

PART I
FOUNDATIONS OF ARISTOTELIAN–THOMISTIC METAPHYSICS

WHY THE SENSES CANNOT HAVE TRUTH: THE NEED FOR ABSTRACTION

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Thomas Aquinas maintains that truth is not found formally in the senses but only in the intellect.¹ If by truth we mean merely the conformity of the mind to the reality known, then the senses do possess truth, as when the sense of sight perceives the color black as it actually is. In general, says Aquinas, the senses correctly perceive their proper object, so that the sense of sight perceives colors, the sense of hearing sounds, and so on. The senses often err, on the other hand, for common sensibles, such as shape, perceiving them as they are not. When viewed from an angle, for instance, a circle is perceived as an ellipse.

If the senses do conform to reality, even if only for the proper sensibles, then why reserve truth to the intellect? Because, says Aquinas, truth is formally realized and completed only by becoming aware of one's conformity to reality.² While the perception of the color black truly corresponds to black in things, the senses are not aware of this correspondence. Only the intellect attains such awareness. Indeed, the intellect itself attains it only in its second act, the act of composing and dividing, and not in the first act of simple apprehension. When the intellect grasps the nature of the color black, then it has a correspondence with reality, but it does not yet recognize this correspondence. Only when it makes a judgment, such as, "The bird is black," does it formally attain truth through an awareness of conformity with the thing known. We do not say, after all, that the word "black" is true or false, but we do say that the sentence "The bird is black" is true or false.

¹ St. Thomas explicitly addresses this issue in *De Veritate* q. 1, a. 9 & a. 11; I, q. 17, a. 2; he refers to it in *I Sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1 ad 6; I, q. 16, a. 2; *I Peri Hermeneias*, l. 3, n. 9.

² See I, q. 16, a. 2; *De Veritate* q. 1, a. 3 & a. 9; *I Sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1 ad 7; *I Peri Hermeneias*, l. 3, n. 6; *VI Metaphysicae*, l. 4.

I. SECOND ORDER TRUTH

One way to imagine the awareness of conformity is to picture the intellect viewing its own act of understanding, laying it up against the reality known, and comparing the two for similarities. When it perceives that its own action is similar to the reality, then it attains to truth most formally, for it is aware of its own correspondence to the reality. In the same way, we might place a portrait of an individual near to the individual and then compare the two, looking for similarities or dissimilarities. If it is similar, then we say it is a true representation.

Such seems to be our procedure when we are presented with a questionable proposition. When it is suggested, for instance, that "The butler did it," we might consider what it means for the butler to kill, and then consider the reality of the matter, trying to discern whether he really did kill. When we come to the conclusion that the reality of the matter did involve the butler killing, then we recognize that the proposition with this meaning corresponds to the reality, and so we declare the proposition true.

Such declarations of truth involve what Maritain called, following Cajetan, a reflective awareness of conformity *in actu signato*, a kind of stepping back and looking at our own acts of knowing. The contrast is to a reflective awareness *in actu exercito*, which is an immediate awareness of our own awareness.³ In the latter, we are aware of a black bird, and by the very same act we are aware of our awareness; the direct object of our thought is the bird, but, by being aware of the bird, we also become aware of our awareness. In the former, we form a new idea, a conception of our conception, whose direct object is our act of knowing.⁴ Because we have become aware of our act of understanding *in actu exercito*, we can make that act of understanding the object of a new conception, a conception that bears upon our own act of understanding, discerning its nature and properties. Such is the work of logic, which reflects upon so-called second intentions; that is, it reflects upon things as they are in our understanding.

³ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Geoffrey Bles: London, 1959), 89, n. 1.

⁴ Maritain, *Degrees*, 89, n. 1 and 394.

Truth and falsity are certainly a central focus of logic, which lays out propositions as objects to be examined. Similarly, we consider the truth of the proposition "The butler did it," by examining it *in actu signato*. We step back and form a conception of the proposition, then consider whether the proposition corresponds with the reality. In such judgments, the proposition itself becomes the subject of another proposition. "The butler did it" becomes the subject of the larger proposition "'the butler did it' is true" in which the predicate "is true" simply means that the proposition corresponds to reality. Indeed, if we adopt the convention of calling first acts of understanding "concepts" and second acts of understanding "propositions," then it becomes plain that we must form a concept of a proposition. We have a simple act of understanding whose object is the judgment "The butler did it," and which we can in turn pass judgment upon, predicating of it various attributes, such as its being true, false, a complete thought, and so on.

