

A Thomistic Appraisal of the Transparency and Passivity of the Intellect

Patrick Toner
Wake Forest University

1. Introduction

I take up some philosophical ideas from Fred Miller’s article¹ and connect them to St. Thomas Aquinas’s thought.² I am principally interested in the “transparency requirement,” as attributed to Aristotle: “the mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own” (p. 29). Miller says that Aristotle uses this requirement as the first premise in an argument that shows the mind has no determinate nature of its own; obviously, this is done by asserting as a second premise the claim that the mind can know reality.

Ayn Rand takes the transparency requirement to entail a passivity requirement. If, as the transparency requirement asserts, the mind has no determinate nature, then the mind has no nature. But if the mind has no nature, then how can it act? Conversely, if it does act, how can it fail to have a nature? Transparency requires passivity, or so it seems.

But there’s more. The passive Aristotelian mind, according to Rand, must gain its knowledge through no process at all. As we just saw, it has no nature and hence cannot act. But if it cannot act, it cannot engage in any processes. So whatever knowledge is to be found

¹ Fred D. Miller, Jr., “Comments on George Walsh: Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,” *Objectivity* 3, no. 1 (2001), pp. 28-37; reprinted in *Reason Papers* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2023), pp. 11–22. I use parenthetical in-text page references to the version of this article published in *Objectivity*.

² Ayn Rand, perhaps surprisingly (since she was an atheist), held St. Thomas in high regard, which suggests that some Thomistic thoughts might not be taken amiss by those interested in Rand’s thought.

in this passive mind must be knowledge arrived at without any process at all. But because, as Rand writes, “all knowledge is processed knowledge,” we can see that Aristotle’s approach to the mind won’t work, and the fundamental problem is the transparency requirement. The transparency requirement yields passivity, which yields unprocessed knowledge, which is impossible. Therefore, we must reject the transparency requirement.

Surprisingly enough, Rand seems here to disagree with Aristotle and to side with Immanuel Kant. This can be seen in a crucial passage from Miller:

Kant rejects Aristotle’s view that knowledge is a process in which forms are *passively* received from external objects by a mind which has a purely potential nature Rand agrees with Kant and opposes Aristotle on a fundamental point: “All knowledge *is* processed knowledge—whether on the sensory, perceptual or conceptual level. An ‘unprocessed knowledge’ would be a knowledge acquired without means of cognition. Consciousness . . . is not a passive state, but an active process. And more: the satisfaction of every need of a living organism requires an act of processing by that organism, be it the need of air, of food or of knowledge.” (p. 33)

Any reader with more than a passing familiarity with Rand realizes that she is no fan of Kant.³ So fear not—the agreement with Kant is quickly joined to a repudiation of Kant:

However, Rand rejects Kant’s use of this very point: “From primordial mysticism to [Kantianism], its climax, the attack on man’s consciousness and particularly on his conceptual faculty has rested on the unchallenged premise that any knowledge acquired by a process of consciousness is necessarily subjective and cannot correspond to the facts of reality, since it

³ Though the article that Miller is responding to tries to draw out some similarities between the pair. See George V. Walsh, “Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,” *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000), pp. 69–103.

is ‘*processed* knowledge.’” On Rand’s view although consciousness is epistemologically active, it is not metaphysically active. As David Kelley remarks, “consciousness no more creates its own contents than does the stomach.” The rejection of the transparency requirement has a central place in Rand’s own epistemology. (pp. 33–34)

As I understand Miller (and Rand) here, the idea is simple. Rand and Kant agree in rejecting transparency (and hence passivity and hence knowledge-as-unprocessed), but they disagree on a much deeper point. Specifically, Kant infers from the fact that knowledge is processed that it is subjective and doesn’t correspond to the facts of reality. But this inference, Rand thinks, is unjustifiable: the action of consciousness is of a sort that allows for objectivity, that is, correspondence with the facts of reality.

