AQUINAS'S COMMENTARY ON BOETHIUS'S *DE TRINITATE*

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Long before Kant published his reflections on the epistemological structure of philosophy, Aquinas addressed the topic in his commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate*.[1] It is an early work, pertaining to the first Parisian period (datable not beyond 1259). The text, apparently unfinished at least as regards the initial intention (precisely a commentary on a work of Boethius on the Trinity), is surprising for its elegance and the profundity of its approach. The critical edition remarks, among other things, upon the extraordinary lexical elaboration of the autograph manuscript. The author knows how to etch from the thin Boethian text an ample discussion of the nature of science, theology, and philosophy. The latter includes the theoretical disciplines, according to the Aristotelian system: physics, mathematics and metaphysics.[2] The literal exposition of the text commented upon is interspersed with six questions, each divided into four articles.

In this essay, I wish only to formulate, after a brief presentation of the epistemological conception developed in the Commentary, some difficulties about the nature of theoretical knowledge and its principles. For this reason, we refer especially to the fifth question.[3]

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[1] *Super Boetium de Trinitate* in *Thomae Aquinatis Opera omnia*, vol. 50 (Roma-Paris: Commissio leonina, 1992); hereafter SBT. The English translation is: Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences,* trans. A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986).

[2] See. Aristotle, *Physics* 2.2; *Metaphysics*, 6.1.

[3] See. L. B. Geiger, "Abstraction et séparation d'après saint Thomas *In de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 3," in L. B. Geiger, *Philosophie et Spiritualité* (Paris: Cerf, 1963), 87–124; L.-M. Régis, "Analyse et synthese dans l'œuvre de saint Thomas," in *Studia Mediaevalia in honorem admodum reverendi patris Raymundi Josephi Martin* (Bruges: Tempel, 1948), 301–30; C. Fabro, *Partecipazione e causalità* (1960; reprint, Segni, Italy: Edivi, 2010); L. Elders, *Faith and Science: An Introduction to St. Thomas*' Expositio in Boethii De Trinitate (Roma: Herder, 1974); J. J. Sanguineti, *La filosofía de la ciencia según Santo Tomás* (Pamplona: Eunsa, 1977); J. F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1984); R. McInerny, *Being and Predication* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986); E. Winance, "Réflexions sur les degrés d'abstraction et les structures conceptuelles de base dans l'épistémologie de Thomas

1. The structure of knowledge

Thomas's approach appears immediately epistemological: to discern the order of the sciences it is necessary to understand the modality according to which reality is variously regarded. The object of a science is not the thing of which it treats, except under a specific qualification which grasps a particular aspect considered, the faculties, and the peculiar perspective of the knowing subject: namely, the operations, the conceptual presuppositions, and the methodological strategy which the same knowing subject always puts in practice to formulate and to respond to any questions. In general,

> When habits or powers are differentiated by their objects they do not differ according to just any distinction among these objects, but according to the distinctions that are essential to the objects as objects.[4]

Such an approach, which underlines, as is apparent, the abstractive profile of scientific knowledge, requires that it be already determined what,

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d'Aquin," *Revue Thomiste* 91 (1991): 531–79; J. A. Aertsen, "Was heißt Metaphysik bei Thomas von Aquin?," in Scientia *und* ars *im Hoch-und Spätmittelalter*, vol. 1, ed. I. Craemer-Ruegenberg and A. Speer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993); S. L. Brock, "Autonomia e gerarchia delle scienze in Tommaso d'Aquino: la difficoltà della sapienza," in *Unità e autonomia del sapere. Il dibattito del XIII secolo*, ed. R. Martínez (Armando: Roma, 1994), 71–95; S. R. M. Gelonch Villarino and S. Argüello, "Santo Tomás de Aquino, la Gnoseología y el tomismo contemporáneo," *Sapientia* 54 (1999): 339–50; S. R. M. Gelonch Villarino, Separatio *y objeto de la metafísica en Tomás de Aquino* (Eunsa: Pamplona, 2002); J. J. Sanguineti "Science, Metaphysics, Philosophy: In Search of a Distinction," *Acta Philosophica* 11 (2002): 69–92; P. Porro, "Tommaso d'Aquino, Avicenna e la struttura della metafisica," in *Tommaso d'Aquino e l'oggetto della metafisica*, ed. S. L. Brock (Armando: Roma 2004), 65–87; P. Porro, "Metafisica e teologia nella divisione delle scienze speculative del *Super Boetium de Trinitate*" and "Astrazione e separazione: Tommaso d'Aquino e la tradizione greco-araba," appendixes to *Commenti a Boezio*, by Tommaso d'Aquino (Bompiani: Milano, 2007); J. Carriere-C. Lafleur, "Abstraction et séparation: de Thomas d'Aquin aux néo-scolastiques, avec retour à Aristote et aux artiens," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 66 (2010): 105–26; R. J. Mayer, "Abstraction: Apriori or Aporia? A Remark Concerning the Question of the Beginning of Thought in Aquinas, Aristotle and Kant," *Angelicum* 87 (2010): 709–46.

[4] SBT, q. 5, a. 1, resp. More precisely: "The method of the sciences is taken from the powers of the soul because of the way in which these powers operate. So the methods of the sciences do not correspond to the soul's powers, but rather to the ways in which these powers can operate, and these are diversified not only according to the powers, but also according to their objects"; SBT, q. 6, a. 1, resp., ad quaest. 2, ad 4. It does not seem that, in the end, a circle is proposed between the faculties, the operations and the objects, but, more likely, an interesting case of intentional relationship (*intentionale Korrelation*).

in general, renders reality (*res*) an object (*obiectum*); or, what in reality and in the knowing subject cooperate in the unified constitution of knowledge. If science, more than just a form of knowledge, represents, moreover, the most excellent form, reflection upon it (epistemology) should offer, then, a general view of human knowledge (a gnoseology). We will have to see to what extent such a common assumption—given that it is not, in our case, a unilateral interpretation—is in fact satisfying.