We conceive the proposition, of course, as a mental act referring to a certain state of affairs, the state of the butler killing. The proposition turns out to be true, then, just so long as this state actually is the case. In other words, we must first judge that the butler actually did kill before we can judge that it is true that the butler killed.

When Aquinas states that we become aware of the conformity between our mental acts and reality only in the second act of the intellect, he might mean that only in the second act do we reflect *in actu signato* upon the relationship between our acts of understanding and the thing known. Only then do we step back and form an idea of our idea, comparing it to the reality it represents. Such seems to be a plausible interpretation of Aquinas's explanation, in the *De Veritate*, why the senses do not have truth. He explicitly acknowledges that even the senses have a self-reflective awareness of their own awareness. What distinguishes the intellect, he claims, is the ability to comprehend the nature of its own actions, thereby allowing it to compare its actions as conforming or not to reality.

Truth is in the intellect...as known by the intellect...but it is known by the intellect insofar as the intellect reflects upon its own act, not simply insofar as it knows its own act but insofar as it knows its relation to reality, which cannot be known unless the nature of its very actions are known. This nature, in turn, cannot be known unless the nature of the active principle is known,

which is the intellect itself, whose nature is to conform to things. In this manner, the intellect, which reflects upon itself, knows the truth.⁵

Such comprehension of its own actions fits well the description of reflection *in actu signato*. It would follow, then, that the senses have a reflective knowledge *in actu exercito* but not *in actu signato*. While viewing a bird, there is a kind of awareness of the viewing, but no conception of what it means to view, no second-order analysis of the act of seeing. Consequently, the senses cannot consider whether their actions conform to the reality. The senses cannot make their own actions the direct object of consideration, so as to recognize their various attributes, such as their conformity to reality. For convenience, let us call this reading of Aquinas the second order view of truth.⁶

II. THOUGHT BEARING ON REALITY

Maritain rejects this interpretation of truth, with good reason.⁷ He acknowledges that we can become aware of the conformity between our mind and reality *in actu signato*, but he denies that truth is found only in such judgments. The truth is found also through reflection *in*

⁵ Aquinas, *De Veritate* q. 1, a. 9: "Dicendum, quod veritas est in intellectu et in sensu, sed non eodem modo. In intellectu enim est sicut consequens actum intellectus, et sicut cognita per intellectum. Consequitur namque intellectus operationem, secundum quod iudicium intellectus est de re secundum quod est. Cognoscitur autem ab intellectu secundum quod intellectus reflectitur supra actum suum, non solum secundum quod cognoscit actum suum, sed secundum quod cognoscit proportionem eius ad rem: quae quidem cognosci non potest nisi cognita natura ipsius actus; quae cognosci non potest, nisi natura principii activi cognoscatur, quod est ipse intellectus, in cuius natura est ut rebus conformetur; unde secundum hoc cognoscit veritatem intellectus quod supra seipsum reflectitur."

⁶ Francis M. Tyrrell seems to hold this position in his "Concerning the Nature and Function of the Act of Judgment," *The New Scholasticism* 26 (1952), 393-423; for he claims that the second act of the intellect is primarily an act of reflecting and only secondarily an act directed to reality (398, 402), but then he explicitly rejects the view (404).

⁷ As does John Wippel in "Truth in Thomas Aquinas: Part 2," *Review of Metaphysics* 43 (1990): 543-67, at 562-63.

actu exercito.⁸ Without stepping back and forming a conception of our own ideas, we can become aware of the conformity between our understanding and reality. In the very act of judging "The bird is black" we become aware of the conformity between the idea and the thing known. We need not go on to form, *in actu signato*, a further judgment that "'the bird is black' is true." Indeed, only through the prior awareness, *in actu exercito*, of some propositions conforming to reality can we go on explicitly to ask, *in actu signato*, whether a given proposition conforms to reality.

