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## The Issue of Intentionality in Contemporary Thomism

### Introduction

The issue of intentionality seems to be one of the central themes in Aquinas' epistemology. Particularly, intentionality seems to be the pivotal point on which Aquinas' epistemological realism rests. However, the best way to interpret Aquinas' account on intentionality, or whether his account is valid, remains an open debate, even (or most precisely, especially) among contemporary Thomists. Among them, the debate reaches high levels of controversy, due to the fact that the issue of intentionality may be one of the most crucial aspects in the theory of knowledge and in philosophical psychology.

Intentionality can be understood as the mode of being of known objects inside the knower. As we will see, this issue is pivotal in order to establish a firm realist cognition. If intentionality is not completely secured, the possibility of falling into nominalism or idealism is high. Thus, modern Thomists try to explain how it works with great diligence. Of course, the main issue in Thomism is the interpretation on

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how Thomas Aquinas himself understood intentionality. And, as we will see, even philosophers of other traditions try to explain the way Saint Thomas understood this issue, in order to defend their own standpoints.

Going back to the question of how Thomas thought of intentionality, the answer to how intentionality can be best understood inside the Thomist tradition, may be in Scott Macdonald's affirmation that "Aquinas does not build his philosophical system around a theory of knowledge. In fact, the reverse is true: he builds his epistemology on the basis provided by other parts of his system, in particular, his metaphysics and psychology."<sup>1</sup> This phrase is actually denser than would seem at first and might provide the ultimate answer to many of the problems surrounding intentionality. The answer is that intentionality is ultimately not an epistemological problem but rather a metaphysical problem, and that in order to solve it, one has to understand the metaphysical intricacies of the mental being.

In order to see how appealing to metaphysics can solve the mystery of intentionality in Aquinas, it is necessary, in the first place to see, from the viewpoint of modern Thomists, in which of the parts of the knowledge process does intentionality occur, what it means, what are its relevant features, and how modern Thomists have interpreted it. Finally, we will give our own account on intentionality and show how modern Thomists could accept this solution. The authors that will be studied are the followers of Aquinas: Robert Pasnau, Claude Panaccio, Jeffrey Brower, Susan Brower-Toland, Roger Pouivet and another author who is not a Thomist but who also discusses the issue: John Haugeland.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott MacDonald, *Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 160.

## **Intentionality in Aquinas' Theory of Knowledge**

The first part relevant to understanding intentionality is the place it has in Aquinas' theory of knowledge. Aquinas, following Aristotle, affirms that there are two types of cognition: sensible cognition and intellectual cognition. Sensible cognition occurs both in animals and in human beings. For this type of cognition to take place, the external senses must receive a form or representation of something that can be sensed. Then, internal organs form a sensible species of the cognized object.<sup>2</sup>

The second part of the cognition process, and the one that interest us here, is intellectual cognition. The first element that comes to existence in intellectual cognition is the intelligible species. As Claude Panaccio states, "the intelligible species is what is deposited within the possible intellect as a result of the agent intellect."<sup>3</sup> The agent intellect takes the sensible species, abstracts its universal qualities and then deposits the product, the intelligible species, on the possible intellect.

Panaccio also affirms that Aquinas believes that in order to have intellectual cognition, intelligible species are necessary. For instance, when the cognizer cognizes a stone, it is not the stone itself but the species of the stone which become present in the soul.<sup>4</sup>

Once the intelligible species is in the possible intellect, through a reflexive act, the intellect can actively think about the intelligible species and form a concept (mental word) of the cognized object. This

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey E. Brower, and Susan Brower-Toland, "Aquinas on Mental Representation; Concept and Intentionality," *Philosophical Review* 117 no. 2 (2008), 196–198.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Panaccio, "Aquinas on Intellectual Representation," *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality*, ed. Dominik Perler (Brill, 2002), 88.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

mental word is the final stage of intellectual cognition, just as the formation of the intelligible species is the first step.<sup>5</sup>

In this process of knowledge, intentionality is relevant because it is the element that determines what is the relation between intelligible species or concepts, and reality. Intentionality means that both intelligible species and concepts are not diverse from the things they know, but rather they are related to them in some way. Intentionality thus becomes the bridge between reality and knowledge, and makes it possible to avoid falling into either skepticism or idealism.