Thus, metaphysics is the science capable of facing this question. Only in metaphysics is reality made the object of consideration in an absolute sense, even in that absolute sense which corresponds to its projection in thought. Therefore, metaphysics is able to investigate the foundations of logic. Moreover, it verifies, reflexively, the field of thought: it determines the principles, the operations, and the modalities of the intentional reference.[5] Again, for Saint Thomas, the truth is a transcendental property of being. Thought does not constitute, therefore, an extrinsic topic for the study of being, but it is intrinsically tied to it.[6]

In particular, metaphysics has to take account of the ontological properties which most directly characterize the object of scientific knowledge as such: immateriality and necessity.

> [A]n object of this kind—namely, an object of a speculative power—derives one characteristic from the side of the power of intellect and another from the side of the habit of science that perfects the intellect. From the side of the intellect it has the fact that it is immaterial, because the intellect itself is immaterial. From the side of the habit of science it has the fact that it is necessary, for science treats of necessary matters, as is shown in the *Posterior Analytics* [I, 6]. Now everything that is necessary is, as such, immobile, because everything changeable is, as such, able to be or not to be, either absolutely or in a certain respect, as is said in the *Metaphysics* [IX, 8]. Consequently, separation from matter and motion, or connection with them, belongs essentially to an object of speculation. As a result, the speculative sciences are differentiated according to their degree of separation from matter and motion [*speculabili, quod est obiectum scientie speculatiue, per se competit separatio a materia et motu, uel applicatio ad ea; et ideo secundum ordinem remotionis a materia et motu scientie speculatiue distinguntur*].[7]

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[5] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4.3.1005b5–11 and 6.4.1027b29–1028a2.

[6] See *Quaestiones de Veritate*, q. 1, a. 1. In the following article, Thomas distinguishes truth in the absolute sense and truth circumscribed by human knowledge; for the latter but not the former, the restrictions introduced by Aristotle regarding the metaphysical relevance of "true being" (*to on os alethes*) are valid. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 6.4.1027b25.

[7] SBT, q. 5, a. 1.

Immateriality is, then, for Thomas, a condition, or better still, a definitive property of knowledge, as a logically and ontologically irreducible kind of possession of being. This is especially so for intellectual knowledge.[8] The material substance and its causal relations are reproduced and then manifested in their pure form, that which we may otherwise call: "the being thus of this." Knowledge and the known reality are, together, determinations properly of the intellect. The expression of the "being thus of this" does not coincide exhaustively with the "being thus of this."[9] Nonetheless, only through the intellect does the being of the existing thing, so to speak, come to light.

Moreover, according to the classical scientific ideal which Thomas seems effectively to take up here, necessity does not correspond only to a subjective need for certainty. It corresponds, above all, to a metaphysical principle which we could summarize as follows: being in the proper sense is unitary. That which in various ways is diverse, and therefore relative, is not understood as a being except in relation to that which, in it or outside of it, is in itself, in a certain way, unitary (a "this" rigidly defined). Such a stable element is that in which being and knowledge together consist.[10] Matter and coming to be are, therefore, objects of scientific knowledge only insofar as it is possible to reduce their particularity and instability, already manifest to the senses, to a universal and necessary instance.

To put it another way and briefly, one can speak of whatever is given in the matter and becoming only in relation to that which in it, or in relation to it, makes possible affirmations which are always true. Such an element is, finally, the form, insofar as it is the supreme representative of act. Every element and process is integrated into the unity of the form through which a reality is actually determined and is, as such, intelligible.

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[8] See *Summa Theologiae,* Opera Omnia, Leonine Edition (Romae: Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1888–1889) I, q. 14, a. 1, resp; hereafter ST.

[9] On the distinction between substantial and intentional being, one still looks to the great Y. R. M. Simon, *Introduction à l'ontologie du connaître* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934). The wide analogy of intentional being by Aquinas seems to move between these extremes. See R. Moser, "Thomas Aquinas, *esse intentionale*, and the Cognitive as Such," *The Review of Metaphysics* 64 (2011): 763–88.

[10] See Plato, *Theatetus*, 157b and *Timaeus,* 28a; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 2.1.993b26. Aristotle reduces, finally, the significance of necessity to simplicity: "the *necessary* in the primary and proper sense is the *simple*, for it cannot be in more than one condition. Hence it cannot be in one state *and* in another"; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), 5.5.1015b11. In this sense, the true and the necessary pertain to the eternal. See *Metaphysics*, 2.1.993b20 and *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.3.1139b24.

> [S]ince everything is intelligible insofar as it is in act, as the *Metaphysics* [9.9] says, we must understand the nature itself or the quiddity of a thing either as it is a certain act (as happens in the case of forms themselves and simple substances); or through that which is its act (as we know composite substances through their forms); or through that which takes the place of act in it (as we know prime matter through its relation to form, and a vacuum through the absence of a body in place) And it is from this that each nature is given its definition.[11]

From such a perspective, the discourse which is able to be made about the reality which surrounds us, that is, the variety of sciences, is disposed in the following way. Insofar as it is sensible, it can be known in the laws and in the unvarying structure of material being: physical-mathematical sciences and philosophy of nature. The quantitative properties of sensible being are able to be understood in their abstract possibilities, independently from their inherence in bodies: mathematics.[12] Sensible and mutable being can, moreover, be considered insofar as it exemplifies some properties, which, upon close scrutiny, are seen not to be chained to such an existential condition. In fact, and even necessarily (as results from their extension, but already in virtue of their conceptual meaning), they are able to be realized even outside of their sensible instantiation: being, being one, being in potency and act, and so forth: ontology and metaphysics.[13]

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[11] SBT, q. 5, a. 3, resp.

[12] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 13.3.1077b18–1077b6.