If truth were found only in explicit truth judgments, in judgments containing the predicate "is true," then most of our judgments would not attain truth, any more than do the senses, since usually we do not make such second-order judgments. We judge that "the butler killed" not that "'the butler killed' is true;" we judge that "The bird is black," not that "'the bird is black' is true." We do not usually pass judgment upon the conformity of our acts of understanding to reality; we pass judgment upon that which the proposition addresses, determining whether this predicate applies to this subject. Indeed, even second-order judgments consider whether conformity, expressed by the predicate "is true," applies to a certain proposition, the proposition being conceived as a reality known.

The second order view reserves truth and falsity not to the second act of the intellect but to a particular subset of second acts, to those in which we directly judge the conformity of our mind to reality. We are left to draw the absurd conclusion that the very propositions we judge to be true are not true most formally. They are no more true than simple acts of apprehension, such as our understanding of the color black, to which we can also apply the predicate "is true," for we recognize the correspondence between the concept and reality. They are no more true than the senses; for we can also judge that the senses conform to reality. Admittedly, it is not the senses themselves that recognize the conformity, but neither, on this interpretation, do we recognize, *in actu exercito*, the conformity of our second acts to reality. On this reading, there is no good reason for saying that propositions can be true but concepts cannot. "The bird is black" can be true or false, but "black" can be neither. Why? Both of them can conform to

⁸ Maritain, *Degrees*, 97, n. 2.

reality; neither of them—on this reading—recognizes its own conformity. The conformity is always recognized in a second-order judgment upon the idea itself.

We must seek to discover, then, in what way the intellect can recognize its own conformity to reality *in actu exercito*. We must show how the intellect, while directly passing judgment upon something else, becomes aware of its own conformity. While judging that “The bird is black,” we become aware that our conception of the bird being black conforms to reality. Since the senses also have a reflective awareness of their own awareness, we must show in what way the intellect’s awareness, in its second act, is distinct from the self-awareness of the senses. The option of turning to a reflective awareness *in actu signato* is excluded. We cannot consider those cases in which the mind gazes upon the content of its own act as a direct object of knowledge; we must consider those cases in which the mind gazes directly upon some external reality. We cannot consider the case in which the mind contemplates the proposition “The bird is black” wondering whether it is true; we must consider the case in which the mind contemplates the bird, relating it to the attribute of being black. We are left, in short, with a reflective awareness *in actu exercito*, an awareness possessed also by the senses. The senses, however, must lack something found in the intellect.

III. WHAT IS PROPER TO THE INTELLECT

Aquinas provides few clues indicating what is distinctive of the intellect’s reflective awareness, but he does say that only in the second act of the intellect does the mind have something of its own, proper to it but not to the reality known. When the act of knowing is in all ways similar to the reality, then no comparison can be made between the two, but when the two are similar and yet distinct, then a comparison can be made.

The notion of truth consists in a conformity [adaequatio] of the thing and the intellect. The very same thing, however, does not conform to itself; rather, a conformity is of diverse things. It follows that the formality of truth is found in the intellect first where the intellect first begins to have something proper to itself, something which the reality outside the mind does not have. Nevertheless, this external reality, having something

corresponding to the intellect, can then be taken to conform to the mind. When the intellect forms the quiddity of things, it has only a likeness of the thing existing outside the mind, even as do the senses when they receive a sensible likeness. But when the intellect begins to pass judgment upon the reality understood, then, this very judgment of the intellect is something proper to it, something not found in the external reality.⁹

Only in combining and dividing, then, do we find a significant difference, allowing us to compare our understanding to the reality. Neither the first act of the intellect nor the senses, says Aquinas, has anything additional beyond what is found in the reality known. The act of judging, however, provides something additional.

