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**ST. THOMAS AND THE QUESTION,  
"HOW ARE SYNTHETIC  
JUDGMENTS A PRIORI POSSIBLE?"**

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**I**

How would St. Thomas answer Kant's question as to how synthetic judgments a priori are possible? Even though to an historian of philosophy such a question might seem to pose a veritable scholar's nightmare (to transpose a question from the context of one philosophy to that of another is bad enough, but when one has to leap over five-hundred years and shift from modern to medieval philosophy to do it, the task begins to appear well-nigh fantastic), still, to a philosopher and particularly to a philosopher of Thomistic leanings, the question has such compelling force as to be practically inescapable. For does it not almost amount to a question as to how St. Thomas would meet the challenge of modern philosophy?

Not that the question has not been touched upon before, and even repeatedly. Indeed, to cite but one notable recent example, Father Copleston a few years ago in his remarkable little book on Aquinas broached the question, and yet without attempting really to answer it. Instead, taking a look at some of the typical first principles or self-evident truths of St. Thomas's philosophy, Father Copleston remarked that since the logical character of such principles seemed to be that of truths at once necessary and informative, he, Father Copleston, would think that they might very properly be referred to as "synthetic a-priori propositions." Needless to say, he was aware that such a term inevitably carries with it Kantian associations and that these are

certainly alien to the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. And yet for all that, his considered judgment was that such a term seemed to him to be "a convenient one."<sup>1</sup>

Now if it were only a matter of terminology that was here at stake, no one would wish to quibble with Father Copleston over his choice of words. And yet since a term like "synthetic a-priori proposition" is no ordinary term (nor is it exactly a trivial philosophical term either), one wonders whether in designating St. Thomas's first principles as synthetic a-priori propositions, Father Copleston may not thereby have precluded himself from ever being able to answer the question of how for St. Thomas such propositions are possible. Or better, one wonders whether in the very use of such a term Father Copleston may not have so boxed himself in that, when it comes to the question of how synthetic a-priori judgments are possible for St. Thomas, he can only answer by transforming St. Thomas's realistic metaphysics into a transcendental philosophy.

Superficially, of course, the question as to whether propositions may be divided into analytic and synthetic would appear to be no more than a logical question; and more specifically still, it would seem to be merely a logical question as to the possible kinds of predicable relationships that can hold between the subjects and predicates of propositions. Thus, as is well known, on the traditional Aristotelian doctrine of the predicables there are five possible ways in which predicate terms can be related to their subjects: a predicate may be either the genus of its subject, its differentia, its definition (or species),<sup>2</sup> its property, or its accident. In contrast, Kant seems to want to condense these five relationships into two:

This relation is possible in two different ways. Either the predicate *B* belongs to the subject *A*, as something which is overtly

contained in this concept *A*; or *B* lies outside the concept *A*, although it does indeed stand in connection with it.<sup>3</sup>

Nor, from the standpoint of the traditional doctrine of the predicables, would there seem to be anything amiss with this kind of condensation. In effect, it seems to do no more than to classify the first three predicable relations as analytic and the last two as synthetic. And what, after all, could be more plausible? For on the traditional doctrine, was it not often customary to characterize the relationships of genera, of differentiae, and of definitions or species to their subjects as being relations of inclusion or containment—for example, *praedicatum inest subjecto*, or *praedicatum est de ratione subjecti*?<sup>4</sup> In contrast, as regards the last two predicable relationships—that is, property and accident—it has always been considered that in such cases the predicate concept is somehow "outside" that of the subject. Indeed, even when the predicate is a *proprium* of the subject—for example, *risibilis* in the case of man—the concept of the predicate comes under a different category from that of the subject of which it is the property.

What is more, when one passes from a consideration merely of the different possible relations as such of predicate to subject to a consideration of the criteria for determining the truth of the propositions in which predicates are so related to their subjects, then again there seems a striking parallel between Kant's division of propositions into analytic truths and synthetic truths, and the traditional division into what might be called truths involving definitional predicates (genera, differentiae, definitions) on the one hand and truths involving predicates like properties and accidents on the other. Thus, on the traditional scheme, how does one know that propositions involving definitional predicates are true? The answer is that such propositions in the very nature of the case can only be self-evident. Or to speak in the language of Aristotelian logic, there just is not any way in which a syllogistic third term may be brought to bear so as properly to mediate between a subject and a predicate in the case of the first three predicable relationships. For instance, in the case of a proposition like "Man is an animal," how could one possibly prove this syllogistically? What sort of third or outside term could be brought to bear that would

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<sup>1</sup>F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Penguin Books, 1955), p. 28, n. 1.

<sup>2</sup>It perhaps scarcely needs remarking that there is some dispute as to whether on the traditional doctrine the third predicable relation is that of definition or of species; and depending on whether one opts for the one alternative or the other, one's entire conception of the nature of predicable relationships may well be

somewhat different. Nevertheless, this issue is not relevant to the concerns of the present paper.

<sup>3</sup>*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 6-7/b 10 (Kemp Smith translation).

<sup>4</sup>This second formula is St. Thomas's. See *ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2. In *ibid.*, I, q. 2, a. 4, he uses the locution, "praedicatum includitur in ratione subjecti."

justify or make evident the fact that being an animal is simply a part of what it is to be a man? This cannot be done for the reason that nothing outside the thing itself can explain why a thing is the very kind of a thing that it is. Such a truth can only be self-evident in a quite literal sense.

