

**Of the mode and order of understanding in Summa Theologica  
by Thomas Aquinas: essential aspects to the master education  
on the medieval university<sup>1 2 3 4</sup>**

***O modo e a ordem de conhecer na Suma Teológica de Tomás de  
Aquino: aspectos essenciais para a formação do mestre na  
universidade medieval***

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**Abstract**

The objective of the article is to analyze how Thomas Aquinas understands the procedures of the intellect to understand things inferior to the human soul, as well as the importance of knowing this process for the education of the master in Western medieval times. Our source is Question 85 of First Part of Summa Theologica, entitled 'Of the mode and order of understanding'. This Question shows one of the main fundamentals of the Thomasian Philosophy of Education and can, in our opinion, teach important lessons for 21st century teachers. The method of research is Social History, whose theoretical principles can be found in the works by Bloch, Febvre, Braudel, and other historians, 'heirs' of Annales school.  
**Keywords:** Philosophy of Education, Teacher formation, Knowledge of reality, Intellectuals.

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## Resumo

O objetivo do artigo é analisar o modo como o teólogo dominicano Tomás de Aquino entende os procedimentos pelos quais o intelecto humano conhece as coisas inferiores a si mesmo, bem como a importância de se conhecer esse processo para a formação do mestre no Ocidente medieval. A fonte para o desenvolvimento deste estudo é a *Questão 85 da Primeira Parte da Suma Teológica*, intitulada “O modo e a ordem de conhecer”. A *Questão* supracitada apresenta um dos fundamentos da *Filosofia da Educação tomasiana* e pode, a nosso ver, ensinar lições importantes para os professores do século XXI. O método empregado para o desenvolvimento da pesquisa é o da *História Social*, cujos pressupostos teóricos remontam às obras de Bloch, Febvre, Braudel e outros historiadores ‘berdeiros’ da escola dos *Annales*.

**Palavras-chave:** *Filosofia da Educação, Formação Docente, Conhecimento da Realidade, Intelectuais.*

## Initial remarks

The theme of this article is the complex relation between soul and education conceived by the Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas, an important university master in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Our main objective is to analyze some aspects of Aquinas’s understanding about the learning process, aiming to foster the study of Thomasian texts in the key process of teacher education. We have no intention to end the debate. To do so, our source is the *Question 85* in the first part of *Summa Theologica* entitled “Of the mode and order of understanding” in which the author investigates how men can know things that are underneath them in the hierarchy of beings.

We recognize the complexity of the discussion on intellect and learning in the work of Thomas of Aquinas. The Dominican theologian focused on the educational issue in several works, mainly those targeting the university public, as his *Summa Theologica*, *Disputed Questions*, *On the unity of the Intellect against the Averroists*, among others. No scientific article could comprehensively encompass all details of Aquinas’s thought on the subject. So, in this text we have focused on an aspect we consider important and that can potentially raise among us, teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, necessary reflections on our job. *Question 85* reflects on how we understand existing things that are, according to Thomasian cosmology, beneath us in the

hierarchy of beings. It contains the complexity of his thought, that can and should be studied though his own works and in those that have, bravely, dedicated themselves to study Thomas Aquinas ideas on knowledge and education<sup>5</sup>.

Faced by this, our intention is to demonstrate Thomas Aquinas's concern on the formation of Western Christian intellectuals in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, expressed in his ideas on how the understanding of things is processed. In fact, *Summa Theologica*, as the theologian himself showed in the Prologue, targeted the students of the University of Theology, who needed to methodically know the themes and theological approaches to become doctors of Theology and, therefore, good teachers.

