

# THE MODERN SCHOOLMAN

A Quarterly Journal of Philosophy

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF SENSATION

### I. EDITOR'S NOTE: THE PROBLEM OF SENSATION

**T**HOMISTIC PHILOSOPHY has always "paid honor"—to use Maritain's phrase—both to sense knowledge and to the material world.

Thomism, in common with Platonism, maintains the essential difference between sense and intellect; but it also insists, as against every philosophy of Platonic inspiration, on the intelligibility of material things and on the dependence of human intellect, precisely as *human* intellect, upon sense data. Problems of sensation and sense knowledge are therefore of capital importance in Thomistic philosophy; indeed they involve crucial issues for any Christian and realistic philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Yet, apparently Neo-Thomism has devoted to these problems neither the extensive research nor the speculative energy that it has given, for example, to the theory of analogy and to the study of intellectual operations. The elaboration of a precise and purified theory of sensation appears to be one of the great tasks facing Thomists today. This elaboration is necessary not only for the proper health and intrinsic development of Thomism itself but for the Thomistic critique of modern philosophy and science. Maritain writes:

The true philosophy of nature pays honour to the mystery of sense perception, and is aware that it only takes place because the boundless cosmos is activated by the First Cause whose motion traverses all physical activities so as to make them produce, at the extreme border where matter awakens to *esse spirituale*, an effect of knowledge on an animated organ.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (New York: Scribner's, 1936), pp. 229-47.

. . . It is instructive here to observe that the rebirth of the philosophy of nature in Germany in our time due to the phenomenological movement, goes, in the case of Mme. Hedwig Conrad-Martius, for instance, and of Plessner and Friedmann, along with a vast effort to rehabilitate sense knowledge. . . . In my eyes [the] existence [of this effort] bears witness to a fundamental and intrinsic need of natural philosophy, which is too frequently neglected by modern scholastics.<sup>2</sup>

These considerations led THE MODERN SCHOOLMAN to canvass the opinions of a number of leading American Scholastic philosophers on this point. Their replies indicated a substantial agreement that this problem has been, in general, neglected and treated, sometimes, in a cavalier fashion. THE MODERN SCHOOLMAN, thereupon, with the hope of encouraging constructive discussion and research, requested Professor Yves Simon to prepare an outline of the problems involved and of the order in which they should be studied. We here present Professor Simon's paper together with comments by Father Péghaire. Further discussion by our readers is invited.

[The papers are divided into numbered paragraphs to facilitate reference; the numbering of the two papers does not correspond.]

## II. ON THE PROBLEM OF SENSATION:

### OUTLINE OF A PROGRAM OF RESEARCH

When the philosopher starts investigating the problem of sensation, he is not supposed to know, as yet, anything about psychical life. The place of the Aristotelian treatise on sensation is significant: it begins with Chapter V of the second book of the *De anima*. Now, the first book of the *De anima* is devoted to an exposition and a discussion of theories concerning the soul held by previous philosophers; the first four chapters of the second book deal with vegetative life; the treatises which are placed before the *De anima* in the received classification of the Aristotelian writings deal with the common properties of physical things and with problems pertaining to the inanimate world. Thus, the chapters on sensation constitute the very first part of the treatment of psychical life. In good Aristotelian method, the philosopher who is becoming acquainted with sensation is achieving his first acquaintance with the universe of knowledge. The procedure followed by the many writers who start their books of psychology with considerations on consciousness, and present sensation as a particular "consciousness-phenomenon" is thoroughly un-Aristotelian. It is a typically Cartesian procedure.

Accordingly, our first notions concerning sensation will not be acquired by locating sensation in any such genus as "psychical processes" or "consciousness-phenomena," but by describing a set of

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Science and Wisdom* (New York: Scribner's, 1940), pp. 59-60.

*contrasts* between the characteristics of sensation and those of the physical processes which have been analysed in the preceding parts of the philosophy of nature.

1. Following the example of Aristotle, we should first consider the difference between sensation and physical processes from the point of view of *passivity*. A physical passion is a complex event, which implies a loss as a necessary condition for an acquisition; thus a piece of wax cannot receive a new shape without suffering the loss of the shape which it previously possessed. This is what St. Thomas calls a *passio proprie dicta*; here, the patient undergoes a law that is not its own, but that of the agent: it would be quite fitting to designate such a passion as *heteronomic passion*. On the other hand, while it is obvious that the sense undergoes the influence of its object, it is no less obvious that such an influence does not necessarily and intrinsically imply any loss or destruction, but constitutes an actualization of the potency of the sense. The sense receives its own perfection from the object, which acts as a friendly principle. This is what St. Thomas calls a *passio improprie dicta*; let us say, an *autonomic passion*.

