Sense Perception and the Flourishing of the Human Person in von Hildebrand and the Aristotelian Traditions

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Abstract

Phenomenologist Dietrich von Hildebrand argues that many properties of the material world only exist in relation to persons, that sense perception is not merely a bodily act, but a properly spiritual, personal act, and that our highest act is not purely intellectual but involves bodily sense perception. By his own assertion, his philosophy must be understood in the context of the Catholic philosophical tradition; here, I consider his account of the material world and of sense perception in comparison to two strands of the Aristotelian tradition in Catholic philosophy, represented by Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas. I show how von Hildebrand's views on the material world and sense perception can be better understood, their phenomenological bases defended, and their deficiencies corrected, by drawing on the notion of *energeiai* from Palamas' thought, and of participation and obediential potency from Aquinas' thought.

Keywords: Aristotle, Gregory Palamas, matter, sense perception, Thomas Aquinas, von Hildebrand.

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Percepción sensible y el florecimiento de la persona humana en von Hildebrand y las tradiciones aristotélicas

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Resumen

El fenomenólogo Dietrich von Hildebrand arguye que las propiedades del mundo material sólo existen en relación con las personas, que la percepción sensible no es meramente un acto corporal, y que nuestro acto más perfecto no es únicamente intelectual, sino que involucra una percepción corporal. Considerado así por el mismo Hildebrand, su filosofía exige ser entendida dentro del contexto de la tradición de la filosofía católica; en este artículo me propongo explorar su visión del mundo material y de la percepción sensible en contraposición con dos vertientes de la tradición aristotélica en la filosofía católica, representadas por Tomás de Aquino, de un lado, y por Gregorio Palamás, del otro. Asimismo, muestro cómo la concepción que von Hildebrand tiene del mundo material y de la percepción sensible puede ser entendida, sus fundamentos fenomenológicos defendidos y sus deficiencias corregidas, a partir de la noción de *energeiai* de Palamás, y de las nociones de participación y potencia obediencial de Aquino.

Palabras clave: Aristóteles, Gregorio Palamás, materia, percepción sensible, Tomás de Aquino, von Hildebrand.

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A chief benefit of reading phenomenologist and personalist Dietrich von Hildebrand is that he helps us grasp more fully what it is to be a human person. Von Hildebrand presents his account of what we human persons are in the context of the Catholic philosophical tradition, including its phenomenological and personalist strands, and its Aristotelian and scholastic strands. Because this is the context in which he developed his account of the human person, his claims must be tested against that tradition. I have both a historical and a systematic goal in this paper: first, I intend to explicate some of von Hildebrand's view alongside certain claims of the Aristotelian tradition, and second, I intend to defend von Hildebrand's contributions to the latter tradition.

On von Hildebrand's view, in order to understand the human person, we must understand the material world personalistically—that is, as oriented to the lives of persons, and also as having personal or person-like characteristics. This is seen in that material things display a "human aspect." The human aspect of material things consists of appearances that belong to material things, but only appear to persons; von Hildebrand interprets these appearances as "messages" sent by God to human persons, since he thinks there is phenomenological warrant for claiming that the human aspect is not reducible to or entirely caused by matter as scientifically-describable (von Hildebrand, 1991: 205-218); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 58-64, 90-91, 165, 330-335). This aspect of material things is grasped by sense perception, which on von Hildebrand's view is not merely a bodily power, but a properly personal (that is, spiritual, intentional, or meaning-grasping) power (von Hildebrand, 1991: 213-7); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 90, 112-115). The human body, at least in some respects, is not merely material or animal, but has a personal mode of being.[1] For this reason, the highest act of which we are capable, and the act in which we most flourish, contemplation, is not, on von Hildebrand's view, purely in the soul, but includes bodily, perceptual acts.[2]

[1] The personalistic mode of being of the body is seen particularly well in the account of sexual expressions of love in von Hildebrand, 1970: 68-70; in the account of laughter as a bodily mode of being-affected and value response, in von Hildebrand, 2016: 419-22; and in the account of praise in von Hildebrand, 1993: 13-4.

[2] On the link between contemplation and sense perception see von Hildebrand, 1953: 81, 328-329; von Hildebrand, 2009: 16-17, 106, 113-114. For the link between contemplation and beauty, and for the claim that contemplation is

I consider these claims in light of the Aristotelian strand of the Catholic tradition, which is part of the context for von Hildebrand's work, and with which von Hildebrand places himself in debate. In particular, I place von Hildebrand's account in conversation with two strands of the Aristotelian tradition on sense perception, one represented by Thomas Aquinas and the other represented by Gregory Palamas. I argue in this paper that this debate and conversation has implications for what human flourishing is. Von Hildebrand's claims about sense perception challenge those strands of the tradition (represented by certain texts of Aquinas') on which the act of flourishing is purely intellectual or volitional. His claims are evidence for those strands of the tradition (represented by certain texts of Palamas') which hold that sense perception is an extension of intellectual power, and so is directly involved in flourishing, not merely an effect or something that accompanies flourishing. However, this same comparison also shows that von Hildebrand's view of the sense perceivable world is open to charges of covert idealism. Nevertheless, these changes can be met by adopting certain principles of Aristotelian metaphysics. I argue that von Hildebrand's "personalistic" view of the material world, including the human body, can be best understood and defended as true by incorporating into his phenomenologically-based metaphysics the Thomistic principles of obediential potency and participation, and the Palamite principle of *energeia*. Through this conversation with Aristotelianism, von Hildebrand's work can even better help us understand what we are, what the perceivable material world is, and in what our ultimate flourishing consists; again, my goals here are both to understand and to defend von Hildebrand's view in the context of the broader Catholic, Aristotelian tradition.