### **The problem of intentionality: different theories**

According to Brower, in order to understand intentionality, there are two questions that need to be answered, a general and a specific one:

General Question: In virtue of what does a mental state possess intentionality at all (i.e., in virtue of what is it ‘of’ or ‘about’ anything at all?)

Specific Question: Assuming a mental state possesses intentionality, what determines its specific intentional content (i.e., in virtue of what is it about certain things rather than others—say humans rather than cows)?<sup>6</sup>

The answers to these two questions are different depending on the stance taken in the intentionality debate. There seem to be at least four different stances as to the nature of intentionality. Brower classifies three of these stances, “identity theory,” “formal sameness theory,” and

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>6</sup> Brower and Brower-Toland, “Aquinas on Mental Representation: Concept and Intentionality,” 194.

“similarity theory,” into one group: reductive theories; he then proposed another theory, “primitive intentionality theory,” which he classifies as non-reductive.

On the other hand, Panaccio classifies theories into two groups: “direct realism” and “representationalism.” He then elucidates the two different views inside representationalism: the view of identity and the view of similarity.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Robert Pasnau presents three possible views of intentionality: “likeness in nature,” “iconic or eidetic likeness,” and “representational likeness.”

Although they are named differently, they are the same theories, with small variations. Thus, the classification used in this essay will be the following: “direct realism” in Panaccio will be understood to be roughly the same as “identity theory” in Brower and “likeness in nature” in Pasnau; “formal sameness theory” will be understood to be the same as the “identity view of representationalism” in Panaccio; “similarity theory” in Brower will be understood to include the “similarity view of representationalism” in Panaccio and “representational likeness” in Pasnau (although Panaccio and Pasnau seem to have slightly different views in this respect). “Iconic or eidetic likeness” in Pasnau cannot be clearly classified in any of the three mentioned groups because it stands in the middle between “direct realism” and “formal sameness theory.”

There is still another theory that cannot be classified in the same group as any of the former theories: the one presented by Anthony Lisska. Although his interpretation of Aquinas is of great interest, his principles are not explicitly about the nature of the intentional object. Or more precisely, his interpretation is much wider than a mere explanation of the nature of the intentional object. Thus, his view will not be included in this paper, although it certainly merits consideration at another time.

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<sup>7</sup> Panaccio, “Aquinas on Intellectual Representation,” 192.

### DIRECT REALISM, IDENTITY THEORY AND LIKENESS IN NATURE

We will begin with the analysis of the different interpretations of Aquinas with direct realism, called identity theory in Brower and likeness in nature in Pasnau. Panaccio affirms that there are two ways of understanding an intentional entity: either as being an intermediate thing between the cognizer and the cognized, or as being the same cognized thing, inside the cognizer. The second theory would be direct realism.

There are many parts of Aquinas' works that seem to support the theory of direct realism. We copy below the most significant ones:

Any intelligible thing is understood insofar as it is one in act with the intellectual cognizer.<sup>8</sup>

Cognition takes place insofar as what is cognized is within the cognizer.<sup>9</sup>

Non-cognizers have their own forms, while cognizers are apt to have in addition to their own form the form of the other things as well.<sup>10</sup>

Direct realism would then mean that there is no intermediary between the object and the mind, but rather that the mind apprehends the object itself. Elizabeth Kruger describes direct realism as "the doctrine that an external object can be apprehended without a mental object being apprehended."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, direct realism would be opposed to representationalism which, in words of Panaccio is a theory that posits that a mental representation is necessary to have any type of knowledge. Mental representation means an element that has symbolic

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 16, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Panaccio, "Aquinas on Intellectual Representation," 200.

nature and semantic content, which refers to something else. These elements are intermediate between the things themselves and cognition.

