

Aquinas on Spiritual Change

In "Is an Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible? (A draft)," Myles Burnyeat challenged the functionalist interpretation of Aristotle by defending Aquinas's understanding of Aristotle's account of sensation.¹ Richard Sorabji had argued that Aristotle takes the reception of sensible forms to be a physiological event,² and Burnyeat compared this to the way functionalists have taken states of sensory awareness to be functional states constituted by or realized in states of the body.³ So, for example, Burnyeat took Sorabji as having asserted that Aristotle takes seeing red to be constituted by the eye jelly turning red. Burnyeat argued against this that Aquinas is correct in interpreting Aristotle as holding that sense perception does not consist in a physiological change, but rather in a spiritual change that has no material or physiological process underlying it.⁴

One might have thought that in contrasting spiritual changes with physiological changes, Burnyeat was contrasting spiritual changes with physical changes.⁵ So one might have expected Burnyeat to oppose not only Sorabji's interpretation of Aristotle, but also Sheldon Cohen's interpretation of Aquinas, since Cohen has argued that Aquinas takes the immaterial reception of sensible forms to be a physical event.⁶ Thus it may come as a bit of shock to find Burnyeat defending Cohen's interpretation of Aquinas in "Aquinas on 'Spiritual Change' in Perception." Burnyeat asserts that he agrees with Cohen's claim that

the spiritual or immaterial reception of a sensible form is always a physical event.⁷

It is my contention that Burnyeat's agreement with Cohen is largely nominal. What Burnyeat means by the term 'physical' differs in significant ways from what Cohen means by it. To the extent that there is substantive agreement between them, I will argue that Cohen and Burnyeat are mistaken in their interpretation of Aquinas.

A crucial piece of evidence that Burnyeat is not using the term 'physical' to mean the same thing that Cohen means by it is provided by the fact that they disagree about the spiritual reception of intelligible forms. Cohen commits himself to the view that the spiritual reception of intelligible forms by the soul is not a physical event, and indeed, Burnyeat quotes him as asserting that Aquinas allows that in intellection there are acts of awareness that are not physical events.⁸ But Burnyeat defines what it is to be physical in such a way that the spiritual reception of intelligible forms counts as a physical event. Burnyeat stipulates that 'physical' means whatever comes within the scope of physics and proceeds to argue that form and matter are basic principles of Aristotelian physics.⁹ His conclusion is that since spiritual change involves form, it falls within the realm of physics:

Thus both natural and spiritual change fall within the realm of physics, because both involve form. The contrast between them is not that

spiritual change is (wholly or partly) non-physical, but that it is a change of form alone. It is a physical, but not a material change.¹⁰

Cohen, or any other scholar, surely would not deny that the spiritual reception of intelligible forms involves form, so he would not deny that the immaterial reception of intelligible forms is physical in Burnyeat's sense of the term. Thus when Cohen denies that the spiritual reception of intelligible forms is a physical event, he must mean something substantially different from Burnyeat. By the same token, when he asserts that the spiritual reception forms is a physical event, he must also mean something substantially different from Burnyeat. Thus their agreement is not substantive, but merely nominal.

What does Cohen mean? What Cohen means by calling an event physical is that it is corporeal. Since Burnyeat has denied that he himself equates the physical with the corporeal, there is further reason to conclude that his agreement with Cohen is merely nominal.¹¹ What is the evidence that Cohen identifies the physical with the corporeal? The following passage is decisive:

(vi) AT 84, A1, r1 Aquinas says

the intellect knows bodies, but not by means of a body, nor through material and corporeal likeness, but through immaterial and intelligible species that can exist in the soul (*quae per sui essentiam in anima esse possunt*).

The contrast seems to be between the intellect and the senses, which know bodies by means of a body (sense-organ), and whose species are only

potentially intelligible until they are made actually intelligible by the active intellect. If so, then Aquinas is saying that sense images are physical likenesses, and implying that they cannot exist in the soul.¹²

In this passage first Cohen translates Aquinas using the term 'corporeal likeness'. Then in explaining Aquinas's remark he says that "Aquinas is saying that sense images are physical likenesses," and furthermore, he contrasts saying with implying. The only possible conclusion is that Cohen is treating the term 'physical' as a synonym for the term 'corporeal'. So when Cohen denies that the spiritual reception of intelligible forms is a physical event, his point is that it is not corporeal. When he asserts that the spiritual of sensible forms is a physical event, his point is that it is corporeal. In contrast, when Burnyeat asserts that the spiritual reception of forms is a physical event, a claim that applies to the spiritual reception of both sensible and intelligible forms, he is implying neither that that event is corporeal nor that it cannot exist in the soul.

Burnyeat's defense of the claim that Aquinas thinks that the spiritual reception of forms is a physical event therefore provides no support whatsoever for Cohen's claim that Aquinas thinks that the spiritual reception of sensible forms is a physical event. Considered independently of Cohen's claim, Burnyeat's claim has little philosophical interest. Yes, there is a legitimate sense of the term 'physical' according to which even the spiritual reception of intelligible forms is physical. We can all agree that it is a legitimate use of the term 'physical' to stipulate as Burnyeat does that it includes anything within the

scope of physics and we can all agree that form is a basic principle of Aristotelian physics. However, in defining the physical in such an inclusive way, we can no longer use that notion to help us understand the way in which the spiritual reception of intelligible forms differs from the spiritual reception of sensible forms.