The paper proceeds in three stages. First, I explicate von Hildebrand's views on sense perception and their implications regarding the material world. Second, I describe the two strands of the Aristotelian tradition on sense perception and human flourishing, placing von Hildebrand in critical conversation with these two strands, both for the sake of better understanding von Hildebrand's position vis-à-vis the tradition, and for the sake of defending key Hildebrandian claims. Finally, I raise a number of objections and reply to them.

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the act in which we act most as persons see von Hildebrand, 1990: 118-125; von Hildebrand, 2016: 5-6, 362-364, 384.

I

Von Hildebrand on Sense Perception. A spiritual cognitive act is an intentional act that grasps the meaning of some object; it is not just an act that is caused by its object, whether or not one consciously grasps the object's meaning, but that requires this grasp in order to occur at all. A perceptual act is a spiritual cognitive act in which the object is intuitively or directly given and discloses itself to a subject. Perceptual acts are not abstractive; that is, they are an encounter with the object as it gives itself, not a separating of something from a perceived object (von Hildebrand, 1953: 173-5, 185); (von Hildebrand, 1991: 71, 79, 165). Abstraction, as von Hildebrand understands it, is a move from the particular to the common and conceptual, and from the more to the less real (von Hildebrand, 1991: 165, 181-2, 249, 272-4).[3]

But—and this is a first point of contact with the Aristotelian tradition—these claims do not exclude the possibility that perception in the Hildebrandian sense, while opposed to a certain kind of abstraction, includes abstraction in the Aristotelian sense. On the Aristotelian view, especially as explicated by Aquinas, some abstraction actualizes—that is, makes *more* real—what is potentially intelligible. We find this feature of abstraction in the form of abstraction used in natural philosophy, in which one abstracts universals from particulars, and in the form of abstraction used in mathematics, in which one abstracts parts from wholes. Yet another kind of abstraction, that used in metaphysics, separates transcendental features of Being from individual beings, and so is likewise a contact with the real, not necessarily a move to the less real, as occurs in Hildebrandian abstraction.[4] Perception as a general

[3] Von Hildebrand (based on 1953: 138) would disagree with those members of the Aristotelian tradition for whom God, as subsistent act of existence, is more like our abstracted concept of existence than like the real exercised act of existence of material things; this view is taken, for example, by Thomas de Vio Cajetan. See Cajetan's commentary on *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) I q. 82 a. 3, as explicated by Dewan, 2007: 295-306.

[4] The Aristotelian view of abstraction is drawn from *De Anima* (hereafter *DA*) III.4&5 (Aristotle, 1957); see also III.7.431b12-19 and *Metaphysics* (hereafter *Met*.) IX.10.1051b18-26 (Aristotle, 1924). For the three kinds of abstraction, see Aquinas 1959b, q. 5 a. 1; Aquinas, 1888-1906, I q. 85 a. 1 ad2. The first kind of

category of acts includes not only sense perception, but any act in which an object (including values, states-of-affairs, and necessary essences) discloses itself to a subject (von Hildebrand, 2016: 18-20). Aristotelians see some abstractive cognition as perceptual: for example, the first kind of abstraction mentioned above leads to perception of an essence.[5] Von Hildebrand rejects the claim that abstraction in this Aristotelian sense is necessary for perception of genuine essences (von Hildebrand, 1991: 165);[6] perception of essences is effected by their self-disclosure, not by a person actualizing them. But while this is a disagreement about what is necessary to perceive essences, it is not a disagreement over whether essence can be perceived: von Hildebrand and Aristotelians agree that they can. Furthermore, von Hildebrand agrees that abstraction in the metaphysical sense facilitates a kind of perception: we can perceive the value and beauty of Being, existence, and essence in general, but only through abstracting Being as such from perceived beings.[7] In this case, what is perceived is the value of Being, and nothing is separated from Being in order to perceive its value (hence, this act is not abstractive in

abstraction is the abstraction of the universal from the particular, the second is the abstraction of the part (e.g. the quantitative part, in mathematical abstraction) from the whole, the third is the separation of the transcendental as such from the individual.

[5] On essences and their mode of being and perception, see Aristotle, *Met.* VII.6 and Aquinas, 1933, c. 2. On intellectual perception in general in Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition see Spencer, 2016: 677-692.

[6] Von Hildebrand does allow that if by 'abstraction' is meant focusing on the essential and not the accidental, then abstraction is involved in perceiving necessary essences.

