Transcendental Thomism: Realism Rejected

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In his book *The Peasant of the Garonne* Maritain speaks of what has been one of the central tenets of the realist tradition from the beginning of philosophy—that the mind attains reality:

> Greek reason was able to become aware of that glory of the mind which is knowing and of the authentic relation between the mind and the extra-mental being of things . . . It was able to see that the human intellect, in identifying itself immaterially, *intentionaliter*, with the being of things, truly reaches that which exists outside our minds . . . [1]

Transcendental Thomism in some profoundly significant ways abandons this tenet.

The adherents of this branch of the Neo-scholastic movement, begun by the Belgian Jesuit, Joseph Maréchal (1878-1944), nobly attempt to beat Kant at his own game; for they seek to establish an apodictic metaphysics of being by using a subjective starting point. But they have, in fact, read Thomas with the eyes of German idealists, and in so doing they have introduced first principles within the Thomistic synthesis that fundamentally alter and transform it in idealist and subjectivist directions. Hence, it is the argument of this paper that a metaphysics of being cannot be based on a transcendental, subjective starting point. The work of the Transcendental Thomists constitutes a latter-day verification of the validity of Gilson's comment in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*: "In the first place, philosophers are free to lay down their own set of principles, but once this is done, they no longer think as they wish—they think as they can."[2]

[1] Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 18.

[2] Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's

In this paper, I will do three things. First, I will examine the understanding of metaphysics and being found in the work of two leading Transcendental Thomists—Karl Rahner and Joseph Donceel. I will draw out and discuss six doctrines in particular which I think illustrate the idealist and subjectivistic nature of Transcendental Thomism. Secondly, I will present a critique of these doctrines. Thirdly, I will argue that the metaphysical doctrines of the Transcendentalists constitute a rejection of realism.

Rahner is, perhaps, the leading Transcendental Thomist in history, though some might make a case for Lonergan (Lonergan requires a separate treatment). Rahner presents his fundamental metaphysics in his doctoral dissertation in philosophy, *Spirit in the World* (1939). Donceel was a Belgian born Jesuit who was a student of Maréchal. His thought became influential in this country after the Second World War. He gave Rahner's ideas a much wider audience than they might have otherwise enjoyed by explaining them in more accessible language in his text books. Both thinkers accept Kant's definition of the transcendental method: "I call every knowledge transcendental, which occupies itself not so much with objects, but rather with our way of knowing objects insofar as this is to be possible *a priori*."[3]

There are six metaphysical doctrines that will illustrate the idealism and subjectivism of Transcendental Thomism: (1) man as questioning is the certain starting point for metaphysics; (2) man is already with being in its totality; (3) being is subjectivity; (4) the intellect pre-apprehends Infinite *Esse*; (5) the agent intellect is the power of forming the first principles of transcendental validity; (6) the first principles function as *a priori* conditions for knowledge. These metaphysical doctrines constitute a rejection of realism. This position is so very different from realism that it cannot accurately be called either Thomism or realism. Fr. Robert Henle, S.J., has it precisely right when he says that transcendental Thomism is a "Christianized version of German idealism" and "has no philosophical right to be called 'Thomism.'"[4]

TRANSCENDENTAL THOMISM

The Starting Point of Metaphysics: Man Questions and Is Already with Being

Rahner's work *Spirit in the World* (1939) examines St. Thomas's metaphysics

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Sons, 1948), p. 302.

[3] Kant quoted in Emerich Coreth, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 35.

[4] Robert J. Henle, S.J., "Transcendental Thomism: A Critical Assessment," in *One Hundred Years of Thomism*, ed. Victor B. Brezik, C.S.B. (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1981), pp. 92 and 110.

of knowledge. In this work Rahner discusses the foundation of metaphysics. He argues that the absolute beginning for philosophy, because it is the absolute irreducible human certitude, is that "Man questions—necessarily."[5] He explains, furthermore, that the point of departure *is* the metaphysical question. What is this question? It is the very fact that man can ask about being:

> For in fact, to put it first of all quite formally, the metaphysical question is that question which in a final and radical sharpening of man's questioning turns upon itself as such and thereby turns upon the presuppositions which are operative in itself; it is the question turned consciously upon itself, the transcendental question, which does not merely place something asked about in question, but the one questioning and his question itself, and thereby *absolutely everything.*[6]

This transcendental question asks about "absolutely everything . . . being in its totality." But Rahner then asks, what is the point of departure for this question? He answers that the very need to question is the only point of departure for the metaphysical question. This need to question is the only point of departure for the metaphysical question that has its foundation in itself. But it does not start out from this point in such a way that it leaves the starting point behind after the first step, never again to look back.[7]

In posing this question, however, Rahner also argues that man is already with being in its totality.[8] If man were not, he could not ask about being. In other words, he must already know of being in its totality to ask about it. "What is absolutely unknowable cannot be asked about."[9] Furthermore, Rahner is saying that metaphysics "takes its departure from nothing, insofar as it already comprehends the whole in order to start out on its way."[10] But this nothing is not an empty void which man can arbitrarily fill. It is "the unambiguous need to be able and to have to encounter being in its totality in his questioning."[11]

The starting point of metaphysics is questioning man who is already with being in its totality:

> This gives the starting point of metaphysics a peculiar duality

[5] Karl Rahner, S.J., *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 58.

[6] *Ibid.* (Emphasis added)

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

> and a unity at once: the starting point is questioning man, who as such is already with being in its totality . . . this starting point is a question and no answer reaches out beyond the horizon which the question has already set as a limit beforehand.[12]

In an article discussing Transcendental Thomism, Donceel defends Rahner's presentation of the starting point of metaphysics. He begins with the "pragmatic" objects with which we come in daily contact. (By pragmatic he means those which we deal with in day-to-day activities.) He argues that they can all be reduced to the formula "Something which is X." He then argues that the "X" is the information which comes from the senses while the "something which" is the contribution of our intellect.[13] The contribution of our intellect, the something which, is equivalent to "a being that." This "something which" or "a being that" contribution of our intellect contains implicitly the whole of metaphysics.

Donceel even says, "For Transcendental Thomism . . . being is contributed *a priori* by the intellect itself."[14] Being comes to us through the senses but in no way from the senses. Man has an "inborn" virtual knowledge of being. "It may be known explicitly only through and in sense knowledge."[15] Donceel takes this to its natural conclusion that metaphysics is ontologically prior to all really human knowledge and is a condition of its possibility: "Far from being a science which man acquires from experience, it is one which he discovers in himself, which he brings to all his experience, which allows him to have any human experience at all."[16] What happens in metaphysics then is that this science passes from unthematic and implicit to thematic and explicit knowledge. "Likewise metaphysics is the formal cause of our human knowledge."[17] It is "the light" which the mind uses in all its activities, as Donceel says at one point.[18]

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[13] Joseph Donceel, S.J., "Transcendental Thomism," *The Monist* 58 (January 1974), p. 75.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[18] Coreth also agrees with Rahner that the starting point for metaphysics is the question itself. He says, "Hence our starting point cannot be merely empirical datum . . . The correct starting point is *the question itself.* The question itself cannot be challenged or questioned, it presupposes nothing, its takes nothing for granted" (Emerich Coreth, *Metaphysics*, pp. 38-39). Coreth further explains: "Man is the questioner, the inquirer, the wonderer, who discovers being more in the act of questioning than in any definite content of the mind, because being always extends beyond any knowledge . . . " (*ibid*). Coreth argues that man is already with being: "Human knowledge can penetrate into the realm of metaphysics because it always occurs within that realm. Human thinking can reach being because it is always already with being" (p. 35).

Being as Presence-To-Self

Rahner says that being is being-present-to-self: "Knowing does not come about 'through a contact of the intellect with the intelligible thing,' but being and knowing are the same. Knowing is the being-present-to-self of being, and the being-present-to-self is the being of the existent."[19] If this is so, then why must man ask about it? The answer is that being is not absolutely present-to-itself.

The first half of this statement, namely, "Knowing is the being present-to-self of being" might be interpreted as a Rahnerian version of the Thomistic teaching that knowing is the union of the knower and the object, such as one finds in Aquinas's *Commentary on the De Anima*. There Thomas says that the intellect is in a way all things.

