

Brian Kemple

Center for Thomistic Studies
University of St. Thomas, Houston
Texas, USA

EVALUATING THE METAPHYSICAL REALISM OF ÉTIENNE GILSON

It is true to say that there would likely be far fewer students of Thomas Aquinas in North America today if not for the work of Étienne Gilson; it is equally true to say that Gilson’s work has made significant contributions both to the overcoming of modern philosophy and to the understanding of Thomas himself, particularly as regards the Angelic Doctor’s metaphysics and philosophy of knowledge. The resurgence of genuine Thomism—as opposed to the Suarezian impostor which had come to dominate—which followed Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris* had much to overcome, not the least of which was the preponderance of modernity’s idealist epistemology. Descartes’ mathematicism, the insistence that all things lacking the certitude of mathematics cannot truly be called “knowledge,”¹ begot Cartesian idealism, which in turn launched a centuries-long quest, carried out by numerous philosophers, for an answer to what might be best described as “the wrong question,” namely: “How is it that we can know things outside the mind?” This question, particularly in the most thorough treatment among moderns given it by Kant, coursed through philosophy so strongly that even many Thomists were swept along by its current.

Enter Gilson. By participating in the recovery of the thought of the scholastics, especially Thomas Aquinas, Gilson was able to formulate a theory of knowledge which, though aimed at answering the question of the moderns, avoided their fundamental errors. If one adopts the necessity of defending a knowledge of the extramental real, Gilson argued, by ground-

¹ Cf. Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937), 132–133. Hereafter *Unity*.

ing it in a critical philosophy which begins with the nature of knowledge itself, one is condemned to idealism.² Against the idealist philosophy Gilson opposed a position which he calls “metaphysical realism,” that is, a philosophy which begins philosophical inquiry, and thereby provides a foundation for not only a theory of knowledge but for all branches of philosophy, in a systematic manner which takes **being**, *ens*, as its principle. Further, he argued that any attempt at a “critical realism” which attempts to synthesize the two positions is fundamentally impossible.³ Gilson’s view on the question of knowledge may be boiled down to a simple, mutually exclusive, and entirely exhaustive division: either one is a realist or one is an idealist, and there is no middle ground, for their points of departure are inherently incompatible.

In his missives against idealism, Gilson outlines many principles of his own theory of knowledge. Consequently, we will begin our consideration of his position on being as first known by looking at those works; secondly, we will turn to his interpretation of Thomas Aquinas on the relevant issues of abstraction and the nature of the concept; and thirdly, we will conclude by considering the opposition between realism and idealism which informs his philosophy.

Overcoming the Critique

Critique, of course, is the system established by Kant, principally in his *Critique of Pure Reason*; but the critical turn, that turn towards beginning our philosophical inquiries with a study of knowledge and a demon-

² Cf. Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 19: “If one’s starting point is a *percipi*, the only *esse* one will ever reach will be that of the *percipi*.” Gilson goes on in the following pages (19–21) to indicate that the essential point of critique is beginning with something of thought, which militates against the very nature of realism, and hence a critical “realism” is impossible, but ends up inevitably in an idealism. As he writes on 21: “Modern scholasticism is a conscious realism, the fruit of reflection and considered choice, but which refuses to take as its foundation the solution for the problem set by idealism because the problem is posed in terms which, of necessity, imply idealism itself as a solution. In other words, surprising as the thesis may appear at first, scholastic realism is not a function of the problem of knowledge—very much the contrary would be true—but in it the real is posited as distinct from thought, the *esse* as distinct from the *percipi*, in virtue of a certain idea of what philosophy is, an idea which is the condition for the very possibility of philosophy.”

³ Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 149: “We . . . have come to the conclusion that the critique of knowledge is essentially incompatible and irreconcilable with metaphysical realism.” Hereafter *Thomist Realism*.

stration of its ability to produce certitude, the turn which dominated modern philosophy, begins with Descartes and his *cogito*. What Gilson sees as fatally problematic in the characteristic epistemologies of modernity are three sequential problems which lead to the completion of the critical turn and thus to the various subsequent instantiations which attempted its incorporation.

