

Brian Kemple. *Ens Primum Cognitum in Thomas Aquinas and the Tradition: The Philosophy of Being as First Known.* Brill 2017. 376 pp. \$99.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9789004352391).

William James once alluded to being-as-first-known as ‘a big blooming buzzing confusion, as free from contradiction in its “much-at-onceness” as it is all alive and evidently there’ (*Writings 1901-1910*, ‘Some Problems of Philosophy,’ 1008). Thomists such as Thomas Cajetan and John Poinset talk about the actual confused cognition of being-as-first-known, but it is Avicenna who first asserts that ‘existent,’ ‘thing,’ and ‘necessary’ are impressed in the soul in a primary way (*Metaphysics of the Healing*, 1.5). Thomas Aquinas similarly states ‘that which the intellect first conceives as most well-known ... is being (*ens*)’ (*De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1). That being is most well known (*quasi notissimum*) means that other notions express a mode of being not expressed by the term ‘being.’ We know everything-that-we-know in light of being, and apart from being we cannot know anything. As new wine carefully decanted into old bottles, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Cajetan, Poinset, Etienne Gilson, and Jacques Maritain develop their own interpretations of being-as-first-known. Brian Kemple summarizes and criticizes these interpretations, disentangles some complex related terms, and points to deeply significant implications.

A study of being-as-first-known should attract those in philosophy of being, no doubt, but it should also interest those in philosophy of mind and language. Unlike speech or communication, language is a distinctive faculty or cognitive capacity specific to the human species. It presupposes a grasp of something (a formal object) of which no other power is capable. The formal object of the human mind is being-as-first-known. As color is to sight, being is to the mind. Language is also a system of modeling the world in cognition, and being-as-first-known is primitive. The primary and principal object of cognition is being ($\tau\acute{o} \delta\acute{\nu}$, *mawjūd*, *ens*), since even non-being is a negation of being, so language necessarily models being-as-first-known. Most interpreters of Thomas ignore that being-as-first-known is even prior to the subject of metaphysics (11), the scientifically-separated being-as-Being, because ‘when we first apprehend being, it is not as being’ (135). Being-as-first-known is rather ‘the fundamental ground of human experience, that through which every human individual constitutes his or her species-specific world of objects understood as beings’ (350).

Kemple introduces the work by ‘escaping the framework of modernity’ (1). The widely accepted Kantian opposition between the subject and object, which makes self-representation central, obfuscates the Latin distinction. Among the Latins and within the Aristotelian tradition, a subject is rather something that exists whether or not anyone is aware of it, and an object is something present to a power, especially to a cognitive power. The subject exists independently of cognition (*ens naturae*), and the object exists purely on the basis of a cognitive act (*ens rationis*) (7). Another widely accepted division today is that of realism and idealism. Even neo-Thomists, such as Gilson and Maritain, situate themselves along this false dichotomy. They embrace the made-up fissure as they herald the realism of Thomas. As Kemple states, ‘this opposition of *ens reale* and *ens rationis* ... oversimplifies the nature of *res* and the “real” as well as the manner in which the cognitive faculties of the human being interact with the world’ (3). Thomas does not use the term *ens reale* but rather treats cognition-independent being (*ens naturae*) and cognition-dependent being (*ens rationis*) fluidly enough that *ens primum cognitum* is indifferent to each. Although Gilson himself might have protested, Kemple offers Peter Redpath’s *Gilson Studies* (of Brill) a much more accurate and nuanced notion of ‘Thomistic realism.’

Regrettably, despite his scholarly treatment of each author, Kemple ignores one major relevant text by Thomas. Since Thomas does not devote a large treatise on being-as-first-known, unlike

Scotus and others, Kemple includes a number of discrete statements from Thomas, as well as an important and in-depth discussion on the operations of the agent intellect and the formation of concepts. But Kemple omits a central discussion in *De Trinitate* (q. 1, a. 3) on ‘whether God is the first known by the mind.’ Thomas here describes and rejects the anonymous (*quidam*) positions of two popular solutions to what is first known: ‘God himself’ and ‘the influx of God’s divine light.’ Thomas also offers his own solution through an account of ‘what is first known to man’ (*quod primo cognitum homini*). Thomas’s entire discussion is well worth exploring. It is noteworthy for example that, in this early text, Thomas explicitly distinguishes between universal and integral wholes, a distinction Kemple accuses the ‘young Thomas’ of confusing (209). The *De Trinitate* passage is cited by Jan Aertsen whose work, Kemple states, ‘should be read by any serious scholar of Thomas’ (240, no. 47), yet Kemple seems to ignore Aertsen’s own treatment of being-as-first-known in the same work (*Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas’s Way of Thought*, Brill 1988, 218-29).

