

An Aquinas Reader

INTRODUCTION

The crucial metaphysical question that today is associated with the name of Heidegger was the question raised by Aquinas: Why is there something rather than nothing? Neither Plato, for whom matter always existed, nor Aristotle, for whom the world of becoming was eternal, answered this question. To give more than a likely account of creation was to exchange myth for metaphysics. This Aquinas did by proposing the distinction between existence and essence to explain the absolute beginning of being and to show the structure that made possible the multiplicity of finite things.

Thomas used the traditional formulas of metaphysics in a way that was new for his time. When the scholar comes across such terms as act/potentiality, being, *id quod est* (that which is), *quo est* (that by which it is), and participation, he correctly recognizes the influence of Aristotle, Plato, and even Boethius and Plotinus. But he would be mistaken if he were to identify the thought of Thomas with that of his predecessors, since Thomas uses the formulas in a thoroughly original way.

Take the idea of *participation* as it turns up in Thomistic texts. Thomas was more convinced than Plato that participation helped us to appreciate what is going on in the created universe; he was in deep agreement with Bonaventure that whoever denies the "ideas" denies the Word of God. But participation for Aquinas is not in ideas or forms as with Plato. It is closer to the Neoplatonism of participation in the "infinite," yet even here the difference is great. Whereas for Plotinus there was participation in the One, for Aquinas it was in *esse* or being that things participated. Nor with Aquinas does participation signify a shadowy or unreal existence; the act of being (*actus essendi*) really belongs to the finite thing. In this insistence upon the "ontological consistency" of beings we experience the influence not of Neoplatonism but of Aristotle, for whom things really possessed their own constitutive and operative principles.

Once again, however, influence must not be mistaken for identity. For while it is true that the act/potentiality structure

was used by St. Thomas to compare and contrast existence and essence with form-matter composition, he nevertheless expressed the real distinction between existence and essence, as the texts show, in terms of participation. It will ever remain Aquinas's neatest accomplishment to have discovered the complementarity of the two greatest minds of classical Greek philosophy to the point of teaching that the Platonic philosophy of participation in being becomes viable only within an Aristotelian philosophy of the experience of becoming, made possible by "potentiality," the basis of change and of continuity. Aristotle's passive potentiality, aptly applied to the explanation of physical change, was transformed by Aquinas into a metaphysical complexification and multiplication. As the source of different *kinds* (species) of things, potentiality is called "essence;" as a source of a thing's specific activities, it is called "nature." Because essence, which limits the infinite riches of existence to being *this* rather than *that* thing, refers to a concrete reality as its foundation, there is just as much scope for an evolution of essences as there is for a scientifically demonstrated evolution of things.

At times students of Aquinas fail to grasp the mutual working relation in the existence/essence composition. For example, each has its own contribution to make: the act of existing (*actus essendi*) is limited by the essence-recipient, whereas the essence becomes real through the act of "to be" that it receives. Like prime matter, essence is called potentiality. But since neither prime matter nor essence is absolute non-being, they might be spoken of as "imperfect act" within the spirit though not the letter of St. Thomas's metaphysics. Aristotle even spoke of a certain yearning or desire of matter for substantial form so that when we call potentiality imperfect act we are only referring to that reality or dynamism that might be operative in any material thing wherein potentiality is never found alone. This view of matter was somewhat validated by Aquinas on the metaphysical plane when he spoke of the principles of created being—matter, form, essence, existence—as participating in the act of "esse" or to-be. By thus deepening the metaphysical analysis to include existence Aquinas is perhaps making explicit what his philo-

sophical predecessors had glimpsed—the causal contributions made by matter and form and the yearning for perfection or reality. In fact, the very gradation of participation in existence becomes with Aquinas the basis for the hierarchical world structure as well as the point of departure for the necessary inference to Unparticipated Being or God. Thus the famous Thomistic theory of analogy and causality presupposes the theory of participation. That is why we may call the “analogy doctrine” the semantics of the metaphysical distinction between essence and existence, recalling that this distinction is meaningless apart from the causality of participation taken over from Neoplatonism and adapted to the only dualism that was important to Aquinas—a Creator-creature dualism that is no conceptual superstructure but an existential exigency for any dialogue of love.