1. First is that, against the advances of science which had been carried out during the centuries intervening the birth of Descartes and the death of Kant (or one might even say until this very day), philosophy—particularly in metaphysics and ethics—seemed to not advance one iota. Whereas physics and astronomy were making great strides forward, metaphysics seemed to spin its wheels in a mud pit of uncertainty, allowing skepticism to waltz past it unhindered. Thus both Descartes, motivated by the skepticism of Montaigne, and Kant, awakened from his dogmatic slumber by that of Hume, sought to recast philosophical inquiry in the model of the precise sciences. For Descartes, this precision was found in mathematics: where everything else seemed dubious, mathematics delivered answers which were clear, distinct, and could not be otherwise. Thus, while he did not reduce all sciences to mathematics, he did demand that the conclusions reached in an inquiry be mathematically-evident:

Descartes' own inference was that mathematical knowledge was the only knowledge worthy of the name . . . The whole philosophy of Descartes was virtually contained in that initial decision [to demand certitude equal to mathematics], for the *I think, hence I am* is the first principle of Descartes' philosophy, but it is his pledge to mathematical evidence that led Descartes to the *I think*.⁴

This mathematicism of Descartes led to his postulation of a common method for all inquiry and a common standard for evidence—for Descartes mistook the certainty a human mind has in the grasp of the inferior object, the mathematical abstraction, to be superior to the difficulty in penetrating the mystery of the superior object, the cognition-independent constitution of the (meta)physically real.

Immanuel Kant would be no less guilty of such an idolatry of method. Though developed significantly since the time of Descartes, there was still in the time of Kant an alluring simplicity of the ideoscopic sci-

⁴ Gilson, *Unity*, 132.

ences, particularly in contrast to the even-further muddled properly philosophical sciences. As Gilson puts it:

There was so striking a contrast between the obvious senility of metaphysics and the flourishing condition of positive science in the second half of the eighteenth century that nothing short of a fundamental blunder made by the metaphysicians themselves could account for their perplexities . . . To sum up the situation in a few words: all was well with science, but something was wrong with philosophy. What was it?

After groping his way through the problem for about fifteen years, Kant thought he had at last found the answer to that question. What defines science as a specific ideal of human knowledge is self-criticism. Perceiving as true what can be demonstrated, science dismisses all the rest as idle speculation, with the twofold result that it is always progressing, and always respected . . . The time had come when men could no longer feel interested in any discipline for the sublimity of its ambitions, but only for the soundness of its demonstrations.⁵

Thus, although he did not fall victim to Cartesian mathematicism, a much more extreme cognitive reductionism, Kant was nevertheless enamored of the “positive sciences,” especially Newtonian physics. What he sought, then, was not to apply the methodology of any one specific science to philosophy, but rather to discover what was common to all science and extrapolate that method to all inquiries, including and especially the philosophical. Only then could speculative thinking rest easily in the “soundness of its demonstrations.”

2. Second is that, following upon the demand for a certitude, be it based upon a mathematical precision as in Descartes or upon the verified roots of self-criticism which Kant sought—which certitude is innately repugnant to the nature of philosophical inquiry—it is deemed necessary by the modern epistemologist to establish some immovable, Archimedean point upon which knowledge can be based, something certain and not open to dispute, doubt, or the variegations of deceivable senses and incorrect judgments. Thus, Descartes found his *cogito* and Kant derived his system of *a priori* categories and intuitions. The consequence of these starting points is that only if “knowledge” itself is as narrow as the paradigmatic

⁵ Id., 224–225.

and ideoscopically-scientific discipline or method in which a starting point for certitude is found can the paradigm then be justly applied to all knowledge. As such, the meaning of “knowledge” for the moderns devolves from something said analogically to a purely univocal concept—the clear and distinct idea in the case of Descartes and the synthetic *a priori* judgment in that of Kant.

For Descartes, this meant eliminating from the meaning of “knowledge” anything which was not contained within a clear and distinct idea—most especially what can be grasped by the senses. In the brief First Meditation, Descartes introduces his intention and method: that is, dissatisfied with previous philosophical attempts to establish the truth, he proposes to reject as true all things which can be subjected legitimately to doubt—in the realm of speculation only, recognizing that to do so in the practical realm would be fruitless and mad—until he can establish for them some certain basis. This certain basis must be an idea clear and distinct, and not capable of being doubted. All subsequent ideas must also have this clarity and distinction to lay claim to being true.

While the First Meditation sees Descartes establish his systematic doubt, it is in the Second Meditation that the **methodological** starting point of Descartes’ inquiry—his firm and immovable Archimedean point—is found. The senses, being clearly something depended upon in common practical affairs, are rejected as providing certitude; for they are often deceived, Descartes claims, by illusions and mirages, and moreover, by dreams. Consequently, it is to some thought independent of sensation which he turns for an indubitable truth: namely, any thought composed of “I think” or “I exist.”⁶ That one inevitably provides himself with evidence of self-existence by reflecting on the fact of thought cannot be denied; that