The reason why Aquinas is understood by many as a direct realist is that many of Aquinas' texts say that the cognized form becomes one with the cognizer, or that cognizers are different from non-cognizers in that a cognizer, on top of having his own form, can have the form of the cognized object. Aquinas affirms that there is some identity between cognizer and cognized, although he clarifies that it is an intentional identity.<sup>12</sup>

The intentional identity would be possible because any nature or essence can have two existences, a material existence as it informs matter, and an immaterial existence in the intellect, such as Aquinas affirms:

[Essence] can have two different modes of being: material being insofar as it is in natural matter; and immaterial being insofar as it is in the intellect.<sup>13</sup>

In cognition, the incredible thing would be that the same essence that is in reality comes to exist inside the cognizer, except it is in a universal and abstract (un particularized) form.<sup>14</sup>

Having an intentional identity would be possible because essences can be in both reality and mind. This gives the impression of a very strong form of realism, in which the nature (essence) of an external thing comes to exist inside the cognizer.<sup>15</sup> The biggest criticism of Panaccio to direct realism is the proofs he provides that Aquinas was a representationalist, and which we will see soon after, when considering formal sameness theory.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De Anima* II, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Panaccio, "Aquinas on Intellectual Representation," 186.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

Brower explains direct realism, which he calls “identity theory,” affirming that it is the crudest and simplest theory of intentionality, which states that the intelligible species in the mind are identical to the forms of the cognized objects. Identity theory, according to Brower, is not supported by any serious Thomists today, except John Haldane, but it is sometimes presented, in non-Thomist circles, as Aquinas’ own theory. Identity theory provides the simplest connection between thought and reality, and thus is supported by Haldane as the only theory that can explain the connection ‘cognizer and cognized,’ in order to be able to avoid both skepticism and idealism.<sup>16</sup>

The main critique to identity theory that Brower postulates is that it advocates for numerical identity between the cognized object and intelligible species. Thus, if there are intelligible species in the mind which are universal, then that would mean that there would need to exist numerically identical universal forms in reality. Moreover, he argues that although that could be the position of certain philosophers, it is clearly not Aquinas’ because he expressly denies the possibility of universals existing as universals in reality. Aquinas specifically states that “humanity is something in reality, but there it is not universal, for no humanity outside of the soul is common to many.”<sup>17</sup>

Another of Aquinas’ quotations that strongly confronts direct realism is the following:

Even if this is a human being and that is a human being, it is not necessary that both have numerically the same humanity, any more than it is necessary for two white things to have numerically the same whiteness. On the contrary, it is necessary [only] that the one be similar to the other in having [an individual form of] humanity just as the

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<sup>16</sup> Brower and Brower-Toland, “Aquinas on Mental Representation; Concept and Intentionality,” 207–209.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, 1.19.5.1.



other does. It is for this reason that the intellect, considering humanity, not as belonging to this thing, but as such, forms a concept that is common to all.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in order to cope with Aquinas, the sameness between the cognized form and the form in the cognized object itself must be numerically distinct. The necessary numerical distinction leads to the second interpretation of Aquinas: formal sameness.

#### FORMAL SAMENESS, REPRESENTATIONALISM AND SIMILARITY THEORY

Panaccio does not speak of formal sameness, but of representationalism which may have two forms: the first would be representationalism in general, which has many of the features of formal sameness, and the second would be a specific type of representationalism with a strong importance of similarity, which is the same as the similarity theory posed by Brower.

Panaccio states that Aquinas affirms in many places that the cognized object only comes into existence within the cognizer “in some way.”<sup>19</sup> Only “a similitude” of the cognized is in the cognizer and that similitude must be inside the cognizer “somewhat as a form of himself.”<sup>20</sup>

This affirmation is not accidental in Aquinas because he speaks of similarity many times in his work, and even explicitly says that a cognized thing is only represented in the cognizer and is not existent in him. Panaccio says that many have argued that *representare* in Aquinas cannot be translated for represented. In order to clarify this issue, he gives evidence of Aquinas repeatedly affirming that both the intelligible form and the concept are representations.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.17.1.1.

<sup>19</sup> Panaccio, “Aquinas on Intellectual Representation,” 187.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 88, 1.