In studying Thomistic metaphysics it is far too easy to get bogged down in a dead-end dispute about the real distinction between essence and existence. Taken by itself, this distinction does not interest Thomas Aquinas and should not be isolated from his total teaching. Like his medieval colleagues, Thomas was primarily concerned with the real distinction between God and man. Man’s metaphysical composition of essence/existence radically distinguishes him from God, whose simplicity is rooted in his unlimited act of existing, which is his very Essence.

But if finite being is therefore only an imperfect image of Infinite Being, it is nevertheless an image, because there is some analogy between creatures having existence and the Creator, who is Existence: All things are alike in sharing an ever-varying relationship between each one’s essence and existence and all are proportionately dependent upon God, whose relation between his essence and existence is one of identity: His Essence is to exist. Since the pure perfections that are present in creatures can be attributed in an eminent degree to God, an analogy that is true to the Thomistic texts is not one of “proper proportionality” alone, as Father Klubertanz has ably argued, but a rich combination of proportionality and attribution. This means that things not only resemble God because they have an essence/existence structure, but they also image God by participating in the perfection of be-

ing. In the Thomistic doctrine of participation creatures have an intrinsic, limited sharing of “being” that determines their specific perfections and their possibilities for development in perfection. In this analogy of attribution or likeness in perfection to God, the likeness is intrinsic to the creature, and because analogy is rooted in the act of being (*actus essendi*), imaging God is an active process.

In man this process is personal. The more perfect personal action is, the more is humanity renewed, improved, and increased qualitatively. Since this process touches upon what is most intrinsic to man and the source of his reality—namely, his participation in existence—man’s possibilities are as infinite as the One who is the Ground of his existence.

And so Thomistic metaphysics clues us in on what the eye does not observe—the existential grounding of the process of knowing and loving and choosing with which we are all familiar. In this perspective we come to see that man does not abstract, conceptualize, possess, or grasp the Absolute or the truth—he is awakened by the Absolute, becomes aware within the horizon of the Absolute, and responds to truth, to goodness, to love, the authentic presence of the Absolute. Corresponding to this vocation of man to commune with the Absolute in and through human actions are certain “psychological conditions.” Although intentionality and tendency are primarily ontological, in the psychological order they express participation in being (*esse*): the presence in this or that reality of a force or perfection surpassing it and drawing it beyond itself. Intentionality, a word associated by many with Husserl, signifies “to tend to something else.” Such is the condition of human knowledge, the condition of human desire. The relation of finite conscious being to Absolute *Esse* is implicit in the very act of knowing, the very act of loving, of choosing. For the finite act of “to be” is the intentional presence of God in the creature and simultaneously “the act that is the creature itself.” This metaphysical analysis reveals the relative perfection of the concrete individual as well as its insufficiency. God is there, present as the giver of perfection, of reality, of existence, as well as the promise of fulfillment.

Therefore the First Cause is cause of all knowing and of power and of all *esse*; therefore it follows that by it all things are caused. He proves, moreover, that it is the cause of all these, by the fact that what is the principle and the most excellent in any rank is cause of all that follows in that rank; but the First Cause has a more excellent knowing than all knowing and more excellent power than all power and more excellent *esse* than all *esse*. It is therefore the cause of all knowing and of all power and *esse*, and from this it follows that it is the Creator of the intelligence and of the soul and of nature and of the rest.

. . . And this is the second way in which something can have the property of not being in another, just as if whiteness

were to be existing in separation from its subject, although for it this is not possible, it would evidently be individual in this way; and this is the way with separate substances, which are forms having *esse*, and with the very First Cause, which is itself subsistent being (*ipsum esse subsistens*).

