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**Autor:** Navarro, Bernardita / Simian, Rafael

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BERNARDITA NAVARRO / RAFAEL SIMIAN

## Saint Thomas and the Ontological Status of the Agent Intellect

For centuries, many Thomists have faced a difficult metaphysical problem. If we contemplate the ontological structure of the human soul, that is, its accidents and substance, in which one of these ‘categories’ does the agent intellect belong?

Although Thomas never formulated this specific question explicitly, he did provide an answer to it by claiming, in no ambiguous terms, that *all* human potencies (of which the agent intellect is one) are necessary accidents flowing from the soul’s essence, i.e. propria. Given that no intellectual potency informs a bodily organ, many prominent commentators have thus concluded that the agent intellect is an immaterial and necessary accidental quality of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite the overwhelming textual evidence proving that for Thomas all human potencies are propria, we think that this should not be the final word on the subject. As we shall see, Thomas’ own conception of the role of the agent intellect in our cognitive life, together with the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions of that role, ought to give us pause. We will argue, indeed, that the traditional position advocated by Thomas and his followers regarding the ontological status of the agent intellect does not square well with Thomas’ own theory of knowledge and metaphysics. In light of this, we should like to propose an alternative (corrective) view, one which we claim fits those aspects of Aquinas’ philosophy better, namely: the agent intellect is the substantial and immaterial *actus essendi* of the soul insofar as through this act the soul can make the natures present in phantasms intelligible. As substantial *esse*, this intellect is the act in which and through which the soul subsists immaterially; but as immaterial, it is not the soul’s *esse* insofar as this act is the actuality of the body and the bodily faculties.<sup>2</sup> Finally, as the act through which the soul

<sup>1</sup> For the names of some of these commentators and their works, see below, section II.

<sup>2</sup> See *Summa Theologiae*, in: *Opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P.M. edita* [henceforth *Opera omnia*], vols. 4–12. Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide 1888–1906, I q. 76, a. 1, ad 5 [henceforth *ST*]: “anima illud esse in quo ipsa subsistit, communicat materiae corporali, ex qua et anima intellectiva fit unum, ita quod illud esse quod est totius compositi, est etiam ipsius animae”; *Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 24/2. Rome: Commissio Leonina 2000, a. 2, co [henceforth *De spir. creat.*]: “In quantum igitur supergreditur esse materiae corporalis potens per se subsistere et operari, anima humana est substantia spiritualis, in quantum uero attingitur a materia et esse suum communicat illi est corporis forma”. Cf. *Summa contra gentiles*, in: *Opera om-*

can make the natures of material things intelligible in act, the agent intellect is identical with the soul's substantial and immaterial *esse* only inasmuch as the latter makes this specific operation possible. Thus, the identification of the agent intellect with the soul's substantial *esse* is not complete, for it solely concerns that *esse* as it remains immune from matter and is able to confer intelligibility upon sensible natures.

This position will certainly strike many as implausible if not preposterous. Reasons seem to abound in Aquinas' writings for rejecting it out of hand. Our case requires, therefore, that we start from the basics, so as to clear the ground from which to rise to the high planes of Thomas' metaphysics of knowledge, which is the proper place to judge about the ontological status of the agent intellect. We will start by trying to understand the need for this intellect in human cognition, and the kind of act it is. Following that, we shall assess the traditional doctrine espoused by Aquinas and many of his commentators, which will give us the opportunity to clarify and put forth the reasons behind our view.

## I. THE AGENT INTELLECT AS ACT

The human soul, according to Aquinas, is the least perfect among intellectual substances, which is why it does not understand any intelligible forms by merely relying on its own nature, but is at first in potency regarding all of them.<sup>3</sup> Hence, to actually acquire those forms, it must first assimilate to them through the senses from the very things which exist outside it.<sup>4</sup> This conception of the soul brings out the two main reasons for the need of what Thomas calls 'the agent intellect', namely: that the power for understanding the essences of things, i.e. the possible intellect, is at first entirely in potency regarding intelligibles; and second, consequently, that the acquisition of intelligible forms must be made through sensible forms, more specifically, phantasms, which are similitudes of things as they (did, would, or actually) exist in matter. Let us see more closely why this makes it necessary for the soul to have an agent intellect.

*nia*, vols. 13–15. Rome: Typis Riccardi Garroni 1918–1930, II 68 [henceforth *SCG*]; *De ente et essentia*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 43. Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, c. 5.

<sup>3</sup> See *ST I*, q. 79, a. 2, co: "Intellectus autem humanus, qui est infimus in ordine intellectuum, et maxime remotus a perfectione divini intellectus, est in potentia respectu intelligibilium, et in principio est sicut tabula rasa in qua nihil est scriptum".

<sup>4</sup> See *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 24/1. Rome: Commissio Leonina 1996, q. 7, co [henceforth *De an.*]: "in sui natura non habet perfectiones intelligibiles, set est in potentia ad intelligibilia, sicut materia prima ad formas sensibiles; unde ad propriam operationem indiget ut fiat in actu formarum intelligibilium, acquirendo eas per sensitivas potentias a rebus exterioribus".

For Thomas, “that which brings potency into act is itself in act”;<sup>5</sup> therefore, “[w]hat is in potency cannot bring itself into act”,<sup>6</sup> for otherwise it would be both in potency and in act in the same respect, which is an obvious contradiction. Furthermore, since *omne agens agit sibi simile*, the act into which something is brought must be effected by something which has that same kind of act.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the possible intellect, which is entirely in potency regarding all intelligibles, must be actualized not by any other power, but specifically by one which is intelligible in act. Given that what is material is not actually intelligible, and given that the phantasms are sensible forms including the properties of things as they (did, would, or actually) exist in matter, it follows that the power of imagination cannot bring the possible intellect into act. Hence, Thomas concludes, the soul must have a *virtus*—the agent intellect—which is *intelligible in act* and also capable of making the forms present in phantasms intelligible in act: “The mind itself is intelligible in act”, says Thomas, “and according to this it is said that there is an agent intellect in the soul, which makes the intelligibles in potency be intelligibles in act”.<sup>8</sup> The agent intellect makes the forms intelligible in act by freeing them from their material conditions, so that these immaterialized forms be received by the possible intellect, thus bringing it into act.<sup>9</sup> That is why Thomas affirms that the agent intellect is “the act of the intelligibles themselves, and through them, of the possible intellect”.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *De principiis naturae*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 43. Rome: Editori di San Tommaso 1976, c. 4 [henceforth *De princ. nat.*]: “quod reducit potentiam ad actum, actu est”. Cf. *ST I*, q. 79, a. 3, co: “Nihil autem reducitur de potentia in actum, nisi per aliquod ens actu”.

<sup>6</sup> *De princ. nat.*, c. 3: “[q]uod enim est in potentia, non potest se reducere ad actum”.

<sup>7</sup> See *SCG II*, 46, n. 5: “Similitudo effectus ad causam agentem attenditur secundum formam effectus quae praeexistit in agente: agens enim agit sibi simile in forma secundum quam agit”; *ST I*, q. 110, a. 2, co: “Manifestum est autem quod factum est simile facienti, quia omne agens agit sibi simile”.

<sup>8</sup> *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 22. Rome: Editori di San Tommaso 1970–1976, q. 10, a. 6, co [henceforth *De Ver.*]: “Ipsa vero mens est intelligibilis in actu; et secundum hoc ponitur in anima intellectus agens, qui faciat intelligibilia in potentia esse intelligibilia in actu”.

<sup>9</sup> See *ST I*, q. 79, a. 3, co: “formae autem in materia existentes non sunt intelligibiles actu, sequebatur quod naturae seu formae rerum sensibilium, quas intelligimus, non essent intelligibiles actu. Nihil autem reducitur de potentia in actum, nisi per aliquod ens actu, sicut sensus fit in actu per sensibile in actu. Oportebat igitur ponere aliquam virtutem ex parte intellectus, quae faceret intelligibilia in actu, per abstractionem specierum a conditionibus materialibus. Et haec est necessitas ponendi intellectum agentem”. And *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 6, co: “verum est quod scientiam mens nostra a sensibilibus accipit; nihilominus tamen ipsa anima in se similitudines rerum format, in quantum per lumen intellectus agentis efficiuntur formae a sensibilibus abstractae intelligibiles actu, ut in intellectu possibili recipi possint”. Cf. *ST I*, q. 84, a. 1, co.

<sup>10</sup> *ST I*, q. 87, a. 1, co: “actus ipsorum intelligibilium, et eis mediantibus intellectus possibilis”.

Claiming that “the agent intellect is the act of the intelligibles, and through them, of the possible intellect” may seem to commit Aquinas to identifying the agent intellect with the very act of the forms which have been immaterialized. This is what Therese Scarpelli Cory appears to have concluded when she said that “the formal aspect of the intelligible [sc. of the immaterialized form] is not strictly speaking *like* the agent intellect: It *is* the agent intellect itself”.<sup>11</sup> Notice, however, that for the agent intellect to be able to bring the phantasms and the possible intellect into act, it must be intelligible in act *prior* to bringing them into act, “since nothing acts insofar as it is in potency, but insofar as it is in act”.<sup>12</sup> The agent intellect cannot be identified with the act of any given immaterialized forms, nor of the possible intellect. When Thomas says that the agent intellect is the act of the intelligibles themselves, he should not be seen as referring to the forms which have in fact been made intelligible, unless we take him to denote the cause by means of the effects. The agent intellect is the *prerequisite* and *causative* act of the actual intelligibility of the natures presented by phantasms, and hence it must be in act prior to the actualization of any of them.

Yet if the soul already has, before the immaterialization of any given form present in a phantasm, an intellectual power which is intelligible in act, how can it be said that the soul is at first entirely in potency regarding intelligibles, like a clean slate on which nothing is written? Thomas was very much aware of this difficulty. In the *Summa contra gentiles*, he says:

But it will perhaps appear to some that this is impossible, namely, that one and the same substance, viz. our soul, be in potency regarding all intelligibles, which corresponds to the possible intellect, and that it makes them in act, which is proper to the agent intellect. For nothing acts insofar as it is in potency, but insofar as it is in act. Wherefore it seems that the agent and possible intellect cannot coincide in the soul’s one substance.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> CORY, Therese Scarpelli: *Averroes and Aquinas on the Agent Intellect’s Causation of the Intelligible*, in: *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 82 (2015), 1–60, at 45 (italics in the original).