A likely candidate for the element proper to judgment is the combination of two concepts, for Aquinas says that even what he calls a division, that is, a negative proposition, involves a psychological union of two concepts, although they refer to a separation in reality.¹⁰ For instance, the proposition, "The bird is not white," brings together in the mind the concepts of "bird" and "white" although it does so only to signify that the two are separate in reality. Perhaps this union of

⁹ Aquinas, *De Veritate* q. 1, a. 3: "Veri enim ratio consistit in adaequatione rei et intellectus; idem autem non adaequatur sibi ipsi, sed aequalitas diversorum est; unde ibi primo invenitur ratio veritatis in intellectu ubi primo intellectus incipit aliquid proprium habere quod res extra animam non habet, sed aliquid ei correspondens, inter quae adaequatio attendi potest. Intellectus autem formans quidditatem rerum, non habet nisi similitudinem rei existentis extra animam, sicut et sensus in quantum accipit speciem sensibilis; sed quando incipit iudicare de re apprehensa, tunc ipsum iudicium intellectus est quoddam proprium ei, quod non invenitur extra in re." It is difficult to translate adaequatio. It has the notion of a conforming or a making equal. Elsewhere, however, he uses the word conformitas (e.g., I, q. 16, a 2). Since Aquinas grants that conformitas can be found between the first act of the intellect and reality while he states here that adaequatio cannot, it may be that "conformity" is too weak of a translation. A sense of making to conform or recognizing a conformity might be needed. We might distinguish between two senses of conformity, one which merely has similarity, perhaps exact likeness, the other which involves a difference that contains a similarity.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *I Peri Hermeneias*, l. 3, n. 4

concepts is the distinctive feature that allows the intellect to make a comparison with reality.

Unfortunately, a sort of union can be found in the first act of the intellect and even in the senses. We can take the concepts "bird" and "black" and unite them into a new concept "black bird." This new concept, although a kind of union of two simpler ideas, is not susceptible of truth, as is the proposition "The bird is black," for we would not say that the combination "black bird" is either true or false. It simply signifies a reality. That which is signified and the reality are one and the same. No comparison between the two is possible.

In a similar manner we can bring together in the imagination the image of the bird and the color black; conversely, we can join the image of the bird with some other color, such as white. These images unite diverse features, and yet we would not call them true or false. The mere union of ideas, then, cannot explain the uniqueness of combining and dividing. What is distinctive of the second act is not a psychological union, says Aquinas, but the very judgment, the very predication of one thing to another.

IV. ABSTRACTION

Since a proposition contains both a subject and a predicate, it might be seen as referring to two objects, for instance, both to a bird and to the color black. In contrast, the combination "black bird" refers to two features melded into a single object.¹¹ In the proposition, the two are kept distinct, although one is applied to the other. That which the concept "black" signifies is applied to that which the concept "bird" signifies. A proposition, then, signifies two objects, but in reality there is only one thing. In other words, what is distinctive in the union of a proposition is that the elements remain in some sense separate, each signifying its proper object, but they are united through an application of one to the other.

While the complex concept "black bird" narrows the reference to just those birds that are black, the proposition "The bird is black," maintains the distinctive reference of the concept bird and, rather than narrowing it, provides additional information. We learn of "bird,"

¹¹ Maritain, *Degrees*, 395.

which has a distinctive reference of its own, that it is black. We learn of "black" that it applies to bird. In contrast, for the concept "black bird" we have a whole new complex nature or essence under consideration. We are not considering "bird" and know in addition that it is black; rather, we are considering "black bird." Such a consideration does not reveal whether bird is anything separate from black or black is separate from bird. The union here is too tight. Predication, on the other hand, considers two objects as separate, but one applying to the other. In other words, the element of combination and division that might allow self-reflective awareness of conformity is not its union, but the distinctiveness of its elements.

Maritain suggests as much in the title of his work, *Distinguishing in Order to Unite*. The union found in predication first distinguishes and then unites. The distinction that Maritain later identifies as essential to the second act is the abstraction carried out in the first act. In some way, the truth realized in the second act requires the abstraction of the first act. Simple apprehension, he says, prepares the mind for judgment.¹² Evidently, the second act, by joining two or more simple apprehensions, reconstructs the original unity within reality, a unity that was broken through abstraction: "The judgment restores to the transobjective subject the unity that simple apprehension (by laying hold of different objects of thought in it) has shattered. That unity could not hold precedence in the mind since, quite to the contrary, the mind undoes it only to reconstitute it afterwards."¹³

Through abstraction, we comprehend some form or feature by itself, apart from the conditions in which it exists. We can grasp "bird," for instance, apart from any particular colors it might have, apart from some particular size, or apart from any particular weight. Similarly, we can grasp the color "black," apart from its being realized in a bird or a dog or in any particular thing.¹⁴ Even the senses have some measure of abstraction, since they know only a slice of a reality, for example, the sense of sight knows colors apart from sounds and odors, and so on.