But the second half of this thesis ("the being present-to-self is the being of the existent") seem untenable. It seems to be claiming that being is subjectivity. Robert Hurd argues that this is precisely what Rahner meant. Hurd explains that he is not saying that subjectivity is a mode of being but that all being is a mode of subjectivity and all beings are subjectivities. The primary instance or the ground of Being is, of course, God Himself. Thus, every being is "a deficient imitation of God."[20] "Every limited participated being—precisely to the extent that it shares in *esse*—must be a real though imperfect approximation of Being as presence-to-self."[21]

Hurd argues, furthermore, that this is Rahner's hermeneutical key to Aquinas's metaphysics of knowledge. Hurd admits that it is very different from the traditional Neo-scholastic understanding of being in which *esse* is the act of all acts, the perfection of all perfections and is ontologically prior to knowledge or presence-to-self. On the contrary, according to Hurd, Rahner sees that "Being as presence-to-self and every finite being is an imperfect and analogous approximation of presence-to-self," and that, "There are more or less perfect modes of presence-to-self, of which rational self-consciousness is only one expression."[22] Now obviously one of the big problems in such a view of the universe concerns the issue of unconscious being, such as rocks and minerals, which seem to make up the vast majority of the physical universe. At the unconscious level of existence, Hurd argues that the presence-to-self is simply

[19] Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, p. 69.

[20] Robert L. Hurd, "Being is Being-Present-to-Itself: Rahner's Reading of Aquinas's Metaphysics," *The Thomist* 52 (January 1988), p. 64.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 65

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

the power of emanation intrinsic to every being, i.e., there is an intrinsic relation between the essence and that which flows forth from this essence.[23]

The Pre-Apprehension of Esse

Rahner also gives much emphasis to the importance of the judgment, for he seeks an *a priori* ground for all affirmation of finite *esse*. Rahner believes that sensation cannot ground universality or necessity. Thus, he must formulate the ground for the phenomenological differentiation of subject and object. Rahner thus discusses the "pre-apprehension of Being." It is this pre-apprehension of Infinite *Esse*, which provides the ontological ground for all judgments of limited *esse*.

Now this pre-apprehension itself does not attain to any object. As he puts it, "Pre-apprehension as such does not attain to an object. By its very essence, it is one of the conditions of the possibility of an objective knowledge. Every represented object of human knowledge is able to be apprehended itself only in a pre-apprehension."[24] In addition it can disclose objects beyond the one to whose apprehension the pre-apprehension occurred in a definite act.[25] In other words, by the act of judging, the knower affirms an object in itself, and this in turn allows him to distinguish himself as the knower from the known. And, of course, God is this ontological ground for all judgments.

This part of Rahner's metaphysics involves the central problem of *Spirit in the Word*, namely, showing how metaphysics is possible when all human knowledge is necessarily referred to sensible intuition. Rahner's thesis is that "the absolute *esse* (that is God) is implicitly and simultaneously affirmed in every act of the agent intellect in every judgment."[26] In this way the agent intellect is a participation in the light of the Absolute Spirit. The reason for this is because knowledge of finite objects is always a knowledge of their limits and this in turn implies that they can transcend their limits against the horizon of infinite *esse*.[27]

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[24] Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, p. 143.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 226.

[27] Coreth refers to this pre-apprehension as a "pre-knowledge." He also speaks of it as the horizon and the unconditioned (Coreth, *Metaphysics*, p. 63): "We know about it [being], otherwise we could not inquire about it." He calls it "an anticipating projecting knowledge." If one asks where is the origin of this knowledge, Coreth responds that it is the act of questioning itself (p. 70). In every act of inquiring or knowing, there is a unity of being and knowing, "since no other being is as immediately given to us as the self-knowing act of inquiring or knowing" (p. 70). Coreth then takes his own and Rahner's principle to its logical conclusion: "Knowing about something else, about an object in the opposition of subject and object is a derivative, not the original sense of knowing" (p. 70).