In this sense, while establishing a theological theme, the modes and order of understanding are also didactic-pedagogical problems. *Question 85* holds a treaty about men that can be subdivided into two parts. The first subdivision is composed by 9 questions (q. 75-83) and focuses on men's constitution as a created being, that is, starting from the essence of the soul, passing by the union of the soul with the body, until men's capacities (intellectual and appetites). The second encompasses 6 Questions (q. 84-89) dealing specifically with human thought. *Question 85* is part of this second group approaching the following problems: 1) how can the soul know something (q. 84)?; 2) what is the itinerary of thought, i.e., which are the processes and procedures inherent to the act of thinking (q. 85)?; 3) how does the soul understand material things (q. 86), itself (q. 87) and the things above it (q. 88)?; 4) finally, how can something be understood when the soul is separated from the body (q. 89)? As we could see, the author sought to summarize the debate on the human action of thinking, so that the students of the University of Theology could, as much as possible, deepen in the theme, searching new studies, when needed, and position themselves during university debates. Besides this, the approach of Master Aquinas reveals a concern to provide students with a comprehensive view on the 'nature' of thinking, allowing a perspective of the totality of the pathways through which men think.

Therefore, we believe that Thomasian texts on the mode and order of understanding foster essential knowledge to the target audience and, one way or the other, to teaching. We cannot affirm that every student of the University of Theology who heard and read his lessons

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<sup>5</sup> Some studies on the subject we have identified are Rousselot (1999), Amatuzzi (2008), Sanguineti (2011), Muñoz (2012), Cuccia (2017), and Cuccia and Muñoz (2018).

became a teacher. However, we defend the thesis that every human action that produces a change in someone else is, in a sense, an educational action. Thus, a Doctor in Theology, who was a Thomas Aquinas's student and, eventually, became the priest responsible for a parish also taught every time he preached or gave a sermon. Thus the teachings of Master Aquinas could have been useful both for their contents, as well as a method and approach. Hence, we believe it is key to understand *Question 85* from the First Part of Summa Theologica as a theological reflection with important pedagogical unfoldings, therefore contributing to understanding Thomasian philosophy of education, which is also key for 21<sup>st</sup> century educators.

In this perspective, we highlight that our motivation emerges from the university context, courses, and programs targeting teacher education, which connect us to the fields of Philosophy of Education, History of education, and the methodological tradition of *Annales* school (Bloch, 2001; Braudel, 2014; Febvre, 1985; Mendes, 2011). According to these theoreticians, historian's work finds meaning when he turns to history based on the problems of today, seeking essential explanations on human actions in time, therefore, in the traces left by the past. Accordingly, due to our concerns with the education of contemporary Brazilian educators, we turn to Thomas Aquinas's experience in Western Christianity in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. What types of provocations can Thomasian works raise in current men, which may make them rethink their own practices? This is, in our opinion, the key question that guides our analysis of the source.

Besides this, Brazilian educational reality demands from education researchers a collective effort to propose questions and solutions to deal with the current national scenario. Apart from the problems shown by national and international evaluations, year after year, that reflect the urgency to rethink educational action aiming to satisfy the learning needs of Brazilian population, educators and students also face successive political crisis which negatively impact school education<sup>6</sup>. School and the instances that conceive, formulate, and enact educational policies have become, in the last years, the stage of ideological divergences seemingly irreconcilable, in which the protagonists act aiming to eliminate their antagonist – for instance

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<sup>6</sup> Though we are dealing here, in this excerpt in particular, with school education, we understand that the educational phenomenon today is in a sort of generalized crisis. We can see evidence of this process in several areas of society. The phenomenon of fake news, for example, is, at the same time, the cause and the effect of this crisis. It is the cause because the fake text is assumed as legitimate and, therefore, intends to show the 'truth', on an event, which results in a non-learning and misinformation. It is the effect because, as we understand, fake news would not thrive in societies grounded on the knowledge and values of science, philosophy, art, summing up, on historically accumulated knowledge of society, in the terms of Saviani (2012).

the organization of groups surrounding the idea of ‘*escola sem partido*’ (partyless school) –, as if the coexistence between entities were impossible. This context endangers the possibility of reflexive knowledge and debate, grounding conditions of a civilized society, guided by the values of the democratic State based on the rules of law.

