EPISTEMOLOGY

The relationship between knowledge and certainty, the nature of truth and meaning, the validity of principles and hypotheses underlying sciences.

PHL 414: Epistemology
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Final Presentation
The Nature of Knowledge

Addressing Thomas’ theory of knowledge; to understand his conception of truth, distinguishing the process of cognition from its result which is knowledge.

- St. Thomas’ theory of knowledge establishes the foundation for what in contemporary theology is called Transcendental Thomism. In the Summa, St. Thomas’ epistemology may rightly be called a psychology of knowing. Basic to Thomas’ psychology of cognition are several principles, the first of which states that all knowledge begins in the senses. The scholastics enunciated the principles this way: “Nothing is in the mind that is not first in the sense.”

- The primary source of knowledge is our sense impressions. Neither inborn ideas nor notions infused by God account or our mental life which begins with the stimulation of our sense by material object.

- Within the physics of Aristotle any type of change requires an agent in actu which communicates its form to what is passive or in potential. Thus, material object, for example an apple, stimulates the sense by impressing its accidental form on them. Sense perception occurs when the senses at one time in potential are in – formed by the object and thereby activated, in actu.
THE PROCESS OF KNOWING

Addressing Thomas’ theory of knowledge, to understand his conception of truth, distinguishing the process of cognition from its result which is knowledge.

“For a thing to have knowledge it means to carry in itself the identity of some other being or thing and not only its “image” but indeed its “form”. A being’s ability to know, therefore, is its ability to transcend its own delimitations, the ability to step out of its own identity, and to have also the form of another being, which means: to be the other being.” (Pieper, Josef. “The Nature of Knowledge.” Living the Truth the Truth of All Things and Reality and the Good. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989. 35-38.)

• In the process of knowing, for change to occur, there must, however, be an affinity or similarity between the sense organ and the informing agent. In this regard, the Scholastics invoked another principle: *similia similibus cognoscuntur* which means like is known by like. Thus, the human mind which is spiritual cannot know material objects anymore than an angel which is devoid of matter can know material objects. What is spiritual can only receive a spiritual form, what is material, a material form.

• Before the mind which is spiritual can attain knowledge of the material world, there must first occur a process of dematerialization. While sense cognition refers only to material objects it is, nevertheless, part of the psycho-physical organism which is man. For this reason, the sense in *actu* occasions in man a psychic change also. He will be affected interiorly as the form makes its way through his Psychic circuitry.
ST. THOMAS’ CONCEPT OF REALITY

Addressing Thomas’ theory of knowledge; to understand his conception of truth, distinguishing the process of cognition from its result which is knowledge.

• In his psychology of knowing, St. Thomas’ works from Aristotle’s physical and logical view of reality. That is, Thomas presumes that every existent thing is, on the one hand, composed of matter and form, and on the other, a substance revealing itself through its accidents. In virtue of corporeal external senses man makes contact with the material world which leaves in him its species sensibilis or phantasm. It is phantasm which makes its way from his external senses to his internal senses.

External senses: The sensitive faculties that encompass sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

Internal senses: The sensitive faculties that encompass the imagination, the memory, sensus communis and the vis cogitativa.

ST. THOMAS’ CONCEPT OF REALITY

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• The notion of internal senses may seem strange to us but it simply designates four faculties, two of which modern psychology readily acknowledges, that is imagination and memory. The other two are sensus communis and vis cogitativa.

It falls to the imagination to reproduce the phantasm or image inwardly so that after an interval of time, the image may be recalled. The memory, however, retains and recalls the image. The memory adds temporarily to the image is that the mind knows it as having been experienced already. If the memory did not add note of pastness, the mind would regard the image as bespeaking a present and immediate experience. It is the role of the sensus communis synthesizes the multifarious impressions which accompany the taste, touch, smell and sight of an apple.

• Sensus communis: Latin term which means common sense. It refers to the synthesis of all the impressions obtained by the external senses.

• St. Thomas’ calls the sensus communis the synthesizing sense. Its operation precedes that of the imagination. Since contemporary child psychology observes in newborns imagination and memory, however rudimentary, the sensus communis must be credited with first bundling together the impressions which enable those faculties to function.
St. Thomas’ Theory of Cognition

Addressing Thomas’ theory of knowledge; to understand his conception of truth, distinguishing the process of cognition from its result which is knowledge.

**Vis cogitativa:** apprehension of that which cannot be perceived by the senses. It denotes the mind’s rudemintary evaulative grasp of its contents.

**Vis aestimativa:** apprehension of that which can be perceived by the senses. It refers to the natural instinct which is present in animals.

Of all natural senses St. Thomas views the **vis cogitativa** as the one most approximating reason. He assigns to the **vis cogitativa** the task cooperating with reason to form judgments pertaining to human actions. Since human actions are by nature destined to realize some value, the **vis cogitativa** has in some indistinct manner put man on notice to the value of his experience.
St. Thomas claims how God is simply the measure of all beings (*Deus omnium est mensura*). He states how for authentic realism, while postulating that objects are the measure of knowledge, must acknowledge that the measure of objects is divine knowledge. D.Q. McInerny in chapter twelve of his book beautifully focuses on the simplicity of the knowledge of God; this is precisely why he states how “we have another reason why divine knowledge must be completely different from human knowledge, first the sensible species, then the intelligible species, constitutes a composition within the human mind, for the mind is quite distinct from the species. But God, being utterly simple, would admit of no such composition.” He makes clear through his rich explanations how there “is no composition involved in divine knowledge, no change, and therefore no potency and no privation, and there is no dependency whatever, in divine knowledge, on anything other than God himself.”