THE AGENT INTELLECT

In order to understand how the Transcendentalists argue for the metaphysical positions that they do, it is necessary to examine briefly their understanding of the agent intellect. For the agent intellect has a crucial role to play in establishing the possibility of metaphysics. Remember the key question of *Spirit in the World* is, how is metaphysics possible when all human knowledge is necessarily referred to sensible intuition?

Rahner is very clear that Aquinas does not think there are any innate ideas. Nevertheless, Rahner does argue that there is an *a priori* element of knowledge and that this *a priori* element is contributed by the agent intellect. Using a quotation from the *Summa Theologiae* (I, 84, 6c), Rahner begins with the notion that the phantasm is not in itself actually intelligible and must be made actually intelligible: "Rather it [the phantasm] is not in itself actually intelligible (which it could be even if it could not exercise any influence on the intellect) and becomes actually intelligible only when the light of the intellect as *a priori*, formal element is joined with it as material cause."[28] Notice that he conceives of the agent intellect as the formal cause of knowledge.

Donceel explains this key element of the epistemology of Transcendental Thomism in an article called, "A Thomistic Misapprehension?" In this article Donceel explains that Transcendental Thomists argue that the agent intellect contributes "something" to sense experience. Indeed, Donceel argues that his contemporary American Thomists had completely overlooked this contribution and thereby had fallen into "a dogmatic empiricism," which attempts to maintain that all knowledge is derived from sense experience, that being is not actually intelligible but must be made so, *and* that there is nothing contributed to the being of sense experience by the agent intellect.[29] Donceel argues that the agent intellect is "the formal element of the cause of our intellectual knowledge," while sense experience provides the material element of the cause. It is the agent intellect then that makes the *a priori* contribution of our intellect to our knowledge.

Donceel appeals to the Thomistic position that that which is known is known after the manner of the knower. Hence, that which I know is the tree, but that in which I know this tree is the affirmed concept and is in part a construction of my intellect.

[28] Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, p. 221.

[29] See Joseph Donceel, "A Thomistic Misapprehension," *Thought*, 32 (Summer 1957), p. 190.

First Principles as A Priori *Conditions*

In addition, Rahner considers the first principles of St. Thomas to function as the *a priori* conditions for conceptual experience. "For Thomas the first principles are not just any product of the intellect, but the fundamental product;" these first principles are "the instrumental principle for abstraction" and "stand on the side of the agent intellect."[30] The light of the agent intellect is the *a priori* and formal condition for the objectivity of the world. But it is also the source for the first principles: "Insofar as it [the agent intellect] apprehends this material of sensibility within its anticipatory (*vorwegnehmenden*) dynamism to *esse*, it 'illuminates' this material, gives it those metaphysical structures of being which were expressed in the first principles."[31]

This is because " whatever is known intellectually is known only as illuminated by the light of the agent intellect" (as Aquinas says in his *Commentary on the First Book of the Sentences*, d. 3, 4, 5), and because we judge everything by the truth of the first principles (as Aquinas says in *De Veritate*, I, 4 ad 5). Donceel argues that we are "entitled to conclude that the light of the agent intellect consists precisely in the truth of the first principles," and that these first principles are "the *a priori* contribution of our intellect to every object we know."[32] We can judge by means of the truth of these first principles only because of their likeness to the first truth (*De Veritate*, I, 4, ad 5). Our metaphysical knowledge is then absolutely sure because it shares in the certitude of divine knowledge.[33] Without this *a priori* grounding for metaphysical knowledge, one is left with a empiricist Thomism which requires a "dogmatic affirmation" to "salvage metaphysics."

CRITIQUE

The Starting Point of Metaphysics: Man Questions

The Transcendentalists' argument that man-questioning is the absolute starting point for all philosophy clearly refers to something similar to a methodic doubt. This doctrine places them in that philosophical tradition which holds with Descartes that philosophy must begin with a certitude possessed by the mind thinking.

The Transcendentalists have put a twist on the Cartesian *cogito*. "I think" is not precisely the incontestable starting point, but "I question" is.[34] This clearly

[30] Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, p. 204.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

[32] Joseph Donceel, "A Thomistic Misapprehension," p. 193.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 196.