Therefore, we submit to the debate of the scientific community the lessons of Philosophy and History of Medieval Education, which we consider to be important. We believe that the relevance of this study is the explanatory potential of the source chosen, recognized as a classic of Western thought. The option to analyze a classic text is another theoretical aspect that deserves attention. In this particular point, we follow the example of other scholars in History and Philosophy of Medieval Education, such as Luiz J. Lauand, Carlos A. R. do Nascimento, Ruy A. da C. Nunes, Reinholdo A. Ullmann, and many others who understood the need to study the classics as fundamentals for teacher education. In fact, historians and Philosophy historians (ac. Libera, 1990; Gilson, 1995; Oliveira, 2005; Boehner & Gilson, 2007; Le Goff, 2010) agree that the work of Thomas Aquinas was essential for the development of scholasticism as a philosophy and a method in medieval university, considered, on one hand, one of the main promoters of the conciliation between Reason and Faith, Philosophy and Theology; on the other, he was a systematic professor, clear and deep, who led the *lectio* and *disputatio*, the two main instances of the scholastic method, with rigor and dedication. *Summa Theologica* is an example of these characteristics and demonstrative of the title of “classic” given to its author, who dedicated himself to know the issues of his time and understand them as a whole.

## **Of the mode and order of understanding in *Summa Theologica***

*Question 85* of the First Part of *Summa Theologica* is divided in 8 Articles. In the first, he asks whether human intellect understands corporeal and material things based on abstraction forms of imaginary representations (phantasms). In the second, the issue is whether intelligible species, resulting from abstraction, are related to our intellect as that which is understood or as that through which we understand. In the third, the question is whether the more universal is first in the order of intellectual cognition. In the fourth, he tries to establish if, through intellect, we can understand many things at the same time. In the fifth, the issue is to investigate if human

intellect understands by composition and division. In the sixth, he asks if the intellect can be false. In the seventh, if one person can understand something better than another. Finally, in the eighth, the question is whether the intellect understands the indivisible before the divisible.

The first Article is, maybe, the most important of this *Question*, because the other seven are unfoldings of the conclusions established on it. Therefore, it is key to understand it well to comprehend the debate and reach the objectives proposed. In the answer of the first Article, Thomas Aquinas explains that there are three grades of the cognitive powers: a first, connected to corporal senses; a second, completely disconnected from corporal senses; and a third that is, simultaneously connected to corporal senses and disconnected with them. In the first grade, there are the irrational animals and, in the second, the angels. Human intellect is connected to the third grade of cognitive powers and, on one hand, depends on corporal senses because of the union of the soul with the body and, on the other, goes beyond sensitive knowledge and reaches the understanding of immaterial things<sup>7</sup>:

But the human intellect holds a middle place: for it is not the act of an organ; yet it is a power of the soul which is the form the body, as is clear from what we have said above (Question 76, Article 1). And therefore it is proper to it to know a form existing individually in corporeal matter, but not as existing in this individual matter. But to know what is in individual matter, not as existing in such matter, is to abstract the form from individual matter which is represented by the phantasms. Therefore we must needs say that our intellect understands material things by abstracting from the phantasms; and through material things thus considered we acquire some knowledge of immaterial things, just as, on the contrary, angels know material things through the immaterial. (Tomás de Aquino, 2002, p. 523, our highlight)<sup>8</sup>.

In our opinion, this concept of human intellect reflects in the process of soul formation. First, education would depend on sensitive experience, but not any sensitive experience. For instance, it is not because we have seen a turtle in some point of our lives that we understand its intelligible form. Data from the senses are the raw material to produce, in our soul, what

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<sup>7</sup> To deepen on the understanding of these different degrees of cognitive powers, besides other *Questions* which compose, together with *Question 85*, the *Treaty on men*, one should read the *Disputed Questions on the Soul*, a series of lessons taught by Thomas Aquinas in the *Studium Santa Sabina*, probably between 1266 and 1267, at the same time he wrote *Summa Theologica* – the latter started in 1265. Besides this text, we recommend reading Book II of *Summa contra Gentiles*, from the booklet *On the unity of the Intellect against the Averroists*, the *Disputed Questions on Spiritual Creatures*, and the *Disputed Questions on Truth*.

