

The Accidentality of Knowledge
in
Aristotelian-Thomistic Philosophy

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1.

Knowledge--what is it? We might answer right away that it is, in man, an accident belonging to the first species of the predicament of Quality. But this would involve a premature statement of the conclusion which we hope to prove in this paper. Therefore, as a first step in arriving at this conclusion, let us examine our terms, knowledge and accident, knowledge first.

St. Thomas seems never to have defined knowledge directly as such. Perhaps the closest approach to a definition of knowledge to be found in his works is the following:

To understand is not a movement that is an act of something imperfect passing from one to another, but it is an act existing in the agent itself, of something perfect.¹

But he has made in passing many statements similar to that above which have been used as a basis for definitions by many others since his time. Essentially these definitions say that knowledge is the immaterial possession of one form--that of the object--by another form--that of the knower--in such a way that neither of these forms loses its own identity. This possession has been variously described as an assimilation, an information, and an immanent action; as such it constitutes an internal perfection of the knowing subject. The object known is in no way affected by this assimilation of its form to the knowing subject. "Cognition is an immanent act, accidental, formally manifesting some object to the soul."² Some identify knowledge with

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the second act of the intellect.³ Two of the better definitions of knowledge are the following:

Knowledge is essentially the consciousness of an object, i.e., of any thing, fact, or principle belonging to the physical, mental or metaphysical order, that may in any manner be reached by cognitive faculties.⁴

. . . knowledge consists in this, that some form is received and had immaterially, that is, in a way surpassing potentiality, or in the fact that a knowing subject has a form, not composedly, not as a development or an actuation of the subject, but rather in an immanent way, i.e., objectively.⁵

From these definitions it appears that knowledge is something active rather than passive as might be assumed when it is considered that the object is received into the subject. It is the possessing of the object. In knowledge the intellect in a certain way becomes the object known, it is the object known. But this view seems inconsistent with the statement that sense and intellect are in potency with respect to the primary objects of knowledge⁶ which St. Thomas makes elsewhere. This apparent contradiction can be resolved. A knowing power is active in so far as it is an operative power, knowledge being efficiently produced from itself. A knowing power is passive, on the other hand, because it is changed by the reception of the object while the object itself is not changed by becoming known to a knowing subject, and because the operation remains in the power itself as its passion, that is, it is an immanent operation. Thus it is that a knowing power can be said to be both active

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and passive without contradiction.

A mere contact between the knowable and the knower is not a sufficient condition for knowledge. There must be a union of the forms of the knower and the known, but in such a way that, as was said above, each of these retains its own identity. Knowledge thus might be termed an equation of the mind to the thing.

Now let us pass on to discuss the existence of knowledge. Does it exist? If so, how does it exist, what type of existence does it have? In the light of what we have said above, the answer to the first question is evident, but to that we can each add the testimony of our own experience with the result that we arrive without any difficulty at an affirmative answer for this question. The second question, however, which deals with the mode of existence proper to knowledge is the very point of this paper. At this point we will merely present the general scholastic teaching as to the type of existence proper to knowledge; further on in this paper we shall attempt to prove that, in the case of man, this existence is accidental. Let it suffice here to say in answer to the second question that knowledge exists in an immaterial way, that it has a spiritual mode of existence.

But why must we posit another mode of existence other than the real mode? The answer is simply

. . . that the material reality, given in sense consciousness, must, in order to be apprehended by the intellect, be made present to the intellect, and

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must, as thus present to the intellect, be conformed to the immaterial or spiritual mode of being of the intellect: according to the principle that whatever is thus in, or present to, a knowing subject must assume the mode of being of this latter.⁷

This immaterial or spiritual mode of being which the object has in the subject is called by the scholastics mental being or existence, intentional existence, sensible species in the case of sense knowledge, and intelligible species with regard to intellectual knowledge. This esse cognitum, as it is also called, is the medium by or through which the mind apprehends, grasps, and knows what it considers the reality to be as it is in itself, whether the reality be the subject itself or something distinct from the subject. But this mode of being is not a medium in the sense that the knowing subject knows it and from this knowledge passes on to the knowledge of the thing in reality. This would be a form of idealism, for the reality would not be known directly and as such but only as it existed in the knowing power of the knower. Thus it can be seen that for the scholastics this mental being or existence of something as an object in the subject represents a reality existing independently of the subject and prior to the intentional existence which is received in the knowing subject as a part of the cognitional process. Thus we see that the same object existing in reality also receives a mental existence when it is known by some knower and thus it has a double mode of existence: mental in the knowing subject, and physical in reality. In addition to the thing known, the knower

also exists in a twofold manner.

