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Aquinas on Being

Anthony Kenny

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ANTHONY KENNY

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan South Korea Poland Portugal
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2002
First published in paperback 2005

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data Available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Kenny, Anthony John Patrick.
Aquinas on being / Anthony Kenny.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Thomas, Aquinas, Saint, 1225?-1274—Contributions in ontology. I. Title.
B765.T54 K435 2002 III. 092—dc21 2002066255

ISBN 0-19-823847-9
ISBN 0-19-927944-6 (pbk.)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Hope Services (Abingdon) Ltd.
Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Biddles Ltd.,
King's Lynn, Norfolk

PREFACE

THE subject of Being is one of the most important of all philosophical concerns. St Thomas Aquinas was one of the greatest of all philosophers. It will be the aim of this book to show that on this crucial topic this first-rank philosopher was thoroughly confused. The project may well seem a bizarre one, and to need explanation at the outset. The explanation will take an autobiographical form.

I first began to read St Thomas fifty years ago, being then a student at the Gregorian University in Rome, a Catholic ecclesiastical institution staffed by Jesuits. Between 1949 and 1952 I took a course in Thomistic philosophy—‘*ad mentem Sancti Thomae*’, as the papal instructions had it. The course involved very little actual study of Aquinas’ writings. We learnt our theory of being, our ontology, from a textbook on metaphysics written by Father (later Cardinal) Paolo Dezza, S.J. But the course did prescribe the reading of one text of St Thomas: the treatise *On Being and Essence* (*De Ente et Essentia*). I found it difficult and unrewarding, and completed my Roman philosophy course without any understanding or appreciation of the genius of St Thomas.

Later, as a graduate student in theology, I had the good fortune to be supervised by Father Bernard Lonergan S.J., who became well-known as a philosopher for his book *Insight*. He tried to make me see that St Thomas should not be judged by the dehydrated versions of his philosophy to be found in textbooks. It was necessary to come to grips with his original massive works—and Lonergan would describe to me his own decades of striving, as he put it, ‘to reach up to the mind of Aquinas’.

It was not, however, until I became a graduate student in Oxford at the end of the 1950s that I really began to learn this lesson. This was thanks partly to Herbert McCabe O.P. and his Dominican colleagues at Oxford, alongside whom I worked as a translator of sections of the *Summa Theologiae* for the new Blackfriars edition. But it was due above all to Peter Geach, whose 1955 lecture to the Aristotelian Society, 'Form and Existence', first made me see the relevance of Aquinas' metaphysical teaching to the concerns of analytic philosophers. The comparison in that paper between Frege's theory of functions and Aquinas' theory of forms has influenced my thinking on these topics ever since, and provides the background to much of the work in the present book.

Not only Aquinas' metaphysics, but his philosophy of mind now began to absorb me, and I belatedly came to appreciate the value of the work done in this area by one of my Roman teachers, Father Peter Hoenen S.J. My Oxford doctoral thesis, which was published in 1963 as *Action, Emotion and Will*, though overwhelmingly influenced by Wittgenstein, drew on Aquinas' philosophical psychology at a number of points.

One of the first books that I published after obtaining a full-time philosophy post was *The Five Ways* (1969), a study of the celebrated proofs for the existence of God offered by St Thomas in his *Summa Theologiae*. While I found it fascinating to examine these proofs in detail, I found that my inquiry led to a negative conclusion. None of the five proofs was a success, because on close examination their premisses depended far more on medieval scientific assumptions than appeared at first sight. The proof that was most free of the taint of medieval physics, and to that extent was most metaphysical, was the fourth way; but this, I discovered, was the most flawed of all the five. The notion of God to which it led was, I maintained, superficially profound but ultimately nonsensical.

From that time, I found that while my appreciation of Aquinas' philosophy of mind continued to grow, my admiration

of aspects of his metaphysics became ever more qualified. This dual judgement was expressed in the short book on Aquinas that I was invited to write in the Oxford series *Past Masters*, which appeared in 1969. The book contained three chapters, the first devoted to a summary of the Saint's life and works, the second to Being, and the third to Mind. The chapter on Mind argued that St Thomas's philosophical psychology was as well worth serious consideration as any theory of mind currently on the philosophical market. The chapter on Being, however, concluded as follows:

The theory of the real distinction between essence and existence, and the thesis that God is self-subsistent being, are often presented as the most profound and original contributions made by Aquinas to philosophy. If the arguments presented here have been correct, even the most sympathetic treatment of these doctrines cannot wholly succeed in acquitting them of the charge of sophistry and illusion. (Kenny 1980: 60)

Both the positive judgement on Aquinas' philosophy of mind and the negative judgement on aspects of his ontology provoked criticism from generally friendly reviewers. Given the brevity imposed by the *Past Masters* format, I had been able to present the case for both judgements only in the most cursory fashion. Accordingly, I decided that I must, at a later stage, produce a more argued and documented submission in each case. In 1993, therefore, I published a book with the title *Aquinas on Mind*, and now I offer this treatise on *Aquinas on Being*.

My reflection on Aquinas' ontology in recent years was greatly helped by discussion and correspondence with Norman Kretzmann, who in the last years of his life wrote two magisterial works on the Saint's natural theology: *The Metaphysics of Theism* and *The Metaphysics of Creation*. He taught me the importance of study of the *Summa contra Gentes* as well as of the *Summa Theologiae*.

Aquinas on Mind consisted largely of close readings, and philosophical analysis, of passages in the *Summa Theologiae* devoted to human intelligence and volition. In the present work I have adopted a rather different approach, treating Aquinas' major works in chronological order and inquiring what is to be learnt from each of them on the topic of being. There is, as will be seen, much similarity and continuity of doctrine between the earlier works and the later: but it is interesting to see the different forms that the teaching takes in the different contexts of monographs, disputed questions, and *Summas* of different kinds. The chronological approach was also necessary if justice was to be done to the claim of some admirers of Aquinas that he began with a naive notion of being in his early work, but acquired a coherent and defensible theory in his mature writings.

Close study of the texts of the different periods has not altered my opinion that Aquinas' teaching on being, though widely admired, is in fact one of the least admirable of his contributions to philosophy. Contemporary philosophers have long been accustomed to draw a distinction between the 'is' of existence, the 'is' of predication and the 'is' of identity. Aquinas most commonly introduces discussion of the verb 'to be' not with a trichotomy but with a dichotomy, which we will shortly have occasion to examine in detail.¹ But the problem is not that Aquinas fails to notice the distinctions that modern philosophers draw, and operates with too few senses of being: on the contrary there are many places in which he analyses the meaning of the Latin equivalent of the verb 'to be', and he draws many acute distinctions. However, the word as he uses it has many different meanings (and, as I shall argue, some non-meanings) that are never brought together into a coherent and systematic whole.

¹ See p. 2 below. A painstaking attempt to relate the 'Frege trichotomy' to Aquinas' dichotomy is to be found in the excellent article by Hermann Weidemann, 'The Logic of Being in Thomas Aquinas', in S. Knuuttila and J. Hintikka (eds.), *The Logic of Being* (Reidel, Dordrecht), pp. 181–200.

This means that ambiguity and equivocation infects many of his philosophical arguments and answers to objections.

This claim can obviously be justified only by a detailed examination of the texts, to which the main part of the book will be devoted. After that, I will be in a position to show that there are no fewer than twelve different ways in which being may be spoken of, or the verb 'to be' used, in the works of Aquinas and the authorities he discusses. Because Aquinas never systematically sorted out the contrasts, relationships, and overlaps between these different types of being, it is often difficult to be sure what exactly he is talking about in any context in which being is the topic. For the same reason, it is difficult to evaluate well-known systematic theses, such as the real distinction between essence and existence and the definition of God as self-subsistent being.

I have done my best to attribute appropriate senses to the passages I have discussed, but in many cases I have failed. For a historian of philosophy, it is a much more daunting task to criticize a philosopher than to defend him. In order to defend a text, it is sufficient to find one reading of it which makes it coherent and plausible; if one wishes to expose confusion, one has to explore many possible interpretations before concluding that none makes the text satisfactory. And at the end of it all, no doubt there are many places in which my failure to make sense of what Aquinas says reflects incomprehension on my part rather than confusion on his.

The history of philosophy can be pursued in various ways. The inquirer's interest may be primarily historical, aiming to bring out for our comprehension the intellectual system of a person or culture distant in time. Or it may be primarily philosophical, seeking to gain from the great writers of the past guidance about intellectual problems that are still living issues. My own historical writing has always been directed by the second motive, though I am well aware of the need to avoid anachronism in the study of long dead thinkers. It is only by appreciating

the differences between their and our approaches to philosophical problems that one can hope to gain new insight into the problems themselves. Otherwise the history of philosophy simply becomes contemporary philosophy in fancy dress.

One can gain philosophical insight not only when writing about a philosopher at his strongest (as I did in my *Aquinas on Mind*), but also when writing about a philosopher at his weakest, as I do in this present volume. All great philosophers have engendered great errors: we cannot, and should not, wholeheartedly accept Plato's theory of Ideas or the dualism of Descartes. It is no disrespect to the genius of Aquinas to try to dissolve some of the confusions on the nature of being to which he appears to have succumbed. We can gain rewarding insights by exploring even the false trails of a great mind.

The task is all the more worth carrying out because many of the teachings of Aquinas that, if I am right, are most vulnerable to philosophical criticism are precisely those that are held up as models of metaphysical wisdom by many of his theological followers. I hope I have shown in my earlier writings that I have no wish to discourage admiration of Aquinas: by putting the present work beside them, I hope to refocus it where it has been misdirected.