<sup>8</sup> (*ST*, I, q. 85, a. 1, conc., our highlight). To guarantee readers' access to any edition of *Summa Theologica*, we indicate in the footnote the reference. '*ST*' stands for *Summa Theologica*, the Roman number after refers to the Part of the *Summa Theologica* in which is the Question, followed by the number of the Question with the letter 'q'; after we present the number of the Article quoted followed by 'a'; and later, the information on what part of the Article we are quoting, if it is an answer from Aquinas, we identify it with 'conc.'; if it is an answer to the objections, we identify it with 'resp', followed by the number of the objection answered.

Thomas Aquinas called ‘phantasms’, or imaginary representations, from which the intellect abstracts the intelligible form. The action of abstracting the intelligible forms of phantasms presupposes, according to the Dominican theologian, a certain mode and order – thus the title of the *Question*, i.e., “of the mode and order of understanding”. The imaginary representations are principles of intellectual knowledge that human beings are capable of and are produced through and for the soul from their sensitive and cognitive abilities. With that stated, we reach the second essential implication of those concepts on human intellect: the progress of intellectual soul would be connected to the broadening of sensitive experience, which grows qualitatively and quantitatively with the maturation of the organism and social connections.

Honoré de Balzac (1959), 19<sup>th</sup> century writer, shows this issue in the characterization of Etienne, in *L’enfant Maudit*. The result of a romance previous to the marriage between Jeanne and the Earl of Hérouville, Etienne was ignored by his father and protected by his mother during his childhood and part of his adolescence. The lack of contact with society, together with the overprotection from the inherent suffering of human life, made Etienne too fragile to deal with the everyday problems of French nobility in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – leading to his death. This example in literature is important because it portrays a reality that is not radically different from ours and is the theme of studies in different areas of knowledge, as presented in the book *Spoilt Rotten: The Toxic Cult of Sentimentality* by Theodore Dalrymple (2015). To deprive children and teenagers from the problems of life in society does not necessarily mean to protect them; it can deprive them from the learning necessary for a healthy adult life.

The idea that men’s act of thinking, abstraction, is related to imaginary representations developed by the soul through the data produced by the senses, on one hand, and that culminate on the understanding of intelligible forms, on the other, unchains the problems approached by Thomas Aquinas in the subsequent articles. Thus, in the second Article, the theologian investigates if the intelligible species is the thing actually understood by the intellect or is it through which it understands. In the conclusion of the article, he defends that “the intelligible species is not what is actually understood, but that by which the intellect understands” and the concept that makes this possible is “likeness.” (Tomás de Aquino, 2002, p. 527-529)<sup>9</sup>. ”

In fact, intellect processes imaginary representations and takes from them the ‘likeness’, which are similar to a correspondence relation between the thing to be understood and its

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<sup>9</sup> (*ST*, I, q. 85, a. 2, conc.).

intelligible form. The knowledge we might have of a certain reality, in this sense, does not fully encompass its integrity and depends, in a great measure, on the conditions of the learning process. The knowledge we can have of the reality 'horse' will depend on how the process to think this reality was led. There are those who think that the horse is a work animal, others consider it a recreational animal, or even a means of transportation. These different ideas on the reality of 'horse' are likenesses, that is, certain correspondences between the known thing and its intelligible species.

This does not mean, however, that, in Thomasian perspective, the understanding of reality is always relative. What determines 'truth', if we can say so, are the intelligible species through which we establish these likenesses. The act of thinking is related to the intelligible species in a dynamic manner, so it is possible that people have different ideas on reality. The intelligible species taken in their totality are not accessible to men because of the union of the soul with the body, but that does not mean that they do not trigger the abstractive process which results in learning.

With that established, the issue discussed is the procedure that enables this process. Here we enter on the themes approached in the next Articles of *Question 85*, which show the gradual nature of intellectual understanding. Thus, in the third Article, Thomas Aquinas analyzes if we first understand what is universal. To answer this problem, the author states that, in the passage from imaginary representations to abstraction, our knowledge proceeds from what is singular to what is universal, different from the abstract thought, in which the movement starts from the universal to the singular (Tomás de Aquino, 2002, p. 531-532)<sup>10</sup>.