The knower has its natural mode of being itself, but also the thing known is in the knower and identified with the knower according to another mode of being. The knower is itself according to its natural mode of being, and it is also the thing known according to this other mode of being, called intentional being.⁸

In summary we see that both the knower and the thing known have a double mode of existence, one physical and the other mental or intentional. We have also seen that this intentional existence of the object is the medium by which it is known to the subject. The question is, is this the existence which is proper to knowledge or is it merely the type of existence which the object has as known? This question we hope to answer in a short time.

An examination of the process by which we acquire knowledge would perhaps be of some value at this point. St. Thomas has said that

. . . for us actually to understand something, all that is needed is the formation of actually intelligible species through abstraction from matter and the conditions of matter, which is the work of the agent intellect, and reception in our understanding, which is the work of the possible intellect.⁹

But the object, if it is not originally in the subject, must in some way be united to the subject and made one with it, by an assimilation of the knower to the object known. In this union of the knower to the known the sense becomes the same as the thing sensed and the intellect in act becomes the thing under-

stood in act; but it must be noted that this does not take place in a substantial manner, for only in God are the substances of the knower and the known identified. Rather the cognitive faculty must be considered as

. . . potential towards all knowable things when it is not actually knowing some thing; and in order to know something actually, it must be determined or specified in act by being informed by the intelligible or sensible species of the object known.¹⁰

The knower potentially considered does not exist as knower, but only when the form of the received object determines its nature and actualizes it is it made an actual intelligence or sense. Thus "by being informed by the forms of different objects the sense becomes all things sensible, and the intellect all things intelligible."¹¹ The form, then, of the thing known is the medium by which the knower and the known are united. The form of the thing known makes it actually what it is. The knower is potentially what the known is actually, since it can receive the form of the thing known. The form of the thing known informs the knower and thus makes it actually what the thing known is, but, as was pointed out above, not in a substantial manner. In this way the knower in act is made one with the known in act. This holds true both for sense knowledge and for intellectual knowledge.

The reality of knowledge is the next thing to be considered. What does the word "real" mean? Narrowly taken, "real" means that which is actually and physically existant, viewed as out-

side the knowing mind. A broader and more generally accepted meaning is that a real thing is one that has or might have its own physical existence. This latter definition excludes those things that only exist formally as an object of thought alone, namely ens rationis. An ens rationis, examples of which include genera and species, universal ideas, and beings of this sort, is an

. . . object which, as formerly described, could not exist except as the term of the mind, because the mind, with its abstractions and reflections, has imposed upon it some conditions essentially mental.¹²

Knowledge proceeds from the intellect and from the object; these are the principles of knowledge. Now the intellect is certainly a real power of the human soul. But what of the object? If the object is a physically existant being either in actuality or in potentiality, that is, if it is here and now existing, or if it could possibly exist, there being no conditions in its essential make up that would prevent its becoming an actually existing being, then there is no difficulty, for then both principles of knowledge, the intellect of the knower, and the object known, are real. Therefore knowledge itself would seem to be real since it springs from real principles. The difficulty arises, however, when ens rationis are brought in as being possible objects of the intellect, since they have no extramental existence. To clear up this difficulty we must find some aspect of reality in ens rationis which is consistent both

with the notion of ens rationis and with the reality of knowledge. We may say that ens rationis does have some aspect of reality in so far as it is a phenomenon and "even the most minimal sort of phenomenon is still something real, and not unqualified nothingness."¹³ Ens rationis has also been described as an "ens conceived as belonging to a fictitious object, real, not without, but only in the mind."¹⁴ This aspect of reality is found in the similitude representing the object--whether the object be a real being, a possible being, or only an ens rationis--to the subject. Thus we can say that even in the case of ens rationis there is a certain aspect of reality present which enables us to say that knowledge of every thing, even of ens rationis, is real, and that, in view of this element of reality, ens rationis might be said to constitute a real object of knowledge, even though it does not really exist in the sense of having actual physical existence or of having any possibility of ever becoming actually physically existant. Thus we can conclude that knowledge is real in all cases.