¹² Maritain, *Degrees*, 98, n. 2.

¹³ Maritain, *Degrees*, 98.

¹⁴ Although, when conceived concretely, it is conceived as an existing thing, just not in this or that particular thing.

Nevertheless, the senses always know an object with its concrete conditions, in some concrete realization. In contrast, the intellect can know the color black apart from its concrete realizations. It knows the color black as it might exist under this condition, in a bird, or in some other condition, in a bear, or in any other possible condition. The sense of sight knows the color black apart from sounds, but it always knows the color black under this or that particular condition.

The combination involved with predication maintains this distinction, this abstraction, in a way that complex concepts such as "black bird" do not. In this concept, we are no longer considering a bird as a kind separate from color, for black has been incorporated into our concept. These complex concepts, then, do not reconstruct reality, but merely provide a different abstraction of reality. In contrast, propositions take the shattered reality and put it back together again, applying one piece to another.

Each of the elements is referred to, but as united or applied to one another. We are referring to "bird," but with "black" applied to it. We are referring to "black," but as applied to "bird." These two views of what is one in reality provide the perspective of truth. Just as two different visual perspectives provide the added dimension of depth, so the two formalities directed to the same reality provide the added dimension of truth.¹⁵ Our understanding has the depth of truth because we perceive that which is a bird, as something coherent in itself, apart from being black, yet we see that this thing referred to is also black. The diverse references become united in something beyond themselves.

In any true affirmative proposition, the predicate and subject must signify what is in some way the same in reality and diverse in formality, which is evident in propositions which have accidental predication as well as in those which predicate essentially. It is plain that "man" and "white" are in the same subject but differ in formality, for the notion of man is distinct from the notion of white. Similarly, when I say "Man is an

¹⁵ Maritain (*Degrees*, 97, 395) says that the predicate and subject, which differ in notion, are identical in the thing; the two formalities are one within the object.

animal,” the very thing that is a man is truly an animal. In the very same supposit is found both sensible nature, from which it is called animal, and rational nature, from which it is called man. Therefore, the subject and predicate are the same in supposit but diverse in formality....To the diversity of formality corresponds a plurality of subject and predicate, while the intellect signifies the identity in reality through composition.¹⁶

A distinction must be drawn between the thing “out there” and the formality in which it is understood.¹⁷ In reality, the bird is one thing with many features or aspects. In our knowledge, however, we know the bird piecemeal, abstracting this or that feature of it: for instance, we know it insofar as it is a bird or we know it insofar as it is black. What is one materially, as thing, is many formally, as object known. As Aquinas says, the subject and predicate refer to diverse formalities but to what is one in reality.

If all we know is “bird,” then we have no notion that there is a difference between this formality that we know and the thing; if all we know is “black” then also we cannot perceive that there is a difference between this formality known and the thing. Only when we know both “bird” and “black,” yet as united, do we perceive that there must be

¹⁶ Aquinas, I, q. 13, a. 12: “In qualibet propositione affirmativa vera, oportet quod praedicatum et subiectum significant idem secundum rem aliquo modo, et diversum secundum rationem. Et hoc patet tam in propositionibus quae sunt de praedicato accidentali, quam in illis quae sunt de praedicato substantiali. Manifestum est enim quod homo et albus sunt idem subiecto, et differunt ratione, alia enim est ratio hominis, et alia ratio albi. Et similiter cum dico homo est animal, illud enim ipsum quod est homo, vere animal est; in eodem enim supposito est et natura sensibilis, a qua dicitur animal, et rationalis, a qua dicitur homo. Unde hic etiam praedicatum et subiectum sunt idem supposito, sed diversa ratione. Sed et in propositionibus in quibus idem praedicatur de seipso, hoc aliquo modo invenitur; in quantum intellectus id quod ponit ex parte subiecti, trahit ad partem suppositi, quod vero ponit ex parte praedicati, trahit ad naturam formae in supposito existentis, secundum quod dicitur quod praedicata tenentur formaliter, et subiecta materialiter. Huic vero diversitati quae est secundum rationem, respondet pluralitas praedicati et subiecti, identitatem vero rei significat intellectus per ipsam compositionem.”