When we use the senses to understand a certain reality, what is presented before us is something chaotic, confusing. As we form imaginary representations, the reality, which is in the process of being understood, is gradually ordered until we reach a global idea of this reality. Thomas Aquinas gives the example of seeing: when we see something far away, we perceive it is an animal; when this animal gets closer, we see it is a man, i.e., not a lion or a deer, but a man; when this man gets even closer, we see that it is João, not Pedro nor Carlos, but indeed João.

In abstraction, the process is different. When we acquire a certain degree of reality understanding, we apply this knowledge to understand new realities. These likenesses, which we

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<sup>10</sup> (ST, I, q. 85, a. 3, conc.).

discussed above, are applied and are in the process of intellectual acts of composition and division, which are explained in the Article 5<sup>th</sup> of *Question 85*. When we meet the human João, we have a universal ideal of who he is (rational animal) and, based on the information we may have after knowing him better, we can see if he is a brave man or a coward, loyal or disloyal, etc. These ideas of ‘brave’, ‘coward’, ‘loyal’, and ‘disloyal’ are also likenesses, which are taught and learned through the correspondence between imaginary representations and intelligible species, as well as the ideas of ‘man’ and ‘horse’.

These reflections are as key for 13<sup>th</sup> century teachers as they are to us, 21<sup>st</sup> century educators. They raise pedagogical questions that we must ask, for instance, the need to learn by approximation, that is, to get closer to what we do not understand via what we do understand. Considering the distances that separate the 13<sup>th</sup> century and today, affirming that we learn new things based on what we know is not much different from what educators close to us say, such as Saviani (2012), Libâneo (2013), and Gasparin (2009). Therefore, we observe that the study of Thomasian reflections on learning show the importance of a long-duration analysis on the educational practice, to validate essential aspects of teaching and learning that are forgotten or neglected in a fast educational action or empty of theoretical-methodological fundamentals. Whatever the reason for this forgetfulness or neglect, if by ignorance or malice, it is up to science, especially History, to remind man of their own humanity.

The next important element to understand the procedures of the act of thinking is the possibility to understand many things at the same time, the theme of the fourth Article. On this, Thomas Aquinas argues that man knows many things if those things compose a unity. In this sense, the intellect can understand many things at once, if they are related to the same intelligible species (Tomás de Aquino, 2002, p. 535)<sup>11</sup>. Resuming to the horse example: when we understand what a horse is, we perceive there is an intelligible species of horse; circumscribed in the same intelligible species, there are many different things that we understand at the same time, that is, the parts of the body of a horse, the fact that it is a quadruped, strong, fast, etc.

These considerations are also relevant to understand Thomasian perspective of human formation, so that it establishes itself as a principle of teacher education: the possibility, according to Thomas Aquinas, to develop a complex understanding of reality, i.e., learning should ‘make sense’. Learning of many things takes place when they form a unity, i.e., when

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<sup>11</sup> (*ST*, I, q. 85, a. 4, conc.).

they are related among themselves in some way. Considering that the learner is only in that situation because he/she does not know, the responsibility to organize the different learning objects to form a unity that ‘makes sense’ is from those who teach, the educator. This organization takes place through the mastery of the content and previous planning of teaching<sup>12</sup>. These principles also appear in contemporary Pedagogy, highlighting the pertinence of Thomas Aquinas’s text to teacher education.

The reflections on the third and fourth Articles are enriched by reading the fifth Article, in which Thomas Aquinas explains the intellect acts of composition and division. According to the author, human intellect can develop ‘likenesses’ of intelligible species by composition and division:

The human intellect must of necessity understand by composition and division. For since the intellect passes from potentiality to act, it has a likeness to things which are generated, which do not attain to perfection all at once but acquire it by degrees: so likewise the human intellect does not acquire perfect knowledge by the first act of apprehension; but it first apprehends something about its object, such as its quiddity, and this is its first and proper object; and then it understands the properties, accidents, and the various relations of the essence. Thus it necessarily compares one thing with another by composition or division; and from one composition and division it proceeds to another, which is the process of reasoning. (Tomás de Aquino, 2002, p. 537)<sup>13</sup>.