But similarly, in Kant's account of analytic truths, he explains that in all such truths "the connection of the predicate with the subject is thought through identity."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the truth of the proposition is determined simply through examining the proposition itself and seeing that anything else would be self-contradictory.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, when it is a property or an accident that is predicated of a subject, then on the traditional doctrine of the predicables the question "Why?" immediately becomes pertinent. Moreover, the answer to such a question naturally takes the form of a syllogistic demonstration, in which a third or mediating term is brought to bear on the other two terms, so as to make evident or demonstrate their connection with each other, this connection not being self-evident or evident from a consideration of just those terms themselves. And likewise, somewhat similar considerations apply with respect to synthetic truths on Kant's scheme. For these, too, require the bringing to bear of some third thing or factor, outside of the mere subject and predicate concepts themselves, in order to evidence the truth of the asserted connection between subject and predicate.

Apparently, then, there would seem to be no reason why the traditional scheme of five predicable relationships could not be collapsed or abbreviated into the simpler, twofold scheme of analytic relationships on the one hand and synthetic relationships on the other. Accordingly, though one might perhaps want to argue with Father Copleston as to whether the so-called truths *per se nota* of Thomistic metaphysics were more properly to be classified as synthetic or as analytic, there would, at least in the light of the foregoing considerations, appear to be no argument at all as to the propriety of applying Kant's classificatory scheme of analytic and synthetic to the propositions of St. Thomas's philosophy.

<sup>5</sup>*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 7/B 10.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Peter G. Lucas (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1953), p. 17: "All analytic judgments rest

wholly on the principle of contradiction."

<sup>7</sup>*New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Flew and MacIntyre, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1955), p. 58.

And yet no sooner has one carried out this easy reconciliation of the two logical doctrines than the whole enterprise has to be abandoned on account of a further unnoticed feature of Kant's otherwise quite innocent-seeming division of propositions into analytic and synthetic. For so far from this division being one that is based merely on the different ways in which predicates can be related to their subjects or on the different ways in which propositions are able to be verified, it suddenly turns out to be, in addition, a division based on what might be called the differing intentionalities of propositions or the differing intentional competencies or intentional reaches of the various types and kinds of proposition. Thus analytic propositions, it turns out, since they involve no more than a mere analysis of what is already contained in our concepts, are held to be of no real factual import at all. They tell us nothing and give no information of any kind about the real world. Accordingly, any proposition that in any wise purports to say what is in fact the case or that speaks to the question of what is so in the real world—any such proposition cannot possibly be an analytic truth and hence must be classified as synthetic.

It is true that Kant himself does not say in just these words that analytic truths are purely verbal or that they tell us nothing about the world or that in this sense they are completely uninformative. Such language is left for later so-called analytic philosophers to exploit. Thus to cite but one particularly clear and, one is tempted to add, cocksure example:

... we can contrast *necessary* propositions such as "3+2=5", "a thing cannot be red and green all over", "either it is raining or it is not raining", with *contingent* propositions such as "Mr. Menzies is prime minister of Australia", "the earth is slightly flattened at the poles", and "sugar is soluble in water". The propositions in the first class are guaranteed solely by the rules for the use of the symbols they contain. In the case of propositions of the second class, a genuine possibility of agreeing or not agreeing with reality is left open; whether they are true or false depends not on the conventions of our language but on reality.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the relevant principle here seems to be that since in

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the case of necessary (that is, analytic) truths their truth depends simply on conventions of our language or on what happens to be contained in our concepts and not at all on the way the world is, for this very reason such truths cannot possibly be truths about the world.

Now, as I say, though Kant does not express himself in just this language, both the point about analytic truths being completely non-factual as well as the principle upon which this rests are unmistakably recognized by Kant. Thus he says, for example, "The understanding in its analytic employment is concerned only to know what lies in the concept; it is indifferent as to the object to which the concept may apply."<sup>8</sup> And still later in the first *Critique* he flatly declares, "All existential propositions are synthetic."<sup>9</sup>

But now given this additional twist, or if you will this further consequence, attendant upon the division of propositions into analytic and synthetic, it quickly becomes apparent that the Kantian scheme of analytic and synthetic is thereby rendered totally irreconcilable with the traditional doctrine of the five predicables. For on the latter doctrine, the mere fact that a predicate term is related to its subject as its genus, differentia, definition, or species certainly does not thereby render the resulting proposition purely verbal. If it did, any such thing as so-called real definitions would become an impossibility. Worse yet, one could not even undertake to say, much less to know, what anything really is. For any "what" statement on the traditional doctrine would need to be classified under one or the other of the first

<sup>8</sup>*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 259/B 315.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, A 598/B 626.

<sup>10</sup>This is not to say, of course, that one might not challenge such a principle on the ground that its opposite was after all not self-contradictory. The Aristotelian doctrine of the potential infinite might be said to involve just such a challenge. Rather the only point we are seeking to make here is that whether in a given instance the appeal to the principle of contradiction is legitimate or not, in the very nature of the case this is the only kind of appeal that can serve as a proper verification for this particular kind of statement or judgment.

<sup>11</sup>Perhaps one might wish to argue that this particular principle is, in

Aristotelian metaphysics, not so much first as derivative. But even so, this would not materially affect the argument here being developed. For whether this principle is in fact an ultimate first principle or not is irrelevant. Even if it were not, it would be derived from a principle that was first, and first precisely in the sense that the ultimate test of its truth could only be the fact that anything else would be inconceivable or self-contradictory. It is this point that we wish to defend as to the kind of verification that is ultimately required for metaphysical principles, not the particular example that may have been chosen in order to illustrate the point.

<sup>12</sup>*Aquinas*, pp. 80-81.

three predicable relationships. And if all of these relationships are held to issue in statements that are purely verbal, there would then be no possible way in which one could say or know what anything is at all.

