

Immanent and transitive action in Aquinas, September 10, 2005

On page 173, O'Callaghan gives a quotation from the commentary on the metaphysics: in that quotation Aquinas refers both to the idea of an act that has no product other than the act of the power and to the idea that the act exists in the agent as a perfection of him and does not proceed to some exterior thing as a perfection of it. Aquinas then gives the example of sight and of contemplation.

I believe it is the case that some Thomists, in particular, Thomists of the Lavall persuasion like John Oesterle, want to identify immanent action with any action that perfects the agent and does not proceed to some exterior thing as a perfection of the exterior thing. If that is the case, that is, if that is what immanent action is, then the idea of not producing a product other than the act of the power itself, the act itself of the power, would be not necessarily connected to the idea of an immanent act. As long as an immanent act produces something other than the act but what is produced remains in the agent you would have an immanent act.

Or at least you would have all that Aquinas means to say when he speaks about the distinction between acts that do and do not perfect the agent or do and do not produce something distinct outside of the agent, as opposed to ask that do or do not produce something other than the act itself.

In response, I say that we have to be careful how we identify "the agent" in which the perfection produced by the power remains, the agent in which that perfection exists. In vegetative things, the powers of the vegetative soul produce effects that remain in the vegetable. But those effects are something over and above the act of the power that produces them. For example, the size of plant is the result of the operation of powers of the plant. But the size itself is not the activity of producing the size. The size itself is something, a product, over and above the act by which the power produces the size.

How do we identify "the agent"? Of course, in the strictest sense the plant itself, the plant as a whole, is the agent. But in the strictest sense, the plant itself, the plant as a whole is the patient. Unless we can qualify the sense in which the plant is both agent and patient, we violate the principle that whatever is moved is moved by something distinct from itself.

The solution to the problem is to find a distinction within the plant of a power, instrument, and the result of the use of the instrument by the power. The power produces an activity distinct from the power, usually that activity is a change in an instrument. And usually the change in the instrument is an activity producing any further effect that actualizes any further potency of a plant.

The way we thus avoid a violation of the principle that whatever is moved is moved by another is that within the vegetative activity there is something moved by another, but both of those things are parts of the plant: the power and the instrument, and also the bulk of the plant. We avoid the problem because each of these things is distinct somehow from the other. They all belong to the same plant. But they are distinct as distinct parts or features of the plant. Therefore within the plant there is an activity that results in the perfection remaining in the plant, but that activity exists because the plant acts through one part or feature of itself, the power or instrument, producing an effect in another part or feature of itself, the instrument or the bulk. Looking at it in this way, the perfection caused remains within the plant, but only because it does not remain in the power from which the change to the perfection derives. It remains within the plant because the change produced by the power exists in something distinct from the power and produces an effect in something distinct from the power.

The last paragraph describes what the commentators call transitive activity. So to show the commentators wrong in this point, is not enough to claim that all Aquinas meant was that the result of an activity remaining within the agent perfects the agent and does not perfect something outside of it. For there are two ways in which the result can remain within the agent.

One way we have just described; the power produces an effect in something distinct from itself,

although that which is distinct from itself belongs to the same overall agent, the plant or the substance. There is another way, however, for an act produced, a perfection produced, to remain within the agent. That way is for the act of the power, something distinct from the power and produced by the power, not to produce any further act in the agent. To do this the act of the power must not exist in a patient distinct from the power, which patient would therefore be a perfected by the act. So we say that the act of the power exists within the power, remains within the power.

The latter is what the commentators mean by immanent action. And it is something that we find in Aquinas. So we have to still maintain the distinction between transitive and immanent action as the commentators meant it when we are discussing Aquinas. Where is it found in Aquinas? one place is the citation from the commentary on a metaphysics that O'Callaghan gives on page 173 see also for citations that O'Callaghan gives to the summa part one question 14, article 1, as well as question 56, article 1. See also question 85 article 2. O'Callaghan quotes Aquinas there as referring to activity that "remains within the agent, as for example to see and to understand." I believe there are sufficient places elsewhere where Aquinas indicates that to see and to understand do not produce a product distinct from themselves which product would remain within the agent. So this text would provide confirmation that we still need the distinction between acts perfecting the agent that produce a product in the agent other than the act itself and acts remaining in the agent which do not produce a product other than the act itself. O'Callaghan goes on to quote Aquinas as distinguishing the acts that remain within the agent from activity that "proceeds to an exterior thing, as to heat and to cut.