God’s knowledge goes beyond... His knowledge as D.Q. McInerny highlights is without imperfection, limitations attached to it; meaning as St. Thomas says God is supreme with respect to knowledge. In the Axiom, *intelligibilis in actu est intellectus in actus*, The operative word is *est* meaning is, which is meant to express an identity.
The Divine Intellect

The basic mechanism of human knowledge; the process by which we come to know things, which is the conformity of the human mind to the object of its knowledge.

The intelligible thing and the intellect are so identified that the object known is the being of the intellect. If ever there was an activity revealing man to be the image and likeness of God, it is that of Knowing. In virtue of Jesus’ divine nature, Jesus is Pure Act knowing himself and the world in an eternal intuition; but in possessing a human nature, Jesus like us, knows only by way of phantasms and intelligible species. How is it that at one and the same time He can as God know everything and as man not? The problem remains unsolvable raising yet another concerning the integrity of Jesus’ consciousness. Jesus’ knowledge we see a clear instance of the utility of philosophic reason in matters of faith. Of a different order than divinely infused faith, reason cannot dispel or penetrate divine mystery. Rather, reason makes precise what surpasses human understanding and with regard to God’s revelation, elucidates what mind cannot know.
THE DIVINE INTELLECT

THE BASIC MECHANISM OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE; THE PROCESS BY WHICH WE COME TO KNOW THINGS, WHICH IS THE CONFORMITY OF THE HUMAN MIND TO THE OBJECT OF ITS KNOWLEDGE

• D.Q. McInerny highlights in his book how “All the knowledge that we come to possess through the use of our natural intellectual powers is rooted in the sense experience, which means that its ultimate source is extra-mental entities: real things in the real world”.
THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

A view of Scouts insistence on the primary of God’s will over His reason which fathered the doctrine of nominalism flowing through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

Duns Scotus, Johannes – (1265-1308) He was a Franciscan theologian of profound influence in the Middle Ages whose philosophy differed from St. Thomas Aquinas. For the Thomist, knowledge and reason hold first place, whereas Duns Scotus gives primacy to love and the will. He was the first great theologian to defend the Immaculate Conception. The word dunce derived from his name as it was used by humanists and critics to ridicule the subtleties of his thought.

Key definitions:

Nominalism: derived from the Latin nomen which means name, a theory which denied universals so that things that are alike share not a common nature but only the same name. Thus, for example, only the individual chair exists but not a reality which is common to all chairs which grounds our use of the word chair as a universal.

Voluntarism: From the Latin word voluntas which means will, it refers to the position which generally views reason and intellect as subservient to the will. An extreme form of medieval philosophy held the view that God’s will could render evil good and good evil simply by fiat.
“Scotus argues that the human intellect is capable of achieving certainty in its knowledge of the truth simply by the exercise of its own natural powers, with no special divine help. He therefore opposes both skepticism, which denies the possibility of certain knowledge, and illuminations, which insists that we need special divine illumination in order to attain certainty”. (Williams, Thomas. “Theory of Knowledge.” Johannes Duns Scotus. Stanford University. Stanford University, 31 May 2001. Web. 20 May. 2014.http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/duns-scotus/#TheKno&gt)

• We can say that in regard to universalism nominalism directly challenged the theory of universals. In so doing nominalism laid greater emphasis on critical reasoning and thereby gave logic and epistemology ascendancy over metaphysics. Consequently, nominalism distinguished itself from objectivism by giving greater prominence to the perceiving subject and the logical operations of thinking.

In this regard the objective realism, which saw truth as a balance between mind and thing began to teeter. Unlike the adaequatio which Thomas proposed, the epistemological starting points of nominalism was separation of thought and essence.
In rejecting Thomas’ intellectualism as excessive, Scotus championed a view of God as infinite, absolute will. According to Scotus, God is in no way constrained by his reason having first to judge the good before He chooses it. Rather, God wills freely so that His choice constitutes the good. Scotus’ insistence on the primacy of God’s will over His reason fathered the doctrine called voluntarism. This doctrine fed the stream of nominalism flowing through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

- In terms of an earlier characterization of universals, nominalism denied to universals an existence in re (in objective reality) and redefined them with regard to their existence post rem, that is, in man’s mind. That universals existed as exemplars ante rem, that is, in God’s mind also posed problems for nominalism.