There are two questions, however, that we ought to ask. First, does the transparency requirement entail the passivity requirement? Second, does the transparency requirement lead to what Rand says here; that is, does it entail that knowledge is causeless, and that knowledge occurs without any process? In what follows, I will give St. Thomas’s answers to these two questions, which are a qualified no and a resounding no, respectively.

2. Does Transparency Entail Passivity?

For St. Thomas, that we have knowledge is a self-evident starting point. That we acquire it is also self-evident. It is also clear that this acquisition involves a process. What, exactly, the process *is* can be established with some certainty via philosophical work. An inescapable point for St. Thomas is that we *do* know the world through a complicated process. And he thinks that this process involves a transparent intellect.

Or does he? We must begin with a clarification. The version of the transparency principle presented above is wide open: “the mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own.” St. Thomas does not accept this wide-open principle, or it at least plays no role in his thought that I am aware of. However, he accepts a transparency principle of his own: a different, but related principle, with a more restricted version of transparency. He also endorses an

argument similar to the one Miller attributes to Aristotle (to Anaxagoras, but he says Aristotle accepts it). Here is St. Thomas's version of the principle, and his version of the argument:

It must necessarily be allowed that the principle of intellectual operation which we call the soul, is a principle both incorporeal and subsistent. For it is clear that by means of the intellect man can have knowledge of all corporeal things. **Now whatever knows certain things cannot have any of them in its own nature; because that which is in it naturally would impede the knowledge of anything else.** Thus we observe that a sick man's tongue being vitiated by a feverish and bitter humor, is insensible to anything sweet, and everything seems bitter to it. **Therefore, if the intellectual principle contained the nature of a body it would be unable to know all bodies.** Now every body has its own determinate nature. Therefore it is impossible for the intellectual principle to be a body. It is likewise impossible for it to understand by means of a bodily organ; since the determinate nature of that organ would impede knowledge of all bodies; as when a certain determinate color is not only in the pupil of the eye, but also in a glass vase, the liquid in the vase seems to be of that same color.⁴

While Miller's version of the principle (the mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own) is, as I said, wide open, St. Thomas's version is narrower. He claims here, more or less, that the mind can know material being only if it has no material nature of its own. This is not, then, an argument for the *naturelessness* of the mind, but rather an argument for the *immateriality* of the mind. (In the text that immediately follows, it becomes something more: an argument for the *substantiality* of the mind, but we can ignore that for purposes of this article. Another thing we can ignore for purposes of

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 75, 2 (bold added). All quotations from the *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) are from Kevin Knight's 2017 online edition of *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920), accessed online at: <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

this article is the issue of how the human being knows immaterial things.⁵)

To put this more clearly, the transparency requirement in Miller's reading of Aristotle plays a role in an argument that goes like this: (1a) The mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own. (2a) The mind can know reality. (3a) Therefore, the mind has no determinate nature of its own. And (3a) yields passivity, which yields unprocessed and hence impossible knowledge.

St. Thomas's argument in the cited text is completely different from this Aristotelian argument. It goes, instead, like this: (1b) If the intellectual principle contained the nature of a body, it would be unable to know all bodies. (2b) By means of the intellect man can have knowledge of all corporeal things. (3b) Therefore, the intellect does not have a corporeal nature.

Let us take note of a few points. First, unlike (3a), (3b) does not imply passivity—or at least it does not imply passivity, unless you think there is some reason to assert that incorporeal things are essentially passive. St. Thomas certainly does not think that. God is incorporeal and clearly not passive, and the same is true of angels and human souls. Second, (1b) does involve a kind of transparency requirement, even if the transparency of (1b) is not quite as . . . transparent . . . as the transparency of (1a). I will come back to this point.

