

THE TRUTHS OF METAPHYSICS

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I

TODAY it would seem to be rather generally assumed that Kant had posed a problem for any future metaphysics which no future metaphysics has either been able to solve, or perhaps even tried very hard to solve. And it would further seem to be the consensus that Kant's famous challenge to metaphysics really turned on what, in the broad sense of the term, might be called a set of simple logical considerations, viz. that any judgment, and hence any metaphysical judgment, must needs be either analytic or synthetic; that if metaphysical judgments be analytic, then, in modern parlance, they cannot be truths about the world; and that if they be synthetic, they cannot very well be empirical truths, since they would then be lacking in those very properties of necessity and universality which Kant felt had to characterize metaphysical truths, if such there be. Accordingly, on the Kantian analysis there is no logical slot left for metaphysical judgments save that of the synthetic a priori. And into this slot, for the well-known Kantian reasons, metaphysical judgments cannot seem to be fitted.

That such a predicament has not left metaphysicians utterly without resource goes without saying, metaphysicians being the kind of breed they are. Indeed, in this country in recent years—to judge at least by the example of Whitehead—the resource of metaphysicians has usually been to regard metaphysics as a speculative discipline. So regarded, the method of metaphysics becomes one of projecting what might be called world hypotheses. Or to use Whitehead's own words, it is a "method of imaginative rationalization,"<sup>1</sup> "the verification of [such] a rationalistic scheme being sought in its general success, and not in the peculiar certainty, or initial clarity, of its first principles."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, "meta-

physical categories are not dogmatic statements of the obvious; they are tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities."<sup>3</sup>

Now with reference to the Kantian challenge to metaphysics, this sort of speculative procedure in metaphysics in effect foregoes any strict claims to what Kant felt to be essential to the logical character of any metaphysical truth, viz. that it be universal and necessary and hence a priori. This is not to say, of course, that Whitehead did not in his own way insist that a "philosophic scheme should be 'necessary,' in the sense of bearing in itself its own warrant of universality throughout all experience."<sup>4</sup> And yet Whitehead would be the first to insist that the claim to "necessity in universality"<sup>5</sup> of his own metaphysical scheme was one that he had put forward only tentatively, and as a claim still to be verified, not as something obvious and self-evident in itself. In other words, a speculative metaphysics of the Whiteheadian variety, rather than meeting the Kantian challenge concerning the logical character of metaphysical truths, would seem to prefer simply to try to outflank Kant's position by not claiming strict a priori certainty for metaphysical principles at all.

Now without meaning in any way to disparage metaphysics thus conceived as a speculative enterprise, I should like in this paper to voice the question as to whether Kant's challenge to metaphysics might not be met rather differently and more directly. Why might there not be genuine metaphysical principles that are universal and necessary and whose truth is guaranteed by an appeal to the law of contradiction, i.e., their opposites being simply inconceivable because self-contradictory? In other words, Kant notwithstanding, what is there to prevent metaphysical truths from being analytic?

To be sure, even to suggest such a possibility must strike everyone as being at once useless and wrong-headed. For who today wants to return to dogmatism in metaphysics? There may well be signs on the contemporary philosophical scene of a genuine revival of metaphysics; but a revival of dogmatic metaphysics, never!

<sup>1</sup> *Process and Reality* (New York, 1930), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12 (wording slightly altered).

<sup>3</sup> *Process and Reality*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Still, could it not just be that there is little more than the authority of Kant to warrant this wide-spread view that to commit oneself to analytic truth in metaphysics is to commit oneself to dogmatic metaphysics of the type of the 17th century rationalists? To cite but one counterexample, it must surely be conceded that Aristotle—who, after all, could scarcely be accused of being a disciple of Descartes—insisted quite unequivocally that all demonstration leading to scientific knowledge, as contrasted with mere dialectical demonstration, must proceed from premises that are “primary, immediate, better known than and prior to the conclusion,”<sup>6</sup> and further that such premises must be “necessary basic truths,” those “attributes that attach essentially to their subjects” being those that “attach necessarily to them.”<sup>7</sup>

And so far from being restricted to Aristotle in one’s appeal, it would seem that the more one reflects on the matter, the more it becomes apparent that throughout the entire history of Western metaphysics there have been constant and repeated appeals to principles that are held to be self-evident, and necessary, and such that they could not but be true. It’s as if there were something about the very nature of the metaphysical enterprise that would seem to render inescapable such appeals to principles that are somehow “first” and are distinguished by their “peculiar certainty or initial clarity.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus to cite but a few examples, taken more or less at random, there is the Augustinian principle, which Gilson has singled out in one of his books as being of peculiar significance: “There is no true being where there is also non-being” (*non enim est ibi verum esse, ubi est et non esse*).<sup>9</sup> Think about such a principle for a moment. What possible warrant could there be for its truth, other than its obviousness, its self-evidence, its peculiar certainty, etc.? For how could a thing be thought truly to be or to exemplify being in anything like a true and proper sense, if it were not free from all admixture of non-being? That true being must

<sup>6</sup> *Posterior Analytics*, 71 b 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 74 b 5-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Process and Reality*, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Etienne Gilson, *Philosophie et Incarnation selon Saint Augustin* (Montreal, 1947), p. 29.

exclude non-being is not the sort of principle that is advanced merely as an hypothesis to be verified in the light of its general success—this goes almost without saying. Nor is it any kind of synthetic truth, be it a priori or a posteriori. No, its warrant is clearly intrinsic to itself: to say of something that it truly is just is to exclude every trace of non-being from it. Anything else would go counter to the clearly intended meanings of the words and terms involved: it would be no less than self-contradictory.