I am much indebted to an anonymous reviewer for Oxford University Press whose careful criticisms of an earlier draft of this work led me to rewrite, and I hope improve, considerable sections of the text.

A.K.

Oxford, 2001

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I *ON BEING AND ESSENCE: I*

THE short treatise *On Being and Essence* (*De Ente et Essentia*) was written when St Thomas was a young man—while still a bachelor, according to his biographer. The exact date is not known, but it certainly was written during the early years of his first period in Paris before he proceeded to the mastership in 1256 at the age of 30. It quickly became popular as an introductory manual of metaphysics, and so provides us with a useful starting point for the study of Aquinas' theory of Being.¹

The treatise is heavily influenced by the eleventh-century Arabic philosopher Ibn Sina or Avicenna, whose *Metaphysics* is referred to in the very first lines of Aquinas' prologue.² 'Being and Essence', Avicenna is quoted as saying 'are the first things grasped by the intellect', and this is taken to show the importance of conceiving them correctly. The statement is puzzling: both concepts seem abstruse and sophisticated, and the words that express them are far from being the first words learnt by children in any language. Something else must clearly be meant.

The saying is most plausibly represented as based on an analogy between intellectual understanding and sense perception. If I see something out of the corner of my eye, I may

¹ References to *De Ente et Essentia* are given to vol. XLIII of the Leonine edn, chapter and line.

² Avicenna (980–1037) was one of the principal interpreters of Aristotle to the Islamic world. Portions of his philosophical encyclopaedia were translated into Latin in Toledo in the second half of the twelfth century, one bearing the title *Metaphysica*.

wonder for a moment whether it is an aeroplane, a bird, a paint-mark on the window, or a mote on my spectacles; but, it may be said, all the time I know it is *something*, a being of some kind or other. However, as St Thomas was often to emphasize, the analogy between the senses and the intellect is a treacherous one. Intellectual understanding proceeds sometimes from the more general to the more specific (I may learn what a tree is before being able to discriminate between an oak and an ash) and sometimes from the more specific to the more general (it is quite possible to be able to recognize a dog before mastering the more abstract notion of animal). It is not plausibly represented as taking its start from the most general and unspecific concept of all.³

The first chapter of the treatise begins with a dichotomy, extracted from Aristotle's glossary of philosophical terms in *Metaphysics*, Book Δ, which recurs frequently in Aquinas' writings in every period. Being, we are told, is spoken about in two ways: the kind of being spoken of in the first way comes in one or other of the ten categories; the kind spoken of in the other way signifies the truth of propositions.⁴

The categories of which Aquinas is speaking originate in a classification made by Aristotle of different kinds of predicate.⁵ The predicate of a sentence may tell you what kind of a thing something is, or how big it is, or where it is, or what is happening to it, and so on. We may say, for instance, of St Thomas Aquinas that he was a human being, and that he

³ A more sophisticated, but still unconvincing, defence of Avicenna's doctrine is presented by St Thomas later in *Summa Theologiae* (1a, 85, 3). See my *Aquinas on Mind* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 108–9.

⁴ *Ens per se dupliciter dicitur: uno modo quod dividitur per decem genera; alio modo, quod significat propositionum veritatem* (1.2–5). There is a problem of translation here, given that there are no quotation marks in Latin. Should we translate as '“being” is used in two ways' or as 'being is spoken of in two ways'? Of the subsequent clauses, the first suggests the former translation and the second the latter.

⁵ See below, p. 178.

was fat, clever, and holier than Abelard; that he lived in Paris, in the thirteenth century, that he sat when lecturing, wore the Dominican habit, wrote eight million words, and was eventually poisoned by Charles of Anjou. The predicates we use in saying these things belong, Aristotle would say, in different *categories*: they belong in the categories of, respectively, substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, posture, vesture, action, and passion.

When a predicate in a particular category is actually true of something, then, according to Aquinas, there exists in the world an entity corresponding to the predicate. The first nine of the predications above are, I believe, true: thus, among the items of the world's history we must include Aquinas' humanity, his size, his intelligence, and so on. The tenth of the predications is most probably false, even though Dante believed it to be true. So we cannot reckon, among the furniture of the universe, the poisoning of Aquinas by Charles of Anjou. But the entities corresponding to the predicates of true sentences make up what Aquinas here calls the being that comes in one or other of the ten categories.

What of the other kind of being, being in the sense of the word in which, Aquinas says, it signifies the truth of propositions? In this sense, he tells us, anything about which an affirmative proposition can be formed may be called a being.⁶ Obviously, the first-class beings in the ten categories can be called beings in this sense too, since true affirmative propositions can be formed of them. But not everything that is a being in the second sense is also a being in the first sense, as Aquinas goes on to assert. There are second-class beings which 'posit nothing in reality', namely, negations and privations. To explain what he means, Aquinas says 'we say that affirmation is the opposite of negation, and that there is blindness in an

⁶ Secundo modo potest dici ens omne illud de quo affirmativa propositio formari potest (1.6-7).

eye'.⁷ It is fairly clear what is meant by saying that blindness 'posits nothing in reality'. It does not mean that blindness is something unreal or fictitious: rather, it means that it is not a positive reality, as the power of sight is, but an absence of such a power. The other limb of the explanation, however, is not so clear. Is Aquinas giving an alternative example, with affirmation being an example of a second-class being, or is he producing an argument, and if so what is its force? If we take this passage on its own, it is difficult to find an answer.

There is a further difficulty. Suppose the sentence 'there is blindness in this eye' is false. In that case, surely there is no such thing as the blindness of this eye: not even a second-class entity. Yet, on the face of it, we have formed an affirmative proposition about it. Even if that is not the kind of proposition that Aquinas had in mind, there is no difficulty in forming perfectly straightforward, but false, subject–predicate affirmative propositions about blindness, such as 'Aristotle was blind'. Perhaps what Aquinas really meant as the criterion for second-class beings was that *true* affirmative propositions could be formed about them.

In the present context, the use to which Aquinas puts his distinction between first-class and second-class beings is to make the point that only first-class beings have essences. There is no such thing as the essence of blindness: there are only essences of entities in the ten categories. 'Essence signifies something common to all the natures by which different beings are located in different genera and species: thus humanity is the essence of a human being, and so forth.'⁸

Here we are brought up short by a difficulty. The items in the ten categories, the first-class beings, corresponded to ten

⁷ Dicimus enim quod affirmatio est opposita negationi, et quod caecitas est in oculo (I.9–10).

⁸ oportet ut essentia significet aliquid commune omnibus naturis per quas diversa entia in diversis generibus et speciebus collocantur, sicut humanitas est essentia hominis (I.22–3).

types of predicate. I gave as an example of the first type of predicate 'is a human being' and said that the entity corresponding to it was an individual's humanity. Now that we are told that the items falling under the ten categories have essences, we would expect that humanity (unlike blindness) has an essence. But instead we are told that humanity *is* an essence—the essence of a human being.

The solution to the puzzle is found by tracing it back to an ambiguity in Aristotle's Greek. Aristotle named the first of his categories the category of *substance* (*οὐσία*): a predication in that category tells you, concerning the thing that the sentence is about, what kind of thing it is—a human being, a cat, a cabbage, a lump of salt. The word 'substance' in this usage marks off one type of predication, in contrast to predications in the other nine categories, which can be called predications that predicate *accidents*. But Aristotle also uses the word 'substance' to refer to the thing that the sentences containing the predicates are *about* (e.g. *Metaphysics*, 1028b, 33 ff.). Thus, Thomas Aquinas was himself a substance, about whom substantial and accidental predications could be made. Sometimes an express distinction is made between these two usages, with substance as subject being called 'first substance' and substance as predicate being called 'second substance'.

When, therefore, we are told that first-class beings are the beings in the ten categories, we should really understand this as including not just the entities corresponding to the ten types of predication, but also the entities of which the predications are made, namely, first substances. Substances, in fact, turn out to be much the most important types of first-class beings.

The lumping together of substances and substantial predicates may seem puzzling to a logical purist; but it is understandable because of the very close relationship between any substance and the predicate which tells you what kind of substance it is. There is an important difference between substantial

and accidental predication. When a substantial predicate ceases to be true of a substance, then that substance ceases to exist; when an accidental predicate ceases to be true, the substance merely changes. Thus, Aquinas could cease to be fat without ceasing to be Aquinas, but he could not cease to be a human being without ceasing to exist.

Thus, when Aquinas in *On Being and Essence* talks of the ‘essence’ of a horse or a cabbage, this is the same as what corresponds to a predication in the Aristotelian category of substance. The essence is what makes a thing the kind of thing it is: what makes a human being human, what makes a cabbage a cabbage and a vegetable, and so on. A predicate in the category of substance gives the answer to the question ‘what kind of thing is this?’ The Latin interrogative used in asking that question is ‘quid?’ and so, Aquinas says, philosophers use the word ‘quiddity’ as equivalent to ‘essence’.⁹

Aquinas goes on to mention other terms that have been used by philosophers in the meaning which he wishes to give to ‘essence’: ‘form’, for instance, in Avicenna, and ‘nature’ in Boethius.¹⁰ In the course of his own writings he will use the three words with distinct meanings. For the moment, he contents himself with drawing attention to the different nuances conveyed by these terms if they are used as equivalent. ‘Form’ is here being used as a general term for the stable element in a

⁹ In this context Aristotle uses the almost untranslatable Greek expression τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι (Met. Z, 1028b34, etc.). This is literally ‘the what-is-it to be’ of a thing, i.e. the type of being that answers the question ‘what is it?’ Aquinas reports him thus: ‘hoc est etiam quod Philosophus frequenter nominat quod quid erat esse, id est hoc per quod aliquid habet esse quid’ (I.31–3). He seems to be understanding the Greek interrogative word (corresponding to ‘what?’) as if it were a pronoun or variable, corresponding to ‘something’. His Latin translates roughly as ‘this is what the Philosopher often calls that-which-something-was-to-be, i.e. that to which something owes it that it is what it is’. A paraphrase more intelligible to modern ears might be: ‘the quiddity is that which makes something F, where F is a predicate in the category of substance’.