¹⁷ Maritain, *Degrees*, 93.

more to the bird than just “bird” and more to the black thing than just “black.” There must be some thing that is both “bird” and “black.” The dual perspective of grasping “bird”—as distinct in itself—and “black”—also as distinct—yet realized in this one thing, provides the realization that the formality known is distinct from the thing.

In contrast, the complex concept “black bird” does not separate the thing from the formality known. Rather, a complex formality is now known. “Bird” and “black” are not known as two distinct formalities but as a single complex formality. Without the separation, the abstraction of one from the other, the mind does not recognize the thing beyond the formality. It gazes upon the nature as a simple unit, without anything additional coming to it. Or, says Aquinas, it is aware of the thing that has the nature;¹⁸ in so doing, however, it knows nothing of the thing beyond its having the nature. Even the combined concept “black bird” does not consider bird as separate from black, requiring something beyond its meaning to bring in black; rather, it considers bird precisely as black. Similarly, when the imagination forms an image of a black bird, there is but a single complex formality known. Predication, on the other hand, keeps bird distinct but adds black onto it. Or, rather, it keeps the black thing distinct, and applies it to the thing that is a bird. When the world is not shattered into diverse formalities, then it cannot be seen as distinct from the formalities.

V. PREDICATION

Abstraction itself, of course, cannot be that which is proper to the intellect, allowing it to perceive a conformity with reality, for abstraction is found in the first act. The judgment or predication itself, says Aquinas, is that which is distinctive of the intellect. Still, abstraction is necessary, in order to provide the two perspectives upon a single reality. Predication goes beyond abstraction, applying one

¹⁸ See *Expositio De Hebdomadibus*, lect. 2: “Aliter autem se habet in his quae significantur in concreto. Nam homo significatur ut qui habet humanitatem, et album ut quod habet albedinem. Ex hoc autem quod homo habet humanitatem vel albedinem, non prohibetur habere aliquid aliud, quod non pertinet ad rationem horum, nisi solum quod est oppositum his: et ideo homo et album possunt aliquid aliud habere quam humanitatem vel albedinem.”

thing to another. It is this application that is distinctive of the intellect. We must not suppose, however, that the psychological act of understanding is itself the something distinctive, for all acts of understanding, whether first or second, are quite distinct from the object known. Aquinas cautions us against looking for a conformity between the psychological act of the intellect and the reality. Rather, we must look for a conformity between reality and that which the intellect says.

The truth of the intellect is a conformity between the intellect and reality, insofar as the intellect says to be what is or not to be what is not; therefore, the truth pertains to that which (in the intellect) is said, not to the operation by which it is said. The intellect is not determined to the truth such that the very act of understanding is conformed to the reality, since the reality is sometimes material while the understanding is immaterial. Rather, that which the intellect says and knows in its act of understanding must be conformed to the reality, so that things are such in reality as the intellect says.¹⁹

We must distinguish, then, between the act of understanding and that which it says or signifies. The act of understanding a bird is one thing; what it refers to is another, namely, a bird. We will be sorely disappointed if we seek a conformity between a bird and our act of understanding a bird, for the one is material and the other immaterial. What we should seek, rather, is a conformity between the bird and what we understand or assert of it, for although our understanding is immaterial, it means or signifies something material.²⁰

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 59, n. 2: "Cum enim veritas intellectus sit adaequatio intellectus et rei, secundum quod intellectus dicit esse quod est vel non esse quod non est, ad illud in intellectu veritas pertinet quod intellectus dicit, non ad operationem qua illud dicit. Non enim ad veritatem intellectus exigitur ut ipsum intelligere rei aequetur, cum res interdum sit materialis, intelligere vero immateriale: sed illud quod intellectus intelligendo dicit et cognoscit, oportet esse rei aequatum, ut scilicet ita sit in re sicut intellectus dicit."

²⁰ Maritain (*Degrees*, 392) says concepts differ from reality according to *esse in*, that is, insofar as they exist in the mind, not according to *esse ad*, that is, according to their intentional content or meaning.