<sup>12</sup> *SCG* II, 77, n. 1: “cum nihil agat secundum quod est in potentia, sed secundum quod est actu”. See also *ST* I, q. 79, a. 3, ad 3: “si agens non *praeexistit*, nihil ad hoc faciet dispositio recipientis” [emphasis added].

<sup>13</sup> *SCG* II, 77, n. 1: “Videbitur autem forsitan alicui hoc esse impossibile, quod una et eadem substantia, scilicet nostrae animae, sit in potentia ad omnia intelligibilia, quod pertinet ad intellectum possibilem, et faciat ea actu, quod est intellectus agentis: cum nihil agat secundum quod est in potentia, sed secundum quod est actu. Unde non videbitur quod agens et possibilis intellectus possint in una substantia animae convenire”.

This is a problem Thomas faced numerous times.<sup>14</sup> The solution leads to a startling conception of the agent intellect. This is how he presents it in his *Summa contra gentiles*:

The intellective soul has something in act regarding which the phantasm is in potency, and it is in potency regarding that which is found in act in phantasms. For the substance of the human soul has immateriality, and, as is evident from what has been said, for that reason it has an intellectual nature, because every immaterial substance is of this kind. But this does not yet suffice for it to have what it takes to assimilate to this or that determinate thing, which is required for our soul to know this or that determinate thing; for all knowledge takes place through the similitude of what is known in the knower. Therefore, the intellective soul itself remains in potency regarding the determinate similitudes of things which are knowable by us, namely, the natures of sensible things. In fact, phantasms present to us these determinate natures of sensible things. However, they have not yet attained intelligible being [*esse intelligibile*], given that they are similitudes of sensible things not only as to the material conditions, which are individual properties, but they are also in material organs. Consequently, they are not intelligible in act. Yet [...] they are intelligible in potency. Thus, they have intelligibility in potency, but [they have] the determination of the similitude of things in act. But the opposite was the case with the intellective soul. Hence, there is an active power in the intellective soul regarding phantasms, which makes them intelligible in act; and this potency of the soul is called the agent intellect. There is also in it a power which is in potency regarding the determinate similitudes of sensible things; and this potency is the possible intellect.<sup>15</sup>

Cognition takes place when the knower is assimilated to the thing known. For intellectual cognition to take place, the knower must be actually intellectual, and the thing known actually intelligible. The soul is in itself im-

<sup>14</sup> See *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 6; *De an.*, q. 5; *ST I*, q. 79, a. 4, ad 4; *De spir. creat.*, a. 10, ad 4; *Compendium theologiae*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 42. Rome: Editori di San Tommaso 1979, I c. 88 [henceforth *Comp. theol.*].

<sup>15</sup> *SCG II*, 77, n. 2: "Habet enim anima intellectiva aliquid in actu ad quod phantasma est in potentia: et ad aliquid est in potentia quod in phantasmatis actu invenitur. Habet enim substantia animae humanae immaterialitatem, et, sicut ex dictis patet, ex hoc habet naturam intellectualem: quia omnis substantia immaterialis est huiusmodi. Ex hoc autem nondum habet quod assimiletur huic vel illi rei determinate, quod requiritur ad hoc quod anima nostra hanc vel illam rem determinate cognoscat: omnis enim cognitio fit secundum similitudinem cogniti in cognoscente. Remanet igitur ipsa anima intellectiva in potentia ad determinatas similitudines rerum cognoscibilium a nobis, quae sunt naturae rerum sensibilium. Et has quidem determinatas naturas rerum sensibilium praesentant nobis phantasmata. Quae tamen nondum pervenerunt ad esse intelligibile: cum sint similitudines rerum sensibilium etiam secundum conditiones materiales, quae sunt proprietates individuales, et sunt etiam in organis materialibus. Non igitur sunt intelligibilia actu. Et tamen [...] sunt intelligibilia in potentia. Sic igitur habent intelligibilitatem in potentia, determinationem autem similitudinis rerum in actu. E contrario autem erat in anima intellectiva. Est igitur in anima intellectiva virtus activa in phantasmata, faciens ea intelligibilia actu: et haec potentia animae vocatur intellectus agens. Est etiam in ea virtus quae est in potentia ad determinatas similitudines rerum sensibilium: et haec est potentia intellectus possibilis".

material, and so it naturally has the capacity for intellectual cognition. Yet that capacity is not thereby in act, since the soul is in a certain way in act but also in a certain way in potency regarding intelligibility, and the sensible natures presented by phantasms are intelligible only in potency, so they cannot bring the soul's intellectual capacity into act. Thomas thinks, therefore, that the intellectual cognition of a thing requires that the soul and the natures presented by phantasms complement each other: the soul must provide the natures what they are lacking to become actually intelligible, while the natures must provide the soul what it is lacking to become actually cognizant of a thing. This can happen because, as is claimed in the quoted passage, the soul and the phantasms are inversely related (in terms of potency and act) concerning different aspects of what pertains to an actually intelligible thing. The crucial point is which aspects are those.

Thomas says that the soul is in potency regarding *determinate* intelligible natures, while the phantasms have determinate natures in act, since they “present to us these determinate natures of sensible things”. But if phantasms have such natures in act, what is it that they lack to be fully intelligible in act? Aquinas' response is clear: because they are still under material conditions, “they have not yet attained *esse intelligibile*”. Since the soul and the phantasms are inversely related concerning intelligibility, this means that the soul is intelligible in act with respect to *esse intelligibile*. Moreover, this means that what the soul bestows on the natures presented by phantasms to make them intelligible in act is not a determination or property, something that changes *what* they are. Instead, leaving the same essential properties in place, the soul only provides those natures with the *esse* that elevates them to the immaterial and hence intelligible realm.<sup>16</sup>

From this, Thomas concludes that there is an active power in the soul regarding phantasms, viz. the agent intellect. This power is the capacity to confer *esse intelligibile* on the natures presented by phantasms. What is normally called ‘abstraction’—which for Aquinas is the proper operation of the agent intellect<sup>17</sup>—is exactly this. The stripping of natures from their individual aspects, which are due to particular material conditions, is realized not by removing properties from them while leaving others attached, as it were, nor by selectively attending to some properties while ignoring others, since both such procedures would presuppose that some properties are already intelligible in act. Nor is it the case that the agent intellect

<sup>16</sup> A reader once posed the question whether in this passage ‘*esse intelligibile*’ is simply synonymous with ‘*ens intelligibile*’, i.e. an entity of an immaterial kind. If this were the case, the phrase would not refer to the intelligible *esse* as distinct from any intelligible form, contrary to our construal of it. This alternative interpretation, however, seems implausible, since the phantasm already has a determinate form in act; what it lacks is *esse* as distinct from any determinate form. And this *esse* is what the soul (through the agent intellect) can bestow on the natures presented by phantasms.

<sup>17</sup> See *De an.*, q. 4, ad 8: “actio autem intellectus agentis est abstrahere intelligibilia”.

must somehow forge the relevant nature out of the phantasm, for the latter already presents that nature to the soul, albeit without actual intelligibility.<sup>18</sup> Instead, abstraction is the conferral of immaterial and hence intelligible *esse* to those natures, thereby making them lose everything they have due to their particular matter, while retaining, in immaterial being, the rest of their properties.<sup>19</sup>

Although Thomas does not make it fully explicit, there is an important conclusion to draw from this passage, namely, that the agent intellect itself is *esse intelligibile*. Let us see why this must be so. It is well known that, for Thomas, “every agent acts through a form of its own”,<sup>20</sup> and that *omne agens agit sibi simile*.<sup>21</sup> For creatures, this means that substance S causes something by operating through some form F; and by doing so, it causes something to be F. Now *esse*, and hence *esse intelligibile*, is in fact a form. Indeed, Aquinas repeatedly says that *esse* is formal with respect to everything else: “[t]hat which is supremely formal regarding all things is being itself [*ipsum esse*]”;<sup>22</sup> “being itself [*ipsum esse*] is thought of as formal and received”.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, he affirms that God, who is *esse subsistens* and *actus purus*, “[i]s, therefore, through his own essence, form”.<sup>24</sup> Since *esse intelligibile* is a form, and given that this form (*esse intelligibile*) belongs to sensible natures as an effect produced by the soul, it follows—as per the *omne agens agit sibi simile* principle—that this *esse intelligibile* must have

<sup>18</sup> In a recent article, James Kintz has forcefully criticized this interpretation of abstraction, which he calls the ‘production model’. He has also attacked the view that abstraction is a procedure of mere removal or selective attention, an interpretation which he calls the ‘extraction model’. Instead, he proposes an ‘illumination model’, which has two main features: sensible natures are already present in phantasms, albeit only with potential intelligibility; and the agent intellect ‘abstracts’ by actualizing that potentiality. In our opinion, our construal of Thomas’ view of abstraction fits this model, though we, unlike Kintz, argue that the actualization of the nature’s potential intelligibility occurs by the agent intellect’s bestowal of *esse intelligibile*. See KINTZ, James: *The illuminative function of the agent intellect*, in: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27 (2019), 3–22.

<sup>19</sup> Following Aristotle, Aquinas often portrays this operation in metaphorical terms, involving light and colors. See, e.g., *Comp. theol.* I, c. 88; *Quaestiones de quodlibet*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 25/1–2. Rome: Commissio Leonina 1996, VIII, q. 2, a. 1, co [henceforth *Quodl.*]; and *De an.*, q. 4, ad 4, where Thomas clarifies how the metaphor works. Let it be noted that the identification of the agent intellect’s conferral of *esse intelligibile* with the operation of abstraction was already recognized by CANALS, Francisco: *Sobre la esencia del conocimiento*. Barcelona: PPU 1987, 439–440; and more recently by CORY, T.S.: *Rethinking Abstractionism: Aquinas’s Intellectual Light and Some Arabic Sources*, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53 (2015), 607–646, at 626–627.

<sup>20</sup> *ST I*, q. 3, a. 2, co: “unumquodque agens agit per suam formam”.

<sup>21</sup> See the passages referred to above, n. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *ST I*, q. 7, a. 1, co: “[i]llud autem quod est maxime formale omnium, est ipsum esse”. Cf. *De an.*, q. 1, ad 17: “esse sit formalissimum inter omnia”.

<sup>23</sup> *ST I*, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3: “ipsum esse consideratur ut formale et receptum”.

<sup>24</sup> *ST I*, q. 3, a. 2, co: “[e]st igitur per essentiam suam forma”.

been effected by the soul insofar as the soul operated through its own *esse intelligibile*.

