



KOPACZYNSKI, Germain, *Linguistic Ramifications of the Essence-Existence Debate*

Lawrence Dewan

Volume 37, numéro 1, 1981

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/705842ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/705842ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Dewan, L. (1981). Compte rendu de [KOPACZYNSKI, Germain, *Linguistic Ramifications of the Essence-Existence Debate*]. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 37(1), 107–108. <https://doi.org/10.7202/705842ar>

de l'enfance. Son charisme était peut-être trop dur, ou trop vivant, pour se durcir en institution. Ce livre nous apporte à cet égard un témoignage irremplaçable pour mieux comprendre l'homme et ses aspirations les plus profondes, le chrétien convaincu qui cherche à dialoguer avec l'Inde, enfin le théologien spirituel qui appuie tous ses discours sur « l'Esprit, le Fond de Dieu (cf. I Cor 2,10), qui est aussi le fond même de l'âme en état de grâce, le mystère le plus intime de chaque élu... » (p. 77).

André COUTURE

KOPACZYNSKI, Germain, **Linguistic Ramifications of the Essence-Existence Debate**, Washington, D.C., 1979: University Press of America. Pp. xii + 199. Bibliography. Index of names. \$9.25.

This book proposes that the centuries-long debate about the real distinction between essence and existence in beings other than God derives in important part from problems of language ineluctably inherent in the metaphysical enterprise. This is taken, not as reason to abandon metaphysics, but as aiding one to understand the nature of the enterprise itself.

With this proposal I am deeply sympathetic,¹ and so I would like to report that this book is worth buying and reading. However I cannot do so. Too long is taken to say too little, and even what is said is not adequately discussed.

For example, in the *final* chapter we are introduced to a picture of the history of philosophy in which "the great Christian thinkers have been in fundamental agreement on the necessity and validity of the basic metaphysical principles. This accord runs through such questions as the existence and nature of God, the knowledge and the freedom of man, the basic structure and demands of the moral law, and the unity, goodness and ultimate harmony of reality." (127) Metaphysical differences and debates go on at a "secondary level" (129), that of "system-building" (127, 129). The area agreement is "the deeper metaphysics" (128). The problem of metaphysical language is seen in the area of "systematic metaphysical language" (131). Nevertheless, while there is agreement "on the basic metaphysical verities" (140), disagreement and "'stretching' of language" in the systematic endeavours, we should not take this to mean that the points of agreement are or can be adequately conceptualized (185, n. 62). Such a distinction requires much more

exploration and explanation than it is given. The reader can be forgiven if he wonders either how "secondary" the secondary level is, or, if it be admitted that it *is* secondary, whether the author has not reneged on his commitment to take the language problem more seriously than those he criticizes.² One thinks, for example, of Charles De Koninck's conception of what constitutes a "system". He insists on the *unity* of natural conceptions (first or common conceptions) and proper (secondary, less naturally given) conceptions in the growth of healthy philosophy. System comes about precisely inasmuch as one begins to *substitute* proper conceptions for common ones.³ My only point here is that Kopaczynski makes no reference to such distinctions, and his presentation of philosophy with its two levels gives us little idea of how the deep level might nourish the further elaborations. We are left with a view of philosophers as all "system-builders". The end-result of all our philosophizing will always be "human constructions" (138), "metaphysical system-building in the thinkers' mind and not with a one-to-one necessary correspondence with the actual being of existing reality" (129). Does this last description mean that when I speak of a thing's "essence" as other than its "esse", the words "essence" and "esse" do not refer to distinct items on the side of things?

Again, the book has as a primary theme that metaphysicians have much to learn from the philosophers of the language analysis and positivist schools of the present century. Paraphrasing Fr. Copleston, Kopaczynski says: "... language is designed primarily for dealing with *empirical reality*: here is language's center of the linguistic platform." (137) Copleston had said: "... language is after all primarily developed to express our *immediate experience of surrounding things*..." (Emphasis mine in both quotations) It seems to me that Kopaczynski's expression "stretches" Copleston's, and stretches it in the direction of embracing the empiricist's starting-point. I found myself wondering how to classify a dog. I am sure it should be put among Copleston's "surrounding things", but I have my doubts whether it would pass muster as an "empirical reality". It might very well be found under the "trans-empirical" banner, a "metaphysical reality". I would like to have seen more philosophical discussion, less a scattering of references to this and that author. Why not say that language is basically *ontological* in character, that our commonest words and our ordinary language have a fundamentally ontological orientation, that the vocabulary of being

is "at the center of the linguistic platform"? Once more, I would have welcomed reference to the reflections on language of Charles De Koninck. His distinction between word or name and symbol raises questions about many seeming "lessons" one might learn from philosophers of the empiricist tradition.⁴

