

Intentional Transfer in Averroes, Indifference of Nature in Avicenna, and the Issue of the Representationalism of Aquinas

Comments on Max Herrera and Richard Taylor

Is Aquinas a representationalist or a direct realist? Max Herrera's (and, for that matter, Claude Panaccio's) qualified answers to each alternative show that the real significance of the question is not that if we answer it, then we can finally learn under which classification Aquinas should fall, but rather that upon considering it we can learn something about the intricacies of the question itself. In these comments I will first argue that the Averroistic notion of "intentional transfer", combined with the Avicennean idea of the indifference of nature, yielding the Thomistic doctrine of the formal unity of the knower and the known renders the question moot with regard to Aquinas, indeed, with regard to the pre-modern epistemological tradition in general. These considerations will then lead to a number of further, both historical and philosophical questions, which I will offer in the end for further discussion.

So, why is it interesting at all whether this or that philosopher is a representationalist or a direct realist? And why is this question interesting in particular in connection with pre-modern philosophers, who certainly did not think of themselves in these terms?

To answer the first question, we must recall that the distinction emerged in the context of the modern (post-Cartesian) theory of ideas. As Thomas Reid saw it, the problem with that theory was that it constituted a mistaken theory of perception and mental representation in general, which in turn led to skepticism concerning an external, mind-independent, physical reality.

How does representationalism lead to skepticism? A simple answer to this question may appear to be that since representationalists assume the existence of some intermediary representations, the so-called ideas, between our mental acts and the objects of these representations, and it is only these ideas that they claim we are directly aware of, it follows that we can never be sure whether there really are any matching objects corresponding to these representations. Therefore, from this representationalist picture it directly seems to follow that all our knowledge-claims concerning an external reality beyond our ideas are doubtful.

The trouble with this simple answer is that it ignores Descartes' important remark in his *Replies to the First Objections*, where he writes: "the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally, as it does in the heavens, but objectively, that is, in the way in which objects are wont to be in the intellect". (AT VII 102; CSM, II 75) The important point here is that the idea of the sun is nothing but the sun considered as the object of the intellect, and not an intermediary "between" the sun and the intellect, distinct from both. So, on the basis of this remark and the popular understanding of what makes someone a representationalist, Descartes is either not a representationalist after all, and then his brand of skepticism cannot be a consequence of his representationalism, or, if his skepticism really *is* a consequence of his representationalism, then we have to reconsider *what* is *essential* to representationalism on account of which it entails this kind of skepticism. However, if we were to say that its skeptical implications are *not* essential

to representationalism, then we would seem to miss the point on account of which the distinction between direct realism and representationalism was philosophically interesting in the first place. So, we had better take the other alternative, and see how Descartes can and has to be a representationalist in the appropriate sense, in which it necessarily leads to the type of skepticism he entertains.

If we take it to be a distinguishing mark of representationalism that it leads to the kind of skepticism Descartes entertains, then we must be clear on the issue of what kind of skepticism we are talking about. Of course, everybody can be skeptical about all sorts of unfounded knowledge-claims, indeed, on the grounds that such claims are not merely actually unfounded, but cannot be justified. In this sense, for example, Aquinas is skeptical about the knowability of the eternity of the world. But the kind of skepticism threatening in the modern case is a sort of *restricted global* skepticism concerning *any* knowledge claim about an extra-mental physical reality, arguing for the possibility of our complete cognitive isolation from such a world, envisioned in the philosophical fables of the Demon-manipulated Cartesian mind, or brains-in-vats, recently most vividly visualized in the Matrix Trilogy.

Descartes' famous dreaming and Demon arguments were devised to establish precisely this possibility, namely, the possibility that all our cognitive acts that appear to represent an extramental physical reality are possibly non-veridical. The dreaming argument seeks to establish this much concerning all sensory cognitions, arguing for the possibility that they are not matched by any actually existing physical object they appear to represent. The Demon argument, on the other hand, seeks to establish that even our intellectual acts may not have any corresponding reality that they appear to represent (that is to say, it may be the case not only that there is no physical world for us to see, touch, hear, etc., but also that if there is any reality besides our own consciousness, that reality cannot be a world of bodies in general: our intellectual concepts of bodies may be entirely vacuous, unmatched by any real object, whether past, present, future, or merely possible). The crucial idea of these arguments is that it might be possible, by means of some elaborate manipulation of our consciousness, for some agent to produce all the same cognitive acts, with exactly the same mental contents in our mind, regardless of whether or not they are matched by some real objects that they appear to represent.