Or as another example, take Leibniz’ celebrated metaphysical principle that still lives on today in the metaphysics of logical atomism: “And there must be simple substances, since there are compounds: for a compound is nothing but a collection or aggregatum of simple things.”<sup>10</sup> Once again, what other ground could there be for this principle that if there are composites there must be simples, unless it be the very sense and meaning of terms like “composite” and “simple”? In short, such a metaphysical truth can be no other than a self-evident truth—a truth of reason, and not of fact.

Or finally, take Whitehead’s own ontological principle, “Apart from things that are actual, there is nothing, nothing in fact or in

<sup>10</sup> *Monadology*, No. 2. In connection with this example from Leibniz, a difficulty may suggest itself which could return to plague us again and again in the course of our argument in this paper. The difficulty concerns what might be called the incidence of that necessity which is supposed to attach to metaphysical principles such as the one here cited from Leibniz. Is the necessity here involved only a hypothetical necessity, e.g., if there are composites, there must be simples? Or is it a categorical necessity, e.g., “all composites are composed of ultimate simples”?

With respect to such a question, our reply is that it makes no difference whether the necessity be hypothetical or categorical; in either case the statement or judgment which is thus held to be necessarily true is a statement about the world. To be sure, in order to defend this contention adequately, we would need to show the sense in which the merely possible and the merely hypothetical nevertheless do have a bearing on the actual. But to show this would carry us rather far afield from the immediate concerns of this paper. Likewise, the matter is further complicated by an assumption taken over from modern logic that no universal proposition has existential import, that they are all hypothetical,—and that therefore they cannot be judgments about the real world. But again, this somewhat uncritical assumption is not a thing we can attempt to deal with within the scope of this paper.

efficacy."<sup>11</sup> Now I would suggest that as this principle functions in Whitehead's system, it does not seem to have quite the same logical character as many of the other "categories of explanation," alongside which it is ranged. For in the case of these latter, it is clear that they do function as hypotheses which are to be regarded as being verified in the light of their success in their role as categories of explanation—e.g. "That the actual world is a process, and that the process is the becoming of actual entities,"<sup>12</sup> or "That there are two species of prehensions: (a) 'positive prehensions,' which are termed 'feelings' and (b) 'negative prehensions,' which are said to 'eliminate from feeling.'"<sup>13</sup> Clearly, these latter principles are synthetic: they are not self-evident, and there is nothing about them which would enable us to say that anything else be simply inconceivable, or that to deny them would amount to a self-contradiction.

But how different is the ontological principle. For how could anything be efficacious in regard to becoming unless it were itself actual, i.e., unless it pertained either to the character of some actual entity in the actual world of that concrescence, or to the character of the subject which is in process of concrescence?<sup>14</sup> Surely, here is a metaphysical principle which is simply its own reason for being, or better its own reason for being true. For that anything should in fact be or be causally efficacious without actually being—this is simply unthinkable; it is even self-contradictory.

So much, then, by way of illustration of how in fact metaphysical systems, both ancient and modern, do seem to rest on principles that are not merely universal and necessary in the manner of synthetic a priori propositions, as Kant thought, but also in the manner of analytic truths, or truths the opposite of which would be self-contradictory. But why is this the case? Why is it that metaphysics cannot seem to dispense with analytic truths from among its first principles?

To this question, the usual answers that would be given today would no doubt be along the lines of Kant's answer to the question

<sup>11</sup> *Process and Reality*, p. 64. Cf. also p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

of why metaphysical truths must be a priori rather than based on experience: "Its principles . . . must never be taken from experience; for it is not physical but metaphysical knowledge, i.e., lying beyond experience. Thus neither outer experience, which provides the source of physics proper, nor inner experience, which provides the basis for empirical psychology, will be the ground of metaphysics. Metaphysics is thus knowledge *a priori*, or out of pure understanding and pure reason."<sup>15</sup>

The trouble, though, with giving this sort of a reason for the a priori (and, by an easy extension, for the analytic) character of metaphysical statements is that it has the effect of confining the objects of metaphysical investigation exclusively to the region of the wholly transcendent and trans-empirical, i.e., to objects such as God, pure spirits, the unmoved mover, the ultimate confines of space, etc. And yet why should it not be quite proper to the study of metaphysics to consider such things as the nature of change and motion, of causation, of time, of substance, of mind, etc.? In other words, while it is entirely proper to want to distinguish metaphysics from physics, it hardly seems necessary to do so by merely equating the physical with the empirically observable, and the metaphysical with the meta-empirical—or, as Kant does, simply to interpret "metaphysical" as meaning "lying beyond experience."

Instead, I would like to suggest a very different reason why an undertaking such as metaphysics cannot dispense with truths and principles that are necessary in the sense of being self-evident and such that their opposites are simply inconceivable. The reason simply is that to know the nature of anything, to know what anything is essentially, necessarily involves the use of propositions that are self-evident, or the truth of which is warranted by these same propositions considered just in themselves, or whose opposites are unthinkable because self-contradictory.

