraction such as the human active intellect performs. Being simply intelligences they must understand by their very nature, and all intelligible truth must naturally be knowable by them.

#### IV. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE HUMAN AND THE ANGELIC INTELLIGENCE

Now since the human intelligence is not an angel, it is not a separated substance; yet it is separable; it can, on the dissolution of the body, become what is known as the *anima separata* or, in the language of the modern spiritualist, the "discarnate soul," and in that state it can, though in a limited fashion, function. If now we can discover what is the proper, connatural, object of the separated substance, how it knows and what; if, again, we can discover what is the proper, connatural object of the separated or discarnate soul, what it can know and how, we shall be well on the way to the solution of the problem: how can the human soul see the essence of God, in which vision revelation places our ultimate beatitude?

It is clear that a separated substance, being a pure intelligence, knows by its own nature; its one function is to understand. It will also follow that everything that is intelligible—in other words all truth—is its natural object, just as all that possesses colour is the natural object of the human eye. Therefore the separated substance naturally knows God. But to what extent? In other words: do the natural powers of a separated substance or angel lead him to a knowledge of the Essence of God, or simply to the fact of His existence? Now an angel is created, therefore he is an effect of God, and consequently no analysis of that effect will demonstrate the nature or afford comprehensive knowledge of the cause that produced it, though it will enable us to argue about it. And this simply because no finite effect of an Infinite Cause can totally represent it, nor can it, in consequence, lead us to more than a partial and inadequate knowledge of its Cause. At the same time an angel, being an intelligence, recognizes himself as an effect of the First Cause, and in the same way understands other angels; yet, for the same reason as above, such knowledge will not enable him to arrive at a knowledge of God's essence. Hence St. Thomas says:

"A separated substance by its own substance (or nature) knows of God (a) that He exists, (b) that He is the Cause of all things. (c) that He transcends them all, and (d) that He is far removed not only from all things that are, but from all things that the created mind can possibly conceive. This knowledge of God we too possess in our degree. For from effects we know that God exists, that He is the Cause of all things, that He transcends them all and is far removed from them all; and this is the final and most perfect stage of our knowledge in this life. Hence says Denis (the Areopagite) 'We are joined to

God as to something unknown,' and this because while we know of God what He is not, what He really is remains totally hidden from us . .

"Since however a nature that is lower in the scale attains at its very best only to what is least in a nature that is above itself in the scale, it will follow that knowledge such as the above must be possessed by the separated substances in a degree far transcending the way in which we possess it." 'The separated substances,' he concludes, 'know with greater certainty and clarity than we do that God exists.' "

But what about the discarnate soul, or soul that has passed from the tabernacle of the body? Is it like the angels? Does it know as they know? Clearly it cannot know more than they know; therefore it cannot possibly attain by its natural powers to a knowledge of the essence of God. If it is to see God, as revelation demands, this can only be through the bestowal of some power to which it has no right and which we therefore term "supernatural." But it is an axiom of the Schools that "grace—or God's gift—does not destroy, but perfects, nature." The problem then, is to discover how the human intellect which, on Aristotle's principles, can only know when a similitude of the thing known enters the percipient mind—and even then only through the medium of an image in the imagination—can see the Essence of God without the intervention of any such similitude and without the imaginary presentment of the object known which Aristotle and the Scholastics demand. If these two points are absolutely and in all circumstances essential to human understanding, then it would seem to follow that vision of the essence of God is not merely due to a supernatural gift but demands a radical change in human nature; and this is impossible.

### ST. THOMAS'S TREATMENT OF THE PROBLEM

St. Thomas treats of the Vision of God by the human soul in various places of the *Summa Theologica* and under various aspects. Thus he deals with our knowledge of God's nature as seen in His works, also with that knowledge of God which is faith, with our intuitional knowledge of His nature—which is our immediate concern here—with that same knowledge as constituting the very essence of our ultimate happiness, and, finally with the same Beatitude as a state to which we are led through Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