¹⁰ Manlius Severinus Boethius, a 6th-century Roman senator, author of *The Consolation of Philosophy* and a number of works on logic.

thing;¹¹ ‘nature’ stresses the link between the essence and the characteristic operations or activities of a thing; ‘quiddity’ indicates that the essence is what is expressed by a thing’s definition. ‘Essence’ itself, he says, is so called because ‘by it and in it a thing has *esse*’.

‘*Esse*’ is the infinitive form of the Latin verb for ‘to be’. In this work it will often be left untranslated when it occurs because, as we shall see, it has multiple meanings in Aquinas’ writing. I shall try in the course of the work to disambiguate these meanings by giving them different English paraphrases, but it is misleading and tendentious to use any one English word (e.g. ‘existence’) to correspond to the Latin ‘*esse*’. The Latin words that give the treatise the title *De Ente et Essentia* are related to the same Latin verb, since ‘*ens*’ is the present participle of the verb, and ‘*essentia*’ is an abstract noun formed from it. They do not, however, present the same systematic ambiguity as ‘*esse*’ does, and so I have retained in general the traditional translations ‘being’ and ‘essence’.¹²

The first-class beings that Aquinas has identified by reference to Aristotle’s categories may, as we have seen, be divided into two kinds: substances and accidents. Accidents are the entities corresponding to the last nine categories: substances are the entities that are assigned to natural kinds by predicates of the first category. It is substances, Aquinas says, that strictly and truly have essences; accidents do so only after a manner of speaking and in a limited sense.¹³

¹¹ Dicitur etiam forma, secundum quod per formam significatur certitudo uniuscujusque rei (I.34–5).

¹² ‘*ens*’ is not without translation problems of its own. Because Latin has no articles, the word can mean either ‘Being’, i.e. all that is; or ‘a being’, an entity, an individual thing that is. One must rely on context to disambiguate. The English word ‘being’ can correspond not only to the Latin participle, but also to the Latin infinitive, in which case it is equivalent to ‘to be’. This use will be generally avoided in this book, since the infinitive ‘*esse*’ is being left untranslated.

¹³ *Essentia proprie et vere est in substantiis, sed in accidentibus est quodammodo et secundum quod* (I.55–7).

In the class of substances, as we shall see, Aquinas included some mysterious entities which are very different from the everyday material objects—such as people, animals, stocks, and stones—that philosophers use to introduce the notion at the outset. Wisely, however, he begins with a discussion of familiar mundane substances as being easier to comprehend, and the first thing he tells us about them is that they are all composite. They are all made up of form and matter.

Aquinas assumes that his readers are familiar with this pair of technical terms, but it is worth pausing to offer a brief explanation of them. ‘Form’ and ‘matter’ have their primary role in the Aristotelian analysis of the changes undergone by individual substances. If a child plays with a piece of plasticine and moulds it first into a boat and then into a giraffe, it is natural to say that the same bit of stuff is taking on different shapes. The Latin words ‘*materia*’ and ‘*forma*’, and still more Aristotle’s Greek words of which they are translations, can have this everyday meaning of ‘stuff’ and ‘shape’. But the moulding of a lump of plasticine, though it is the kind of thing that Aquinas, following Aristotle, often uses as an illustration to introduce the notions of matter and form, is not strictly a case of substantial change. That takes place when a substance of one kind turns into a substance of another kind. A better example to illustrate the Aristotelian notion would be a bottle containing a pint of cream which, after shaking, is found to contain not cream but butter. The stuff that comes out of the bottle is the same stuff as the stuff that went into the bottle, in the sense that nothing has been added to it and nothing has been taken from it. But the kind of stuff that comes out is different from the kind of stuff that went in. The stuff that remains the same parcel of stuff throughout is called by Aristotle *matter*. The matter takes first one *form* and then another: first it has the form of cream, and then it has the form of butter.

Most substantial changes are rather more complicated than this simple example suggests. One of Aquinas’ favourite exam-

ples of such a change is the death of an animal. But when a dog dies and its body rots, we do not have a case of a single substance of one kind turning into a single substance of another, but a case of a single substance turning into many different substances into which the body decomposes. On the other hand, when I eat a varied meal, matter of many different kinds takes on my substantial form, the form of humanity. Most substantial changes are, in the manner illustrated, either one-many changes or many-one changes.

Whenever there is substantial change, there must be an episode that begins with one or more substances $A, A', A'' \dots$ and ends with one or more different substances, $B, B', B'' \dots$. That is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for substantial change to occur. If this is to be a change rather than a substitution, it is necessary that there should be something in common between the substance(s) present at the beginning of the change and the substance(s) present at the end of the change. One way of explaining the concept of *matter* is to say that matter is what is common to the two termini of a substantial change.

Aquinas' purpose in introducing the notions of matter and form at this point is to relate each of them to the notion of essence, his main concern. The essence of a thing is not its matter alone: matter of itself is indeterminate, restricted to no one kind, whereas the essence of a thing is what makes it belong to a particular species and genus. The essence is not pure form, either: the essence of a thing is what is expressed by its definition, and the definition of a natural substance mentions its matter as well as its form. In mathematics, no doubt, we can define a triangle without asking what it is made of; but no similar account could express the essence of a tree or a metal. We have to say that an essence is neither matter nor form, but includes both.

The essence is not some third thing, over and above matter and form—some relationship between them, perhaps. For

matter and form are not two separate entities, existing independently of each other, which can then be joined together by some additional entity. Matter can exist only under some form or other: it is form that actualises matter and makes it into a being, an individual being of a particular kind.¹⁴

In compound substances, Aquinas concludes, the word ‘essence’ means the compound of matter and form¹⁵—a definition, he remarks, which accords with those of Boethius and of Averroes.¹⁶ There is something puzzling about this. The only instance of an essence we have so far been given is that humanity is the essence of a human being. Surely it is the human being—not his humanity—that is the compound of matter and form. The human being, we might say, is something concrete, and his essence is something abstract. If we speak in this way, the definition we are given seems to confuse concrete and abstract in a disconcerting way. The confusion thickens when Aquinas goes on to cite, in support of his definition, a dictum of Avicenna to the effect that ‘the quiddity of composite substances is the composition of form and matter’. We already know that quiddity = essence; but now it is being identified with something abstract (‘composition’) rather than with something concrete (‘the compound’).

There is no real confusion here, only a superficial one that is due to Aquinas’ desire to enrol in his support a variety of authors using different terminologies in different languages. Despite appearances, he did not mean to identify the essence (e.g. humanity) with the substance (‘human being’): when he spoke of ‘the composite’ he did not mean ‘a composite substance’ but only ‘a composite item’. What he really means is

¹⁴ Per formam enim, quae est actus materiae, materia efficitur ens actu et hoc aliquid (2.31–2). The form in question is substantial form: accidental forms, like whiteness, can be added to an already existent essence.

¹⁵ Relinquitur ergo quod nomen essentiae in substantiis compositis significat id quod ex materia et forma compositum est (2.38–40).

¹⁶ Averroes, or Ibn Rushd (1126–98), a native of Cordoba in Muslim Spain, was the author of a series of influential commentaries on Aristotle’s works.

set out in his own terms a little further on in his text. ‘The *esse* of a composite substance belongs not to the form alone nor to the matter alone, but to the composite itself; and the essence is that in respect of which a thing is said to have *esse*.’¹⁷ The things that there are in the world around us are neither pure matter nor pure form, but parcels of matter-plus-form, or, less crudely, matter under form, informed matter.

Between them, form and matter constitute the essence, but they contribute to it in different ways. Only form, he says, is, in its own way, a cause of essence and being. The meaning of this is not altogether clear. If we recall Aristotle’s four causes, don’t we remember that there was such a thing as a material cause? On the other hand, if what Aquinas means is not that form is the only cause of essence, but that form is the only formal cause of essence, the point hardly seems worth making.¹⁸ The special role of form, in fact, becomes clear only after Aquinas has considered an objection to the thesis that essence combines matter and form.

The objection goes like this. Matter is the principle of individuation. So if essence includes matter as well as form, essences must all be individual and not universal. But if so, universals cannot be defined, since a definition is something that expresses an essence. But that is absurd.

Before considering Aquinas’ answer to this objection, I should say something about the thesis that matter is the principle of individuation. What is meant is that, however different things may be from each other, it is not the differences between their properties or characteristics that make them distinct from each other. For it is possible for things to resemble

¹⁷ *esse substantiae compositae non est tantum formae neque tantum materiae, sed ipsius compositi; essentia autem est secundum quam res esse dicitur* (2.52–4).

¹⁸ Aquinas tries to clarify the point by a reference to cooking, but his analogy is too dependent on medieval chemistry to be illuminating. A modern paraphrase might go like this: it is the baking that turns the ingredients into the cake, but the essence of the cake is the recipe, which specifies both the ingredients and the baking.

each other totally without being identical with each other. Two peas, for instance, however alike they are, however many properties they have in common, are two peas and not one pea because they are two different parcels of matter. Two cloned animals might resemble each other in every possible respect, yet they would be two, not one, because they were two distinct material bodies.

