

***Pag-unawa* and the Thomistic Virtue of Mercy**

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship of *pag-unawa*, the Filipino notion of “understanding” with Aquinas’ discussion of the virtue of mercy. For the Angelic Doctor, knowledge is considered to take precedence over love except in cases when the lover considers the beloved under the gaze of mercy or when the other is higher than the person knowing. It is by examining Aquinas’ nuanced development of the relationship of love and knowledge that we can arrive at a better understanding of *pag-unawa*. For Aquinas, mercy can only be a virtue if it is a movement of the intellectual appetite regulated by right reason. Intriguingly, he perceives mercy as a kind of “defect” in human beings in so far as they look upon another’s distress as their own. In other words, there is a union with the object loved similar to how the soul becomes one with the object known.

In my view, *pag-unawa* can be understood in terms of the knowledge-preceding-love dynamic when applied to things that we can know ordinarily, i.e., knowledge derived through abstraction mediated by sense experience. Moreover, I propose that the dynamic of love-preceding-knowledge (*una ang awa*) can be applied to the virtue of *pag-unawa* when it becomes an imitation of God’s merciful action. In this sense, right understanding of someone or something presupposes a merciful gaze. This allows for a Thomistic appreciation of *pag-unawa* that respects the Filipino psyche while remaining faithful to Aquinas’ principles.

Keywords: *Pag-unawa*, understanding, love, knowledge, mercy, *awa*, virtue, Filipino

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Introduction

As we attempt to situate the Filipino notion of *pag-unawa* within the Thomistic account of mercy, several difficulties arise from the onset: First, the basic understanding of *pag-unawa* for the Filipino does not immediately call to mind the notion of mercy except by undergoing philosophical (and even theological) examination. Second, by the fact that it springs from Asian soil, we must acknowledge that the Filipino consciousness operates differently from the Western mind, and yet this does not prevent us from arriving at a point of convergence. Last, the main challenge is to maintain the integrity of both worldviews in such a way that the result would still be Thomistic and at the same time Filipino.

It must be clarified that this paper neither claims to equate *pag-unawa* and mercy nor contrive the meaning of one with the other. I merely want to point out that our understanding of one can lead to an enrichment of the other, and vice versa. Thus, we find a suitable ground wherein the dynamics of *pag-unawa* can be seen through the lens of Thomistic philosophy. In other words, by employing the principles of Thomism on how *pag-unawa* is understood and practiced by the Filipino, we are able to construct the beginnings of understanding what can qualify as a Filipino virtue.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, we shall discuss the Filipino understanding of *pag-unawa* through a semantic and phenomenological approach. Second, we shall delve into Aquinas' theory of knowledge and love, leading to an interrogation of their relationship with the virtue of mercy. This analysis will focus on his *Summa theologiae* and his Commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* and Aristotle's *De Anima*. Finally, we shall attempt to find a logical connection between the two by employing a Thomistic language to the Filipino psyche.

Filipino Ethics and the Virtue of *Pag-unawa*

As a preliminary thought, it must be kept in mind that *pag-unawa* has certain levels of interpretation that we must first elaborate. The first definition would refer to the simple apprehension of the mind to the meaning of an object, i.e., something related to understanding or grasping of an object's signification. The second refers to a profounder way of "knowing" things that involve both mind and heart. This is an understanding that involves trust and not merely as grasping or defining things.

Pag-unawa as Simple Apprehension

Understood in plain terms, *pag-unawa* can be defined as an act of comprehension or understanding. It can also be described as an activity by which

a person simply apprehends the meaning or essence of a thing. Taken together, it implies the natural or ordinary means of acquiring knowledge that is presupposed in any learning process. In this sense, it can be taken as an activity that pertains exclusively to the intellect, which employs the basic use of the senses. In the Tagalog-English dictionary, L.J. English defines *unawa* as mental grasp, understanding, grip (mental), among other significations, all of which pertains to the intellect.¹ A synonym of this word in its weaker form is the Tagalog word *intindi*, derived from the Spanish word *entender* (to grasp, to understand).²