And to see why any and all "what" statements, i.e., statements that set forth what a thing is essentially, can only be analytic or self-evident, one has but to consider that rather more ancient and alternative doctrine of the predicables, which nowadays tends un-

<sup>15</sup> *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. by P. Lucas (Manchester, 1953), p. 15.

fortunately to be passed over and forgotten in favor of the more recent and fashionable Kantian division of predicable relationships simply into analytic and synthetic. On the older scheme, it will be remembered, a predicate is thought of as being related to its subject, as being either its genus, differentia, definition (or species), property, or accident. Consider now the first three of these five predicable relationships. They are all supposed to be such as to express what the subject is essentially. And, according to the canons of traditional Aristotelian logic, in the case of no one of these essential predicable relationships can the pertinence of the predicate to the subject be demonstrated through any third or mediating term. Or to put it in more modern terminology, the truth of propositions involving these predicable relationships cannot but be analytic.

Moreover, the reason for this is that there just isn't any way in which a cause or a reason can be given for a thing's being the thing it essentially is. For example, to take a somewhat trivial illustration, just what sort of cause or reason could be given for a triangle's being three-sided? Surely, there is no way of answering this question, other than to say that that is just what a triangle is, that being three-sided is just a part of what is involved in a thing's being a triangle. Or to take still another example, just suppose for purposes of argument that the world is peopled with individual substances, each of which is of a certain type or kind. And suppose that one such natural kind is the species 'horse' and that there are many such individual horses. Very well, then, if with respect to a given individual horse, say Dobbin, we ask just why Dobbin is a horse and not a crow or a crayfish, the question has no proper answer. To be sure, questions as to why Dobbin is dapple gray, or walks with a limp, or is blind in one eye—these questions all have proper answers; but not the question why Dobbin is a horse.

In short, the principle that is involved here is that, accepting Butler's dictum that everything is what it is, and not another thing, then any and all questions as to why any thing<sup>14</sup> is what it is and not another thing have no proper answers. Instead, the truth

<sup>14</sup> A "thing" can here be understood as either an individual or a species. In either case, its own "what," i.e., what it is, is not to be explained through any sort of outside cause.

of any statement purporting to assert what a thing is can only be self-evident, or evident in and through that statement itself and not through anything else. In other words, the truth of such a statement can only be analytic.

Accordingly, making application of this principle in the field of metaphysics, we can see why such a thing as analytic truth is inescapable in metaphysics. For metaphysics, whatever else it may be, is certainly concerned with getting at the nature of things, at being qua being, at that "essence to the universe which forbids relationships beyond itself,"<sup>17</sup> at those ultimate "whats" or natures that determine all things to be the kinds of things they are. But clearly, like any "what" statements, the "what" statements of metaphysics—statements as to what being is, what the nature of things is, what the ultimate causes of things are—such statements cannot be other than analytic,<sup>18</sup> i.e., their logical character must be such that they can be certified as true on no other ground than that to deny them would be self-contradictory.

## II

But now, having thus painstakingly, if not painfully, established the indispensability and inescapability for metaphysics of analytic truth, have we not by that very fact placed metaphysics in an utterly untenable position logically? For contemporary logical analysts, no less than Kant, would seem quite agreed that the

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, as our argument proceeds, the use of this word "analytic" can only become increasingly misleading. For as Kant understood the term, whenever a predicate is analytically contained in the subject of a judgment, then that judgment will be at once guaranteed to be necessarily true and precluded from being a factual truth or truth about the world. But the argument of the present paper is designed to show that there can perfectly well be judgments that are analytic in that they are necessarily true, and yet at the same time are not analytic (at least as Kant understood the term) in that they do convey information about the world. Accordingly, one could describe the aim of the paper in either of two ways: either that it seeks to show that the judgments of metaphysics can be analytic; or that it seeks to show that the necessary truths of metaphysics are neither analytic nor synthetic.

In the nature of the case, however, even though the use of "analytic" is thus bound to be misleading, it cannot be avoided altogether.

logical character of analytic truth is such as to prevent such truths from ever being informative or being truths about the world. And so it is that no sooner does one exhibit the complete dependence of metaphysics upon analytic truth than one thereby establishes the utter emptiness of metaphysics, so far as any and all of its claims to being a knowledge of the real are concerned.

And why is analytic truth thus thought to be in principle incapable of yielding any knowledge of the real order? The answer is at once as simple as it is seemingly compelling: in order to determine whether a necessary statement or analytic judgment is true, one never has to consider the facts in the case, one only has to consider various logical or linguistic features of the judgment itself. Thus whatever my judgment may be about, or whatever the state of the world may be, this can make absolutely no difference to the truth of an analytic judgment; all that makes a difference is whether the predicate concept of the judgment be analytically contained in that of the subject or not. But clearly, if the truth of a judgment be quite unaffected by the way the world is, then such a judgment can hardly be said to give any information about the way the world is.

To be sure, this conception of statements that are seen to be true simply from an examination of the statements themselves, rather than from any examination of the facts which the statements purport to be about—this particular conception is rather differently construed by different logicians. But the end result is in each case the same: such statements turn out to be necessarily true, for the very reason that they have no bearing upon, and give no information about, the real world at all.

Thus, for example, some contemporary logicians like to construe necessary truth strictly in terms of the Kantian notion of analytic truth: a statement is necessarily true if the predicate concept is analytically contained within the subject. And Kant's stellar example of such a truth is the statement "All bodies are extended," in which, as Kant construes it, the subject concept, "body," already contains the predicate concept within itself.

Others again like to think of such logical necessity as being not so much a matter of analyticity, as of linguistic convention: "Anyone who is a younger son is a brother;" "A bachelor is a man

who is unmarried." Here clearly, the truth of such statements does not depend on the nature of things, or more specifically even on the nature of younger sons or of bachelors, but simply on the meanings of these words in English.