[7] (von Hildebrand, 1953: 135); (von Hildebrand, 1991: 182); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 190-1). Other phenomenologists, such as Heidegger, might object that von Hildebrand misconstrues Being as such as the most empty and general of concepts, and so overlooks the genuine ontological difference between Being and beings, in which Being is that rich fullness by which beings are and come to unconcealment. But this is not so: on von Hildebrand's view, it is true that abstraction is needed to reach Being as such, but it is not the abstraction to the universal (the first kind of abstraction) but rather separation. Furthermore, although he never devotes a full study to Being, there is nevertheless on his view a "depth and grandeur", even a beauty, to Being as such and to its value, which belongs to beings by their existence, though, as on Heidegger's view that this depth is never fully disclosed in a particular being.

von Hildebrand's sense), although this presupposes a step of abstraction in which being is mentally separated from particular beings (that is, this act of perception presupposes abstraction in both the Hildebrandian and Aristotelian sense.)

In any perception, on von Hildebrand's view, the self-disclosure of the object "fecundates" the subject, that is, renders the subject capable of understanding the object, moving to further perceptual acts, delighting in the object, and expressing that understanding and delight. The object furthermore draws the subject into experiential, contemplative union—a "spiritual wedding"—with the object, in which the subject enters into and understands the innermost depths of the object. The object here is entirely "thematic"—that is, when I perceive, my attention is entirely on the object and its meaning, not on the acts by which I intend it, or on myself as causally affected by the object (von Hildebrand, 1953: 137, 211-3, 232); (von Hildebrand, 1991: 59, 74, 94-100, 224-232); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 19-20, 112-5, 371-2).

For this reason, sense perception differs from sensation. In sensation, my attention is on the sensed object causally impinging upon my body, as when a bright light hurts my eyes or a lovely scene caresses my eyes. This is an experience of my "lived body", my living conscious body insofar as it can be causally acted upon. It is not an experience had by me *qua* person, that is, by me insofar as I engage in intentional, meaning-grasping and meaning-motivated acts. In sense perception, which is (paradoxical though it may sound) (von Hildebrand, 2016: 114) a personal and spiritual, though bodily, act, we make intentional contact with a qualitatively rich dimension of the world, which is meaningful in itself (von Hildebrand, 1991: 94); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 114-115),[8] the "human aspect" of the world (von Hildebrand, 1991: 205-218); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 58-64, 90-91, 165, 330-335). With my eyes, I see colors, surfaces, visible wholes, and entire scenes; with my ears, I hear tones, melodies, harmonies, and entire musical works. It is plausible to think that these aspects of the world would not exist if there were no human (or, for the simpler features of this aspect, animal) perceivers (von

[8] The human being includes the value and modes of being proper to matter, organisms, and persons (von Hildebrand, 1953: 130). In being an organism, the world can causally impinge upon my body, causing various physiological, vital, or psychological events, including sensation, but in being a person, I interact with things through spiritual acts.

Hildebrand, 2016: 112-120, 333-335). But it does not follow that these aspects of the world are merely subjective or to be explained idealistically, existing only "in" observers in the manner of Kantian phenomena (von Hildebrand, 1991: 209-210); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 59-61). Rather, they are given as real and as belonging to objects—indeed, they present themselves as how the world "ought" to look (von Hildebrand, 1991: 216); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 60). This is the case even for those features of the human aspect of the world that can only be seen from some point of view, such as the blue color of mountains when seen from far away (von Hildebrand, 1991: 212-213); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 330-331). These "human aspects" of the world are actually given experientially as *more* real and meaningful, with greater impact on one's personal, spiritual life, than their causal, scientifically-observable base, such as electromagnetic or sound waves. We can receive these aspects as "messages" from God and traces or reflections of Him, *vestigia Dei*, which have the power to raise our minds to Him more than the causal, scientifically-observable base (von Hildebrand, 1991: 214); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 97-98).[9]

That the perceivable world has not only a scientifically-explainable, causal layer but also a meaningful, human layer is seen all the more in experiences of beauty and of other intelligible properties that appear in the sensible world. For example, to see some material thing, like a waterfall or mountain, as powerful or as immovable is to *see* a property that is neither purely visible nor purely immaterial, but that appears in the visible. Unlike color and light, power and immobility do not directly impinge on my eyes, and yet I see these attributes appear in the visible world (von Hildebrand, 2016: 205-6). More importantly, many physical things, due to their colors or tones or physical forms, present themselves as beautiful, in a beauty that appeals to the senses.[10] Here something deeper than normal, perceivable colors, tones, or wholes appears to the senses.[11] We are affected here, *through* the eyes or ears, in our spiritual affective power. This is a power for acts that are both acts of feeling and

[9] For von Hildebrand's analysis of the traditional *vestigium-imago* distinction in ways that creatures reflect God, see von Hildebrand, 1953: 148.

[10] This sort of beauty is discussed at great length by von Hildebrand, especially in von Hildebrand, 2016: c. 4-5.