What warrants our attention to the linguistic analysis of *pag-unawa* lies in its common usage in conversations or its signification in the aspect of pedagogy and comprehension. As Campoamor states, echoing Saussure, we usually find meaning in a given sentence based on the sign and signified, which effects a *tunog-imahe* (sound-image) gathered from sight and hearing perception.³ However, this signifier-signified aspect of language is arbitrary and the user should be weary of the changes of its usage depending on a given milieu to know its real meaning.⁴

To understand *pag-unawa* more deeply, it is important to note how Filipinos understand how they understand. Mercado posits that the Filipino has a more intuitive and inductive approach to reality.⁵ Placing duty over rights and the immanent over the transcendent,⁶ he seeks to preserve the social order to which the individual is subservient, and responds to the situation depending on his self-perception vis-à-vis the community in which he belongs. “The Filipino way of looking at the truth illustrates his intersubjective way of thinking.”⁷

Citing the French Thomist, Jacques Maritain, Mercado claims that Filipinos reach toward truth and beauty by intuition, i.e., in a poetic way. “The artist (or

¹ Leo James English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary* (Manila: National Bookstore, 1987) 1535-1537.

² Wiktionary.org, “unawa,” May 16, 2009 accessed Nov. 14, 2022, <https://tl.wiktionary.org/wiki/unawa> “*Ang mahinang salin nito na ‘intindi’ buhat sa espaniol ay pangkaraniwang gamit sa kasalukuyang Tagalog na may patungkol sa karaniwan at lihim o tagong mga pahiwatig ng mga pangungusap.*” (The weaker translation of [*unawa*] which is “*intindi*” derived from the Spanish is usually used in Tagalog at present pertaining to the ordinary and hidden or implicit senses that sentences convey).

³ Gonzalo A. Campoamor II, *Wika at Pasismo, Politika ng Wika at Araling Wika sa Panahon ng Diktadura*, (Quezon City: Sentro ng Wikang Filipino, 2018) 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Leonardo N. Mercado, *The Filipino Mind: Philippine Philosophical Studies II*, (Washington D.C.: 1994), 41.

⁶ Leonardo N. Mercado, *Filipino Thought*, (Manila: Logos Publication, Inc., 2000), 48. It must be noted that Mercado uses the term “transcendent” differently from that of Sherwin’s in the succeeding pages.

⁷ Mercado, *The Filipino Mind*, 52.

poet) knows through inclinations or ‘connaturality.’”⁸ Because of this non-dualistic perception, there arises an axiological and ambivalent dimension of values that affect the Filipino’s understanding of virtues to which *awa* is not spared:

Likewise, *awa* (pity, mercy) can be positive when it is love, care, empathy, when it leads to liberation from oppression, or when it leads to self-development. But the same act of *awa* can be negative when the act has a hidden agenda or cover-up as when used for attention-seeking or showing off, when it takes advance of others, when it leads to enslavement and perpetuates the misery of others.⁹

To put it succinctly, there are virtuous and vicious forms of *awa*, directed either to good or to evil respectively.

***Pag-unawa* as Affective Cognition**

The second and more profound meaning of *pag-unawa* is an understanding that involves the movement of mind and heart. In other words, it is a term that signifies not merely simple apprehension but a perception of things that reaches the level of consciousness regarding matters related to spiritual things.¹⁰ Javier posits that *pag-unawa* is intimately linked with the Filipino notion of *panahon*, *pag-asa*, and *pag-tanda* (time, hope, and maturity)¹¹ in the sense that the person’s horizon or worldview is widened when he has the virtue of *unawa*.¹² When one has maturity, one has hope, and one has memory.