A couple of particular notes on the earlier part of the book:

(1) Kopaczynski spends time showing that St. Thomas Aquinas says a real distinction can exist only between two *res* (48-49): he takes the texts concerned as usable in argument against saying that St. Thomas regarded the distinction between essence and *esse* as real; this is because "Thomas... never speaks of *esse* as a *res*..." (43) This is not true. Thank goodness, St. Thomas does on at least one occasion speak of *esse* as a *res*. Indeed he uses it as something obvious, in order to explain a way of speaking about *veritas*. He tosses it off, as though to say: "Anyone should know what I mean when I speak that way!" Cf. *De veritate* q. 1, a. 4, ad 4. "Res" has to be used with the same sort of variability in meaning seen in such words as "ens" and "unum". (2) There is a rather glaring error in the use of a Latin text of St. Thomas at p. 57. Kopaczynski says he is following "Prof. Carlo" in citing the text, but he gives no reference to any work of William Carlo at this point. He cites *In I Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1 (cf. ed. Mandouret, p. 766). He reads the text as one wherein St. Thomas "apparently holds *esse* to be accidental". (57) In fact, what is being called an "accidens" in the text is the relation, not the *esse* of the relation. The relation has *esse* (meaning the act of the essence) from those things which cause it in the subject, and according to this *esse* the relation is not referred or related to another thing; rather, the relation is referred or related to the very subject in which it is found, just like any other accident (in one of the other categories).

I cannot help reflecting that it is sad to find this idea that philosophers in the Aristotelian or Scholastic or generally Western philosophical tradition require teaching from the most recent representatives of the Empiricist school, as to the importance of language in metaphysical thought. When one thinks of how prominent the problems of language have been in that tradition! Let us mention Plato's Seventh Letter,⁵ Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, book delta. Think of the metaphysico-linguistic aspects of the Christological and Trinitarian controversies. Remember Augustine's *De trinitate*, *De doctrina christiana*, *De magistro*.

Think only of St. Thomas' *Summa theologiae* I, q. 13 and its parallels! Anyone who has worked seriously in the domain of metaphysical discussion can hardly ever have doubted the importance of language. Indeed, the reality of metaphysics should direct our attention to the profundity of language, its resourcefulness not merely as "invocative" of things but as *representing* things. No conception of language can abstract from the *finesse* of the speaker of words. I would most willingly admit that speaking about God presents very special, indeed unique problems. However, this truth tells us something about the nature of language: not merely its poverty, but also its surprising resourcefulness. If we say that man is an animal capable of speech or language, let us not suppose offhandedly that language is a reality all that available for our inspection: we have not seen what a resourceful creature is the "speaker of words" until we have heard him speak about God without altogether failing (and here I mean that such language is not merely "invocative", but is representative: as St. Thomas teaches, when we call God "good" or "wise", we represent Him, though imperfectly [*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 2; ed. Ottawa, 77b14-41]).

Notes

1. Cf. my "St. Thomas, Capreolus, and Entitative Composition", *Divus Thomas* 80 (1977) 355-375; also "St. Thomas and the Divine Names", *Science et Esprit* 32 (1980) 19-33.
2. His example of someone to be criticized is Jacques Maritain: cf. p. 182, n. 24. However, Kopaczynski's note, referring to *A Preface to Metaphysics*, should read "pp. 15-16" instead of "pp. 5-6".
3. Cf. Charles De Koninck, "Three Sources of Philosophy", *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 1964, p. 17.
4. Cf. e.g. *The Hollow Universe*, London, 1960: Oxford University Press, pp. 9-16, 59-64 (and the whole book). On the lesson of logical positivism, Kopaczynski could also have referred with profit to Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, New York, 1952: Scribners, pp. 5-10.
5. Plato's Seventh Letter provides the theme for the last chapter of Etienne Gilson's *Linguistique et philosophie*, Paris, 1969: Vrin, a work to which no reference is made by Kopaczynski, though he makes much use of earlier writings of Gilson.

Lawrence DEWAN O.P.
Collège dominicain d'Ottawa