Moreover, the consequence for metaphysics, particularly if metaphysics be considered to be in some sense or other a science of first principles, would be disastrous. For simply as a matter of historical fact, the key principles that have operated in traditional Western metaphysics, Thomistic or otherwise, are principles whose warrant would appear to consist simply in the fact that anything else would be inconceivable, that their opposites would be self-contradictory. For example, consider Leibniz's famous principle enunciated in the second paragraph of the *Monadology*: "And there must be simple substances, since there are compounds; for a compound is nothing but a collection or *aggregatum* of simple things." Now, quite apart from Leibniz's own concern with the distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact, let us just ask ourselves what sort of warrant or justification could we or anyone else give for such a principle? What sort of evidence could one adduce for the truth of such a statement, or on what sort of grounds does one make an assertion like this? Would not the answer have to be to the effect that in the very nature of the case that which is compound must ultimately be made up of simples,<sup>10</sup> that anything else would be contrary to the very nature of a compound or would be incompatible with the very meaning of the term.

Or again, consider the sort of warrant that might be given for a typical principle in Aristotelian metaphysics, such as, say, the principle that accidents must be accidents of substances.<sup>11</sup> As Father Copleston states the case:

... the statements which he [the ordinary man] makes imply a recognition in practise of a distinction between things and their modifications, between "substance" and accidents, between that of which we predicate qualities, quantity, and relations and qualities and relations which exist only as qualities and relations of that of which they are predicated. We can say that Peter is sitting on a chair, but nobody would expect to encounter the relation of "sitting on" existing as an entity apart from any sitter.<sup>12</sup>

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And why would not one expect this? One is inclined to supplement Father Copleston's account by saying that one would not expect this for the very reason that an accident such as sitting, by its very nature, can only be a quality or position of something, that anything else would be unthinkable because self-contradictory.

But now if on the Kantian view any judgment that is warranted simply by the principle of contradiction is an analytic truth and as such not a truth about the world at all, then what is one to make of the characteristic judgments of metaphysics? As Kant sees it, one cannot consider such judgments to be analytic, since that would mean that metaphysics, so far from being about being, as Aristotle thought, would not be about being at all. The assertions of metaphysics would instead be purely verbal, nothing more. Accordingly, if one insists that metaphysical judgments are not purely verbal but are, or at least pretend to be, assertions about the world or about the nature of things, then Kant insists that there is no alternative but to regard metaphysical judgments as being synthetic. But as we have already noted, in Kant's eyes, a synthetic judgment, since its truth is not evident from a consideration of the terms themselves, requires some third thing, some factor outside of and other than the subject-predicate concepts themselves, some

unknown= $X$  which gives support to the understanding when it believes that it can discover outside the concept  $A$  a predicate  $B$  that is foreign to this concept, which it yet at the same time considers to be connected with it.<sup>13</sup>

And what can this third thing, this unknown= $X$ , be? Well, it cannot be experience, because, unlike synthetic judgments a posteriori, the judgments of metaphysics lay claim to universality and necessity. And no amount of empirical observation of accidents being in substances, or of effects following upon causes, Kant insists, can ever be sufficient to ground a universal and necessary judgment. Hence the

<sup>13</sup>*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 9/B 13.

<sup>14</sup>On these expressions, see *Critique of Pure Reason*, § 14, (Kemp Smith, pp. 125-26).

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *Prolegomena*, pp. 50-51: "But the word transcendental, which for me

never means a reference of our knowledge to things, but only to our *faculty of knowing*."

<sup>16</sup>*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 92/B 124-25.

third thing, or the unknown= $X$ , must be sought elsewhere than in experience. But where is it to be sought then?

To this Kant's well-known answer is that the basis and warrant for the universality and necessity of metaphysical judgments can only be traced to the fact that such principles as, for example, the causal principle or the substance-accident principle are the very conditions of "the possibility of experience," the very conditions of our being able to have any experience of a world at all, the very conditions of the possibility of our ever knowing anything as an object.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in providing this kind of warrant for synthetic a-priori principles, Kant has clearly and consciously transformed such principles from being metaphysical principles of being or reality into transcendental principles of our knowledge or experience of reality and of the world.<sup>15</sup> As he remarks,

There are only two possible ways in which synthetic representations and their objects can establish connection, obtain necessary relation to one another, and, as it were, meet one another. Either the object alone must make the representation possible, or the representation alone must make the object possible. In the former case, this relation is only empirical, and the representation is never possible *a priori*. . . . In the latter case, representation in itself does not produce its object in so far as *existence* is concerned, for we are not here speaking of causation by means of the will. Nonetheless the representation is *a priori* determinant of the object, if it be the case that only through the representation is it possible to *know* anything as an object.<sup>16</sup>

Returning then to our original question as to how St. Thomas might best deal with Kant's question concerning how synthetic judgments a priori are possible, we wonder if Father Copleston may not have given hostages, if not to fortune, then at least to Kantians, in suggesting that the basic principles of Thomistic metaphysics are in the nature of synthetic a-priori truths. For then there would seem to be no way of accounting for such principles save in the way Kant does. And if Aquinas were to account for his metaphysical principles in this way, then instead of a philosophy of being qua being, Thomistic realism

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would have suddenly been transformed into a transcendental philosophy, no more, no less.

It is true, of course, that Father Copleston is quite well aware that those propositions which Aquinas would hold to be *per se nota* are considered by Aquinas to be at once "necessary and yet at the same time [to] give information about reality."<sup>17</sup> For this reason, Father Copleston explains, such self-evident principles are both like and unlike Kant's analytic truths:

They can be said to be analytic, if an analytic proposition is defined as a proposition which is seen to be necessarily true once the terms are understood. But if an analytic proposition is understood as one which says nothing except about the use of symbols, Aquinas would not admit that his *principia per se nota* are analytic in this sense.<sup>18</sup>

However, Father Copleston does not see fit to explain how it is possible for such self-evident principles of Aquinas to be both necessary and informative. Instead, one suspects that Father Copleston may have been somewhat uneasy on this point. And being thus uneasy, he appears to have been desirous of approximating, so far as possible, St. Thomas's metaphysical principles to the sorts of things that Kant would call a-priori synthetic truths.<sup>19</sup> It is almost as if Father Copleston had said to himself, if the so-called self-evident truths of Thomistic metaphysics are construed as analytic truths, then one can understand how they can claim to be necessary, but one would be hard put to it to understand how they could ever be informative; accordingly, suppose we try the other alternative of construing such metaphysical first principles as if they were synthetic a-priori principles;