2. By saying that sensation is a passion of a certain kind, we do not mean that it is a merely passive process. Considering sensation from the point of view of activity, we find in it the first example of *immanent action*. We shall put a strong emphasis on the contrast between immanent action and the common type of action analysed by Aristotle in the third book of the *Physics*. We shall not fail to point out, on the other hand, that the concept of immanent action is but imperfectly realized in sensation, inasmuch as the immanent action of sensing necessarily coincides with a transitive action exercised by a physically present object.

3. Considering sensation, in the third place, from the point of view of *unity*, we shall describe it as an *intentional union*. Here is the crucial point: whereas the union of a matter and a form—let us say a *matter-form union*—gives birth to a third reality made of the two united terms, the union that takes place between the sense and its object does not give birth to any composite; sense and object remain face to face in their union, without altering each other.

And thus we have firmly established the main characteristics of sensation as a psychical event. We know, at least basically, what we have to account for. Many deceptive theories are already ruled out, inasmuch as they treat sensation as if it were a heteronomic passion, a transitive action, a matter-form union.

4. Next comes the question: *How* can the physically present object bring about, in the sensorial power, this autonomic passion, this immanent action, this intentional union? The theory of the *species sensibilis* (let us say, *sensorial idea*) is a way toward an answer.

This theory is best introduced by a comparison between the Epicurean simulacrum and the Aristotelian species. The simulacrum is a small thing which enters inconspicuously into the body and carries to the soul a picture of the big external thing; it is a small thing that resembles a big thing and that, on account of its minuteness, does things that a big thing cannot afford to do. On the other hand, the Aristotelian species is *not a thing*. This is what Cajetan shows in a celebrated commentary: “. . . duo sunt genera entium. Quaedam ad hoc primo instituta ut sint, quamvis forte secundo alia repraesentent: et haec vocamus *res*. Quaedam vero ad hoc primo instituta sunt naturaliter, ut alia repraesentent: et haec vocamus *intentiones rerum*, et *species* sensibiles seu intelligibiles.”<sup>3</sup> From a metaphysical point of view, Cajetan thus defines the species by the following proportion:

$$\frac{\text{species}}{\text{the act of representing an object}} = \frac{\text{thing}}{\text{the act of existing}}$$

It should be possible to express similar relations on the level of philosophical physics, of which psychology is a part. Considering, on the one hand, that the most intimate union that can result from the putting together of two things is a matter-form union; considering, on the other hand, that the union that the sensorial idea is intended to account for is an intentional union, we can describe the sensorial idea as an entity that is to an intentional union what a thing is to a matter-form union. The proportion:

$$\frac{\text{sensorial idea}}{\text{sensation as an intentional union}} = \frac{\text{physical thing}}{\text{matter-form union}}$$

constitutes a definition of the sensorial idea that, though obviously obscure, is entirely safe.

5. Here it becomes necessary to compare sensorial knowledge with higher forms of knowledge, as Aristotle often does. This does not imply that, contrary to our initial propositions, higher forms of knowledge should be studied before sensation; it only implies that the theory of sensation cannot be completed without some acquaintance with higher cognitive processes, which acquaintance will be primarily derived from common experience and common thinking.

<sup>3</sup> Cajetan, *In I Summae Theologicae*, 55. 3.

There are ideas in the intellect: let us call them concepts; in the imagination—we call them images; in the memory—we call them memories. These ideas are known to us in and through an experience. On the contrary, sensorial ideas, if there are any such entities, seem to escape the grasp of any experience. Their existence, if it is to be established at all, has to be established by a rational analysis. It can be said that *one major distinguishing feature of Aristotelian psychology is the proposition that there are species, ideas, not only in the intellect and in the internal senses, but also in the external senses.*

The causation of the sensorial idea raises a problem of the first magnitude. Other ideas (those of the intellect, of the imagination, of memory) are born within the soul; they result, in some way or other, from previous acts of knowledge; in last analysis, from sensations. The sensorial idea is not born inside the soul. It is born in the physical nature, produced in the sense by the action of the sensible object. *One major distinguishing feature of Aristotelian psychology is the proposition that the gap between nature and the soul is bridged by ideas of an absolutely initial character, which originate in the physical nature, which exist as qualities in the physical nature before they come to exist as ideas in the soul.*

6. The problem is now to find an adequate cause, inside the physical nature, for that entity which is not a thing, but an idea, the *species sensibilis*.

This tremendously important question has been given little treatment. In most of his writings on sensation, St. Thomas abstracts from the question whether the object, which causes the species, causes it by the power that it owes to its proper nature or by some participated power. Yet in a passage of the *De Potentia*<sup>4</sup> he explicitly traces the production of the sensorial idea to a participation of physical things in a way of acting that is proper to separate substances. Cajetan discusses the question rather thoroughly in his commentary on the *De anima*.<sup>5</sup> Here is his conclusion: "si ad proximum agens respiciendum est, forma objecti est. Si ad primarium cujus participatione hoc fit, separatum est agens."