[13] "[B]eing and substance are separate from matter and motion not because it is of their nature to be without them, as it is of the nature of ass to be without reason, but because it is not of their nature to be in matter and motion, although sometimes they are in matter and motion, as animal abstracts from reason, although some animals are rational." SBT, q. 5, a. 4, ad 5. This point has given place to a large debate. Geiger, in "Abstraction et séparation," retains the semantic independence of the transcendental notions are not guaranteed until the effective demonstration of the existence of a suprasensible reality. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas,* and Aertsen, "Was heißt Metaphysik bei Thomas von Aquin?" object that such independence is already implicit in the their definition (*ratio*). As one can see, the argument is extremely complex, especially and also notable for its implications about the relationship between ontology and metaphysics. In this regard, I hold that the independence in question is necessary for the formulation of the hypothesis itself of a suprasensible reality ("does a suprasensible reality exist?"), but that this is not enough to constitute ontology as a science autonomous from metaphysics, if ontology is not to be understood, in the end, as a kind of transcendental logic. The significance of transcendental notions, as also of pure categories, one must always redefine in function of their concrete application. For example, suprasensible being brings an analogical specification of being a substance. See SBT, q. 4, a. 2, resp; q. 6, a. 3, resp. One notices that the applicability and the ontological interpretation of the categories was precisely one of the principle problems examined by Boethius in

The first and the second level, the physical and mathematical, are elevated above matter and becoming not because of the character of the reality to which they refer, but that of our abstractive consideration itself. The physical and mathematical properties are able to be led back to sensible being. However, physics considers the sensible directly, or entirely, but in the universal. The mathematical considers exclusively the quantitative structure of the same sensibile being. Such structure is, therefore, in turn formed as an object or as the higher term of a relatively autonomous field of predication. Within this field, the quantitative structure is freely elaborated by the imagination as a sort of "intelligible matter".[14]

The third level, the metaphysical, considers properties that, as a result of their analysis by argument (causal *resolutio*), are able to be understood to be in a condition not subject to matter and becoming. Such properties are able to be attributed, finally, to a subsisting subject, in itself so qualified: spiritual substances. Only on this level does the intellect find a full response to its nature and its extreme need for truth. If it were not for the conditioning of the senses, from which, however, we must advance towards suprasensible reality, and if not for the elevation of this beyond the limits of our intellect—

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the text commented upon by Thomas, concretely, if and how the categories can be attributed to God. Still, going beyond a logical consideration, in itself necessarily univocal, the continuity of the resolutive and deductive procedure of reason (*resolutio* and *compositio*) brings a systematic articulation of the meanings of being, and, more radically, of the principles themselves of being, as for example formal and efficient causes. Thus, created being is not an analytical property of the entity, although it gets to the bottom of it. See ST I, q. 44, a. 1, ad 1.

[14] This corresponds, more precisely, to the understanding of the substance as a pure subject of the quantity. See SBT, q. 5, a. 3, resp. On this point arises the ontological chain that Thomas, however, attributes to the mathematical object. The intelligible matter is not able to be, therefore, understood simply as the intuition of pure extension, as in Kant. Concerning the relative objective independence of the mathematical being, one reads the following passage: "Our judgment about some things . . . does not depend upon what the sense perceives, because even though they exist in sensible matter they abstract from it when their essences are defined; and we judge of anything chiefly according to the definition of its essence. But because they do not abstract from every kind of matter when their essences are defined but only from sensible matter, and because an object for the imagination remains after sensible characteristics have been set aside, we must judge about such things according to what the imagination reveals." SBT, q. 6, a. 2, resp. The concrete and intuitive determination of the mathematical object is not, therefore, an objection to the affirmation of its ontologically abstract and derived status, if one holds firm the sensible, real term from which the abstractive procedure begins (the quantity as property of the sensible matter) and if one gives attention to the different ontological range of sensibility and imagination.

limits of which the intellect itself is aware—one would be able, perhaps, to hope to have in metaphysics the same certainty that is found in mathematics.[15]

Revealed theology is distinguished from metaphysics because it proceeds from the self-manifestation itself of the Principle, God, who is also the direct object of its treatment.[16] Metaphysics, however, reaches the reality of God indirectly, as the ultimate explanatory principle of its proper object: being insofar as it is being, that is, substance, finite being.[17]

In the superimposition of these levels, diverse applications of the intellect are at work, which effect different forms of abstraction from matter and becoming. On the first level, the physical, one abstracts, leading back the particularity of an empirical given to the universality of a type or a law. The intellect adds to this result, analyzing the structure of the nature and reconstructing progressively the order of the causal relations between beings. At the second level, the mathematical, one abstracts in a negative sense, isolating and considering separately one aspect among others, to develop therefore, in a manner relatively pure, analytic, the relations of implication.[18]

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[15] See SBT, q. 6, a. 1, resp.; SBT, c. 2, exp., 133b.

[16] "[B]ecause these divine beings are the principles of all things and nevertheless they are complete natures in themselves, they can be studied in two ways: first, insofar as they are the common principles of all things, and second insofar as they are beings in their own right. . . . We can reach them by the light of natural reason only to the extent that their effects reveal them to us. It was in this way that the philosophers came to know them . . . There is, however, another way of knowing beings of this kind, not as their effects reveal them, but as they reveal themselves." SBT, q. 5, a. 4, resp. See ST, I, q. 1, a. 7. The passage from metaphysics to theology implies the transition from the merely epistemic sense of manifestation to the anthropologically pregnant sense of self-manifestation.

[17] See Thomas Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio,* 2nd edition, ed. M. R. Cathala and R. M. Spiazzi (Taurini-Romae: Marietti, 1971), proem.