Now in the passage from the *Summa contra gentiles* we quoted above, Thomas explicitly asserts that the soul makes the sensible natures intelligible in act through a power called ‘the agent intellect’: “Hence”, says he, “there is an active power in the intellective soul regarding phantasms, which makes them intelligible in act; and this potency of the soul is called the agent intellect”. The soul makes natures intelligible in act through a power, viz. the agent intellect, which is, consequently, the form through which the soul produces a similar form in sensible natures. Given that what the soul confers on sensible natures is *esse intelligibile*, the agent intellect must then itself be *esse intelligibile*.<sup>25</sup>

Thomas’ solution to the problem of how it is possible that one and the same substance, i.e. the soul, be both in potency regarding all intelligibles—which is why it has a possible intellect—and also in act—which is why it has an agent intellect capable of bringing those intelligibles from potency into act—is therefore as follows. The soul is not intelligible in act with regard to any *determinate* form (not even that of the soul itself), and hence the soul is *tabula rasa* in this respect and has a possible intellect (as said in both passages quoted from the *Summa contra gentiles* and in many others). Nonetheless, the soul is not entirely in potency, since it is intelligible in act with regard to *esse intelligibile*, which is the form and power, viz. the agent intellect, through which it makes intelligibles in act (as is clearly implied in the second text from the *Summa contra gentiles*).

This result may be surprising to those who only focus on Thomas’ recurrent assertions that the soul is in potency in the order of intelligibles. Yet, as we have seen, the soul’s actual intelligibility, its having *esse intelligibile*, is fully consistent with the soul’s potentiality regarding all determinate intelligible forms. Moreover, the result we obtained is not just supported by the texts from the *Summa contra gentiles*, but is further confirmed by Thomas’ own metaphysics of knowledge. Let us go through this step by step.

The first thing we should be aware of is that, for Thomas, *intelligibility is inextricably linked to immateriality*. He made this clear when he affirmed that “something is intelligible in act because it is immaterial”.<sup>26</sup> A bit earlier, he had also said: “The angel, given that it is immaterial, is a certain sub-

<sup>25</sup> On this, see also CORY, T.S.: *Averroes and Aquinas*, 41–46. Hans Urs von Balthasar points to the same when he sees the *esse-essentia* distinction within the realm of human cognition, where the agent intellect is *esse* (*akthafte gelichtete Fülle*) and the form received in the possible intellect, *essentia*. Von Balthasar, however, does not touch on the question of the ontological status of the agent intellect. See BALTHASAR, Hans Urs von: *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, Band III/1. Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag 2009, 3rd ed., Teil 1, 364.

<sup>26</sup> *ST I*, q. 79, a. 3, co: “ex hoc est aliquid intelligibile actu, quod est immateriale”.

sisting form, and through this it is intelligible in act".<sup>27</sup> Finally, he could not have been more open about the fact that immateriality suffices for intelligibility when he claimed that, supposing there is an ark (*archa*) subsisting without matter, "an ark without matter would not differ from an intelligible ark".<sup>28</sup>

Now the human soul is a spiritual, immaterial substance, whose "esse exceeds bodily matter".<sup>29</sup> Thus, we should conclude that the human soul, insofar as it is not mixed with the body, is intelligible in act. This is in fact what Thomas teaches in his *Disputed Questions on Truth*. He says that the mind comprehends "all those powers which, in their acts, completely withdraw from matter and the conditions of matter".<sup>30</sup> Given that the mind is immaterial, and that intelligibility is inextricably linked to immateriality, it should be no surprise that, for Aquinas, "the mind itself is intelligible in act".<sup>31</sup> Intelligibility and immateriality go hand in hand, to the point that Thomas describes the very operation of the agent intellect, i.e. making intelligibles in potency be intelligibles in act, as a conferral of immateriality: "sensible forms, or [forms] abstracted from sensible things", he says, "cannot act on our mind, unless insofar as they are rendered immaterial through the light of the agent intellect".<sup>32</sup>

Yet, at the same time, Thomas claims that the soul's possible intellect "is in potency regarding everything that is intelligible for the human being".<sup>33</sup> But if so, in what respect could the soul be intelligible in act? To answer this question, we should recall that the soul is capable of making sensible forms intelligible in act, and that *omne agens agit sibi simile*. This means that the soul makes those forms intelligible in act by conferring its own actual intelligibility on them. So, if we identify that which the soul bestows on them, we will identify the respect in which the soul itself is intelligible

<sup>27</sup> *ST I*, q. 56, a. 1, co: "Angelus autem, cum sit immaterialis, est quaedam forma subsistens, et per hoc intelligibilis in actu". Cf. *Quodl.* VII, q. 1, a. 1, co: "ipsa divina essentia, cum sit a materia separata, est per se actu intelligibilis".

<sup>28</sup> *De spir. creat.*, a. 1, ad 12: "archa sine materia non differret ab archa intelligibili". We stress this point because some commentators still believe that *universality* and immateriality account for actual intelligibility, and hence that sensible natures are only potentially intelligible because they are *particulars* and material. See, e.g., KINTZ, J.: *The illuminative function*, 7; 12. The reason why sensible natures are not actually intelligible lies solely in their materiality.

<sup>29</sup> See *De spir. creat.*, a. 2, co: "In quantum igitur supergreditur esse materie corporalis potens per se subsistere et operari, anima humana est substantia spiritualis".

<sup>30</sup> *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 1, ad 2: "sub mente intelligantur comprehendi omnes illae potentiae quae in suis actibus omnino a materia et conditionibus materiae recedunt".

<sup>31</sup> *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 6, co (cited above, n. 8).

<sup>32</sup> *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 1: "formae sensibiles, vel a sensibilibus abstractae, non possunt agere in mentem nostram, nisi quatenus per lumen intellectus agentis immateriales redduntur".

<sup>33</sup> *De an.*, q. 2, co: "Hunc igitur intellectum possibilem necesse est esse in potentia ad omnia que sunt intelligibilia per hominem".

in act. What is it, then, that the soul grants them and enters into composition with them, so that they acquire actual intelligibility?

In general terms, there are basically six ways in which Thomas thinks something could enter into composition with something else:<sup>34</sup> (i) as parts of one body; (ii) as form and matter; (iii) as nature and subject (or particular material substrate); (iv) as *esse* and *essentia*, (v) as genus and difference; and (vi) as substance and accident. Now, the forms abstracted from phantasms are determinate immaterial accidents of our soul. Hence, what the soul confers on them cannot be a substance or accident, and all bodily and hylomorphic composition must be ruled out. This leaves us with options (iv) and (v). As for the latter, we should notice that both genus and difference are determinate forms. Given that the soul is in potency regarding all determinate intelligible forms, what it confers on sensible forms to make them intelligible in act cannot itself be a determinate form. Otherwise, the soul would be intelligible in act precisely with regard to that determinate form. It seems, then, that the only composition left is that of *essentia* and *esse*. But since determinate forms are not themselves *esse* but *essentiae*, what the soul effects on these forms and enters into composition with them must be some kind of *esse* that makes them intelligible in act, i.e. *esse intelligibile*. This is in fact what we gather from Thomas' writings. In at least two places he invokes the *esse-essentia* composition regarding intelligibles. He writes about one and the same intelligible species (form) as possessing either *esse intelligibile* or *esse reale/naturale*.<sup>35</sup> If the form has *esse reale/naturale* in the sensible world, then it is only potentially intelligible. But if it has *esse intelligibile*, then, and only then, is it intelligible in act and informs the possible intellect. In other words, the actually intelligible form is not just a determinate form, but a composite of a determinate form and *esse intelligibile*. Given that our soul is in potency regarding all determinate forms, this *esse intelligibile* must be what the soul confers on sensible forms, enters into composition with them, and allows them to be understood by the possible intellect. Hence, the soul itself must be intelligible in act with respect to *esse intelligibile*.

Now, the soul has an agent intellect insofar as it is intelligible in act: "the mind itself is intelligible in act; and according to this it is said that there is an agent intellect in the soul".<sup>36</sup> So if the soul is intelligible in act by having *esse intelligibile*, and if the soul has an agent intellect insofar as it is intelligible in act, it appears that the agent intellect itself is *esse*

<sup>34</sup> See *ST I*, q. 3.

<sup>35</sup> See *De an.*, q. 2, co: "Sic igitur species intelligibilis habet duplex subiectum: unum in quo est secundum esse intelligibile, et hoc est intellectus possibilis, aliud in quod est secundum esse reale, et hoc subiectum sunt ipsa fantasmata"; *Quodl. VIII*, q. 2, a. 2, co: "Unde species intelligibilis est similitudo ipsius essentiae rei, et est quodammodo ipsa quidditas et natura rei secundum esse intelligibile, non secundum esse naturale, prout est in rebus".

<sup>36</sup> *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 6, co (cited above, n. 8).

*intelligibile*. This is in fact corroborated by the *omne agens agit sibi simile* principle. Applied to creatures, this principle says that a substance S causes something by operating through some form F; and by doing so, it causes something to be F. We have seen that what the soul (i.e. S) effects on determinate forms is *esse intelligibile* (i.e. F). But we also know that the form through which the soul operates in this case is the agent intellect (i.e. F). Thus, since F is *esse intelligibile*, and F is the agent intellect, the agent intellect must be *esse intelligibile*. We have thus arrived, by means of Thomas' metaphysics of knowledge, to the same result we reached by textual analysis of the *Summa contra gentiles*.

None of this entails, to be sure, that the soul itself, as a whole substance or essence, is intelligible in act—a consequence that would clearly violate the doctrine that the soul is in potency regarding all determinate forms. To see this, we must recall that intelligibility is inextricably linked to immateriality. The human soul is certainly immaterial, but it is also the form of a body. Hence, given that part of the soul is enmattered, the soul's *esse intelligibile* does not suffice to make the soul's substance or essence, as a whole, intelligible in act. The soul has *esse intelligibile* only insofar as it is immaterial, not as it informs the body and brings about the bodily faculties.