Finally, there are still others who like to explicate logical necessity in terms of the purely formal or structural features of a proposition. For instance, consider Quine's example, "No unmarried man is married." The truth of this statement does not depend on the meaning of the expression "unmarried man" in English. Instead, it depends simply on the purely formal features of the statement as expressed by so-called logical words like "no," "is," "un-," etc. Indeed, we could abstract altogether from the specific content of the statement and express the truth purely formally, viz. "No non-A is A." Interpreted in this way, necessary truths become not so much linguistic truths as purely formal truths, or logical truths, as they are sometimes called, i.e., they are true simply in virtue of the logical form of the statement and not at all in virtue of the content of the statement or what the statement is about.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, on all three of these interpretations the criterion for determining the truth of necessary statements lies not in the facts the statements are about, but simply in the character and structure of the statements themselves. Hence to find out whether any given judgment is necessarily true or not, the rule to follow is: don't examine the facts in the world; examine the judgment. Little wonder, that the further consequence should be drawn: all necessary truths are non-factual; they cannot be truths about the world.

Nevertheless, when we come to apply considerations of this sort to the necessary truths of metaphysics, the logical principles concerning such analytic and necessary truths seem not quite to fit, at least not at first. Thus in the case of Leibniz's principle to the effect that any and every composite entity or aggregatum in the world is made up of ultimate simples, this certainly does seem to be

<sup>19</sup> The extension of this principle to the tautologies of the propositional calculus is not directly relevant to the concerns of this paper, and hence has not been discussed.

put forward as a truth about the world, and at the same time it is advanced as being a necessary truth. Or to vary the illustrations somewhat, suppose that we introduce an entirely new and different example of a metaphysical principle, this time from Aristotle. Thus everyone is familiar with the well-known Aristotelian principle to the effect that such things as quantities, qualities, activities, etc., simply cannot exist in and of themselves; they have to be quantities or qualities or activities of substances. Thus how could there be an activity such as hitting or striking, say, without there being something that does the hitting or the striking?

Surely, the force of such a question is to point up the fact that here we have to do with nothing less than a necessary truth. That is to say, the very idea of a hitting or a striking that goes on all by itself without there being anything or anybody that does the hitting is simply unthinkable. And just as surely as this is a necessary truth, it seems also to be a truth about the world. Indeed, the precise thrust of the principle is the assertion that in fact, in the real world, there just can't be accidents that aren't accidents of substances.

And yet no sooner does one try to conceive of this Aristotelian principle as being at once a necessary truth and also a truth about the world, than one immediately finds oneself put to rout by such logical considerations as we have already outlined and which tend to show quite unequivocally that being a necessary truth and being a truth about the world are simply incompatible. For suppose one attempts to construe the necessary character of the truth about substances and accidents, and the inconceivability of its opposite, along Kantian lines, then our Aristotelian principle will turn out to be analytic: "Any quality or quantity, or activity must be the quality, quantity, or activity of something, i.e., of a substance." But considered as an analytic truth, this means no more than that "being of a substance" is contained in the very notion of a quality or quantity or activity. The predicate concept, in other words, is just a part of the meaning of the subject. But so construed, the statement as a whole gives no information whatever about what is really the case; it merely exfoliates what is bound up in the concept of the subject term, and hence says nothing at all about the real world. As Kant himself remarked, "The understanding in its

analytical employment is concerned only to know what lies in the concept; it is indifferent as to the object to which the concept may apply."<sup>20</sup>

Or suppose that the necessity of "Every accident is an accident of a substance" is that of a mere linguistic truth like "Every younger son is a brother." Then clearly, our supposedly metaphysical truth will not be a statement about the world, but only a statement about the way words like "accident" and "substance" are used in English.

Or again, it might be possible to treat our metaphysical truth about substance and accident as if it were no more than a formal truth in Quine's sense. With reference to his own example, "No unmarried man is married," Quine's comment is: "The relevant feature of this example is that it not merely is true as it stands but remains true under any and all reinterpretations of 'man' and 'married.' If we suppose a prior inventory of logical particles, comprising 'no,' 'un-', 'not,' 'if,' 'then,' 'and,' etc., then in general a logical truth is a statement which is true and remains true under all reinterpretations of its components other than the logical particles."<sup>21</sup> Or as Quine has put it elsewhere, a logical truth, i.e., one that is logically necessary, is one in which only the logical words occur essentially, all others vacuously.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, though, if such a formal truth does not depend for its truth on its own content, or on what it is a statement about, then there is a sense in which such a truth is not about anything and gives no information about anything, not even about its own content.

Thus "No unmarried men are married" or "All black cats are black" tell us nothing whatever either about unmarried men or about black cats, for the simple reason that the truth of these statements does not depend upon the character either of unmarried men or black cats. Accordingly, making the requisite application to our example of a metaphysical truth, it becomes clear that if

<sup>20</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 259/B-315 (Kemp Smith translation).

<sup>21</sup> See "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, 1947), pp. 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> *Mathematical Logic* (Cambridge, 1947), p. 2.

"Every accident is an accident of a substance" be interpreted as saying simply that "Accidents being accidents of substances, they are therefore of substances,"<sup>23</sup> this would really tell us nothing about accidents, or substances, or anything else, since all that is being asserted is the purely formal truth that any A that is B is B.