Having thus rather sketchily considered our first term, knowledge, let us now go on to a consideration of the other term, accident.

An accident is that whose existence is in esse, that is, it must exist in another as in a subject of inhesion. It is the same thing to say that an accident "exists in a subject" and to say that it "inheres" in a subject. Both expressions denote the

type of existence which makes an accident what it is, that is, a type of existence that is dependent on the existence of something else for its own existence. This "something else" is the subject of inherence, a substance.

Accident is the universal said of a species as that which belongs contingently to that species and to the individuals of that species. An accident is a characteristic that can come to be or disappear without destruction of the species in which it is found. For example, "white" is said of man as an accident. The color white does not necessarily characterize man, nor is it found always in man, nor does it belong only to man.¹⁵

An accidental form does not give absolute existence to its subject, for its subject is an already existing being. The accidental form merely modifies the subject in some way, making it such, or so great or in such a condition.

If we compare the idea of knowledge which we have outlined above with that of accident we may perhaps see things more clearly. Our first statement about accidents was that their essence is to exist in another. In looking back over our consideration of knowledge it will be seen that in every case knowledge is always considered in relation to some subject, something must have knowledge. This is consistent with our own personal experience which tells us that knowledge is always in some subject, the knower, and not existing of and by itself. Knowledge can certainly come and go as anyone who has had to take a test, and who hasn't, can testify. This presence and non presence of knowledge does not affect in any way the essence of the subject,

it does not make him more or less a man by its presence or absence. Although no essential change takes place in a man who has gained or lost knowledge, nevertheless, change takes place. This change is entirely different from all physical processes, for the knowing subject, without appearing to change the object, or to suffer some physical change itself, takes or receives the object known. Aristotle said that "in knowing there was a special kind of interchange that was not physical change and could not be reduced to material transformation."¹⁶ The reason for this is the immaterial basis on which knowledge rests. This change modifies the knowing subject in that he gains some form that he did not previously have; this is called "intentional increase." Thus we see that knowledge seems to fulfill all the qualifications of an accident which we have outlined above in our treatment of accidents. With these considerations in mind, let us now give a proof for our contention that knowledge is an accident.

The potency fulfilled by an act must be in the same genus as the act fulfilling that potency, and conversely, the act fulfilling any potency must be in the same genus as the potency which it fulfills, since these two, potency and act, according to the scholastic axiom, divide being and any genus of being. Thus when a potency is not in the genus of substance, its corresponding act is not in the genus of substance. But the intellect is a potency which is not in the genus of substance, for if

it were, when it was activated by its own proper act, it would exist as intellect, that is, intellect would exist in a substantial manner, as a substance; it would be a substance. This is obviously false, for the only case in which intellect exists as intellect is that of God, in Whom all things are identified, and even there no potency is involved. Knowledge, therefore, the proper act of the intellect, is not in the genus of substance. Those things that are not in the genus of substance must of necessity fall in the genus of accidents, since these two genera, dividing according to affirmation--being in another, that is, having its existence only in another, this is accident --and negation--not being in another, that is, not having its existence in another but rather having it per se, this is substance--contain all beings really or possibly existing. Knowledge, therefore, is in the genus of accidents, since, as was shown above, it is not in the genus of substance. But those things that are in the genus of accidents are accidents. Therefore knowledge, in all beings except God, is an accident.

In general it seems that the Aristotelian-Thomistic school of philosophy from Aristotle and St. Thomas right on down have taught that knowledge is an accident to the knowing subject. "There can be no doubt, therefore, that Aristotle regarded the proper sensibles as qualities of the sentient subject,"¹⁷ and therefore, as accidents, since Aristotle taught that qualities were accidents and in fact were one of the nine genera of acci-

dents. St. Thomas, treating of God's knowledge, says, ". . . an intelligible species in the intellect that is other than the intellect's essence has an accidental being, which is why our knowledge is numbered among the accidents."¹⁸ St. Thomas uses this statement as a major in a syllogism to prove that God understands only through His essence. He does not bother to prove this statement and in this omission he shows that it was considered so obvious as not to require proof.