<sup>17</sup>*Aquinas*, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>Apologies are doubtless due Father Copleston for the admittedly very speculative account of his views which follows and which rather fancifully seeks to supply some of the reasons that presumably must have led him to make many of the rather cryptic assertions which he does make in his *Aquinas*. My concern here, he it admitted, has not been to do justice to Father Copleston so

much as to set forth a way of interpreting Aquinas against a background of Kantian critical philosophy, which, while it may be plausible and hence exceedingly tempting, nevertheless has the effect, it would seem to me, of seriously undercutting the realistic metaphysics of St. Thomas. But that such a way of interpretation can be properly fathered upon Father Copleston is questionable, to say the least.

<sup>20</sup>*Aquinas*, pp. 28-29.

then it will be readily understandable how they can be both necessary and informative at the same time.

However, if this is in fact the course of Father Copleston's interpretation and if one undertakes to follow him in this course, then one is up against the difficulty that certainly for Aquinas his self-evident principles are unmistakably principles whose truth is known directly upon their terms being known. And this would appear to mark such truths as being analytic rather than synthetic, which is just what Father Copleston wishes to avoid.

Presumably it is to meet this difficulty that Father Copleston then proceeds to attribute to Aquinas a rather curious doctrine; that is, a doctrine of "two types of self-evident principles."

The first type consists of those propositions in which the predicate "falls under the definition of the subject", that is, in which the predicate gives the whole or part of the connotation of the subject or is contained in the intention of the subject. Definitions are of this type, and purely formal propositions like *A is A*. The second type consists of those propositions in which the predicate is an attribute or property which belongs necessarily to the subject.<sup>20</sup>

Now all this is passing strange. Not only does Father Copleston not tell us just where in St. Thomas one may find any such explicit differentiation between two types of self-evident propositions, but in addition the very account which Father Copleston himself gives of the second type of self-evident truths would seem to rule out the possibility of such truths being properly self-evident truths at all. For the account is clearly an account of statements in which the predicate term is not definitionally related to the subject but rather is a property of the subject. But in the context of Aristotelian logic, propositions in which properties are asserted of their subjects are, in the nature of the case, held to be propositions that are demonstrable; and they are demonstrable precisely in the sense that they admit of an outside or third term which can mediate between the subject and predicate of the conclusion; and consequently, being demonstrable and hence mediately evident, they are clearly to be distinguished from principles that are indemonstrable and immediately evident. To recur once more to

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the familiar, hackneyed, but still very useful examples, "Man is capable of laughter" is a demonstrable proposition, whereas "Man is rational" or "Man is animal" are not. And why? Simply because in the first case, man's capacity for laughter can be explained through the reason of man's being a rational animal, whereas for man's being rational or being an animal no reason or reasons can be given at all. Hence these latter are truths *per se nota*, whereas the former, being a truth in which the predicate is an attribute or property of the subject, is just the sort of truth that is demonstrable and as such not self-evident at all.

Why, then, should Father Copleston have chosen to regard such principles as self-evident, albeit self-evident of a special type? The answer, I believe, becomes clear as soon as one considers the particular example which Father Copleston gives of such a self-evident principle of the second type.<sup>21</sup> His example is none other than the causal principle itself, "Everything which begins to exist begins to exist through the agency of an already existent being." And the interesting thing about this principle, Father Copleston notes, is that for St. Thomas this is not a truth which is evident merely from the definitions of the terms involved. He even quotes St. Thomas's explicit assertion to this effect: "Relationship to a cause does not enter the definition of a being which is caused" (*ST*, I, q. 44, a. 1 ad. 1).

Accordingly, in this example Father Copleston would seem to have a clear case of a metaphysical principle which St. Thomas himself would certainly regard as being a necessary truth but which at the same time he explicitly denies to be any mere truth by definition. And this for Father Copleston means that it is not a truth about which one has to worry whether it is, as one says, "merely analytic" and hence not a truth about the world at all. Instead, as Father Copleston sees it, it can serve as a perfect example of what Kant would call a synthetic a-priori principle. At the same time, Father Copleston is sensitive to the fact that Aquinas does consider that *principia per se nota* comprise a not inconsiderable or insignificant part of philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular. And so, in order not to have to discredit St. Thomas's metaphysics by loading it with self-evident prin-

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup>*ST*, I, q. 44, a. 1 ad. 1 (Pegis translation, Random House).

<sup>23</sup>The distinction between predicable relations that are essential and those that are accidental is originally appropriate

to essences which are subsumable under the categories, and hence it is only by extension and by analogy that it is made to apply to notions that transcend the categories in the manner of "being," "being caused," and so on.

ciples that are no more than definitions and hence noninformative, and in order at the same time to credit it with principles of the type of the causal principle that are not definitions and yet are necessary in the manner of self-evident truths, Father Copleston would appear to have invented a special logical classification—what he calls self-evident principles of the second type—and then to have foisted such a classification on St. Thomas.

