

## The Cogitative Power: Aquinas's Development of His Predecessors' Views

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The cogitative power is a little-known topic in Aquinas's philosophical psychology. Yet it is of great importance, since it constitutes the bridge between the embodied external senses and imagination, on the one hand, and the immaterial intellect and universal reason, on the other. For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, imagination deals only with sensory images, while the immaterial intellect deals with non-sensory universal concepts. In contrast, the cogitative power, like the imagination, is localized in the brain, and it has individual identities as its object. It also has a key role in the existential judgment, for, as we will see, Aquinas teaches that "the cogitative apprehends the individual as existing under a common nature."

Perhaps the best way of understanding the many different functions that the cogitative performs is to unveil its historical origins in ancient Greek and medieval Arabic philosophy. Having done so, one can elucidate the terminology that describes the infra-intellectual nature of this power. Aquinas inherited several names for the cogitative power. These names help indicate its myriad functions, which range from perceiving threats to moral reasoning regarding individual actions. Although this paper employs Thomistic and Aristotelian technical philosophical language, it will hopefully provide some guideposts through this challenging material.

### The Origin of the Cogitative

For Aristotle, the intellect and will have "despotic" (i.e. absolute) control over the body's voluntary movements, but only "political" (i.e. indirect) rule over the lower sensory powers, whether they be appetitive or imaginative. Hence, these lower powers can resist the intellect's judgment; they do not necessarily obey. When one's intellect commands one's hand to move, it does so with absolute authority. Yet when one's rational appetite orders an emotion in a sensory appetite to change, the result is usually far from instantaneous.

Aristotle distinguishes the power of understanding (*nous*) or universal reason (*logos tou katholou*) from the capacity for reasoning regarding contingents, i.e. the reasoning (or calculative) power. These are uniquely human capacities of the imagination in conjunction with intellect, as evidenced by the exclusively human capacity for moral reasoning regarding our actions. This is the first origin of the cogitative power.

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To take a systematic approach, one can demonstrate the existence of a cognitive power inferior to intellect as follows. Cognition necessarily precedes appetition, since one cannot seek to acquire or avoid what one is wholly unaware of. Humans sometimes make simultaneous contradictory judgments regarding some thing or action. This is especially evident in the case of neurotic or psychotic behaviors. For example, a paranoid's imaginary assessment that someone is a threat causes him to discount all intellectual arguments to the contrary. Although the paranoid's intellect is present as a specifically human capacity, as evidenced by language-use, its activity is impeded, and he considers what is only imaginary to be real.<sup>2</sup>

Less dramatically, one may form contradictory intellectual and instinctive judgments; as in "a third piece of cake should not be eaten" (in view of the calories it contains) and "a third piece of cake is desirable" (in view of its flavor). One can make a cognitive application of the principle of non-contradiction to such opposed evaluations. The principle of non-contradiction states that something cannot both be and not be, at the same time, and in the same respect. As applied here, one power cannot assess something both positively and negatively at the same time and in the same respect. Therefore, there are two judging faculties, one sensory, the other intellectual, which do not always act in unison.

Aristotle followed a similar reasoning process in introducing a sub-intellectual cognitive capacity that forms practical judgments regarding singulars. Chapters 9-11 are in some ways the high point of *De Anima* Book 3, for they show how the soul's powers interact so as to allow animals to act in the world. Whereas Platonic dualism rendered the interaction of soul and body mysterious, Aristotle's holistic account of soul and body allows for a seamless account of the relation between cognition and desire.