For instance, Aquinas says that it is not the stone itself but the species of the stone which is in the soul when cognition takes place. And the species of the stone becomes a species of the intellect in act. He also mentions the necessity of an intermediate species that is not the same form of the intellected object. He states:

It is to be taken into consideration that the external things intellected by us do not exist in our intellect according to their own nature, but what has to be in our intellect is their species, in virtue of which the intellect comes to be in act. [...] intellection itself stays within the cognizing subject and has with the thing, which is intellected a relation, which depends on the fact that this aforesaid species [...] is a similitude with the thing.<sup>21</sup>

Then, the species is not numerically the same form of the stone but something different, which can have the same form of the stone. The greatest attack on this theory is also Panaccio's. He himself questions how the quiddity of the stone can be present in the intellect. He states that although quiddities are substances, species are accidents, so the accidents in the mind cannot be the same as the quiddities in the objects cognized.<sup>22</sup>

He also states that quiddities are caused by many things, depending on their nature, but species are only produced by the intellect. Thus, if they have different causes, they must also have different natures. Moreover, he states that concepts and species are different in every mind that possesses them: my concept of stone is not your concept of stone; yet both different concepts can refer to the same cognized object: the same stone. Finally, he affirms that thinking about a

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Panaccio, "Aquinas on Intellectual Representation," 193.

species, or thinking about a concept, is not the same as thinking about the cognized object. For instance, thinking about the concept of the human being, is not the same as thinking about this human being.<sup>23</sup> These objections seem to be sufficient to dismiss the formal sameness theory.

#### SIMILARITY THEORY

The last theory, which Panaccio directly endorses, is the similarity theory. This theory is also called similarity theory by Brower. The similarity theory states that what is present in the mind in the form of species or concepts is not a form equal to the form present in the cognized object, but a similar form. Panaccio presents many texts from Aquinas that seem to endorse this position, such as the following:

The intellect forming quiddities has nothing but a similitude of the things existing outside the mind.<sup>24</sup>

What is intellected, is not in the intellect by itself, but through its similitude.<sup>25</sup>

Just as the perfection of the cognized thing consists in having a certain form by which this thing is such or such, thus the perfection of cognition consists in having a similitude of this form.<sup>26</sup>

All these affirmations would seem to point to the fact that the same form is not present in the mind as it is in the object cognized, but only a similitude of this form. Here Pasnau and Panaccio seem to have

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 193–195.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 76, 2, ad 4.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Sententiae Super Metaphysicam*, VI, 4.

slightly divergent positions. Panaccio clearly states that this similarity, although not of form in the metaphysical sense, is of form in a vulgar sense: “Similarity, in its more general sense, however, can hardly be reduced to the sharing of a spatial sense or of a sensible quality: any isomorphism will do.”<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, Pasnau rejects any type of isomorphism and actually states that the likeness between species and known object may have certain similitude in form, but that Aquinas himself does not mention any special type of similitude, such as isomorphism. The only thing that Aquinas mentions is that the species need to be a representation of the object.<sup>28</sup> In any case, both agree that it is not the metaphysical form of the object which is present in the mind, but a similarity or representation or likeness.

#### NON-REDUCTIVE THEORY

Finally, the last position is the one adopted by Brower. As we mentioned earlier, he names his theory “non-reductive.” This position argues that the concept is not a similarity or a likeness or the same form or whatever other explanation, but a simple, unanalyzable quality that concepts have.<sup>29</sup>

It would seem that his position is tautological, inasmuch as it explains concepts and intelligible species by mentioning that they are so because they have a quality, which we cannot analyze, which makes them so. This would amount to explaining, for instance, what is red by saying that red is something that has an unanalyzable monadic quality that makes it red, or that what makes the essence be the essence is that

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<sup>27</sup> Panaccio, “Aquinas on Intellectual Representation,” 198.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 110.

<sup>29</sup> Brower and Brower-Toland, “Aquinas on Mental Representation; Concept and Intentionality,” 231.

it is, primitively, an essence. This seems to contradict the most basic rule of definitions, which is that the definition cannot be circular.