Moreover, the soul's *esse intelligibile* cannot be the soul's substance or essence, either as a whole or in part, for no creature's substance or essence, either as a whole or in part, is *esse*. The agent intellect cannot be identified with the soul.<sup>37</sup>

Nor can the soul's *esse intelligibile* be identical to the soul's substantial *esse* as a whole, for this is also partly communicated to matter.<sup>38</sup> Thus, though this is a question we shall return to in the next sections, the soul's *esse intelligibile*—and so the agent intellect, which is *esse intelligibile* and the power to make intelligibles in act—is *either* in the accidental immaterial realm of the soul, as is the possible intellect, *or* in the substantial realm, viz. as the soul's substantial *esse*, but *only insofar as* it remains immune from matter.

<sup>37</sup> John Capreolus (d. 1444), at least in one passage, affirmed that “intellectus agens non proprie est vivens; nec aliqua qualitas animae; sed ipsa anima” (CAPREOLUS, Ioannes: *Defensiones theologiae divi Thomae Aquinatis*, ed. Th. Pègues, C. Paban. Toulouse: Cattier 1900–1908, vol. 7, 214a [henceforth *Defensiones*]). According to SELLÉS, Juan Fernando: *El intelecto agente según Capreolo y Cayetano*, in: *Scripta Mediaevalia* 7 (2014), 159–174, at 166, this is the first and only time in the history of philosophy that an author expressly identifies the agent intellect with the soul itself. It should be observed, however, that Capreolus is not consistent on this matter, as Sellés notes. In another place of his *Defensiones*, following Thomas, he says that the agent intellect “esse accidens, non substantiam; est enim qualitas de secunda specie, scilicet naturalis potentia” (CAPREOLUS, I.: *Defensiones*, vol. 3, 476b).

<sup>38</sup> See *De spir. creat.*, a. 2, co: “in quantum uero attingitur a materia et esse suum comunicat illi est corporis forma”.

It is also important to notice that the agent intellect's being *esse intelligibile* does not imply any kind of actualization of the possible intellect without the aid of phantasms. As we have seen, the possible intellect is not actualized by *esse intelligibile* alone, but also through determinate forms: "the light of the agent intellect, which is the act of the intelligibles themselves, and *through them* of the possible intellect".<sup>39</sup> The function of the possible intellect "is to receive the forms abstracted from sensible things, which are made intelligible in act through the light of the agent intellect".<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the agent intellect is not enough to actualize the possible intellect, since that can only happen through determinate forms, while the agent intellect is not a determinate form, but *esse intelligibile*.

This conception of the agent intellect, however, may strike some as anti-Thomistic for another reason. After all, if we say that this power is simply *esse intelligibile*, does that not make it a subsisting *esse*, and so equal to God? Thomas' idea cannot be that the agent intellect is unlimited actuality, a subsistent act without any correlative potentiality. He explicitly rejected, against the opinion of some Catholics, the identification of the agent intellect with God.<sup>41</sup> Rather, this intellect is "something formally inherent to the human being".<sup>42</sup> We fully agree with these claims. In our judgment, it seems that the proper way to understand the conclusion that the agent intellect is *esse intelligibile* is as follows. The agent intellect is an immaterial but limited actuality (*esse intelligibile*), one which must be received by a created immaterial form inseparable from said actuality. The form in question must relate to the agent intellect as to its *esse*. This form is not the possible intellect, nor any sensible natures present in phantasms, for these are all actualized as effects of the agent intellect, which must therefore be in act prior to their actualization. On our view of the ontological status of the agent intellect, as we shall see below in sections III and IV, the determinate form where the agent intellect is first received is the very essence of the soul insofar as it is immaterial and unmixed with the body.

But if there is such an immaterial determinate form, why do we say that the agent intellect is *esse intelligibile*, leaving aside that form? The answer is simple: given that the proper effect of the soul, through the agent intellect, is the bestowal of *esse intelligibile* on the forms present in phantasms,

<sup>39</sup> *ST I*, q. 87, a. 1, co [emphasis added]: "lumen intellectus agentis, quod est actus ipsorum intelligibilium, et *eis mediantibus* intellectus possibilis".

<sup>40</sup> *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 6, co: "[intellectus possibilis], cuius est recipere formas a rebus sensibilibus abstractas, factas intelligibiles in actu per lumen intellectus agentis". Cf. *ST I*, q. 85, a. 1, ad 4; *De an.*, q. 5, ad 9.

<sup>41</sup> See *De an.*, q. 5, co: "quidam catholici posuerunt quod intellectus agens sit ipse Deus, qui est 'lux uera que illuminat omnem hominem uenientem in hunc mundum'. Set huiusmodi positio, si quis diligenter consideret, non uidetur esse conueniens".

<sup>42</sup> *De spir. creat.*, a. 10, co: "ita necessarium est quod intellectus agens sit aliquid formaliter inhaerens homini".

and given that *omne agens agit sibi simile*, the notion ‘agent intellect’ refers only to the prerequisite and causative actuality (*esse intelligibile*) that makes such bestowal possible. Thomas’ conception of the agent intellect is deliberately restricted to this causal context: “[the soul’s] potency, *through which it abstracts the intelligible species from phantasms*, is called ‘agent intellect’”.<sup>43</sup> The immaterial determinate form that originally holds this prerequisite and causative actuality is left aside in said notion because it does no work upon the forms present in phantasms to elevate them to the immaterial and intelligible realm.

Aquinas’ conception of the agent intellect, then, at least as far as our subject-matter is concerned, could be summed up as follows. It is an immaterial act, i.e. *esse intelligibile*, residing in the soul as a prerequisite and causative actuality for the *esse intelligibile* of the natures presented by phantasms, so that the soul, which is in potency regarding all determinate intelligible forms, may receive those natures in the possible intellect, and thus attain intellectual cognition of them. Four important clarifications are in place. First, as prerequisite and causative act, the agent intellect is not to be identified with the *esse intelligibile* of the natures presented by phantasms. Second, this intellect’s intelligible actuality entails neither that the soul’s substance nor its essence, as a whole, is intelligible in act, since the soul is partly enmattered, whereas intelligibility requires immateriality. Third, the agent intellect, as *esse intelligibile*, cannot by itself actualize the possible intellect, whose actualization requires a determinate form, and hence the phantasm. Finally, fourth, the agent intellect is not some self-subsisting, pure *esse intelligibile*, but must be originally and inseparably received by a created immaterial form, though the notion of the agent intellect, as prerequisite and causative act of the *esse intelligibile* of intelligibles, focuses only on said actuality.

The problem stated at the beginning of this paper can now be formulated thus: if we contemplate the ontological structure of the human soul, i.e. its accidents and substance, in which one of these ‘categories’ does the prerequisite and causative *esse intelligibile* Thomas calls the ‘agent intellect’ belong? We have already said that Thomas never put forth this question in these terms; nonetheless, his position clearly was that *all* human potencies belong in the class of necessary accidents, i.e. *propria*. Accordingly, many commentators have affirmed that the agent intellect is a *proprium*, without showing any signs of trouble. As we shall try to argue, however, that position, though faithful to Thomas’ letter, is highly questionable once we keep in mind what we have just seen about the agent intellect. Our thesis, as said at the beginning of this paper, is that Aquinas’ own metaphysics and epistemology should have led him and his followers to a different

<sup>43</sup> *Comp. theol.* I, c. 88 [emphasis added]: “potentia autem eius secundum quam abstractit species intelligibiles a phantasmatis, vocatur intellectus agens”.

view, viz. the agent intellect is the soul's substantial *esse*, but *only insofar as it remains immune from matter and enables the soul to make the forms of material things intelligible in act*.<sup>44</sup>

## II. THE AGENT INTELLECT AS PROPRIUM: AQUINAS, BÁÑEZ, ET AL.

Already in his *Commentary on the Sentences* Thomas affirmed what appears to have been a persistent, life-long view, namely: that “from the soul, since it is a substance, no operation proceeds unless by means of a potency”, and that

These potencies flow from the essence of the soul itself, some as perfections of bodily parts, whose operation is effected through the body, such as the senses, the imagination, and the like; and some as existing in the soul itself, whose operation does not need the body, such as the intellect, the will, and the like. Therefore, I say that they are accidents: not that they are common accidents, which do not flow from the principles of the species, but instead follow from the principles of the individual; rather, they are proper accidents [*propria accidentia*], which follow from the species and originate from the principles of it.<sup>45</sup>

Aquinas clearly denies that the essence or substance of the soul should be identified with any or all of its potencies, i.e. the principles which allow it to operate. If we divide everything belonging to a substance into that which is essential to it, i.e. must be understood in order to know what the thing is, and that which is not essential to it, and call the latter ‘accidents’, then all human potencies are accidents. Now, as Thomas explains in his *Disputed Questions on the Soul*, there are three kinds of accident.<sup>46</sup> The first kind comprises those accidents which belong to an individual because of some principle of it which is not a constituent of its essence, but which are

<sup>44</sup> We should note that there are a handful of Thomists, namely Francisco Canals (d. 2009) and some of his disciples, who have previously defended this thesis. However, their arguments and formulae are different from our own, and they depend on doctrines espoused by, among others, Cajetan. Furthermore, they ascribe said thesis to Thomas himself. The work that initiated this strand of Thomism, and which has undoubtedly inspired our research, is CANALS, F.: *El “lumen intellectus agentis” en la ontología del conocimiento de santo Tomás*, in: *Convivium* 1 (1956), 101–136.

<sup>45</sup> *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi episcopi Parisiensis*, 4 vols., ed. Pierre Mandonnet, Marie-Fabien Moos. Paris: Lethielleux 1929–1947, I, d. 3, q. 4, a. 2, co [henceforth *In Sent.*]: “ab anima, cum sit substantia, nulla operatio egreditur, nisi mediante potentia [...]. Hae autem potentiae fluunt ab essentia ipsius animae, quaedam ut perfectiones partium corporis, quarum operatio efficitur mediante corpore, ut sensus, imaginatio et huiusmodi; et quaedam ut existentes in ipsa anima, quarum operatio non indiget corpore, ut intellectus, voluntas et huiusmodi; et ideo dico, quod sunt accidentia: non quod sint communia accidentia, quae non fluunt ex principiis speciei, sed consequuntur principia individui; sed sicut propria accidentia, quae consequuntur speciem, originata ex principiis ipsius”.

<sup>46</sup> See *De an.*, q. 12, ad 7.

nevertheless inseparable from the individual in question, such as being male or female. The second kind comprises those accidents which also belong to an individual because of some principle of it which is not a constituent of its essence, but which are separable from the individual in question, such as being seated. (These two kinds of accident are called ‘common accidents’ in the passage just quoted). The third kind of accidents are called ‘proper accidents’, or ‘propria’. They belong to something because they follow from the principles making up its very essence, like being able to laugh, which follows from the human essence. Humanity is not defined by this property; however, the latter necessarily follows from that essence, and so it must inseparably belong to any human being.