Aristotle on Metaphysics

Commentary on Metaphysics, Prologue

1. As the philosopher teaches in his *Politics*, whenever several things are ordered to one, it is necessary that one of them be regulating, or ruling, and the others regulated, or ruled. This, indeed, is evident in the union of soul and body—for the soul naturally commands, and the body obeys. Likewise, among the powers of the soul, the irascible and concupiscible powers by a natural order are ruled by reason. But all the sciences and arts are ordered to one thing, namely, to the perfection of man, which is his happiness. Hence it is necessary that one of them be the ruler of all the others, and, as such, rightly deserving of the name of “wisdom,” it being the part of the wise man to order others.

2. Now, what this science is, and with what things it is concerned, may be considered if one diligently looks into how someone is suitable for ruling. For, just as in the aforesaid book the philosopher says that men of strong intellect are naturally the rulers and lords of others, while men who are of robust body, but lacking as to intellect, are naturally servants, so that science should be the natural ruler of others which is, of all, the most intellectual. This is the science treating of the most intelligible things.

3. The “most intelligible things” may be taken in three ways. First, from the order of intellection. Those things from which the intellect receives certitude are seen to be more intelligible. Hence, since the certitude of science is acquired by the intellect through causes, the knowledge of causes is seen to be in the highest degree intellectual. Hence too, the

science considering first causes is seen to be in the highest degree the regulator of the others.

4. Second, by comparing intellect to sense. Sense being the knowledge of particular things, the intellect is seen to differ from it as comprehending universals. Hence that science is in the highest degree intellectual that is concerned with principles in the highest degree universal. These, indeed, are being, and those things that follow on being, such as one and many, potency and act. Such things should not remain wholly undetermined, since without them a complete knowledge of what is proper to some certain genus or species cannot be had. Nor again should they be treated in some one of the particular sciences—since every genus of being, to be known, requires these, there would be a same reason for treating them in every particular science. Hence it remains for such things to be treated in some one common science, which, as being intellectual in the highest degree, is the regulator of the others.

5. Third, from the knowledge itself of the intellect. Since each thing has intellectual power by virtue of being immune from matter, those things must be in the highest degree intelligible that are in the highest degree separated from matter. For the intelligible and the intellect must be proportionate, and of one genus, the intellect and the intelligible in act being one. But those things are in the highest degree separated from matter which abstract, not only from signate matter [matter signed by quantity], “as in the case of natural forms taken universally, concerning which natural science treats,” but entirely from sensible matter. And this not only according to notion, as in the case of mathematical things, but also according to being, as is the case with God and the intelligences [angels]. Hence the science treating of these things is seen to be intellectual in the highest degree, and the ruler, or mistress, of all.

6. Now, this threefold consideration should be attributed, not to different sciences, but to a single science, for the aforesaid separated substances are the universal and first causes of being. And it belongs to the same science to consider the proper causes of some genus, and the genus itself—just as natural science considers the principles of natural body.

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Hence it necessarily pertains to the same science to consider separated substances and being in common, the latter being the genus of which the aforesaid substances are the common and universal causes.

7. From this it is clear that, while considering all the three aforesaid things, this science nevertheless does not consider any one whatever as subject, but solely being in common. For the subject in a science is that whose causes and passions [properties] we seek, and not the causes themselves of the genus in question. Rather, the knowledge of the causes of some genus is the end to which the consideration of the science attains.

8. Now, although the subject of this science is being in common, the whole is yet said to be concerning things separated from matter as to being and notion. This is by reason of the fact that not only are those things said to be separated as to being and notion that can never be in matter, such as God and the intellectual substances, but also those that may be without matter, as is the case with being in common. This would not occur if they were to depend upon matter as to being.