In answering the objection based on this principle of individuation, Aquinas says that we have to distinguish between senses of ‘matter’:

It is not matter understood in any old way that is the principle of individuation, but only determinate matter. By determinate matter I mean matter considered under specified dimensions. Matter of this kind is not included in the definition of human being qua human; but it would be included in the definition of Socrates, if Socrates had a definition. In the definition of human being what occurs is indeterminate matter; for the definition of human being does not contain this flesh and these bones, but flesh and bones in the abstract, which are the indeterminate matter of human beings.¹⁹

At first sight, this passage provides an answer to the puzzle we encountered earlier of wondering whether an essence was concrete or abstract. Shall we say, in the light of this text, that an essence is something abstract? It contains matter, not in the sense of containing a concrete lump of flesh and blood, but in the sense of having the abstract property of materiality. To be a human being you must possess flesh and blood; you don’t have to possess any particular chunk of flesh and blood.

But once again, we are thrown into confusion when Aquinas goes on to try to relate his account to that of his predecessors.

¹⁹ *Materia non quolibet modo accepta est individuationis principium, sed solum materia signata; et dico materiam signatam quae sub determinatis dimensionibus consideratur. Haec autem materia in definitione quae est hominis in quantum est homo non ponitur, sed poneretur in definitione Socratis si Socrates definitionem haberet. In definitione autem hominis ponitur materia non signata; non enim in definitione hominis ponitur hoc os et haec caro, sed os et caro absolute quae sunt materia hominis non signata (2.80–4).*

Averroes is quoted with approval as saying that Socrates is nothing other than animality and rationality, which are his quiddity. Whereas the earlier passage puzzled us because it seemed to be treating an abstract entity as a concrete one, this passage seems to be treating a concrete entity (Socrates) as if it were identical with an abstract one (his quiddity or essence). This makes us wonder whether the contrast between concrete and abstract is really helpful in attempting to understand Aquinas.

Both in Latin and in English, there is an undoubted grammatical distinction between concrete and abstract words. 'Animal' is a concrete word in both languages, whereas 'animality' and 'animalitas' are abstract. We say that Fido *is* an animal, but that he *has* animality; and the corresponding contrast obtains in Latin also. But does anything in reality correspond to this grammatical distinction? When we talk about Fido *qua* animal and when we talk about Fido's animality, are we not talking about the same thing?

However we are to understand the passage cited from Averroes, Aquinas in this context regards the contrast between individual and universal as being more relevant than the contrast between concrete and abstract. 'The essence of human and the essence of Socrates', he says, 'differ only as determinate and indeterminate, just as the essence of a genus and the essence of a species differ as determinate and indeterminate.'²⁰

Socrates is an individual of the universal species *human*, and *human* is a species of the genus *animal*. In each instance, Aquinas says, we have the relation of determinate to determinable, but the method of determination differs in each case. A species is made more determinate than a genus by the addition of a differentiating characteristic: thus, the species *human* is more determinate than the genus *animal*, because a human is

²⁰ *Essentia hominis et essentia Socratis non differt nisi secundum signatum et non signatum . . . sic etiam essentia generis et speciei secundum signatum et non signatum differunt* (2.85-7, 90-1).

a rational animal, possessing the differentiating characteristic of rationality. An individual, however, is 'determinate with regard to the species' (i.e. is a particular member of a species) by virtue of the determinate dimensions of the matter that makes it up.

But there is also a question to raise about the application of the universal/individual distinction when we are talking of essences. 'Human' is a universal term, capable of being predicated of many different individual men and women: so the essence, humanity, is a universal essence. However, the passage just quoted makes clear that for Aquinas there is also such a thing as the essence of Socrates, an individual essence. But a few lines earlier, as we saw, Aquinas implied that there was no such thing as a definition of Socrates. How then can there be an essence of Socrates, since essence is what is expressed by definition?

Aquinas does not help us at this point, though there are many passages in his other works, as we shall see, that place it beyond doubt that he believed in individual as well as universal essences. The solution to the problem must be that, whereas every definition corresponds to an essence, not every essence has a definition corresponding to it. Or perhaps we should put the matter thus: different individual essences share a definition, the definition of the species to which they belong in common. Thus, Socrates and Plato both fulfil the definition of *human*; but neither of them has an individual definition, though each of them has an individual essence.

When, at the beginning of chapter II, Aquinas first made mention of form and matter, he gave as an illustration of the concepts 'soul and body in human beings'. Soul and body do not in fact provide a straightforward instantiation of form and matter, and now, as the treatise progresses, Aquinas begins to address the complications involved. He asks whether an animal's body is or is not a part of the animal. To answer the question, he distinguishes between senses of 'body'. 'Body' may be

a predicate in the category of substance: in that case, to say of something that it is a body is to say that it is a three-dimensional object.²¹ Now some bodies are alive, and some are not. If, when we say that something is a body, we mean simply that it is an object whose form enables it to be measured in three dimensions, then we can say that the body is only a part of the animal, and that the soul is something quite separate which is added on to it as a distinct part of the animal.²² On the other hand, if by 'body' we mean something that possesses a form which, in addition to making it three-dimensional, may also have other characteristics, then a body is not a part of an animal: it is the animal itself, described generically. When I say that something is, in this sense, a body, I am leaving open what kind of form it is that makes it three-dimensional. There are many possibilities: for instance, it may be the form that makes a stone a stone ('lapidity', Aquinas calls it), or it may be an animal soul. In the case of an animal, Aquinas says, the form that makes the body three-dimensional is the very same as the form that makes it an animal: namely, its soul.

Aquinas' distinction between body as part and body as genus is not easy to make sense of. There is no problem in understanding the second limb of the distinction, where 'body' indicates a general class of which 'animal' indicates a sub-class. All animals are three-dimensional objects, but not all three-dimensional objects are animals. In describing something simply as a body, I am leaving open the question whether it is a stone, a vegetable, or an animal. I may say, for instance, that every body continues in its state of rest, or of uniform motion in a right line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed thereon. Such a law applies to bodies as such,

²¹ Corpus enim secundum quod est in genere substantiae dicitur ex eo quod habet talem naturam ut in eo possint designari tres dimensiones (2.110-12).

²² anima . . . erit superveniens ipsi corpori, ita quod ex ipsis duobus, scilicet anima et corpore, sicut ex partibus, constituetur animal (2.132-4).

irrespective of whether they are alive or inert. That is the second sense of ‘body’ identified by Aquinas, and it is easily comprehensible, even if (in English) not always idiomatic. It is not so easy to grasp the first limb of his distinction. There seems to be no sense of ‘body’ in English that means ‘inert body’. This may be a mere matter of a difference between the idiom of English and medieval Latin. We do have a word ‘corpse’ in that sense, a word that derives from the Latin word for body, ‘*corpus*’; furthermore, we can use the word ‘body’ to refer to a corpse. But the point that is more than a matter of idiom is that it is not possible to regard a body, in this sense, as being part of an animal. An animal is not a corpse plus a soul, and Aquinas elsewhere makes abundantly clear that he did not think so. Without its soul, an animal’s body is no longer the same body.

Some of Aquinas’ contemporaries thought that the form that made an animal bodily was different from the form that made it a living being, and that that form in turn was different from the form that made it a sensing, feeling animal. Thus, if we analyse an animal in terms of matter and form, we would have to list three forms and not one. On that view, one could see reason to say that an animal’s body was a part of it. An animal would be, as it were, a Russian doll of three levels: the first or inmost figure would be the body; encasing that would be the vegetable; and encasing that would be the animal. The whole doll would be made up of three parts, one of which would be the body. But throughout his life Aquinas consistently rejected the theory of multiple forms, and his teaching does not lend itself to any such fantasy.²³

Parallel to his distinction between two senses of ‘body’, Aquinas goes on to make a similarly puzzling distinction with

²³ His fullest rejection of the theory came in his *On the Unity of the Intellect against the Averroists* (*De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*) of 1270, but his own contrary theory is explicitly stated in this early work: *non enim anima est alia forma ab illa per quam in re illa poterant designari tres dimensiones* (2.142–4).

regard to the word 'animal'. It can mean, he says, something that possesses the perfections of self-movement and perception, but no further degrees of perfection. Or it can mean something whose form enables it to move itself and perceive with the senses, irrespective of whether that form is merely a sensitive soul or a soul that is both sensitive and rational. By analogy with the previous paragraph, it appears, Aquinas expects us to draw the conclusion that 'animal' in the first sense refers to a part of a human being, and in the second sense represents the genus of which humans are a species. Once again, the second sense is unproblematic, but once again, there are difficulties in making sense of the first limb of the distinction. Idiom is not a problem here, because we do in abuse call our enemies animals, meaning that they have forfeited their rationality. But even when we use that idiom, we do not think of a human being as an irrational animal with an intellect somehow tacked on to it or wrapped around it.

In the background of all Aquinas' discussion at this point is the traditional definition that a human is a rational animal. 'Human' marks the species, 'animal' marks the genus, and 'rational' marks the element that differentiates this particular species from other species in the genus. This element in Latin is called '*differentia*', and we may keep this word in English too, though unlike 'genus' and 'species' it has not become acclimatized in the language (though it is listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). The scheme of genus, species, and differentia can be applied at various levels, with what appears as genus at one level appearing as species at another: thus, 'an animal is an animated body' can also be regarded as the definition of a species by its genus and differentia.