Presumably, therefore, however one may choose to construe the logical necessity that attaches to the necessary truths of metaphysics, the consequence is inescapable: no more than any other necessary truths, the truths of metaphysics in no wise serve to disclose any natural necessities or real necessities *in rerum natura*; instead, they evidence no more than a linguistic or logical necessity, which, while it may attach to the linguistic or logical form of the proposition in which the metaphysical truth is expressed, has nothing to do with the content of the proposition or the real things the proposition is supposed to be about. Indeed, as Kneale has so aptly remarked: whereas the older nominalists would have said, "The world consists of individuals: universals belong to language," modern conventionalists say "The world consists of facts: necessities belong to language."<sup>24</sup>

Nor could one find a more striking illustration of how a supposed claim regarding a real, metaphysical necessity in things can be readily transformed into no more than a logical or linguistic claim, having to do only with the logical character of the statement in which the claim is made, than in certain recent criticisms of the traditional proofs for God's existence. Here is an example drawn from J. J. C. Smart's essay in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*:

The trouble comes in the first stage of the argument. For the first stage of the argument purports to argue to the existence of a necessary being. And by "a necessary being" the cosmological argument means "a logically necessary being," i.e., "a being whose non-existence is inconceivable in the sort of way that a triangle's having four sides is

<sup>23</sup> It is well known that Quine himself feels that there is no reliable criterion for determining whether a seeming analytic truth can be thus interpreted as a formal truth. For this reason, he rejects the category of analytic truth altogether. This, however, does not effect the argument of the above paragraphs.

<sup>24</sup> William Kneale and Martha Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford, 1962), p. 639.

inconceivable." The trouble is, however, that the concept of a logically necessary being is a self-contradictory concept like a round square. For in the first place "necessary" is a predicate of *propositions*, not of things. That is, we can contrast *necessary* propositions such as " $3+2=5$ ," "a thing cannot be red and green all over," "either it is raining or it is not raining," with contingent propositions such as "Mr. Menzies is Prime Minister of Australia," "the earth is slightly flattened at the poles," and "sugar is soluble in water." The propositions in the first class are guaranteed solely by the rules for the use of the symbols they contain. In the case of propositions of the second class a genuine possibility of agreeing or not agreeing with reality is left open; whether they are true or false depends not on the conventions of our language, but on reality. . . . So no informative proposition can be logically necessary. Now since "necessary" is a word which applies primarily to propositions, we shall have to interpret "God is a necessary being" as "The proposition 'God exists' is logically necessary." But this is the principle of the ontological argument. . . . No existential proposition can be logically necessary for we saw that the truth of a logically necessary proposition depends only on our symbolism, or to put the same thing in another way, on the relationship of concepts.<sup>25</sup>

### III

So much, then, for the usual run-of-the-mill criticism that is nowadays so often pressed against metaphysics by self-styled logical or linguistic analysts: just let metaphysics be associated with necessary truth, or analytic truth, or truth such that its opposite is inconceivable, and metaphysics is thereby immediately done in, the reason being that, since necessary truths cannot be truths about the world, metaphysics is thereby rendered wholly empty and uninformative. And why can't necessary truths be truths about the world? Simply because necessary truths are logically such that their truth in no wise depends on what the facts are, or on the way the world is. But if the truth of a statement does not at all depend on the facts which the statement is presumed to be about, then the statement can scarcely be a statement about those facts at all, but rather can amount to little more than an expression of the logical or linguistic features of the proposition in which the statement happens to be couched.

<sup>25</sup> *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Flew and MacIntyre (New York, 1955), p. 38.

Surely, nothing could sound more plausible, and yet a little reflection should suffice to show that in fact nothing could be more fallacious. For even supposing that a necessary truth cannot be a truth about the world, does it therefore follow that it is somehow no more than a truth about itself, i.e. a mere logical or linguistic truth? Indeed, this would seem to be nothing if not a non-sequitur. Yes, it is even worse: it involves no less than the logical fallacy of confusing *use* with *mention*. Thus, for example, when I say, "Every accident is an accident of a substance," I am clearly not making an assertion about the English word "accident," or even about my own notion or concept of accident. This doesn't mean of course that I couldn't make a statement to the latter intent. I could perfectly well say, for instance, "The English word 'accident' is always used in locutions that involve either explicitly or implicitly the preposition 'of,' as 'accident of something.'" Or I might say, "My concept of 'accident' is such that the further notion of being 'of a substance' is necessarily built into it."

But while I can perfectly well make statements of the latter sort, I must certainly not confuse them with statements of the former kind, viz. "Every accident is an accident of a substance." Indeed, to make such a confusion is surely to confuse *use* with *mention*, i.e., a statement in which I *use* a certain word or concept must not be supposed to be a statement *about* that word or concept; a statement about the color red is certainly not a statement about the word "red" or the concept "red."

Likewise, when Smart confidently declares that the proposition "God is a necessary being" has to be interpreted as meaning, "The proposition 'God exists' is logically necessary," it is clear that something has gone wrong somewhere. For surely, a statement about God's existence is not as such a statement about the proposition, "God exists." To be sure, Smart might hold, without any confusion of use with mention, that any statement as to the existence of God or of a necessary being would itself have to be a necessary statement or a logically necessary truth.<sup>24</sup> Yet clearly,

<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that it might not be untenable on other grounds to hold that a proposition such as "God exists" can be advanced only as a logically necessary truth. Aquinas, for example, would have questioned whether for human beings such a truth could be a necessary truth. All

any such statement about another statement, i.e., a statement about the statement "A necessary being exists," is not as such the same as the statement it is about. Using a statement or proposition to make an assertion is no more the same as making a statement about that statement or proposition than is using a word or concept in a statement the same as making a statement about that word or concept.