⁶ This is not, however, an original thought. Roughly twelve centuries earlier, St. Augustine, in book 10, chapter 10 of his *De trinitate* writes: “Who doubts himself to live, or remember, or understand, or will, or think, or know, or judge? For whensoever he doubts, he lives; if he doubts, he remembers why he doubts; if he doubts, he understands himself to doubt; if he doubts, he wills to be certain; if he doubts, he thinks; if he doubts, he knows himself to not know; if he doubts, he judges that he ought not to consent blindly.” The same thought is echoed in Augustine’s *Enchiridion*, c. 7, n. 20, that “by not positively affirming that they are alive, the skeptics ward off the appearance of error in themselves, yet they do make errors simply by showing themselves alive; one cannot err who is not alive. That we live is therefore not only true, but it is altogether certain as well.” Additionally, Thomas Aquinas expresses the same indubitability of one’s own existence in *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 10, ad. 7: “Thus no one is able to think himself not to exist with assent; for in thinking something, he perceives himself to be.”

is, as Descartes wrote in his other most important work, *The Discourse on Method*, “cogito, ergo sum”—“I think, therefore I am.”⁷ Thus Descartes defines the human person as a “thinking thing,” as the conclusion derived from this evidence for the existence of the self.

In analyzing the notion of the “thinking thing,” Descartes posits understanding, affirming, denying, willing, refusing, imagining, and sensing to be functions of the mind, i.e., functions which belong to anything which has “thinking” as its mode of being. He continues to refine such a notion against the corporeal, which seems so inescapably present. Can bodies be known with clear and distinct ideas? Not bodies considered abstractly, vaguely and in general; but a concrete, particular body? To this question Descartes subjects for scrutiny a piece of wax, which he subjects to a series of tests with regard to its sense qualities, finding that the identity of the wax cannot be discerned by any of them. What Descartes therefore gleans from this experiment is that he still has found no source of certitude equal to that found in mathematics other than what is found in the intellect alone; sense or perceptual knowledge is entirely eliminated. “Brute animals,” then are considered to be merely unknowing animatrons. Knowledge is reduced to the univocity of strictly-intellectual certitude.

As is well-known, the problem of this relation of sense perceptions to knowledge—reduced as it is to such a univocity—dominated modern philosophy, and would be determinative for the direction taken by Kant. Now, whereas Hume, something of a catalyst for Kant, insists that the connection of cause and effect arises as a psychological impression formed by the constant juxtaposition of similar sense impressions, Kant claims that the connection of cause and effect is an innately possessed concept to which things’ appearances can be adequated.

This relating of an *a priori* concept to the sense intuition such that the two are irreconcilably distinct yet necessary to the attainment of knowledge, however, Gilson notes, proves to be the ultimate failing of Kant’s epistemology. To summarize Gilson’s argument:⁸ by reducing knowledge to the univocity of the intellectual, the *a priori* categories of the mind,

⁷ At §7 of 1644: *The Principles of Philosophy*, as well as (in French) in the *Discourse on Method* of 1637, “Je pense, donc je suis.” Nevertheless, the same sentiment can be found in *Meditation II*: “hoc pronuntiatum: *ego sum, ego existo*, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum.” “This statement: *I am, I exist*, as often as it is advanced by me, or conceived by the mind, is necessarily true.”

⁸ Gilson, *Unity*, 236–237.

Kant's system collapses in on itself; for the veracity of knowledge, through the synthetic *a priori* judgments which occur within natural philosophy and mathematics, requires the union of two distinct sources of cognition—the categories of reason and the intuitions of the senses (or at least, in the case of mathematics, the pure intuition of space)—the positing of a cause for which union seems to transgress the very principles of Kant's epistemological system.

3. Third is that it thus becomes clear that in making the critical turn, one turns the universe inside out: for the first principle of all philosophy becomes **thought**, rather than **being**, and so rather than attempting to discern how it is that the intellect conforms to what is, the critical philosopher has no choice but to twist what is until he can explain thought. To quote Gilson:

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, which will settle once and for all the future course of our philosophy, and make it a failure or a success. Are we to encompass being with thought, or thought with being? In other words, are we to include the whole in one of its parts, or one of the parts in its whole?⁹

While it is certainly true that every being which is grasped, in its being, by a human, is grasped by thought—and that thought therefore makes every being an object for the human—it is nevertheless false to think that thought is therefore the first principle of our knowing things. As Gilson is quite right to point out, the intelligibility of things is not first and foremost because they are thought, but because they **are**.

It is against the backdrop of the critical turn, and his repudiation of it, that Gilson develops his own theory of knowledge. In consequence of what he perceives to be the failures of the critical turn, Gilson lays out several “laws” which he says are to be inferred from philosophical experience. While these are principally a prohibition against idealism,¹⁰ they nevertheless give the basic structure of the “metaphysical realism” favored

⁹ Id., 316–317.