The soul’s potencies are accidents of the third kind, following from the principles constituting the soul’s essence. Notice that Aquinas makes no exceptions. Some potencies are bodily, since their operations involve matter, and so they have the composite as their subject; but some are not, because their operations could not be performed through a bodily organ, and so they inhere only in the soul. Such is in fact the intellect, for intellectuality and intelligibility require immateriality.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the obvious conclusion to draw regarding the agent intellect—backed by a host of very similar texts<sup>48</sup>—is that, for Aquinas, it is an immaterial proprium of the soul. This is what he suggests, moreover, when he says that this intellect has the soul’s substance as its subject, just as the possible intellect and the will: “The potencies that are in the soul’s substance alone as in their subject are the agent intellect, the possible intellect, and the will”.<sup>49</sup> Given that these two other potencies are clearly accidental, the same must be true of the agent intellect.

This is the conclusion Domingo Báñez (1528–1604) drew centuries ago in his *Commentary on the First Part of the Summa*.<sup>50</sup> He was perhaps the

<sup>47</sup> See *De spir. creat.*, a. 1, ad 12: “immunitas a materia est ratio intellectualitatis”; *ST I*, q. 79, a. 3: “ex hoc est aliquid intelligibile actu, quod est immateriale”.

<sup>48</sup> See *De an.*, q. 12, co: “Manifestum est ergo quod ipsa essentia anime non est principium immediatum suarum operationum, sed operatur mediantibus principiis accidentalibus. Vnde potentie anime non sunt ipsa essentia anime, set proprietates eius”. Cf. *De an.*, q. 12, ad 7; *De spir. creat.*, a. 11, co; *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, ad 5; *I*, q. 77, a. 6, co; *Comp. theol.* I, c. 89; *Quodl.* VII, q. 1, a. 4, co; *X*, q. 3, a. 1, co.

<sup>49</sup> *De spir. creat.*, a. 11, ad 20: “potentiae uero que sunt in sola substantia anime sicut in subiecto sunt intellectus agens et possibilis et uoluntas”. The same is suggested by another text, quoted in DEWAN, Lawrence: *St. Thomas and the Integration of Knowledge into Being*, in: *International Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1984), 383–393, at 390 n. 27: “Ad quintum dicendum quod, cum essentia animae sit immaterialis, a supremo intellectu creata, nihil prohibet virtutem quae a supremo intellectu participatur, per quam abstrahit a materia, ab essentia ipsius procedere, sicut et alias eius potentias” (*ST I*, q. 79, a. 4, ad 5).

<sup>50</sup> The work’s original title is: *Scholastica commentaria in primam partem angelici doctoris D. Thomae ad sexagesimam quartam quaestionem complectentia*. Salamanca: typis Haeredum Mathiae Gastii 1584; followed by: *Scholastica commentaria super caeteras primae partis quaestionis*. Salamanca: S. Stephanum 1588 [henceforth *Schol. comm.*]. This last vol-

first commentator to pose the question stated at the beginning of this paper. For him, however, the difficulty does not lie in establishing whether the agent intellect is an accident of the soul; instead, this is taken for granted and never seen as problematic. Rather, the whole discussion revolves around which kind of accident it is. In fact, Báñez's argument to conclude that the agent intellect is a proprium of the soul consists of two parts: first, he refers to some texts evincing that this was Aquinas' position;<sup>51</sup> and second, he *discards* other kinds of accidents as viable candidates for the agent intellect, thus proving his position by eliminating all other seemingly plausible alternatives.<sup>52</sup> Without yet wanting to go into the arguments backing this position, the salient point for us now is that Báñez not only defends, but is completely untroubled by the idea that the agent intellect is a proprium of the soul.

Many other scholars followed in his footsteps in the years to come.<sup>53</sup> This is the case of Fridericus Nicolaus Gavardi (1640–1715), for whom “the agent intellect is a natural potency of the soul, which belongs to the second species of quality”,<sup>54</sup> i.e. it belongs to the species of accidental quality comprising potencies—in this case, one that is natural, or that follows from a thing's essence. The same is true of Félix Amat de Palau y Pont (1750–1824). First, he affirms, as *praenotandum*, that the potencies of the soul are different from its substance and essence: “no substance is immediately operative; hence, the soul is not its very potency, but has many potencies really different from its essence, among which the intellect and the will hold a principal place [...] and are exercised without an organ”.<sup>55</sup> All potencies,

ume discusses the ontological status of the agent intellect (commentary on *ST* I, q. 79, a. 3). We have consulted the edition of Petrus Maria Bertanus (Venice 1602), followed by the column number and letter. For a detailed study of Báñez's conception of the agent intellect, see GARCÍA CUADRADO, José Ángel: *La luz del intelecto agente. Estudio desde la metafísica de Báñez*. Pamplona: Eunsa 1998.

<sup>51</sup> See *Schol. comm.* 588B. The texts are: *In II Sent.*, d. 17, q. 2, aa. 1-2, co; *SCG* II, 77, ad 4; *De an.*, q. 5, co; *Sentencia libri de anima*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 45/1. Rome: Commissio Leonina 1984, III, l. 10 [henceforth *In De An.*].

<sup>52</sup> See *Schol. comm.* 588E: “colligitur a sufficienti divisione”. His arguments are not original, but simply restate what is said by Aquinas in *De an.*, q. 5; *ST* I, q. 77, a. 1, ad 5; and *In III De An.*, l. 10. See *Schol. comm.* 588B-589A.

<sup>53</sup> As shown in a recent comprehensive study of the history of the doctrines about the agent intellect, there are many such interpreters. See SELLES, J.F.: *El intelecto agente y los filósofos*, 3 vols. Pamplona: Eunsa 2012–2017, esp. vol. 3, ch. IV, IX, X, XVI, XVII.

<sup>54</sup> *Philosophia Vindicata ab erroribus Philosophorum Gentilium iuxta doctrinam Beatissimi P. Augustini Ecclesiae Doctoris et Beati Aegidii Columnae*. Rome: ex Typographia Ioannis Francisci de Buagnis 1701, 531A, n. 5: “Nostra tandem sententia docet intellectum agentem esse potentiam naturalem animae, quae spectat ad secundam speciem qualitatis”. Cf. 533A, n. 10: “Intellectus, ut sic, qui est qualitas de secunda specie qualitatis, dividitur in intellectum agentem, & possibilem”.

<sup>55</sup> *Institutiones Philosophiae ad usum Seminarii Episcopalis Barcinonensis*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Barcelona: Typis Ioachem Verdaguer 1830, *Metaphysica*, Art. IV, n. 273 [henceforth *Institutiones Philosophiae*]: “nulla substantia est immediate operativa, ideo anima non est ipsa sua poten-

including the intellect and the will, are accidents. And in case there is any doubt that this applies to the agent intellect, he then says that “by this term *intellect* a twofold potency is meant: on one hand, [...] the *agent intellect*; on the other, [...] the *passive or possible intellect*”.<sup>56</sup> The agent intellect is, therefore, an immaterial accidental potency.

Recent decades are no exception. Lawrence Dewan, for example, says that the human soul, as an immaterial substance, is an active principle in the formation of the intellectual power, which is an accident of it.<sup>57</sup> But such formation also includes the agent intellect, which is, therefore, “in the realm of accident”.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Donald Haggerty asserts that the agent intellect is a “dynamic principle ‘flowing from the essence of the soul’”,<sup>59</sup> and that it “inheres as a dispositive quality of the intelligence animating the natural tendency of intelligence to seek intelligibility in extramental being”.<sup>60</sup> As a quality flowing from the soul’s essence and inhering in it, the agent intellect is clearly an accident. Finally, Therese Scarpelli Cory claims that “the agent intellect or intellectual light is a form of sheer intelligibility or immateriality, inhering in the individual soul”.<sup>61</sup> In saying this, she stresses that the agent intellect is a power, and that, according to *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, ad 5, “the soul’s powers are properties (accidental forms flowing from its essence) belonging to the category of quality”.<sup>62</sup> Sticking to the textual evidence, these modern scholars, like their predecessors, seem completely untroubled by the integration of this doctrine into Thomas’ larger conception of the agent intellect.

Yet, why should anyone see a problem with this position? After all, Aquinas seems to have cogently argued for it. If a Thomist were to attack it, would she not run into other difficulties, e.g. by having to reject some key metaphysical or epistemological thesis Aquinas relied on to back his position? Before delving into Aquinas’ reasons for the claim that the agent intellect is a proprium of the soul, we first want to show some problems af-

*tia, sed plures potentias habet a sua essentia reapse distinctas, inter quas praecipuum locum habent intellectus et voluntas [...], sine organo corporeo exercentur*”.

<sup>56</sup> *Institutiones Philosophiae, Metaphysica*, Art. IV, n. 278: “hoc nomine intellectus duplicem significari potentiam, alteram, [...] intellectus agens, alteram [...] intellectus patibilis, aut possibilis”.

<sup>57</sup> See DEWAN, L.: *St. Thomas and the Integration*, 389.

<sup>58</sup> DEWAN, L.: *St. Thomas and the Integration*, 390.

<sup>59</sup> HAGGERTY, Donald: *The Agent Intellect and the Energies of Intelligence*, in: RAMOS, Alice (ed.): *Beauty, Art, and the Polis*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press 2000, 20–33, at 22.

<sup>60</sup> HAGGERTY, D.: *The Agent Intellect and the Energies of Intelligence*, 25.

<sup>61</sup> CORY, T.S.: *Rethinking Abstractionism*, 619.

<sup>62</sup> CORY, T.S.: *Rethinking Abstractionism*, 619, n. 46. For further examples of recent commentators who say or imply that the agent intellect is an accident, see LEE, Patrick: *St. Thomas and Avicenna on the Agent Intellect*, in: *The Thomist* 45 (1981), 41–61, at 56–59; KENNY, Anthony: *Aquinas on Mind*. London: Routledge 1993, 47; 52; 126.

fecting that view. Having done this, we will try to argue that our own position, i.e. that the agent intellect is the substantial and immaterial *esse* of the soul insofar as through this act the soul can make forms intelligible in act, not only fits Aquinas' conception of the agent intellect better, but also does not—as far as we can see—run counter to any key tenet of his epistemology or metaphysics.

