

Knowledge as a Self-Evident Good in Finnis and Aquinas: When is the Immediately Obvious not so Immediate?

MARK W SAYERS*

Introduction

A number of commentators have researched the links between John Finnis' natural law theory and that of St Thomas Aquinas.¹ Particular examples of the kind of research this writer has in mind are those conducted by, respectively, McInerny and Lisska. These scholars highlight the different epistemologies and metaphysics at work in Finnis' natural law from those of the natural law tradition generally and Aquinas in particular. These investigations may be conveniently characterised as of two different types.

The first type, of which McInerny is an example, has as its focus the Humean nature of Finnis' theory. The thrust of this type of critique is that Finnis' efforts to accommodate positivism cast Finnis adrift from the Aristotelian tradition in general. The second type, of which Lisska is an example, has as its focus the differences between Finnis and Aquinas in particular.

The focus of this article is akin to the Lisska-type critique of Finnis in that it argues that Finnis' natural law theory would have been better for relying on Aquinas' understanding of how it is that self-evident knowledge comes about.

In short compass, this article begins with Finnis' presentation of "The Self-Evidence of the Good of Knowledge" in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* and then compares it with *Summa Theologiae* I, Q 84, Art 7. The article explains Finnis' assumption that the curiosity to know whether a belief is true is based on the experience that at least some questions have answers. The article then compares this with Aquinas' postulate of the phantasm which knows no such assumption.

The conclusion is that despite the difficulties which others have noted with the Thomistic system generally, if one wishes to explain the phenomenon of self-evidence one is better advised to adopt Aquinas than Finnis. This is so if only because at least Aquinas allows for the possibility of an immediate appreciation of

* BA (Hons) LLB (UQ) MA Phil (UQ).

¹ Examples of McInerny's and Lisska's separate investigations can be found at: R McInerny *Ethica Thomistica* (Catholic United Press: Washington 1982); R McInerny "Natural Law and Human Rights" ((1991) 36 *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 1-14); A Lisska "Finnis and Veatch on Natural Law in Aristotle and Aquinas" ((1991) 36 *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 55-71); A Lisska *Aquinas' Theory of Natural Law* (Clarendon: Oxford 1996).

a self-evidently true proposition (which possibility is an essential criterion for self-evidence) whereas no such possibility exists within Finnis' explanation.

Finnis: Natural Law and Natural Rights, pp 64-75

Finnis' opines in the first paragraph of the section in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* entitled, "The Self-Evidence of the Good of Knowledge" that it is clear that "there are no sufficient reasons for doubting it to be so" – that is, that knowledge is a good (p 64).² The same paragraph ends with the conclusion: "[that knowledge is a good/ form of human flourishing] cannot be demonstrated, but equally it needs no demonstration" (p 65).

Finnis goes on to compare the self-evident truth of the proposition that knowledge is a good with what he terms "principles of theoretical rationality". Examples of this are the principles of logic and deductive inference– for example, the principle that phenomena are to be regarded as real unless there is some reason to distinguish between appearance and reality.

These principles are, in Finnis' argument, similarly not capable of demonstration. Similarly, they too can be denied although to do so disqualifies the denier from the pursuit of knowledge. Similarly, the principles do not convey anything about the world so much as they convey something about the mind and attitude of the person who purports thereby to know the world (p 69).

At the very least what both the principles of theoretical rationality and the proposition that knowledge is a good do convey about the mind and attitude of the person who purports to know the world *via* those principles and that proposition is, according to Finnis, that "one certainly must know at least the fact that some questions can be answered" (p 66).

This minimal proposition reflects Finnis' understanding that there are pre-conditions to an individual's realisation of, for instance, the truth of the proposition that knowledge is a good. For according to Finnis, it is not the case that we have an innate appreciation of this proposition. Nor is it the case that this proposition is equally true for all of us, or indeed any one of us, at all times in all situations. Nor is it the case that all true propositions (for example, knowledge) are equally worth knowing by all of us at all times (p 62). This is because, in Finnis' analysis, knowledge is what he calls an "achievement-word".