Looking at these arguments in this way, the connection between skepticism and representationalism now should be obvious. In this framework, global skepticism about external physical objects emerges because the relationship between cognitive acts and their ultimate objects is taken to be contingent. What really matters in this regard is not that an intermediate object, distinct from both the cognitive act and its ultimate object is posited between the act and its ultimate object, for even if the intermediate object is identified with the ultimate object, as is the case in Descartes' remark, if that identity is taken to be contingent, then the possibility of complete cognitive isolation will still be an inevitable implication. But Descartes certainly took the identity of the sun with the idea of the sun to be a contingent identity, which is clear from his allowing the possibility that I might entertain the very same visual idea of the sun (having the very same act of sight), even if God were to remove the sun itself and would just maintain my act of sight, now targeting the remaining vacuous sun-idea.

So, taking it to be the distinguishing mark of modern representationalism what renders it philosophically interesting, namely, that it entails the possibility of complete cognitive isolation from a physical reality, the really essential feature of representationalism turns out to be not that it posits an intermediary object, but rather that it takes the relationship between cognitive act and ultimate object to be contingent. To be sure, assuming the non-identity of intermediary object and ultimate object renders it more plausible to assume the contingency of this relationship. For then we clearly *can* have the same acts, with the same intermediary objects, regardless of whether there are matching ultimate objects in reality, *unless* there is some further reason for us to claim that there is a necessary relation between intermediary and ultimate objects. But, as we could see, the actual identity of ultimate and intermediate objects in and of itself does not guarantee the necessary relationship between act and ultimate object, for the actual identity of ultimate and intermediate object may be taken to be contingent. On the other hand, the non-identity of ultimate and intermediate objects does not entail the contingency of the relationship between act and ultimate object, if there is a reason why the intermediate and ultimate objects are necessarily related, despite their non-identity.

I believe that in the pre-Cartesian, indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, pre-Ockhamist epistemological framework, what provides this further reason is precisely the idea of intentional transfer combined with the doctrine of the indifference of nature, analyzed by Max and Richard, yielding the Thomistic doctrine of the (formal) identity of the knower and the known.

In this framework, there *are* intermediary objects between cognitive acts and their ultimate objects. Indeed, there can be *multiple* intermediary objects between a cognitive act and its ultimate objects, as Aquinas certainly takes it to be the case in intellectual cognition, where an act of thought uses an intelligible species to form a concept to represent a common nature that in turn exists individualized in the ultimate objects of this act of thought, namely, in the members of the species, some of which provided the sensory information, the phantasms, from which their intelligible species was abstracted.

So, if what makes someone a representationalist is the mere positing of intermediary objects, then Aquinas is certainly “guilty” on several counts. But, as we have seen, the mere positing of intermediary objects in and of itself is not what makes representationalism an alleged “epistemological crime”. It is rather its implication of the possibility of Demon-skepticism that does. However, this implication is not so much the consequence of the positing of intermediary objects, as it is the consequence of the assumed contingency of the relationship between cognitive act and its ultimate object, whether *with* or *without* the assumption of any intermediaries between them. But Aquinas is certainly not guilty of *this* kind of “epistemologically criminal” representationalism. His representationalism is the epistemologically *innocent* positing of intermediary objects that on account of their formal identity with the ultimate objects *necessarily* relate cognitive acts to their ultimate objects. But this kind of “innocent” representationalism is certainly unjustly “criminalized” by the modern perception that the positing of intermediaries directly entails the possibility of Demon-skepticism.

Now, having thus distinguished epistemologically “innocent” and epistemologically “criminal” representationalism, and having classified Aquinas as belonging to the

innocent kind, the question obviously emerges whether there are also corresponding versions of direct realism, and who, if anybody, falls under those classifications.