Any conformity involves a comparison between two things. We must drop the supposition that the conformity of truth is between an act of the mind and some reality, as if we view our act of mind and then we view the reality, comparing the two as similar to one another. Rather, says Aquinas, truth involves a conformity between what the intellect knows or says and some reality. Little wonder, then, that the full sense of conformity is lacking for the first act of the intellect. In this simple act of understanding, the intellect grasps some feature of reality. That which the mind knows *just is* this feature. There are not two things here, one of which may be said to be similar to the other. There is only one thing: that which the intellect knows, which is also some reality. Even a complex concept, such as “black bird,” involves only one thing known.

The second act of the intellect, on the other hand, gives us a subject and predicate, two things that now can be compared with one another. It does not compare them, however, according to their formal notions, as if it were considering the similarities and differences between the nature of bird and the nature of black, the way we might compare birds and mammals. Rather, it compares the application of one to the other, and this very application is a construct or activity of the mind. We have something *of the mind*, not so much *in the mind*, that can be compared to the reality, namely, the saying of one thing of another. The saying “is black” is compared to the reality of the bird, which is known through the subject, and found to be in conformity. We are aware, then, that what we say conforms to the reality.

Abstraction allows this comparison, in part, because the subject and predicate have distinct content, so that what is known as black is distinct from what is known as bird, and yet they are perceived to coincide. They are different yet one, so there must be something beyond these formalities by which they are united, some reality beyond what is known in abstraction. More profoundly, perhaps, abstraction allows this comparison because it frees our knowledge from the material conditions of things. With our senses, we must always know things as bound to the singular. Our senses cannot free up the quality “black” so that it can be applied to something else, such as a bird. Even our imagination knows the quality black as concrete, and if it first imagines a black square and then a black bird, it has not applied the first image of black to a second image of bird, but has rather formed a

new concrete image of black in the shape of bird. With our intellect, on the other hand, we can separate out "black," knowing it apart from the concrete conditions of existing in this bird or in that cat; consequently, we are free to apply "black" to diverse subjects, for the conception of it is not bound to this or that subject.

Without abstraction, then, there could be no predication. We could not know two objects as distinct, and we could not take one object and apply it to another. This application is something peculiar to the mind; it signifies a union not found in the bare formality of the subject. The predicate "is black," for instance, when applied to "bird" signifies a union, but the very idea of a bird does not contain this notion. We are able, then, to compare this application, this saying of the moment, to the reality; when we perceive conformity, then we have the truth.

The judgment we pass is upon some reality, for example, upon a bird that is black. We are not judging that our act of mind conforms to reality; this we do only *in actu signato*. *In actu exercito* we pass judgment upon things such as birds. When we judge, however, that black applies to bird, we are judging that that which we say, this union or application known in the predicate, corresponds to the reality as known in the subject. No comparison, nor even any saying, could be made without abstraction.

The senses, forever bound to concrete realizations, are unable to apply one thing known to another. All they perceive is in the concrete, unable to be lifted and applied to another. Even though the senses grasp the world in slices, they cannot pull the world apart, freeing one slice to unite it with another. The senses can never take one reality and lay it against another, knowing them as distinct yet united. What the senses know, then, does indeed conform to reality, but the senses can never recognize this conformity. They always know the reality they dwell upon, but never know something about it to compare with another.

VI. SELF-AWARENESS

The intellect is aware that what it says corresponds to reality. Prior to combining and dividing the mind does not recognize a difference between the reality known and the thing in reality, for the simple reason that there is no difference; the first act of the intellect can refer to an object under only one formality, even if it is a complex formality.

When diverse formalities signified converge upon one thing, however, then we become aware of a difference. We can also become aware that, despite this difference, there is correspondence. Truth and falsity may now be found in that which is signified by the mind. To judge that the reality is so is also to become aware that the proposition that refers to this reality conforms to it.

[The second act of] the intellect can know the relation of conformity, so that in it alone can truth be known. Therefore, the philosopher says in book vi of the *Metaphysics* that the truth—in the sense of becoming aware of the truth—is only in the mind. To know this relation of conformity is nothing other than to judge that something is so or not so in reality, which is to compose and divide. Therefore, the intellect knows the truth only by composing and dividing in its judgment, which is itself true if it conforms to reality, as when the intellect judges to be what really is or not to be what is not.²¹

The senses can attain none of this. While they have a kind of self-awareness, a kind of consciousness, they are not aware that their actions are about some reality. They do not recognize anything distinct from what they grasp. As such, they cannot sort out the object they know from the thing in reality. In no way, then, are they aware of any conformity between the object of their awareness and some reality beyond their actions.