In Chapters 9-11, Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of imagination. In brutes, *sensory* imagination acts in tandem with the sensory appetites. In contrast, the rational or deliberative imagination can apply the universal judgment of right reason to oneself and to a concrete act. Aristotle contrasts deliberative imagination's particular judgment with intellect's universal ethical judgment: "Since the one judgment or reasoning (*logos*) is universal and the other is particular, for the first tells us that such and such a kind of man should do such and such a kind of act, and the second that this is an act of the kind meant, and I a person of the type intended, it is the latter opinion that really originates movement, not the universal."<sup>3</sup> The parallel text in the *Nicomachean Ethics* gives the example of a son's duty to respect his father. "All sons should respect their fathers" is a universal intellectual judgment. Deliberative imagination then applies this to one's concrete situation. One only moves oneself to act by means of a singular judgment bearing upon oneself and a designated object.

In late antiquity, a Greek commentatorial tradition (unknown to Aquinas) held that the passive intellect (*nous pathētikos*) of *De Anima* 3.5 does not refer to intellect, properly speaking, but to sub-intellectual capacities such as imagination. Similarly, Avicenna, Averroes and Aquinas take the passive intellect as equivalent to (or inclusive of) the cogitative power. Hence, *De Anima* 3 chapters 5 and 9-11 are the ultimate origin of the cogitative power. Aquinas follows Averroes' interpretation of *De Anima* 3.9-11 when he teaches that the *sub-intellectual* cogitative power works against the right assessment of a situation in the weak-willed.

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<sup>2</sup> For a cinematic presentation of this, one could watch the recent film *The Professor and the Madman*.

<sup>3</sup> *De Anima* 3.11, 434a17-20; McKeon ed., 600 (modified).

Thus, Aquinas formulated his doctrine of the internal senses in general and the cogitative in particular based on the Latin translations of Avicenna's book on "The Soul", known as his *De Anima*, and of Averroes' Long Commentary on the *De Anima*. Let us briefly present these two thinkers' views.

In order to explain animal behavior, Avicenna added the estimative power to the Aristotelian triad of the common sense, imaginative power and memory. Not only did Avicenna introduce a new power into Aristotelian psychology; he also considered the estimative power to be the ruling internal sense. The estimative grasps sensed objects as either harmful or beneficial by means of *notions* or *ideas* (the Arabic is *ma'ānin*, most literally, 'meanings'). A mouse views a cat as dangerous, or a beaver views a stick as useful for dam-building by means of such notions. The estimative power's object is thus sensory (rather than intellectual) notions of good or evil.

For Avicenna, the human cogitative joins and divides both images and notions of harm or benefit. These notions in no way attain the universality of intellectual concepts. Yet they surpass mere imagination since, as such, they cannot be pictured or otherwise represented. Nonetheless, Avicenna holds that they are always joined to external sensibles or internal images. In this, they differ from concepts. For, in contrast to Aquinas, Avicenna holds that the intellect is freed from the need for images or phantasms (the Greek term) once abstraction has taken place. The Latins translated *ma'ānin* by the Latin term *intentiones*, thus yielding estimative and cogitative "intentions" as a distinct kind of sub-intellectual but supra-imaginary cognitive object. Aquinas explicitly notes that 'intention' does not mean the same thing when said of the cogitative's sub-intellectual ideas as opposed to the will's intention to act.

For Averroes, the cogitative power grasps the individual as such. It is by the cogitative that one perceives "Socrates" when one sees him approach. Averroes writes: "[The cogitative] power is a kind of reason. And its activity is nothing but the placing of the idea of the imagined form in its individuality in memory, or the discerning of it [i.e. the individual] from [the image] in conception and imagination."<sup>4</sup> Averroes rejects the Avicennian estimative as an unnecessary novelty, and along with it, animal ideas of harm or benefit. Restricting himself only to overtly Aristotelian terminology, Averroes replaced the brute estimative with mere imagination. Rather than ascribe estimative ideas of harm or benefit to animals, he speaks of instinct. For Avicenna, the human estimative grasped sub-intellectual ideas, while the cogitative composed and divided these ideas. Averroes assigned these functions to the cogitative.