By "achievement-word", Finnis means that "knowledge" can only be so if it is knowledge of the truth. "Belief" is not knowledge; rather, belief becomes

² J Finnis *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Clarendon: Oxford 1980). Hereinafter, page references in the text of this article refer to this monograph.

knowledge when the truth of a belief becomes apparent (p 59). Some work has to be done, either personally by the individual or received as the fruit of the work of others and accepted by the individual, before belief is transformed into knowledge. And for Finnis, the workhorse which quickens this achievement is curiosity.

Finnis understands curiosity as "a name for the desire or inclination or felt want that we have when, for the sake of knowing, we want to find out about something". This understanding Finnis encapsulates as the assertion by the individual that in respect of the truth of a belief: "It would be good to find out (if it is true)" (pp 60-61).

These pre-conditions cannot be innate, argues Finnis, if only because a new born baby has "no such set of felt inclinations". Even if it were the case that neonates did have such an inclination, a further pre-condition Finnis imposes is that knowledge, when defined as "understanding grasp" of the world, logically presumes the experience that one must first "know at least the fact that some questions can be answered" (p 66). Without that experience then, the phenomenon of curiosity, in Finnis' argument, would be both inexplicable and pointless.

Finnis argues that one must first have the experience that there is the possibility of answers before one asks questions out of curiosity. One must first know that it is possible to test belief before one can have knowledge.

Aquinas: Summa Theologiae I, Q 84 Art 7

Question: Can the intellect know anything through the intelligible species which it possesses, without turning to the phantasms?

Thesis: It is impossible for our intellect in the present state of life, in which it is united with receptive corporeality, to know anything actually without turning to the phantasms. If the object which belongs properly to our intellect were a separated, essential form, or if, as the Platonists assume, the nature of sensible things did not subsist in individual things: then our intellect would not always have to turn to the phantasms when it knows.

The aforesaid question is the title of the Seventh Article of Question 84, in the First part of the *Summa*.

Generally, Question 84 explores both what it is and how it is that we know what we know. The very possibility and meaning of human knowing is the subject matter of both the Question in general and the Seventh Article in particular. However, Aquinas approaches the topic not so much as one of epistemology as one of metaphysics. Aquinas seeks not so much a theory of knowledge as a metaphysic

of knowledge.³ Aquinas' attempt to establish this metaphysic of knowledge has been described thus:

- (a) Knowledge is an intellectual encounter with the material world *via* sensibility;
- (b) The resulting intellectual knowledge is an immaterial, universal, and necessary knowledge (a metaphysic) which in principle transcends the object of departure;
- (c) The point of inquiry is 'is the possibility of metaphysical knowledge intrinsic to and present in every instance of our knowing irrespective of the character of the object of departure?'⁴

Entire books have been written on the implications of Aquinas' inquiry on this point. Space does not permit here anything other than the broadest thumbnail sketch outlining Aquinas' reasoning.

Aquinas is reasoning the very possibility of metaphysics. And Aquinas plumps for the option that metaphysics is the result of a *conversio*/conversation, as it were, between the knowing subject and the objects of knowledge within the imagination of the knowing subject.

In effect, I know what I know because there is a reflexive relationship between myself as known with that which is known, if only within the mental world which both posits myself as known and *x* as at least knowable, if not known.⁵ That this is the case becomes particularly clear when I examine that reflexive relationship in the context of knowing that which is either immaterial, universal or necessary. It is in this context that the role of "phantasm" becomes clearer.

In Aquinas' metaphysic of knowing, phantasm is an intuitive moment which occurs in the conversion of the mind from the sensate, material particular to an appreciation of the intellectual, immaterial universal⁶— a conversion of which it is inappropriate to say whether it occurs before or after some stage in the process of knowing. Rather it is an apprehension of the universal in a unified process whereby the intelligible species is apprehended in phantasm.⁷

3. K Rahner *Spirit in the World* translated by J Metz (Sheed and Ward: London 1968) p 19.

4. Ibid at 20-21.

5. Ibid at 390.

6. Ibid at 266-274.

7. *Summa Theologiae* I, Q 86, Art 1.