We have seen then, that we learn through reasoning, which consists in composing and dividing imaginary representations. We do not intend to simplify Thomas Aquinas’s thought, but we believe it would be possible to infer that the result of reasoning is a type of synthesis, produced by students from their imaginary representations and with the mediation of an educator. Thus, understanding reality is a rational action of approximation and distancing, division and composition that can happen in different ways, as it happens in time and in a contextualized manner, as started by the theologian when answering the second objection: “composition and division of the intellect involve time” (Tomás de Aquino, 2002, p. 537)<sup>14</sup>.

One of the relevant aspects in this debate is the fact that it is because of reasoning, i.e., operations of composition and division that the intellect can err. Errors, in Thomasian text, can

<sup>12</sup> Tomás de Aquino develops this discussion on teaching in other works, such as in *Question 11 of Disputed Questions on Truth* (Tomás de Aquino, 2004) Article 3 of *Question 181* in the Second Part of the Second Part of *Summa Theologica* (*ST*, II-II, q. 181) (Tomás de Aquino, 2016, p. 1013-1014).

<sup>13</sup> (*ST*, I, q. 85, a. 5, conc.).

<sup>14</sup> (*ST*, I, q. 85, a. 5, resp. 2).

be considered as discrepancies between reality and what is thought about it. The possibility of intellect error is discussed in the 6<sup>th</sup> Article and is diligently presented by the author. The intellect, according to him, cannot err when referring to its own object. What the intellect understands is always the quiddity, i.e., the essence of things. Intellect can err, however, when related with different elements to reach the understanding of intelligible species. When composing, dividing, and reasoning, eventually, the intellect can fail to organize learning data, which can lead to not learning. This is important because it allows us to see the origin of the flaws in the educational process, which are almost always multiple and diverse and can be found in the education process, not so strongly in the learning process – what ends up demoralizing discourses that usually transfer to students the responsibility for their failure:

every faculty, as such, is "per se" directed to its proper object; and things of this kind are always the same. Hence, as long as the faculty exists, its judgment concerning its own proper object does not fail. Now the proper object of the intellect is the "quiddity" of a material thing; and hence, properly speaking, the intellect is not at fault concerning this quiddity; whereas it may go astray as regards the surroundings of the thing in its essence or quiddity, in referring one thing to another, as regards composition or division, or also in the process of reasoning. Therefore, also in regard to those propositions, which are understood, the intellect cannot err, as in the case of first principles from which arises infallible truth in the certitude of scientific conclusions. (Tomás de Aquino, 2002, p. 539)<sup>15</sup>.

In Article 6 there are also other important reflections on the truth of conclusions and the certitude of science. As we can see in the excerpt above, when the quiddity of the propositions is reached, one can get closer to the possible truth of human intellect. If when reasoning, we detour from this quiddity, we get farther from truth. This distancing determines the possibility of intellect error. This process takes place, for example, when we make the effort to frame reality into our preferred theoretical-methodological assumptions, even if these assumptions are not enough to understand it. Intellectuals<sup>16</sup>, certified scholars, have the commitment to investigate reality and make it understandable for the rest of the population, presenting to society the best possible solutions for their problems, with a margin of success, and always clarifying their assumptions. This demands from the intellectual the humbleness to look in the mirror and recognize the need to be unsatisfied with what is known. The intellectual

<sup>15</sup> (ST, I, q. 85, a. 6, conc.).

<sup>16</sup> We understand 'intellectuals' here as important social agents to understand reality, so that the action of those characters in history needs to be critically analyzed, in a perspective of totality and in the long duration (ac. Oliveira, Mendes & Santin, 2016).

is also defined by the recognition of its own falsehood and the deleterious consequences of vanity, particularly in those whose profession is to teach and practice science.