More modern philosophers in this school are equally as definite. "Whatever is known is, as known, an accident of the knowing soul. . . ."¹⁹ Father Joseph Gredt, O.S.B., considered by some authorities to be perhaps one of the best modern Thomistic philosophers, especially in the field of knowledge, has, in no uncertain terms, placed knowledge as an accident. ". . . the action of knowledge pertains to the first species of the predicament of quality, for it is an accident disposing well the knowing power."²⁰

Such statements as those quoted above are typical of the treatment of this aspect of knowledge to be found in Thomistic philosophy. In most cases, the accidentality of knowledge is merely mentioned in passing or as a part of another proof. There seems to have been no effort made to prove that knowledge is an accident in man. Perhaps this lack of a specific and thorough treatment of this subject is due to the fact that the accidentality of knowledge was and is generally held and, since

it has never been seriously contested, there has never arisen a necessity for a definite, detailed treatment of it. There have, however, been some objections raised against the accidentality of knowledge which we will now give and try to answer.

If knowledge were real, then the knower, in knowing the greenness of a green wall, let us say, would then become green. It is obvious, however, that the knower does not become green upon knowing the greenness of the wall. Knowledge, therefore, cannot be real, but must exist in some other way. But those things which are accidents must really exist, that is, their existence must be in the order of reality, they must be real beings. ". . . knowledge," however, "is intentional being. . ." ²¹ and therefore belongs to another mode or order of being called the intentional order. It seems, therefore, that knowledge is not an accident of man.

In answering this objection, we must first point out that the knower, in knowing the greenness of a wall, does become green, not, however, in a material way, that is, he is not colored green in such a manner that this coloration is perceptible to his own senses or to those of any other knower, but he is colored in an immaterial way only. The knower knows the greenness of the wall by abstracting the form of greenness, that is, the immaterial part or principle of the essence of the greenness, from the matter of greenness, that is, the material element of the greenness. Thus since in the process of knowledge materi-

ality is abstracted from, a thing had as known must be had immaterially. Since, therefore, the thing known is had immaterially by the knowing subject it can not affect the matter of the knowing subject in such a way as to make it colored green and thus sense perceptible to the knower himself or to other knowing subject. Therefore, as was said above, the knower in knowing the greenness of a wall, does, in a certain way, become green. And thus it is that St. Thomas echoes Aristotle in saying that the mind is in a certain way all things, for it becomes, in a certain way, whatever it knows. From what we have just said, it is clear that the conclusion that knowledge cannot be real is invalid according to this argument.

In answering the second part of the objection it must be noted that the intentional order is taken as being in opposition to the real order, that is, the two orders are taken as mutually exclusive. Usually these two designations are used to distinguish between a thing existing outside the knowing subject--the real order--and a thing existing as known in the knowing subject--the intentional order--and in this sense they do appear to be mutually exclusive. But within the knowing subject those things which exist according to the intentional mode of being, must also have some aspect of reality in so far as they do exist, as we stated above in our treatment of the reality of knowledge. Thus the two orders, although they appear to be mutually exclusive, actually are not. The conclusion, therefore, that know-

ledge is not an accident of man does not validly follow from the premises when, as pointed out here, the real and intentional orders are not considered to be mutually exclusive.

Again St. Augustine has said that knowledge and love are not in the soul as accidents in a subject.²² It seems, therefore, that knowledge is not an accident of man.

In answering this objection it should be noted that in this statement the "soul" which St. Augustine refers to is the soul known or loved, and not the soul knowing and loving. It is true that the known or loved soul is not the subject of the acts of knowing or loving as being the subject of accidents for if it were, then the accidents of knowing and loving which are proper to the knower and the lover would transcend their own subject, which is clearly false. The conclusion, therefore, that knowledge is not an accident of man does not follow from the statement of St. Augustine mentioned above, since the objector took the word soul to mean the soul of the one knowing and loving in place of the meaning which St. Augustine gave it, the soul of the one known and loved.