[34] Coreth virtually says as much: "Whenever we question, we know that we question,

contradicts Aquinas's contention: "For that which, before anything else falls under apprehension, is being, the understanding of which is included in all things whatsoever a man apprehends."[35] Maritain points out that the first point of a Thomist critique must not be "I think" but "*that which is, is.*" When Rahner says that he must question absolutely everything (or as another commentator, Emerich Coreth, puts it—the only correct, unchallengeable starting point is questioning), one has definitely abandoned the realist starting point that what is, is. As Gilson puts it, "If the *cogito* is to enjoy this privilege of unquestionability, the *res sunt* must be excluded."[36] It is precisely the distinguishing mark of realism that it begins with being, with the things that are. Wilhelmsen puts it very well: "For this school of thought, the first and ultimate principle is the judgment 'Being is'. We call this school of thought 'metaphysical realism.'"[37] If the philosopher abandons this self-evident starting point in exchange for another, then he will end up doubting this first principle of realism. He must then submit the existence of extramental being to his new starting point.[38]

The realist does not begin philosophy by asking about asking itself. He begins by asking about reality—what is it to be real and whence did it come. The whole realist tradition begins with asking about reality, not about the subjective phenomenon of asking. Yet, to use questioning as the starting point is to attempt to move from a subjective starting point within human thought to reality. This is the perpetual claim of the modern idealists—that beginning with a subjective starting point they can reach reality. The distinguishing mark of idealism is precisely to move from thought to things.

With Being in its Totality

Another major difficulty with the metaphysics of the Transcendentalists is the teaching that the human being is already with being it its totality. This would seem to imply that being is not something which first falls into the intellect, but a subjective *a priori* of some sort. Yet this is precisely what Rahner seems to mean by saying that man is always already with being in its totality. This is further borne out in his comment that metaphysics constitutes a transcendental

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that we are the inquirer, that we perform the act of inquiring. In every act of inquiring or knowing, some being is given which coincides immediately with knowing, which knows itself as being . . . We have an immediate unity of being and knowing in very act of knowing" (Coreth, *Metaphysics*, p. 70).

[35] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae. 94.2c.

[36] Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 62.

[37] Frederick Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1956), p. 15.

[38] See Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism*, p. 62.

self-reflection on what is implicitly affirmed. Donceel is even more explicit: "For Transcendental Thomism, on the other hand, being is contributed *a priori* by the intellect itself."[39]

Rahner recognizes that man questioning as a starting point is unstable and must have a grounding, so he argues that man is always already with being in its totality.[40] Being in its totality becomes an *a priori* notion of the human mind. It is not that which first falls into the intellect. Aquinas on the contrary argues that being is what the intellect first attains, even if only in a confused and indistinct manner. It is the proper object of the intellect. As Aquinas says in the *Summa Theologiae*, "Now the first thing conceived by the intellect is being, because everything is knowable only in so far as it is in act as it says in the *Metaphysics*. Hence, being is the proper object of the intellect."[41]

Being as Subjectivity

Rahner's argument that being and knowing are a unity is an attempt to overcome the Kantian critique of theoretical theology. He wants to show how metaphysics is possible even though all knowledge originates through the senses. Kant's clear distinction between thought and being, between phenomena and noumena, would seem to preclude theoretical metaphysics and theology. Rahner's position would seem to overcome this Kantian position by eliminating the distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal, thereby making room for a scientific metaphysics and theology.

But there is no aspect of Rahnerian metaphysics that seems to me to manifest so clearly his idealism, especially if Hurd's understanding of Rahner's position is correct, and I think it is. Indeed, Hurd calls this understanding of being as self-presence, Rahner's "hermeneutical key" to Aquinas.[42] If being is subjectivity, and the ultimate mode of subjectivity is God, then reality is first and foremost Thought. One is inevitably reminded of Hegel's notion of the Absolute as Self-Thinking Thought. But, in Rahner's conception, all of being is various degrees of presence-to-self.

Now, a problem obviously arises when one considers unconscious being, such as rocks and minerals. It is these ordinary substances that seem to pose one of the big problems for such a view of the universe. Hurd argues in response to this problem that, at the unconscious level of existence, presence-to-self is simply

[39] Joseph Donceel, "Transcendental Thomism," p. 76.

