Faculties or Powers of the Mind

1 Faculties, powers or capacities

While continuing to speak of intellect and will as faculties, Tallon is dissatisfied with this way of thinking and believes that it should be replaced by a focus on conscious and intentional operations. The uncertainty manifested here points to a basic lack of clarity in the undertaking as well as to a task yet to be completed. He looks to Bernard Lonergan in particular as the guiding authority in abandoning talk of faculties of the mind. Tallon says that ‘we must stop thinking in terms of faculties of mind and will [...] (1997, 146). Or again:

All this talk of faculties must finally be overcome anyway, as Lonergan has so well said, when a ‘faculty psychology’, based on a priority of metaphysics over epistemology gives way to a contemporary priority of the phenomenology of consciousness over hermeneutics, leading to an operational description of affection, cognition, and volition. (254–5)

Taking the heart as symbol of affection, he says, ‘what is meant is not a third separate faculty, alongside mind and will as separate faculties: [...]. Heart here actually means a kind of ability or skill, a felt manner of self-presence and self-possession within the complex that is triune consciousness’ (93). Whatever is meant by heart as ‘a felt manner of self-presence and self-possession’, it is difficult to see how it could be classified as an ability (rather than an occurrence or a state). The ability would have to be ‘being able to feel in this way’. But then, an ability, unlike its exercise, is not a conscious operation. In any case, the characterisation of affection as an ability undercuts the whole objection to
faculties, for abilities belong to the same company as capacities, powers or faculties. The human mind, as Kenny says, is ‘the capacity to acquire intellectual abilities. It is a capacity, not an activity [...]’. It is a second-order capacity: an ability to acquire or possess abilities’ (1989, 20).

An account of the mind in terms of powers or faculties was introduced by Aristotle and subsequently taken up and developed by Islamic thinkers and later by the Scholastics. Descartes criticised the Scholastics in this regard, as in much else, but faculty accounts of the mind continued to hold a central place in modern thought, although not without opposition from empiricists. Various pseudo-scientific versions of ‘faculty psychology’ emerged in the nineteenth century, and in one way or another the idea of mental faculties fell into disrepute. Alan Donagan has suggested that many twentieth-century philosophers have objected to powers or capacities because their attribution goes with the idea that human beings are genuine causes of their actions, ‘agent causes’ (not simply fields within which events occur).

This reaction against faculties has been turned around in analytic philosophy from the mid-twentieth century. In The Concept of Mind, Gilbert Ryle was robustly critical of pseudo-accounts in which mental faculties appear as occult agencies, immaterial organs or para-mechanical causes on the model of mechanical forces in the physical world. In particular, he had no time for the will and volitions. Even so, Ryle developed a distinctively Aristotelian approach to the mind as the domain of mental powers or capacities and their exercise. More recently, Anthony Kenny drew on Ryle and Wittgenstein (as well as Aristotle and Aquinas) in setting out a sympathetic analysis of the philosophical notion of mental faculties in The Metaphysics of the Mind. The idea had also been given renewed currency by Noam Chomsky, at a rather fine-grained level, in his theory of the innate human capacity for language learning as distinct, say, from the innate capacity for mathematical computation. In a quite different corner of contemporary analytic philosophy, new versions of faculty psychology have also been developed on functionalist lines in cognitive science, and especially in ‘modular’ theories of the mind (or the brain).

As with Lonergan, Tallon’s concern relates primarily to the Aristotelian notion of faculties as developed in medieval philosophy and theology. One possible objection, raised by George Turski, is that faculties involve the compartmentalisation of the mind and result in a ‘multipartite self’:

The traditional dichotomies between thought, emotion, and volition simply break down in favor of a more fluid transition between these