

Faculties of the Soul and their Hierarchy in Bonaventure's 13th Century Voluntarism

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Abstract

The aim of my article is to observe the way in which the concept of *hierarchy* may be applied and understood from the philosophical writings of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio in a twofold manner as mainly applied to the created world, but also as a reference to the faculties of the human soul dealing with both intellectual and moral knowledge. The assumed perspective shall be treated from the point of psychological voluntarism assumed by the philosopher in asserting a primate of will in dealing with moral actions and human behavior. The terms implied in defining how one may apply the concept of *hierarchy* in relation to the faculties of the soul refer to intellect, reason, conscience, will and synderesis. By means of direct textual analysis I want to establish the correct links between these concepts and what their role in the process of moral knowledge is.

Keywords: conscience, will, synderesis, hierarchy, Bonaventure, voluntarism, medieval philosophy

Philosophy represents, according to Bonaventure, a way of approaching the knowledge of nature according to Aristotelian ideas that mingle with the Augustinian way of understanding the concept of *logos* present in ancient Greek philosophy as the second Person of the Trinity, the divine Reason. The Christian philosopher has to observe the created world according to the light of this divine reason, Christ, understood as the Center of all sciences. In the hierarchy of

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sciences that lead to the divine Logos, each science reveals in a necessary way certain *marks* or *traces* of the Trinity. This is possible due to the fact that each science, and, especially, the one dealing with the interpretation of the Scripture, hides an understanding of the Trinity. Philosophical speculation arises from the faith in a revealed Truth that nurtures the desire of knowledge present in the human being. Philosophy and theology become two ways of reaching God, ways that have different methods, but succeed in completing and developing each other (Gilson 1991, 407).

Bonaventure's idea of knowing the world through contemplation manifests in a threefold manner: first one has to be purified, after illuminated and in communion with God. The reality is thus observed by following an order of the created things understood through the help of analogy with the uncreated ones according to the following hierarchy: material world, human mind, eternal art as a mirror for the Trinity (Bonaventure 1891, 1, 3):

[...] *haec respicit triplicem rerum existentiam, scilicet in materia, in intelligentia et in arte aeterna, secundum quam dictum est; fiat, fecit, et factum est; haec etiam respicit triplicem substantiam in Christo, qui est scala nostra, scilicet corporalem, spiritualem et divinam.*

A closer look to the structure of the treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* offers a clear sight of the way in which Bonaventure understands the hierarchy of the world: the first chapter speaks about the *vestigia*, the marks or traces of God present in the universe at a material level, while in the second chapter sensibility is present as a common feature in the vivid beings. The signs through which God may be observed by man according to his intellectual faculties are described in the third chapter of the treatise completed by chapter four that shows how the natural powers of the soul may be perfected with the help of divine grace. The deeper understanding of the divine being is made by contemplating the divine unity according to the name *being* (*esse*) as life generating principle for the entire creation (present in chapter five) and the contemplation through faith of the Trinity as *summum bonum* achieved in the sixth chapter of the treatise. The last chapter reminds the life of Francis as it has been done in the beginning of the work in

the Prologue in order to highlight the fact that through rapture God may be known even in this ephemeral life and thus achieving *scientia viatorum* that will be perfected in the moment that men as righteous beings will earn the complete knowledge of God, *scientia beatorum*, in the kingdom of Heaven.

Through the itinerary defined by Bonaventure one observes a variety of ways that lead the creation *quantum potest* to knowing God. Walking the first step in the hierarchy of the created world, human reason discovers the existence of a Creator, a discovery inherent to human nature and not a subject of grace, because reason is present in man even after the original sin. Reality is perceived by man in a threefold structure through sensibility, soul and mind, structure that unfolds itself in senses, imagination, reason, intellect, intelligence and synderesis or the faculty that helps one to distinguish right from wrong orienting us always towards what is right, according to the voluntarist perspective assumed by Bonaventure (1891, I, 4, 6):

Secundum hunc triplicem progressum mens nostra tres habet aspectus principales. Unus est ad corporalia exteriora, secundum quem vocatur animalitas seu sensualitas: alius intra se et in se, secundum quem dicitur spiritus; tertius supra se, secundum quem dicitur mens. [...] Iuxta igitur sex gradus ascensionis in Deum, sex sunt gradus potentiarum animae per quos ascendimus ab imis ad summa, ab exterioribus ad intima, a temporalibus conscendimus ad aeterna, scilicet sensus, imaginatio, ratio, intellectus, intelligentia et apex mentis seu synderesis scintilla.

