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**EPISTEMOLOGICAL GROUNDS  
OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY  
IN THOMAS AQUINAS'S PHILOSOPHY**

Inasmuch as Aristotle in his *On interpretation* investigates the problems of language, Thomas Aquinas enlarges these considerations in his commentary on Aristotle's work significantly. Following Aristotle, Aquinas considers such issues like problems of signification of nouns and verbs, functions of noun and verb in the proposition and many other typical problems formulated in the Aristotelian framework. However, unlike in Aristotle's work, all these problems in Aquinas's commentary seem to be related to the problem of intersubjectivity. The main question concerns the problem of human communication and the objectivity of language the latter could be understood as the objectivity of linguistic references. Aquinas asks about the conditions of intersubjectivity of human language. Moreover, the problem of intersubjectivity binds various topics in the Thomistic philosophy. Among them, the relation between the language and the intellect, the theory of proposition and the concept of signification should be mentioned in the first place. Yet, all these issues can find their explanation and justification in the epistemological framework. Hence, Thomistic epistemology, namely the theory of possible intellect could be regarded as a condition and ground of the intersubjectivity.

Thomas Aquinas starts his consideration concerning the communication by a claim that a man is essentially "social and political animal" (*animal naturaliter politicum et sociale*), therefore the human being needs to communicate with other people.<sup>1</sup> The human communication

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Peryermeneias*, in: *Opera omnia, cum hypertextus in CD-ROM*, ed. by R. Busa SJ, 1996., lib. 1 l. 2 n. 2.

occurs in language and, as Thomas notices, *people who speak different languages, cannot get on with each other*.<sup>2</sup> Thus, language is a mediation of human communication as well as its indispensable condition. Moreover, the man uses the language, because the latter can signify and can constitute understanding in other's human mind. Nevertheless, the need of communication is not essential only for humans. Aquinas points out that animals communicate with each other as well, because they also can produce "significant voices" (*voces significativa*). But what differs animals from humans is their inability of intellectual cognition. Aquinas notices that if a man cognized only through senses, he wouldn't invent language, the natural significant voices would be sufficient to communicate. But, the man is able to cognize intellectually and this is the reason of invention a language.<sup>3</sup>

In order to communicate his thoughts, the man has to utter some words. These words become parts of a sentence; the latter has to be true or false. With reference to Aristotle's work, Aquinas tries to explain what the interpretation means. So, he claims that interpretation is the speech which sets forth some truth or falsehood. Only such a sentence could be significant (namely it can mean something) and as such, it could be interpreted. So, the knowledge how to build the true-valued sentence is crucial for understanding a significant role of speech.<sup>4</sup> However, constructing the affirmative sentences as well as negative ones is based on some kind of intellectual operation. This operation relies on compositions and divisions which are formal aspects of the sentences. However, Aquinas distinguishes material aspects of the sentences as well. Nouns and verbs are these aspects. Whereas language includes many parts, it can signify materially various things because of its infinite possibilities of formulations. However, when the sentence is already fixed, it can formally signify only one thing, since material aspects of the language have been already framed and composed<sup>5</sup>.

Affirmative sentence is based on intellectual composition, when intellect composes simple conceptions and states connection of the things referred by the conceptions in the world. For example, when there are two conceptions in human's mind, "man" and "rational", intellect can compose them and assert that "Man is rational", because it is true that man is rational. On the other hand, negative sentence is based on intellectual division when intellect divides these mental conceptions and states division between them. Conceptions like "man" and "donkey" are divided by the intellect, because man is not a donkey, so negative sentence "Man is not a donkey" could be formulated. Consequently, at the linguistic level, the affirmative sentence signifies some kind of composition of things in the world, and the negative sentence signifies some kind of intellectual division based on the objects in the reality.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the whole language from Aquinas's standpoint is derived from the operation of human intellect.

Thomas points out that while considering the language, the proper object of consideration should not be the mere utterances (*voces*), but rather "that what is in utterances" (*ea quae sunt in voces*). He calls it *notae* – signs and he claims that these signs could exist threefold. Firstly, they can exist in intellectual conceptions, secondly, in verbal utterance and thirdly, in writing.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup>Ibidem, lib. 1 l. 2 n. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Ibidem, lib. 1 l. 1 n. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Aquinas *De falaciis*, cap. 8.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Peryermeneias*, op.cit., lib. 1 l. 3 n. 4.

<sup>7</sup>Ibidem, lib. 1 l. 2 n. 4.

So, *notae* are in fact propositional contents and they are precisely what is communicated, transferred from one intellect to another. They could be considered at the mental level as well as at the linguistic one. Therefore, language is a sort of vehicle and is understood by Aquinas as the mean of transference of mental content and in consequence, it plays merely intermediary role.