Furthermore, we can understand this second sense of the word better when we study the semantics behind the word *pag-unawa*. The term *unawa* points to two Filipino words “*una*” (first) and “*awa*” (mercy). For Bishop Pablo Virgilio David, the Judeo-Christian understanding of mercy can be captured by “*awa*” at “*habag*” which arouses in the person “an experience itself of being moved from within.”¹³ Furthermore, he relates compassion (Latin: *cum-passio*) with *malasakit*, both

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86. See also Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, (Cleveland: The Word Publishing Co., 1954) 67.

⁹ Mercado, *Filipino Thought*, 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* ‘UNAWA’ salita sa Tagalog na ang kabatiran ay hindi lang sa pangungusap kundi umabot sa antas ng kamalayan tungkol sa mga kapahayagang pang-espirituwal.”

¹¹ “Pag-tanda” can mean two things: First, it is related to memory, i.e., when one deliberately remembers something; secondly, it pertains to maturity or coming of age. It immediately becomes evident on how the three are related to *pag-unawa* in that understanding in terms of affective cognition considers memory and maturity, along with the hope for something more of the person or situation.

¹² Roberto E. Javier, Jr., “Unawa – Mula Pag-iisa tungo sa Pakikiisa sa Kapwa: Ang Pag-iisip sa Panahon, Pag-asa, at Pagtanda,” in *Malay*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (December 2018) 42.

¹³ Pablo Virgilio David, DD & Nina Tomen, *The Gospel of Mercy According to Juan/a*, (Makati: St. Pauls, 2016) ix.

signifying an element of sharing the pain of the other or suffering with. He explains that *malasakit* can take the place of *makialam*, (to be engaged, to be involved, or to intervene) which came from the word “*alam*” or “know” when one shares in the suffering of others.¹⁴

The implications of this interpretation and its relation to the Thomistic understanding of mercy will be investigated below. Suffice to say that *pag-unawa* covers a broader sense which relates to *pagtanda* (either growing in age or remembering). We also see an element of being moved to the object of the virtue as it were from within (will), along with a desire to comprehend or know (intellect). *Pag-unawa* taken as affective cognition is not only concerned with the categorical level of human personality, but rather, of the transcendental level, i.e., one that is more concerned with goodness rather than rightness between the person and his action.

A person who has reached a level of maturity has *pang-unawa*: “ang mas magulang/lalong nakatatanda’y may malawak na pang-unawa, (the elder has a broader understanding),”¹⁵ allowing him to have *malasakit* (empathy) for others. “Ang *malasakit* kung gayo’y magsisimula sa emosyon ng *awa’t habag*, na mauwi sa *pag-unawa* sa abang kalagayan ng iba’t magtutulak para kumilos, tumulong, o gampanan ang gawaing makabubuti.”¹⁶ (Empathy, beginning thus, with the feeling of mercy and compassion which leads to the understanding of others’ needs, urging one to act, to help, and to perform his duty to do good).

Thomistic Accounts of Knowledge, Love and Mercy

Aquinas presents a more structured theory in terms of how man acquires and orders his knowledge at *Summa theologiae* I q. 85, a. 1. However, placed in the context of volition and the passions, the role of reason plays a more complex part in the development of virtue. We shall look into the crucial role of reason as we explore how the Angelic Doctor balances the relationship of knowledge and will as stipulated in the *Summa theologiae* and his *Commentary on the Sentences*. Finally, we shall include Aquinas’ explanation on the virtue of mercy found in *Summa theologiae* II-II q. 30, a. 3. He also discusses the precedence of love in the acquisition of knowledge.

Aquinas on Knowledge and Love

Aquinas’ theory of knowledge is a development of the Aristotelian theory of *ideogenesis*. In *Summa theologiae* I q. 85, a. 1, he mentions that the intellect understands

¹⁴ Ibid., x-xi.

¹⁵ Javier, “Unawa – Mula Pag-iisa tungo sa Pakikiisa sa Kapwa,” 43.