The actual question with which we are concerned is dealt with almost at the opening of the *Summa*; for after treating of God's existence and attributes St. Thomas opens his twelfth *Quaestio*: "How God may be known by us." He is dealing, be it noted, with real knowledge, knowledge, that is, of the nature of God as distinct from our knowledge of His existence, which the Saint has already discussed. He begins by asking whether "any created intellect can see the essence of God," and his affirmative answer is based on St. John's words: "We shall see Him as He is." In his discussion of the question, after pointing out that because God is supremely knowable in Himself it will not follow that created intellects can therefore know Him, any more than the splendour of the sun enables a bat to see it, St. Thomas proceeds to show that the conclusion at which some have therefore arrived, viz., that the created intellect can never arrive at the vision of God's essence, is false. His argument is that since the ultimate perfection of man must lie in his highest function, that, namely, of understanding, it will follow that if the created intellect can never know the essential nature of God either it will never attain to final happiness at all, or that happiness must lie in something other than God; a conclusion "which is contrary to our faith." Moreover, since the perfection of every single thing lies in the attainment of its principle, it will follow that the ultimate perfection of the rational nature must lie in the intellectual attainment of God. "Further, such a conclusion is opposed to reason. For there is in man a natural desire of knowing the cause of any effect he sees, so that if the mind were unable to attain to the first cause of things this natural desire would remain unsatisfied. Hence we must simply concede that the Blessed do see the essence of God."

This argument is not meant to be a demonstration in the strict sense; for its basis is revelation and not pure reason.

But while the argument from desire may not perhaps be absolutely convincing to all minds it seems clear that to question it would involve questioning the justice of the Creator of our nature with its desires.

Granting, however, that such knowledge is possible, St. Thomas next asks whether such vision of God's essence is through the medium of some likeness of God. For all knowledge seems to involve the presence of the object known in the

percipient, not of course in its physical nature but in an image of it, just as the image of a stone is formed on the retina of the eye which sees it: "If the object seen and the principle of the visual power were one and the same it would follow that the percipient must derive from the same thing both its visual power and the 'form' whereby it sees. It is clear however that God is the Author of the intellectual powers and can be seen by the intellect; and since created intellectual powers are not God's essence it remains that they can only be some participative likeness of Him Who is the Primal Intelligence." Only in this sense he concludes, can we say that God's essence is seen through the medium of some likeness of God, viz., that the intellectual faculty is itself an intellectual light derived from the First Light. But of the thing seen, the divine essence, there can be no image or likeness in the mind for the compelling reason that, no created image can mirror the Infinite.

By this exclusion of all images of God in the mind that sees His essence St. Thomas might seem to be placing this beatific vision in a category apart. But he is careful to show that this is not his intention at all by formulating this point as a difficulty which tells against himself. "The intellect actually understanding is the thing actually understood. But that can only be when the intellect is 'informed' by an image of the thing understood. If then God is actually seen by the created intellect He must be seen by some likeness or image." His answer is brief: "The divine essence is God's very existence. Consequently, just as other intelligible forms (natures) which are not their own existence are united to some mode of existence whereby they 'inform' the intellect and thus reduce it to actual understanding, so the divine essence is united to the created intellect as something actually understood; and of itself it reduces the intellect to actual understanding." In other words: if we are to see God, then God must in some way be in us according to the norm of all vision, whether sensible or intellectual. But whereas other things enter our intellect by a likeness or image of themselves, this is impossible in the case of the vision of God; for no image can mirror the Infinite, and of course if the medium were merely a finite image then it would not be the essence of God that we see but something short of it. Some might feel that this solution of the difficulty, that all vision demands a likeness in the percipient, was merely a counsel of despair: no other way is possible; this one, then, must be true. But St. Thomas really argues: No other solution is possible; but this one is possible; therefore it is true. The question, then, is: how is it possible? How can the very essence of God enter into our minds?

It is somewhat remarkable that here in the *Summa Theologica* St. Thomas gives us but little information on this point. The divine essence, he, says, is united to the created intellect as something actually understood; of itself it reduces the intellect to actual understanding; but he does not discuss how this can be. Elsewhere, however, he enters into details. *Faith*, he insists, demands such vision; reason also demands that perfect happiness can only consist in the most perfect exercise of our highest faculty, the intellect; only the supremely intelligible can satisfy this condition; therefore our final happiness must consist in the vision of God Himself as our ultimate—and in the case of rational creation—our immediate principle or Cause "as our faith declares." Now this vision cannot be through any image of God since any image which was not God Himself could only lead to analogical and therefore insufficient knowledge.

"It remains then," he concludes, "that that whereby the created intellect sees God in His essence must be that divine essence itself. Not of course that the divine essence should be the informing principle of the intellect itself (for that would make the human intellect God), but that it stands to it as its informing principle. Hence, just as from a form (or specific principle) which is part of a thing, and from matter, one actual thing is produced, so—though in different fashion—from the divine essence and the created intellect there results one thing 'in understanding,' while, that is, the intellect understands and the divine essence is understood by means of itself."