And yet I do not believe such a stratagem will work, and not merely on the grounds that it would appear to lack sufficient textual warrant but rather on the grounds that philosophically it bids fair to wreck St. Thomas's metaphysics rather than to save it. And to see just how the stratagem fails, I suggest that we look at the remainder of the passage, cited by Father Copleston, in which St. Thomas states that the causal principle is not a principle that is true by definition:

Though relation to its cause is not part of the definition of a thing caused, still it follows as a result of what belongs to its nature. For, from the fact that a thing is being by participation, it follows that it is caused. Hence such a being cannot be without being caused, just as man cannot be without having the faculty of laughing.<sup>22</sup>

Now what Aquinas seems here to be saying is that being caused is to the being that is caused much as the faculty of laughing is to a human being. The predicable relation in both cases is that of a property to its subject. But then in neither case is the relation self-evident in the proper sense. Rather, in both cases the relation is demonstrable. Just as the faculty of laughing may be shown to pertain necessarily to man in virtue of what he is—that is, a rational animal—so being related to a cause may be shown to pertain necessarily to anything that is caused in virtue of what such a thing is—that is, a being by participation.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, consider what this demonstrability of the causal principle implies for St. Thomas. It implies that although this principle just as such is not a self-evident truth in the sense of being a truth in which the predicate falls under the definition of the subject, it is nevertheless dependent upon, and derivative from, a truth which is self-evident in just this sense—the principle, that is, that "anything that

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is being by participation is a thing that is caused." And so, what of Father Copleston's elaborate and somewhat contrived expedient of construing St. Thomas metaphysical principles as being self-evident in the manner of type 2, so as to avoid having to consider his metaphysics as resting ultimately upon principles that are self-evident in the manner of type 1, these last being suspect on the ground that they are only definitionally true and hence uninformative? The answer is that it avails nothing. For in the very passage which Father Copleston cites from Aquinas as exhibiting a self-evident principle of the second type, this principle is explicitly interpreted by Aquinas as being dependent upon a self-evident principle of the first type.

Coming around again to the issue between Aquinas and Kant and to the question as to how synthetic judgments a priori are possible, the issue, it would seem, can now be reduced to quite simple terms. Either there are metaphysical principles such as are true simply in virtue of the meanings of the terms involved and such as are at the same time genuinely informative, or else there are no such principles. If there are such principles, then Aquinas has got it made, so to speak, so far as the logical structure and order of his metaphysics is concerned; the truths of metaphysics will be either self-evident principles or truths that are dependent upon such principles.<sup>24</sup> Not only that, but in such a context Kant's question as to how synthetic a-priori judgments are possible can appear as little more than "irrelevant, immaterial, incompetent, and to be stricken from the record." For if Aquinas were to admit the use of a term such as "synthetic a priori" at all, he would need to construe it as designating those propositions

whose predicate terms are related to their subjects as necessary attributes or properties of those subjects. And as to the possibility of such propositions, there simply is no problem for Aquinas, for in principle they can all be derived from self-evident principles by the ordinary process of syllogistic demonstration.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, if there are no self-evident principles that are at once necessary and informative, then Aquinas and his metaphysics are indeed undone. And in their stead what one will have at the most will be synthetic a-priori propositions in the strict Kantian sense of the term. Nor will it be possible to explain the possibility of such propositions save in the manner of Kant; that is, by regarding them as being, if we may so put it, not metaphysically but transcendentally true, as being the conditions of the very possibility of experience.

And as for Father Copleston, it should now be clear that on this issue of the synthetic a priori what he was really attempting to do was to slip between the horns of the dilemma of Aquinas with his self-evident principles on the one hand and Kant with his principles that are the conditions of the possibility of experience on the other. But unhappily, to slip between these two is something that just cannot be done. For what Father Copleston is in effect proposing is that we regard the principles of Thomistic metaphysics as being in the nature of synthetic a-priori truths and that we then stop there. But, unfortunately, one cannot stop there. Supposing that such metaphysical truths are not evident in themselves, then they will either have to be justified in the way St. Thomas does, by tracing them back to principles that are self-evident—in which case they would not be synthetic a-priori truths in the proper sense at all—or they will have to be justified in the way Kant undertakes to do, by treating them as conditions of the possibility of experience—in which case they have ceased to be in any sense principles of a realistic metaphysics such as that of Aquinas. In short, on the issue of the possibility of the synthetic a priori, there just is not any way of avoiding a choice as between Aquinas and Kant. One either has to fish (and as a fisherman, I am tempted to add, for real fish) with Aquinas, or be content to cut bait with Kant.

<sup>24</sup>Perhaps it should be remarked that merely because St. Thomas thought of his metaphysics as resting ultimately upon *principia per se nota*, it should not be supposed that he therefore thought that "by a purely deductive and quasi-mathematical method we could not only deduce the general system of reality but also make new factual discoveries" (Aquinas, p. 23). Father Copleston's discussion is excellent on this very point of distinguishing St. Thomas's way of doing metaphysics from that of the "rationalist" metaphysicians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (*ibid.*).

<sup>25</sup>Again, it should be noted (cf. n. 11 above) that it makes little difference that

in practice we are not always able to tell whether a particular metaphysical principle we happen to be working with is self-evident or demonstrable in terms of a higher principle; in principle, though, the logic of the matter is clear—on the one hand, there are immediately evident truths, and on the other hand mediate evident ones dependent upon the former. Father Copleston's mistake seems to be that having noticed that many key metaphysical principles are not strictly speaking *per se nota*, he wants to conclude from this that perhaps they are not derived from such self-evident principles at all, being instead synthetic a-priori truths.



## II

Very well, supposing that we are finally resolved to fish with Aquinas and not cut bait with Kant, does that put an end to the matter of the synthetic a priori? Unhappily not. For while our object lesson in the person of Father Copleston has made it clear that there is no way in which the question of synthetic a-priori truth can be grafted on to the philosophy of St. Thomas, it has at the same time made it equally clear that the irrelevance and incompetence of this question with respect to St. Thomas are entirely conditional upon there being such things as truths that are evident in themselves and at the same time are proper truths about the world. Aquinas apparently never doubted that there are genuine factual truths of this sort and that they are *per se nota*. But did he ever show how there can be such truths? And if Aquinas did not or could not do this, then the problem of the synthetic a priori is right back on our doorstep; and with it the entire Kantian solution to the problem will be right there too, waiting to get in the door as well. Indeed, if our foregoing diagnosis of Father Copleston's predicament was correct, his whole trouble can be said to have arisen simply from his doubts as to whether there could be such things as factually true statements which at the same time are true by definition. And where is the right-thinking analytic philosopher of the present day who would not share precisely the same doubts?

