Aquinas’s Use of Platonism

What has often gone unnoticed or at least is not commented on is the way in which St. Thomas Aquinas used Platonic insights in order to explain what the soul is and how it functions in extraordinary situations before and after death. Such Platonism typically occurs when Aquinas sets out to explain why and how it is that the human soul needs to function independently of the senses. The reason for such independence is that the mind can see God unhindered by any sensory input when God is seen face to face. How it occurs is explained by Aquinas in terms of an intense intellectual attentiveness to God which occurs with the necessary aid of a supernatural disposition which allows God to be seen in the divine essence itself. This encounter is described as *visio Dei*, the face to face vision of God. In order for the mind to operate in this way, sensory activity must, according to Aquinas’s account, cease since, according to Thomas, if the senses continued to operate in their natural way of providing potentially intelligible data for mental abstraction, this would prevent the possibility of such an encounter occurring:

...for the understanding to be raised to the vision of the divine essence, one’s whole attention must be concentrated on this vision, since this (the vision of God) is the most intensely intelligible object, and the understanding can reach it only by striving for it with total effort. Therefore it is necessary to have complete abstraction from the bodily senses when the mind is raised to the vision of God.

(*De Veritate, 13.3*)

Indeed, Aquinas implies that were the senses to be somehow involved, this would result in a form of sensory pollution that would taint the purity of the mental act of seeing God’s essence:

* All Hallows College, Dublin.
Nevertheless, in so far as the purity of intellectual knowledge is not wholly obscured in human understanding, as happens in the senses whose knowledge cannot go beyond material things, it has the power to consider things which are purely immaterial by the very fact that it retains some purity. Therefore, if (the mind) is ever raised beyond its ordinary level of immaterial things, namely, the divine essence, it must be wholly cut off from the sight of material things during that act. Hence, since the sensory powers can only deal with material things, one cannot be raised to the vision of God unless he/she is wholly deprived of the use of the bodily senses. (De Ver. 13.3)

While this may seem a plausible possibility after death when the soul is separated from the body and bodily existence altogether, it does present a problem for Aquinas’s Aristotelian interpretation of how knowledge is acquired in life before death. Yet, St. Thomas insists that the mind acts in this purely mental way, without any sensory input whatsoever, during the experience of rapture (raptus) or religious ecstasy when God is seen in what might be described as a temporary beatific vision. While this is an exceptional experience granted only to a privileged few, Aquinas does believe that such a vision is really possible in life before death and he selects as an example of this extraordinary experience, the description that is given by St. Paul in his second letter to the people of Corinth, 2 Cor. 12.1–7.1 This temporary vision of God described by St. Paul could only have occurred, according to Thomas’s explanation, because the activities of the sensory powers were completely suspended so that the mind could approach God’s essence wholly non-impeded, all of this in the context of Paul’s biological life still continuing. This conclusion allows St. Thomas to retain his conviction that the soul-body unity which enables Paul as a human being to function in a psycho-physical way, is intrinsic to his constitution as a composite entity, essentially defined as such.

By contrast with rapture, the final beatific vision after death is the destiny of all humankind and is open to everyone who conscientiously seeks God. This ultimate experience, which also occurs by supernatural dispensation, enables one to see God after death and in the ultimate state of bodily resurrection. What is significant here too is that such knowledge does not occur in the mode of cognising reality, which, for

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1 See De Veritate Q.13 and Summa Theologica II–II.Q.175.