Now, the crucial question is: how is it possible that people understand each other? How is the communication possible? In order to answer these questions, it should be stressed, that the main assumption of medieval philosophy of language is a thesis concerning the object of signification. In medieval philosophy, words refer neither to particular external things, nor to ideal and non-temporal meanings. The utterances refer to the mental concepts directly. The relation between the utterances and the concepts is called signification. Therefore, words signify the concepts and then, these concepts signify directly things in the world. So, the relation between language and things in the world is mediated by the concepts. Mentioned relation is exemplified precisely by the communication. In the process of communication, speakers indicate only the mental concepts, because mental concepts are the direct objects of the signification of language. In consequence, the mental concepts are the very object of dialogue, rather than the external world. At the very point, the question concerning objectivity as well as intersubjectivity and its justification arises.

As it has been mentioned above, Thomas Aquinas understands *notae* as signs. The contents of linguistic utterances are signs of *passiones animae* – passions of the soul, because they signify passions of the soul in an immediate way. In his commentary on *De anima*, Aquinas develops the idea that every act of the soul is some kind of passion. Hence, passivity of these passions or conceptions is strongly underlined here. Considering the nature of mental passions, Aquinas recalls his metaphysical rule, that what is conceived passively has to be the effect of some kind of agency. Whereas intellectual or mental passions are conceived passively, they have to be effects of some act. So, Thomas says, passions of the souls have their source in the real world. In consequence, the world is the cause of our mental conceptions.

This idea is deeply rooted in Aquinas's theory of cognition. According to Aquinas, *the object of cognition is somehow in the cognizer*.<sup>8</sup> It might sound little odd, but what Aquinas has in mind here is that the object of cognition is in fact some kind of inner intellectual object, *species intelligibilis*. This is the main assumption of Thomistic epistemology and it is well explained by John Versor, fifteenth century Aquinas commentator. Versor tries to describe the operation of possible intellect by using the metaphor of wax. Intellect is just like wax, he says. When we try to emboss something in the wax, for example seal ring, the sign of the ring remains in the wax. The sign is from this moment formally identified with the seal ring. Following Versor, the same happens in the case of cognition. The real objects could be embossed in possible intellect. However, the embossed objects are not identified with the real objects, because they are in the intellect only formally.<sup>9</sup> Both Versor and Aquinas stress the passivity of possible intellect; its main operation is to receive the forms.

Understanding the cognition as a mere passivity is Aristotle's idea and it was widely discussed in the thirteenth century by medievals. Peter John Olivi was one of the scholars who

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri De anima*, in: op.cit., lib. 2 l. 12 n. 5.

<sup>9</sup>J. Versor, *Quaestiones magistri Iohannis Versoris super De ente et essentia sancti Thomae de Aquino Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, H. Quentell, Kolonia 1487Q IX, Sc 1.

definitely refuted it. According to Olivi, process of cognition cannot be passive. He justifies his opinion by giving the example of dream and unconsciousness. When the man sleeps or is unconscious, outer objects have an influence on man's cognitive powers. However, cognitive powers do not act. In order to explain the process of cognition, Olivi refers to the notion of intentionality. According to Olivi's theory, intellect has to direct its attention to the object, so it is not completely passive.<sup>10</sup>

However, Aquinas wants to follow Aristotle's theory, so he explains that an act of any cognition, no matter whether sensory or intellectual, happens only when the object of cognition actualizes the intellect. So, to perceive an object is to have sensory form which is caused by an object. Moreover, the object of cognition actualizes the intellect only if it is "embossed" in the intellect or to put it differently, when the intellect receives the form of the object. Aquinas claims that the intellectual or sensory receiving the form happens "according to similarity" – *secundum similitudinem*. So, the form has to be the resemblance of the object.<sup>11</sup> The epistemological function of these forms are twofold. Firstly, due to the forms the real objects are recognized by the intellect. Therefore, in this account, forms are regarded as information-bearing structures. Secondly, forms are representations of the objects with semantic properties like content, reference, truth-value etc. Representational functions of the forms are considered by Aquinas on two levels, both sensory and intellectual. Sensory form is the representation of particular individual and the intellectual form is the representation of the universal nature of the things.<sup>12</sup>

While considering the nature of resemblance of the intellectual forms, Thomas distinguishes two kinds of similarity: natural similarity and representation. He explains this difference by describing the example of a stone. Intellectual species (*species inteligibile*) of a stone has less features of stone than sensory species (*species sensibilis*) of stone, and nevertheless, intellectual species represents the stone more properly.<sup>13</sup> It means that Thomas denies that the act of cognition requires natural similarity. Thus, epistemological representation is not iconic representation.<sup>14</sup> For Aquinas, such a natural and iconic representation is needless in his epistemological framework.<sup>15</sup>

