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*Overcoming an anaxagorian conception of Noûs
by a metaphysical theory of the best possible:
from Socrates to Aquinas***

Abstract

This paper intends to show that our reception of Plato's criticism of Anaxagoras' philosophy of mind is somehow mediated by Thomas Aquinas' conception of freedom. The Socratic-Platonic Metaphysical theory of mind as something essentially connected to the best is transformed by Aristotle into a theory of the intelligence which, in its acting, necessarily records the possibility of performing the opposites or contraries. Therefore, 'the (Platonic) best' is now specifically understood as 'the best possible'. Within this Metaphysical conception, Aquinas distinguishes two levels (which are also to be found in 'freedom'). In the first or more superficial one –here called 'horizontal'–, the mind chooses to perform the best possible or not, that is, it can fulfill the science which is within the mind itself or not. In the second or more radical one –here called 'vertical'–, the mind has to perform a reflexive act, by means of which it chooses willing or not its *necessary possibility* of performing the science that the mind possesses.

Key words: Mind, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, Metaphysics, Aquinas.

Superación de la concepción anaxagoriana del Noûs mediante una teoría metafísica de lo mejor posible: de Sócrates a Santo Tomás de Aquino

Resumen

Este artículo se propone mostrar que nuestra recepción de la crítica de Platón a la filosofía de Anaxágoras se encuentra mediada, de algún modo, por la concepción de la libertad de Tomás de Aquino. La teoría metafísica de la mente de Sócrates y Platón, como aquello conectado esencialmente con lo mejor, es transformada por Aristóteles en una teoría de la inteligencia que, en su desempeño, registra necesariamente la posibilidad de llevar a cabo los opuestos o contrarios. Por lo tanto, "lo mejor (platónico)" se entiende ahora específicamente como "lo mejor posible". Dentro de esta concepción metafísica, Santo Tomás distingue dos niveles (que se van a encontrar

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** This paper was originally presented to (and approved to be read in) the XXII World Congress of Philosophy, 2008, Seoul, Korea.

Artículo recibido octubre de 2010 – Arbitrado enero de 2011

Apuntes Filosóficos. Vol. 20. Nº 38 (2011): 127-132.

también en la “libertad”). En el primero o más superficial –denominado aquí “horizontal”– la mente escoge hacer lo mejor posible o se abstiene de hacerlo, es decir, puede realizar o no la ciencia que está dentro de la misma mente. En el segundo o más radical –llamado aquí “vertical”– la mente tiene que realizar un acto reflexivo, por medio del cual escoge, voluntariamente o no, su *posibilidad necesaria* de actuar de acuerdo con la ciencia que posee ella misma.

Palabras clave: Mente, Filosofía Antigua y Medieval, Metafísica, Santo Tomás de Aquino.

In *Phaedo*, 96a-102b Plato delivers us the *Great Charter* (*carta magna*) of Western Metaphysics.¹ This document describes the Socratic-Platonic process after which the Theory of Ideas was found. The first stage of this mental voyage was overcome after concluding that, in the investigation of nature (*phýseōs historia*), the method used by Pre-Socratic naturalists is insufficient or, taken as a whole, wrong. The second stage consists in a crash with Anaxagoras and his theory of mind (*noûs*).

Following Plato’s reading of Anaxagoras’ philosophy of mind, the Anaxagorean intelligence can be described as follows: «a sort of management of physical elements, wrongly supposed to be causes of phenomena.» Socrates says: “I found my philosopher [Anaxagoras] altogether forsaking mind or any other principle of order, but having recourse to air, and ether, and water, and other eccentricities.” (*Phaedo*, 98b-c.)²

Whether Plato’s interpretation of Anaxagoras is right or wrong, it does not concern the present argument. Instead, we will focus on Plato’s own theory of the intelligence. Apart from that, I will show that this one is considered by Aristotle to be basically right. Plato claims that a *real* intelligence –a metaphysical *noûs* (not a merely logic reason) intends to choose the best in each of its acts.

¹ Vid. Giovanni Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 1997.

² It is hard to determine now to what extent Aristotle adheres to Plato’s interpretation of Anaxagoras. Cfr. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 984b11-19 and 985a18-21 (vid. Thomas Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, Cura et studio M.-R. Cathala y Raymundi M. Spiazzi, Marietti, Taurini-Romae, 1964, I, *lect.* 6 and 12; henceforth ‘*In Met.*’); Aristotle, *On the Soul*, I, c.2, 404a25-b5 and 405b20-23; *ibid.*, III, c.4, 429b23-25 (vid. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri De anima*, en *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, tomus XLV, vol. 1, Iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, cura et studio fratrum praedicatorum, Commissio Leonina (Roma) – L. P. J. Vrin (Paris), 1984, I, c.3, lin. 163-251 and c.5, lin. 257-266; *ibid.*, III, c.3, lin. 7-17).