¹⁰ Enumerated in id., 306–316. Especially the first, fourth, and fifth: “Philosophy always buries its undertakers” (306), “As metaphysics aims at transcending all particular knowledge, no particular science is competent either to solve metaphysical problems, or to judge their metaphysical solutions” (309–310), and “The failures of the metaphysicians flow from their unguarded use of a principle of unity present in the human mind” (312), respectively.

by Gilson. Here we will only focus on those few which are most pertinent to Gilson's realism.

First is that, "By his very nature, man is a metaphysical animal."¹¹

Second, "Metaphysics is the knowledge gathered by a naturally transcendent reason in its search for the first principles, or first causes, of what is given in sensible experience."¹²

Third, "Since being is the first principle of all human knowledge, it is *a fortiori* the first principle of metaphysics."¹³ This law follows for Gilson from two points: first, **being** is that "which the mind is bound to conceive both as belonging to all things and as not belonging to any two things in the same way;"¹⁴ second, that whatever "is first, last and always in human knowledge is its first principle, and its constant point of reference"—and since "metaphysics is knowledge dealing with the first principles and the first causes themselves,"¹⁵ one and the same being is the first principle of knowledge and the subject matter of metaphysics.

On the one hand, this law is absolutely true—being is certainly both the first principle of all human knowledge and the principle of metaphysics, but at the same time, it is also the first principle of biology, chemistry, mathematics, logic, and computer programming. It is true that *ens primum cognitum* has an intimate connection to the metaphysically-considered *ens*, but we should not be too quick to understand the *ens* which is said to be first known as one and the same thing as the *ens* which is the proper subject matter of the science of metaphysics.

It is with that in mind that we look at a fourth of Gilson's laws, "All the failures of metaphysics should be traced to the fact, that the first principle of human knowledge has been either overlooked or misused by the metaphysicians."¹⁶ Certainly, the idealists are guilty of this, having completely misapprehended the first principle of human knowledge—and it remains sound advice also for the realist.

Abstraction and the Nature of the Concept

To understand the consequences of Gilson's stark division between realist and idealist philosophies, particularly as this division bears upon his

¹¹ Id., 307.

¹² Id., 308.

¹³ Id., 313.

¹⁴ Id., 312.

¹⁵ Id., 313.

¹⁶ Id., 316.

interpretation of *ens ut primum cognitum*, we need to look at his treatment of St. Thomas' doctrine on intellectual knowledge, for it is in his interpretation of the Angelic Doctor that Gilson's own philosophy of a metaphysical realism is exposited.

First, it is to be noted that, with regard to abstraction, Gilson faithfully and closely follows Thomas in emphasizing that the object of intellectual knowledge is something universal. He begins by reiterating Thomas' oft-stated claim that the proper object of the human intellect is the quiddity.¹⁷ The quiddity is said by Gilson to be the essence of a thing as known by a concept, a true but perhaps misleading statement. In terms of abstraction, he makes the problematic statement that this operation of the *intellectus agens* consists in the dissociation of the "universal and intelligible element" from the "particular and material element," a befuddling intersection of the two which he never explains.¹⁸ Gilson is very careful to point out both the intimate connection between the object of intellectual knowledge and the sensible thing in which that object is known, as existentially united in the concrete substantial constitution of the thing, and that the intelligible is in some manner separated out from that existential reality by abstraction.¹⁹ Through abstraction, something is realized in the intellect which allows the intelligible to be realized in the intellect apart from the material and particular, such that the concrete, particular, material being is subsequently known intellectually through the intellect's ability to grasp its nature.²⁰

¹⁷ *S.Th.*, Ia, q. 17, a. 3, ad. 1.

¹⁸ Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), 218: "The proper object of the human intellect is quiddity; that is, nature existing in a particular corporeal matter. Thus it is not ours to know the idea of stone, but the nature of such and such a determined stone. This nature is the result of the union between a form and its proper matter. Similarly, the abstract concept "horse" is not presented to our mind as an object. It is the nature, rather, of a horse that has been realized in a given, determined, concrete horse. In other words, it is easy to discern in the objects of human knowledge a universal and intelligible element which is associated with a particular and material element. The proper operation of the agent intellect is to dissociate these two elements in order to furnish the possible intellect with the intelligible and universal which lay implied in the sensible. This operation is abstraction." Hereafter referenced by its French title, *Le Thomisme*.

¹⁹ In the parlance of many Thomists, but not Thomas himself, we could say that according to Gilson the universal and intelligible object is known in the real being, in *ens reale*.