However, here the questions arises: could Thomistic theory of cognition be regarded as a sort of representationalism? The main thesis of representationalism assumes that the world we see is not the real world itself, but merely virtual picture of the real world. In consequence, the world itself is epistemologically unavailable for humans. Therefore, human cognitive powers do not grasp directly the world itself, but only its representation, which is understood as a kind of inner picture. And indeed, Aquinas states that *the thing is cognized by the soul only through some sort of similarity, which exists in the soul*.<sup>16</sup> So, the real object can be cognized only through a kind of inner representations. However, Aquinas does not seem to maintain such a view. Although Aquinas assumes the theory of species, he still claims that human cognitive powers grasp directly the object in the world. Directness or indirectness of cognition is dependent on the kind

<sup>10</sup>R. Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 132.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri De anima*, op.cit., lib. 2 l. 12 n. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Ibidem, lib. 2 l. 12 n. 5.

<sup>13</sup>R. Pasnau, op.cit., p. 107.

<sup>14</sup>Ibidem, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup>Ibidem, pp. 111-112.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Peryermeneias*, op.cit., lib. 1 l. 2 n. 5.

of a cognized object. According to Thomas, there is no more direct cognition of material objects than cognition through representations (*species*). Thus, the statement of existence of species does not result in the assumption that humans perceive the world indirectly<sup>17</sup>.

In the light of above consideration it should not surprise that Thomas concludes that if the passions of the soul were similarities of the real objects, they had to be the same for everyone (*eadem apud omnes*).<sup>18</sup> However, *different people have different opinions concerning different things*. But Aquinas claims that passions of the soul or, as he calls them intellectual conceptions cannot deceive. In order to understand the Aquinas's theory of passions, let us refer to Saint Augustine's philosophy. In Augustinian terminology, passion of the soul is called *verbum interius* – the inner word. Curiously enough, this notion is the centre of the Augustinian theory of communication. When we communicate with each other, Augustine says, *verbum* remains immanently in us. We use the voices or outer signs in order to evoke in the listener's soul just the same *verbum* which persists in our soul.<sup>19</sup> In order to illustrate his theory, Augustine mentions when he was once asked about the city of Carthagine. So as to describe the city, Augustine had to "look inside his soul" and search for a *verbum* of the city. Thus, according to Augustine, in communication we refer not to external objects, but rather to *verbum*, namely internal concepts of the things.<sup>20</sup>

Aquinas draws Augustinian theory and he uses this term in his works as well. Thomas, following Augustine, maintains that *verbum* should be identified as a inner act of understanding; language is not involved in such an act. Hence, *verbum* as a sign and similarity of the object is an intellectual and non-verbal comprehension of the object. For this reason, says Aquinas, fallacious intellectual act is an act which does not correspond with the truth. Therefore, such an act is no understanding.

According to Aquinas, truth and falsehood concern only the level of propositions. The latter, as it has been mentioned above, are kinds of compositions. So, if someone is mistaken while uttering a sentence, he should consider the parts of the propositions, because these parts signify the passions of the soul. But the passions cannot deceive, mainly because on the level of the passions false cannot arise. In order to explain it, Thomas gives an example of *hircocervus*. This Latin word could be translated into "deer-goat" and since Aristotle, it has been regarded by medievals as an example of non-signifying nonsense word. Thomas claims that „deer-goat" is a simple intellectual conception and the truth or falsehood do not concern it. However, if the intellect compares such a conception to the reality, then, it can state whether a conception is true or not by finding out whether a designate of conception exists or not<sup>21</sup>. But still, such a comparison of word and conception can be formulated only in the proposition. Hence, the false can arise only on the level of constructing the propositions. In a result, the false arises only due to the intellectual operations.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup>R. Pasnau, *op.cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Peryermeneias*, *op.cit.*, lib. 1 l. 2 n. 9.

<sup>19</sup>Augustine (Augustyn), *O Trójcy Świętej*, trans. M. Stokowska, introduction J. Tischner, Księgarnia św. Wojciecha, Poznań 1962, IX, VII, 12.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibidem*, VIII, VI, 9.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Peryermeneias*, *op.cit.*, lib. 1 l. 3 n. 13.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibidem*, lib. 1 l. 2 n. 10.

Thomas indicates that intellectual comparison of the conceptions and the real world takes place according to composition as well as to division. These operations of intellects could be understood as thinking. So, when intellect operates, namely divides or compares, it just thinks. Moreover, thinking is a sequence of these mental representations. Aquinas grants that whereas intellect compares one conception to another, it compares one thing to another at the same time. So, thinking understood as an intellectual operation on concepts is a referential relation. Intellectual comparison results in statement concerning relation or identity between two real objects. In consequence, intellect formulates the proposition composed of immediate signs of the conceptions and the real objects. However, intellectual division bases on discovering by an intellect the differences between the objects. Such a discovery results in statement concerning division of the objects.<sup>23</sup> So, as it has been claimed above, comparison between intellect and reality finishes with the formulation of the proposition; the latter signifies directly composition or division of the concepts and indirectly things in the world.