[40] Coreth is very similar to Rahner on this point. As Coreth explains, "Our metaphysics considers real being, the totality of all that which really is. It is in touch with reality because it starts from the reality of the self-actuation of our inquiring spirit, from which it proceeds to the rest of reality" (Coreth, *Metaphysics*, p. 53).

[41] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.5.2c.

[42] Robert Hurd, "Being is Being-Present-to-Itself", p. 67.

the power of emanation intrinsic to every being, i.e., there is an intrinsic relation between the essence and that which flows from this essence.[43]

It is not possible here to give adequate treatment to this notion of being so central to Rahner's view. But there is an unmistakable resemblance to German idealism in such a view. For Rahner, "to be" is "to be present-to-self" or "to be subjective." In such a conception one will not arrive at *esse*, the act of existence by which all things are. It is also not possible to examine the texts from Aquinas in detail, but let it suffice to say that the key text from *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.11, which Rahner uses to support his notion of being, does not do so. A careful examination of chapter eleven reveals this fact. In this text Aquinas is explaining "how generation is to be understood in divinity, and what is said of the Son of God in Scripture."[44] But this chapter does not support the thesis that being is subjectivity . Even though there is an emanation among sub-rational creatures, this sub-rational emanation is strictly external, i.e., it concerns only generation; there is an explicit affirmation that the being of the intellect and its act of understanding are not the same; and there is the explicit statement that "no sensitive power reflects upon itself."

What lies behind this attempt of the Transcendentalists to move from an idea to being is the attempt to encompass being with Thought. As Gilson says, "The most tempting of all the false first principles is: that thought not being is involved in all my representations. Here lies the initial option between idealism and realism."[45] Rahner is right in seeing self-aware being as the summit of being, but in mistaking this mode of being for being itself, he has failed in his attempt to encompass the whole in one of its parts. He has attempted to overcome Kant with Hegel.

Pre-Apprehension of Esse

In the doctrine of the pre-apprehension of *esse* one finds idealism *par excellence*. I would submit that this is very close to Hegel's notion of identity-in-difference in which dialectical reasoning overcomes the concepts of the mind, and sees that one concept passes over into its opposite. One of philosophy's tasks is to help the understanding through dialectical reasoning grasp the identity-in-difference. The finite cannot really be thought without also relating it to the

[43] See *ibid.*, p. 77.

[44] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles Book Four: Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O'Neil (Notre Dame, Indiana : University of Notre Dame Press, 1975) 4.11.1: "Quomodo accipienda sit generatio in divinis, et quae de filio dei dicuntur in scripturis" (Aquinas, *Sancti Thomae de Aquino opera omnia*, vol. 15, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Leonine Editione Manualis (Rome, 1934).

[45] Étienne Gilson, *Philosophical Experience*, p. 316.

infinite. And the Absolute is identity-in-difference, for the Absolute is the all-comprehensive totality. Listen to what Rahner says:

> For this reason, Thomas can understand the agent intellect in a special way as a participation in the light of the Absolute Spirit, not merely because, being dependent on this, it is a matter of fact similar to it, but because finite spirit is spirit only through the pre-apprehension of absolute *Esse* in which the Absolute Being is already and always apprehended.[46]

Rahner's doctrine of the pre-apprehension of absolute *esse* seems to be remarkably close to this fundamental Hegelian notion of identity-in-difference.

The Agent Intellect

The Transcendental Thomists have misinterpreted Aquinas's doctrine of the agent intellect in various ways. First, they have made the light of the agent intellect to be the formal cause of our knowledge. Secondly, they have made the light of the agent intellect to be the habitual knowledge of the first principles (always implicit but made explicit in the science of metaphysics) directly contradicting Aquinas's teaching in his *Disputed Questions on the Soul.*[47] Thirdly, they have misunderstood the nature of the concept in which things are known. They argue that the presence of this concept implies some sort of *a priori* contribution on the part of the intellect. Indeed, they come close to characterizing Aquinas as one who held a representative theory of perception and a concomitant correspondence theory of truth rather than a direct theory of perception and an identity theory of truth. (Maritain is right to follow John of St. Thomas in identifying the concept as a formal sign rather than an instrumental sign: "A formal sign is a sign whose whole essence is to signify."[48]) The Transcendentalists fail to make this distinction and hence fall into the trap of considering the concept as a entity in its own right, which they must somehow match up with a corresponding thing in reality. This misinterpretation of the

[46] Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, p. 226.