In the vein of a creative retrieval, Kemple interprets the nature of relation for Thomas as being towards (*esse ad*), a mode of existence irreducible to the subjectivities from which it arises. The essence of relation is ‘essentially suprasubjective, inasmuch as it extends to some object (a *terminus*), inherently public, beyond the subject upon which it is founded (the *fundamentum*)’ (281). A relation (e.g., fatherhood) is not identical to its subject/foundation (e.g., the father) nor to its object/term (e.g., the son) but is rather indeterminate to either subject or object. The father or son could die, and the relation itself would remain, albeit as cognition-dependent. Poinot interprets the *ratio* of relation as something abstracted from both cognition-dependent and cognition-independent being (289). Apart from its subject and object, relation is essentially a suprasubjective being (*esse ad*) whose ‘equiprimordial’ counterpart is subjective or categorial being (*esse in*), which either exists in itself (substance) or in another (accident). The upshot here is that being-as-first-known embraces both the suprasubjective (*esse ad*) and the subjective (*esse in*).

Kemple’s effort to read into Thomas a suprasubjective relation (*esse ad*) that is equiprimordial to categorial being (*esse in*) seems noble but incomplete. For example, according to Deely, whom Kemple cites at length, ‘the relation itself, so founded, is not something inherent (*inhaerens*) but something respecting (*respicens*), something over and above the subjectivity upon which it depends for its being’ (*Purely Objective Reality*, 30). But Thomas’s Commentary on the *Metaphysics* states that relations seem farther removed from substance than the rest of the categories insofar as these relations have a more imperfect mode of being: ‘And for this reason they inhere (*inhaerent*) in substance by means of the other categories’ (*In XII Meta.*, lect. 4, no. 2457). This text would support the view that ‘relation itself’ is just an inherent accidental form. Kemple might well respond with the distinction between ontological relations *secundum dici* (‘of accident to substance which subsist within the independently existing being’) and transcendental relations *secundum esse* (‘which subsist between that being and others, both cognition-independent and cognition-dependent’) (275). Kemple knows his subject well and helpfully disambiguates difficult distinctions such as *relativa secundum dici/esse*, but his treatment of Thomas’s texts seems insufficient. For example, if Thomas implicitly held to suprasubjective relation, then he would have relied upon it to resolve the fact that the relation of creation considered in its being (*secundum esse*) is posterior to the subsisting subject (e.g. *De Potentia* q. 3, a. 3 ad 3). But it is not clear that he does.

Kemple’s book is an excellent contribution to a study of being-as-first-known among the major scholastic authors, with additional forays into the writings of Martin Heidegger and Robert Sokolowski. One tantalizing subtopic throughout the work points to the relevance of ‘cognitive objectivity’ for ‘socially-constituted reality.’ The reality of a ‘professor’ or a ‘judge,’ for example, arises both as cognition-independent (e.g., capability to teach/judge) and cognition-dependent (e.g.,

recognition by university/state) (325). Besides the already mentioned omission of a central text, Kempel's work suffers in two stylistic respects. First, the monograph contains dissertation-related foibles such as Latin spelling errors, references to 'this dissertation,' and 52 pages of block quotations with ten lines or more. Moreover, the authority of its dissertation advisor (the late John Deely) looms with insertions of 'semiotic animal,' 'alloanimal,' 'hardcore reality,' and the nearly constant and irksome translation of '*ratio*' as 'rationale.' '*Ratio*' is difficult to translate, but it is untoward and unhelpful to have Poinset state, '*ens* is the first knowable rationale' (85), or 'the formal and proper rationale of the intuitive and the formal and proper rationale of the abstractive are not rationales which essentially and intrinsically change cognition' (70). Second, the monograph's organization could be clearer and more streamlined. The chapters start with Scotus as a 'foil', then treat Cajetan and Poinset, then Maritain and Gilson, then finally to Thomas's account, only to return to Poinset with an appearance by Francisco Suárez.

Gaston G. LeNotre, Dominican University College