After, in Article 7, Thomas Aquinas questions if the same thing can be better understood by a person than by another. In the conclusion, the Dominican theologian states that there are two ways to consider this problem. First, we can consider it from the perspective of the thing understood. Considering the object of intellectual understanding is quiddity<sup>17</sup>, as already established by the author, the intellect cannot understand better or worse a certain substantial essence. Or, the intellect understands it or it does not. Therefore, from the perspective of the thing understood, it is not possible for a person to know better than the other. Second, we can consider the problem from the perspective of the cognoscente subject. Here, a person can know something better than another as one can be more disposed to knowledge than the other. This inequality of knowledge, we may say, depends, according to the author, on two conditions:

First, as regards the intellect itself, which is more perfect. For it is plain that the better the disposition of a body, the better the soul allotted to it; which clearly appears in things of different species: and the reason thereof is that act and form are received into matter according to matter's capacity: thus because some men have bodies of better disposition, their souls have a greater power of understanding, wherefore it is said (De Anima ii, 9), that "it is to be observed that those who have soft flesh are of apt mind." Secondly, this occurs in regard to the lower powers of which the intellect has need in its operation: for those in whom the imaginative, cogitative, and memorative powers are of better disposition, are better disposed to understand.. (Tomás de Aquino, 2002, 541)<sup>18</sup>.

We can see that the concepts of Master Aquinas regarding the inequality of knowledge are connected to the conditions in which the intellect operates. However, we believe this question needs to be analyzed based on other important data, because, though it may simply seem as a psychomotor problem, it is, in fact, multifaceted, concerning different fields in Pedagogy. First, we should consider that the Thomasian concept of intellect established itself as the base for teacher education in the 13<sup>th</sup> century university because it is through it that the human being completes itself and, consequently, fulfills itself as a creature (Santin, 2018) –

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth mentioning that the concept of quiddity employed by Thomas Aquinas is synonymous with the substantial essence or substance. Therefore, when the author affirms that the object of intellect itself is quiddity, he is saying that it is up to the intellect to understand the substantial essence of existing things, through imaginary representation, or phantasms, produced by the integrated work of soul's abilities – from those connected to corporal organs, to those which transcend the body, as we can observe in *Disputed Questions on the Soul* (Tomás de Aquino, 2012) and other works by Aquinas.

<sup>18</sup> (*ST*, I, q. 85, a. 7, concl.).

becoming then a theme of educational interest. After, it is worth highlighting that human intellect, according to Thomas Aquinas, is one of the capacities of the soul mobilized towards learning and not the only capacity to which learning depends (ac. Tomás de Aquino, 2012).

In fact, the intellect depends on imaginary representations to enact the operation to understand the substantial essences of things by abstraction. The production, in the soul, of those imaginary representations, or phantasms, depends on sensitive and intellective activities, passing by external senses, by the internal senses, by the sensorial appetitive abilities, by locomotion capabilities, until it reaches intellective potencies. Thus, we notice that the learning process, as understood by Thomas Aquinas, is complex and involves the totality of the being. This means that learning depends on the experience of the knowing subject.

Therefore, we have seen that the inequality of knowledge, according to Thomas Aquinas, can be understood as the manifestation of an extraordinary abstraction ability, which takes place with gifted and highly skilled people, or as the manifestation of a reality ravaged by inequalities of education and access to knowledge. In the above except, taken from Article 7, the author clearly affirms that the intellect depends on the ‘lower powers’ to act, which are the “imaginative, cogitative, and memorative powers”<sup>19</sup>. These abilities – imagination, ‘cogitation’, and memory – are renewed as the subject interacts with reality, by his/her own initiatives and means, or through the mediation of someone more experienced<sup>20</sup>, because they are mobilized by the action of external senses (touch, taste, smell, vision, and the hearing) and by common sense that are, on its turn, moved by the experience with sensitive things. Thus, we understand that knowledge inequality, particularly among subjects that do not have an extraordinary ability, is due to several forms of inequality that make knowledge more accessible to some than to others<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> An analysis of those ‘lower powers’ can be found on *Question 78* in the First Part of *Summa Theologica* (ac. Tomás de Aquino, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> On the two ways to reach understanding, Discovery and teaching, see the two *Questions* already mentioned in this text, in another footnote *Question 11* of *Disputed Questions on Truth* and Article 3 of *Question 181* in the Second Part of the Second Part of *Summa Theologica*.