### III. THE AGENT INTELLECT AS PROPRIUM: SOME PROBLEMS

The main problems we see with the view that the agent intellect is a proprium of the soul are, first, that it is not compatible with Thomas' epistemological realism; and second, that it contradicts the doctrine of the soul as *tabula rasa*.

Regarding the first problem, let us begin by specifying what we mean by Thomas' epistemological realism. This is the doctrine that, despite the fact that the human soul can have intellectual cognition of things by making them intelligible, it is nevertheless able to know such things as they really (did, would, or actually) exist *independently* of the soul's making them intelligible.<sup>63</sup> This important doctrine is threatened, however, by the claim that the agent intellect is a proprium. As we have seen, the soul, which is a substance, must make sensible natures intelligible in act in order to know them. It confers intelligibility on them through the agent intellect. Now, according to the *omne agens agit sibi simile* principle, a substance S causes something by operating through some form F; and by doing so, it causes something to be F. In this case, S is the soul, and F the agent intellect. So if the soul confers intelligibility on sensible natures through the agent intellect, it must do it by making those natures similar to this intellect.<sup>64</sup> If this intellect were a determinate form, a proprium of the soul, then it would belong to a genus and have a specific difference. (Thomas in fact says that all the potencies of the soul, as propria, belong to the genus of quality).<sup>65</sup> It would then follow that, in conferring intelligibility to sensible natures through the agent intellect, the soul would make them intelligible by causing this determinate form in them. But such a conferral would add a new property (or properties) to said natures, namely

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., *SCG* III, 49, n. 5: "Similitudo intelligibilis per quam intelligitur aliquid secundum suam substantiam, oportet quod sit eiusdem speciei, vel magis species eius".

<sup>64</sup> See *SCG* II, 76, n. 3 [emphasis added]: "Intellectus agens non facit species intelligibiles actu ut ipse per eas intelligat, maxime sicut substantia separata, cum non sit in potentia: sed ut per eas intelligat intellectus possibilis. Non igitur facit eas nisi tales quales competunt intellectui possibili ad intelligendum. Tales autem facit eas qualis est ipse: nam omne agens agit sibi simile".

<sup>65</sup> See *ST* I, q. 77, a. 1, ad 5: "cum potentia animae non sit eius essentia, oportet quod sit accidens, et est in secunda specie qualitatis"; *De spir. creat.*, a. 11, co: "sunt enim in secunda specie qualitatis, que dicitur potentia uel impotentia naturalis".

those pertaining to the genus to which the agent intellect should belong, in addition to its specific difference. Thus, the soul would need to change the sensible natures' properties in order to know them. In other words, the soul would not affect those natures while preserving the same essential properties they had in the phantasms. The soul would assimilate herself to sensible natures which are not like those existing independently of the soul's making them intelligible. Intellectual cognition would take place only by forging a world at least partly of its own, thus clearly contradicting Thomas' epistemological realism.

Furthermore, the claim that the agent intellect is a proprium, and hence a determinate form, runs counter to Aquinas' repeated espousal of the view that the soul's possible intellect is at first entirely in potency regarding intelligibles. As said above in section I, the natures as presented by the phantasms are not fully intelligible in act. The agent intellect is the power that is able to provide them the missing intelligible actuality. This implies two important things. First, that this power must be in act prior to the actualization of sensible natures. And second, that, since the effect on these natures is the actuality of intelligibility, and given that *omne agens agit sibi simile*, the agent intellect must itself be intelligible in act. If this intellect is a proprium and hence a determinate form, that means that the soul, because of its own intellectual nature and prior to any intellectual operation on any phantasm, is in possession of a determinate, actually intelligible form. Now, the agent intellect is related to the possible intellect like the efficient cause is related to matter.<sup>66</sup> The agent intellect causes a form in the possible intellect by having an actually intelligible and determinate form at its disposal, so to speak. But if the agent intellect itself, because of the soul's own nature, is an actually intelligible and determinate form, then this intellect should cause a form, viz. its own form, in the possible intellect prior to any activity on phantasms. This consequence, however, certainly contradicts the doctrine that the soul's possible intellect is at first in potency regarding all determinate intelligibles (a doctrine which is, paradoxically, one of the reasons for attributing the agent intellect to the soul in the first place, as we saw in section I).

These two problems show us why, among other things, it is so important that the agent intellect be *esse intelligibile*, as seen in section I. For under this conception, the agent intellect is not a determinate form, but rather an intelligible act capable of effecting an act (the *esse intelligibile* of

<sup>66</sup> See SCG II, 78, n. 2: "Dicit enim, primo, quod, sicut in omni natura est aliquid quasi materia in unoquoque genere, et hoc est in potentia ad omnia quae sunt illius generis; et altera causa est quasi efficiens, quod facit omnia quae sunt illius generis, sicut se habet ars ad materiam: necesse est et in anima esse has differentias. Et huiusmodi quidem, scilicet quod in anima est sicut materia, est intellectus (possibilis) in quo fiunt omnia intelligibilia. Ille vero, qui in anima est sicut efficiens causa, est intellectus in quo est omnia facere (scilicet intelligibilia in actu), idest intellectus agens".

intelligible species) which may enter into composition with any determinate form (the intelligible species themselves). Consequently, even if the soul, because of its own nature, must have this intelligible actuality prior to any operation on phantasms, that does not mean that the soul is in act regarding some intelligible determinate form. On the other hand, this conception of the agent intellect does not conflict with Thomas' epistemological realism. For if the soul is said to make the intelligibles by conferring *esse intelligibile* on them, then the action of the agent intellect is restricted to the bestowal of an act which is not a determinate form, and hence does not change any essential properties of what is presented by the phantasm. Thus, this action allows for the immaterial and intelligible reception of a nature whose essential properties remain the same in spite of the soul's own contribution to intellectual cognition.

In order to escape the problems just mentioned, those holding that the agent intellect is in the accidental realm of the soul could argue as follows. For some Thomists, though not all, accidents have their own *esse* distinct from the *esse* of the substance in which they inhere. Thus, these Thomists could say that, as *esse intelligibile*, the agent intellect should not be conceived as a proprium, which is a determinate form belonging in a distinctive genus with a specific difference, but rather as the *esse* of a proprium. The agent intellect would thus be the *esse accidentale* of an immaterial proprium of the soul.<sup>67</sup>

This new conception, however, is still incompatible with the view that the soul's possible intellect is in potency regarding all determinate intelligible forms. To see this, one must remember that, according to Saint Thomas, intelligibility is inextricably linked to immateriality. Hence, "if the individuation [of something] does not take place through matter, nothing prevents those things as individuals from being intelligible in act".<sup>68</sup> Given that the form making up the immaterial proprium (whose *esse* is supposed to be the agent intellect) would be unmixed with any bodily part, and also actualized by an *esse accidentale* which is *esse intelligibile*, viz. the agent intellect, it follows that this form—as an individual accident belonging to an individual soul and prior to any operation upon phantasms—must be fully intelligible in act. The agent intellect, as a power *for efficient-*

<sup>67</sup> As is well known, this conception of the agent intellect as *esse accidentale* could not be envisaged by Thomists such as É. Gilson, C. Fabro, or J. Albertson, who deny that accidents have *esse*. Instead, according to them, the actuality of *esse* in creatures corresponds to the substance alone. For this brand of Thomists, then, the arguments sketched above, if accepted, should suffice to reject the accidentality of the agent intellect. For these interpreters' views on the subject, see the references given in WIPPEL, John: *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas. From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press 2000, 254.

<sup>68</sup> SCG II, 75, n. 10: "Si autem individuatio fiat non per materiam, nihil prohibet ea quae sunt individua esse actu intelligibilia". Cf. *De Ver.*, q. 2, a. 2, co & ad 4; *De an.*, q. 2, ad 5; *ST* I, q. 86, a. 1, ad 3.

ly causing the reception of intelligible forms in the possible intellect, would thus have an actually intelligible and determinate form at its disposal. Accordingly, the agent intellect should cause said form in the possible intellect prior to any activity on phantasms. Thus, the soul's possible intellect would not be in potency regarding all intelligibles, contrary to a main doctrine of Aquinas' epistemology (one that, again, is supposed to be a reason for attributing the agent intellect to the soul in the first place).

Now, there are only two ways in which the agent intellect can be in the accidental realm of the soul: either as an immaterial accident, or (at least for some Thomists) as the *esse* of an immaterial accident. Since neither of these options agree with the basic tenets of Thomas' epistemology, and since everything in creatures is either accidental or substantial,<sup>69</sup> it follows that the agent intellect must be in the realm of the soul's substance. It must be either the soul's substance itself, or its essence, or its *esse*—and in each case, either as a whole or in part. We have seen in section I above that the agent intellect, as *esse intelligibile*, cannot be identical to the soul's substance as a whole, for intelligibility is inextricably linked to immateriality, while the soul's substance is not entirely immaterial. Nor can the agent intellect be identical to the soul's essence as a whole, given that this is, in part, the form of a body. Moreover, since no creature's substance or essence, either as a whole or in part, is *esse*, the agent intellect, as *esse intelligibile*, cannot be the soul's substance or essence, either as a whole or in part. Therefore, this intellect must be the soul's substantial *esse*. Yet it cannot be the soul's substantial *esse* as a whole, for this, though exceeding matter, is also partly communicated to the body. Consequently, the agent intellect must be the soul's substantial *esse*, but *only insofar as* it remains immune from matter and enables the soul to make the forms of material things intelligible in act. We have thus reached our thesis regarding the ontological status of the agent intellect. The next section attempts to further clarify and defend this seemingly awkward view.

#### IV. THE AGENT INTELLECT AS SUBSTANTIAL AND IMMATERIAL ESSE

The thesis that the agent intellect is the soul's substantial *esse* insofar as it remains immune from matter and enables the soul to make the forms of material things intelligible in act is surely to meet with resistance on many fronts. Since Aquinas profusely wrote on this subject, most if not all the

<sup>69</sup> See *De spir. creat.*, a. 11, co: "non enim inter substantiam et accidens potest esse aliquid medium, cum substantia et accidens diuidant ens per affirmationem et negationem, cum proprium substantie sit non esse in subiecto, accidentis uero sit in subiecto esse". And *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, ad 5: "nihil potest esse medium inter substantiam et accidens, quia diuiduntur secundum affirmationem et negationem, scilicet secundum esse in subiecto et non esse in subiecto".

objections to that thesis, at least within Thomistic circles, will probably replicate the different arguments he cited to reach his own conclusion, viz. that all potencies of the soul, including the agent intellect, are propria. For even if this conclusion is, as we just saw, inconsistent with Thomistic epistemology, is not the thesis we are now proposing liable to the same charge? Indeed, given that our thesis contradicts Thomas' conclusion, there are only two paths left for us to show that the thesis actually fits Thomistic epistemology and metaphysics: either we show that the arguments are invalid and that their premises are fully in agreement with our position; or we declare them to be valid, and then argue that some of the premises are false, but that they are not significant epistemological or metaphysical views within Aquinas' philosophy. Since we do not think his arguments are invalid, we will indeed reject some of his premises. But these, as we shall see, are not key epistemological or metaphysical views. Thus, our position, unlike its alternative, does not come at a high price.