²⁰ Cf. Gilson, *Thomist Realism*, 193: "Realist abstraction is an apprehension of the universal in the particular and of the particular through the universal. The concepts and judgments it utilizes substitute for our lack of an intellectual intuition of the singular."

Through this operation, according to Gilson, it is the subsistent principle or form which comes to be known apart from the individuating characteristics contained in the phantasm:

Now, to know what subsists, in individual matter, without taking into account the matter within which this object subsists, is to abstract the form from the individual matter which the phantasms represent.²¹

Consequently, Gilson goes on to assert that the “simplest aspect” of abstraction is the consideration of the essence of something without consideration of the distinguishing aspects of the individuals contained logically under those species.²²

Thus, in its separating function, Gilson appears to believe that the *intellectus agens* dissociates the essence of real beings by grasping the substantial form, such that what is grasped is independent of anything individuating; that the essence is grasped in a universal fashion. Again, he emphasizes at once the existential unity and the intellectual separation of the intelligible from the sensible, saying that the intellect considers the essences separately, but **in** the phantasms of the imagination.

Yet the separating out of form from matter is not the only function of the *intellectus agens*, for abstraction, of which Gilson says illumination of the sensible species is its very essence, results in the **production** of the intelligible. This productive function is not like some kind of photocopying, whereby the form contained in the image of the phantasm is exactly reproduced sans matter in the intellect, but rather the “engendering” in the possible intellect of what is potentially universal in the phantasm.²³ Gilson explains this process of the production of the intelligible by looking at two properties of the intellect and the phantasm: namely, their respective intelligibility and determination. For the intellect is of itself something intelligible, but it lacks determination, innately containing no proportionate object for its own consideration, whereas the phantasm is determinate but lacks intelligibility. Thus the *intellectus agens* confers intelligibility on the phantasm, whereby it in turn confers a determinate object to the *intellectus possibilis*. In other words, the form represented in the phantasm provides the specification inherently lacking in the intellect, which gives to that

²¹ Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 218.

²² *Id.*, 218–219.

²³ *Id.*, 219.

form its intelligibility by separating it out from the material and particular aspects of the individual.

Yet, Gilson notes, abstraction alone does not constitute the knowledge of something, but there is a further process necessary; the intellect's operation does not terminate with the reception of the determinate abstracted form, with what we would call the *species impressae*. Rather, there is a further step which must be taken, namely, the formation of the concept, or what we would call the *species expressae*. The concept is no longer formally the same as the impressed species or the intelligible species as contained potentially in the phantasm, but is a similitude, an intentional being²⁴ existing only on the basis of thought, distinct from the impressed

²⁴ This admission made, perhaps, begrudgingly. Cf. John Deely, *Intentionality and Semiotics* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2007), 9–12. While Gilson's student, Joseph Owens, in his *Cognition: an epistemological inquiry* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; Houston, TX: University of St. Thomas Center for Thomistic Studies, 1992), uses the term "intentional being" frequently, he seems nevertheless to disavow that the notion is one which is genuinely of St. Thomas: "Aquinas, *De ver.*, 21.3.ad 5m, carefully distinguished the technical sense of the term *intentio* in its present context [as referring to first and second intentions of the mind] from what its etymology seemed to imply" (164, n. 20). The text referenced, *De veritate* q. 21, a. 3, ad. 5, states: "Nevertheless it must be known, that when it is said that the end is prior in intention, 'intention' is taken as the act of the mind, which is 'to intend'. When we compare the intention of the good and the intention of the true, 'intention' is taken for the rationale which the definition signifies; thus it is taken equivocally in the two places." Owens' interpretation of this passage seems, however, to first of all imply that the *intentio intellecta*, while of a kind of being, is an intentional being, which is distinct from the substantial or subjective being which is proper to things as they are in themselves, to the so-called *ens reale* of extra-mental being, and second of all to be contrary to what is stated in *SCG*, I, c. 53, n. 4: "This intention of the intellect, since it is a terminus of intelligible operation, is other than the intelligible species which makes the intellect to be in act, which it is necessary to consider as the principle of intelligible operation; although each is a similitude of the thing understood. For, by the fact that the intelligible species which is the form of the intellect and the principle of understanding is the similitude of an exterior thing, it follows that the intellect forms an intention for itself similar to that thing; because such as a thing is, such does it operate. And from the fact that the intention of the intellect is alike to some thing, it follows that the intellect, forming such an intention, understands that thing." In other words, the intention formed by the intellect—which has all of the marks of the *species expressa*—is for the intellect an orienting back towards the thing. In the previous passage of *SCG*, I, c. 53, i.e., n. 3, *intentio* and *definitio* are explained as synonyms; which should not be taken to imply that the *intentio intellecta* is something strictly immanent, as it were, but rather that it *per naturam* tends back towards the things to which it is alike. The point made in *De veritate* q. 21, a. 3, ad. 5, seems simply to be that there is no process of the individual possessing the *intentio intellecta* moving itself towards an entitative or subjectively-constituted union with the thing intended, as there is in the case of a practical intention. Cf. John F. Peifer, *The Mystery of Knowledge* (Albany, NY: Magi

intelligible species and expressed in the *verbum mentis*, considered as a **substitute** for the thing:

The act of knowledge is further liberated from the object in a still sharper way when the interior word or concept is produced. The name “concept” is given to what the intellect conceives in itself and expresses by a word. The sensible species and then the intelligible species, by which we know but which we do not know, is still the form itself of the object. The concept is the similitude of the object which the intellect brings forth under the action of the species. This time, therefore, we are in the presence of a substitute for the object. This substitute is no longer either the substance of the knowing intellect nor the thing known itself, but an intentional being incapable of subsisting outside of thought, which the word designates and which later will be fixed by the definition.²⁵

The nature of this intentional being of the concept is not further discussed by Gilson; but it is important to note that he considers it something distinct, in terms of its constitution, both from the substance of the intellect or the intellectual creature and from the thing known.

It seems at this point that Gilson becomes concerned with preserving the metaphysical realism of his interpretation of St. Thomas; for the admission of the concept as an object constituted in at least some measure by thought, dependent upon thought for its existence, seems to open the door to some of the difficulties of the idealist—as though Gilson heard in that admission a whisper of Kant’s unbridgeable chasm between noumena and phenomena. Thus, it is qualified that, whereas the impressed species is the direct likeness of the object itself, the concept is a representation of the form and so a likeness of it, but not directly:

Between the thing, considered in its own nature, and the concept which the intellect fashions out of it, there comes a twofold likeness or resemblance which it is important to be able to distinguish. First, there is the likeness of the thing in us; that is, the resemblance of the form which is the species, here a direct likeness, expressed from itself by the object and imprinted by it in us. It is as indistinguishable from it as is the action which the seal exerts on wax from the seal it-

Books, Inc., 1952), 163–164, n. 76. The attainment of the object is entangled in the notion of the *intentio intellecta*; we cannot immanentize the *intentio*.

²⁵ Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 229. Cf. *S.Th.*, Ia, q. 85, a. 2, ad.

self. Consequently, this likeness is not distinguished from its principle because it is not a representation of it but its promotion and, as it were, its prolongation. Secondly, there is the likeness of the thing which we conceive in ourselves and which is not the form itself but nothing more than its representation.²⁶

First, we note that Gilson applies the example, taken from Aristotle's *De anima*,²⁷ of the impression of the seal on wax and applies it to the impression of the intelligible species upon the intellect.²⁸ Secondly, since the production of the concept, as expressed by the word and "fixed" by the definition,²⁹ follows upon the impression of this intelligible species, Gilson says that the fruit of the concept is given to it by the species of the thing, and therefore there is a true resemblance: "The concept of an object resembles it [the object] because the intellect must be fecundated by the species of the object itself in order to be capable of engendering the concept."³⁰

Gilson goes still further to defend the realism of his interpretation of Thomas' theory of knowledge. Because the process of concept formation is a natural one, and since its object is the intelligible, Gilson concludes that the concept is unerringly produced; there cannot be a mistake in the formation of a concept, and consequently there is an infallible conception of essences (emphasis added):

The operation by which the intellect engenders in itself the concept is a natural operation. In accomplishing it, it is doing what it is its nature to do. Since the process of the operation is as we have described it, we can conclude that **its result is naturally unerring**. An intellect which only expresses the intelligible, if the object has first impressed it in it, cannot err in its expression. Let us give the term "quiddity" to the essence of the thing thus known. We shall be able to say that the quiddity is the proper object of the intellect, which never errs in apprehending it . . . **The intellect conceives essences as infallibly as hearing perceives sounds and sight colors.**³¹

²⁶ Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 229.

²⁷ Aristotle, *De anima* II.12, 424a 20–22; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In de anima*, lib. 2, lec. 24, n. 551 and n. 554.

²⁸ Neither Thomas nor Aristotle, it would seem, ever applied the example of the wax and the signet ring to the impression of a species upon the intellect.

²⁹ The meaning of this term, "fixed by the definition," seems to me ambiguous.

³⁰ Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 230.