Third, in fact, St. Thomas reads the relevant Aristotelian text as asserting (1b), not (1a). Here is how he explains the relevant text in his *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*:

⁵ The matter is complex, and I can hardly begin to do it justice here. One relevant text is this: "There is, however, a difference between these two kinds of knowledge, and it consists in this, that the mere presence of the mind suffices for the first; the mind itself being the principle of action whereby it perceives itself, and hence it is said to know itself by its own presence. But as regards the second kind of knowledge, the mere presence of the mind does not suffice, and there is further required a careful and subtle inquiry. Hence many are ignorant of the soul's nature, and many have erred about it"; see Aquinas, *ST*, I, 87, 1. So Augustine says (*De Trinitate*. x, 9), concerning such mental inquiry: "Let the mind strive not to see itself as if it were absent, but to discern itself as present—i.e., to know how it differs from other things; which is to know its essence and nature."

Anything that is in potency with respect to an object, and able to receive it into itself, is, as such, without that object; thus the pupil of the eye, being potential to colors and able to receive them, is itself colorless. But our intellect is so related to the objects it understands that it is in potency with respect to them, and capable of being affected by them (as sense is related to sensible objects). Therefore it must itself lack all those things which of its nature it understands. Since then it naturally understands all sensible and bodily things, it must be lacking in every bodily nature.⁶

This is basically the same argument as the one from the *Summa Theologiae*. On St. Thomas's reading, the transparency requirement in Aristotle is limited just as it is limited in St. Thomas's own thinking. Miller and St. Thomas thus interpret Aristotle differently here.⁷ Whether St. Thomas is correct in his reading of Aristotle or not, I think the main point is that there is enough shared insight between (1a) and (1b) that we should see (1b) as a narrower version of (1a).

What we can see so far is that at least one version of the transparency requirement, namely, (1b), does not entail passivity. At least, (1b) does not entail passivity via an argument like Miller's

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Book III, Lecture 7, #680. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. K. Foster, OP and S. Humphries, OP (South Bend, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1994), p. 206.

⁷ Aristotle writes (as Miller notes in his translation, p. 29), "it has no nature, and is not one, except in being potential," which can seem to support Miller's wide-open reading. St. Thomas's reading of that line is: "From this he concludes, not that in fact the nature of the intellect is 'not one,' i.e., that it has no definite nature at all; but that its nature is simply to be open to all things; and that it is so inasmuch as it is capable of knowing, not (like sight or hearing) merely one particular class of sensible objects, nor even all sensible accidents and qualities (whether these be common or proper sense-objects) but quite generally the whole of sensible nature. Therefore, just as the faculty of sight is by nature free from one class of sensible objects, so must the intellect be entirely free from all sensible natures"; see Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Book III, Lecture 7, #681. I firmly decline to become embroiled in how best to interpret Aristotle, and so leave aside this discussion.

account of Aristotle's argument. Maybe there is another pathway from transparency to passivity or maybe there is another pathway from transparency to the causelessness of knowledge, but I leave aside such possibilities. Hence, we have St. Thomas's answer to our first question.

3. Does Transparency Entail Unprocessed Knowledge?

We have looked at one line of reasoning showing that transparency in St. Thomas's sense doesn't lead to passivity of the mind. However, that does not settle the question of whether St. Thomas is committed to passivity. There could be other lines of reasoning from transparency to passivity. In this section, I take a more detailed look at the process of knowing in St. Thomas and show that knowing involves a process via a mind with an identity.

According to St. Thomas, "the proper object of the human intellect, which is united to a body, is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter."⁸ Intellect *as such* is not ordered to the knowledge of bodies. *Angelic* intellects are ordered to the knowledge of incorporeal being, but the *human* intellect, because it is the intellect of a bodily creature, is properly ordered toward other bodily creatures, which they are meant to know.

Other bodies are known through a process that roughly goes as follows. The human knower is put in touch with his surroundings through the senses. The senses receive the forms of the things known, without their matter, but under material conditions. Those forms are "dematerialized" by the agent intellect, and then the forms are received by the possible intellect. Note that the human intellect has two elements: an active element (the agent intellect) and a passive element (the possible intellect). The job of the agent intellect is to dematerialize the received forms. The job of the possible intellect is to receive them, which is to say, to become them. It is at this latter point that transparency is relevant to the process. The possible intellect cannot have a physical nature of its own, else that physical nature would impede the receptions of certain forms by putting its own stamp on those forms. It is through immaterial reception of the forms that we grasp the natures of material things.⁹

⁸ Aquinas, *ST*, I, 84, 7.