Since “epistemological guilt”, on the foregoing analysis attaches to the contingency of the relation between cognitive acts and their (ultimate) objects, and not to positing any intermediaries, one might expect that there are direct realists, i.e., philosophers not positing such intermediaries, who are, nevertheless, “epistemologically guilty” in allowing the contingency of this relationship. In fact, this is precisely the characteristic of post-Ockhamist nominalism, and of Ockham himself, after he abandoned his *fictum*-theory. Late-medieval nominalist philosophers are direct realists in the sense that they deny any intermediaries between cognitive acts and their objects, but they are “epistemologically guilty” in the sense just described. Descartes, on the other hand, seems to be an interesting borderline-case: he is apparently talking about ideas as intermediary objects all the time, but in the above-quoted remark, he allows their identification with ultimate objects. But since he obviously merely contingently identifies intermediary and ultimate objects, he is necessarily “epistemologically guilty” of the usual charges brought against representationalism. Nevertheless, the genuine representationalists in the commonly accepted sense, in which they both endorse intermediary objects and are “epistemologically guilty”, are Reid’s actual targets, namely, the British empiricists, Locke, Berkley and Hume, who just reacted differently to basically the same representationalist framework (the latter two simply abandoning the inaccessible ultimate objects of Locke’s ideas).

Now, given this analysis of the representationalist vs. direct realist distinction, I think it is clear why it cannot be applied without further ado in a pre-modern, pre-Cartesian, or indeed pre-Ockhamist context. But this result certainly opens up a number of further philosophical and historical questions.

It seems that the epistemological advantage of Aquinas’ and Averroes’ pre-modern representationalism is that on account of analyzing the cognitive process in terms of intentional transfer that preserves the same ontologically indifferent *ratio*, it simply does not allow for the possibility of the fundamental, global mismatch between mental representations and their ultimate physical objects that “epistemologically guilty” modern representationalists as well as nominalist direct realists commonly endorse. If this is correct, then the fundamental issue seems to be the following: what accounts for this shift in the analysis of the cognitive process that allows the emergence of “epistemologically guilty” modern representationalism and the equally guilty direct realism of late-medieval nominalists?

People sometime make the argument (in fact, my friend and colleague Giorgio Pini made this point just a couple of weeks ago in connection with my lecture on a similar topic) that it was the 1277 condemnations’ emphasis on divine omnipotence that allowed the emergence of these “epistemologically guilty” analyses of the cognitive process. But the relevant principle of that emphasis (namely, that the first agent by its absolute power can bring about immediately whatever it brings about by its ordinate power mediately) was very much in force in the thinking of Aquinas as well as in the thought of his Islamic predecessors. So, the emphasis on omnipotence in itself, although it is certainly relevant, does not seem sufficient. What else is needed, then? Perhaps it is in this regard that we

can learn a great deal from Averroes' criticism of Al-Ghazali (and from Al-Ghazali's earlier criticisms of Alfarabi and Avicenna).

For there, it seems, we may find the key to *what* it is in the general analysis of causation that allows Ghazali's occasionalism, in the sense of the total elimination of the transfer of energy and information from secondary causes to their effects. The relevance of this question is that this occasionalist possibility has the complete cognitive isolation of a cognitive subject from a world of secondary causes merely as its special case.

Furthermore, I think it is also quite remarkable that we do not have the epistemological dangers of occasionalism in Avicenna or Averroes, despite the fact, as Richard carefully pointed out, that the agent intellect in their conception is just as ontologically separate from us as God is, and so it might just as well have the power to isolate us from, rather than join us to, an external physical reality. Again, the notions of intentional transfer and indifference of nature seem to be crucial here, in contrast to the notion of causality involved in Ghazali's occasionalism. But, not knowing these authors first-hand, I may be totally wrong here.

So, and this is my specific question to our presenters as experts in Islamic philosophy: what is it in Al-Ghazali's account that allows his occasionalism and what is it in Averroes' and Avicenna's accounts of causality that excludes it (if it really does), despite their common endorsement of divine omnipotence?

Gyula Klima
Fordham University

Presented at the
Fordham International Conference on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy
October 15, 2005,
Fordham University,
New York, NY