¹⁶ Ibid.

corporeal and material things by means of abstraction: “Our intellect understands material things by abstracting from the phantasms.”¹⁷ And because nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses,¹⁸ knowledge can be defined simply as the acquisition of forms,¹⁹ i.e., simple apprehension. It is perhaps useful at this point to differentiate this type of understanding (*intellectus*) from the function performed by reason. For Aquinas, both the intellect and reason are “different aspects of the same cognitive power,”²⁰ in that the intellect supposes the cognitive power’s ability to understand acquired knowledge, while reason supposes the cognitive power’s ability “to reason actively toward the acquisition of new knowledge.”²¹ Simply put, I understand the understanding’s (*intellectus*) function to be more intuitive, while reason, more discursive. Reason relates to understanding in the same way as “moving to resting, or of acquiring to having.”²²

It is well known that Aquinas follows the Augustinian assertion that we can only love that which we know.²³ “But good is not the object of the appetite, except as apprehended. And therefore love demands some apprehension of the good that is loved.”²⁴ However, what is pertinent to our discussion is how he balances this principle by asserting the role of love as the cause of the movement of the will towards the attainment of the good.²⁵

In this important development, the Angelic Doctor makes an exemption in matters wherein the object that is known is beyond the person’s capacity of knowing,²⁶ for instance in the case of knowing God. In such cases, it is the will that assists the intellect so that the person may come to a fuller knowledge of an object beyond his mental grasp. We find this further elaborated in Aquinas’ *Commentary on the Sentences*. Here, he defines love as “a certain transformation of the affection into the loved object.”²⁷ It is worth quoting Aquinas here at length:

¹⁷ ST I q. 85, a. 1.

¹⁸ De Veritate, q. 2, a. 3, arg. 19.

¹⁹ ST I q. 85, a.1, resp.

²⁰ Nicholas E. Lombardo, OP, *The Logic of Desire*, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011) 97.

²¹ Ibid.

²² ST I, 79, a. 8

²³ ST I-II q.27, a. 2, resp.

²⁴ ST I-II q. 27, a. 2, resp.

²⁵ ST I-II q, 36, a. 2.

²⁶ De Virt., a. 3, ad. 13. Aquinas explains: “Whence, when things are below the one who understands, then the intellect is higher than the will, because things exist in a higher manner in the intellect than in themselves, since everything which is in another is in it according to the manner of that in which it is. But when the things are above the one who understands, then the will rises higher than the intellect is able to attain.”

²⁷ In sent. III 27.1.1.

Love pertains to the appetite. Now, the appetite is a passive power; hence, the Philosopher affirms (*De anima* 3) that the appetite moves as a moved mover. Now, every passive power is perfected by being informed by the form of an active power, and through this motion, it is brought to its term and rests. The intellect before it is informed by an intelligible form doubts and inquires, but when it has been informed ceases to inquire and becomes fixed in this form, and then the intellect is said to adhere to the thing firmly. Similarly, when the affect or appetite is entirely imbued with the form of the good, which is its object, it takes pleasure in it and adheres to it as being affixed to it, and then it is said to love it. Hence, love is nothing other than a certain transformation of the affection into the loved object.²⁸

Aquinas clearly recognizes that although love is a skin of knowledge, it is plausible to take love as a *point de depart* of a further motion. “Just as the intellect through being informed by the essences of things acquires knowledge of the principles and then reasons according to these principles to conclusions, so too love generates actions according to the form it has received.”²⁹ Although Aquinas is explicit to point out that the “will responds to what is known,”³⁰ as presented to it by reason, he also permits that “to some extent the intellect can be directed by the will.”³¹ Furthermore, although the passions can sometimes cloud reason, it can, at times, sharpen it too, “because the pleasure that follows the act of reason, strengthens the use of reason.”³²

Aquinas on Mercy

For Aquinas, mercy can only be a virtue if it is a movement of the intellectual appetite regulated by right reason. Intriguingly, he perceives mercy as a kind of “defect” in human beings in so far as they look upon another’s distress as their own.³³ In other words, there is a union with the object loved in a manner similar to how the soul becomes one with the object known. Mercy is defined as “grief for another’s distress.” Aquinas adds: “Now this grief may denote, in one way, a movement of the sensitive appetite, in which case mercy is not a virtue but a passion; whereas, in another way, it may denote a movement of the intellectual appetite in as much as one person’s evil is displeasing to another.”³⁴

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Michael S. Sherwin, OP, *By Knowledge & By Love*, (Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2005) 67.