⁹ In the preceding two paragraphs, I have summarized material from Aquinas,

But we are not yet done. The forms of material things exist in material things; hence, in order to know them as they are, we must know them *as* material. Our knowledge doesn't rest in the immaterial grasp of the nature of the material object. It must reach back outward to grasp the thing in its materiality. As St. Thomas says:

Now it belongs to such a nature to exist in an individual, and this cannot be apart from corporeal matter: for instance, it belongs to the nature of a stone to be in an individual stone, and to the nature of a horse to be in an individual horse, and so forth. Wherefore the nature of a stone or any material thing cannot be known completely and truly, except in as much as it is known as existing in the individual. Now we apprehend the individual through the senses and the imagination. And, therefore, for the intellect to understand actually its proper object, it must of necessity turn to the phantasms in order to perceive the universal nature existing in the individual.¹⁰

We do not need to worry about the language of *phantasms* here. The short version is that the phantasm is that received form existing under material conditions. The point that matters for us right now is that the *process* of knowing involves an inward movement from the thing to be known to the intellect, and then an outward movement from the intellect back to the thing known. Thus, when Rand insists that all knowledge is processed knowledge, it should be clear that St. Thomas agrees. (At least, he agrees that all *human* knowledge is processed knowledge, but that is all we are examining here.) This is consistent with the version of the transparency requirement that St. Thomas endorses. Knowledge must be passive, as Aristotle argues, if it is to be accurate, for the senses are a way by which objects act upon us, and we passively receive what they have to tell us about themselves. But that's not the end of the story: "We have to remember that in the process of sensation there are two phases: the passive phase, in which the sense is informed and determined by the external object; and the

ST, I, 84, 1 and 6; *ST*, I, 85, 1; and *ST*, I, 75, 2.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, I, 84, 7.

active phase, which properly constitutes the act of knowledge, and in which the informed faculty determines itself.”¹¹

However, even this passive phase is passive only in a broad sense. As St. Thomas explains:

Thirdly, in a wide sense a thing is said to be passive, from the very fact that what is in potentiality to something receives that to which it was in potentiality, without being deprived of anything. And accordingly, whatever passes from potentiality to act, may be said to be passive, even when it is perfected. And thus with us to understand is to be passive.¹²

The possible intellect is passive by simply receiving something. We can look at the first two senses of passivity for contrast:

Firstly, in its most strict sense, when from a thing is taken something which belongs to it by virtue either of its nature, or of its proper inclination: as when water loses coolness by heating, and as when a man becomes ill or sad. Secondly, less strictly, a thing is said to be passive, when something, whether suitable or unsuitable, is taken away from it. And in this way not only he who is ill is said to be passive, but also he who is healed; not only he that is sad, but also he that is joyful; or whatever way he be altered or moved.

The possible intellect is thus passive in that it gains something, and not in any other sense (such as the first or second senses above).

4. The Intellect and Its Process of Knowing

I should clarify that the possible intellect is not really a thing that might have or lack a nature of its own. Properly speaking, it is a power of the soul, not a substance or a “being” in its own right.¹³ To

¹¹ H. D. Gardeil, *Introduction to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas III: Psychology*, trans. John Otto (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1956), p. 53.

¹² Aquinas, *ST*, I, 79, 2.