[11] Though, even in perceiving colors and tones something genuinely meaningful, deeper than the causal and merely physical, appears to sense perception.

essentially meaning-grasping and motivated by our grasp of meaning, unlike feelings which are aroused purely causally, physiologically, or by mental free association, without requiring grasp of or motivation by meaning. When we see an instance of beauty that appeals to the senses, this affective power is taken hold of and brought to enjoyment, without our attending to bodily sensations (von Hildebrand, 2016: 48, 377-379).

At a yet deeper level, to see joy spread over someone's face is to see a spiritual quality "expressed" in the physical. For an interior spiritual quality or act to be expressed in the physical is for the numerically same quality to be present interiorly and exteriorly: one and the same joy is felt interiorly and expressed exteriorly, such that there are, as it were, two sides to the joy, one able to be experience by oneself and the other observable to others. To say that as spiritual quality is physically expressed is not just to say that the physical appearance signifies or is associated with the spiritual quality. When one thing signifies another, or when one thing is associated with another, the mind must first grasp the sign and then move or reason to what is signified, even though this often happens very quickly, especially when one has the habit of seeing some signified thing in some sign. But in expression, physiological processes make intuitively present something spiritual, such that, although it is in itself interior and invisible, it can be directly seen. The experience of seeing a sign and the experience of seeing something expressed are phenomenologically different (von Hildebrand, 2016: 139-140). Spiritual qualities can also be seen even in non-personal, non-conscious phenomena like a radiant blue sky, which gives itself as objectively joyful. To genuinely see a radiant blue sky is to see joy made present in nature, not merely to project joy into nature, or to find joy associated with or signified by the sky. One piece of evidence for this claim is that one can see joy made present in the radiant blue sky even one is far from joyful (von Hildebrand 2016: 181-185, 277, 298, 451). We do not see physical properties and then abstract the notion of joy; rather, we make perceptual contact with that spiritual quality in the physical world.

At the deepest level of what can be sensibly perceived, there is the "beauty of the second power." This is an immaterial beauty that entirely exceeds sense-perceivable properties like colors and tones and even exceeds the beauty that appeals to the senses. In the most sublime music and paintings, or in the glories of nature, we experience a beauty that seems entirely incommensurate with the ordinariness of the sensible medium in which it appears. We experience this heavenly

beauty in something like the way we experience sublime moral values in a human person.[12] A beauty that comes "from above" rests upon the sense-perceivable beauty; the latter, more normal, beauty is a necessary condition for the appearance of the former, but the connection between the two is not intuitive: it is not clear how something like colors or tones, meaningful, beautiful, and personally-oriented though they are, could put us in touch with beauty of the level we encounter in the greatest works of, for example, Mozart or Titian. Yet here too the beauty, which presents itself as entirely spiritual, is present in the sense-perceivable world, and bodily perception grasps what seems to entirely exceed the physical world (von Hildebrand 2016, 211-212).

At each level of the human aspect, the bodily sense-perceptual powers make contact with meaning conveyed by the sensible world: the intelligible is encountered *as perceivable*. The perceptual (and so bodily) experience of beauty is even a form of "contemplation." (von Hildebrand, 1953: 137, 211-3, 232); (von Hildebrand, 1991: 59, 74, 94-100, 224-232); (von Hildebrand, 2016: 19-20, 112-5, 371-2).[13] Indeed, von Hildebrand says the most beatific experience of which human persons are capable is the vision of Christ—which involves sense perceptual acts (von Hildebrand, 1953: 329); (von Hildebrand, 1991: 234); (von Hildebrand, 2007: 131). Our highest, most personal act, involves not only the intellectual, volitional, and affective powers of the soul, but also the body, though in its personal, not its lived-bodily, mode of being. Furthermore, the material world is meant to or ought to present the invisible in the visible. There is a Christological element at work here: just as Christ is the icon of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), so the perceptual world is an icon of invisible beauties.[14]

[12] This sort of beauty is discussed at great length by von Hildebrand, especially in von Hildebrand, 2016: c. 9.

[13] See note 2 above.

[14] Here von Hildebrand anticipates the work of later religious phenomenologists, especially Jean-Luc Marion, who discuss the appearance of the invisible in the visible, perhaps in best developed form in Marion, 2004. But von Hildebrand, unlike Marion, incorporates this account of perceiving the invisible in the visible into a thoroughly *realist*, though also phenomenologically grounded, philosophy.

II

Von Hildebrand and the Aristotelian Tradition on Sense Perception. Since von Hildebrand places himself in the Catholic intellectual tradition, it is helpful both for understanding his views, and, more importantly, for determining what is true in his views about ourselves, our acts, and our flourishing, to test them against the claims of a major strand of that tradition. The Aristotelian tradition takes up similar questions to those that motivate von Hildebrand on sense perception, and von Hildebrand places himself in conversation with that tradition. But Aristotle says potentially conflicting things about the relation between our intellectual power (*nous*) and powers of sense perception (*aisthesis*), which gave rise to at least two strands of the Aristotelian tradition, represented here in particular by the work of Thomas Aquinas and of Gregory Palamas. Each strand can be understood as privileging one set of Aristotelian texts over another.