³⁰ Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 81.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 101.

³³ ST II-II, q. 30, a. 2.

³⁴ ST II q. 30, a. 3, resp.

This second movement of the intellective appetite must be guided by reason for it to qualify as a virtue. In the following article of the same question, mercy is described as a chief virtue in terms of divine activity: “Hence mercy is accounted as being proper to God: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested.”³⁵ In terms of human relations however, charity is the chief virtue since it connects us to God. However, mercy remains the chief virtue when it comes to relations of human persons.³⁶

What I wish to highlight in Aquinas’ discussion is how *mercy* allows the lover to look at sorrow and distress of the other as his own.³⁷ “Now this happens in two ways: first, through union of the affections, which is the effect of love. For, since he who loves another looks upon his friend as another self, he counts his friend’s hurt as his own, so that he grieves for his friend’s hurt as though he were hurt himself.”³⁸ If we apply how Aquinas developed the dynamic of knowledge and love in his *Commentary on the Sentences* quoted above, we will derive from it a movement of the will and intellect that can be approximated to the Filipino virtue of *pag-unawa*.

***Pag-unawa* in the Light of Thomistic Ethics**

We shall now investigate the meaning of *pag-unawa* placing it in conversation with the Thomistic understanding of mercy. In this paper, I posit that although *pag-unawa* can be understood in the normal sense as simple apprehension normally acquired through the mediation of the senses, the broader and profounder meaning can be better understood and is compatible with Aquinas’ explanation of mercy. In other words, the hermeneutic key that we can use to unlock the Filipino notion of *pag-unawa* is the Thomistic explanation of the virtue of mercy.

To prove my point, we must further elaborate a distinction made earlier in passing that *pag-unawa* is more concerned with the transcendental rather than the categorical level of human personality. Here, it would be profitable for our discussion to use the distinction of Michael Sherwin, OP, on the relationship of love and knowledge in Aquinas. Quoting Keenan, he mentions that “the distinction between goodness and rightness is not between person and act, but between the heart and reason.”³⁹ Sherwin explains that “goodness pertains to the transcendental level of

³⁵ ST I-II q. 30, a. 4, resp.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ ST II-II, q. 30, a. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ James Keenan, *Goodness and Rightness in St. Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae*, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992) 143, cited in Michael Sherwin, *By Knowledge & By Love*, 13.

one's fundamental freedom, [while] rightness pertains to the categorical level of one's freedom of choice."⁴⁰

When a person employs *pag-unawa* in the transcendental level or as affective cognition (*una ang awa*) such as in the dynamic of a love-seeking-understanding, it must be placed in the context of Aquinas more mature works wherein he portrays the act of love “as a purely formal striving that establishes our fundamental moral goodness.”⁴¹ While *pag-unawa* or understanding taken as simple apprehension is concerned with being right, i.e., to be in conformity with practical reason, *pag-unawa* in its more profound sense is aimed at goodness. “Yet we are ‘good’ only if these actions are *from* charity — only if they spring from, and are generated and informed by charity.”⁴²

Pag-unawa as *una ang awa* is an act by which a person “understands” another through the eyes of mercy, i.e., in the sense of affective cognition. To make an analogy on the mercy of God towards mankind, God, being situated on an infinitely higher position of maturity (*pag-tanda*) stoops down so that his *malasakit* (compassion) becomes a form of *makialam* (involvement). Man can only approximate this by imitating the divine condescension and making the other's sorrow and distress his own. This allows for a dynamic that clearly expresses the love-first way of knowing things that is still faithful to Aquinas while remaining respectful of the mind-heart consciousness of the Filipino.