Nevertheless, I would make bold to suggest that doubts of this sort rest on a misunderstanding and that once one correctly understands the nature of truths that are said to be evident in themselves, one can readily see that there is no reason at all why such truths should not be informative or should not be truths about the world.

Let us again consider the argument against self-evident truths being factual. As stated above,<sup>26</sup> the argument comes down to this: If a statement depends for its truth solely on the definitions of the terms involved or merely on the conventions of language or simply on what happens to be contained in our concepts and not at all on the way the

<sup>26</sup>Cf. pp. 243-44.

<sup>27</sup>In another paper entitled "The Truths of Metaphysics," in *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 17 (1964), 372-95, I have tried in rather more detail,

though I daresay with equal lack of success, to deal with this currently fashionable snobbery toward the use of self-evident truths in philosophy.

world is or on what the statement purports to be about, then how can such a statement possibly be a statement about the world or give any information about facts in the world?

Thus to take some examples, "Any younger son is a brother" or "A bachelor is an unmarried man." Now who would claim that such statements give genuine information about the natural world? Do we learn from them facts about the biological or the physiological realm in the way we do from statements like "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" or "Sugar is soluble in water"? Of course not. And why not? Clearly, the answer is that statements such as the first two are no more than linguistic truths. They simply reflect the meaning and usage of English words like "brother," "bachelor," and so on. Hence they give no information about the world of nature. Moreover, the mark or criterion of the purely verbal character of such statements is that in order to know that a statement like "A younger son is a brother" is true, we do not have to consider the world at all; we only have to consider the meaning of the words in the sentence. On the other hand, to know that sugar is soluble in water, it is not enough just to consult the dictionary; it is necessary to look at the facts.

And so, fortified in his self-righteousness by such obviously telling considerations, any self-respecting modern analytic philosopher is only too eager to apply considerations of the sort to any and all metaphysical principles which a thinker like Aquinas would consider to be *per se nota*; and the results are nothing short of devastating.<sup>27</sup> For take the two principles "Any accident must be an accident of a substance" and "Any thing that is being by participation is caused." The truth of these is said to be self-evident, and what does that mean? It means that the very meaning of *accident*, for example, requires that it be of a substance, that anything else would simply be unthinkable because self-contradictory. But is not such an explication of the truth of a self-evident metaphysical principle strictly comparable to the explication of the truth of "A younger son is a brother"? In the one case as in the other, the truth of the statement depends only on the meaning of the terms involved; and in neither case does one have to conduct an empirical investigation of the facts to ascertain the statement's truth, as one does in the case of, say, "Sugar is soluble in water." Indeed, such a requirement would be as ridiculous in the case of "Any accident is

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necessarily an accident of a substance" as in the case of "Any younger son is necessarily a brother." For this is just the point of saying that principles like the substance-accident principle or the causal principle are self-evident. They are evident simply through themselves; and hence one does not have to go outside them—either to experience, or to a third or mediating term, or to some unknown  $x$ —in order to determine their truth. But then the embarrassing consequence follows that if the self-evident principles upon which a realistic metaphysics is supposed to rest are such that to ascertain their truth one does not have to look at the facts or at the real world at all (one only has to look at those statements themselves and the meanings of the terms involved), then clearly such statements cannot be statements about the facts or about the real world or about being or about reality or about anything of the sort. No; all such presumed metaphysical truths turn out to be purely verbal, nothing more.

Now in making rejoinder to this argument, I should like to make two points. In the first place, I would like to suggest that the conclusion that actually follows from the argument is not the conclusion that has customarily been supposed to follow. And in the second place, even supposing the conclusion to follow from the argument, the antecedent upon which the consequent depends contains a serious ambiguity. This having once been cleared up, the whole argument is thereby rendered irrelevant and innocuous so far as the *principia per se nota* of St. Thomas are concerned.

To take the first point first. As usually stated, the argument against the possibility of self-evident principles ever being truths about the world takes the following abbreviated form: Since the truth of such a self-evident statement depends only on the meaning of the words or terms involved, such a statement cannot be a statement about the facts but only a statement about its own words or terms. The statement is purely verbal, in other words. But when cast in this form, the argument would seem to do no less than commit the obvious fallacy of confusing use with mention.<sup>28</sup> Thus merely because I use certain words or terms in making a statement, that certainly does not mean that my statement is about those words or terms. In the statement

<sup>28</sup>It might also be called a confusion of personal with material supposition, or perhaps even of first with second intention.

<sup>29</sup>*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 259/B 315.

"Any accident is an accident of a substance," for example, I certainly do use the word "accident," and I use the word as having a certain meaning or significance; and yet that still does not mean that my statement is about the mere word "accident" or even about the mere meaning of the term. No, the statement is about accidents.

Of course, I can make a statement about a word or about a mere meaning. I can say, for example, "The word 'accident' in English is so used as to imply the further locution 'of a substance.'" But still, even though I can thus frame a sentence in which I mention words or meanings which I have used in other sentences, that does not mean that in the original sentence, "Accidents are accidents of substance," what I am talking about is the word or the meaning of *accident*, and not the thing.