At this point, Aquinas' purpose is to relate the triad genus/species/differentia to the triad matter/form/composite. He says: Genus and species and differentia stand in the same relationship to each other as matter, form and composite do in nature. But there is no identity here. Genus is not matter, but is derived from matter as

signifying the whole; differentia is not form, but is derived from form as signifying the whole. So we say that a human being is a rational animal, but we do not say that he is a compound of animal and rational in the way that we say that he is a compound of soul and body. For a human being is said to consist of body and soul, like two things which constitute a third thing that is not identical with either of them.²⁴

What does this mean? The first point to grasp is that for Aquinas form and matter (body and soul, in this example) are items in the world, extra-mental realities, while genus and differentia are in this context concepts, items in the mind. Whereas a real human being is a compound of body and soul, if we put together *rational* and *animal* what we get is not a human being, but the concept *human*. This concept, he says, is a third concept made up of two constituent concepts.²⁵ Secondly, a differentia is a concept that applies to something on the basis of its form, and a genus is a concept that applies to something on the basis of its matter, while the species or defining concept applies on the basis of both the matter denoted by the genus and the form denoted by the difference.²⁶ Thus, in ‘Socrates is an animal’, we are not to think of ‘animal’ as naming or denoting some part of Socrates, but as denoting the whole of Socrates, albeit on the basis of a material part of him. Similarly, in ‘Socrates is a rational being’, we are not to think

²⁴ genus, species et differentia se habent proportionaliter ad materiam et formam et compositum in natura, quamvis non sint idem quod illa: quia neque genus est materia, sed a materia sumptum ut significans totum; neque differentia forma, sed a forma sumpta ut significans totum. Unde dicimus hominem esse animal rationale, et non ex animali et rationali, sicut dicimus eum esse ex anima et corpore: ex anima enim et corpore dicitur esse homo sicut ex duobus rebus quaedam res tertia constituta, quae neutra illarum est, homo enim neque est anima neque corpus (2.195–207).

²⁵ Si homo aliquo modo ex animali et rationali esse dicatur, non erit sicut res tertia ex duobus rebus, sed sicut intellectus tertius ex duobus intellectibus (2.208–10).

²⁶ definitio vel species comprehendit utrumque, scilicet determinatam materiam quam designat nomen generis, et determinatam formam quam designat nomen differentiae (2.190–4).

of the predicate as denoting some part of Socrates, but as denoting the whole of Socrates, albeit on the basis of his soul. In ‘Socrates is a human being’, the predicate similarly denotes the whole of Socrates, this time on the basis of both his constituent parts.

It follows, from the parallel structure that Aquinas presents, that the words ‘matter’ and ‘form’ must operate on a sliding scale, just as the concepts of genus and differentia do. Just as what figures as genus in one context figures as species in another, so something that is material in one compound may be formal in another. When we say that being an animal is a material element in Socrates, we are not thinking of the prime or basic matter which is the substratum of substantial change: we mean his body, with all its animal characteristics, such as the powers of motion and sensation. When on the other hand we say that Fido is an animated body, these animal characteristics are now the formal element in relation to which the three-dimensional body is the matter.

Matter and form were introduced into this treatise by Aquinas in order to illuminate the concept of *essence*. Now that matter and form have been related to genus and differentia, we may go on to ask how genus and differentia relate to essence. Aquinas answers along the following lines. ‘Animal’ is a word that can be used to denote both the human Socrates and the dog Fido. Since it denotes the whole of Socrates and the whole of Fido, it will denote *inter alia* the essence of Socrates and the essence of Fido. But though these two essences can be denoted by the same word, that does not mean that there is a single essence of everything that falls under the concept *animal*. On the contrary, it is because the genus-word is indeterminate that it can cover essences of quite different kinds.²⁷

²⁷ Quamvis autem genus significet totam essentiam speciei, non tamen oportet ut diversarum specierum quarum est idem genus, sit una essentia, quia unitas generis ex ipsa indeterminatione vel indifferentia procedit (2.223–7).

One and the same piece of matter may turn into different kinds of thing by the addition of different forms; but a species is not a genus with something added to it, but rather a genus with an indeterminacy removed. The differentia that determines a species of a genus is already covered, though not specified, by the blanket term for the genus. 'Animal' covers everything that is an animal, and all the parts of anything that is an animal, including the rationality of Socrates and the caninity of Fido.

Once again, Aquinas draws an analogy between, on the one hand, the relation of genus to species and, on the other, the relation between species and individual. 'Human' covers every human individual and every essential part of every human individual; but it does so, Aquinas says, indistinctly.²⁸ Among other things, it will cover the determinate chunk of matter that makes up Socrates.

However, there is an important difference between the words 'human' and 'humanity'. 'Humanity' signifies what makes a human human (*id unde homo est homo*). But this does not include the individuating matter: that is what makes Socrates Socrates, but it is not part of what makes Socrates human. 'Socrates is human' is correct; the predicate covers, or denotes, the whole of Socrates, including his individuating matter. But 'Socrates is humanity' will not do; nor will 'A human being is humanity', because the word 'humanity' was devised precisely to exclude the individuating matter. Humanity is only a part of Socrates, though a part of a very special kind. It includes both form and matter; what it leaves out is what distinguishes one bit of matter from another.²⁹ The essence of Socrates is not Socrates.

²⁸ Species, secundum quod praedicatur de individuo, oportet quod significet totum id quod est essentialiter in individuo, licet indistincte (2.249–52).

²⁹ Humanitas . . . est forma quae est totum, scilicet formam complectens et materiam, tamen cum praecisione eorum per quae nata est materia designari (2.288–90).

This last conclusion raises a question. One can accept, easily enough, that humanity does not include individuating matter. But this seems to be true of humanity considered as a universal. If, as Aquinas holds, there are individual, and not just universal, essences, we can ask what makes Socrates' essence the essence *of Socrates*. Is it not the very same thing as makes Socrates Socrates—namely, that it is the essence of this particular body? If matter individuates Socrates from all other human beings, why doesn't it individuate Socrates' essence from all other human essences? If humanity as such contains form and some matter of a specific kind, surely the humanity of Socrates contains form and *this* matter of the same specific kind. This is a question the answer to which we seek in vain.

In the third chapter of the treatise, Aquinas' consideration of the relationship between species, essence, and individual brings him face to face with the issues that, in antiquity, gave rise to Plato's famous theory of Ideas. The theory arose as follows. Socrates, Pericles, and Alcibiades are all called 'human'; they have it in common that they are all men. Now when we say 'Socrates is human', does the word 'human' stand for something in the way that the word 'Socrates' stands for the individual man 'Socrates'? If so, what? Is it the same thing as the word 'human' stands for in 'Pericles is human'? Plato's answer is yes: in each case in which such an expression occurs it stands for the same thing, namely that which makes Socrates, Pericles, and Alcibiades all men. Plato gives this various designations in Greek which correspond more or less to the English word 'humanity', but his favourite designation is 'The Idea (or Form) of Human'. This Idea was something quite distinct and separate from any individual human being, and indeed belonged to a different, more stable, and more important world than the world of our everyday existence.

The common predicates that gave rise to Plato's theory are the predicates that Aquinas calls species, genus, and differentia, and he explicitly rejects Plato's treatment of them:

It cannot be said that the notions of genus and species apply to an essence as being something which is a certain existent reality separate from individuals, as the Platonists supposed; because if so species and genus would not be predicated of a particular individual—you couldn't say that Socrates is something which is separate from him—and such a separate entity would be no help in knowing this individual.³⁰

St Thomas' own account, as we adumbrated earlier, is that a term such as a species word applies to the whole of which an essence is a part. But he now goes on to explain, in an important passage, that a non-Platonic nature or essence (a part of an individual, not something separate from it) can be considered in two different ways.

Take a given essence, E. If we consider E in the abstract, then all we can say truly about E is what applies to E *qua* E. For instance, a human being *qua* human is rational and animal; but simply *qua* human she is not black or white. So humanity, considered in the abstract, is neither black or white. Suppose now we raise the question: is humanity as such one or many? If we interpret this question as meaning: is it part of what is involved in being human that there should be more than one human being, or that there should be only a single one, then it is clear that we cannot give either answer. Plurality cannot be part of humanity, because at one time there was only Adam, and for all we know at the end of history there may be only a single human left alive. Singularity cannot be part of humanity, because nowadays there are billions of human beings. So we must say that *how many* human beings there are is not part of the essence of humanity, considered in

³⁰ Non potest dici quod ratio generis vel speciei conveniat essentiae secundum quod est quaedam res existens extra singularia, ut platonici ponebant, quia sic genus et species non praedicarentur de hoc individuo; non enim potest dici quod Socrates sit hoc quod ab eo separatum est; nec iterum illud separatum proficeret in cognitionem huius singularis (3.8–20).

the abstract.³¹ Equally, *which* individual persons it is instantiated in is not part of the essence of humanity, so considered.³²

If we consider humanity in the concrete, however, we find it existing in individual human beings; and many things are true of these individual humanities in virtue of the individuals to which they belong. There are white humans with their individual humanities, and black humans with theirs. But of course it is not part of a white person's *humanity* to be white: being white is no part of what makes a white person human.

There is in reality, for Aquinas, no such thing as humanity in the abstract. Humanity in the abstract exists only in the mind. It is this that gives rise to notions such as species, genus, and difference. Human nature exists in the mind in abstraction from individuating characteristics, related uniformly to all the individual humans existing outside the mind. There is no Idea of Human, only people's ideas of humanity. Aquinas rejects Plato's Forms in favour of Tom, Dick, and Harry's concepts. Any idea of human nature is an idea in some individual's mind.³³

The species *dog* does not exist in reality, and it is no part of being a dog to be a species, even though dogs are a species. But if being a species were part of what it was to be a dog, then Fido would be a species. When we say that dogs are a species,

³¹ Si quaeratur utrum ista natura sic considerata possit dici una vel plures, neutrum concedendum est, quia utrumque est extra intellectum humanitatis, et utrumque potest sibi accidere. Si enim pluralitas esset de intellectu eius, nunquam posset esse una, cum tamen una sit secundum quod est in Socrate. Similiter, si unitas esset de ratione eius, tunc esset una et eadem Socratis et Platonis nec posset in pluribus plurificari (3.37–43). In the paraphrase above I have altered one of Aquinas' examples, because there seems a confusion in his text between 'una' meaning 'undivided' and 'una' meaning 'unique'. Humanity in Socrates is undivided, but not unique, as it was in Adam before the creation of Eve. But the point Aquinas is making is undoubtedly correct, and can be made with a different example.