[18] "[N]atural science uses a rational method in this respect, that it is characteristic of reason to move from one thing to another; and this method is observed particularly in natural science, where we go from the knowledge of one thing to the knowledge of another; for example, from the knowledge of an effect to the knowledge of its cause. And the procedure in natural science is not only a movement from one thing to another distinct from it in the mind and not in reality, as when we go from the concept *animal* to the concept *man*. In the mathematical sciences we proceed only by means of what is of the essence of a thing, since they demonstrate only through a formal cause. In these sciences, therefore, we do not demonstrate something about one *thing* through another thing, but through the proper definition of that thing. . . . But in natural science, where demonstration takes place through extrinsic causes, something is proved of one thing through another thing entirely external to it." SBT, q. 6, a. 1, resp. ad 1, quaest. In this passage, one can

On this level, one finds, most satisfyingly, the requirement of necessity. The metaphysical abstracts from matter and from becoming because, starting from here, one is directed to a reality the existence of which one is justified in declaring by the force of a chain of efficient causality. And, finally, one has to deny for this reality the same properties by the force of which one argues: nature depends necessarily on a principle which is not in turn material and mutable. Such necessity is, however, induced by starting from the ontological structure of matter and becoming, nor could it be otherwise.[19] Aquinas, moreover, also provides for a level, intermediate between physics and mathematics, which follows upon the formalization of the sensible or qualitative properties which form the object of a determinate physical science, like music or astronomy.[20]

In the light of the framework just presented, in the text of Thomas we can then find:

a) a *theory of the object*. The *res* is considered in every science in relation to a determinate formal aspect or a determinate epistemic perspective. The determination of the aspect and of the perspective depends on:

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read, *ex post*, the disjunction of the rationalistic lemma *causa sive ratio*.

[19] The underlining of the ontological gap introduced by the causal resolution with respect to the homogenous procedure of conceptual abstraction has led many to reject the interpretation of Maritain regarding the existence of three levels of abstraction See J. Maritain, *Distinguer pour unir, ou, Les degrés du savoir* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1940). However, the term abstraction has an ample analogical extension, which the Commentary of Thomas contributes precisely to articulate. See ST I, q. 85, a. 2, ad 1. To this end, Pasquale Porro (see the texts cited above in note 3: "Tommaso d'Aquino, Avicenna e la struttura della metafisica," "Metafisica e teologia nella divisione delle scienze speculative del *Super Boetium de Trinitate,*" and "Astrazione e separazione: Tommaso d'Aquino e la tradizione greco-araba") notes an ambiguity in the procedure of Thomas with regard to the distinction within the concept of abstraction relative to the transcendental notions. In fact, these also, insofar as they are able to be applied indifferently to material or immaterial reality, are subject to the same criterion of semantic independence which serves to isolate the diverse conjoined aspects of the reality of fact. Nevertheless, we may note, because real existence (*separatio*) is implicit (or con-signified) in the notion itself of *ens*, the resolution into *ens* and consequent notions is not a purely formal procedure (logical or rational), the ontological scope of which has still to be interpreted, but it has a direct real or causal value (one treats also of intrinsic causes). See SBT q, 5, a. 3, resp., 149b; SBT q., 6, a. 1, resp., ad quaest. 1, resp. ad quaest. 3. In this sense, the intellectual operation at the origin of the transcendental notions appears to have to be entirely distinguished from abstraction, commonly understood. See Régis, "Analyse et synthese," 319.

[20] See SBT, q. 5, a. 3, ad 5, ad 6, ad 7; Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.2.194a8.

b) a *theory of abstraction*. The human intellect apprehends being under the species of denominations and attributions marked by universality and necessity, raising itself progressively above the particular and mutable condition of the nature and relating itself to the intelligible identity represented by the form. Such elevation, the abstraction, acquires a different meaning in function of:

c) a *theory of judgment*: the synthesis expressed in the judgment is able to refer to a subject really existing or to a property considered in itself.[21] The form is able to be thus understood, on the ontological level, as the essential or accidental determination of a subject or as a subject subsisting in itself. The latter is the case of the realities for which the state of abstraction of the form with respect to matter is not only a meta-empirical condition of thought but also a real mode of being .

2. Saint Thomas and Platonism

On the basis of the points just made, we can now ask ourselves: if the reality which most immediately confronts us and which is the basis of every inference, is in matter and motion—Aristotelian and Thomistic realism lives on this presupposition—and if science is not able to regard it otherwise than in its universal form, how does science, in the first place, satisfy the demands

[21] The interpretation of the ontological value of judgment depends, therefore, upon the ontological value of the respective terms. In this sense, Aquinas observes, with Aristotle, that the copula signifies the truth of the proposition, even if not necessarily the existence of the relative subject, as is the case with privations (see Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, c. 1). In every case, the mode of existence of a subject and of the relative state of things must be interpreted. See Fabro, *Partecipazione e causalità*, 61. There, Fabro extends the consideration to diverse fields of discourse and to the relative statements, such as scientific, mathematical, logical, poetic, and literary statements. His reading differs from the position perhaps more known and prevalent (for example, of Marechal, Gilson, and Lonergan), which, on the basis especially of q. 5, a. 3, attributes to judgment the specific cognitive function of existence (or the relative critical moment). Such an interpretation is also contested by McInerny, *Being and Predication*, ch. 13, but to emphasize, against so-called "existential Thomism", the notional consistency and articulation of the entity. McInerny holds, in fact, that existence as such, through its still empirical and conceptually undifferentiated aspect, is not able to constitute the central object or problem of metaphysics. On Fabro and Gilson about the apprehension of existence and being (*actus essendi*), see: M. Paolini Paoletti, "Conoscere l'essere: Fabro, Gilson e la conoscenza dell'*actus essendi*," in *Crisi e destino della filosofia: Studi su Cornelio Fabro*, ed. A. Acerbi (Roma: Edusc, 2012), 157–72.

of truth, that is, how does it tap into reality as it is?