What makes all of this possible to the intellect is the power of abstraction. The senses always know concrete individual things and are

²¹ Aquinas, I *Peri Hermeneias*, l. 3, n. 9: “Intellectus autem potest huiusmodi habitudinem conformitatis cognoscere; et ideo solus intellectus potest cognoscere veritatem. Unde et philosophus dicit in VI *Metaphysicae* quod veritas est solum in mente, sicut scilicet in cognoscente veritatem. Cognoscere autem praedictam conformitatis habitudinem nihil est aliud quam iudicare ita esse in re vel non esse: quod est componere et dividere; et ideo intellectus non cognoscit veritatem, nisi componendo vel dividendo per suum iudicium. Quod quidem iudicium, si consonet rebus, erit verum, puta cum intellectus iudicat rem esse quod est, vel non esse quod non est. Falsum autem quando dissonat a re, puta cum iudicat non esse quod est, vel esse quod non est.”

unable to separate out one aspect of a thing from another.²² They grasp a black bird as a single whole, without identifying its being black as distinct from its being a bird. "Black," therefore, cannot be said of "bird," for there is no separate awareness of black to be said of anything.

In contrast, the intellect distinguishes the color black from being a bird. Since it does not belong to the notion of a bird that it be black and it does not belong to the notion of the color black that it be a bird, these two are truly known distinctly. If a bird should be black, then, it can only be on account of something beyond what is known in bird, only because the bird is more than just bird. It must not merely be such; it must also be. Only because "bird" is distinct from "black" can one be said of another. Without separation, there is no application of one thing to another, for there is only one thing. This very application of one thing to another, however, is not found in reality, where various features of reality simply exist together. We find a bird that is black, not black being applied to a bird. Abstraction, then, allows the intellect to perceive its own distinct "saying" or application. The mind asserts something about reality; when the reality, known in the subject, is such, then the mind is in conformity.²³

As we are self-reflectively aware of our knowledge that the bird is black, we are also aware that we have asserted black of the bird. We are aware of something in our thought not found in the reality. Prior to this point, our thought has always focused on the reality. A knowledge of "bird" or "black" is a knowledge of things, not of our awareness of things. Now, however, while still focusing upon the reality, such as the bird being black, our self-awareness might be better called *self-consciousness*, a distinct recognition of our minds as different, not simply as present, but as unique and active.

²² Except that their proper objects are limited, for example, sight knows colors while hearing knows sounds. Because the proper object of imagination is the sensible as absent, it must "abstract" from both time and place.

²³ As Patrick Lee argues in his "Aquinas on Knowledge of Truth and Existence" (*New Scholasticism* 60 [1986]: 46-71, at 65-67), the second act of the intellect makes an assertion of one thing to another, becomes aware of some distinct existence, and recognizes its own conformity, all in a single act.

The life of the senses divorced from reason is rather flat. Objects present themselves, animals are aware of them and respond. While they are conscious of objects, they do not clearly distinguish the object from their awareness of them. While they know realities, they do not know them precisely as realities. They can be familiar with objects from past experience, but they cannot assert that one object is something else. Faced with a Humean stream of perceptions, they can react, but they cannot ask whether anything is true. Like Hume, they cannot even know their own minds, for they perceive nothing distinctive of their minds.²⁴ While they have a self-reflective awareness of their own awareness, they cannot step back, *in actu signato* and consider the nature of their thoughts. Whatever notion they might have of themselves, if any, is not of a mind self-aware of other realities.

Reason's power to abstract, then, opens the doorway to truth. It distinguishes so that it might then unite. Pulling the world apart into abstract formalities, it is then able to put the world together again through assertions of one thing to another. The fragmentation of the world is a prerequisite to recognize the world around us.

²⁴ Maritain (*Degrees*, 89, n. 1) states that only in judging do we have reflective knowledge of our existence.