³² Homo, non in quantum est homo, habet quod sit in hoc singulari vel in illo (3.66–7).

³³ Quamvis haec natura intellecta habeat rationem universalis secundum quod comparatur ad res extra animam, quia est una similitudo omnium, tamen, secundum quod habet esse in hoc intellectu vel in illo, est quaedam species intellecta particularis (3.102–7).

we are not really, if Aquinas is right, saying anything about dogs: we are making a second-order statement about our concepts. First, we are saying that the concept *dog* is universal: it is applicable to any number of dogs. Second, we are saying that it is a composite concept which has other concepts as constituents: for instance, *animal*. Genus and species are defined in terms of predication: and predicates are things that minds make up, in forming affirmative and negative propositions.³⁴

Our ideas are universal in that they can apply to, or represent, many individuals of a kind; on the other hand, they are individual because they are ideas in individual minds: my ideas are mine and not yours, even though you and I may have ideas of the same things. Following a suggestion of Aquinas, we can think of a statue on a cenotaph: it represents indefinitely many of the fallen, but it is itself a single piece of marble. Thus, Aquinas can defend a robustly anti-Platonic principle: there are no universals outside the mind, not even universal ideas.

Plato, however, is not the only target that Aquinas has in his sights at this point. Averroes would agree with him that there are no universals outside minds. However, he argued from the universality of our concepts that there must be only one single intellect for the whole human race. Aquinas, on the contrary, insists that each of us has an individual intellect: my mind is not your mind any more than my body is your body.

Once again, the analogy with the statue helps: just as one statue may represent many people, so many statues may represent a single person (e.g. Stalin). That an idea of humanity may represent the common element in many humans does not mean that it has itself to be an element common to many humans.³⁵

³⁴ Praedicari convenit generi per se, cum in eius definitione ponatur. Praedicatio enim est quiddam quod completur per actionem intellectus componentis et dividitatis (3.133-5).

³⁵ Et ideo patet defectus Commentatoris, . . . qui voluit ex universalitate formae intellectae unitatem intellectus in omnibus hominibus concludere; quia non est universalitas illius formae secundum hoc esse quod habet intellectum, sed secundum quod refertur ad res ut similitudo rerum (3.107-13).

2 *ON BEING AND ESSENCE: II*

So far, the teaching of St Thomas in *On Being and Essence* has been comparatively straightforward. We have been introduced to a number of concepts, such as matter and form, genus and species, that are the common stock-in-trade of the Aristotelian tradition. These concepts have been related to the notion of *essence*, which is the main theme of the book: but the entities whose essences have been investigated have been the everyday entities of our familiar world: human beings and other animals, statues and puddings. True, there has been discussion of the souls of human beings; but for all that has been said so far, these need not in any way be spiritual or supernatural beings. St Thomas, as a good Aristotelian, believed that plants and animals had souls, no less than human beings. A soul was simply the principle of life—something that might, on investigation, turn out to be material or immaterial. If (as Aquinas believed) a human soul was immortal, that was not because it was a soul, but because of features peculiar to humanity. No appeal to these features is necessary to understand the concept of soul as employed in the first half of the treatise.

With chapter four, everything changes. Now, we are told, we have to investigate how the concept of essence applies to separated substances: namely, the soul, the intelligences, and the first cause. Aquinas assumes that his readers know what these are. By ‘the soul’ he means the souls of human beings, in the intermediate state between death and the final resurrection to which he and all Christians looked forward. During this period, it was believed, human souls existed disembodied. By ‘the intelligences’ he means both the angels of biblical tradition and the

immaterial agencies that in Aristotelian theory were responsible for the movements of the heavens. By the first cause, of course, he means God (whom he elsewhere identifies with the prime mover unmoved of Aristotelian cosmology).

Modern secular readers may be unconvinced of the reality of any of these entities. Aquinas, writing for his Dominican colleagues, naturally feels no need to prove their existence. But he does offer a proof that whatever possesses intelligence (as do all the three kinds of beings he has listed) must be immaterial:

We see that forms are not actually thinkable except in so far as they are separated from matter and the conditions of matter; and they do not become actually thinkable except by the power of an intelligent substance receiving them within itself and acting upon them.¹

This alludes to an account of thought which Aquinas developed over his career and which is connected with the account of universals we saw in the previous chapter. The capacity for thought, which marks off human-language-users from other animals, consists in the ability to master universal ideas and necessary truths. The intellect, Aquinas believed, acquires its concepts by reflection upon sensory experience. We have no innate ideas, and therefore experience is necessary for us to acquire concepts; but experience, though necessary for human concept acquisition, is not sufficient for it, because other animals share our experience but do not master our concepts. To acquire and use universal concepts, we need a species-specific capacity: the human intellect. The intellect presents itself in two aspects, active and receptive. The active intellect is the capacity to form universal ideas and to attain necessary truths; the receptive intellect is the storehouse of ideas and knowledge once acquired.

¹ Videmus enim formas non esse intelligibiles in actu nisi secundum quod separantur a materia et a conditionibus eius; nec efficiuntur intelligibiles in actu nisi per virtutem substantiae intelligentis, secundum quod recipiuntur in ea, et secundum quod aguntur per eam (4.13–18).

The active intellect is required, according to Aquinas, because the material objects of the world we live in are not, in themselves, fit objects for intellectual understanding. The nature and characteristics of the objects we see and feel are all embedded in matter: they are transitory and not stable, individual and not universal. They are, in Aquinas' terms, only potentially thinkable or intelligible, not actually so. To make them actually thinkable, the active intellect abstracts from their corruptible and individuating matter and creates concepts that are universal and necessary. It is these universal concepts that are the actually thinkable objects.²

Aquinas draws on this theory to establish the immateriality of the intellect. Because the objects of the intellect are purified from matter, so must the intellect itself be:

Any intelligent substance must be totally disengaged from matter: it must neither have matter as a part of itself, nor be a form imposed on matter as material forms are.³

The argument from the immateriality of ideas to the immateriality of the intellect is not spelt out: perhaps there is a tacit appeal to a principle that like is known by like. However it is to be understood, the argument seems vulnerable to rebuttal on the lines that Aquinas himself used in the previous chapter to reject Averroes' argument that, because ideas were universal, there must be a universal intellect. From the fact that a single idea covers all human beings, we cannot conclude, Aquinas insisted, that all human beings have only a single idea. To think so is to confuse what an idea is *of* with *whose* idea it is. Likewise here, we might object, we cannot argue from a property of an idea to a property of its possessor. Ideas may be

² The theory here summarized is analysed (in its fully developed form in the *Summa Theologiae*) in my book *Aquinas on Mind* (London: Routledge, 1993), 108–10.

³ Unde oportet quod in qualibet substantia intelligente sit omnino immunitas a materia; ita quod neque habeat materiam partem sui, neque etiam sit sicut forma impressa in materia, ut est de formis materialibus (4.19–22).

immaterial without the minds whose ideas they are being immaterial.

More precisely, we might wish to make a distinction between the two types of engagement with matter that Aquinas identifies in the passage just quoted. We may agree that an intellect cannot have matter as part of itself. An intellect is a power, and powers do not have material parts. My intellect cannot be cut up or weighed; but that is not because it is a spirit, but because it is a capacity rather than a substantial object. (Of course, my brain is material; but there is good reason to reject the thesis that the brain is simply identical with, or is simply part of, the mind.) For that matter, my hearing or my taste cannot be cut up or weighed (though of course the organs of these senses can). So in this respect Aquinas has not identified anything that marks off the intellect from the senses.

We have not, however, been offered good reason for rejecting the second type of engagement with matter. Why may not the ability to form universal ideas belong to a corporeal agent, and thus be ‘a form imposed on matter as material forms are’? The one type of agent that we all know to exist which is capable of forming universal ideas is the human being: and human beings, during the one phase of their existence of which we have certain knowledge, are corporeal substances.

In this passage, however, Aquinas is arguing not with those who, like twenty-first-century philosophers, might question whether the intellect enjoys the second type of disengagement from matter, but with predecessors and contemporaries who might question whether it enjoyed the first type. For some philosophers—following, Aquinas says, Ibn Gabirol or Avicenna⁴—maintained that souls and intelligences were made up of matter and form. These philosophers were not so hardy as to say that intelligences possessed immaterial matter. They did, however, make a distinction between corporeal mat-

⁴ A Jewish poet and mystic who lived in Spain in the 11th century.

ter (such as visible and tangible objects possess) and incorporeal matter, which they attributed to these spiritual entities.

Aquinas gives such speculations short shrift.⁵ He prefers the thesis of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de Causis*,⁶ which asserts that the intelligences possess form and *esse*, and he interprets 'form' here as meaning quiddity or essence.⁷ Forms, he says, can exist without matter even though matter cannot exist without form. An intelligence has a simple essence, which is pure form, subsisting without matter.⁸

What are we to make of this? Many philosophers, of different schools, have been happy with the idea that a mind can exist without a body. Descartes, for instance, having proved his own existence by the argument 'I think, therefore I am', asks '*What* am I, this I whom I know to exist?' After long reflection, he concludes that his essence consists solely in the fact that he is a thinking thing, and that he is capable of existing whether or not he has a body. Unlike Aquinas, however, he does not regard a disembodied mind as being an immaterial *form*.