Another objection that could be presented to Brower is that the more (the nature of concepts, what they are) cannot be explained by the lesser (something the nature possesses, a quality). Another objection is that Brower takes concepts to be quality accidents: “According to our interpretation, a concept is a particular quality numerically distinct from the form of the object it represents.”<sup>30</sup> If concepts are qualities, then what are these “unanalyzable” features they possess: the quality of a quality? A third objection to Brower would be that he affirms that formal sameness theory cannot be correct because then concepts, which are qualities themselves, cannot become essences. How would it then be possible for concepts, which he still accepts to be qualities, to become essences, only because of “a monadic nonrelational feature they possess”?<sup>31</sup>

It seems that the biggest problem with Brower’s theory is that he affirms that intentionality is a feature of concepts, that is, something concepts have, and that it is not analyzable. Nevertheless, it seems that Brower, with all the objections posed, still has the most appropriate theory of intentionality, as will now be explained.

### **Overcoming problems in the non-reductive theory**

Brower essentially argues that concepts, and also intelligible species, are, ultimately, different realities from other entities. He does this by positing that concepts have certain qualities that are non-reducible

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

that make them so. This seems to be problematic because it appears to be tautological to explain the nature of a thing by appealing to a specific quality of that thing that makes it be what it is. However, Brower can be interpreted as affirming that what concepts have that make them concepts is something that cannot be found in anything else: the monadic property of concepts.

How then is this monadic property not a crutch to explain something that we do not understand? Here comes *quid* to taking the most out of Brower's interpretation. The property that concepts have cannot be understood as one property among many that concepts have, as if we said that this chair has the property of being made of wood, of being black, of being small etc. If the monadic property of concepts was such as the properties of the chair we have just mentioned, then we would not overcome the objection which we mentioned earlier that a property of a concept cannot make the concept "become" a substance, and that if concepts are accidents, then this property would be an accident of an accident.

Then how should this property be understood? This property should be understood as the metaphysical mode of being of concepts. That is, concepts are metaphysically something distinct from anything else. Hence, concepts are, by their own metaphysical constitution, concepts, and thus must be understood not by appealing to something else (reductive interpretation) but by considering it by itself (non-reductive).

Still, Brower argued that being non-reductive means that it is unanalyzable. We feel that this affirmation must also be interpreted properly. That something is unanalyzable from a metaphysical perspective would mean that it can only be described as something unique, and not as something that can be understood as a derivative or a part of something else or a composite of different things that can be described by its parts. Unanalyzable should not be understood as meaning that nothing can be said about it, because then the proper word would be unintelligible, and that is not the word used by Brower.

In this sense, Brower himself does describe the monadic feature of concepts saying that its content is that they are about something else.<sup>32</sup> Intentionality, understood as a reference to something else, is thus the primary way to describe concepts. As can be seen, appealing to this monadic property is not thus tautological, because the property itself can be described.

We arrive now to the central point of the paper. How to interpret Brower in a way that does not give place to so many confusions and how to take the positive points in the rest of the previously analyzed authors? To find this explanation we must return to the beginning of the paper.

### **The metaphysical solution to the problem of intentionality**

We said at the beginning that Macdonald's phrase that "Aquinas does not build his philosophical system around a theory of knowledge. In fact, the reverse is true: he builds his epistemology on the basis provided by other parts of his system, in particular, his metaphysics and psychology,"<sup>33</sup> may solve the problem. And this solution would also explain Aquinas' own position with his own work. The solution would be appealing to a metaphysical entity that is specifically the entity that exists in knowledge.

Aquinas makes a clear distinction between *ens rationalis* and *ens reale*. Mental entities are a special modality of entities which are found in the mind. Species and concepts would thus be mental entities. This would solve the problem of thinking that concepts have a quality that

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>33</sup> MacDonald, "Theory of Knowledge," 160.

makes them intentional. It is not a quality, but the metaphysical *esse* of concepts.

When we say that mental entities are different from real entities, this is a metaphysical distinction similar to the one between substance and accidents, or between essence and act of being. There are many levels of being, and in each level, there seems to be a metaphysical distinction. Thus, we can distinguish between act and potency. Then we can distinguish within the act form and matter. Within the form, we can distinguish accidents and substances, within the substances we can distinguish between essence and act of being, etc.<sup>34</sup>

This solution also seems to be hinted at by many of the cited authors and would thus probably be accepted by them. Panaccio, at the very beginning of his essay on Aquinas' intellectual representation, when explaining how a cognized object can exist in a cognizer, affirms that:

Such intentional identifications are thought to be possible because, as Aquinas makes it clear in his commentary on *De anima*, the very nature of the thing, its essence-human nature, for example, or feline nature—"can have two different modes of being: material being insofar as it is un natural matter; and immaterial being insofar as it is in the intellect."<sup>35</sup>

This phrase thus accepts that there are different modes of being of essences. What does the phrase "different modes of being" of essences mean? It can only mean one thing: that they are metaphysically distinct entities. This is supported by the fact that these two modes of being have very different qualities.