Likewise, if one wishes, one can perhaps reasonably argue that if I have no other evidence for the truth of a statement like "Accidents are accidents of substances" than the mere meanings of the words and terms involved, then I do not have adequate evidence for the truth of the statement itself. But this is a very different thing from saying that if the meaning of the terms is the only evidence I have for the truth of the statement, then the statement itself is not a statement about accidents but only about *accident*, the word as a word. Again, this would be a patent confusion of use with mention. Yes; one cannot but suspect that it was just some such confusion as this that was operative even in Kant's pronouncement that "the understanding in its analytic employment is concerned only to know what lies in the concept; it is indifferent to the object to which the concept may apply."<sup>29</sup>

And now for the second point of rejoinder—and this after all is the more important. Even if it be shown that from the mere truth conditions of so-called self-evident propositions one cannot legitimately infer that such propositions are no more than statements about their own terms and their meanings, that still does not suffice to reinstate such propositions as statements about the world. To accomplish this, one has to examine rather more closely the logic of the criticism that seeks to deprive self-evident truths of any and all factual import. For the argument is that if the truth of a statement depends only on the meanings of the terms involved, then such a statement cannot be a

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truth about the world. Now suppose we grant for a moment the cogency of the inference. Still is there not a certain ambiguity present in the antecedent? Thus as regards the key word, "meaning," is not this a word that is to be interpreted as signifying now the meaning, and now again the thing *meant*?

For example, an instance which St. Thomas gives of a proposition which is known to be true, once the meanings of the terms are known and understood, is the proposition "Man is an animal."<sup>30</sup> But clearly, the self-evidence of this principle does not have to turn on our understanding the meaning of *man* or of *animal* in the sense of the linguistic or psychological or logical instrument or vehicle of such meaning. No; it may quite well and presumably actually does turn on the meaning of these terms in the sense of that which is meant. Purely objectively and quite apart from our thoughts or meanings, a human being is just the kind of being that is an animal.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, a word such as "concept" is ambiguous in a way similar to that of "meaning." For by the word "concept" we may mean either that which is conceived, the object of our concept, or the conceiving, the latter being taken as merely the means or instrument through which the object is thus conceived. Accordingly, when in the case of "Man is animal" one says that this is true simply on the ground that the predicate is already contained in the concept of the subject, is it not perfectly plausible to interpret this as meaning that animal is bound up in the very nature of man, as being a part of the very thing that is

<sup>30</sup>For example, in *ST*, I, q. 2, a. 1.

<sup>31</sup>In other words, as is quite well known but all too frequently overlooked, as St. Thomas understands self-evidence, this does not mean that self-evident propositions are evident to the user in any mere psychological sense. No; quite objectively and quite apart from whether anyone recognizes the self-evidence of the proposition or not, the proposition is self-evident just in the nature of the case—which means in the very nature of the objective situation which is intended by the proposition. In confirmation of this, one needs only to point to St. Thomas's well-known distinction between those things which are self-evident in themselves, though not to us, and those that are self-evident in themselves and to us. Cf. *ST*, I, q. 2, a. 1.

<sup>32</sup>Note that the fact that the self-evidence of propositions has an objective basis, being grounded on an objective situation in which an outside cause is precluded from being relevant or operative in the case in hand—this fact means that we can perfectly well be mistaken about the self-evidence of various propositions: we may think a certain proposition is self-evident which really is not, or a proposition may well be self-evident and we may not recognize the fact. Hence the examples which one may bring forward of self-evident propositions—for example, the substance-accident principle, or the causal principle, or "Man is an animal"—might be subject to question whether they really were self-evident or not; but the principle of self-evidence is not subject to question in the same way.

conceived when one uses a word or concept such as "man"? Accordingly, interpreted in this way, it simply is not true that a statement that is self-evident must be a statement whose truth depends only on the meanings of the words and concepts involved, and not at all on the facts or on the way things are in the world. Quite the contrary, if "dependence on meanings and concepts" is understood as dependence on the things so meant and the objects thus conceived, then the truth of a self-evident proposition will of course depend on the facts in the case and on the way the world is.

And so the back is simply broken of the criticism that since a self-evident truth is one whose truth does not depend on the way the world is, it therefore cannot be a truth about the world. For while the consequent in this case does follow from the antecedent, the antecedent, as it turns out, happens not to be true.

Indeed, the same point is borne out from a reconsideration of some of our earlier remarks concerning the difference between definitional predicates and predicates that are necessary attributes or properties of their subjects. Propositions involving the former relationships, we said, can only be self-evident, whereas those involving the latter predicable relationship are not self-evident but demonstrable. But just why did we say that a statement like "Man is an animal" can only be evident or known through itself, whereas with "Man has the capacity for laughing" it is otherwise? The answer we gave, it will be remembered, was that there just is not anything outside the nature of man or of animal that can act or operate so as to bring the two together—and that simply for the reason that being an animal is what man is, and no sort of external cause is either required or possible for a thing to be the thing it is. On the other hand, with respect to such a thing as the capacity for laughter, this is something that is outside the nature of man and is not a part of what it is to be a man. Hence in this case, the connection between the two needs to be mediated by something additional and over and above what is propounded in the proposition.<sup>32</sup>

But here once more it becomes apparent that there is an ambiguity in the notion of proposition just as there was in that of meaning and of concept. For *proposition* may mean either the linguistic or logical instrument through which something is propounded, or it may mean

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that which is propounded or the fact that is being asserted and stated. Hence when it is said that a metaphysical proposition such as "Accidents are accidents of substances" is known simply through itself, the *self* here refers to the fact itself that is being asserted or propounded, not to the mere sentence or logical tool through which the intellect propounds or recognizes this fact. In other words, there is nothing in the facts or in the world that does or can account for accidents being related to substances, other than just the fact itself that to be an accident just is to be in or of a substance.

Who says, then, that the self-evident truths of metaphysics cannot be about the world and cannot even claim to be factual statements at all? No; the self-evidence of such principles means just that they are evident through the facts themselves that these principles are about and not through any other facts or anything else whatever. But with this, we come back once more to our major thesis, that for St. Thomas the Kantian problem as to how synthetic a-priori judgments are possible does not arise, need not arise, and even in a sense cannot properly arise at all. Indeed, what was instructive about the case of Father Copleston was that the only way such a problem could plausibly be supposed to arise would be if one began to doubt whether the self-evident principles on which Thomistic metaphysics rests are any more than mere analytic truths and hence not truths about the world. But surely now we hope that we have not merely scotched this snake but killed it!