Thomas considers the method of finding out whether intellectual conceptions are true or false. The method is twofold depending on the function of intellect. So, in the case of speculative intellect the mere real object is the proper measure of truth and falsehood of the conceptions. However, in the field of practical intellect it is just the opposite. This practical intellect is the proper measure and the principle of judgment whether the object is true or not. Hence, a piece of art is regarded as a true only when it is adequate to the conception of an artist. Analogically, a piece of art is false when it does not correspond to the artistic idea.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, considering the problem of intersubjectivity, Aquinas wants to assure the objectivity of our linguistic references. In other words, he wants to find out whether people refer to the same objects in the communicative situation. But, since language directly signifies the intellectual conceptions, Aquinas needs to guarantee the objectivity of them. For this reason, he develops the theory of possible intellect, which receives the formal representations of the objects. In a result, intersubjectivity is grounded by Aquinas in his epistemology.

However, it seems that establishing the principles of intersubjectivity in the objective intellectual concepts does not solve the problem, because human communication always involves the language. Thomas Aquinas seems to realize that, thus, he considers the nature of direct relation between language and the world. He formulates this problem in the following question: whether words signify naturally or *ex institutione*, namely from convention? Basically, to signify naturally is to be the resemblance of a signified object. However, John Versor notices some other differences between natural and conventional signification. First difference is based on expression. Voices which signify naturally are not perfectly formulated, because affection disturbs proper expression. In addition, voices which signify naturally, signify unambiguously and objectively. So, their signification is the same for everyone. This is the second difference. The third difference is in the signified object. Natural voices signify directly affections (like the groans of the wounded) and the conventional voices signify intellectual concepts directly. And finally, natural voices are arranged to signify the nature, and the conventional voices are arranged to signify ac-

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De falsis*, op.cit., lib. 1 l. 3 n. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, lib. 1 l. 3 n. 7.

ording to imposition.<sup>25</sup> Hence, in the Versor's account the similarity between the language and the world could be regarded only on the sensory and emotional level.

In order to consider how the similarity between the language and the world could be understood, Aquinas recalls opinions of some other philosophers in the first place. Some of them claim that words do not signify naturally at all. Some other claim that all words signify naturally, because words are just natural similarities of the objects. Aquinas rejects both these two extreme views and in the end he recalls Aristotle who has stated that words do not signify naturally unless *object signified belongs to the nature*.<sup>26</sup> So, Aquinas rejects the view that words signify naturally. Among words, only onomatopoeias (regarded just like Versor's groans of the wounded) can signify naturally, because they signify the very nature of the object.

Aquinas concludes that the words do not signify naturally, but *ex insitutione* – from convention or imposition. Besides, in order to justify his thesis, Aquinas recalls the understanding of language: *word*, he says, *could become a sign*.<sup>27</sup> It is possible, however, only due to significative function of words. Therefore, it means, that the word which does not signify cannot be a sign. It becomes a sign only when it begins to mean something, when it is imposed upon the signified object. And signification happens only in the speech acts, and curiously enough – in communication. On the other hand, voice which signifies naturally cannot become a sign, because it is already a sign. It does not need an imposition, because, it is already arranged to signify the part of nature.

Summing up, according to Aquinas, language has been invented by humans and it is entirely conventional. So, language is not the natural representation of the world. How is then intersubjectivity possible? Aquinas claims that it is possible because all people live in the same world and this world is identical for everyone. Hence, people understand each other, because they experience the same world. This experience results in formation of the intellectual conceptions, which are similarities of the things. At the end, it should be stressed, the principle of intersubjectivity is to be found in the theory of cognition in the Aquinas's account. In consequence, the aim of the communication is to use the language in order to describe the intellectual conceptions in the most accurate way.

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<sup>25</sup> J. Versor J., *Dicta super septem tractatus summularum Petri Hispani*, Nürnberg 1495, A4.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Peryermeneias*, op.cit., lib. 1 l. 4 n. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, lib. 1 l. 4 n. 11.

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## **Epistemological Grounds of Intersubjectivity in Thomas Aquinas's Philosophy**

**ABSTRACT.** The aim of this paper is to present an epistemological grounds of intersubjectivity in Thomas Aquinas' account. Aquinas refers to Aristotelian theory of language and tries to answer the question concerning the possibility of intersubjective human communication. In order to answer it, he develops the philosophy of language which is based on his epistemology. Thus, an epistemology seems to be the basis of guarantion of the intersubjectivity.

### **KEYWORDS**

Thomas Aquinas, Medieval philosophy of language, Intersubjectivity