¹³ Aquinas, *ST*, I, 79, 1.

the extent that we can nevertheless think of it as having (or lacking) a nature, St. Thomas thinks it has one, and likewise he attributes to Aristotle the thought *not* “that [the intellect] has no definite nature at all; but that its nature is simply to be open to all things.”¹⁴

This is relevant to an interesting, but I think muddled, point of Rand’s. Speaking of Kant’s theory, she writes:

This is a negation, not only of man’s consciousness, but of *any* consciousness, of consciousness as such, whether man’s, insect’s or God’s. (If one supposed the existence of God, the negation would still apply: either God perceives through no means whatever, in which case he possesses no identity—or he perceives by some divine means and no others, in which case his perception is not valid.)¹⁵

This is a striking claim. The first horn of the dilemma is a *non sequitur*, at least if we apply the thought to human knowers instead of to God. From what we have already seen, we know that since the intellect is merely one of many powers of the human soul (which is itself only a part of the human being), the fact (if it were a fact) that human knowledge occurs through no means whatever would not entail that the *human being* has no identity, even if it does entail (as in fact it does not) that the human intellect has no identity.¹⁶

The second horn of the dilemma does not hold up, but before I can show that, I need to sort out what it means.¹⁷ If God perceives by some divine means and no others, his perception is invalid . . . why? Is it because *perception* is univocal, and so all perception must occur in

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, #681.

¹⁵ Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, 2nd ed., ed. Harry Binswanger and Leonard Peikoff (New York: Meridian, 1990), p. 80.

¹⁶ Applying the thought to God is trickier because of the doctrine of Divine Simplicity, but I can hardly attempt to discuss that here.

¹⁷ I should point out that God does not perceive at all: unlike ours, God’s knowledge is causal. He does not become aware of things by observing them; they come to be because he knows them. The objection is flawed from the outset, but it is still worth talking about.

the same way? (Or in near enough the same way to count. For example, insect perception is clearly different from ours in its details but still involves a sensory connection via organs of sense and some kind of neural “processing” system, even if it is not as centralized as the mammalian brain.) But this cannot be, and here is why. Leonard Peikoff presents a thought experiment from Rand involving a species of thinking atoms. These are atoms that have sense perception (and “some kind of sensory apparatus”), but of a kind, obviously, that doesn’t involve eyes or ears (or brains). These atoms perceive other atoms directly. For them (unlike for us), atomic theory is *not* a theory, arrived at via inference, but rather a directly known thing. For these atoms, though, knowledge of the existence of macrophysical objects such as humans or planets would have to be derived through some kind of inference, as the objects exceed their sensory capacities. We are the mirror images of these atoms, in that while we have a direct perception of macrophysical objects such as ourselves, we lack such a perception of atoms, and must arrive at their existence via inference.¹⁸

Obviously, Rand does not believe in such things, any more than she believes in God. It is not a question of whether thinking atoms or God exist, but of whether their perception would be valid. She claims, according to Peikoff, that the perception of the atoms would be valid, despite its differences from ours. But how? Why? What is the connection between the two forms of perception other than that Rand is *claiming* that the atoms sense? How do they do it? They possess no known sensory apparatus and no known method of gaining contact with the outside world, and yet we can claim that they have this perceptual ability without running into the notion that their perceptions are invalid. Is it simply that we *declare* that their method of knowing is perception, like ours, despite the fact that it is manifestly not like ours? Then I can declare the same thing of God: he has “some kind of sensory apparatus.”

You might say, “But at least the atoms are material! God isn’t!” And I ask, “What difference does that make?” I do not know how God’s perceptual processes work, but I can see that they could, and so I say he uses the same method that we use. And that is all Rand

¹⁸ Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1993), p. 43.

says about the atoms, after all. Saying “But at least they are material” does no work whatsoever.¹⁹

The main point here is that while I cannot fully explain the possible intellect, it is a means of knowing. I describe it negatively: it is a potency of the rational soul to grasp form. This is not something I fully or positively understand, except through grasping that I do know things outside of me. I do possess those forms, and hence I know I must have the power to grasp those forms. I also know, through the transparency principle, that this power must not be material, etc. Therefore, I conclude that this somewhat ineffable power exists. Is this a *negation* of consciousness? Of course not. It is an *explanation* of consciousness, though admittedly an incomplete one.