Is this Pantheism? Does it mean that the created intellect and the divine essence become one thing? If so, it is Pantheism. But St. Thomas is careful to point out that this is not what he means: "This does not mean," he says, "that the divine essence becomes the informing principle of the created intellect as though it were a part of its essential being, but that in the actual act of understanding the divine essence stands to the created intellect in the same way as a form (or specifying principle) stands to matter of which it is an actual part in being."

But even so St. Thomas has not yet explained how this can be. He finds, however, in the Commentary of Alexander on Aristotle's *De Anima* an illustration which serves his purpose. "Whenever two things are received into a third and one is more perfect than the other, the more perfect is related to the less perfect just as a form (or specifying principle) is related to the material that it perfects; light, for example, is the perfecting principle of colour when both are in the ether. Consequently, since the created intellect which is in the created substance is less perfect than the divine essence also existing in it (he means in beatific vision), that divine essence will, in a sense, stand to that created understanding in the same proportion as a form (or specifying principle). We find a sort of parallel to this in nature: a subsisting thing cannot, if it is in any way conjoined to matter, be the form (or specifying principle) of any other matter; a stone, for instance, cannot be the specifying principle of any other matter. But a self-subsisting immaterial thing can become the informing principle of matter, as is evident in the case of the soul. Similarly, then, in a certain sense the divine essence, which is pure act, becomes the specifying principle of the intellect as actually understanding, though totally different from it in actual being. Hence the Master says that the union of the body with the rational soul is a kind of type of the union of the beatified rational soul with God."

Elsewhere St. Thomas speaks of this presence of the divine essence in the soul as the "illapse" of the Deity into the soul. "The divine essence," he teaches, "sufficiently represents itself (to the intellect), and consequently when it is united to the intellect as its 'form' the latter sees of God Himself not only that He exists but also what He is."

## VI. THE LIGHT OF GLORY

But there remains a further problem: We have already seen that the created intelligence which sees God is itself a participated likeness of Him Who is the Primal Intelligence, and that consequently the created vision of God is intelligence meeting Intelligence, light meeting Light. But it still remains true that it is but a human and created or finite thing and that it is still a case of a finite light and intelligence meeting the Infinite; or, as Aristotle expresses it: "the difficulty of understanding things arises from ourselves and not from the things themselves; for even with regard to the most patent things our intellect is like the eye of a bat looking at the sun." The bat of course has eyesight, just as a man has; it is simply a question of degree; so that for a bat to be able to gaze at the sun his eyesight would need no change in its nature, it would merely require strengthening. So, too, with the human intellect. If a thing is true it is intelligible and therefore has some relation to all intellectual beings. Hence for the human intellect to elicit an act of understanding of the Supreme Being involves no change in its nature; if such change were requisite, then that human being would cease to be a human being; consequently, for the human intellect to understand God its powers must simply be intensified. We have a parallel to this in the "light of faith," which contradicts no power of the intellect but enables it to admit truths which it does not understand but accepts on authority. And since the created intellectual light is already a participation in the divine intelligence, any further intensification of this light will only mean a further participation in the divine intelligence; it is in this sense that St. Peter terms grace a participation in the divine nature; and grace does not destroy but perfects nature. There must be added, then, to the created intellect, if it is to see the divine essence, some intensification of its natural light, and this, says St. Thomas, "is the light of the divine glory; of it the Psalmist speaks when he says: '*In Thy light we shall see light.*'" This light is not God Himself, it is not a new faculty, it is not charity, rather is it a supernatural habit strengthening the intellect to elicit an act which though in perfect conformity with its powers is yet beyond them if unaided. This light St. Thomas also calls *gratia consummata*. We must be careful, however, when we speak of this light of glory as an intensification: "No intensive increase of the natural powers would suffice, for this vision is not of the same nature as the natural vision of the created intellect... There must then be an increase of the intellectual power by its obtaining some new disposition." In other words, some added power which is supernatural, beyond our nature, that is, but not contrary to it.