Very well, then, does this not dispose of that rather familiar criticism of metaphysics which countless logical and linguistic analysts have been so fond of hawking about? Is it not enough simply to point out that just as the analysts claim to have exposed classical metaphysics for its confusion of necessary with factual truths, so we for our part can claim, by still further logical analysis, to have exposed the analysts themselves for having, in their very criticism of metaphysical truths, committed an elementary logical blunder of confusing use with mention?

Alas, any such a "destruction of the destructions" would be all-too-easy. For one thing, it would be hard to find in the writings of modern analysts any explicit assertion to the effect that any and every statement in metaphysics that claims to be a necessary statement about the world is, as such, a statement only about the logical or linguistic character of the statement itself. To be sure, contemporary analysts come awfully close to saying this at times, but they never quite say it. Thus Quine, for example, while he is most vigorous in maintaining that "No unmarried men are married" is not really a truth about unmarried men, does not ever say that the statement in question is actually a statement about its own logical particles, "no," "un-," "are," etc.

For another thing, even if we were to catch one of our analysts red-handed in a confusion of use with mention, that still would not prove too much, so far as the rehabilitation of the necessary truths of metaphysics are concerned. For even if one cannot go so far as to say that metaphysical truths are no more than logical or linguistic truths, without falling into a logical fallacy, still the critic of metaphysics could stop short at the mere negative assertion

we are saying is that one might perfectly well maintain such a thesis without necessarily falling into any confusion of use with mention.



that necessary truths cannot be truths about the world. He would not then have to go on to any more positive assertion as to what they are truths about. And this would suffice to empty metaphysics of all significance with respect to the real world.

In short, we are thus brought back again to what is the really decisive point: in so far as metaphysical truths claim to be necessary truths, then the criterion of their truth can only be intrinsic to such truths themselves. That is to say, their truth will presumably depend only on such things as whether the predicate concept is analytically contained in that of the subject or not; or whether their denial would involve self-contradiction or not. In other words, the facts, the realities, may be what they may, this still will make not the slightest difference to the truth of a necessary proposition. And how, then, can a necessary truth possibly be said to have any factual relevance?

Moreover, what is so embarrassing about this consideration is that it would seem to be quite readily admitted even by those who are the staunchest defenders of metaphysics and who take it quite for granted that metaphysics must involve such things as necessary truths. Thus in the entire first section of this paper it was argued that in the very nature of the case the truths of metaphysics, at least many of them, must be self-evident truths, that there is no other warrant for the truth of such metaphysical statements save the recognition that anything else would be self-contradictory. Nor is it just in this paper that the claim has been made that metaphysical truth must somehow be self-warranted or self-evident. It is throughout the whole tradition of classical Western metaphysics that the same claim seems to have been put forward repeatedly, and apparently without the least suspicion that such a claim as to the logical character of metaphysical truths could have the effect of rendering such truths completely empty and uninformative. And just by way of example, suppose we take the case of St. Thomas Aquinas. He, as is well-known, frequently speaks of self-evident truths, or truths *per se nota*, as he called them. And as examples of such truths, he cites statements such as "A whole is greater than any of its parts," or "A human being is animal." And for aught I know, he might very well have considered as an example of a truth *per se notum* that very metaphysical principle which has been

serving us as our stock illustration of a necessary truth, viz. "An accident is an accident of a substance."

Now what, according to Aquinas, are the marks or criteria by which one can recognize such truths to be self-evident? One such criterion that he gives is that those statements or principles may be said to be *per se nota*, which are known once their terms are known.<sup>27</sup> Or again, he suggests that a statement or truth is *per se notum* if its opposite is simply unthinkable.<sup>28</sup> And by unthinkable or inconceivable in this context, Aquinas presumably does not mean unthinkable in any merely psychological sense. No, he means unthinkable or inconceivable, in the sense of being logically self-contradictory.

But if such be the criteria of necessary or self-evident truths for Aquinas, are they not startlingly like the criteria of logical necessity that modern analysts and logicians employ? Thus if a self-evident truth is one in which one has only to know the meanings of the terms involved to know that the statement is true, does not this sound very like Kant's criterion of analytic truth, viz. that the predicate concept is somehow analytically contained in the subject? Would not Aquinas say that "A whole is greater than any of its parts," for example, was self-evident, simply because being greater than any of its parts is a part of the meaning of the concept of a whole? Indeed, for that matter in *Summa Theologica* Ia IIae, q. 94, a. 2, St. Thomas explicitly cites as a criterion of self-evidence the fact that "its predicate is contained in the notion of the subject" (*praedicatum est de ratione subjecti*). Now what could sound more like Kant's criterion of analyticity than this?