Descartes was excessively hostile to Aristotelian metaphysics; but in this instance his avoidance of the hylomorphic terminology was well inspired. The notion of *form* was introduced earlier in this book by reference to the Aristotelian system of categories, substantial forms being what corresponded in reality to true predicates in the first category, and accidental forms being what corresponded in reality to true predicates in

⁵ Nec potest aliquis dicere quod intelligibilitatem non impediatur materia quae libet, sed materia corporalis tantum (4.23-5).

⁶ An Arabic paraphrase of a theological work by the neo-Platonist philosopher Proclus, translated into Latin in the 12th century by Gerard of Cremona. Aquinas was aware that it was not by Aristotle.

⁷ In commento nonae propositionis libri de Causis dicitur quod intelligentia est habens formam et esse, et accipitur ibi forma pro ipsa quidditate vel natura simplici (4.37-8).

⁸ non oportet ut essentiae vel quidditates harum substantiarum sint aliud quam ipsa forma (4.59-60).

the remaining nine categories. But it is hard to see how the notion of pure form can be explained by reference to predication. Forms are forms of the entity which is the subject of predication: Socrates' wisdom is what corresponds to the predicate in the sentence 'Socrates is wise', and Plato's humanity is what corresponds to the predicate in the sentence 'Plato is human'. In the same way, a pure form would be something that corresponded to a predicate in a sentence that had no subject; but this seems close to an absurdity. What, we wonder, is the difference between the angelic pure forms that Aquinas accepts and the Platonic Ideas or Forms that he rejects?

Descartes, while accepting the possibility of disembodied minds, did not think of them as being forms inhering in no substances. On the contrary, the principle on which he bases the inference from 'I think' to 'I am' is the thesis 'nothing has no properties'.⁹ Where there is a property or attribute, there must be a substance in which it inheres. From the manifest occurrence of the property of thinking, he concludes to the underlying subsistence of a *res cogitans*, a thinking substance. This substance was, as a matter of fact in the present life, closely united to a body; but it was not essential to it to possess a body.

Aquinas, unlike Descartes, thought that the essence of a human being involved body as well as soul. Like Descartes, however, he was willing to accept the possibility of minds that were essentially disembodied. But, whereas for Descartes a disembodied mind is a substance in which the properties of mind inhere, for Aquinas a disembodied mind is a form that inheres in nothing. It is itself a self-subsistent entity.

There is no problem about this, he maintains. Where A is the cause of B, A can exist without B, but B cannot exist without A. But form is a cause of matter, for form gives *esse* to matter; so it is impossible for there to be matter without form, but

⁹ Nullius nullae sunt proprietates. *Principia Philosophiae* (AT VIII.9).

not impossible for there to be form without matter.¹⁰ This argument seems to move too quickly. The principle on which it is based is no doubt true of efficient causation; but the relationship of matter to form is not that of efficient causation. Indeed, there is no simple causal relationship in which the two stand to each other. In the case of everyday compound objects, where the notions of matter and form are really at home, matter, obviously enough, is a material cause, and form, equally obviously, is a formal cause. But matter is the material cause not of the form, but of the compound; equally, form is the formal cause not of the matter, but of the compound. The best we can say of their mutual causal relationship is this: the matter makes the form to be the form of this individual; and the form makes the matter to be matter of this particular kind. In neither case does 'makes' indicate efficient causation.

When Aquinas says that form gives *esse* to matter, all that he can mean is that form makes matter to be the kind of thing it is; he cannot mean that it brings matter into existence.¹¹ When a substantial change takes place, no new matter enters the world, but matter that already existed under one form begins to exist under another. There is as we say—echoing the medieval terminology—a *transformation*. Nothing in the hylomorphic analysis of change, to which Aquinas is here tacitly appealing, justifies the postulation of forms belonging to no matter.

Equally, we might say, the hylomorphic analysis of change in material objects offers no argument *against* the possibility of disembodied minds. What it does suggest, however, is that if that possibility is to be defended it would be better to maintain

¹⁰ Quaecumque enim ita se habent ad invicem quod unum est causa esse alterius, illud quod habet rationem causae potest habere esse sine altero sed non convertitur. Talis autem invenitur habitudo materiae et formae quod forma dat esse materiae; et ideo impossibile est esse materiam sine aliqua forma; tamen non est impossibile esse aliquam formam sine materia (4.42–9).

¹¹ The point would be made in Latin by saying that it gives *esse quid* not *esse simpliciter*.

that there can be substances to which the analysis of matter and form does not apply, rather than that there are substances in which there is form without matter (or substances in which there is incorporeal matter). In some places, as we shall see, this seems to be a line favoured by Aquinas: but in the present context he prefers to explore the concept of pure form. The essence of a non-compound ('simple') substance, he says, is form alone.¹²

Following the teaching of Avicenna, Aquinas draws two consequences from the contrast between simple substances whose essence is pure form and compound substances whose essence involves both matter and form. First, whereas a compound substance is not the same thing as its essence—a human being is not his quiddity—the essence of a simple substance is the very same thing as the substance itself, for there is nothing in the substance except the form, no extra element to receive the form.¹³ Second, whereas in the case of compound substances there can be several entities of the same kind, individuated from one another by their matter, in the case of simple substances there can only be one individual of each species.¹⁴ This means that, whereas in the case of human beings, Tom, Dick, and Harry are three individuals of a single species, if angels are disembodied intelligences, then Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael must be as different from each other as are a horse, a dog, and a cat.

Aquinas does not at this point explore these arcane theses further. His concern is to draw the contrast not so much between human substances and angelic substances, as between angelic substances and the divine substance. Though the non-compound substances are form without matter, they are not

¹² *Essentia autem substantiae simplicis est forma tantum* (4.65).

¹³ Avicenna dicit quod 'quidditas simplicis est ipsummet simplex', quia non est aliquid aliud recipiens ipsam (4.77–9).

¹⁴ *Quot sunt ibi individua, tot sunt ibi species, ut Avicenna expresse dicit* (4.88–9).

totally simple and uncompounded, and they are not pure actuality but contain an admixture of potentiality. Only God is pure actuality.

Before going on to consider Aquinas' argument to this effect, I will take a moment to explain the terms 'actuality' and 'potentiality'. These, like 'matter' and 'form', are two ubiquitous items in the Aristotelian arsenal of technical terms. If we consider any substance, such as a piece of wood, we find a number of things that are true of that substance at any given time, and a number of other things that, though not true of it at that time, can become true of it at some other time. Thus, the wood, though it is cold, can be heated and turned into ash. Aquinas called the things that a substance is its 'actualities' and the things that it can be its 'potentialities': thus, the wood is actually cold but potentially hot, actually wood, but potentially ash. The changes that realize the potentialities of things can be either substantial changes or accidental changes. The change from being cold to being hot is an accidental change, which the substance can undergo while remaining the substance that it is; the change from wood to ash is a substantial change, a change from being one kind of substance to another kind.

What is the relation between these three pairs of terms 'potentiality/actuality' 'substance/accident', and 'matter/form'? A brief and crude answer is that the latter two pairs are instantiations of the first pair. More precisely: a substance is in a state of potentiality with respect to the many different accidents it may take on; matter is in a state of potentiality with regard to the many substantial forms under which it may exist. But substance and matter do not, for Aquinas, exhaust the types of potentiality that there are: in the central passage of *On Being and Essence* he invites us to treat essence as a form of potentiality. It is this that enables him to state that every creature, everything in the universe except God, is permeated by potentiality. For in every creature essence and *esse* are distinct; in God alone they are identical.

The key passage runs as follows.

Whatever [belongs to a thing and] is not part of the concept of an essence or quiddity is something that arrives from outside and is added to the essence; because no essence can be conceived without the elements which are parts of the essence. But every essence or quiddity can be conceived without anything being understood with respect to its *esse*; for I can understand what a human being is, or what a phoenix is, and yet be ignorant whether they have *esse* in the nature of things. Hence it is clear that *esse* is different from essence or quiddity, unless there is something whose quiddity is its *esse*; and there could be only one such primal thing.¹⁵

This passage is one of the most discussed in all of St Thomas' writings: it is the best known argument for the famous doctrine attributed to him, known as 'the real distinction between essence and existence'. Before discussing the nature of its conclusion, and its worth as an argument, something must be said about the translation.

Here, as elsewhere in this book, I have left the Latin word '*esse*' untranslated. This is because it is a word with many different meanings in St Thomas and it is important both to distinguish between these meanings, and to preserve their relation to each other in his thought. It is tendentious, for instance, systematically to translate '*esse*' as 'existence', because in many places in the text the word has quite a different meaning. Here, however, the context makes clear that it is indeed existence that St Thomas has in mind in this passage. I can know what a human or a phoenix is without knowing whether

¹⁵ Quidquid enim non est de intellectu essentiae vel quidditatis, hoc est adveniens extra, et faciens compositionem cum essentia, quia nulla essentia sine his quae sunt partes essentiae intelligi potest. Omnis autem essentia vel quidditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo: possum enim intelligere quid est homo vel phoenix, et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura; ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia vel quidditate. Nisi forte sit aliqua res cuius quidditas sit ipsum suum esse; et haec res non potest esse nisi una et prima' (4.94–105). On the addition of the words in square brackets, see Scott Macdonald, 'The *Esse/Essentia* argument in Aquinas's *De ente et essentia*', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 22 (1984), 160.

humans or phoenixes exist, that is to say whether there are any such things as humans or phoenixes in reality ('in the nature of things').