9. According to the three aforesaid, therefore, from which the perfection of this science is derived, it obtains three names. It is called "divine science" or "theology" insofar as it considers the aforesaid substances; it is called "metaphysics" insofar as it considers being and those things that follow upon it (for these "transphysical" things are encountered following the procedure of resolution, as the more common come after the less common). But it is also called "first philosophy" insofar as it considers the first causes of things. Thus, therefore, it is evident what the subject of this science is, and what its relation is to the other sciences, and how it is named.*

*Translated by P. H. Conway, O.P., and R. F. Larcher, O.P. (ASC 1).

*Commentary on The Causes,
Prologue*

Relation of philosophy to its order of learning

1. As the philosopher says in *Ethics X*, the final happiness of man consists in the best activity of man's highest power, that is, of the intellect with respect to the best intelligible object.

2. Since an effect is known through its cause, it is plain that the cause is by nature more intelligible than the effect—even though at times, so far as we are concerned, effects are more known than causes, due to the fact that it is from particulars, falling under the senses, that we acquire the knowledge of universal and intelligible causes.

3. Hence it is necessary that, absolutely speaking, the first causes of things be by nature the greatest and best intelligible things, since they are beings in the highest degree, and true in the highest degree, being, as they are, the cause to other things of their being and truth, as is evident from the philosopher in *Metaphysics II*—even though the first causes of this sort are less known, and later known, so far as we are concerned.

4. For our intellect is related to them as is the eye of the owl to the light of the sun, which light, because of its exceeding brightness, it cannot perfectly perceive.

5. Therefore it is necessary that the final happiness of man that he is able to have in this life consists in the consideration of the first causes—since that little that can be known of them is more lovable and noble than all that can be known of lower things, as is evident from what the philosopher says in *Parts of Animals I*.

6. To the extent that this knowledge is perfected in us after this life, to that extent is man constituted perfectly happy, according to the words of the Gospel, "This is eternal life, that they may know thee, the true and living God" [John 17: 3].

7. Hence the principal goal of the philosophers was that, by means of all they considered in things, they might arrive at a knowledge of first causes. For this reason they ordered the science of first causes last, intending to devote the final period of their life to its consideration.

8. First, they would begin with logic, which sets forth the method of the sciences; second, proceed to mathematics, which even children can master; third, to natural philosophy, which, because of experience, requires time; fourth, to moral philosophy, of which a young man cannot be a suitable hearer. Last, however, they devoted themselves to divine science [metaphysics], which considers the first causes of things.*

Early Errors in Metaphysical Analysis *On the Power of God*, q. 3, a. 6

The ancient philosophers who studied material things observed only the material principles of nature and so fell into the error of supposing that all natural things are uncreated. Because they thought matter and conflict to be the principles of nature, they came to hold two first principles of things by three wrong ways of considering contraries. The first was to consider only the point of specific difference between contraries, ignoring their generic union from the fact that contraries are in the same genus. And so they found a cause for that wherein they differed, not for what they had in common. Thus, as explained in *Physics* 1: 4, they proposed two first contraries as two first principles to account for all contraries. Empedocles, one of these, looked upon the first contraries as the two first active principles, namely, attraction and repulsion; and it is said (*Metaph.* 1: 4) that he was the first to propose the two principles, good and evil. Their second mistake was to judge two contraries to be equal, whereas one contrary must always imply privation of the other and thus be perfect while the latter is imperfect, the former good and the latter less so (*Phys.* 1: 2). Consequently they looked upon good and evil as distinct natures, inasmuch as they seemed to them to be the most generic contraries. This was

why Pythagoras said that all things were divisible into two genera, good and evil; in the genus of good things he classified all perfect things such as light, males, repose, and so forth, whereas in the genus of evil he classified darkness, females, and so forth. Their third mistake was to consider things in relation to themselves or to one another but not as related to the order of the universe. Thus whenever they discovered any one thing to be harmful to another or imperfect when compared with perfect things, they proclaimed it as simply naturally evil and not originating from the cause of the good. And so Pythagoras classified women as being imperfect in the genus of evil. This likewise was the source of the Manichean judgment that corruptible things as less perfect than incorruptible ones are the product not of the good God but of a contrary principle, and the same holds for the visible when compared with the invisible, and the Old Testament when compared with the New, a position strengthened by observing that some good creatures like man are harmed by some visible and corruptible creatures. But impossibility lurks in this error, for everything is derived from one First Principle, which is good. We may prove this now by three arguments.