Or again, if Aquinas goes so far as to say that the opposite of a self-evident truth is simply unthinkable because self-contradictory, is not this really tantamount to what modern logicians do when they try to explicate the necessity of statements purely in terms of the formal or structural features of those statements? Thus why is it necessarily true that no unmarried man is married? The answer is that this is true on purely formal or syntactical grounds—"No non-A is A." But so also when one says that the opposites

<sup>27</sup> *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 2, a. 1, 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, *sed contra*.

of "A whole is greater than any of its parts," or of "A human being is an animal," involve self-contradictions, is this not tantamount to saying that the opposites of these statements would be of the form, "A is non-A"?<sup>9</sup>

Very well, then, if we take St. Thomas' account of the criteria of necessary truths in metaphysics to be not untypical of what one finds among metaphysicians generally, then it would seem that, however much metaphysicians may insist that the necessary truths characteristic of their discipline are truths about the world, nevertheless when one examines carefully the criteria which these metaphysicians themselves acknowledge to be criteria of such necessary truths, it turns out that these criteria involve no reference and make no appeal to what is the case in reality or in the world; instead they are criteria which one can apply simply by considering the logical form and character of the proposition or statement itself. And more specifically as regards St. Thomas, may not one say that given his own criteria of necessary truths, when he then proceeds to claim that such truths are truths about the world—or in the case of specifically metaphysical statements, truths about being *qua* being—is he not in effect trying to conjure a real necessity out of what is no more than a logical necessity, much as one might try to pull a rabbit out of a hat?

Surely, though, something must be wrong with this picture. And what is wrong is that in all these criticisms of the necessary truths of traditional metaphysics, it is simply assumed that the necessity of such statements arises out of purely logical or linguistic relationships within the proposition itself, and is then projected onto the reality which the statements are supposed to be statements about, whereas in fact it is just the other way around: it is because of a necessity in the things the statement or proposition is about that the statement or proposition in turn comes to have its characteristic of logical or linguistic necessity. Nor is more required than a somewhat more careful historical and logical analysis of the relevant examples, and one can readily see how this is so.

Thus let us again return to a consideration of the Thomistic criterion of a necessary or self-evident truth, viz. a truth whose truth is immediately evident, once one grasps the meaning of the terms. Now superficially, as we have already noted, this sounds

very like the criteria that are currently cited as criteria of purely logical or linguistic truths, viz. a truth such that one need know nothing of the facts which the proposition is presumed to be about in order to know the proposition to be true—all one needs to know are the meanings of the terms and concepts involved. Once more, to quote Kant's pronouncement: "The understanding in its analytic employment is concerned only to know what lies in the concept; it is indifferent as to the object to which the concept may apply."

Yet a moment's reflection should suffice to show that despite the seeming agreement between Aquinas and Kant in this regard, actually there is a basic ambiguity in the key expressions that are used throughout, i.e., in words like "concept" or "meaning," and that Aquinas is presumably using them in one way and Kant in another. Thus as everyone knows, in the context of Scholastic philosophy, or even in that of everyday usage, a word like "concept" can signify either the logical or psychological instrument of conceiving, or the object itself which is thus conceived. And so also with a word like "meaning," this can be used to designate either our meaning of something, or that which is thereby meant.

Now presumably, Kant when he talks about "what lies in the concept," or "what is analytically contained in the concept," is referring to concepts considered as our psychological or logical instruments of conceiving or knowing, and not at all to the object which is thus conceived ("the object to which the concept may apply.")<sup>20</sup> In contrast, with Aquinas, when he speaks of a self-

<sup>20</sup> It might be objected that our interpretation of Kant's meaning in this passage is faulty. The trouble comes from the fact that in any discussion of an object of a concept, i.e., the object conceived, there is a likely ambiguity. For by the "object of a concept" one may mean simply the content of the concept or what the concept means; or one may mean by an "object of a concept" any of the actual particular individuals to which the concept may be applied or referred. The difference, in other words, is roughly the difference between meaning and reference.

Now in the argument which we have developed in the text, we have sought to distinguish between, on the one hand, what the concept means or refers to, either one, and, on the other hand, the concept considered as the psychological or logical instrument of such meaning or reference. As for Kant, however, it might be maintained that in the above quoted passage he wishes to distinguish only between the concept in the sense of that which is meant and the object to which that concept refers or applies. But

evident truth being one that may be seen to be true, the minute one grasps the meanings of the terms involved, what he understands by "meanings" are the objects meant, and not simply our human acts and instruments of meaning such objects. Consequently, so far as Aquinas is concerned, the truth of a statement such as "A whole is greater than any of its parts" does not depend on how we understand the word "whole," or on what we happen to pack into our concept of whole, or on how we define it; no, it depends on what it is, on the kind of *thing* a whole is, on its nature or essence, on its very 'what' or quiddity.

Moreover, the same point is borne out when we consider propositions as wholes and ask what it means for a proposition to be self-evident, or *per se notum*, or true just in and through itself. For just as there are two different senses to words like "concept" and "meaning," so likewise there is a similar ambiguity with respect to "truth" and "proposition." Moreover, until this ambiguity is cleared up, one cannot be too sure just what "self" refers to, when one says of a proposition that it is self-evident, or known through itself.

Thus when one speaks of a "truth" or a "proposition," one can mean either (1) that through which something is known, or (2) that which thereby comes to be known. Accordingly, when a proposition is said to be self-evident or known just through itself, suppose that we consider the word "self" to refer to the proposition taken in the second and not in the first of these two senses of the word. It would then be that which the proposition (in sense 1) is about or that which is intended by the proposition (in sense 1) that is made evident just through itself and not through anything else.