First, one must clear the field of an incorrect reading. The universal, for Thomas, as for Aristotle, rests in the form inhering in the sensible. The universal does not correspond, Platonically, to a reality subsisting in itself, nor does it represent, nominalistically, the content of an empirical schematism or a mere explicative hypothesis.[22] The intellect considers the form in itself or the unified hierarchical order of the properties which constitute the intelligibility of the entity.[23]

> [A]nything can be thought of without all the items that are not essentially related to it. Consequently, forms and natures, though belonging to things existing in motion, are without motion when they are considered in themselves; and so they can be the objects of sciences and of definitions, as the Philosopher says [*Metaphysics*, 7.14.1039a24]. . . . Natures of this sort, thus abstracted, can be considered in two ways. First, in themselves; and then they are thought of without motion and determinate matter. This happens to them only by reason of the being they have in the intellect. Second, they can be viewed in relation to the things of which they are natures; and these things exist with matter and motion. Thus they are principles by which we know these things, *for everything is known through its form*.[24]

That which remains outside of the form is insofar as it is subject to the form's causal power and therefore to its explanatory power. Matter and motion are, in this sense, both the limit and the object of the intelligibility described by the form. The direct reference of science is, therefore, to the universal and only indirectly, or accidentally, to the real terms supposed in them.

Nevertheless, we can ask ourselves, how the intellect is able to refer itself to the form inherent in matter and motion as the real subject of the universal properties which it must discover, if such a condition of inherence is not fitted to its eyes with its own value or intelligible significance? If being

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[22] It is fitting to caution that the Platonic conception to which Thomas himself refers, is conveyed by the critique of Aristotle of the Teacher regarding the substantial nature of genera. It should be noted that in the texts of Plato the term "universal" (*katholou*) through which the Stagirite sets up his refutation does not ever appear (I owe this observation to Riccardo Chiaradonna). An element genuinely Platonic seems to us to be, however, the assumption of intelligible identity as a characteristic immediately constitutive or significative of being (for example in the *Theatetus* and *Sophist*), and it is precisely this position which is criticized by Thomas in his Commentary.

[23] See M. Mignucci, *La teoria aristotelica della scienza* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1965), 75 and 301.

[24] SBT, q. 5, a. 2, resp. (italics mine).

appears and consists in the actuality of the form, is the matter, in which that must inhere, only the condition or receptacle of its exemplifications?[25]

These typical problems of Platonism ought to be foreign to the Thomistic doctrinal framework. Nevertheless these easily emerge in the writing which we have in hand. One could respond that such problems, if they are there, are owed to the contextual particularities of the work and they find solution or a better explanation in the posterior noetic doctrine, which is that which most properly characterizes the thought of Saint Thomas. One remembers, for example, the doctrine of induction and of the cogitative faculties, in which, on the basis of the psychology of Aristotle and Averroes, the Angelic Doctor marks the positive insertion of the intellect into the sensible, its hermeneutical capacity through which is emphasized the resolutive, that is, foundational, function of the reference to the latter (*conversio ad phantasmata*).[26] We hope, however, to limit our attention to the problems which our text directly presents us.

The commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius is one of the principle places in which Platonism receives a systematic criticism from Saint Thomas. In this sense, he determines here the ontological distinction between the mental suprasensible and the real suprasensible, or between the logical and the spiritual, between the abstract modality of thought and its real content; again, he determines here the distinction between abstraction, through which an aspect of reality is considered isolated in its significance

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[25] One can observe that for Aristotle experience (or perception) is the condition, indeed, the road of access to the knowledge of the universal. See Aristotle *Posterior Analytics,* 2.19.100a15; Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Posteriorum*, lib. 2, l. 20, n. 14. Still, the intellect is for the Stagirite the function which presides over the recognition of the inherence of the universal in the particular. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.9.1142b25–30. The problem which we are raising here regards, however, the nature of the perception with which is grasped the reality of the individual as such in relation to the general principle of intelligibility of the form.

[26] "De ratione huius naturae [naturae in materia corporalis existentis] est, quod in aliquo individuo existat, quod non est absque materia corporali. Unde natura lapidis, vel cuiuscumque materialis rei, cognosci non potest complete et vere, nisi secundum quod cognoscitur ut in particulari existens. Particulare autem apprehendimus per sensum et imaginationem. Et ideo necesse est ad hoc quod intellectus actu intelligat suum obiectum proprium, quod convertat se ad phantasmata, ut speculetur naturam universalem in particulari existentem," ST I, q. 84, a. 7, resp.; *In Aristotelis De Anima* (Turin: Marietti, 1959), lib. 3, l. 8, n. 713. See C. Fabro, *Percezione e pensiero* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1962), 193–242; G. P. Klubertanz, *The Discursive Power: Sources and Doctrine of the* vis cogitativa *according to St. Thomas Aquinas* (Saint Louis: Modern Schoolman, 1952); M. Siggen, *L'experiénce chez Aristote* (Bern: Lang, 2005), 356–415.

and in its essential properties (that is independently from the properties following upon its individual or sensible realization) and the separation (*separatio*) through which a reality or its determination are positively declared as existing independently from the sensible, from matter. The abstracting intellect is subjectively the same which is capable of discerning, through reflection, the gap thus introduced between the real and its representation. But, it is also the same intellect (at least in the Aristotelian framework of Aquinas) which guarantees their relation: the reference of the abstract form to the inhering form.

Nonetheless, how is it possible that reality, which is the source, the subject and the final term of every explanation, is grasped through an abstract form, which is determined as such, only in the modality which it receives from the intellect? Abstraction of the form omits the individuality and the mutation: precisely those characteristics which, for Aristotle himself, signify in the most evident way the gap between real being and ideal being.[27] Matter and becoming constitute "the this" in space and time, which is for us the first and fundamental subject of predication.