In the texts emphasized by the first tradition, *aisthesis* is the power to receive sensible forms and thereby "become" sensible things *qua* sensible—that is, become one in form with them, such that the form of the sensible object is what structures and gives content to the sense power's act of intending the sensible object (*DA* III.8.431b20-432a8). By this power one cognizes concrete individuals as such, as when we perceive not human nature but Socrates, or we perceive not a general account (*logos*) of what we ought to do in some kind of situation in general, but rather the beauty (*kalon*) in virtue of which a particular act is to be done in a particular situation.[15] *Nous*, by contrast, grasps the intelligible and Being as such; *nous* can receive and so "become" *all* forms, not just sensible ones. *Nous* sometimes does this by making contact with and perceiving things intelligible in themselves, such as essences. This Aristotelian act corresponds to perception of necessary essences on von Hildebrand's view. In other cases, *nous* becomes its objects by abstracting and rendering intelligible the natures of sensible things. This corresponds to the act of grasping "morphic unities", on

[15] *DA* II.5.417b18-23; *Met*. VII.10.1036a7-25; *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*) II.9.1109b20-23; II.6.1115a13; VI.8.1142a25; VI.12. 1143b38-1144a32 (Aristotle, 1894). See Tuozzo, 1995: 129-154. No *logos* can be given of the perceived, concrete individual (*Met*., VII.11.1037a25-29)

von Hildebrand's view; morphic unities are the natures of things that lack strictly necessary essences and include what it is to be a member of a biological species. *Nous*, on this first set of texts, does not grasp the concrete material individual, except insofar as its essence or form is rendered intelligible.[16] Not all beauty is actually intelligible on this view: the senses (even those of animals[17]) can grasp beauty, but not actually intelligible meaning. Sense perception grasps what is potentially intelligible, but only *nous* grasps what is actually intelligible.

Von Hildebrand does make some claims in common with this view; for example, he holds that perception of colors is less meaningful than perception of essences, just as Aristotle holds that *aisthesis* does not grasp meanings, such as beauty, as deeply as *nous*. However, von Hildebrand does think both perception of colors and perception of essence are intrinsically meaningful, given that they are "messages" from God. Indeed, he thinks the former is meaningful in the sense of actual intelligibility (and not merely in the sense of being a form that can be received by a cognitive power) since he thinks it is more meaningful than what is grasped in scientific knowledge. He does admit that it is the soul's power of being-affected, more than sense perception, that is struck by beauty—but beauty, on his view, is always deeply meaningful (that is, actually intelligible) even when grasped just by sense perception, while on Aristotle's view, it is not always so (von Hildebrand, 2016: 8, 59-60); (von Hildebrand, 1991: 79, 221-2).

Aquinas largely follows this first set of Aristotelian texts, but he moves closer than they do to von Hildebrand's view (Aquinas, 1950, IX, lectio 11). Sense perception, on Aquinas' view, not only receives sensible forms, but also participates in the intellectual power—that is, it shares in the intellect's ability to receive and cognize being, and the intellect is its exemplar—but sense perception grasps only the sensible contents of material things, not actually intelligible meanings (Aquinas, 1888-1906, I q. 77, a. 7); (Aquinas, 1959a, II lectio 13). A strict version of the first strand of the tradition, such as in Averroes, would emphasize those texts on which *nous* is entirely unmixed with other kinds of souls, such

[16] The foregoing account of *nous* is synthesized from *DA*, III.4&5; III.8.431b20-432a8; *Met.*, IX.10.1051b18-26; *NE*, VI.6.1140b31-1141a8; VI.8.1142a25. See Wood, 2011: 404-7. The foregoing ideas from von Hildebrand are from 1991: 165.

[17] Aristotle, *History of Animals*, VIII.9.618a18 (Aristotle, 1990).

as the soul that engages in *aisthesis*; on Averroes' view, the individual human soul does not include *nous* at all, but rather *nous* is a separated intelligent substance that interacts with our souls.[18] But Aquinas emphasizes Aristotelian texts on which each kind of soul contains the lower kinds, and so the intellectual soul contains the sensitive, and the sensitive powers are a participation in and flow from the intellectual.[19] Furthermore, sense perception can grasp beauty, on Aquinas' view, and this is meaningful, for example, insofar as it can lead to romantic love for one particular other person, though the other's intelligible beauty (such as the beauty of their moral virtues) can only be grasped through the intellect (Aquinas, 1969, IX, lectio 5).[20] Finally, Aquinas distinguishes the exterior from the interior senses. Exterior senses, such as sight and hearing, grasp qualities such as color and sound. Interior senses include the common sense, which unites what is grasped by individual exterior senses into a single sensory experience of the world, or the cogitative power, which grasps individual intentionally-graspable features of beings, such as their danger or benefit. These interior senses grasp features of things that are not directly sensed but are grasped in sensible things (Aquinas, 1959a, lectio 13); (Aquinas, 1888-1906, I q. 78 a. 3&4).[21] Aquinas thereby includes a sort of sensory grasp on the invisible in the visible, which is another parallel between his account and von Hildebrand's.