Brower mentions that this position is expressly accepted by Aquinas when he affirms that "indeed, Aquinas will even speak of

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<sup>34</sup> The theory of the "staircase of levels of being" is our own, although the fact that there are levels of being was accepted both by Aquinas and by Aristotle.

<sup>35</sup> Panaccio, "Aquinas on Intellectual Representation," 186–187.



objects themselves as having different modes of existence: material existence in nature and immaterial existence in cognizers.”<sup>36</sup>

One of the characteristics of the two modes of being that clearly signals that they are metaphysically distinct is elucidated by Panaccio when he states that “mental words have peculiarities of their own which do not fit quiddities very well. First, they are produced by the intellectual act, engendered by it. In what sense could an essence, a quiddity be produced by the mind?”<sup>37</sup> And then goes to affirm that if they have different causes, then they must be different in nature.

We already cited this passage when mentioning the objections posed to direct realism. Nevertheless, that objection did not reach the roots of the problem. In order to really understand the implications of this phrase, one has to consider that concepts and intellectual species have a mode of causation which is different from any extra-mental substance. And if the difference is so great, then concepts must be radically different from extra-mental substances. That means that the difference cannot be explained by anything less explicative than a metaphysical diversity.

This metaphysical appeal can be better understood if one considers the opposite view. Pouivet, an analytic philosopher, holds that the only way to interpret intentionality is as a characteristic of language that has no metaphysical implications. He affirms thus that phenomenologists have misunderstood intentionality because they believe that “consciousness is what gives life to the phenomenon of intentionality itself.”<sup>38</sup> Although we will not analyze here Pouivet’s analytic view, it seems that phenomenologists have arrived at the same point foremen-

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<sup>36</sup> Brower and Brower-Toland, “Aquinas on Mental Representation; Concept and Intentionality,” 200.

<sup>37</sup> Panaccio, “Aquinas on Intellectual Representation,” 194.

<sup>38</sup> Roger, Pouivet, *After Wittgenstein, St. Thomas* (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2006), 65.

tioned: intentionality has a specific cause which is consciousness, or the mind, and because it has a different cause, it is a different reality.

Phenomenologists seem to have arrived at a very clear conception of the essence of intentional beings. Pouivet presents the phenomenological view of Husserl affirming that the latter, in section 131 of “Ideas,” breaks from analytic philosophy when he says that intentional objects permit us to have the meaning of the known objects. The intended object is different from the object but also identical. It is the object free from all its predicates.<sup>39</sup>

As Pouivet duly notices, these affirmations raise many questions, as “what does it mean to say that it is both ‘identical’ as well as the ‘object’ (*Gegenstand*)?” And here Pouivet mentions the key to understanding the phenomenological viewpoint. Phenomenologists affirm that all things are in their own essence related to other things, and that they are naturally this way.<sup>40</sup> This would mean that all things are about something else. This would seem to be the monadic property of Brower. Leaving aside the fact that phenomenologists think that all things are intentional, they give an appropriate description of intentional entities: they are, as we mentioned earlier, intrinsically about something else. It is not something that is added to them, but rather, we may argue, their metaphysical nature.

We have considered the quality of mental entities that refers to the “aboutness” of something, else, to their intentionality. There is also another quality of mental entities that is mentioned by many of the cited authors that that may also be explained metaphysically: that it is similar, but not exact to that entity to which it refers.

It would seem that the emphasis put on the metaphysical distinction between mental and extramental entities would annul the possibility of

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

the similarity between them, or, in other words, would not make it possible to explain how the content of an intentional being could be related to the object it represents. This would happen because if, for instance a rock is known, and the intelligible species of the rock was metaphysically distinct from the rock, then it would not be the rock that I am knowing but something else.