To guarantee the relation between abstract form and inherent form it is not enough, therefore, that the abstract form (essence) includes among its notional elements the matter universally understood or that the universal form, insofar as it is such, always implies attribution to a determinate subject. Again, it is not enough that between the individual and the universal form with which it is comprehended there is perfect correspondence under the objective or formal profile.[28]

In fact, by hypothesis, matter and the individual known through the intellect are likewise ideal, as much as their forms: they are precisely exemplifications of their respective forms. The correspondence between the two terms, form and its individual exemplification, is established in relation to that which is formally identical in them; what is left is, on the other hand,

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[27] See Aristotle, *Categories,* 5; *Metaphysics*, 9.3.1047a30.

[28] "[V]irtus superior potest illud quod potest virtus inferior, sed eminentiori modo. Unde id quod cognoscit sensus materialiter et concrete, quod est cognoscere singulare directe, hoc cognoscit intellectus immaterialiter et abstracte, quod est cognoscere universal"; ST I, q. 86, a. 1, ad 4. The problem of the relation between the universal and individual in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle is thus summarized by Joseph Owens: the form (the content of which is able to be apprehended independently from its individual or universal application) expresses the intelligible nucleus of the entity upon which rests the entitativity of being. See J. Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian "Metaphysics"* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 379–99.

accidental. The application of the universal form presupposes and does not constitute the real existence of the concrete term, the *res*, to which it is referred.

The problem is, as is apparent, above all ontological. In this sense, it does not appear that the theory of the cogitative, which functions as a mediator between sensibility and the intellect, is able indeed to resolve this problem, at least when it is invoked for the guaranteeing of the objective correspondence between the universal and the particular. The *res*, if it ought not remain a postulate, requires to constitute a principle of intelligibility and not a mere term of application.

There is, then, an intellectual moment for which the ontological priority of the concrete is preserved. More precisely, the relation of the universal to the individual and the distinction and connection between thought and reality normally expressed in judgment are debtors to an intellectual operation capable of revealing the intrinsic significance of the concrete existing thing, which is the subject or referent of such a judgment.[29] In this cognition, in fact, the first sense of *separatio* (*chorismos*) emerges.

In other words, the intrinsic determination of the individual, as a subsisting subject, is prior, from the logical and ontological point of view, with respect to its formal determination.[30]

> The composite which results from matter and form is called substance because it separable in an absolute sense [*simpliciter*], that is, it is able to exist separately *in rerum natura*; and of this alone is there generation and

[29] This point is well highlighted in Winance, "Réflexions sur les degrés." The concentration of Thomistic metaphysics on the concrete is well documented by Aimé Forest on the metaphysical level not however on the epistemological level, at least as regards the problem which we are now considering. See Aimé Forest, *La structure métaphysique du concret selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1931).

[30] As was noted and is still intensely debated, this assumption appears clear in chapter 5 of the *Categories* of Aristotle but not likewise in book 7 of the *Metaphysics*. It is worthwhile, in this way, to ask if, and to what measure, the logical-linguistic recognition of the categories in the first receives in the second a coherent foundation. Similarly, Dewan notices the particular care of Saint Thomas, in his commentary on books 7 and 8 of the *Metaphysics*, in distinguishing more clearly than it appears in the Aristotelian text itself the logical sense and the physical or existential sense of the notion of form and essence. See L. Dewan, *Form and Being*: *Studies in Thomistic Metaphysics* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 131–74. For an accurate analysis of the causal and epistemological role of form in Aristotle and Aquinas: see G. De Anna, *Causa, forma, rappresentazione: una trattazione a partire da Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milano: Angeli, 2010).

corruption.[31]

The reality of the inherent form is connoted by its reference to becoming: more precisely, as its term, in the generative process, or as its subject, as the principle of activity. As one finds on the physical level which is drawn from life, there is an intrinsic correspondence between the unitary reality expressed by the form and its operative capacity, a correspondence, which is efficaciously expressed by the scholastic principle *agere sequitur esse*.[32] Acting, of which becoming is only a deficient form, is, therefore, an essential principle of the intelligibility of the entity. Yet, it is precisely this which abstractive thought is never capable of reproducing and which it must always presuppose.

3. Res et intellectus

The preceding considerations, as just sketched, lead us to deny or at least minimize the validity of the assumption with which we began: that scientific knowledge represents a privileged path for investigating human knowledge in general.[33] Indeed, scientific knowledge is affected by an ontological limit inherent in the modality of the abstractive intellect. Such limitation is, nonetheless, detected by a judicative moment virtually present in the elaboration of scientific knowledge which permits discerning reflexively, in general and in every instance, its subjective relativity or objective reference.

However, it remains to be asked what implications such a conclusion is able to have for metaphysics, the definition of the epistemic status of which, to be sure, is among the principal questions investigated in the Commentary of Saint Thomas. Is metaphysics not, perhaps, precisely the science which is

[31] Aquinas, *Sententia Metaphysicae*, lib. 8, l. 1, n. 7.

[32] An interesting application of this principle is found in the argument with which Thomas reveals the intensive sense of personal substantiality. "[A]dhuc quodam specialiori et perfectiori modo invenitur particulare et individuum in substantiis rationalibus, quae habente dominium sui actus, et non solum aguntur, sicut alia, sed per se agunt: actiones autem in singularibus sunt"; ST I, q. 29, a. 1, resp.

[33] This assumption is, for example, consistently maintained by Hilary Putnam to show the irreducibility of different epistemic fields and the impossibility of metaphysics. The internal realism sustained by the American philosopher is not able to admit, in fact, an approach to reality as such except through the conceptual path of the idea of totality (the world seen by the eye of God). See the lectures given in Perugia, published in *Ethics Without Ontology*, (London – Cambridge [MA]: Harward University Press, 2005), 52-70.

capable of extending itself beyond every formal limitation? Is metaphysics not the proper instance where that criterion should be found? To such a question, one might answer, leaving to the side for a moment the text which we are considering, that if metaphysics investigates the properties of the entity insofar as it is an entity this nevertheless presupposes that the subject of such properties is, first of all, manifested to us. Those general properties themselves acquire a real significance in function of the specific nature of the entity of which they always are, or also in function of the complex of formal and causal relations among entities.