³¹ *Id.*

Though there is an ambiguity in Gilson's notion of the concept—namely, whether or not it is synonymous with or somehow virtually contains the definition³²—this claim that the concepts whereby the intellect grasps essences is infallible is troublesome on several counts, and seems to us to be said in an attempt to justify the metaphysical realism of Gilson's philosophy of knowledge. As he adds just a little later, "To say that the immediate object of thought is the concept is not, therefore, to deny that it is the thing, but rather to affirm that it is the thing, inasmuch as the thing's intelligibility makes all that of the concept."³³ In a sense, but not the one evidently meant by Gilson, this statement is true: whatever intelligibility there is to be found in a concept is ultimately instigated or derived from that which is found in the experience had of things; but to say that the concept of a thing is, as the object of thought, the same as the thing itself because all of the concept's intelligibility is constituted by that of the thing itself is to oversimplify the truth of concept formation to the genuine detriment of understanding the truth of the human intellect.

Realism vs. Idealism and the Question of *Ens ut Primum Cognitum*

Ultimately, what we find in Gilson's approach is a systematic integration of St. Thomas' doctrine into a philosophy specifically oriented to the refutation of idealism. Having correctly identified that idealism is an untenable position, Gilson appears to overreact, taking as a given fact that there is an absolute dichotomy between the realist and idealist. This acceptance of such a dichotomy is the result of the presumption that all objects of thought are either the so-called real beings, *entia realis*, of extramental substantial constitution, or the logical beings, *entia rationis*, which exist only in thought. The closest Gilson comes to admitting the possibility of some third kind of object is in his depiction of the concept as an intentional being; but he quickly effaces this possibility, in an evident attempt to produce an airtight defense against idealism, by reducing the content of the

³² There does not appear to be sufficient textual evidence across Gilson's *oeuvre* to say definitively one way or another what his position was. It does seem to be a fair inference, however, based upon his response to Fr. Regis in the appendix to *Being and Some Philosophers*, 221–227, that what Gilson considers as the concept (adopting a notion closer to that which is found in modernity), *proprie loquendo* and in opposition to the broader sense of the *conceptus*, is that which has a distinct intelligible content, i.e., that which is or can be more fully expressed in a definition.

³³ Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 233.

concept to that which is derived from the substantial form of the thing itself.³⁴

Gilson thought it impossible that a genuine metaphysics would be possible without “returning to realism pure and simple.”³⁵ This “pure and simple” realism requires that one take being as first known to be *ens reale*. Certainly, the first conception of being is germinated from something existing in the order of substantial constitution, from something somehow constituted between principles of essence and existence which in no way depends upon our intellect for its being. In a way, however, this is to make the inverse mistake of Plato—who thought that things must be constituted according to the way they exist in the mind—namely, to believe that what is in the mind is precisely the same as what it discovers in the thing. Thomas confirms a point very similar to Gilson’s statement that “nothing is in the understanding unless it has first been in the senses,”³⁶ for as the Common Doctor writes: “omnis nostra cognitio a sensu incipit”—“every one of

³⁴ Cf. Owens, *Cognition: an epistemological inquiry*, 152: “In abstraction, however, the corresponding representation is no longer individual and mixed with the other features, but expresses the one aspect only. It is called the concept, in the sense of an expressed species, but the thing itself, as presented in the concept, is what one knows through abstraction.” Again, *id.*, 153: “In late Scholasticism the intellectual representation tended to be called the formal concept, to mark it off as the concept produced by the mind. Contrasted with it was the conceived object, under the designation ‘objective concept’. This notion paved the way for the Cartesian doctrine of ideas as the proper object of the mind’s consideration. The notion of an ‘objective concept’ does not fit very well into an epistemology in which real sensible things are the direct object of our intellection. Rather, the object of the concept is the thing itself as known in abstraction. In this way the human nature, the animal nature, and the vegetative nature of a perceived object are represented in separate concepts. They are represented apart from each other, even though in reality they are never found in separation from the really existent individual.”

³⁵ Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 92.

³⁶ Gilson, *Thomist Realism*, 183. It should be noted that the text Gilson cites, *De veritate* q. 10, a. 6, s.c. 2, has two marks against it for supporting the precise claim that Gilson makes: first, it is present in a *sed contra* which, while not contradicted by Thomas, nevertheless may not fully represent his own position; and secondly, even if it is taken as the meaning of St. Thomas, the text—“omnis nostra cognitio originaliter consistit in notitia primorum principiorum indemonstrabilium. Horum autem cognitio in nobis a sensu oritur, ut patet in fine Poster. Ergo scientia nostra a sensu oritur”—includes two terms, *originaliter* and *oritur* which signify that knowledge **begins** with sense; not that it always and in every case is reliant upon something having been contained in sense. This notion of beginning, seemingly in the sense of the first piece of a larger construction rather than as a persistent principle, is confirmed in the texts cited below, in which Thomas states that our cognition *incipit a sensu*.