Again the proof for the accidentality of knowledge based on potency and act given in this paper does not seem to be valid for Father Grætt says that the knower in the act of knowing "does not put himself in the state of a potency being actuated by a form, . . . but is like a perfect thing, an act which possesses an act."²³

In answering this objection it must be noted that it is a general principle of scholastic philosophy that for two things to become one, one of the two must be related to the other as potency to act. It is not inconsistent, however, with the idea of potency or of act that a thing be in potency and in act at the same time provided it is not contested that the thing is both in potency and in act in relation to the same thing in the same way at the same time. Thus a thing may at one and the same time be related to one thing as a potency and to another as an act, without involving any contradiction. In Father Gredt's statement quoted above the knower in the act of knowing is said to be like an act possessing an act. Here the knower is compared to the act possessing; but this act which possesses must be passive with respect to the act which it possesses, for, according to the principle mentioned above, the two could not become one without one being related to the other as potency to act. It is called "act" in so far as it possesses and possession is an act; but it is related to the act possessed as a potency to an act. The act possessing is in potency in relation to the act possessed because the possessing act is changed by the very possession of the act possessed, passing from potential to actual possession. The act possessing is also changed by the act possessed in that in a certain way it becomes the act possessed. Thus the conclusion that the proof for the accidentality of knowledge based on potency and act given in this paper

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is invalid does not follow from the statement quoted from Father Gredt for, as was pointed out above, the act possessing is in potency in relation to the act possessed.

F O O T N O T E S

1. "Non enim intelligere est motus qui est actus imperfecti, qui est ab alio in aliud: sed actus perfecti, existens in ipso agente." Summa Theol., I, 14, 2 ad 2.

2. "Cognito est actus immanens, accidentalis, aliquod obiectum animo formaliter manifestans." Meinrad-Stephane Morard, O.P., "De La Connaissance," Freiburger Zeitschrift Fur Philosophie und Theologie, 1956, 3:393.

3. Robert Markus, "Substance, Cause and Cognition in Thomistic Thought," New Scholasticism, 1947, 21:446.

4. C. A. Dubray, "Knowledge," The Catholic Encyclopedia, 8:673.

5. ". . . cognitio in eo consistit, quod forma aliqua recipitur et habetur immaterialiter, i.e. modo supereminenti super potentialitate, seu in eo, quod subiectum cognoscens habet formam non compositivam, non tanquam evolutionem seu actuationem subiecti, sed modo eminentiorem, i.e. obiectivam." Joseph Gredt, O.S.B., Elementa Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae, (Friburgi Brisgoviae, 1937), 1:358, #465, 1.

6. III De Anima, 7, 9, 13.

7. Peter Coffey, Theory of Knowledge (London, New York, 1917), 1:268.

8. W. H. Kane, "Outline of the Thomistic Critique of Knowledge," New Scholasticism, 1956, 30:194.

9. St. Thomas Aquinas, Truth (English translation by Robert W. Mulligan, S.J.) (Chicago, 1952), q. 18, a. 1, ob. 8.

10. Br. Benignus Gerrity, The Relations between the Theory of Matter and Form and the Theory of Knowledge in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (Milwaukee, 1949), pp. 73-74.

11. Idem, pp. 73-74.

12. John Rickaby, S.J., The First Principles of Knowledge (New York, 1921), pp. 313-314.

13. E. Kilzer, "Modes of Existence," Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1946, 21:238.

14. Josiah Royce, "Latin and Scholastic Terminology," Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, (New York, 1940), 1:632.

15. John A. Oesterle, Ph.D., Logic (New York, 1952), p. 13.

16. Thomas Gilby, The Phoenix and the Turtle (London, New York, 1950), p. 54.

17. D. J. E. Hawkins, The Criticism of Experience (New York, 1945), p. 33.

18. Summa Contra Gentiles, (English translation by Anton C. Pegis) (New York, 1955), I, cap. 46.

19. Rudolf Allers, "Cognition," Dictionary of Philosophy (New York, 1942), p. 57.

20. ". . . actio cognoscitiva ad primam speciem praedicationis qualitatis pertinet; est enim accidens bene disponens virtutem cognoscitivam." Gredt, op. cit., 1:370, #475, 4.

21. J. F. Anderson and G. Phelan, "Metaphysics of Knowledge," Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1946, 21:106.

22. IX De Trin., C. 4 ML 42,963.

23. ". . . non se habeat ut potentia actuata per formam, . . . sed ut perfectum, ut actus, qui possidet actum. . . ." Gredt, op. cit., 1:358, #465, 2.

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