Phantasm is thus the dynamic which converts knowledge of the particular into appreciation of the universal. It justifies meaningful speech of not only the sensate but the non-sensate abstractions which derive therefrom as a matter of logical necessity. A modern parallel is the concept of *horizontverschmelzung* in Gadamer's hermeneutics.⁸

"Phantasm" may thus be understood as the word which explains the phenomenon whereby our horizon expands with each act of knowing. It is a broadening of vision which increases not only the sum of our knowledge but our perspective and character within the world, the ever-expanding world, in which we are situated. Baldly put, phantasm is thus an apprehension of perspective.

This apprehension is preceded only by the pre-apprehension of the fact that there is "esse/being in the world" – that is, that the world is and that it is the being of this world which we know.

For Aquinas, it is this pre-apprehension which explains our urge for metaphysics and it is the phantasm which posits the possibility of metaphysics for ourselves who possess a "mode of thought whose only intuition is sense intuition".⁹

For the purposes of this writer and the comparison with Finnis' concept of self-evident truth, what is of particular importance is how Aquinas' metaphysic of knowledge impacts on Aquinas' philosophical anthropology.

The result is that Aquinas' posits us, in keeping with the Aristotelian tradition, as "the knower". In other words, it is our defining characteristic that we alone seem to be the only creatures who are aware of themselves as knowers of the known world. We both know that we know and that we alone know. The fact that we know this much means that we are an open question mark on the world seeking to know the world. And because the pre-apprehension of phantasm predicates that there is "being in the world", then we are defined as "openness to being".¹⁰

The result is that we are already "exiles in the world".¹¹ This is because we are aware that, like the world in which we live, the quiddity of our life is that we are finite, material and particular. Yet despite this realisation that we are in and part of the world which we apprehend – that we are part of the same stuff of the being of the sensate world which we know *via* our senses – we are faced with the reality that

⁸ H-G Gadamer, *Truth and Method* translated by W Glen-Dopel (Sheed and Ward: London 1975).

⁹ Rahner op cit, p 387.

¹⁰ Ibid at 393.

¹¹ Ibid at 406.

we reason about the world we know in a way which is the direct opposite of the finite, material and particular way in which we know the world. This is the defining point of our ambivalence. Our intellectual knowledge of the world has the potential to have characteristics the direct opposite of the characteristics of our sensate knowledge of the world.

As Rahner put it:

Each side of this ambivalence calls the other forth. If knowledge is primarily intuition, and if the only human intuition is sensibility, then all thought exists only for sense intuition. And if the meaning of sensibility as such is the necessity of action, then all knowing seems only to serve man's (*sic*) vital self-assertion in the struggle, care and pleasure of this world. Everything 'metaphysical' seems to exist only to make possible this objective, sense intuition; we seem to know ... the 'object' of metaphysics only as the necessary horizon of the experience of world which is possible only in this way.¹²

Thus for Aquinas, metaphysics is not an optional extra but is necessary – how else is it that we reason universally and abstractly despite our mode of thought being otherwise determined by the sensate? Aquinas posits metaphysics as a necessity because we think the way we do – it is not the case that we think the way we do because we allow for the possibility of metaphysics. And this necessity is independent of and precedes our apprehension of the world – our pre-apprehension of the world *qua locus* of being is itself part of the metaphysic of our lives.

Aquinas on Phantasm and Finnis on Self-Evident Truth

Thus far this article has explained Finnis' understanding of self-evident truth generally with reference to the example of what for Finnis is the self-evidently true proposition that knowledge is a form of human flourishing – something which is good for us. The article has also outlined one aspect of Aquinas' metaphysic of knowledge: the phantasm. It is now appropriate to compare the assumptions which both Finnis and Aquinas make about knowledge in general and the possibility of self-evident truth in particular.

It has been shown that Finnis postulates certain pre-conditions for the achievement of knowledge. The first of these is that the individual be aware that at least some questions have answers. The second is the curiosity to ask questions as to the truth of the beliefs which the individual encounters. These pre-conditions must be fulfilled before the individual can find the answer to the question of whether *x*-belief is true and thereby gain knowledge about that belief.