[47] "Furthermore, there are some men who hold that the agent intellect is nothing more than our habit of indemonstrable principles. But this cannot be true because we know even these indemonstrable principles by abstracting from singulars, as the Philosopher teaches near the end of the *Posterior Analytics*...For these principles are themselves related to the agent intellect as its instruments, because by means of these principles the agent intellect makes other things to be actually intelligible" (Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones de Anima*, trans. James H. Robb [Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1984] q. 5c).

[48] Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 119. Maritain continues: "It is not an object which, having, first, its proper value for us as an object, is found, besides, to signify another object" (*ibid.*).

agent intellect doctrine in Thomas leads the Transcendentalists to justify their transcendental turn, which in turn leads to their fundamental metaphysical doctrines.

Hurd says that they are seeking the *a priori* conditions of knowledge like those in the tradition of Augustinian illuminationism.[49] But Augustinian illuminationism is not subjectivistic in a modern sense for the simple reason that there is an objective guarantor of the truth. To take one example from this tradition, Anselm in his *De Veritate* argues that the ultimate measure of truth is the thing's rightness ("*rectitudo*") or conformity to the divine mind. Indeed, truth is the *rectitudo* between the thing and the divine mind.[50] Transcendental Thomism is not a recasting of Augustinian illuminationism, for it does not argue in defense of this conformity to the ideas of the divine mind. Instead it argues for the radically subjective position that the agent intellect is the *a priori* ground for knowledge. This is not Augustinian subjectivism, in which objectivity was guaranteed by nothing less than the divine ideas; they have a theory in which truth is a *rectitudo* to the *human mind*, and this, I would submit is vintage modern idealism. This theory is the subjectivism of a mind that determines all reality.

First Principles as A Priori *Conditions*

Rahner's discussion of the first principles as *a priori* conditions of knowledge also entails significant problems for a realist metaphysics. The first principles are causes because they exist first. But Rahner's discussion amounts to saying that they are ontological conditions of knowledge in the subject as well as in the object. In Kant the principles of reason apply to the understanding and define the standards to which its activities must conform. On this matter, perhaps, the best thing to do is to drag some of these first principles out into the light of day, and name them (something that Rahner, Donceel, and Hurd do not do). For example, do we really want to say that the principle of contradiction is a subjective *a priori* of knowledge rather than a principle of reality itself? Or take the principle of sufficient reason. Do we really want to say that this is a subjective contribution of the intellect to knowing, rather than a fundamental principle articulating the nature of reality itself? I think not.[51]

[49] Coreth argues in the introduction to his *Metaphysics* that the Transcendentalists are merely reviving the tradition of searching for the *a priori* conditions of knowledge which is found in Plato, Augustine, and "the Augustinian current within Scholastic philosophy," but which was eclipsed by "the Aristotelian current" (pp. 35-36). Hurd argues in an article that the Transcendentalists have incorporated the insights of the Augustinian tradition into Thomism (Robert L. Hurd, "Heidegger and Aquinas: a Rahnerian Bridge," *Philosophy Today*, 28 [1984], pp. 105-137).

[50] St. Anselm, *Dialogus de Veritate*, especially chapters 10-11.

[51] *See St. Thomas* Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae.94.2.