The first argument: Whenever various things have any one thing in common, in respect to that common thing they must be referred to one thing, since either one must be the cause of the other or they both must come from a common cause, inasmuch as it is impossible for what they have in common to be rooted in the properties in which they differ. . . . Now, all contraries and different things existing in the world have some one thing in common, either the specific or generic nature or at least the common principle of being, and therefore they must all have one principle as the cause of being in all. But being as being is a good, evidenced by the fact that everything desires to be, for the good is defined as that which is desirable. And so above the whole variety of causes we must suppose one first cause, just as above those contrary agents in nature the natural philosophers supposed one primary agent, namely, the heaven, as cause of all lower motion. But since variety in position is found in this heaven, and from this variety the contrariety of lower bodies is de-

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rived, we must come to a first mover that is moved neither per se nor accidentally.

The second argument: Every agent acts insofar as it is in actuality and thus perfect in some way. Now insofar as anything is evil it is not in actuality, since we call evil what is in a state of potentiality, without its proper and due act. But insofar as anything is in actuality, it is good, because this gives it perfection and entity as well as essential goodness. Hence nothing acts insofar as it is evil but everything acts insofar as it is good. In both ways, then, that position holding evil to be the creative principle of evils is insupportable. This argument coincides with what Dionysius says (*On the Divine Names* IV): that only by the power of good does evil act, and evil is beyond the scope of intention and generation.

The third argument: If different beings were to be derived exclusively from contrary principles without these being derived from one supreme principle, it would be impossible for them to belong to the same order except by accident, because if many things are coordinated there must be one coordinator, unless this happens by chance. Now, we notice corruptible and incorruptible things, spiritual and bodily, perfect and imperfect altogether in one order. Thus the spiritual things move the bodily, as is evident in man, at least. Also, corruptible things are governed by incorruptible things, as we see in the alteration of elements by heavenly bodies. Nor may we say that this happens by chance, for then it would not be a question of always or for the most part, but only in a few cases. So all these different things must be derived from one First Principle where they are coordinated, and on this account the philosopher concludes (*Metaph.* 12: 10) that there is one ruler of all.

Meaning of Existence

On the Power of God VII, 2,
ad. 9

What I mean by existence (*esse*) is the most perfect of all, and this is apparent from the fact that actuality is always more perfect than potentiality.

Notice that no form at all is considered as actual unless some existence is understood as present, for humanity or

fire can be viewed as existing within the potentiality of matter or within an agent's power or even within an intellect, but it is made to be *actually existing* only by having existence (*esse*).

So obviously this existence (*esse*) is the
actuality of all acts

and therefore the perfection of all perfections.

Neither may we think that this existence (*esse*) has anything added to it so that this "something added" would be more formal than it and would determine it as act determines potentiality; for this kind of existence (*esse*) is essentially other than what it is "added" to in order to be thus determined [*esse* belongs to an utterly different order from that of essence], and nevertheless it cannot happen that what is thus added to existence (*esse*) is anything extraneous to it, because there is nothing that can be extraneous to existence (*esse*) except, obviously, nonbeing, but then nonbeing can be neither form nor matter; and therefore existence (*esse*) is determined by something other, not as potentiality is determined by act but rather as act is determined by potentiality.

For even when forms are defined, we add the respectively proper matter of each in that place where the "difference" is usually mentioned, as, for example, we say that the soul is the act of "a physical organic body," and it is in this way that this existence (*esse*) differs from that existence (*esse*), for it is the existence (*esse*) of this or that nature.