¹² Ibid at 407.

It is obvious in his exposition of these pre-conditions that Finnis is trying to avoid any suggestion that we have either innate knowledge or an innate intuition/disposition towards knowledge. As Finnis explains it, the pursuit of knowledge springs from our experience that knowledge is possible. In that sense knowledge is a given of our experience. Since knowledge is a given, it is not necessary – even if it were possible – to demonstrate the possibility of knowledge.

In this respect, to cite an earlier example of Finnis', knowledge is akin to the concept "between", as in the proposition "B lies between A and C". Knowledge, like the use of "between" here, either is or is not. It is pointless to demonstrate that knowledge is possible, and self-defeating to demonstrate that it is not possible. This is because in either case one has to rely on the possibility that the demonstration itself constitutes knowledge.

Aquinas similarly is not concerned with demonstrating the possibility of knowledge. For Aquinas too, knowledge is a given. However, it is a given without pre-conditions other than the pre-conditions of what might be called the infrastructure of knowledge, for example, the phantasm.

Thus whereas Aquinas only assumes the need for the infrastructure of knowledge, Finnis assumes the need for the volition to employ that infrastructure. To resort to Finnis' characterisation of knowledge as an "achievement-word", Finnis assumes that we want to have to achieve knowledge whereas for Aquinas knowledge is, as it were, thrust upon us. It is important to note that whilst Finnis is careful to avoid any possibility of innate ideas, innateness and immediacy are not the same thing. Something can be immediate, as Aquinas postulates, without it thereby being innate.

Finnis effectively posits us both as:

- (a) Initially disengaged from, if not the world, then at least from knowledge; and
- (b) Capable of choosing to be engaged with the world in the pursuit of knowledge.

Aquinas, on the other hand, effectively posits us as inextricably engaged with both the world and knowledge. Aquinas does not do this so much because we are enmeshed in the world "out there" beyond ourselves, as because the fact of our engagement with the world gives us the knowledge both that we are and who we are.

Finnis' characterisation of us as having a choice whether or not to pursue the truth of the beliefs which we encounter does not accord with Aquinas except insofar as, for Aquinas, if there were such a choice, then our knowledge of that choice itself defines us.

The result is that for Finnis we have the capacity to be question marks on the world, whilst for Aquinas we are question marks thrust upon and into the world. To borrow Rahner's existential metaphor, Finnis postulates us as distant from *esse/being* but having the capacity to engage with being. But for Aquinas we have no such choice, we are by definition "being open to the possibility of being".

For Finnis, we could be human and yet not be engaged in the pursuit of knowledge. For whilst it is self-evidently good for us to be engaged in the pursuit of knowledge – a pursuit which encourages our human flourishing/development – that pursuit is neither necessary to, nor a defining characteristic of, our existence. For the reasons aforesaid, that proposition is inconceivable for Aquinas.

Consequences and Conclusions

It has been demonstrated in this article that at least in regard to their respective understandings of the pre-conditions of knowledge, Finnis and Aquinas do not agree. Of itself this would be of no great consequence were it not for the fact that Finnis elsewhere invokes the *aegis* of Aquinas.¹³ It then behoves those who would seek to place Finnis' work in context to consider his points of difference from Aquinas.

Having demonstrated the fact of this difference between Finnis and Aquinas, it is now appropriate to explain the significance of that difference.

As mentioned earlier, Finnis is careful to eschew any hint of adopting innate ideas or intuition as part of his epistemology of the self-evident truth of propositions. Hence the "given-ness" of the phantasm as the intuitive dynamic in the *conversio/conversation* of self with the world would not appeal to Finnis.

It might be possible to synthesize Finnis and Aquinas by proposing that the phantasm is part of the infrastructure of knowledge about which we have a choice whether or not to be engaged with in the pursuit of knowledge. But such a proposal would not alleviate Finnis' concerns regarding the provenance of phantasm. Indeed such a proposal would hint of casuistry – it would make Finnis and Aquinas fit simply because the former declares some degree of affinity with the latter as if such declaration was tantamount to Finnis equating or identifying his theory with that of Aquinas.