So far, then, we have seen how the vision of God's essence by the created intellect, whether Angelic or human, involves no contradiction. According to Aristotle's teaching all knowledge demands the reception of the thing known unto the percipient in some form or other, and in this divine vision God, Who is known or seen, Himself enters the mind; He is

both that which is seen and that whereby He is seen. Again, the human intellect has a certain affinity for all truth; intelligence and intelligibility are in a sense correlatives. And though the divine essence is infinitely distant from the human intelligence, this is not the distance of opposition or contradiction; for that the human mind should claim the power to see God is not like the ear claiming to see or the eye to hear. But at the same time this infinite transcendence of the divine above the human does mean that the human mind cannot by its natural powers see the supremely intelligible, namely God, any more than—to use Aristotle's expression—a bat can see the sun. If then it is to see God the human intelligence must receive some new disposition fortifying it for the task.

## VII. THE PHANTASMA

But a peculiar difficulty remains when it is a question of the human intelligence as distinct from the angelic. For an angel, or separated substance, is a pure intelligence; he is immaterial or spiritual. The human intelligence, however, as we saw at the outset, dwells in a corporeal framework through and by which it functions. Through the ever-open doors of the senses impressions are conveyed to the mind through the medium of the imagination, and for the registering of every fresh intellectual impression or idea recourse must perforce be had to these presentations by that faculty. But if this recourse to imagination's presentations is connatural to the human intellect it would seem that in beatific vision, where there is no place for the imagination, either the whole nature of our intellectual operations must be radically changed—and we thus cease to act as human beings—or the place of the imagination must be supplied by something similar to the "Light of glory," or the dependence of the intellect on the imagination must be confined to this material sensible life wherein the intellect has perforce to function through the bodily organism.

## VIII. THE ARABIAN PHILOSOPHERS

We have taken for granted Aristotle's epistemology and his views on the constitutive elements of the human species. But in the thirteenth century those ideas either were not fully grasped, or were presented in a distorted fashion, or—owing to an extravagant notion of the real character of the separated substances—the human intellect was conceived of as being itself a separated substance, or at least as possessing such affinity with angelic natures that it could naturally know them and that its ultimate beatitude consisted in such knowledge.

These aberrations of the Arabian philosophers were due, at least in part, to the fact that, as St. Thomas points out, "the question whether the human soul can, while still joined to the body, understand the separated substances, Aristotle undertook to answer; but since his answer is not to be found in any of his works that have come down to us his followers were led to indulge in all sorts of answers to the question."

The story of the Arabian school of Platonist and Aristotelian philosophers is an exceedingly interesting one. It was founded by Alexander of Aphrodisias in the second century after Christ, and to him succeeded in the three following centuries the Platonist commentators Porphyry and Simplicius. When the Emperor Justinian closed this Platonist School in A.D. 529 it passed to Persia and Syria, where Aristotle's works were translated by the Christians at Nisibis and Edessa, as also at Baghdad. It was in this latter centre that the Arabians became acquainted with Aristotle's philosophical system, though, at the same time Byzantium was serving as a focus for Aristotelian studies under Photius, Nicetas and Comnenus, and especially at a later period under Michael of Ephesus in the twelfth century. These twin streams of interpretation—from Persia, Syria, Arabia and the Moors on the one hand, and from Athens and Constantinople on the other, converged on the University of Paris in the twelfth century.

Most of the theological speculations of these Arabians were ultimately derived from Proclus, whose influence appeared especially in the famous treatise *De Causis*, the authorship of which is unknown, but which exercised a profound influence on the theological thought of the Middle Ages. Proclus himself had taught—as an echo of Plato—that there existed a series of hypostatized, universal ideas which constituted a hierarchy of causes, and this notion runs, as we shall see, throughout the Arabic speculation of the time of the Scholastics.

The best known among the Arabian philosophers are Alkindi, (c. 870); Alfarabi (d.c. 950); Avicenna or Ibn Sina (980-1037); Algazel, or Gazali (1059-1111). All these represented the strictly Eastern tradition. From North Africa or Moorish Spain came Avempace or Ibn Badsha (d. 1138); Abubacer or Ibn Bekr (1100-1185); and, most famous of all, Averroes or Ibn Roshd (1126-1198)—it is to him that St. Thomas refers when he speaks of "the Commentator," just as by "the Philosopher" he means Aristotle. Avicebron, author of the *Fons Vitae* often quoted by St. Thomas, was really a Jew and not a Moor; his true name was Salomon ben Gabirol.

It must not be thought that because St. Thomas fought so strenuous a battle against these teachers he therefore condemned them utterly. He clearly regarded them as giant intellects, and treats them with real respect. At times he even uses Avicenna as an acknowledged authority, though he points out that in addition to his errors on the question we have been discussing Avicenna held the strange notion that evil was limited to this side of the moon, also that he erred touching predestination and prophecy. Avempace he seems to have only known through the writings of Averroes; at any rate he speaks of him as "*Avempace quidam*." Algazel he often refers to, also to Avicebron.