Picking up a strand of thought prominent in Duns Scotus, nominalism viewed divine freedom as somehow restricted by such exemplars.
**THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE**

A view of Scoult's insistence on the primary of God’s will over His reason which fathered the doctrine of nominalism flowing through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

• “Scotus believes that our intellect's need for phantasms is a temporary state. It is only in this present life that the intellect must turn to phantasms; in the next life we will be able to do without them. For another thing, Scotus may have thought that even in this life we enjoy a kind of intellectual cognition that bypasses phantasms. He called it “intuitive cognition.”” (Williams, Thomas. “Theory of Knowledge.” Johannes Duns Scotus. Stanford University. Stanford University, 31 May 2001. Web. 20 May. 2014.http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/duns-scotus/#TheKno&gt;
Descartes in the seventeenth century and Kant in the eighteenth occupy our attention since they represent a major shift in the conduct of philosophy. They focus philosophy on the knowing subject so that epistemology becomes the overreaching concern. The simple realism which characterized scholastic thought is no longer assumed. Thus, Descartes begins his philosophical journey from the indubitable fact of his own thinking existence: “I think, therefore, I am.”

Emmanuel Kant found his philosophy on the logical analysis of human judgment and the a priori conditions it carries with regard to material phenomena. In any case, the new fashion of philosophizing occasions a realignment: faith and theology lose their former handmaiden, that is, philosophy which now couples itself with science.
Kant was not insensitive to matters of faith, especially those which found a speculative basis in metaphysics and natural theology. Yet he foresaw the negative effect his critical examination of reason would have on the traditional questions of God’s existence and knowability, freedom, the soul and its immortality, etc.

In the Preface of his first Critique, Kant sharply contrasted the certainty and success of logic, mathematics and natural science with what he saw as the unfounded claims of metaphysics. In his second critique, he hoped to establish, among other things, a more solid basis for knowledge of God and the soul. Kant says, “I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.”
KANT’S INTERPRETATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Kant in his critique resorted to logical inquiry into the various kinds of judgment constituting knowledge. Kant distinguished judgments which are analytic from those that are synthetic. Of the latter, he further distinguishes those a priori from those a posteriori.

**Important concepts:**

**A priori:** applies primarily to concepts, propositions and judgments. It means prior to experience. A priori has as its opposite the empirical or a posteriori, that is, that which comes after in virtue of experience.

**A posteriori:** applies primarily to concepts, propositions and judgments. It means after experience. A posteriori has its opposite a priori, that is, that which comes prior from experience.

Analytic judgments are those in which the predicate explicates the subject without adding anything to it. That a body is extended or that man is rational tells us nothing that cannot be derived from an understanding of the subject itself.
A synthetic judgment, on the other hand, amplifies the subject since the predicate is not implicit in it. That body falls to earth adds to the subject the notion of weight and gravity.

Most synthetic judgments follow upon experience, that is, come afterwards and are, therefore called *a posteriori*. They report that A is B. But Kant postulates that there are synthetic judgments which report not only that A is B, but that A must be B. They are necessary judgments he calls *a priori*.

Although Kant acknowledges in such synthetic judgments the presence of empirical elements such as matter and motion, he claims that, irrespective of their presence, no experience can enable us to know that this *synthetic* judgments are always apodictically true.

Yet we know that a priori, that is, beforehand, that they will always hold true in every instance. Thus, the critical issue for Kant's theory of knowledge revolves around the question, "How are synthetic a priori judgment possible?" From whence do they drive?"
In Kant’s view, knowledge comes about because of certain conditions imposed on objects by our cognitive faculties.

Substance and cause are two categories from the twelve which Kant discerns. Such categories are logically prior to all the concepts we empirically reach through generalization from sense data. Kant postulated that the forms and categories were integrally connected and reflective of the fact that our perceptual and conceptual lives, were intertwined. In his famous phrase, Kant said, “Percepts without concepts are blind and concepts without precepts are empty.”

Thus, the sensible forms of intuition and the categories of the mind are the a priori conditions for the possibility of all knowledge. They are presupposed in all experience and Kant referred to them as transcendental.

In the main, Kant’s epistemology has the positive effect of justifying in mathematics and in natural sciences synthetic a priori judgments. But, an important negative conclusion attached to his analysis. Since space, time and the categories applied only to objects of sensuous intuition, he logically reasoned that we can have knowledge only of things as they appear to us, that is, what he called phenomena. Things-in-themselves or noumena, as he called them, escaped our capacity to know. Hence, he was willing to admit that there are things-in-themselves beyond the phenomena but not what they are.
In restricting knowledge to the sensate and phenomenal, Kant placed supersensible and transcendental objects beyond the reach of reason. His theory of knowledge, therefore, had a negative and far-reaching ramifications for metaphysics and natural theology. After all, God, the soul, immorality, freedom, etc., corresponded to nothing in the phenomenal world. Nevertheless, Kant conceded that reason possessed them as ideas. While according them mental reality, Kant treats them in the last section of his Critique, the *transcendental Dialectic*.

In *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant takes aim at those ideas which in their goal mimic the sensible forms of mental categories. For while the latter serve as a priori conditions making knowledge possible, the ideas of metaphysics and natural theology propose to reach the ultimate ground or the unconditioned basis for the objects or phenomenal experience. The usual ideas of dialectal thought are those pertaining to the self, to the totality of the world and to a supreme Being.