At the first level of the hierarchy of the created world by observing material reality, one sees that objects are created according to a certain weight, number and measure like marks imprinted by the Creator in the created things. The unity, beauty and order of creation reflect by means of analogy the power, the wisdom and the kindness of the Creator. The one grasping to understand more will access the next level of created reality through faith by approaching its origin, evolution and end as signs of the divine power, providence and justice. From a rational point of view, the multitude of forms belonging to created things determines the human being to approach the understanding of Divinity with the help of analogy in a different manner: things that are changeable or

unchangeable, corruptible or incorruptible represent ways of approaching the power, the wisdom and the kindness of the Creator once again (Bonaventure 1891, I, 11, 12, 13).

The next step of the hierarchy of the created world leads man in realizing that creation reflects in the human being when speaking about the nature of its sensitivity. Reality is perceived by the means of the five senses according to shape, force, efficacy, beauty, delicacy and proportion. At a sensitive level knowledge arises due to an action of an exterior object upon a sense organ. Through apprehension (*apprehensio*) the sensible world is perceived due to the five senses (Bonaventure 1891, II, 4):

Intrat igitur quantum ad tria rerum genera in animam humanam per apprehensionem totus iste sensibilis mundus. [...] et sic generatio speciei in medio et de medio in organo et conversio potentiae apprehensivae super illam facit apprehensionem omnium eorum quae exterius anima apprehendit.

Delighting (*oblectatio*) follows apprehension and helps one perceive if the sensed aspect is agreeable or not (Bonaventure 1891, II, 5):

Ad hanc apprehensionem, si sit rei convenientis, sequitur oblectatio. Delectatur autem sensus in obiecto per similitudinem abstractam percepto vel ratione speciositatis, sicut in visu, vel ratione suavitatis, sicut in odoratu et auditu, vel ratione salubritatis, sicut in gustu et tactu, appropriate loquendo.

Judgement (*diiudicatio*) establishes why the perceived aspect delights the perceiver by expressing a reason for which a thing is in a certain way or in another (Bonaventure 1891, II, 6):

Post hanc apprehensionem et oblectationem fit diiudicatio, qua non solum diiudicatur, utrum hoc sit album, vel nigrum, quia hoc pertinet ad sensum particularem; non solum, utrum sit salubre, vel nocivum, quia hoc pertinet ad sensum interiorem; verum etiam, quia diiudicatur et ratio redditur, quare hoc delectat; et in hoc actu inquiritur de ratione delectationis, quae in sensu percipitur ab obiecto.

The soul formulates a judgement (*iudicium*) regarding the action that one suffered and this judgement represents the exact way in which man accesses knowledge at a sensitive level. In this sense, Bonaventure asserts that the soul itself is affected by this action in a spiritual manner (the soul

representing the principle that maintains life in a body), but reacts in an immediate manner by formulating the judgement (*iudicium*) about the action.

Bonaventure creates a synthesis between the Aristotelian theory of sensation (the passivity of human nature receiving sensitive data) and the Neoplatonic theory found in Augustin (the soul has a direct action in perceiving the sensitive world) when developing the theory of sensitive knowledge. Another interesting aspect regarding the medieval theory of human knowledge expressed by Bonaventure is related to practical knowledge. When speaking about practical knowledge as Bonaventure understood it one has to take in consideration the connections present between the faculties of the human soul: conscience, will, synderesis. Similar to the theoretical human knowledge seen from an Augustinian and Aristotelian perspective, the way in which human behavior has been defined in the philosophy of the Middle Ages has been approached in two different ways according to: voluntarism (psychological before 1270 and ethical after 1270) and intellectualism (Stone 2004, 99).

Psychological voluntarism follows the line of the Augustinian hermeneutical tradition in which authors like Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure and John of Rochelle assert that the role of the affective and volitional parts of the human soul is primary in moral behavior and activity (Stone 2004, 100-102). Differing from the psychological version of voluntarism, ethical voluntarism adopted by John Peccham, Peter John Olivi, Walter of Bruges, John Duns Scotus, Henry of Ghent confirms the primacy of the will in relation to reason, but in their texts one tends to observe that the will has an active and dynamic character, in other terms, a liberty to act against the principles of reason (Stone 2004, 100). The origin of intellectualism is to be found in the texts of Aristotle and in the works of his Arabian commentators in which human action is determined by the rational part of the human soul, free will representing merely a moral choice developed through rational deliberation (Stone 2004, 101).