our cognitions begins from sense.”³⁷ Nevertheless, we ought to note this important if slight difference between Gilson’s claim and the teaching of Thomas: while it is agreed that every cognition **begins** in sensation, Thomas never declares that **everything** in the understanding has first been in the senses. In fact, we can find texts which seem to support clearly that Thomas held a different position:

sense cognition is not the whole cause of our intellectual cognition. And therefore it is not to be wondered at if the intellectual cognition extends itself beyond the sensitive.³⁸

And:

A sign conveys something, on the basis of that which is known to us, by which we are led to the cognition of another. The first things known to us are things falling under the senses, from which every one of our cognitions has its rising; and therefore the sign as to its first institution signifies some sensible thing, insofar as through it we are led into the knowledge of something hidden.³⁹

And:

the cognition of the mind is said to have its origin from the senses not so much because that which the mind knows, the sense apprehends; but because from those things which the sense apprehends, the mind is led into further things, just as the sensibles lead the understanding to the divine intelligibles.⁴⁰

³⁷ *SCG*, II, c. 37, n. 2. Cf. *S.Th.*, Ia, q. 9, a. 1, c.; *S.Th.*, IIIa, q. 60, a. 4, ad. 1; *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lib. 2, lec. 1, n. 2; *Super Isaiam*, c. 1, lec. 1; *Super Ioannem*, c. 3, lec. 1; id., c. 8, lec. 8.

³⁸ *S.Th.*, Ia, q. 85, a. 6, ad. 3: “quod sensitiva cognitio non est tota causa intellectualis cognitionis. Et ideo non est mirum si intellectualis cognitio ultra sensitivam se extendit.”

³⁹ *In IV Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 2, c.: “signum importat aliquod notum quo ad nos, quo manuducimur in alterius cognitionem. Res autem primo notae nobis, sunt res cadentes sub sensu, a quo omnis nostra cognitio ortum habet; et ideo signum quantum ad primam sui institutionem significat aliquam rem sensibilem, prout per eam manuducimur in cognitionem alicujus occulti.”

⁴⁰ *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, ad. 2: “unde non pro tanto dicitur cognitio mentis a sensu originem habere, quod omne illud quod mens cognoscit, sensus apprehendat; sed quia ex his quae sensus apprehendit, mens in aliqua ulteriora manuducitur, sicut etiam sensibilia intellecta manuducunt in intelligibilia divinatorum.”

While Gilson may not have intended his statement to be taken to the letter, it seems that his adamantness against the idealist position would repudiate that any object of knowledge—as, at the very least, a specificative object existing independently of the act whereby a mind grasps it—is one which is not constituted within the subjective order. Certainly, he would not deny that there are *entia rationis* as objects of the intellect which are not actually existing in nature—there is no such thing as “animal” nor is there some independently existing “2,” yet we know them—but the notion that an *entia rationis* could be a specificative rather than a terminative object seems to have no place in Gilson’s metaphysical realism.

Ultimately, Gilson is consistent; as he himself stated, “any attempt on the part of a philosopher to shun the consequences of his own position is doomed to failure.”⁴¹ By taking *ens ut primum cognitum* as *ens reale*, Gilson is bound to uphold a strictly-realist notion of conceptualization. As a consequence, *entia rationis* are relegated to a kind of second-order of existence. The objects of knowledge are exclusively and exhaustively divided into the extra-cognitionally real, *ens reale*, and the intra-cognitionally unreal, *ens rationis*; and the two only meet in the consideration of *entia rationis* inasmuch as they are considered part of the substantial constitution of *entia realis*. To get beyond this division, Thomism needs a much stronger, well-developed, and robust notion of conceptualization.

EVALUATING THE METAPHYSICAL REALISM OF ÉTIENNE GILSON

SUMMARY

While there is an absence of treatises devoted to the question of *ens ut primum cognitum*, there is no shortage of brief and implicit treatments; indeed, nearly every Thomist of the past seven centuries seems to have at least something to say about the notion that being is the first of our intellectual conceptions. Most recent Thomist thinkers—including Gilson—assume this *ens* to be nothing other than the *ens reale* of things entitatively considered, operating as they do out of a framework within which realism and idealism are presumed to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive attempts to answer the question of human knowledge. It is the intent of this essay to examine how Gilson arrives at his position, which he calls “metaphysical realism,” and to point to some of the difficulties it entails.

⁴¹ Gilson, *Unity*, 302.

KEYWORDS: realism, critique, metaphysics, being as first known, *ens reale*, Thomas Aquinas, epistemology.