### Aquinas on the Cogitative

Aquinas synthesizes the Aristotelian account of imagination and memory with the Avicennian estimative power. Aquinas distinguishes the sensory soul's faculties by applying the following principle: one defines a *power* by the proper *formality* under which it apprehends its *object*. External senses such as sight and hearing receive external sensory forms such as color and sound. Aquinas adopts Avicenna's language of the "internal senses." For Aquinas, the four internal senses are the common sense, imagination, the cogitative power, and memory.

The common sense (*sensus communis*) provides awareness of and discriminates between external sensory impressions. One can refer to the Aristotelian capacity as the common sense to distinguish it from the unrelated "common sense" of ordinary language.

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<sup>4</sup> *Long Commentary on De Anima* (LCDA) 3.20 (ed. Crawford, 449.175-79).

This Aristotelian power of the soul unites the disparate external sensory qualities such as color, sound, smell, odor and texture regarding a single object, say, an apple. Imagination retains the unified sensory impression of the apple.

Aquinas almost always engages in gradated assent or dissent from his predecessors. He thus forms a new synthesis meant to exclude oversights but retain the truth from each. This is what he does regarding Aristotle, Avicenna and Averroes regarding human and brute supra-imaginary sensory cognition.

Thus, Aquinas modifies and synthesizes Avicenna's and Averroes' views on the estimative and cogitative. Like Avicenna, Aquinas attributes the estimative grasp of sensory harm or benefit to brute animals. Like Averroes, Aquinas uses 'cogitative' for the exclusively human power that apprehends non-externally-sensed notions. Unlike Avicenna and like Averroes, Aquinas calls the corresponding power in perfect animals the estimative (*aestimativa*) because it cannot perform the additional functions rendered possible by continuity with intellect. Aquinas integrates Averroes' account which stresses the cogitative apprehension of individual intentions. Due to the cogitative's continuity with intellect, it is the highest, most perfect internal sense.

I submit that it is best to use 'perception' to refer to what Aristotle called the indirect sensation of an individual. Aristotle notes that one directly senses a colored sounding object, yet one does not grasp individual identity by means of external sensation. One senses an individual such as "Callias" indirectly, or, to use Aristotle's term, incidentally. In keeping with modern English usage, it seems best to reserve 'sensation' for the apprehension of proper sensibles such as color and sound, and common sensibles such as shape and size.

Once the estimative or cogitative has associated harm or benefit with some object (e.g. a predator), the memorative power retains the corresponding notion. The common sense, imaginative, cogitative and memorative powers allow humans to sense and evaluate objects in their environment, and then react appropriately by the sensory appetite and locomotive power.

Let us now proceed to discuss relevant terminology for the cogitative. We can then examine its sensory nature and proper object.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas argues that materialists are mistaken when they claim that even the most abstract mental acts belong exclusively to a body or a bodily state. However, one can fall into the opposite error by focusing so exclusively on the immaterial intellect as to overlook the internal senses' indispensable role in human knowledge, not just in its beginnings, but in all stages of human cognition. One may call this overemphasis epistemological intellectualism. Such intellectualism ultimately can lead to an anthropology that seems rather dualistic. This is contrary to Aristotle's doctrine that "there is no thought without an image" and that "the intellect thinks the forms *in* the images."

Aquinas clearly teaches that the human capacity for abstract reasoning makes us cognitively superior to all other animals. Yet, like other animals, humans unavoidably rely on internal senses such as the imagination and the cogitative (or estimative) in their thought processes.

An in-depth study of the internal senses' respective functions can help establish a middle ground between the two extremes of physicalism and intellectualism. While materialists attribute all mental acts to the brain, the standard Thomistic account of universal knowledge tends to focus exclusively on intellect, with the internal senses

serving merely as a conduit to transmit images from the external senses. Yet, for Aquinas, the internal senses have a crucial function in *all* human knowledge.