To return, however, to the speculations of the Arabian teachers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They held that we could have a complete understanding of the angels. But is this true? Can we know the natures or essences of separated substances? Can we know them as they really are in themselves and not merely the fact that they exist, as well as certain conclusions as to what their natures are or rather ought to be? The question is not a frivolous one; for many of the Arabian philosophers—for example Avempace—and even the early Aristotelian commentator Alexander, maintained that we really could know the nature of the angels; they even held that ultimate human beatitude consisted precisely in such knowledge. St. Thomas terms the arguments by which Avempace supported, his view "frivolous," and rightly, because no speculative knowledge of which we are conscious can do more than show that such natures exist; it can never show us what they really and essentially are in themselves. But the ideas of Alexander demand fuller consideration. For while he held that our passive intellect was an integral but corruptible portion of our nature and that consequently it could never arrive at any knowledge of the angelic nature, Alexander also taught—and this was the false doctrine that ate into the heart of the philosophy and theology of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, especially in the University of Paris—that the active intellect was no part of man but was itself an angel or separated substance, also that it was the active principle of intelligence in us and finally took the place of the passive intellect whereby we are actually understanding. And since this active intellect became, according to Alexander, our informing principle and was itself an angel, we not only became angels specifically—if such a thing were possible—but by means of this separated substance we ultimately came to know all other separated substances and in such knowledge lay our ultimate happiness.

It is easy to see that such a doctrine destroyed the reality of the human species, negated the immortality of the soul, and made the revealed doctrine of man's ultimate vision of the essence of God fantastic. In St. Thomas's day this doctrine was in possession, and its hold was intensified by the support it received from the greatest of all the Arabians, Averroes. Moreover this doctrine was presented as being solidly based on Aristotle's teaching. These facts afford us an idea of the gravity of the task devolving on the Christian teachers of that day who would show that the truths of revelation, for example the immortality of the soul and its future vision of the essence of God, were by no means in conflict with sound reason and—since the mighty authority of Aristotle had been invoked—were not in conflict with what the Stagirite really had taught.

The views of Alexander were peculiarly dangerous from the very fact that they seemed to adhere so closely to Aristotle's teaching. For whereas Avempace held that by ever-growing refinements of mental abstraction we ultimately attained to a knowledge of the separated substances—a view which St. Thomas dubs "frivolous," Alexander had taught nothing so trivial as this. Nor, for he was a true disciple of Aristotle, had he fallen into the ridiculous error held later by Avempace of supposing that images in the imagination could be a medium for arriving at a knowledge of the purely immaterial. Like Aristotle, too, he had always insisted that the active intellect was the principle of actual knowledge. But his twofold error lay in making the passive intellect corruptible and the active intellect something external to man, something eternal and self-subsisting, yet the actual principle of man's knowledge.

But Averroes, the greatest of all the Arabians, felt so keenly the enormity of making the passive intellect corruptible that he went to the opposite extreme and regarded both it and the active intellect as imperishable, eternal, self-subsisting principles apart from man.

He argued that our intellectual faculties can understand both speculative principles and even the active intellect itself. He also maintained that it was this latter, namely, the active intellect, which put us in positive possession of speculative principles and thus made them actually known; moreover, that in the intelligible order, this active intellect was really the informing principle of such speculative principles. Hence by our gradually increasing grasp of speculative principles the active intellect became more and more a part of us. And if, in the process of time, we men were able, by assiduous study, to make all speculative principles our own we should find that we had completely absorbed into ourselves the separated self-subsisting substance or angel known by these philosophers as the active intellect, and should, have thus acquired full knowledge of the essence of a separated substance; in this would have lain our beatitude.

Against all these views St. Thomas shows that according to Aristotle's positive teaching the intellectual soul is the "form" or specifying principle of the body; that it is in very deed its effective as well as its final cause; further, that since the intellect—whether active or passive—is simply a faculty of the soul it cannot be, as the Arabians insisted, a "separated" substance, but must be an essential part of man.

