

# THOMISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

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## Thomistic Psychology

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Philosophy, Theology, Metaphysics, Psychology (Historical)

### 1. Core Definition and Scope

Thomistic Psychology refers to the comprehensive system of thought regarding the nature and operations of the human person, derived from the writings of the Italian philosopher and theologian, **St. Thomas Aquinas** (1225-1274). It is fundamentally a branch of philosophical anthropology that integrates the metaphysical principles of Aristotelian logic and physics with the tenets of Christian doctrine. Unlike modern, empirical psychology, which often focuses on observable behavior and neurochemical processes, Thomistic psychology is concerned with the intrinsic nature of the soul, its faculties, and its ultimate destiny. It provides a highly integrated framework for understanding how human beings know, choose, and act, placing the individual within a specific moral and teleological structure.

The psychological standards established by Aquinas are based on deductive reasoning from metaphysical axioms concerning the relationship between form and matter. This approach treats the human being as a substantial unity of body and soul, where the soul serves as the substantial form of the body, giving it life and specific structure. The scope of Thomistic psychology extends far beyond mere mental processes; it encompasses epistemology (the study of knowledge), ethics (the science of human action), and theology (the ultimate end of human existence). Consequently, its primary aim is not therapeutic intervention in the modern clinical sense but rather the holistic understanding of human nature as a composite being striving for rational perfection and ultimate beatitude.

The continued relevance of this framework, particularly among Catholic academic circles and Roman Catholic thinkers, lies in its robust defense of human rationality, free will, and the inherent dignity of the person. It offers a detailed map of the soul's operations, classifying the various internal and external senses, the sensitive appetites (passions), and the supreme rational faculties of the intellect and the will. These classifications are utilized to explain both moral virtue and vice, positioning the proper coordination of these faculties under the guidance of reason as the pathway to human flourishing.

### 2. Foundations in Aristotelian and Classical Thought

Aquinas's system is impossible to understand without recognizing its deep roots in the works of Aristotle, particularly *\*De Anima\** (On the Soul). Aquinas meticulously synthesized Aristotle's natural philosophy--which views the soul as the principle of life--with the revealed truths of Christianity. This synthesis led to the adoption of **Hylomorphism**, the metaphysical doctrine that all created physical substances are composites of prime matter and substantial form. In the human

person, the body is the matter and the soul is the form. This foundational principle dictates that psychological activity is always embodied activity, countering purely dualistic views which treat the soul as merely housed within the body.

The Aristotelian principle of the soul as the substantial form ensures that psychological phenomena, such as sensing, imagining, and reasoning, are understood as operations of the composite being, not just the immaterial soul acting in isolation. For instance, sensation requires both a material organ (the eye, the ear) and the formal principle (the soul) which actualizes the potentiality of that organ. This integrated perspective contrasts sharply with earlier Platonic or Augustinian traditions where the soul was often viewed as a perfect entity tragically imprisoned within a corruptible body. Aquinas insists on the natural, integrated relationship between body and soul.

Furthermore, Aquinas employed Aristotle's hierarchical classification of life forms, differentiating between vegetative, sensitive, and rational souls. This hierarchy is retained within the human soul, which possesses all three levels. The human soul performs vegetative functions (nutrition, growth), sensitive functions (locomotion, sensation), and uniquely, rational functions (intellect and will). By grounding his psychology in this sophisticated classical framework, Aquinas provided a systematic, logically coherent account of life and mind that stood in stark contrast to the more disjointed psychological explanations prevalent in early medieval thought.

### 3. The Faculties of the Human Soul

Thomistic Psychology details the soul not as a simple entity, but as having various "powers" or faculties that allow it to perform different kinds of operations. These powers are divided into five main genera: the vegetative, the sensitive (which includes both the external and internal senses), the appetitive, the locomotive, and the rational (intellectual). Understanding these faculties is essential to grasp how human knowledge is acquired and how moral choices are made. The rational faculties--the intellect and the will--are seen as distinct but interconnected, serving as the highest operative principles of human nature.