<sup>21</sup> The issue of educational inequality, its multiple causes and varied effects, is not the object of this study. This debate has been broad and discussed by several intellectuals since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We can refer, for example, to Durkheim, Anísio Teixeira, Fernando de Azevedo, Lourenço Filho, Gramsci, Althusser, Bourdieu, among others who dedicated their careers to investigate educational inequality and its reasons, pointing out ways and perspectives of analysis that can, in a way, combat the problem of access to systematized knowledge. We are not comparing the debate established by Thomas Aquinas with that of contemporary intellectuals. The reality of the 13<sup>th</sup> century is much different from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, we believe that an analysis on the long term of

The last Article of *Question 85* is dedicated to intellectual knowledge and questions if intellect understands first the divisible or the indivisible. Summarizing, the author reaffirms that the object of the intellect is quiddity abstracted from imaginary representations to clarify that we first understand the indivisible that precisely characterizes imaginary representations. When a certain representation is formed in the soul, it presents itself as an indivisible whole that we gradually decompose and compose until reaching quiddity. That is why, in our understanding, the answer to the problem is that the intellect starts from the indivisible part of imaginary representations, uses intellectual resources to compose and divide whatever is necessary, thus, knowing what is divisible to reach, in the end, the understanding of substantial essences, which are, by definition, indivisible (ac. Tomás de Aquino, 2002, p. 543). Thereby, a certain itinerary of the intellect is established to understand quiddity: it dialectally starts from a ‘confused’ whole to, then, turn to an ‘ordered’ whole.

## Final remarks

In this study, we have seen that, in the work of Thomas Aquinas, the mode and order of understanding were key themes for the students of the University of Theology in 13<sup>th</sup> century Christianity. On one hand, future theologians learned the elements that characterized the process of soul formation and, on the other, reflected on the importance of these elements to educational practice, which allows us to apprehend from Thomasian lessons some relevant thoughts to think about our own pedagogical practice.

The first of these lessons is to perceive that, as men from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, we need a favorable condition to learn, which is translated into content knowledge, organization, and guidance, as the human soul cannot develop in the void and in chaos, with no foundation, object, and clear purposes.

The second is related to learning and, consequently, to the development of the soul, which depends on processes that take place in time and are susceptible to mistakes. The fact

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educational inequalities can enrich the discussion, allowing us to notice that the root of the problem can be not only the nature of a certain economic and social system. The fact that Thomas Aquinas had noticed, even in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and in a ‘scientific’ work, that inequalities of understanding can be triggered by what we now call ‘education inequality’, as synonymous with ‘inequality of access to systematized knowledge’ shows that we are faced by a typically human phenomenon, that manifests itself in different ways in different times, and with which we have to deal, regardless of the economic and social principles that organize society.

that knowledge starts from imaginary representations, passing by the ‘similarities’ with intelligible species and operations of division and composition, means that education is, temporally and spatially, dependent on certain conditions involving material and human resources. Particularly regarding human resources, we need to think about the consequences of an educator precariously trained or neglectful with students’ learning. It would be quite simple if education depended only on things external to men, but *Question 85* of the First Part of *Summa Theologica* shows that the problem can be more complex than it seems, demanding from all agents an intellectual formation and the conscious will to act according to the good of individuals and society.

Finally, we reiterate the value of studying the classics for teacher education in Brazil. We have tried to show that this study, particularly the works of Thomas Aquinas, is able to raise reflections on key problems of education under perspectives that we, eventually, neglect in the eagerness to constantly offer something new and as quickly as possible. Here we follow the teachings of Nietzsche (2019), in *On the use and abuse of History for life*, who, when questioning the pertinence of ‘old’ and ‘new’ for current life, states “that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential.”. (p. 14). Therefore, we need to turn to history to answer present problems in a balanced way, grounded on the experience of men and women in the past, as well as the singular experience of men and women today.

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