7. In close connection with the last problem, we have to investigate the question of the existence of the sensorial idea *in the medium*. Cajetan teaches that forms are spiritualized gradually and that between their material condition in the object and their psychical condition in the sense they enjoy, in the medium, a condition that is intentional and non-psychical. Notice that the concept of such a condition would solve the problem of the termination of the act of

<sup>4</sup> 5. 8c.

<sup>5</sup> *In II de anima*, 11. Along the same line, see John of St. Thomas, *Philosophia Naturalis*, III, 6. 3.

sensorial knowledge: no *species expressa* is needed in external senses because the form *in the medium* is a term whose degree of immateriality is proportionate to the degree of immateriality of sense knowledge. On this, see Cajetan, *In II de anima*, 6.

8. Here comes the question of sensation as an essentially *experimental* knowledge. In an admirable dissertation, John of St. Thomas shows that a sensation without a physically present object implies a contradiction.<sup>6</sup>

9. Concerning the *validity* of sense knowledge, the first thing to do is to expound the Aristotelian division of the sensible objects into *per se proper*, *per se common*, and *per accidens* sensible objects. With regard to *per accidens* objects of sensation, the sense does not enjoy any natural guarantee of validity; no natural guarantee of validity, either, with regard to common sensible objects. With regard to proper sensible objects, the sense enjoys an essential indefectibility, compatible, however, with incidental failures. Those considerations suffice to destroy the grounds of most objections against the reliability of sense knowledge, since such objections are generally relative to the perception of *per accidens* sensible objects, or to that of common sensible objects, or to incidental failures in the knowledge of proper sensible objects. Yet serious difficulties concern the normal perception of the very proper object of each sensorial power. In order to clear them up we shall ponder over the mutability of sense qualities and analyse its consequences with regard to the *kind of truth* that can be expected of powers of knowledge whose object is thoroughly mutable. The temptation is great to attribute to the object of sense knowledge a steadiness which is a property of intelligible objects.

10. Concerning the *division* of the external senses, it should apparently be granted that it is not any more possible for philosophy to define any particular sense than to define any particular chemical or living species in its ultimate specificity.

However, philosophy can go beyond the generic study of *the* external sense. The distinction made by Gredt between higher senses and lower senses seems philosophically relevant and can be greatly clarified by using the concepts of proprio-ceptive and extero-ceptive sensations. Lower senses (e.g., touch) are those whose operations are either proprio-ceptive sensations or combinations of proprio-ceptive and extero-ceptive sensations. Higher senses (e.g., sight) are those whose operations are pure extero-ceptive sensations.

11. The question of *affective sensations* (pleasure and pain) should be treated in connection with proprio-ceptive sensations.

12. Next comes the question of the *consciousness* of sensation. See Cajetan, *In II de anima*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Philosophia Naturalis*, III, 6. 1.

13. The theory of sensation normally ends with the problem of the organization of *concrete perception*. It would be particularly relevant to show how the knowledge of the common sensible objects and of the *per accidens* sensible objects acquires some kind of steadiness, despite the fact that the sense lacks any natural guarantee with regard to any object that is not its proper object.

YVES R. SIMON

Notre Dame University

### III. NOTE ON THE CONSIDERATION GIVEN BY SCHOLASTIC PHILOSOPHERS TO EXTERNAL SENSATION

1. Professor Yves Simon is quite correct in deploring the altogether incomplete treatment accorded to the problem of external sensation by Scholastic philosophers. I quite agree with him that this problem is in great need of being defined and examined more deeply.

2. I am of the opinion that it is all-important to make a clear distinction between the two points of view, the psychological and the critical. Each of these calls for a separate consideration, yet with equal emphasis, though the psychological consideration must obviously be made the foundation of the study of the value of the truth that comes from sensation. The psychological part of the study should bring out clearly the possible contribution of experimental psychology as well as the pertinent facts and problems from rational psychology.

3. First of all, there should be an attempt to determine clearly and precisely just to what extent the data furnished by St. Thomas, Suarez, and John of St. Thomas (and the other early Scholastic philosophers as well) can be accepted in our own day. This would call for a *historical* study marking the difference in these theories between elements founded on an outdated and therefore false physiology, and conclusions resulting from a very elementary experience, which might even today have a certain validity. This study would follow to some extent the general lines of what I suggested in my article on the internal senses, "A Forgotten Sense, the Cogitative."<sup>7</sup> Of course, the projected study would have to go far deeper than I attempted to do in my article.