Moreover, the intellect is not “divided” into only agent and possible, but into other “forms” as well. For example, there is the power of reasoning: “For to understand is simply to apprehend intelligible truth: and to reason is to advance from one thing understood to another, so as to know an intelligible truth.”²⁰ This is another form of processing, in Rand’s terms, the reasoning process. This is not simply to grasp something—for example, knowledge of the cat in front of you—but also involves inferences that one might make about the cat. As St. Thomas explains:

Reasoning, therefore, is compared to understanding, as movement is to rest, or acquisition to possession; of which one belongs to the perfect, the other to the imperfect. And since movement always proceeds from something immovable, and ends in something at rest; hence it is that human reasoning, by way of inquiry and discovery, advances from certain things simply understood—namely, the first principles; and, again, by way of judgment returns by analysis to first principles, in the

¹⁹ My interest in this thought experiment is primarily to connect it to the possible intellect, but I will pause to say it is characteristic of Rand to be heavy-handed and quite thoughtless in her rejections of God, so this treatment here is not surprising. I have made this kind of argument at length elsewhere; see my “Objectivist Atheology,” *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007), pp. 211–35.

²⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, I, 79, 8.

light of which it examines what it has found. Now it is clear that rest and movement are not to be referred to different powers, but to one and the same, even in natural things: since by the same nature a thing is moved towards a certain place. Much more, therefore, by the same power do we understand and reason: and so it is clear that in man reason and intellect are the same power.²¹

It should now be clear that St. Thomas's view involves no claim of the ineffability of consciousness, nor does it suggest uncaused knowledge. These notions have no place in St. Thomas's thinking, and yet, we see that the transparency requirement, in at least a modified form, is clearly there.

5. Knowledge, Perception, and Form

Having disposed of Aristotle's and Kant's transparency requirement, Miller argues as follows:

If we hold that knowledge is the result of processing by the mind in accord with its own forms, how can we be assured that this is not a distorting process like the rose-colored glasses mentioned earlier? The objectivist epistemology must contain a theory of form different from both Aristotle's and Kant's theories. (p. 34)

The idea here is that since the transparency requirement has been rejected, we must affirm that the mind does process knowledge in accord with its own form, which raises the standard representationalist puzzle: How do we know that the contents of our minds correspond to a world "out there" that they purportedly represent?

The Thomistic tradition has much to say about this problem, and Rand echoes much of it. But leave this aside for now and consider the second issue here. Miller thinks that the rejection of the transparency requirement involves the rejection of Aristotle's account of form. He goes on to argue that Rand, with her (to me, very abstruse) Objectivist theory of concepts, helps to solve this problem:

²¹ Ibid.

We find a hint of such a theory on the level of sense perception in Rand's notion of perceptual form: here form denotes the aspects of the way an object appears which are determined by the manner in which our senses respond to the object in the particular conditions at hand. For example, the color of an object might be a part of its perceptual form. The form is not in the external object considered as independent of being perceived; nor is the form "in the mind" as an object of perception in its own right. It is instead a relational state arising from the interaction between the object and our perceptual systems. (p. 34)

How would St. Thomas handle this issue of form within his transparency-affirming view? It is simple enough and should be clear, I hope, from what has already been said. The Thomist affirms that the color is in the external object as an accidental form. In perception, that accidental form comes to inform the mind of the knower. This very same form is found, then, both in the thing perceived and in the perceiver. This explains why perception is not a distorting process. But neither is it a non-process. This perceptual knowledge is processed knowledge, processed in the way I briefly outlined above. The result of the process is that the mind grasps the form of the thing known. In short, the ancient principle of "like knows like" is honored in as literal a way as you like. The soul in a way becomes all things, as Aristotle maintains. This is no matter of an ineffable intellect grasping things in an inexplicable way. This is a matter of a rational animal knowing the world around it through the process of perception, part of which involves intentional existence of the form of the thing known in the knower, with the knower becoming the known.

I do not here argue that St. Thomas's theory of the intellect is better than Rand's, Aristotle's, or Kant's. Instead, I argue that his theory—by providing an account that retains transparency, identity, and processed knowledge in the human intellect—avoids the problems alleged by Rand to arise for both Aristotle and Kant.