¹³. J Finnis *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Clarendon: Oxford 1983) p 12.

Finnis is not a Thomist nor even a neo (transcendental)-Thomist in the mould of Rahner. Finnis is essentially a positivist who seeks to establish from experience that propositions such as "x is self-evidently true" are as much facts in the world – to borrow Wittgenstein's turn of phrase – as is Mount Everest and the chair on which he sits. Aquinas too is a realist who seeks to establish that propositions such as "x is self-evidently true" are, to speak anachronistically, facts in the world.

Finnis' endeavours in this regard focus on our experience of the world beyond ourselves. Finnis asks us to consider, as if in the third person, the consequences of, in this case, knowledge on our lives: does it help us or not? Aquinas endeavours are cast, as it were, in the first person: what does it say about me that I know x?

In the end, if Finnis does say anything meaningful, it is something meaningful about knowledge and the world "out there". In the end, if Aquinas does say anything meaningful, it is something meaningful about my knowledge and myself.

The differences between Finnis and Aquinas relate back to the fact that whilst both of them might fairly be described as realists (because they assert the truth/reality of phenomena in the world) they approach their topics with different emphases.

Finnis is essentially a positivist in that he accepts the limits for meaningful speech imposed by modern British empiricism. Thus the self-evident truth of the proposition that knowledge is good, is that we can all conceive, if not experience, that this is indeed the case. Aquinas is essentially a nominalist in that he extrapolates from the language we use about experience certain propositions which he contends are meaningful and provide insight into ourselves and the world. Finnis and Aquinas both assert that an immaterial, necessary universal truth evolves from our initial material, random, and particular encounter with the world. It is just that Finnis founds his assertion on our experience of the world in, as it were, the third person whereas Aquinas founds his assertion in, as it were, the first person.

Aquinas' theory cannot be totally dismissed because, when it is cast in the first person,¹⁴ the most one can say to contradict it is that Aquinas does not speak for me – that is, Aquinas' understanding of how he encounters the world does not accord with how I understand myself to encounter the world. This does not necessarily mean either that Aquinas inaccurately portrays his encounter with the world or that it is impossible that someone else's experience might find itself reflected in Aquinas's portrait.

¹⁴ It is not that the text in Aquinas reads in the first person, nor that the text in Finnis reads in the third person, but that this is the characterisation used by the present author to distinguish the respective methodologies of Aquinas and Finnis.

However, when cast in the third person, Finnis' supposed objective portrayal of how we encounter the world does invite contradiction if our experience does not accord with his thought-experiment.

For this author, the Achilles' heel to Finnis' portrayal of how it is that we can all investigate the self-evident truth of the proposition that knowledge is good, is the issue of volition.

If x is truly self-evident, then it ought not be the case that its self-evidence is dependent on my wanting to test whether my belief about the self-evident truth of x is truly knowledge. The self-evidence of x ought be as clear to me as my hand. If I have to want to find out if x is true and that my appreciation of x is not a mere belief, then it is as if I have to want x to be true.

The conclusion can only be, at least with respect to Finnis' attempt to demonstrate the self-evidence of the truth of the proposition that knowledge is good for us, that Finnis does not succeed in establishing that proposition as self-evident. True, Finnis does assert that the proposition is neither capable nor in need of demonstration. However, having said that, Finnis then attempts to explain the phenomenon of the proposition that knowledge is good for us.

Where Finnis fails is that he interposes volition between the self-evident truth of the proposition and our knowledge of it. Finnis imposes pre-conditions regarding the possibility of the enquiry and the curiosity to enquire. And casting these pre-conditions as he does in the third person of empiricism, Finnis disqualifies himself from asserting that for x to be self-evident is to assert that x is immediately obvious.

Yet is it not the case that anything less than an immediately obvious appreciation that x is self-evidently true, at least denigrates, if not denies, the self-evident status of x ?

In the result, those who would assert the self-evidence of, for instance, natural law maxims are still left with Aquinas' metaphysic of epistemology. Fraught as it is with its own difficulties, at least Aquinas' conception of the self-evident qualifies on the count that our appreciation of the self-evidently true is immediate.