### Terminology: 'Passive Intellect' and 'Particular Reason'

Aquinas uses varied terminology for this internal sense. Aquinas considers Aristotle's 'passive intellect' and 'particular reason' in *De Anima* 3.5 and 3.11 (respectively) to refer to the cogitative power, as we see here:

The passive intellect, of which the Philosopher speaks, is not the potential intellect, but particular reason, which is called the cogitative power. It has a determinate organ in the body, namely, the middle ventricle of the brain, as the Commentator [i.e. Averroes] says in the same place; and without it the soul understands nothing at present; though it will do so in the future, when it will not need to abstract from phantasms [i.e. in the beatific vision].<sup>5</sup>

Aquinas maintained this account of the cogitative unchanged from his first major work, the *Sentences* to his last, the *Summa theologiae*. Aquinas makes three crucial assertions in this important text. First, the cogitative is omnipresent in the life of the mind due to the intellect's dependence on phantasms. Second, the cogitative is localized in the brain. Third, the passive intellect is not the "possible" or potential intellect, but the cogitative power. Let us consider each.

First, since the immaterial intellect cannot operate independently of a bodily instrument in the present life, humans cannot understand without the cogitative. As we will see, the cogitative plays a role in the three acts of the mind. These acts are: apprehension of concepts, judgment, and reasoning. One can readily understand these mental acts by attending to their corresponding linguistic expressions. One expresses an apprehended concept by a universal *term*, a judgment by a *proposition*, and a reasoning by a *sylogism*. A syllogism is a combination of interrelated statements wherein the conclusion follows from the premises.

Aquinas explicitly states that, while universal reasoning is a function of the intellect, the cogitative functions as *particular* reason. While universal reason forms judgments with exclusively universal terms, the cogitative forms judgments containing singular terms. Thomistic accounts of human cognition could benefit by integrating the cogitative's key role in thinking of, reasoning about, and speaking of singulars.

Second, following Avicenna and Averroes, Aquinas holds that the cogitative is localized in the brain's middle ventricle. Although one cannot reduce the cogitative power to its material substrate, the cogitative is the form or first act of specific organs, namely, certain brain centers.

Third, Aquinas explicitly teaches that '*passive* intellect' does not refer to the possible or *potential* intellect. In the *Contra Gentiles*, he writes: "the habit of science is not in the passive intellect...but rather in the possible intellect."<sup>6</sup> The potential, or possible intellect, is part of what we call 'intellect' in ordinary language; our ability to retain and utilize abstract concepts. Nonetheless, prominent translations render *intellectus passivus* as "possible intellect" and *intellectus possibilis* as "passive intellect." Although recent translations have begun to correct this error, past scholarly literature sometimes refers to the potential intellect as the passive intellect and *vice versa*.

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<sup>5</sup> Sent. 4.50.1.1 ad 3.

<sup>6</sup> CG 2.73, n. 22; cf. CG 2.75, n. 16: "the passive intellect...is a material power."

## Nature and Proper Object

An objection in *Summa theologiae* 1.78.4 suggests that the cogitative is an entirely different power from the estimative: “The cogitative’s act...[is] not less distant from the act of the estimative...than the estimative’s act is from the act of imagination.” Aquinas replies: “The cogitative and memorative have such an eminence in man, not due to that which is proper to the sensitive part, but from a certain affinity and proximity to universal reason, according to a certain overflow. And thus they are not different powers, but the same, yet more perfect than they are in other animals.” Although the cogitative is more perfect than the estimative, there is not a difference in kind, but only in degree, between the two powers. The cogitative’s greater perfection is due to its continuity with intellect, by which it is elevated to perform higher acts. Although universal reason’s influence allows the cogitative to perform acts which the estimative is completely incapable of, the two powers’ objects are identical insofar as both deal with intentions that the external senses cannot perceive.

In the context of indirect intellectual cognition of the singular, Aquinas identifies the cogitative’s object as individual intentions. Hence, the cogitative’s proper object is twofold: individual notions such as Socrates or Plato, as well as notions of harm and benefit.