Moreover, the sense and import of such an interpretation can perhaps be made somewhat clearer by referring once more to some of the remarks which we made earlier concerning the traditional doctrine of the predicables. For according to that doctrine, it is

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however this may be as regards this particular passage, the entire context of Kantian critical philosophy is one in which the necessity that attaches to the objects meant by our concepts is a necessity that is justified only on the basis of a transcendental deduction and not on the basis of its being a necessity that is found *in rerum natura*.

only in the case of a predicate's being a property or an accident of the subject that the question "Why?" becomes a proper question, e.g., "Why is a triangle such that the sum of its angles is equal to two right angles?" or "Why is a human being a language-user?" Inasmuch as that which is signified by the predicate in these cases is a different kind of a thing or entity, i.e., is in a different category,<sup>20</sup> from that which is signified by the subject, there must be some sort of cause, a real cause in nature, why the former should inhere in the latter. To put the same thing in different words, the inherence of a particular quality in the particular substance that it does inhere in is the sort of thing which is not and cannot be self-evident.

In contrast, in cases such as that of a man's being rational or being an animal, or that of a triangle's being three-sided, the question "Why?" is not a proper question, simply because there is no sort of cause in nature or in reality that makes triangles to be three-sided, or men to be animals. Instead, man is an animal simply through himself, or through human nature itself. Or similarly, that a triangle is three-sided is self-evident, simply for the reason that this fact is made evident not through any outside causes, but simply through the thing itself, i.e., through the nature or essence itself of triangle.

Now in the light of such analyses it can be seen how in all of these cases the truth of the proposition, i.e., the truth of what is being propounded or asserted, is said to be either self-evident or not self-evident simply in the light of the natures of the things the proposition is about, and not at all in the light of the mere words or concepts (in sense 1) out of which the proposition (again in sense 1) is made up.

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<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the language and terms of this discussion of the predicables may strike the reader as being both unpleasantly and unduly Aristotelian. To this, the only answer is that while the unpleasantness of such language may be irremediable, its propriety is none the less undeniable, if for no other reason than that, the doctrine of the predicables being an Aristotelian doctrine, anything other than a discussion of it in Aristotelian language would seem inappropriate.

Perhaps, though, the discussion may be made at least a little more palatable if the reader be reminded that the discussion is only for purposes of illustration and not for purposes of foisting Aristotle upon him.

But with this, the case which modern linguistic and logical analysts have tried to make against the necessary truths of metaphysics collapses completely. For it just isn't true that the necessity of such supposed truths about the real is determined entirely on the basis of the mere logical and linguistic features of the statements just as such, and not at all on the basis of the things these statements are statements about. Nor does the seeming embarrassing consequence of this mistaken assumption have any bearing either, the consequence, viz. that if the truth or falsity of a proposition is in no wise governed by the way the world is, the proposition itself cannot possibly be a truth about the world. For while the consequent may well follow from the antecedent, the antecedent in this instance has nothing to do with the case. Indeed, when properly understood and interpreted, the necessary truths of traditional metaphysics can be seen to be self-evident in terms of the things themselves which these truths are supposed to be truths about, and not in terms of the mere words and concepts and formal structure of these truths considered merely as sentences and logical propositions. That modern analysts should not have seen this would appear to speak not too well for their powers either of historical or of logical analysis.

Now this is not to say that there may not be any number of epistemological or metaphysical questions connected with the interpretation which we are here proposing of the necessary or self-evident truths of classical metaphysics. Thus is it possible for us human beings to apprehend the so-called natures or essences of things, in the light of which the necessary truths of metaphysics become self-evident? And can we say that such natures and essences really do exist, and if so how? Further, even if there are such natures and essences of things, and if it is possible for us to know them, just how does this knowledge come about? And supposing that we can and do achieve at least a partial knowledge of such natures and essences, and that we express this knowledge in necessary and self-evident propositions, is this knowledge necessarily infallible, and can there never be such a thing as error in such contexts? For that matter, what about the obvious incompatibility of metaphysical principles that have been put forward by different thinkers and that nevertheless have all been claimed to be

self-evident and necessary truths? These and any number of questions like them remain at once pertinent and proper, despite the argument of this paper. But what we hope our argument has disposed of is the currently fashionable belief that the necessary truths of metaphysics can be invalidated on logical grounds alone, as if a mere logical or linguistic analysis of such statements were sufficient to show that such statements could not possibly be statements about the world. This belief, so far from reflecting the superior insights of modern analysts, would seem only to indicate that in some ways at least they have been both historically and logically purblind.

Nor is even Immanuel Kant himself able to escape all such strictures. For in many ways the basic and over-riding question of the first critique, "How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?" may now be seen to rest on a simple misapprehension. Put very simply, the misapprehension involves what we hope we have shown is the largely uncritical assumption that analytic truths cannot be truths about the world and that only synthetic propositions can have existential import.<sup>21</sup> Remove this assumption, and the main Kantian question as to how synthetic judgments a priori are possible loses much of its force, and the subsidiary question as to how metaphysical judgments can ever be justified as synthetic a priori principles loses all of its force. In fact, granted that necessary truths can be truths about the world, will it not be possible for philosophers once again to go about the business of doing metaphysics, without having to worry in the least about Kant's fundamental question<sup>22</sup> as to the very possibility of such a thing as metaphysics?

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<sup>21</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 598/B 626.

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that there may not be other questions in the *Critique* which would not have to be met by metaphysicians and which certainly do represent legitimate challenges to the reliability of metaphysical knowledge, e.g., the antinomies and the refutation of the proofs for God's existence. Still, in terms of the main argument of the *Critique*, it is well known that such questions tend only to confirm and not to initiate what is Kant's real difficulty in regard to metaphysical knowledge, the difficulty, namely, that traditional metaphysics has completely failed to deal critically with the question, "How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?"