Moreover the soul is immortal; that is to say it is not a "form" or specifying principle which perishes with the body. This is not simply a question of revelation and therefore of faith, but a principle which can be proved by reason. The consequence is that quite apart from revelation—it is demonstrable that man's final happiness can never be attained in this world. And while nothing but God can satisfy the cravings of the soul, revelation teaches that that same soul shall as a matter of fact enjoy ultimately the vision of God's very essence. Such vision must, then, be possible. Lastly, because "grace does not destroy, but perfect, nature," that vision must be exercised by the soul in a manner which does no violence to the nature of the intellect. But that God Himself should enter the soul and thus become both the goal of beatific vision and its medium, and that the created intellect, to elicit such an act of vision, must demand such supernatural "fortification" of its powers as is expressed in the term *lumen gloriae*—these difficulties, though very real, are, to St. Thomas's thinking, trifling compared to the difficulty arising from the fact that the human intellect necessarily understands through the medium of phantasmata or the imagination's concepts. For here we have a fundamental fact. At every turn St. Thomas repeats it: "We cannot," he says, for example, "even reflect upon things of which we already possess knowledge without turning to these phantasmata—though he [Avicenna] denies this." "But this very fact," St. Thomas continues, "makes it all the more difficult to see how the separated soul can understand. For then there will be no phantasmata, since both for their apprehension and preservation these require the organs of the body."

The solution, for him, lies in the fact that the human intellect is a light whose connatural object is truth or all intelligible things. So long as it dwells in the body it can only arrive at truth through the medium of the senses and the imagination. But once separated from the body it will be "like the angels"; it will be a separated substance, though incomplete in the sense that it will always retain its relationship to the body in which it dwelt; indeed it will be in a "violent state" until it is rejoined to it. But it is "separated," and therefore must understand precisely as the angels understand; all truth must be accessible to it. St. Thomas proves step by step that man's full beatitude cannot be realised in this world. For this beatitude must lie in the knowledge of God, yet the ordinary vague knowledge of God we all have or can have will not suffice, nor will demonstration of His existence such as speculative science can afford satisfy us, nor the knowledge which is faith—since that, of its nature, supposes a certain baffling obscurity incompatible with beatitude.

"For reasons like these," he concludes, "Alexander and Averroes made man's ultimate happiness consist, not in human knowledge such as arises from speculation, but in man's union with a separated substance, a union which they thought possible in this life. Aristotle, on the contrary, since he realised that in this life we have no other means of arriving at knowledge except through speculation, maintained that man could not attain to perfect happiness save in some proportionate fashion. This shows us to what straits these brilliant minds were reduced. We, however, are freed from such straits if we grant, as we have proved, that man can attain true happiness after this life since his soul is immortal, and that

in that state the soul understands in the same way as do separated substances.[ ] Hence man's ultimate happiness will lie in that knowledge of God which the human mind has after this life, knowing Him, that is, in the same way as the separated substances know Him.

"Hence it is that the Lord promises us a reward in heaven, and St. Matthew says that the saints shall be like the angels, who always see God in Heaven."

"If the passive intellect is, despite its union with the body, incorruptible and independent of matter for its existence, as we have shown above, it follows that its present state of compulsion to understand through material things is an accident arising from the soul's union with the body. Consequently, when the soul comes to be separated from the body the passive intellect will be able to understand things that are intelligible in themselves, namely separated substances, and this through the light of the active intellect which is a likeness in the soul of the intellectual light which is in the separated substances. This is the teaching of our faith touching our understanding of separated substances after death, but not during this life."

Elsewhere St. Thomas expresses the same doctrine with even greater fulness: "If the human soul were receptive of abstract and universal notions in the same way as are the separated substances it would, since its intellectual powers are the least in the scale [of intelligent beings], have only most imperfect knowledge, for it would only know things in a general and confused fashion. Consequently, for its knowledge to be perfected and distinct in detail, it must gather its knowledge of truth from individual things; and the light of the active intellect is necessary in order that things may be received into the soul in a higher fashion than they actually exist in matter. Consequently, again, for the perfection of its intellectual operations the soul was necessarily united to the body. At the same time we cannot doubt but that through the movements of the body and the soul's occupation with sensible things the soul is hindered from receiving the influences of separated substances; for we see that people when asleep, and therefore freed from the action of the senses, receive certain revelations which do not happen to them when in the full possession of their senses. When, then, the soul is wholly separated from the body it will be more fully receptive of influences coming from the separated substances, in this sense, that then by such influence it will be able to understand without having recourse to the imagination's concepts, a thing that it cannot now do. At the same time this influence will not cause such perfect and detailed knowledge as that which we now receive through the medium of the senses save in the case of those souls which, in addition to the aforesaid natural influence, shall receive another and supernatural influence fitting them to know all things most fully and to see God Himself"

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