Metaphysics, if it is restricted to general ontology, is then, in its turn, a particular discourse about being, the sense of which and the validity of which depend on a higher judicative moment (see text 1 below). Such a moment—this is the thesis which we, finally, wish to sustain here—is the intellect itself which underpins ordinary human experience as the principle of its ontological consistence.[34] Such an intellectual insight into experience includes, on one hand, the perception of whatever is really subsisting, from which we can derive the fundamental sense of that which, although not being material and sensible, can be understood nonetheless, at least by hypothesis, really to subsist. This perception, we said, is essentially chained to individuality and movement (see text 2 below). On the other hand, the ontological capacity of the intellect is fed by the continuous growth of the experience of being in its different fields, which are the particular objects of the other sciences (see text 3 below).

Indications in this direction can be mined from the text we are examining. The three following citations are sufficient for an example:

> 1) Although the subjects of the other sciences are parts of being, which is the subject of metaphysics, the other sciences are not necessarily parts of

[34] Leonardo Polo, reading, in a certain way, Heidegger, holds that the objective delimitation of the sciences can be detected by a non intentional intellectual function (non-representative or objectivizing) which is at the bottom of the method of metaphysics and which would consist in the habitual knowledge of being and of the relative principles. See L. Polo, *Curso de teoría del conocimiento*, vol. 4 (Pamplona: Eunsa, 2004). For our part, we underline the primary illuminating function of such a cognitive modality in experience, a function which metaphysics can then reflexively detect and take up as the basis of its own method. In such a perspective, the noetic priority of the transcendental notions upon abstraction, sustained by Mayer ("Abstraction: Apriori or Aporia?" 733) appears to us to be able to be confirmed as far as to lead back their content to that radical intellectual apprehension (*noesis*) always acting in which consists the *habitus principiorum*. Otherwise, the classical difficulties of innatism in guaranteeing the essential active dimension of knowing would be represented, to the benefit of the pure objectivity of the concept.

> metaphysics. For each science treats of one part of being in a special way distinct from that in which metaphysics treats of being. So its subject is not properly speaking a part of the subject of metaphysics, for it is not a part of being from the point of view [*rationem*] from which being is the subject of metaphysics; *from this viewpoint it is a special science distinct from the others*.[35]
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> 2) Action and passion do not belong to things as they exist in thought but as they exist in reality. Now since the mathematician deals with things that are abstract only in thought, insofar as they come under his consideration they cannot be the principle or the end of motion. So the mathematician does not demonstrate by means of efficient and final causes. But the things the metaphysician deals with *are separate, existing in reality, and these can be the principle and end of motion*.[36]
>
> 3) Although divine science is by nature the first of all the sciences, with respect to us the other sciences come before it. For, as Avicenna says, the position of this science is that it be learned after the natural sciences, which explain many things used by metaphysics, such as generation, corruption, motion, and the like. It should also be learned after mathematics. . . . Other sciences, such as music, ethics, and the like, contribute to its fullness of perfection [*alie uero scientie sunt ad bene esse ipsius*].[37]

A little beyond the last passage cited, Aquinas adds that, although it is true that the object of all the disciplines mentioned receives its ultimate formation in metaphysics, whatever it receives from them is sufficiently secure in itself, or in self-evident principles.[38] Experience of the world transmitted by the common sense and elaborated in the particular sciences is, therefore, sufficiently qualified, from the ontological and epistemic point of view, to constitute the basis of metaphysical reflection.

More precisely, if the resolution of every form in the entity is that which constitutes the proper objective field of metaphysics—from here, all other progress on the causal level advances—it is necessary to guarantee the real significance, not just analitic or merely abstract, of such a resolution. The latter hypothesis, would, in fact, cause metaphysics to assume anew the same subjective restriction, that is, the same ideal relativity of logic and

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[35] SBT, q. 5, a. 1, ad 6 (italics mine).
[36] SBT, q. 5, a. 4, ad 7 (italics mine).
[37] SBT, q. 5, a. 1, ad 9.
[38] For an historical account of the logical function of first principles in Aquinas, see L. Tuninetti, *"Per se notum". Die logische Beschaffenheit des Selbstverständlichen im Denken des Thomas von Aquin* (New York: Brill, 1996). For a theoretical account of the foundational relationships between metaphysics and sciences, see J. J. Sanguineti, "Science, Metaphysics, Philosophy."

mathematics. Now, the sense of real being corresponds to that which most radically underlies the consciousness, as an unexpressed intellectual presupposition on which all the judicative activity present in human life depends. Metaphysics is confirmed in its radicality insofar as it returns reflexively to this presupposition.

Conclusions

On the basis of the elements presented, in the way of a conclusion, we now want to consider why the Thomistic inquiry carried out in the Commentary satisfies, as we anticipated at the beginning, the profound need of critical philosophy for a reflexive delimitation of thought and the examination of the method of philosophy; and, on the other hand, in what measure it still leaves open problems.[39]

a) Philosophy discerns the proper modality of thought from the reality to which thought is referred. There is not an absolute symmetry between the concept and the reality, or between the structure and the truth of a proposition and the reality of the relative state of things. Platonism is criticized in this regard. This means, more precisely, that philosophy discerns the mode of being of the realities which are objects of the different sciences, their abstract condition in relation to that which even for them, as for the common sense, acts as a source and a fundamental criterion of knowledge: sensible reality. In the recognition of this are joined together all the operations through which the intellect transcends sensible experience and leads back the partiality of consideration which is at the source of the different sciences. One can thus distinguish the universal condition of concepts which have a direct empirical instantiation from concepts which refer to aspects of reality.

b) The possibility of science is chained to the possibility of the universalization of experience. More generally, the intellect directly regards the actuality of the form, which is expressed in the concept. The judgment through which a form is attributed to a determinate sensible reality occurs

[39] One recalls that among the fundamental problems at the root of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was, as for Aquinas in his Commentary on Boethius, the precise delimitation of philosophy with respect to natural science, but especially with respect to mathematics. See, for example, the "Doctrine of method" in the same first *Critique*.

through the cooperation of the intellect and of the sensible faculties. The intellect reflects on the empirical genesis itself of the concept and applies it consequently to the reality which corresponds to the same notes.