For Plato, Anaxagoras had good reasons to claim that *noûs* is the cause of being, generation, corruption (and so on) of all things, establishing all these in order. But at the same time Plato argues that Anaxagoras did not adequately support this claim because of his radical Naturalism. If, as Anaxagoras suggests, *noûs* is the radical cause of all beings, motions, etc., then ‘the best’ should go hand-in-hand with *noûs*. But Anaxagoras did not take this second essential step in his theory of *noûs*, namely, the necessary relationship between intelligence and ‘the best’. From a Platonic point of view, the general facts in the universe are structured or organized by ‘the best’, or –more precisely– by a *noûs* which intends ‘the best’. Anaxagoras’ *noûs* did not explore this way, since he still assigns –as Presocratic Naturalists did– physical elements (earth, fire, air, bones, muscles, etc.) to be the causality of any action, even of an «intelligent» action. In this regard Plato makes an interesting observation: “There is surely a strange confusion of causes and conditions in all this. It may be said, indeed, that without bones and muscles and the other parts of the body I cannot execute my purposes. But to say that I do as I do because of them, and that this is the way in which mind acts, and not from the choice of the best, is a very careless and idle mode of speaking. I wonder that they cannot distinguish the cause from the condition, which the many, feeling about in the dark, are always mistaking and misnaming.” (*Phaedo*, 99a-b.)

In other words, Plato is claiming that if the physical elements are necessary in order that a phenomenon can take place, these elements are not the true cause (*tò aition tō ónti*), but just the condition of possibility of the constitution of the phenomenon. For Plato it is very harmful to confuse the material condition of possibility (which is an instrumental cause) with the true cause of a produced fact. It is quite plain that if Socrates did not have arms and legs, he could not have chosen the best death for himself, but his choice of the noblest death for himself was not finally produced by his body at all, but by his *noûs*, which was seeking the best.

Now, the question is: Why should we change from an Anaxagorean conception of intelligence (at least as interpreted by Plato) to a Platonic one, which sets ‘the best’ as the essential object of *noûs*? Is it not possible for the intelligence to have other choice than the best in its acting? It is useful to read Aristotle’s view on this issue. Aristotle establishes that, in its real act, the intelligence can operate in contrary or opposite ways, or, to put it in Platonic terms, the best or

the worst.³ Commenting on Aristotle, Aquinas writes: “Nam scientia, quae est potentia rationalis, est quaedam ratio rei scitae in anima. Eadem autem ratio rem manifestat et eius privationem.”⁴ So, the opposites, pointed out by Plato as the best and the worst, are now understood by Aristotle, on the one hand, as the manifestation or carrying out of the *ratio rei scitae in anima*, and, on the other hand, as the carrying out of the privation of this *ratio rei*. That is to say that, also for Aristotle, the proper (*per se*) act of *noûs* is not the management of physical elements either, but it is a potency that intends to carry out the best, namely, to carry out *the ratio rei scitae in anima*:

“Unde necessarium est, si scientia est quaedam ratio rei scitae in anima, quod eadem sit scientia contrariorum. Unius quidem per prius et secundum se, alterius vero per posterius. Sicut medicina per prius est cognoscitiva et factiva sanitatis, per posterius autem infirmitatis; quia et hoc, ut iam dictum est, est de ratione rei scitae in anima, quae est unius oppositorum secundum se, et alterius secundum accidens. Et, quia quod Philosophus supra de privatione dixerat, postmodum ad contrarium transtulit, ostendit quod eadem ratio est de contrario et privatione. Sicut enim per negationem et ablationem manifestatur privatio, ut puta ablatio visus manifestat caecitatem; ita per negationem et ablationem manifestatur contrarium: quia privatio, quae nihil aliud est quam ablatio alterius, est quoddam primum principium inter contraria. Omnium enim contrariorum unum est sicut perfectum, alterum vero sicut imperfectum, et privatio alterius. Nigrum enim est privatio albi, et frigidum est privatio calidi. Sic igitur patet, quod eadem scientia se habet ad contraria.”⁵

For the Aristotelian intelligence ‘the best’ is primarily the science of some reality, which was produced within the intelligence. So, ‘the [Platonic] best’ now is specified by Aristotle as the best possible (as the science possessed in the intelligent soul), since it is a possibility of the rational potency, which is the *noûs* itself. Then, to fulfill the best possible reality is to manifest a reality in a perfect rational way, because the rational way entails the opposites: the science of the thing and the privation of it. Therefore, an intelligence conceived

³ Cfr. Plato, *Phaedo*, 97d and 98b.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In Met.*, IX, *lect.* 2, n. 1790.

⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 1791-1792.

as management of physical elements would not be a rational power to Aristotle either, since it could not choose whether to manifest the science it possesses or not; and, for this reason, it would not be free, since it would necessarily perform the possible for Nature or physical universe. This possible, of course, it is not able to entail the label of ‘best’ or ‘worst’.

Anyway, that *noûs* necessarily (*per se*) does intend in its act to perform the best in a free way, also for Aristotle mainly means that it can effectively perform the best possible –rather than a mere possibility of privation or of not fulfilment of the best–, since it is causally autonomous regarding the physical universe. It can do it, it wishes do it, and it ought to do it, because to carry out the best is the natural end of *noûs*. Is *noûs* bound to carry out the best reality? No. According to Aristotle *noûs* may not fulfill the best possible –if it does not will it– and, on the contrary, to fulfill the worst possible –the privation of the best possible–. But if *noûs* wants to fulfill the best possible, then it will succeed in doing something which surpasses it, since ‘the best’ is not only something possessed by the intelligent soul, but something *extra animam* as well. For this reason, that the intelligence acts in a free way (*i.e.*, not necessarily), is not opposed to the fact that in this free act ‘the best’ continues still existing. And then, we can not find in the Aristotelian *noûs* rational contraries with the same value. As Aquinas tells us, ‘the best’ is always and necessarily, in every act of the rational power, somehow manifested –the best understood by Aristotle as the science on something–.⁶ Indeed, in rational potencies, ‘the best’ was transformed from

⁶ “Scientia est quaedam potentia actionis, et motus principium, ex eo quod aliquis habet rationem rei faciendae, et hoc principium motus est in anima. Et quia ita est, sequitur quod res naturales faciant unum tantum; sicut salubre facit solum sanitatem, et calefactivum facit solum caliditatem, et infrigidativum facit solum frigiditatem. Sed ille qui agit per scientiam operatur utrumque oppositorum, quia eadem ratio est utriusque in anima, quia habet principium talis motus, licet non similiter, sicut dictum est. Et ideo, sicut actio naturalis procedit ad effectum, quasi copulata ad formam, quae est principium actionis cuius similitudo relinquitur in effectu, ita anima movet per suam operationem ad ambo opposita ab eodem principio, idest a ratione quae est una duorum oppositorum, copulans ad ipsum principium utrumque motum, et ad ipsum principium utrumque terminans, in quantum similitudo illius principii in utroque oppositorum in esse productorum salvatur. Manifestum est igitur quod potentiae rationales contrarium faciunt potentiis irrationalibus; quia potentia rationalis facit opposita, non autem potentia irrationalis, sed unum tantum. Et hoc ideo est, quia unum principium oppositorum continetur in ratione scientiali, ut dictum est.” (*Ibid.*, 1793.) Does the fact that the intelligence always and necessarily –*per prius et per se*– manifests

something simply necessary to something necessarily possible: from a physical being to a rational or free one. In the latter case, to do the best is to do it freely, that is, in a possible or rational way.

Finally, what does it mean for Aquinas to act or to manifest some reality in a possible, rational, or free way? As we can see from *Summa theologiae*, I, q.93, a.9, for instance, it does not just mean to will carry out ‘the best possible’ or not, but also to will or not the somehow necessary desire of carrying out the best possible. To put it differently, to act freely means not only to want and master to accomplish the science possessed by the intelligent soul or not, but also to want and master the-same-necessarily-possessed-science or not. This act of will is more radical than the *somehow* free act of wishing to carry out the science in reality. The free act to carry out the science (pointed out by Aristotle) depends on the free act of willing—in the sense of accepting—to have the science about reality or not. We can say that while one act of freedom looks at ‘horizontal’ opposites or contraries—wishing to carry out our science of something or not—the more radical one looks at ‘vertical’ opposites—willing our own *necessary possibility* of carrying out something or not—. In the latter contraries to do the best possible consists in a free will of our natural and free knowledge and desire of the best possible—a divine gift that our *noûs* can not foresee to possess—.

So Anaxagoras is overcome by Socrates and Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, even when among the latter thinkers *noûs* goes acquiring a deeper reflexive character, within a common metaphysical theory of the best possible.

the best possibility mean that it cannot choose the worst, or that it necessarily chooses the best? Of course not. Whether its choice is the best or the worst, its election is necessarily free. It is not necessary, as is the case with natural potencies, which always and necessarily choose their end. Anyway, the point is that the *noûs qua talis* necessarily chooses somehow the best, even when it is choosing the worst.