Cohen's assertion that the spiritual reception of sensible forms is a physical event is much more interesting because he does not define the physical in such an all inclusive way. What Cohen means is that the spiritual reception of sensible forms is a wholly corporeal event. This assertion has real teeth, especially since he holds that Aquinas thinks the spiritual reception of intelligible forms is not a physical event, by which he means that it is not a corporeal event.

There is one important point of convergence between the views of Cohen and Burnyeat, reflected in the following passage:

But Aquinas himself, as we have seen, happily insists that seeing red is (i) a purely spiritual change, nothing more, and (ii) a bodily change to the eye where the form of red is received without matter. And I take it that all parties – ancient, medieval, and modern – would agree that 'bodily' implies 'physical'.¹³

Burnyeat is here agreeing with Cohen that it is a sufficient condition for an event to be physical that it be a "bodily change." But the phrase "bodily change" is ambiguous, and this ambiguity leads to a fallacy committed by both Burnyeat and Cohen. The phrase "bodily change" can mean corporeal change, but it can

also mean change in or of the body. Cohen fails to note this ambiguity and mistranslates Aquinas's phrase 'cum aliqua corporis immutatione' as 'with some physical change' when it should be 'with some change of the body'.¹⁴

Now Burnyeat and Cohen are probably right that all changes in or of the body are physical events.¹⁵ We can also agree to a further claim that does not follow on Burnyeat's use of the term 'physical', that all changes in or of the body are corporeal events. But the fallacy is this. It does not follow, as Cohen mistakenly infers and Burnyeat endorses, at least nominally, that those changes are wholly physical. There is certainly conceptual space for the possibility that there are events taking place in the body which are physical to that extent, but which nevertheless are not wholly physical. In other words, there is conceptual space for the possibility that there are events taking place in the body that are corporeal because they take place in the body, but which are not wholly corporeal because there are further conditions on what is required for an event to be wholly corporeal.

As I have argued at length elsewhere against Cohen, this is precisely the position adopted by Aquinas.¹⁶ Aquinas thinks that a wholly corporeal event requires that the change be natural and not spiritual. Thus he thinks that the sensible reception of sensible forms occupies a halfway state between the immaterial and material, between the corporeal and incorporeal. It is partly material and corporeal because it takes place in the body, but it is partly

immaterial and incorporeal because it is not a natural change but rather a spiritual change.

¹ M. F. Burnyeat, in *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, edited by Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 15-26.

² Richard Sorabji, "Body and Soul in Aristotle," *Philosophy* 49 (1974) p. 74.

³ Burnyeat [1992] pp. 16, 18-19. Sorabji indicated in replying to Burnyeat that he would deny that Aristotle is reducing perception and thought to "physiology, behavior or function." See his "Intentionality and Physiological Processes: Aristotle's Theory of Sense-Perception," in Nussbaum and Rorty [1992] p. 208.

⁴ Burnyeat, [1992] pp.15-18, see also his "Aquinas on 'Spiritual Change' in Perception," in *Ancient and Modern Theories of Intentionality*, edited by Dominik Perler (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2001), p. 130.

It is worth noting that Hilary Putnam and Martha Nussbaum's objection to Burnyeat that Aquinas does in fact believe that there is "some *concomitant necessary material change* in that organ" when I become aware of red relies on a dubious translation and interpretation. They quote Aquinas as asserting that "But Aristotle insists that... sensing and the related operations of the sensitive soul evidently happen together with some change (*immutatio*) of the body, as in sensing the pupil is changed by the appearance of color," (in "Changing Aristotle's Mind" in Nussbaum and Rorty [1992] p. 53). There is nothing in the Latin answering to Putnam and Nussbaum's 'together'. Thus it is much more likely that Aquinas's point is that sensing itself is a change in the body, not that it is accompanied by a change in the body. Moreover, since Aquinas asserts that the pupil is changed by the species (rendered above as 'appearance'), Putnam and

Nussbaum have to be assuming that the change caused by the species is different from sensing itself, which is precisely what Burnyeat denies. Finally, and most decisively, Aquinas does not in this passage assert that the change in question is a material change, leaving it open to read Aquinas, as Burnyeat does, as holding that the change in question is a spiritual change taking place in the sense organ. Thus, even if one agrees with Putnam and Nussbaum against Burnyeat that Aquinas is referring not to sensing itself but to a change in the organ that accompanies sensing, there is no justification for their reading Aquinas as asserting that the change is a material change. Putnam and Nussbaum seem to be inferring that any change that takes place in the body is a material change, a fallacy which is similar to but worse than the fallacy discussed below that is committed by Burnyeat and Cohen.

⁵ Sorabji [1992] p. 220 took Burnyeat to be arguing that Aristotle thought no physical change was needed in perception.

⁶ Sheldon M. Cohen, "St. Thomas Aquinas on the Immaterial Reception of Sensible Forms," *The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983) pp. 193-209.

⁷ Burnyeat, [2001] pp. 130, 143, 147, 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹¹ Burnyeat, personal correspondence, December 6, 2002.

¹² Cohen [1983] p. 199.

¹³ Burnyeat [2001] p. 147.

¹⁴ Cohen [1983] p. 198.

¹⁵ On Burnyeat's understanding of the term 'physical', this amounts to asserting that all changes in or of the body come within the scope of physics. I'm inclined to think that this is an empirical claim and that it is true.

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