In what follows, we will briefly review Aquinas' arguments one by one, which will also greatly help us elucidate our position.

The first thing we must understand is that Thomas does not directly ask whether the soul's potencies are accidents of it; so, his arguments do not directly conclude that all our potencies are accidents. Rather, the question he addresses is always whether the soul's potencies are the essence of the soul, or the soul itself (*utrum potentiae animae sint idem quod animae essentia; utrum anima sit suae potentiae; utrum essentia animae sit eius potentia*).<sup>70</sup> Thus, his arguments are primarily intended to show that this is not the case. But given that for him the soul's potencies must be either the essence of the soul (or the soul itself) or accidents of it, with no other alternative in sight, he thinks the reasons serving to rule out the first disjunct thereby prove the second. Indeed, more than once he affirmed that

there can be nothing in between substance and accident, since substance and accident divide being [*ens*] through affirmation and negation, for it is proper to the substance not be in a subject, whereas it is proper to the accident to be in a subject. Therefore, if the potencies of the soul are not the very essence of the soul (and it is manifest that they are not distinct substances), it follows that they are accidents contained in one of the nine genera.<sup>71</sup>

Consequently, even if Thomas' arguments only conclude that the potencies of the soul are not the soul's essence (or the soul itself), it should be un-

<sup>70</sup> This is how the question is formulated, respectively, in *De spir. creat.*, a. 11; *De an.*, q. 12; and *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1.

<sup>71</sup> *De spir. creat.*, a. 11, co: "non enim inter substantiam et accidens potest esse aliquid medium, cum substantia et accidens diuidant ens per affirmationem et negationem, cum proprium substantiae sit non esse in subiecto, accidentis uero sit in subiecto esse. Vnde, si potentie anime non sunt ipsa essentia anime – et manifestum est quod non sunt alie substantie –, sequitur quod sint accidentia in aliquo nouem generum contenta". Cf. *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, ad 5.

derstood that for him this conclusion entails that those potencies are accidents.

It is precisely the premise that the soul's potencies are either its essence or its accidents, not some key epistemological or metaphysical tenet, that we find problematic in Aquinas' arguments for the accidentality of all human potencies, including the agent intellect.

In the passage just quoted, this premise appears to follow from the idea that everything in creatures is either substantial or accidental. But this does not actually follow. Indeed, the substantial *esse* of creatures is, by Thomas' own admission, neither essential nor accidental.<sup>72</sup> Hence, there must be more to the inference in question. As we shall corroborate later in our discussion, what makes the inference legitimate in this passage is the implicit view that all human potencies are determinate things (material or immaterial) falling under one or another of the ten genera. For if something is a determinate thing falling under some genus, then it surely must be either essential or accidental. We have seen, however, that the agent intellect cannot be a determinate immaterial form; rather, it must be *esse intelligibile*, thus not falling under any of the ten genera. Therefore, in declaring that the agent intellect is the soul's substantial and immaterial *esse*, we agree with Thomas' general understanding of creatures as composites of substance and accidents, and we also agree with his conception of *esse* as neither essential nor accidental to creatures. What we are rejecting is the view that *all* human potencies are determinate things falling under some genus, things which must, therefore, be either essential or accidental to the soul.

Let us now review the reasons behind Thomas' denial that the soul's potencies are its essence (or the soul itself), and see whether the epistemological and metaphysical views he advances, and which are significant for his philosophy, are actually compatible with our own position regarding the agent intellect. There are five main reasons in Aquinas' writings.

The *first* reason for the non-essentiality of human potencies starts by saying that a diversity of acts requires a diversity of corresponding potencies. But the soul is capable of many different acts while having only one essence. Therefore, many principles of operation are needed to bring about these acts, principles which must be different from the soul's one and only essence. And if these principles, viz. the potencies, are not the soul's essence, then they must be accidents of it.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> See *In duodecim libros metaphysicorum expositio*, eds. Marie-Raymond Cathala, Raimondo Spiazzi. Turin: Marietti 1964, IV, l. 2, n. 558: "Esse enim rei quamvis sit aliud ab eius essentia, non tamen est intelligendum quod sit aliquod superadditum ad modum accidentis, sed quasi constituitur per principia essentiae".

<sup>73</sup> See *De an.*, q. 12, co: "Manifestum est ergo quod ipsa essentia anime non est principium immediatum suarum operationum, set operatur mediantibus principiis accidentalibus. Vnde potentie anime non sunt ipsa essentia anime, set proprietates eius. Deinde hoc apparet

This argument attacks the view that *all* human potencies are to be identified with the soul's essence. But this is in no way our position. First, because we do not deny that the soul needs many accidental potencies to carry out its different operations. Second, because we do not claim that any potency is identical with the soul's essence, not even the agent intellect.

The *second* reason against the identification of the soul's essence with its potencies says that, if any potency were the essence of the soul, then the latter's *esse* would also be *operari*. But such identification is realized only in God. Therefore, since diverse acts correspond to diverse things, all human potencies are distinct from the soul's essence.<sup>74</sup> And if they are not the soul's essence, they must be accidents of it.

It is not difficult to see that the premises of this argument in no way affect our position. First, because we do not say that the agent intellect is to be identified with the essence of the soul, but rather with its substantial and immaterial *esse* insofar as through this act the soul can make sensible forms intelligible. Second, because this position does not entail that the soul's *esse* would also be *operari*. As we saw in section I, the agent intellect's proper operation is to make intelligibles in potency be intelligibles in act. But the agent intellect is not said operation; instead, it is the *prerequisite* and *causative* act for the operation. Accordingly, the agent intellect, as the soul's substantial and immaterial *esse*, allows for a clear distinction between the soul's *esse* and its intellectual *operari*.

It is important to consider a *third* reason given by Thomas for distinguishing *esse* and *operari*, this time specifically in intellectual creatures, where *operari* amounts to *intelligere*. Thomas warns his students about the identification between a creature's *esse* and its *intelligere* because the lat-

ex ipsa diuersitate actionum anime, que sunt genere diuerse et non possunt reduci in unum principium immediatum, cum quedam earum sint actiones et quedam passionones, et aliis huiusmodi differentiis differant, que oportet attribui diuersis principiis. Et ita, cum essentia anime sit unum principium, non potest esse immediatum principium omnium suarum actionum, set oportet quod habeat plures et diuersas potentias correspondentes diuersitati suarum actionum. Potentia enim ad actum dicitur. Vnde secundum diuersitatem actionum oportet esse diuersitatem potentiarum". Cf. *De spir. creat.*, a. 11, co: "primo quidem quia essentia una est, in potentiis autem oportet ponere multitudinem propter diuersitatem actuum et obiectorum: oportet enim potentias secundum actus diuersificari, cum potentia ad actum dicatur". Thomas further elaborates the distinctions between the acts in *De spir. creat.*, a. 11, co, showing that one and the same essence cannot be the immediate principle of those acts. We will not deal with these elaborations here, since the basic point, viz. that there are different acts but only one essence, already appears in the argument stated above.

<sup>74</sup> See *De spir. creat.*, a. 11, co: "primo quidem quia impossibile est quod alicuius substantie create sua essentia sit sua potentia operatiua. Manifestum est enim quod diuersi actus diuersorum sunt; semper uero actus proportionatur ei cuius est actus. Sicut autem ipsum esse est actualitas quedam essentie, ita operari est actualitas operatiue potentie seu virtutis: secundum enim hoc utrumque eorum est in actu, essentia quidem secundum esse, potentia uero secundum operari. Vnde cum in nulla creatura suum operari sit suum esse, set hoc sit proprium solius Dei, sequitur quod nullius creature operatiua potentia sit eius essentia; sed solius Dei proprium est ut sua essentia sit sua potentia".

ter is an act capable of any form, since its scope is the whole of being; whereas the former is certainly limited to a determinate form falling under a genus and a species. Only in God do *esse* and *intelligere* coincide.<sup>75</sup> This is why Thomas specifically distinguishes an intellectual creature's essence from its intellect. For the act of the essence is *esse* just as the act of the operative potency is its operation. In this case, the operative potency is the intellect and its operation, *intelligere*. But since diverse acts correspond to diverse things, if *esse* and *intelligere* are distinct, then so are the creature's essence and intellect.<sup>76</sup>

The act of *intelligere* Thomas is referring to in this argument is an operation, namely the act of understanding a form or essence. But given that the agent intellect is not to be identified with its operation, since it is the prerequisite and causative act for that operation, it follows that it is not to be identified with human *intelligere*. Hence, our position does not commit us to saying that the soul's *esse* is *intelligere*. Nor does it entail, therefore, that *intelligere* is a substantial act of the soul, or that it is an act that must always be taking place as long as the soul exists. On the contrary, given that the operation of the agent intellect requires the formation of phantasms, and given that these depend on the activity of the senses, which is certainly accidental, the operation of the agent intellect must also be an accident.<sup>77</sup>

But there is a *fourth*, perhaps more troubling reason. Thomas says that the soul's essence cannot be identified with its potencies because, since potency and act divide being (*ens*) and every genus of being, it is necessary that potency and act be referred to the same genus. So, if an act is not in the genus of substance, the potency for that act cannot be in the genus of substance. But the operation of the soul is not in the genus of substance; hence, neither are any of the soul's potencies in that genus. Given that the

<sup>75</sup> See *ST I*, q. 54, a. 2, co: "Simpliciter quidem, sicut intelligere, cuius obiectum est verum, et velle, cuius obiectum est bonum, quorum utrumque convertitur cum ente; et ita intelligere et velle, quantum est de se, habent se ad omnia [...]. Esse autem cuiuslibet creaturae est determinatum ad unum secundum genus et speciem, esse autem solius Dei est simpliciter infinitum, in se omnia comprehendens [...]. Unde solum esse divinum est suum intelligere et suum velle".