But at most, and here Aquinas clearly holds to the first reading of Aristotle, there can be a "moral" and causal union between acts of intellect and of the internal senses. By this he means that the two acts can be experienced as unified, and the meaning grasped by the intellect can be joined with (or can "overflow" into) the sensory act (Aquinas, 1888-1906, I q. 78 a. 4 ad5; I-II q. 4 a. 5 ad4; q. 20 a. 3); (Aquinas, 1959a, lectio 13). The act of intellect, not perception, even interior perception, grasps intelligible meaning, and only by separating it by abstraction from the sensible, material world. Intelligible meaning is at most signified by and potentially present in the sense-perceivable world, never genuinely "expressed" there, that is, not genuinely incarnated or made actually

[18] See e.g. *DA*, II.2.413b24-29, and III.5. See also Aquinas, 1961, II c. 61.

[19] See e.g. *DA*, II.3.414b18-415a10. See also Aquinas, 1888-1906, I q.75&76.

[20] cf. (Aquinas, 1888-1906, I-II q. 27 a. 1 ad3; q. 145 a. 2).

[21] For an excellent survey of the literature and explication of Aquinas' views on interior sensation see DeHaan, 2014: 397–437.

present in the material world.[22] There is on this view no "human aspect": colors and tones are actual accidents of things that do not exist just as a human aspect intended for perceivers and are not actually intelligible in themselves (Aquinas, 1959a, lectio 2 n. 612). On this view, intelligible meanings are, *qua* actually intelligible, only in minds (Aquinas, 1959a, lectio 9 n. 727). Our highest act is an act of intellectual contemplation of God. Sense perception can help us to achieve that act by directing our attention to God and by providing us with the data that allows us to begin intellectual reasoning, which ultimately leads to contemplation of God. And the intellect can "overflow" the happiness of its act to sense perception—that is, our intellectual enjoyment can cause feelings of enjoyment in our bodily, sensory feelings, and we can feel the bodily and sensory happiness in a way unified with intellectual enjoyment—; indeed, as embodied human persons, it is better for us if we feel happiness in both body and soul. But our sensory acts are in no way essential to our highest act—that is, nothing bodily or sensory is part of our highest act itself, which is purely intellectual (*NE* X.7.1177a12-19); (Aquinas, 1888-1906, I-II q. 3 a. 3&8).

But if we turn now to the texts emphasized by the second tradition, there we find that Aristotle suggests the possibility that *aisthesis* is an extension of *nous*, that there is one power here considered in two modes. In these texts, he furthermore says that that it *is* the case that *nous* can grasp the concrete individual. *Nous*, a power of the human actuality (*energeia*), is a power that can be actualized by and unified with the actualities (*energeiai*) of individual beings. While essences are not individual, *energeiai* are individual. In being structured by the actuality of the being that is before it, *nous* becomes and so grasps the individual. The most plausible way to interpret this is that *nous* does this through its exercise as *aisthesis*. Higher kinds of soul, as we have seen, contain lower ones, so the noetic soul contains the sense-perceiving soul; human *aisthesis*, then, is not the same as animal *aisthesis*, but an extension of human *nous*. This noetic grasp of the individual occurs especially in

[22] On the phenomenon of expression, already alluded to above, see von Hildebrand, 2016: 59-60, 170-3, 209-12. On how this phenomenon is absent from the Thomistic-Aristotelian view see Spencer, 2018.

grasping the beauty (*kalon*) of the individual: sensible things, especially in their beauty can express intelligible and moral properties.[23]

Several Greek Neo-Platonic and Patristic thinkers, most prominently Gregory Palamas, follow this reading of Aristotle.[24] On this tradition, sensible qualities are intrinsically intelligible, since they are activities (*energeiai*), which are that in virtue of which a being is intelligible.[25] Palamas argues that both *nous* and *aisthesis*, taken together, can be rendered divinized: since both just are the human power to grasp and be formed by *energeiai* of beings distinct from oneself, both can be restructured by divine activity (*energeia*) such that they perceive intelligible divine activity in the world. All activities of things in the

[23] Aristotle raises the question whether sensible things and what they are, are grasped by two powers, or one power under two different modes, at *DA* III.4.429b11-22; likewise, he suggests that the concrete individual could be grasped by *nous* at *Met.* VII.10.1036a7, and this is supported by his view that *nous* comes to be one with the actuality (*energeia*) of a being, and the fact that the *energeia* of a being is individual, at *Met.* IX. He affirms that *nous* aims at the concrete individual, especially the *kalon* of concrete, perceivable actions, at *NE* VI.11.1143a29-b13. He affirms that the sensible can express the intelligible and the moral at *Politics*, VIII.5.1340a15-17 (Aristotle, 1957). For a further argument for the individuality of *energeiai* and their intelligibility, see Spencer, 2015: 145-164. Aquinas, actually, has already provided us with a way to reconcile these texts with the texts that grounded the first tradition on which *nous* is wholly separate from *aisthesis*: there is one soul in the human person, including both *nous* and *aisthesis*, but *qua* aesthetic, the soul is the form of the body, while *qua* noetic, it is a separable substance.

[24] The differing influence of Aristotelianism, especially the notion of *energeia*, on both Latin and Greek philosophy through the 15th century, has been ably traced in Bradshaw, 2007, which also contains a fine account of Palamas on the senses. For an argument for how to reconcile these traditions, and for more on Palamas, see Spencer, 2017: 123-139.