### III

But no, we are still not entirely out of the woods. There is still one last threat of a recurrence of the problem of the synthetic a priori to plague the philosophy of St. Thomas. And in many ways this last is the most serious of all. For granted that the ultimate logical basis of Thomistic metaphysics is certain *principia per se nota* and granted that these self-evident principles do give genuine information about the world, and indeed about the very most basic features of the world, still is there not a sense in which even these principles fall short of

<sup>32</sup>I take it that it is just this aspect of the problem that Father Copleston wishes to focus attention upon by his very suggestive remark, "Aquinas admitted

one and only one self-evident and necessary existential proposition, namely the proposition 'God exists'" (*Aquinas*, p. 31).

strict universality and necessity? Do they have any more than a hypothetical necessity? And given that their necessity is hypothetical, is not this sufficient to render such Thomistic metaphysical principles synthetic in the Kantian sense after all?<sup>32</sup>

Now this difficulty, it would seem, can be manifested in two ways. First, if we examine once more the two examples of metaphysical principles that we have drawn from Aquinas—that is, "Accidents are necessarily accidents of substances" and "Any thing that is participated being is caused"—we can readily see that both of these principles are able to have factual import and to apply to the real world only if there is such a world or a created universe for them to apply to. And, of course, for St. Thomas the existence of a created universe is not necessary but contingent upon God's will.

But then, it would seem that our supposed self-evident principles could hardly be simple but must be complex, and that their self-evidence and necessity would pertain to them not *in toto* but only in part. For example, take the substance-accident principle. While it looks to be a simple categorical proposition, is it not really to be construed as two propositions: "If anything is an accident, then it can only be the accident of a substance" and "There are such things as accidents in the world"? And when so construed, it is only the first of the two component propositions that would seem to be universal and necessary and self-evident; the second or existential proposition would surely not be any of these.

And now for the secondary way of focusing the difficulty. If St. Thomas's self-evident principles, or at least many of them, are truths of fact only insofar as there are facts for them to apply to, and if the existence of such facts of a created universe is a contingent matter, then will it not likewise be contingent and open to question whether these particular self-evident principles or some others are the ones that apply to the facts of our world? For example, if the created world is ordered according to the principles of substance and accident, then will it be true universally and necessarily that in such a world accidents will be accidents of substances? But how can we then be sure that our world is ordered according to substance-accident principles, rather than according to others? After all, just as other possible worlds are conceivable, so also are other ordering principles conceivable as pertaining to this

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actual world here and now. Indeed not only are such other orders conceivable; others have actually been conceived as being the actual order of our own very world. For example, instead of Aristotelian substances, Whitehead conceived of our world as being made up of what he called actual occasions. Or again, present-day logical atomists conceive of the world as being made up of bare particulars exemplifying real universals. Now given such alternative conceivable orders, how are we to know which order is the actual one? And with this question, we would again seem to be face to face with the traditional Humean and Kantian difficulties. For it would seem that it could not be by experience that we know that the order of our world is one of substance-accident, of cause-effect, and so on, since experience can never guarantee the requisite universality and necessity of such principles. Nor is it pure reason that can inform us that the principles of substance-accident, cause-effect, and the rest are the ones that hold of our actual world, since pure reason can at best acquaint us only with possible principles and possible orders, not with actual ones. In short, it is the Kantian question all over again, "How are synthetic a priori judgments possible?" And how this time can St. Thomas escape the incidence of such a question?

Well, for better or for worse, we do not propose at the end of this paper to deal with a question which can only serve as the beginning of a new paper. Suffice it merely to say that Kant's question about the synthetic a priori reminds one of nothing so much as a character from classical mythology. When put down in one form, it quickly assumes a different shape and renews the struggle in a new guise and context. And so having put down the synthetic a priori in the one context by showing that self-evident truths can perfectly well be factual and informative, the defenders of St. Thomas will now have to deal with this new threat of the synthetic a priori by showing that human experience is not the sort of thing that either Hume or Kant thought it to be. For each of these thinkers in his own way tended to suppose that what is given by the senses is one thing and what is given in intelligence or pure reason is another and entirely different thing, and the

<sup>34</sup>Cf. the very perceptive and suggestive remarks to this effect in the essay by R. W. Schmidt, s.j., entitled "The Evidence Grounding Judgments of Existence," which appeared in *An Etienne Gilson Tribute*, ed. C. J. O'Neil (Mil-

waukee: Marquette Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 228-44.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. my paper "On Trying to Say and to Know What's What", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXIV, 83-96.

problem thus becomes one of how the twain shall meet. In contrast, St. Thomas seems to feel that what a human being comes to understand through the use of his intellect or reason is not simply the a-priori deliverances of a pure reason just as such; rather what a human being comes to understand is nothing other than what is given to him through his senses, what he understands, to be sure, through his intellect and reason.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, if I may but suggest what I think could prove to be the prime resource of St. Thomas in thus obviating Kant's question, I would say that it lies in the simple fact that human beings are able both to say and to know what things are.<sup>35</sup> True, such a human knowledge of the "what's" of things is not infallible, but it is undeniable. The fact of such knowledge being undeniable, it turns out that in particular cases of our saying and knowing what the things are that we experience, our knowledge proves to be an evident knowledge, a knowledge which in the very nature of the case neither requires nor can admit of some third thing, some unknown *x*, to make it possible. But if so, then once more it will be found that in the context of St. Thomas's philosophy there will be no need to pose the question, "How are synthetic a priori judgments possible?"

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