<sup>76</sup> See *ST I*, q. 54, a. 3, co: "Cum enim potentia dicatur ad actum, oportet quod secundum diversitatem actuum sit diversitas potentiarum, propter quod dicitur quod proprius actus respondet propriae potentiae. In omni autem creato essentia differt a suo esse, et comparatur ad ipsum sicut potentia ad actum, ut ex supra dictis patet. Actus autem ad quem comparatur potentia operativa, est operatio. In Angelo autem non est idem intelligere et esse, nec aliqua alia operatio aut in ipso aut in quocumque alio creato, est idem quod eius esse. Unde essentia Angeli non est eius potentia intellectiva, nec alicuius creati essentia est eius operativa potentia".

<sup>77</sup> See *De an.*, q. 12, co: "et esse intelligens uel sentiens actu non est esse substantiale set accidentale, ad quod ordinatur intellectus et sensus".

soul's essence is indeed in the genus of substance, it follows that no potency can be identified with the soul's essence.<sup>78</sup>

We have acknowledged that the operation of the agent intellect is accidental. But if Thomas' premise that potency and act must be referred to the same genus is accepted, then it seems that the agent intellect should also be taken to be accidental, thus contradicting our position. Notice, however, that the premise invoked by Aquinas refers to beings (*entia*) falling under genera. (This is connected with and confirms what we said at the beginning of this section, namely: that throughout his discussion, Aquinas presupposes that human potencies are determinate things, be they material or immaterial, falling under some genus. Hence the premise that they must be either the essence of the soul or its accidents, with no other available alternative). But the agent intellect, as *esse intelligibile*, is not a being (*ens*), and it certainly does not fall under any genus. In fact, as said in section I, the agent intellect must have some (yet to be identified) correlative potentiality, with which it forms some kind of being (*ens*); and as seen in section III, the agent intellect cannot be a determinate form, and hence cannot fall under any genus. Consequently, our position is not really threatened by the main premise of Thomas' fourth argument.

Finally, Thomas put forth a *fifth* reason against the essentiality of the soul's potencies. He says that the soul, insofar as its essence is concerned, is act, namely the act which brings the generation of a living being to an end. In fact, according to its definition, the soul is essentially the form, and hence the act, of the body which has life in potency. Thus, if the very essence of the soul were its potencies, and so the immediate principle of its operations, then that which has a soul would always have the vital operations in act, just as that which always has a soul is always actually alive. But this consequence is patently false. Therefore, the soul's essence is not its potencies.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> See *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, co: "Primo quia, cum potentia et actus dividant ens et quodlibet genus entis, oportet quod ad idem genus referatur potentia et actus. Et ideo, si actus non est in genere substantiae, potentia quae dicitur ad illum actum, non potest esse in genere substantiae. Operatio autem animae non est in genere substantiae; sed in solo Deo, cuius operatio est eius substantia. Unde Dei potentia, quae est operationis principium, est ipsa Dei essentia. Quod non potest esse verum neque in anima, neque in aliqua creatura; ut supra etiam de Angelo dictum est".

<sup>79</sup> See *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, co: "Secundo, hoc etiam impossibile apparet in anima. Nam anima secundum suam essentiam est actus. Si ergo ipsa essentia animae esset immediatum operationis principium, semper habens animam actu haberet opera vitae; sicut semper habens animam actu est vivum. Non enim, in quantum est forma, est actus ordinatus ad ulteriorem actum, sed est ultimus terminus generationis. Unde quod sit in potentia adhuc ad alium actum, hoc non competit ei secundum suam essentiam, in quantum est forma; sed secundum suam potentiam. Et sic ipsa anima, secundum quod subest suae potentiae, dicitur actus primus, ordinatus ad actum secundum. Invenitur autem habens animam non semper esse in actu operum vitae. Unde etiam in definitione animae dicitur quod est actus corporis potentia vitam habentis, quae tamen potentia non abiicit animam. Relinquitur ergo quod essentia

Our position does not contradict the false consequence brought out by Aquinas in this argument. For we neither say that the agent intellect is the essence of the soul, nor that its operation must take place at all times, from the very moment that the soul begins to exist, as was said when dealing with the third reason.

There seems to be a problem, however, with Thomas' Aristotelian conception of the essence of the soul as the form and act of the body which has life in potency. For if the agent intellect is, as we claim, the substantial and immaterial *esse* of the soul insofar as through this act the soul can make intelligibles in act, then the agent intellect must be the act of the soul's essence. But if this essence consists in being the form and act of the body which has life in potency, it appears that the *esse* of such an essence is *neither* immaterial, since the form in question is materialized; *nor* a power through which the soul is ordained to another act, viz. making intelligibles in act, since the form in question is conceived as act of the body, and not as being somehow in potency for another act. This twofold obstacle calls for a nuanced response.

First of all, Aquinas' definition refers to all souls, not to the human soul specifically. Given that some souls are nothing more than the form of a body, that definition only concerns the soul as such a form. But, as we have seen, the essence of the human soul is more than just being the form of a body, because it has a substantial and immaterial *esse*. And it is precisely with this immaterial *esse*—and thus with the immaterial aspect of the soul's essence which is actualized by said *esse*—that we are concerned with when treating of the agent intellect, since this intellect is immaterial. So there is no problem in saying that the agent intellect, as substantial and immaterial *esse*, is the act of the essence of the soul, but *only insofar as* this essence is immaterial and thus the correlative potentiality of the act which enables the soul to bring about a distinct intellectual operation, i.e. making the forms of sensible things intelligible in act.<sup>80</sup>

The second point was that the substantial *esse*, as the act of the soul's essence, should not be conceived with reference to this intellectual operation. The soul's essence, regarded in itself, should be conceived as form and act of the body, not as being in potency for another act. We certainly

*animae non est eius potentia. Nihil enim est in potentia secundum actum, in quantum est actus*". Cf. *SCG* II, 62, n. 12.

<sup>80</sup> The qualification that the agent intellect is *not* the *esse* of the soul's essence as a whole, but only insofar as this essence is immaterial, is very important for understanding why the soul, despite having substantial *esse* which is *esse intelligibile*, is not transparent to itself and hence does not form a concept of itself relying solely on its own nature, like angels do. In fact, since the soul's essence is partly the form of the body, and given that intelligibility is inextricably linked to immateriality, it follows that the essence of the soul is not actually intelligible as a whole, and thus the soul cannot, relying on its own nature, cognize itself, but must await its intellectual operation, which is based on sense-experience, for that. On the difference between angelic and human self-knowledge, see *ST* I, q. 87, a. 1; a. 3.

agree with the view that the soul's essence is not, considered merely in itself, a potency for another act, least of all for the act of making sensible forms intelligible in act, which is accidental and so should not be included in a conception of the soul's essence. The substantial *esse* of the soul, therefore, is not, *as* act of the soul's essence, the act through which sensible forms can be made intelligible. So there should be a rational (or conceptual) distinction between the agent intellect and the soul's substantial *esse*. Indeed, since the agent intellect must be in the substantial immaterial realm of the soul, and yet is a power for an accidental act, the *notion* 'agent intellect' comprises not just the soul's substantial and immaterial *esse*, but also the fact that this *esse* serves as a power for making sensible forms intelligible in act.<sup>81</sup>

Having thus reviewed Thomas' five arguments for the accidentality of all human potencies, including the agent intellect, we can now see that our thesis does not contradict any major epistemological or metaphysical view advanced in those arguments. In fact, the only premise we have rejected in order to defend our position within Thomas' philosophy is that *all* human potencies are determinate things falling under some genus, things which must, therefore, be either essential or accidental to the soul. Otherwise, we fully agree with Thomas' espousal of the following assertions, namely: that the essence of the soul differs from its potencies; that the soul's substantial *esse* is not to be identified with its *operari* or *intelligere*; that potency and act must be referred to the same genus; that the soul's definition is to be the form and act of the body that has life in potency; and finally, that the soul's essence, regarded merely in itself, is act and in no way a potency ordained to another act.

Thus, by following Thomas' own conception of the agent intellect (section I), we have not only reached our thesis by arguing against its traditional alternative (section III), but have now also seen that this thesis seems to conflict with none of the key metaphysical or epistemological tenets advanced by Aquinas when dealing with the ontological status of human potencies.

## V. EPILOGUE

At the beginning of this essay, we posed a problem that has occupied the minds of Thomists for centuries, namely: if we contemplate the human soul's ontological structure, that is, its accidents and substance, in which one of these 'categories' does the agent intellect belong? We have tried to show that the answer to this question should not only heed those texts where Thomas explicitly treats of the ontological status of human poten-

<sup>81</sup> The agent intellect is also *not* the soul's immaterial *esse* insofar as this act serves other purposes, e.g., forming the power of the will.

cies. Rather, these texts should be reflected upon within the larger context of his conception of the agent intellect: its role in our cognitive lives together with the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions of that role. Once this is taken into account, the position advocated by Thomas and many commentators that all human potencies, including the agent intellect, are *propria* appears quite problematic. We have seen, in fact, that Thomas' epistemological realism and the view of the soul as *tabula rasa* are not consistent with that position. As a consequence, we have argued that the agent intellect should be seen as the soul's substantial *esse* insofar as it remains immune from matter and enables the soul to make the forms of material things intelligible in act. This thesis, though contrary to Thomas' declared position and to some premises of his arguments for the accidentality of all human potencies, does not seem to contradict any key metaphysical or epistemological tenet advanced by Aquinas when dealing with the ontological status of human potencies. Hence, despite the fact that many more matters connected with our thesis are still pending close attention, it seems at least plausible to adopt that thesis in order to explore, understand, and further develop Aquinas' metaphysics of knowledge.<sup>82</sup>

### *Abstract*

*If we contemplate the ontological structure of the human soul, i.e. its accidents and substance, in which one of these 'categories' does the agent intellect belong? Both Thomas and many Thomists have either implied or claimed that the agent intellect is a proprium (necessary accident) of the soul. In this paper, we argue that this is inconsistent with Thomas' own epistemology and metaphysics. Hence, we propose an alternative (corrective) view, one which we think fits Aquinas' philosophy better, namely: the agent intellect is the substantial and immaterial actus essendi of the soul insofar as through this act the soul can make the natures present in phantasms intelligible.*

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