

Form in Aquinas's "Epistemology"

In De Ente, Aquinas distinguishes the use of form, the "form-as-a-part" and "form-as-a-whole." Metaphysically considered (or as considered by the philosophy of nature), the nature we find in AI is a whole composed of two interior causes, substantial form and prime matter. "Form" in the previous sentence refers to form-as-a-part, form as one of the interior factors causing what exists when AI exists.

"Form as a whole" describes a logical relationship, not a causal relationship. Instead of articulating the nature we find in AI as man or rational animal we articulate it as humanity or rational animality. When we do this, we articulate AI's nature as if it were a form possessed by the individual subject, AI. And since the nature we are articulating as if it were a form is, from a metaphysical causal point of view, a whole composed of parts, we can call the nature so articulated a form-as-whole (the whole being the combination of a form-as-part and prime matter).

If this is correct so far, what does Aquinas mean when he says that when we know things, our souls receive the forms of things? Does he mean form-as-part or form-as-whole or something else? And is Aquinas using phrases like "the soul receives the forms of other things" to describe our relation to the object known (to the quod we know) when we know, are conscious of, what individuals, for example, AI are? Or is he using those phrases to describe how our conscious relation to what things are is caused (the quo by which we know it)? Or is it both at the same time, or something else altogether?

The significance of the problem is this. When I know the meaning of a word like "man" I am knowing a metaphysical whole composed of form and matter; I am not just knowing the soul. Man is abstract relative to AI's individual nature, but not because the object we are aware of in knowing the meaning of the word "man" is the form alone. Man or rational animal is abstract because it grasps what the union of matter and form in AI is insofar as that whole is caused to be what it is by AI's substantial form. It does not grasp

what AI is insofar as he is caused to be what he is by prime matter as a principle of individuation. (Prime matter is also a cause of the “common sensible characteristics” belonging to what AI is, since only substantial forms received in prime matter cause the existence of natures with those characteristics. So man does grasp what AI is insofar as prime matter is a cause of those characteristics; that is, man does not abstract from prime matter as a cause of common sensible characteristics.)

Sometimes we call the essence of something, what AI is, a form. But if we do, then according to De Ente we are speaking of the form-as-a-whole, that is, of the nature composed of substantial form and prime matter conceptually articulated as if it was a form received in an individual conceived as if it was matter for that form. In other words, in corporeal things the essence is a “form” only in this logical sense. Metaphysically, it is a compound of form and matter.

Now, by the soul’s receiving the forms of other things when we know things, does Aquinas mean that the object known is the form-as-part only, that is, that the object known is not the whole nature compounded of substantial form and prime matter but the substantial form only. If so, then the object known would not be the nature of anything, would not be what AI is, for example, but only a part of what AI is. We would never know what AI is.

Well, by the soul’s receiving the forms of other things when we know things, does Aquinas mean that the object known is the form-as-whole? If so, the object known is the whole nature, what AI is, not the substantial form only. Then, Aquinas is using phrases like “the soul receives the forms of other things” to describe our relation to the object of our consciousness (to the quod), rather than how that relation is caused (by the quo). But if that is what he means, it is hard to see how he can get the mileage he appears to try to get out of those phrases as far as the question of the immateriality of the soul is concerned.

He could still get mileage out of the fact that the object known, the whole essence composed of form and matter, is universal as an object of consciousness but individual as

physical existent. But if the argument from the universality of the objects known is all that he has in mind, then speaking of the soul's receiving the forms of other things may just one of those misleading medieval conventions (like calling vegetative and sensory powers "powers of the soul" rather than powers of the nature composed of the soul and prime matter) that teachers have to waste so much time explaining when teaching from the texts of Aquinas.

But Aquinas could mean something else by the soul's receiving the forms of the things we know. Awareness of the meaning of "man" is an accidental mode of being inhering in our substance. As such, the existence of that awareness requires the existence of a new accidental form inhering in our substance. That new form is what Aquinas means by the concept as the quo by means of which we are aware of something as opposed to the quod of which we are aware. Here the quod is a substantial nature, what it is to be a man. As the presence of the nature of man in a physical individual comes about through the causality of a form inhering in prime matter, so the presence of the nature of man in consciousness comes about through the causality of an accidental form inhering in the knower's soul. To the extent that these two forms cause the presence in matter and in the soul of the very same nature, perhaps we can call them two instance of the "same" form, one instance inhering in matter and another instance inhering in the soul.

But this interpretation, too, seems not to help if Aquinas wants to use the reception of the form of the thing known in the knower as an argument for the immateriality of the soul. (For one thing, the argument would seem to prove the immateriality of an animal's sensory soul as much as the human rational soul – assuming that the argument is not just a misleading way of talking about the universality of the objects of rational consciousness.) For the only basis for calling the substantial form and accidental form the same form is a certain sameness – though far from a complete sameness – in their effects. The nature that is present in an individual physical existent is the same nature present in consciousness. But the presence of something in the physical existence of individuals (caused by its substantial

form) is hardly the same effect as its presence in consciousness (caused by an accidental form of the knower). And I would argue that even when the effects of two causes are very similar, it need not follow that the natures of the two causes must be that similar; causes of different natures constantly have effects that are similar by chance. Some varieties of a disease can be caused by viruses and other varieties by bacteria or genes. So it would be stretching it to argue from the presence in consciousness of the same nature that is present in AI to the presence among the accidents of the soul of the same form that causes that nature to be present in AI.

Maybe the way out would be to interpret Aquinas as saying that that the object of a concept, e.g., what AI is, is a complete nature. But since a complete nature is composed of matter and form-as-part, when the nature is present as the object of a concept, the form-as-part must be present also, that is, must be present as included in that object. This way out would be unexceptionable, but would leave the question why Aquinas does not just say the nature is present and wants to emphasize that the form-as-part is present. Perhaps the latter question could be answered by the metaphysical distinction Aquinas wants to draw between substantial forms (and this would appear to be relevant only to substantial forms) that can and cannot receive the forms (substantial only or substantial and accidental?) of things other than themselves.