[25] See Yannaras, 2007: 88. It should be noted that some Thomists, especially those in the Existential Thomist tradition, see all things as forms of intrinsically intelligible *esse*, and so materiality as a sort of lesser extension of the more "intense" form of *esse* found in spirit; see e.g. Carlo, 1966. For a way to potentially reconcile or synthesize these claims with the first Aristotelian tradition, see Spencer, 2015: 225-243. My claim is not at all that von Hildebrand is an existential Thomist of this radical sort—he clearly, for example, distinguishes essence from existence (see e.g. von Hildebrand, 1953: 48)—but only to draw a limited parallel.

world are messages from God to draw the whole person, including intellect *and* sense perception, into the highest act of contemplation. By their *energeiai*, all beings, including God, not only exist, but tend to manifest themselves, in both noetic and aesthetic ways.[26] Our highest acts, in which full human flourishing consists, involve both intellect and sense perception on this view; since the latter is an extension of the former, one and the same act can be present in both powers.

Von Hildebrand's phenomenology provides reasons to prefer this second account over the first. Sense perceptual powers are not just powers that convey information that is only potentially intelligible to intellectual powers purely in the soul. Rather, although in perception the lived body is not thematic, the bodily powers themselves are directly involved in the act of grasping beauty, and can be exercised in a spiritual and personal, rather than lived-bodily, mode. As on the second Aristotelian account, the intentional power sense perception is for von Hildebrand an extension of spiritual, intentional powers in the soul. The first Aristotelian account cannot explain experiences like that of non-abstractively perceiving invisible properties expressed in the visible; on the first Aristotelian account, the meaningfully intelligible and the sensible are related only causally or by signification.[27] But von Hildebrand has given us phenomenological reasons to think that the sensible is sometimes an expression, not just as sign or an effect, of the intelligible and spiritual, and so, if his account of experience is correct, we should prefer a view on which our bodily sense perceptual powers are extensions of powers of the soul, as on the second Aristotelian or Palamite account. On this view, it is plausible to say that our highest, most flourishing act is not just an intellectual contemplation of God

[26] (Gregory Palamas, 1983a: c. 62-4, 374-6); (Gregory Palamas, 1983b: I.i.20, 28; III.1.14, 19-20). This view of the divinizability of the senses, and their ability to perceive God at work in the world, is also found outside the Palamite tradition e.g. in (John Paul II, 2006: 67.1-5, 391-3).

[27] It should be noted that some Thomists, especially Maritain, (1930: 162) have recognized this: Maritain recognizes that in perceiving beauty, we use our senses in such a way that they are "intellectualized": intellect does not just extend or turn to the sensible, but rather the senses themselves are exercised in an intellectual way, that is, an actually meaning-grasping way.

in His immaterial divine nature,[28] but an intellectual and sensory contemplation of God in Christ, where the divine nature is expressed in Christ's perceivable flesh, and the act of sense perception is an extension of the intellectual act—that is, the two acts are numerically one.

III

Challenges and Replies. Yet the first Aristotelian and Thomistic account suggests a significant challenge to von Hildebrand's view, and to the second Aristotelian or Palamite account. Von Hildebrand emphasizes the reality and objectivity of the human aspect of the world, that is, he insists that the human aspect of the world is not merely in human minds but consists of properties that genuinely characterize real objects in the world. In many cases, one must be aware of the reality of the human aspect to fully appreciate its beauty—that is, one must be aware that it genuinely exists in and characterizes real objects and is not an illusion or hallucination. But von Hildebrand also emphasizes that the human aspect of the world is oriented towards persons and their perceptions, and would not exist were there no perceiving persons (von Hildebrand, 2016: 329). Von Hildebrand seeks to secure the extra-mental reality and objectivity of the human aspect, even though it only exists for human persons and if there are human persons, by claiming that the human aspect is founded in the scientifically-observable stratum of reality, the layer of particles and waves.

But given that the human aspect also is founded in human perception, the connection between the human aspect and the scientific stratum is tenuous. Von Hildebrand runs the risk of a covert idealism: while the human aspect is not *in* the mind, it does only exist for perception, without a clear grounding in the real, non-personal world, and so it is not clear how it could be part of the material world on his view. His view overlooks our experience of the sheer *materiality* of the material world,[29] not in the

[28] Since I am connecting von Hildebrand's view to that of Palamas, some might object that on Palamas' view, human persons cannot contemplate the divine nature, but only the divine *energeiai*. Here, I do not wish to enter the debate over what is meant by 'divine nature' or 'divine essence.' In this context, I just mean God in Himself, apart from the Incarnation.