This objection can be solved by returning to one of Aquinas' quotes. He affirms that "the likeness of the intelligible thing, which is the intelligible species, is the form by which the intellect knows."<sup>41</sup> This means that the intelligible species is a certain kind of form. But is it the same form as the form in the known object? Clearly not, because it is a likeness of that object and not the object itself. Thus, we could conclude that the metaphysical entity "form" can have two modes of being: intentional (mental) and extra-mental. This would mean that it is the same form, and thus the likeness between concept and known thing, but is a different mode of that form, and hence the special characteristics that intellectual entities possess.

A phrase that can perfectly explain how mental entities are different from other entities and how this difference is the ultimate explanation of intentionality is one given by John Haugeland, who explains what the metaphysical view is (if only to criticize it):

In the good old days, a philosopher might hold that mental entities are somehow ontologically distinctive (modes of a special substance, say), and then maintain that an essential part of the distinction lies in their having original (as opposed to derivative) intentionality as an intrinsic property. Thus, just as material entities have mass and extension, so mental entities have content.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 85, 2.

<sup>42</sup> John Haugeland, "The Intentionality All-Stars," Ed. James Tomberlin, *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 4 (1990).

This is exactly the view presented in this paper: intentionality is only understood if a metaphysical distinction is made which affirms that mental entities are special modes of being that are characterized by being about something else, and thus similar to that something else.

### **Metaphysical hierarchy on mental entities**

Finally, when making a metaphysical distinction, there is always the question of the hierarchy of being. Thus, in the distinction between act and potency, it is clear that act is denser in being than potency. The same happens with substance and accident, of which the superior one is substance, or with essence and act of being, etc. Consequently, the last question we could ask is whether mental entities are ontologically superior or inferior to extra-mental entities.

At first glance, it would seem that mental entities are inferior, because they are about something else. Nevertheless, Aquinas seems to directly hold the opposite thesis when he affirms that the form has a higher form of being inside the human soul than externally. This is also supported by the fact that the most dignified the cause the most dignified the effect, and it is clear that the human mind is a higher cause than natural causes: thus, the effect of the act of the human mind, which is the mental entity, is ontologically superior to the effects of natural causes (extra-mental entities). A third argument as to the superiority of the mental entity is that it is more perfect than non-mental entities: it is universal, it is abstract, it is devoid of its contingent characteristics, it can multiply itself infinitely in different minds, etc. All of these show its superiority over particular, contingent, singular, non-mental entities.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can say that the question of intentionality in Aquinas is of utmost importance because it points to a deeper and more relevant discussion that overflows epistemology: it signals a metaphysical debate that needs to be addressed in order to find the best epistemological answer. Although Panaccio, Pasnau, Pouivet and Brower, among others, all have relevant positions in the debate, none of them is able to recognize that intentionality is loaded dice because it points to the closest moment between cognition and reality, and thus the answer cannot be given only from the standpoint of cognition, but also the standpoint of reality (metaphysics). In this sense, we can cite Gustav Bergmann as cited by Anthony Lisska: “Epistemology is merely the ontology of the knowing situation.”<sup>43</sup> We hope that the debate takes this direction, so that a more coherent answer (never a final answer, because philosophy can always go deeper) can be given.



### **The Issue of Intentionality in Contemporary Thomism**

#### **SUMMARY**

The issue of intentionality is one of the pivotal points in the theory of knowledge. Depending on how intentionality is understood, one can be a realist, a nominalist, or an idealist. For that reason, modern Thomists widely discuss this theme. The four different positions in this debate are: the first three, which are considered reductive views are: “identity view of representationalism,” “direct realism,” and “similarity theory.” The fourth is considered a non-reductive view and can be called primitive intentionality theory. The paper concludes that the most adequate way to understand intentionality is a non-reductive view, not exactly the same as the “primitive intentionality theory,” but rather a view that

considers *esse intentionale* as a metaphysical mode of being which solves the question of the existence of known objects.

**Keywords:** intentionality, epistemology, Neo-Thomism, *esse intentionale*, Thomas Aquinas, realism

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