CONCLUSION

Donceel says that "the transcendental Thomist admits that he reads Thomas with modern eyes."[52] In reading Thomas with modern eyes the Transcendentalists have lost the center of his metaphysical revolution—the act of *esse*. The intellect's activity bears upon *esse* and not on a ground in the human mind where *esse* is pre-apprehended. For St. Thomas being is not contributed to knowing by the intellect nor is it the formal cause of knowledge. But to make the transcendental turn is to isolate the intellect within the intellectual order. This move constitutes such a radical change in the orientation of Thomistic metaphysics that it misses St. Thomas's whole endeavor in metaphysics.[53] Contrast this conception with Rahner's statement near the very end of *Spirit in the World*: "For strictly speaking, the first known, the first thing encountering man, is not the world in its "spiritless" existence, but the world-itself as transformed by the light of the spirit, the world in which man sees himself."[54]

This brings us to the twofold reversal going on in Transcendental Thomism. The first concerns Aquinas, both in his metaphysics and his epistemology. Whereas for the Aristotelian tradition cognition is a type of being; the Transcendentalists would make being a type of cognition. The second reversal concerns the medieval Augustinian tradition. The Transcendentalists have got the whole point of Augustinian illumination backwards in that they teach that the truth of things is not its *rectitudo* to the divine mind but an *a priori rectitudo* to the human mind. In short, I would submit that Transcendental Thomism threatens to misread the whole medieval scholastic tradition by beginning with the Kantian problem and the idealist hermeneutic.

[52] Joseph Donceel, "Transcendental Thomism," p. 84.

[53] "The experiential moment of metaphysics is therefore the moment of vital contact with reality in direct existential judgments. The primary necessities and insights of metaphysics are not deduced from concepts, nor added by *a priori* forms in the mind but are already contained in the existential judgments we constantly make" (Robert J. Henle, S.J., *Method in Metaphysics* [Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1951], p. 52). Maritain makes a similar point in an eloquent passage of *Existence and the Existent* where he speaks of this contact with reality as being the root of metaphysics: "This is why, at the root of metaphysical knowledge, St. Thomas places the intellectual intuition of that mysterious reality disguised under the most commonplace and commonly used word in the language, the word *to be*; a reality revealed to us as the uncircumscribable subject of a science which the gods begrudge us when we release, in the values that appertain to it, the act of existing which is exercised by the humblest thing—that victorious thrust by which it triumphs over nothingness" (Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantiere and Gerald B. Phelan [Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1956], pp. 28-29).

[54] Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, p. 406.

Kant cannot be overcome with his own principles. To begin with his problems and principles is to give him the battlefield. That is to say, the first principles of an endeavor make all the difference. If you begin with certain problems and certain starting points, their consequences must be accepted, even if their originator does not see them. As Gilson says, "The proper function of philosophical schools is precisely to uncover the consequences of principles, although those who formulated the principles may not have been aware of the consequences, or having perceived them, believed that they were not obliged to accept them."[55] One cannot have it both ways. Gilson continues: "There is no middle ground, You must either begin as a realist with being, in which case you have knowledge of being or begin as a critical idealist with knowledge, in which case you will never come in contact with being."[56] This is one of those fundamental turns in philosophy. The road not taken will make all the difference. The Transcendental Thomists may perfectly well argue for their idealism but they must accept the inevitable consequence that they have lost the central metaphysical insight of St. Thomas. In short, contra Robert Hurd's eloquent defense in the *Thomist*, Rahner has not discovered a new hermeneutical key to Aquinas. A key implies something that unlocks various aspects of a thinker's thought. Rahner developed instead a new hermeneutics for Aquinas—that of German idealism which radically transforms the Thomistic synthesis.

[55] Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism*, p. 150. Gilson and Maritain disagreed about the need for a critical account of knowledge. But at no point in Maritain's realist critique does it become idealist or subjectivistic. He very clearly spells out the principles that must guide a realist critique of knowledge and then he follows them closely. One finds these principles in *The Degrees of Knowledge*. Maritain outlines there these three points which distinguish a Thomist critique from an idealist one: (1) "the pure *cogito*, closed upon itself, can in no sense provide its starting point;" (2) "an authentic critique of knowledge does not imply a single instant of real or universal doubt;" (3) "an authentic critique of knowledge, recognizing as it does that it is foolish to regard the retracing of its own footprints as the first step along its path, does not pretend to be a prerequired condition of philosophy" (Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 75-79). Maritain here gives clear expression to fundamental premises of Thomistic realism. They cannot be abandoned without rendering the metaphysical position idealist. In various ways the Transcendentalists depart from all three points in their own critique.

[56] Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism*, p.149.