[29] On the importance of materiality for avoiding idealism, see Milbank, 2014: 265.

sense of one of the intelligible qualities of matter that are focused on by von Hildebrand (and the second Aristotelian traditions), but in the sense of the material thing's "thereness", its *lack* of intelligibility, what Max Scheler calls its "resistance" to our efforts (Scheler, 1992), and its material causal power which is its indeterminacy and ability to be made into any kind of material substance.[30] To encounter the beauty of nature or art is indeed to encounter that which is intelligible, valuable, and meaningful incarnated in the sensible, but it is also to encounter this sort of materiality, resistance, and indeterminacy. The human aspect is given as belonging to the *material* world. Von Hildebrand considers this material layer when he talks about what impinges on us causally not intentionally, but the lack of an account of how this layer of the world relates to the intentionally-grasped, human aspect renders the latter potentially idealistic, that is, purely intra-mental and not genuinely belonging to the material world. Von Hildebrand's only real solution to how these two aspects relate is to appeal to mystery: their relation is either not intelligible, or is a mysterious divine "invention", in which God in some way intuitively opaque to us links the human aspect to the scientific layer. The relations among parts of the human aspect, such as between color and beauty, or between sensory beauty and beauty of the second power, are likewise relegated to mystery (von Hildebrand, 2016: 140, 185, 202, 209); (von Hildebrand, 1991: 162, 202).

While the world does show up as mysterious, and this should not be denied or regretted, the complete relegation of these relations to mystery is philosophically and experientially inadequate. The first Aristotelian tradition, especially as developed by Thomism, can help here, without requiring us to go so far with that tradition as to say that the properties of the human aspect are natural, qualitative, fully extra-mental properties of material things, existing entirely independent of human perception.

My proposal is that the human aspect is an actualization of an underlying material substance and can be understood further through the Thomistic notions of "participation" and "obediential potency." When matter is placed in the right contexts—for example, when God sends a message through it, or when it is worked on human artists—it participates in human persons and in values such that the human

[30] These views of the first Aristotelian tradition on matter's lack of intelligibility and material causality are summarized well in Aquinas, 1972.

aspect emerges. To participate is to imperfectly and non-essentially take on properties that belong essentially and perfectly to another, in virtue of the extrinsic exemplary formal causality of the latter (Aquinas, 1954, lectio 2). On my extension of von Hildebrand's view, bolstered by this Thomistic view, the material world, when it is perceived, comes to share in properties that belong essentially to persons or to values. These properties of the human aspect are an actualization of potencies in matter. But these are not "natural potencies", which are potencies for acts and accidents that beings can naturally have under their own power, but "obediential potencies", which are potencies that things have for taking on properties that exceed what they can achieve by their own natural acts or out of their own power.[31] On Aquinas' view, we have an obediential potency (rather than a natural potency) for grace and charity: we can receive grace and charity, but only by God acting up on us, not by the powers we have by our nature. Likewise, the Hildebrandian could argue, the scientific, material, indeterminate layer of the world has an obediential potency for the properties of the human aspect. Through extrinsic formal causality (and efficient causality) exerted by the presence to matter of values and of human and divine persons, the properties of the human aspect are elicited from that matter that it could not achieve by its own natural acts. The material world shares in the world of values and persons, and the properties of the human aspect genuinely, though non-essentially, characterize material things. But this does not involve losing material things' sheer materiality. And now, with my proposal regarding obediential potencies, there is a clear grounding of the human aspect in underlying matter. This proposal also does not require us to abandon the idea of the human aspect being a "divine invention", but it gives an analysis of that notion that incorporates it into the intelligible act-potency relation: God sets up obediential potencies in things, such that they can be the basis for the human aspect of the world, which He can elicit from these potencies in order to send messages through perceivable properties. These messages *are* His invention, and they do not flow naturally and automatically from the scientifically-describable stratum of matter, as von Hildebrand argues on experiential grounds.

Similarly, the human body comes to participate in and be obedient to the human spirit, and so we have perceptual powers that are properly

[31] On obediential potency in the Thomistic tradition, see Feingold, 2010; Long, 2010; and Spencer, 2014: 165-180.

personal powers, extensions of the spiritual power proper to our bodies. This also allows us to explain more clearly how von Hildebrand is right that the material world, including the human body, can be "personalized", raised up to acts, like acts of perception, that are properly acts of the spirit, and how the highest acts of which we are capable directly involve the body, not just the soul, with acts of the body being mere effects or "overflows" from the acts of the soul. We can best see this by understanding how von Hildebrand both helps us see the truth of the second Aristotelian tradition, but also is aided by the resources of the first. When the body participates in the soul's personal mode of being, the acts of the body are personal acts. They are, by participation, numerically one with acts of the soul, such as acts of the intellect; this is due to the body's obedience to the soul.[32] The highest, most flourishing act of which the whole human person is capable involves this union between bodily, sensory acts and the acts of the soul.

Von Hildebrand's phenomenological metaphysics is best understood in the context of the tradition of which he was a part, the Catholic tradition. This is the case not just for the sake of assessing the truth of von Hildebrand's claims, but also for clarifying his view, and developing his phenomenology and metaphysics so that they better describe reality and allow us to better understand ourselves. The confrontation undertaking in this paper between von Hildebrand and two major strands of the Aristotelian tradition shows how such a confrontation can help us better grasp the relation between the material world, including our own bodies, and persons.[33]

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[32] See (Aquinas, 1888-1906, I-II q. 56 a. 4 ad3).

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