Excursus

During his visit to the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines in 2015, Pope Francis famously said: “Certain realities of life we only see through eyes cleansed by our tears.” Another Francisco, the current Master of the Order of Preachers, Rev. Fr. Gerard Francisco P. Timoner III, O.P. echoes the Roman Pontiff when he says in a commencement address: “Compassion cures our blindness. Our study must ultimately lead us to perceive human crises, needs, longings and sufferings as our own. Good theology is ‘linked with that *miser cordia* which moves us to proclaim the Gospel of God's love for the world and the dignity which results from that love.”⁴³

Fr. Timoner points out that, for us Filipinos, in order to understand a person, mercy must take precedence: “Una-awa. Upang maunawaan natin nang lubusan ang

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. 14.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Gerard Francisco P. Timoner III, OP, “Commencement Address of Fr. Gerard Francisco P. Timoner III, OP,” *Loyola School of Theology*, (March 18, 2015), accessed Nov. 14, 2022, <https://lst.edu/articles/commencement-address-of-fr-gerard-francisco-p-timoner-iii-op/>.

isang tao, kailangang mauna ang awa.”⁴⁴ (To understand a person more deeply, mercy must be first). A merciful attitude disposes the lover to understand the beloved better. *Pag-unawa* is not just a matter of abstraction which is exclusively an activity of the intellect; it is rather the activity of the whole person. Timoner continues:

For us Filipinos, mercy is not just a matter of the heart but a matter of the mind as well. It is interesting that for us, to ‘know’ or ‘understand’ is to be ‘compassionate ...’ Mercy is no mere sentimentality. It involves not just the heart but the mind as well. Similarly, understanding is not purely cognitive. It engages not only the mind but the heart as well. Unawa makes the heart and mind one.⁴⁵

This heart-mind holism of the Filipino soul is expressed in the term *loób*.⁴⁶ Reyes posits that in this unity of mind and will, the latter, i.e., the will, is more privileged than the former⁴⁷ which explains why the dynamics of Filipino virtues are more inductive and more attuned to goodness. Some scholars attempted to situate the rational element in the term *loób*, like Miranda who divided it into three parts: 1) Cognitive/Intellectual element; 2) Volitive/Will element; 3) Emotion/Pathic element.⁴⁸ Although conceding that there is a “lack of metaphysical, logical, and technical terms in the Filipino language,”⁴⁹ despite this weakness, it remains advantageous to establish and preserve the relationship of the one with the other.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Our brief investigation leads us to posit that understanding *pag-unawa* in the light of Aquinas’ definition of mercy leads to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the Filipino virtue. We do not in any way posit that the two share the same signification. By using Thomistic language in the understanding of *pag-unawa*, we have applied Aquinas’ approach to knowledge that builds on love through the practice of mercy. We have seen that *pag-unawa* counts as a virtue that

⁴⁴ *lifestyle.inquirer.net*, ‘Unawa’: For Filipinos, mercy is a matter of heart and mind,” (January 3, 2016), accessed Nov. 4, 2022, <https://218391/unawa-for-filipinos-mercy-is-a-matter-of-heart-and-mind/>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Loób* is a Filipino term that connotes the power of the will. Literally, it means “within” or the “inside” of the person, which refers less to physical location than one’s psycho-moral character. See Dionisio M. Miranda, *Loob: The Filipino Within*, (Manila: Logos Publication Inc., 1988) and Jeremiah Reyes, *Loób and Kapwa: Thomas Aquinas and a Filipino Virtue Ethics*, September 2015.

⁴⁷ Reyes, *Loób and Kapwa*, 92.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

is truly Filipino since it possesses the *mind-heart* perception of things and the *self-other* orientation of morality, and yet we can say that it is permeable to Thomistic explication. Furthermore, we also demonstrated how *pag-unawa* tends towards goodness in its affinity with the transcendental level of human personality. When a person practices *pag-unawa* (*una ang awa*) he is able to understand the other better since he approaches the beloved not as an object to be investigated, but a person, like him, whose goodness he must will.**PS**

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