The **Sensitive Faculty** is crucial because it acts as the bridge between the physical world and the immaterial intellect. This faculty includes the five external senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch) and four internal senses: the **common sense** (which integrates data from the external senses), the **imagination** (which retains and reproduces sensory data in the absence of the object), the **memory** (which stores images tied to time), and the **cogitative power** (or estimative power in animals), which assesses the beneficial or harmful nature of sensible objects. This structure highlights the importance of embodied experience in the acquisition of all knowledge, affirming the maxim: "Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu" (Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses).

The **Rational Faculty** consists of the Intellect and the Will. The Intellect is the power that grasps universal truths and essences, abstracting the universal "form" or concept from the particular sensory data provided by the internal senses. The Intellect is further divided into the passive (or possible) intellect, which receives the abstracted universal concepts, and the active (or agent) intellect, which illuminates the sensory data to make the universal forms intelligible. The Will, conversely, is the rational appetite; it is the faculty that pursues the good presented to it by the intellect. While the intellect determines what is true, the will determines what is good, thus initiating human action.

#### 4. Key Psychological Principles and Epistemology

A cornerstone of Thomistic thought is the compatibility of **reason combined with faith**. Aquinas maintained that because both reason (the natural light of the intellect) and faith (the supernatural light of revelation) originate from God, they cannot ultimately contradict one another. When they appear to clash, it suggests an error in human reasoning or a misunderstanding of revelation. This principle elevates the role of human intellect in understanding the natural world, allowing for philosophical inquiry and scientific pursuit without fear of conflicting with theological dogma. The intellect's ability to grasp objective reality through sensory experience and abstraction is foundational to this epistemology.

In the process of cognition, the intellect works through a complex process involving phantasms. The external senses perceive a particular object (e.g., this specific apple). The internal senses process this data into a phantasm (a sensory image). The active intellect then illuminates the phantasm, abstracting the universal nature (the concept of 'apple-ness' or 'substance') and creating an intelligible species, which is received by the possible intellect. This process ensures that all abstract knowledge remains tethered to empirical reality, differentiating Thomism from pure rationalism.

The relationship between intellect and passion is another vital psychological principle. Passions (or emotions), such as love, hate, fear, and anger, are movements of the sensitive appetite. These are not inherently bad; they are natural responses to perceived good or evil. However, they must be governed by the intellect and directed by the rational will. Moral development, therefore, involves training the passions to follow the dictates of right reason, leading to the acquisition of cardinal virtues like temperance and fortitude. When passion overwhelms reason, the individual acts imperfectly or viciously, demonstrating a breakdown in the hierarchical operation of the soul's faculties.

#### 5. Free Will and Moral Responsibility

The concept of **free will** (\*liberum arbitrium\*) is central to Thomistic moral psychology, serving as

the basis for human dignity and moral responsibility. For Aquinas, freedom is not mere spontaneity but rather the capacity for rational self-determination. The will is free because it is directed toward the good, yet because the intellect can present many particular goods (health, wealth, knowledge) as desirable, the will retains the freedom to choose among them, or even to choose a lesser good over the greater good due to a deficiency in practical reasoning or undue influence from the passions.

The act of choice (\*electio\*) is a joint operation of the intellect and the will. The intellect makes a final judgment about the best course of action (the practical judgment), and the will consents to this judgment, moving the individual to act. This intimate connection means that freedom is intrinsically linked to rationality. When individuals act irrationally or against their better judgment, it is often due to ignorance (the intellect failing to grasp the true good) or passion (the sensitive appetite overriding the rational appetite).

This emphasis on free will provides the ethical framework necessary for Aquinas's theological project. Since humans are responsible for their actions, they can merit reward or incur blame. The cultivation of moral virtues (such as prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude) is essential because these virtues perfect the rational faculties, enabling both the intellect and the will to operate smoothly and consistently toward the true good, thereby maximizing the capacity for truly free and rational choice.

## 6. The Pursuit of Ultimate Happiness (Beatitudo)

Aquinas argues that all human actions are ultimately directed toward the final end of happiness, or \*beatitudo\*. This drive is inherent in human nature as rational beings. However, Thomistic psychology makes a critical distinction between imperfect happiness and perfect happiness. Imperfect happiness is achievable in this life through the exercise of virtue, particularly the contemplative life of philosophical and theological study (the **knowledge of God as ultimate happiness** being the highest attainable form of earthly joy). Yet, this happiness remains imperfect because human knowledge is limited and subject to the vulnerabilities of the physical world.