> Science treats of something in two ways: in one way, primarily and principally; and in this sense science is concerned with universal natures, which are its very foundation. In another way it treats of something secondarily, as by a sort of reflection [*secundario et quasi per reflexionem quandam*]; and in this sense it is concerned with the things whose natures they are, inasmuch as, using the lower powers [*amminiculo inferiorum uirium*], it relates those natures to the particular things possessing them. For a knower uses a universal nature both as a thing known and as a means of knowing. Thus, through the universal nature of man we can judge of this or that particular man [*per universalem enim hominis rationem possum iudicare de hoc vel de illo*].[40]

In this regard, we raised a problem: in what way, conformed to the Aristotelian principle of realism, is sensible reality able to be maintained in the condition of a real subject if intelligibility in general is restricted to its form, that is, to the ensemble of its properties?

The possibility of judgment postulates, on the other hand, a criterion of higher intelligibility, which is not granted by the restriction of theoretical knowledge to the form and to the notes of universality and necessity. The sense of subsistence (*separatio*) and the assertive force expressed in judgment imply the possibility for the intellect to recognize the real being above all in those marks which constitute the limit of science, namely, individuality and becoming. Interestingly enough, these ontological marks identify the situation of the same finite knowing subject, also identify our ontological situation. The scope of these marks and of the relative modality of knowledge, therefore, has to be recognized as not merely empirical but transcendental. The cornerstones of Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics seem to demand it: respectively, the ontological ratification of the sensible, of matter and potency, and the Thomistic doctrine of the act of being (*actus essendi*) as a constitutive principle of the entity, beyond the form[41].

In summary, the integration of experience into the field of ontology,

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[40] SBT, q. 5, a. 2, ad 4.

[41] For a such an interpretation of the relationship between form and *actus essendi*: see C. Fabro, "The intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy. The Notion of Participation," *The Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974), pp. 449-491. For a different interpretation about this, with special regard to Boethius: S. L. Brock, "Harmonizing Plato and Aristotle on *Esse*: Thomas Aquinas and the *De hebdomadibus*", *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 465-494.

because of which the Aristotelian ontological semantic is able effectively to overcome the Parmenidean *aporia*, requires a gnoseological doctrine adequate to its principles through which the Platonic correspondence between being and the actuality of the form is able to be critically examined.[42] Otherwise, the assumption of such a correspondence renders ambiguous and problematic the ontological distinction between mental being and real being.

It is precisely in this direction that the Thomistic metaphysics appears to proceed.[43] The text which we have examined has made us, however, observe, although in a preliminary manner, the persistence of this problem. As was noted, the theory of judgment as *separatio* is not enough to guarantee a real approach to existence but presupposes it. This presupposition does not appear, however, sufficiently unfolded on the part of Saint Thomas, nor, perhaps, for the problems just now highlighted, was it able to be on the basis of the Aristotelian noetic alone. The problem of realism, which finally underlies the overthrow of the points which we have considered, is a problem with which the modern reader inevitably invests the text of Aquinas and which modern philosophy alone has been able to pose in all of its subtlety.[44]

This conclusion introduces, finally, a broader question: in what measure

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[42] In this regard, Luigi Ruggiu notes the in some way transcendental function attributed by Aristotle to the experience (*epagoghé*) of becoming, referring especially to the refutation of Parmenides in Aristotle's *Physics* 1.2.185a12. Luigi Ruggiu, "Rapporti fra la *Metafisica* e la *Fisica* di Aristotele," *Aristotele: Perché la metafisica,* ed. A. Bausola and G. Reale (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1994), 319–76. The question about the coherent introduction of this modality of experience into the complex of the Aristotelian noetic of the first principles remains, however, unanswered. For a contribution in this direction. See D. Composta, *L'esperienza metafisica dell'essere in Aristotele* (Roma: Las, 1997).

[43] Josef Santeler, in *Der Platonismus in der Erkenntnislehre des Heiligen Thomas von Aquin* (Innsbruck-Leipzig: Rauch, 1939), 264, sees in Saint Thomas an unresolved Platonic residue: the essential universality of the form which renders hopelessly problematic his doctrine of universals and individuation. This point is in reality in contrast with what Aquinas sustains from the time of *De ente et essentia*, chapter 3. Nonetheless, Santeler contributes to the moving of attention from form to existence as the principle of the constitution and of the intelligibility of the entity, a point of view more coherent with the framework of Thomistic metaphysics.

[44] The modern presuppositions present in contemporary readings of the Commentary are noted by Gelonch and Argüello, *Santo Tomás de Aquino*, 1999. In my opinion the presupposition of the critical problem, if properly understood, is not an obstacle but an advantage, because it permits examination, with greater attention, of the knowledge of being which is the basis of metaphysics. I was occupied with the point in a study of the thought of F. H. Jacobi: see A. Acerbi, *Il sistema di Jacobi: Ragione, esistenza, persona* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2010).

is the epistemology of Aristotle and Saint Thomas adequate for their ontology? On the response to this question depends the more precise placement of the Commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius in the complex of the work of Aquinas. Moreover, if the observations here briefly conveyed are granted, they ought to indicate an undertaking not of little interest for contemporary philosophy: the bringing to the forefront of the epistemic relevance and the metaphysical consistency of ordinary human experience.