Although Aquinas never states the estimative’s proper object, it too grasps both individuals and harm or benefit. However, Aquinas makes a qualification regarding higher animals’ apprehension of individuals: “the animal in no way apprehends by its natural estimative...individuals to whom its action or passion does not extend.” Thus, the estimative’s primary focus is what is to be sought or avoided as good or bad for the animal. In contrast, the cogitative has an additional speculative orientation whereby it can apprehend an individual as such in a way that transcends the drive towards the survival of the individual or the species. One may thus conclude that the estimative’s primary object is intentions of harm or benefit. Since the estimative only apprehends individual intentions in relation to such survival-oriented intentions, the individual intentions are subordinate to those of harm or benefit. Thus, individual intentions constitute a secondary object of the estimative.

## Division of the Cogitative’s Functions

By collating all of Aquinas’s scattered texts on the cogitative, one can determine that it performs a total of six functions. The fundamental division is between those it shares with the estimative and those that transcend mere estimation due to universal reason’s influence.

### List: Six Cogitative Functions<sup>7</sup>

A) Brute or Human Estimative:

- 1) Perceives notions (intentions) of harm or benefit
- 2) Perceives individual notions (e.g. Socrates)

B) Particular Reason:

- 3) Prepares phantasms for abstraction
- 4) Instrumental role in indirect reflective intellectual knowledge of the singular [via individual notions]

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<sup>7</sup> This list elaborates on Fabro, “Knowledge and Perception,” 353. Fabro omits function 6.

- 5) "Forms the minor of the practical syllogism"
- 6) "Reasons from one [singular] thing to another" (practical or speculative)

The last three functions depend on the cogitative's role as particular reason regarding the individual notions that intellect only knows indirectly. Aquinas mentions the sixth function in order to bring out how the inference to a conclusion regarding a singular, whether practical or theoretical, is a distinct act from forming a discrete singular proposition (such as a singular minor premise).

One could object is that it seems incongruous for the same power to govern both instinctive actions, such as an infant's taking the breast, and the quasi-intellectual functions of judgment and reasoning regarding singulars. Hence, the cogitative's apparently heterogeneous acts may seem to lack cohesiveness. Yet a distinction based on Aquinas's use of 'estimation' as applied to humans sheds light on his account. It follows from Aquinas's statements that one can divide the cogitative's functions into two levels: intellect-related and sense-related. One should attribute those cogitative acts that depend on intellect to *particular reason*, and those that only require sensation to the *human estimative*.<sup>8</sup>

By this distinction, one situates the cogitative's many operations on a vertical axis from least to most cognitively advanced. The cogitative's first two functions pertain to the human estimative. These acts involve reason only indirectly, as in acquired intentions of harm or benefit, or not at all, as in a newborn infant's seeking to nurse. The four intellect-related functions belong to particular reason, the highest being speculative discursive reasoning that makes use of singular instances, such as the deduction that, if all humans are rational, Socrates must be rational.

This way of parsing out the cogitative's acts is merely an explication of Aquinas's own usage. Aquinas employs 'particular reason' and 'passive intellect' exclusively regarding the cogitative in humans who have attained the age of reason. He writes: "The sensitive power at its highest point participates somewhat in the intellectual power in man, in whom sense is joined to intellect."<sup>9</sup> The highest point of sensory activity thus corresponds to the cogitative as particular reason. The cogitative power can only perform its higher functions because it is united to the intellect.

As with most of Aquinas's key terms and notions, his use of 'estimative' and 'cogitative' shows no fundamental change throughout his career. In his earliest discussions of the cogitative and estimative in the *Sentences*, Aquinas has already assimilated and synthesized Avicenna's and Averroes' views. Aquinas explicitly distinguishes the animal estimative from the human cogitative in *Sentences* 4.49.2.2.