Perfect happiness, or \*Beatitudo\*, is defined as the perfect and everlasting possession of the ultimate good, which is God Himself. This requires the Beatific Vision, an act of the intellect perfected by grace, wherein the human being directly apprehends the Divine Essence. This goal provides the ultimate teleological context for Thomistic psychology; the entire structure of the soul--its faculties, its ability to reason, and its capacity for free choice--is oriented toward this supernatural end.

By identifying the ultimate end as the contemplation of God, Aquinas dismisses lesser goods--such as wealth, bodily pleasure, power, or even intellectual achievement divorced from divine truth--as insufficient sources of true, lasting contentment. These goods are merely instrumental, providing

temporary satisfaction, but they cannot fully satisfy the infinite capacity of the rational appetite (the will). The psychological necessity of striving for the infinite good is what drives the human soul and provides meaning to the moral life.

## 7. Historical Development and 20th-Century Revival

Thomistic psychology flourished throughout the Scholastic period, establishing the dominant paradigm for understanding human nature in Western Europe until the rise of empirical science and early modern philosophy (Descartes, Hobbes). While its influence waned significantly after the 17th century, particularly as psychology began to emerge as an independent, non-metaphysical discipline in the late 19th century, it experienced a significant revival in the 20th century. This revival, known as **Neothomism**, was largely spearheaded by **Roman Catholic thinkers** and institutions, often encouraged by papal endorsements (such as Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* in 1879).

During the formative 20th century, Neothomist scholars, such as Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, sought to reintroduce Aquinas's system into contemporary debates, defending its validity against modern secular philosophies. This movement attempted to engage with--and often critique--the burgeoning fields of clinical and experimental psychology, arguing that the metaphysical grounding of Thomism offered a more complete and coherent account of the human person than strictly materialistic or behavioral models. These thinkers stressed that while empirical psychology could catalog mental processes, it required Thomistic metaphysics to understand the *meaning* and *purpose* of those processes.

Although Thomism did not manage to penetrate the mainstream of scientific psychology, its revival ensured its continued vitality within theological and philosophical institutions globally. Today, the principles of Thomistic psychology inform courses in philosophical anthropology, ethics, and moral theology, particularly where questions of free will, the nature of consciousness, and the unity of body and soul are debated outside of purely materialistic paradigms.

## 8. Criticisms and Contemporary Standing

The primary and most significant criticism acknowledged even within contemporary Thomistic scholarship is that **Thomistic psychology is not highly regarded among many professionals in the field of psychology** today. This marginalization stems fundamentally from a paradigm shift regarding what constitutes valid psychological knowledge. Modern psychology, following the scientific revolution, demands empirical verification, quantitative measurement, and methodological naturalism.

Thomistic psychology, being primarily a deductive, philosophical discipline based on metaphysics, does not align with these scientific criteria. Concepts such as the "substantial form" of the soul, the "active intellect," or the "rational appetite" are not observable phenomena and thus hold no

explanatory power in scientific models reliant on neurology, genetics, or behaviorism. Furthermore, the explicit theological teleology--the orientation toward the knowledge of God as the ultimate end--renders it unsuitable for inclusion in a secular, scientifically neutral curriculum.

Critics argue that Thomism remains stagnant, unable to account for the vast empirical discoveries regarding mental illness, cognitive processes, and neurological structures made since the 13th century. While Thomists counter that their system addresses the \*essence\* of the person, which underlies all empirical findings, the lack of predictive or testable hypotheses ensures its exclusion from the scientific mainstream. Consequently, Thomistic psychology survives today mainly as a philosophical framework for ethics and theological reflection rather than as a competing scientific theory of the mind.

### Further Reading

[Thomas Aquinas](#) (Wikipedia)

[Theology](#) (Wikipedia)

[Aristotelianism](#) (Wikipedia)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Saint Thomas Aquinas: Philosophy of Mind](#)