4. Taking as a starting-point the data of contemporary psychology as it differentiates between *a*) stimulus and response, *b*) the impression made on the nervous system, and *c*) the psychic reaction which is sensation in the proper sense, an act of cognition, there would have to be an inquiry into the extent to which this analysis prepares the way for the Thomistic analysis, which, as I see it, is concerned exclusively with the third stage, the question on which contemporary

<sup>7</sup> *The Modern Schoolman*, XX (May, 1943), pp. 210-29.

psychologists seem to have reached the very maximum of confusion. Here is precisely the place for the solution of the question of *impressed sensible species*, and the examination of Numbers 5 and 6 of Professor Simon's notes.

5. There would be no reason for giving too much importance to the study of the "medium," contrary to Professor Simon's suggestion. If I understand it correctly, this "medium" is really nothing other than air, or "the ether," or perhaps also the nerve substances of the sense nerves and the cerebral centers at which they terminate. There is here no question of a psychic "entity," but of a physical, or at best a physiological, factor having nothing to do with impressed species.

6. Rather would I suggest that close attention be given to the question of whether or not there are expressed sensible species. Here the whole question of sensible intuition is at stake, and, connected with this, the question of the validity of both our internal and external senses.

7. I am not as pessimistic as Professor Simon on the question of the specific determination of the different external senses. Even should the difficulty be as great as he thinks it is, it would still be far from useless to institute once and for all a historical study of the views of the ancients on this question and to make a serious critical evaluation of the reasons they give as a foundation for their distinction. To my knowledge this work has never been undertaken. The little attention I personally have given to the subject has served to convince me that many most interesting points could be discovered, especially in the writings of Albert the Great and Alexander of Hales, and perhaps even in those of Scotus and Suarez. Likewise, it would still be far from useless to discover and bring out the principle or principles which the early Scholastics apply in working out this question.

It would then be possible to attempt at least a definition of the distinction in question and an examination, from the Thomistic point of view, of all the supposedly modern senses (kinaesthetic, coenesthetic, sense of equilibrium, and so on).

8. Like Professor Simon I am quite convinced of the great importance of throwing light, from the Thomistic point of view, on the question of what is nowadays called "perception" or the construction of a sensible object. (Cf. W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, II, chaps. xix, xx, xxi.) Some modern Scholastic writers, such as Gredt, admit this conception; but to what extent can the conception itself be found in St. Thomas's doctrine or reduced to his principles?

9. This last question brings us to the very threshold of the critical question of external sensation. Thorough examination of this last problem is absolutely necessary. Contemporary Scholastics, as well as philosophers of post-Cartesian development, introduce much



confusion into this question, thus jeopardizing the possibility of an adequate and satisfying answer to the problem of the validity of all of human cognition. But the problem seems to me far more complicated than Professor Simon seems to think it is in number 11 of his outline. In my opinion, the following would be required: (1) a serious historical study of the position of St. Thomas and the other great medieval philosophers, with a careful working out of the relation which these authors establish between the validity they grant to the senses and their theories in the fields of physiology, physics, and (where one can speak of such) optics and acoustics; (2) a study of the position held by contemporary philosophers on the notion of sensation, in which they hopelessly mix up the ideas of *sensatum* and *sensatio*—and this bit of research would no doubt involve a pushing of the inquiry all the way to Kant and Descartes, thus showing how, historically speaking, these modern views date their beginnings from the decadence of Scholasticism; and (3) a constructive essay, made possible by the previous work of clearing away, which would give special attention to reality and which, I am sure, would have as its result a sort of illustration of St. Thomas's principles, thought out again, now, in the setting furnished by contemporary physiology and experimental psychology.

10. This would lead to a careful search for the relations existing between sensible cognition and intellectual cognition, from the purely psychological point of view as well as from the critical point of view. For there is no doubt that man never performs an act of sensation unaccompanied by some more or less complex act of spiritual intellection. It would be most useful to have definite ideas on this problem. To my knowledge, this research has never been undertaken.

11. Modern philosophers devote a great deal of attention to cognition of duration and time, of space, of movement. It would be well for us to have, as part of our Scholastic philosophy, a psychological as well as a critical study of this question. We should therefore see whether there can be found in St. Thomas's writings the elements of a solution to this problem, or at least basic principles which might serve in solving it in the spirit of the Angelic Doctor, without at the same time neglecting the data contributed by modern philosophy.

12. I shall close by calling attention to two points. *a)* Research similar to that outlined above would be a worth-while thing—to be done at a later date—on the subject of the internal senses. Indeed, will it be possible to carry out the research on the external senses without some reference at least to the *sensus communis*? *b)* Will not the answers given to this group of questions by different authors be lacking in unity?

J. L. PEGHAIRE, C.S.Sp.

*University of Montreal*