Although Aquinas never states the distinction between the human estimative and particular reason explicitly, he habitually refers to the estimative rather than the cogitative when referring to infants, children or the insane, as well as human sensuality in general. The mature Aquinas refers to the estimative power in humans, significantly, in reference to madmen: "The judgment and apprehension of reason is impeded by the violent and disordered apprehension of imagination, as is the estimative power's judgment, as can be seen in the insane."<sup>10</sup> Aquinas refers to the estimative rather than the cogitative precisely because particular reason's operations depend on universal reason, and the latter is impaired in the insane due to the imagination's malfunction.

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<sup>8</sup> Klubertanz mentions this use of 'human estimative' (*Discursive Power*, 239).

<sup>9</sup> In DA 2.13, n. 397.

<sup>10</sup> "Impeditur enim iudicium et apprehensio rationis propter vehementem et inordinatam apprehensionem imaginationis, et iudicium virtutis aestimativae, ut patet in amentibus." ST 1-2.77.1.

One can reasonably apply ‘estimative’ to humans more generally regarding cognitive acts that do not involve reason, whether in children or in instinctive reactions in adults. One finds confirmation of this in Aquinas’s use of *aestimare*, beginning with the *Sentences*. Thus, in discussing the passion of revenge, Aquinas observes: “the injury against a person has a natural horror, nor does it end in some real good for the one committing it, but only an estimated good, i.e. vengeance.”<sup>11</sup> Aquinas frames the apparent as opposed to the real good as the object of estimation rather than intellection and cogitation.

The cogitative has a key role in human knowledge of singulars. For Aquinas, the intellect’s proper object is the universal nature. Hence, it cannot know the singular as such, but only insofar as it falls under the universal. Aquinas writes: “The cogitative apprehends the individual *as existing under a common nature*.”<sup>12</sup> Aquinas also attributes an “absolute judgment regarding singulars” to the cogitative power.<sup>13</sup> These comments refer to the cogitative’s key role in what Thomists now call the existential judgment. Since the intellect can only know singulars *indirectly*, that is, by reflecting back on its own activity, the cogitative is the highest power that has direct knowledge of singulars. We could not be aware of the people and things that surround us as actually existing without the cogitative’s apprehensions of singulars. Of course, the cogitative alone is insufficient for us to know things as existing. Existential judgements also require the immaterial intellect’s grasp of being as its formal object.

Shortly after Aquinas’s death, Scotus rejected his view that the intellect has no direct knowledge of singulars. For Scotus, each individual has its own proper nature; thus Socrates has “Socrateity.” This ontological privileging of material singulars seems difficult to reconcile with their inherent contingency. The idea that each individual has its own individual nature was a step towards Ockham’s conceptualism. Ockham went on to hold that only singulars are real and hence there are no universal *natures*, just *concepts* that group things together. In saying that the concept of *horse* is fundamentally no different than that of, say, *pegasus*, Ockham laid a crucial foundation-stone of Modern philosophy. Otherwise put, Ockham made a crack in the foundation of Aristotelianism that the Moderns would increase so much as to yield Postmodern nihilism.

In conclusion, this paper has provided a brief historical and systematic presentation of the cogitative faculty, its objects, and its acts. We have clarified several confusions that the topic could give rise to. Of course, what we have seen is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. (My forthcoming book on this topic goes into greater detail on all the points presented herein.)

The cogitative power is relevant to many questions regarding the relation between the soul and the body, such as how to distinguish between aspects of mental acts that are brain-based, and those that pertain to the immaterial intellect and thus transcend the brain. Despite the unavoidable technical terminology, I hope this introduction might serve to stimulate interest in this important and timely topic.

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<sup>11</sup> “*Nocumentum quod alicui in persona infertur, naturalem horrorem habet, nec terminatur ad aliquod reale bonum facientis, sed solum ad bonum aestimatum, quod est vindicta.*” Sent. 3.37.1.2.2 ad s.c. 1.

<sup>12</sup> In DA 2.13, n. 398. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> In EN 6.9, n. 1255.