As a representative of psychological voluntarism, Bonaventure asserts the supremacy of the will in explaining

moral actions and the importance of the intervention of divine grace in certifying the rectitude of human actions. Grace constitutes the fundament of a righteous will and of reason as bearers of the real truth discovered by the means of the activity done by the intellect. Observing the way in which Bonaventure understands the hierarchy of the created world one discovers that the same hierarchic model may be applied in understanding the connections between the faculties of the soul regarding practical knowledge, conscience, will, synderesis. The judgement that has to be made in this case is to analyze the type of hierarchy present here, if one may speak of a primate of will, of conscience or of synderesis in which regards human behavior and what determines moral acts. If, from an ethical point of view, conscience is understood in medieval philosophy as the faculty that differentiates good from evil, but also as the source of remorse for those who commit bad deeds, will is seen as a natural innate power of the soul that is never wrong (along with the other infallible powers of reasoning, memory and thought) in deliberating moral aspects and the exercise of this power, named also will, that fails when manifests itself in a chaotic way, ignoring moral principles (Petrus Lombardus 1891, I, II, II, 3). The term *synderesis* is transliterated from the Ancient Greek word συντήρησις < συντήρειν (tr. to watch over, to look carefully and attentive) and it means attentive sight, watch. Medieval writers took the term from the *Commentary to Ezekiel* made by Jerome who interprets the vision of Ezekiel as an allegory that illustrates the rational part of the soul (human face), the emotional one (the lion) and the appetitive one (the calf) according to Plato. According to Jerome's interpretation, the forth part with the image of the vulture is not mingled with the other tree because it is the faculty that corrects the others when they fail in their moral deliberation. It is the faculty that is never extinguished, but only diminished in those who are choosing freely to act morally wrong. In the hierarchy of the faculties of the soul, from a voluntarist point of view, has primacy over the others, because it is never wrong and it represents the faculty that orients the human soul towards doing good deeds, as an inclination, a tendency of always chasing and choosing the *summum bonum*:

Plerique, juxta Platonem, rationale animae, et irascitivum, et concupiscitivum, quod ille λογικόν et θυμικόν et επιθυμητικόν vocat, ad hominem et leonem ac vitulum referunt [...]. Quartamque ponunt quae super haec et extra haec tria est, quam Graeci vocant συνήρησιν, quae scintilla conscientiae in Cain quoque pectore, postquam ejectus est de paradiso, non extinguitur, et qua victi voluptatibus vel furore, ipsaque interdum rationis decepti similitudine, nos peccare sentimus (Hieronymus, 25, 22).

Bonaventure asserts that the term *conscience* could be understood in three ways: de thing that we are conscious about, the possibility of being conscious because natural law is written in our conscience and as a habitus, a disposition that perfects our way of reasoning at a practical level. Conscience as habitus guides ones deliberation and could be seen as innate by approaching the fundamental moral principles and as an acquired aspect achieved through education. Similar to free will that depends on reason and will because it functions through deliberation, conscience and synderesis refer to reason and will and both work in a natural by tending towards what it is good (according to natural law), differing from free will that sometimes tends towards that what is good and sometimes towards that what it is bad.

Synderesis represents the movement of the will that orients it towards good and the spark of conscience that ignites the deliberation regarding moral principles. If synderesis is understood by Bonaventure as a natural infallible tendency towards good, conscience is morally oriented from a theoretical point of view dealing with primary moral principles and specific conclusions that may be not always be drawn correctly through reasoning (Bonaventure 1891, II, 39). Here Bonaventure distinguishes three types of principles that are dictated by conscience: according to, indifferent and contrary to divine law (Bonaventure 1891, II, 39, a. 2, q. 3, ad 4). The ones that are according to divine law are simple and universal (they act against a principle that has as finality the action of committing a mortal sin); the ones that are indifferent to divine law remain like that as long as conscience maintains its deliberation in this direction of keeping them neutral from moral affiliations (they refer to objects and actions that until a certain point in human deliberation do not belong to the moral sphere until it is decided

differently by a morally judging community), and the principles contrary to divine laws are the ones that place man outside salvation and according to this reason, they do not oblige man in acting in a certain way, but show him how to avoid a morally wrong deliberation (Bougerol 1969, 38-39). This type of judgement may also surprise the belief that a thing is good, although it is definitely wrong from a moral point of view, and the acts submitted to this fallacious belief constitute a sin because they are always oriented against God.

As the intellect that has received by creation a “natural light” that orients it towards knowledge, thus will is oriented in a just manner towards a moral activity. The light of reason is called conscience when referring to the knowledge of God, and the natural inclination of will it is called synderesis when man acts according to that what it is good (Bougerol 1969, 125). If synderesis represents a static faculty in the sense that it cannot be altered or changed by anything exterior to it, conscience is a perpetual evolving faculty that may be trained with the help of moral exercise on how to apply better innate principles. The hierarchy present in the human being at the level of its faculties reflects the hierarchy of the created world at a microcosmic level through the means of analogy. In this sense, man has been named *minor mundus* in medieval times and is “struggling” to preserve it until the contemporary ones and beyond.

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