It is hard to put oneself in the frame of mind of someone who does not know whether there are any human beings in existence, so let us concentrate on the second example, that of the phoenix. I know that a phoenix is an Arabian bird of gorgeous plumage that has a life-span of six hundred years, after which it burns itself to ashes, and then emerges with renewed youth to live through another cycle. I can know this without knowing whether there is any such thing in existence as a phoenix. In fact, I have a pretty shrewd idea that there is no such thing, and I suspect St Thomas did too; but there is nothing in the concept of phoenix that I have just enunciated to show whether there is or is not such a thing. If this is what is meant by the distinction between essence and existence, then the thesis is quite unproblematic.

Note however that just as '*esse*' here unproblematically means existence, so '*essence*' here has a simple and unproblematic meaning. 'The essence of F' here means simply 'The meaning of the word "F"'. Later in his life, St Thomas will make a sharp distinction between the meaning of F (which I know by knowing language) and the essence of F (which takes scientific study to ascertain). When he says, however, that I understand the essence of phoenix, he can only mean that I know what the word 'phoenix' means: he cannot mean that I have made a scientific study of phoenixes, as there aren't any around for me to study. I know the essence of phoenix in the sense that I have a concept of phoenix, the concept that is exhibited in my mastery of the use of the word. In these terms, the doctrine of the real distinction may be expressed thus: I can grasp a concept without knowing whether the concept is instantiated. Other formulations can be put forward which make substantially the same point in ways that some philosophers may find more congenial. I can understand a predicate without knowing whether it is true of anything;

I can use the expression 'is a phoenix' without knowing whether anything is a phoenix.

Philosophers in the scholastic tradition have long argued about whether the distinction here established is a real or only a notional distinction. Even among those who regard the real distinction between essence and existence as a fundamental thesis of St Thomas, there are some who deny that it is meant to be proved by the phoenix argument.¹⁶ It is not always clear what exactly is meant to be the difference between a real and a notional distinction; but it seems safe to assume that there is only a notional, and not a real distinction, where one and the same object is identified by two different concepts. Thus, for instance, there will be a notional, but not a real, distinction between the morning star and the evening star, or between the square of 2 and the square root of 16. On the other hand, there will be a real distinction between the planet Mars and the planet Venus, and between the square root of 9 and the cube root of 16.

It seems clear that Aquinas' phoenix argument establishes something other than a conceptual distinction. 'The existence of X' and 'the essence of X' are not two different descriptions of a single object. But the objection to talk of a 'real distinction' is that it seems too weak a way of marking the difference in question. It conjures up a picture of two entities of a similar kind with a metaphysical fissure separating them. Despite Aquinas' frequent insistence that the question 'What is an A?' (*Quid sit?*) is radically different from the question 'Is there an A?' (*An sit?*), the thesis of the real distinction suggests that A's essence and A's existence provide two different answers to a single question, whereas of course they are answers to questions of totally different kinds. The query 'Is there a real distinction between essence and existence?' should bring us up short like the question 'In three blind mice is there a real distinction between the threeness and the blindness?'

¹⁶ E.g. Joseph Owens, 'Quiddity and Real Distinction in St Thomas Aquinas', *Mediaeval Studies*, 27 (1965), p. 5.

Once again, the doctrine, whether or not its formulation is confusing, seems to be true and important. It is when the doctrine is employed to mark a fundamental difference between creatures and God that it becomes more difficult to comprehend. For it seems that, in the same way as I can have a concept of phoenix without knowing whether or not there are phoenixes, so I can have a concept of God without knowing whether or not there is a God. Atheists, after all, have a concept of God; otherwise they wouldn't know what it was they were denying when they deny that God exists.

But this, no doubt, is too crude a way of disposing of St Thomas' celebrated thesis. We must follow in detail the steps by which he established that in God alone essence and *esse* are identical. At the end of the passage quoted above, he tentatively put forward the idea that there might be something whose quiddity was its *esse*; he went on immediately to say that there could be no more than one such thing, and that it must be the first of all things.

For it is impossible that there should be more than one of something unless (1) some differentia is added, as when the nature of a genus is found in more than one species; or (2) a form is received in different parcels of matter, as the nature of a species is found in more than one individual; or (3) the one is independent and the other is received in something.¹⁷

The first two forms of multiplicity are already familiar, but the third is new. To explain what he means, St Thomas says that if there were 'a separate colour' it would be distinct from a non-separate colour by its very separation.¹⁸ That is to say, if

¹⁷ *Impossibile est ut fiat plurificatio alicuius, nisi per additionem alicuius differentiae, sicut multiplicatur natura generis in species; vel per hoc quod forma recipitur in diversis materiis, sicut multiplicatur natura speciei in diversis individuis; vel per hoc quod unum est absolutum et aliud in aliquo receptum (4.105-11).*

¹⁸ Some MSS, favoured by the Leonine editors, read 'calor' not 'color'. I choose 'color' simply to facilitate discussion in translation; the underlying argument is not affected either way.

there were something that was not the colour of anything, it would be an entity distinct from any individual colours belonging to individual things. It is not altogether clear what St Thomas has in mind. Most probably he did not believe that, short of a miracle, there could be a colour that was not the colour of anything,¹⁹ and by ‘a separate colour’ he means a Platonic Idea. But there is no need, in the immediate context, to indulge in Platonism.²⁰ Nowadays we are in a position to offer an example, unknown to St Thomas, of a colour that is not the colour of anything, namely the colour of the sky. The blue of the sky is not a property of any substance: yet it is a distinct entity from the blue of this thrush’s egg, even if it is exactly the same shade. So we can, for the time being at any rate, accept Aquinas’ schema of three types of multiplicity. It offers us three ways in which there can be more than one of something: more than one kind of animal, more than one human being, more than one instance of a particular colour.

The argument continues:

If there is postulated some thing which is nothing but *esse*, so that it is subsistent *esse* itself, this (1) will not receive any differentia, because if it did it would not be nothing but *esse*, but *esse* plus some form; and (2) much less will it receive the addition of matter, because if it did it would not be subsistent but material.²¹

Hence, Aquinas concludes, this thing which is its own *esse* must be unique; there can be only one such being. And there-

¹⁹ On his account of the Eucharist, the colour of the host is not the colour of anything: it is an accident inhering in no substance. But this is irrelevant to the present context.

²⁰ Using a Platonic Idea as an illustration of the intelligibility of a thesis is a dangerous procedure. If we believe there are no Platonic Ideas, it is not because an exhaustive search has failed to discover any, but because the notion of such an Idea contains self-contradictory or incoherent elements. Such incoherence will surely infect the notion we are using the Idea to illustrate.

²¹ Si autem ponatur aliqua res quae sit esse tantum ita ut ipsum esse sit subsistens, hoc esse non recipiet additionem differentiae, quia jam non esset esse tantum sed esse et praeter hoc forma aliqua; et multo minus reciperet additionem materiae, quia iam esset esse non subsistens sed materiale (4.113-19).

fore, in everything else in the world *esse* is other than quiddity, nature, or form.

At first sight, there is something amiss with the argument. In the first premiss we are given three types of multiplicity; in the second we are told that pure *esse* does not admit of the first two types of multiplicity; we then conclude that pure *esse* does not admit of multiplicity at all. What, we may wonder, has happened in the process of reasoning to the third type of multiplicity? Might not this type of multiplicity apply in the present case, thereby vitiating the argument to the conclusion that there is only one thing that is its own *esse*?

To solve this problem, we have to ask: what, in the present instance, would the third type of multiplicity apply to, in the way in which it applied to patches of colour in the earlier example? Thomas' threefold schema shows how there can be more than one: but more than one *what*? In the present case, the answer must be: being (*ens*). To anticipate Aquinas' eventual conclusion, the first type shows how there can be creaturely beings of different kinds, the second shows how there can be different individual creatures, and the third shows how Creator and creatures are, despite the gulf between them, both beings. The third possibility shows how there can be these two types of being, creating and created; but it does not show how there can be more than one self-subsistent being, because it was the very self-subsistence that provided the distinction between the two types of being.

Still, there is not an exact fit between the schematization in the first premiss and its application in the second. For in the first premiss the third kind of multiplicity came about because one of the items to be counted was an instance of a property in the abstract, belonging to nothing. In the application to *esse*, the first item to be counted is not at all abstract; it is not *esse* with no owner, but *esse* identical with its owner. So the parallel with colour, however charitably interpreted, does not provide the parallel that is needed for Aquinas' conclusion.

One may, in any case, wonder whether the notion of self-subsistent *esse* is itself a coherent one, whether or not it can apply in more than one instance. But before addressing this question, let us follow the argument whereby Aquinas seeks to establish his second conclusion about self-subsistent *esse*, namely that it is not only unique but also primary—primary, as we shall see, in a causal sense.

Whatever belongs to a thing is either caused by the constituents of its nature . . . or comes from some external element.²²

Aquinas gives examples to illustrate each of these cases. Human beings are capable of seeing jokes, because that is a consequence of human nature. The air outside is light because the sun is shining. Now what of *esse*? A thing's *esse* cannot be an effect of its nature, because that would mean that the thing was its own cause. So anything whose *esse* is not identical with its nature derives its *esse* from something else.

Therefore there must be some thing which is the cause of being to all things, by the fact that it is itself nothing but *esse*; otherwise there would be an infinite regress in causes, since everything which is not pure *esse* has a cause of its *esse*, as has been said.²³

Accordingly, Aquinas concludes that the intelligences, which are composed of form and *esse*, derive their *esse* from a primary being which is pure *esse*, and this is the first cause, which is God.

Throughout this argument, as in the phoenix argument discussed earlier, *esse* has to be taken as existence. The absurdity of *esse* being caused by the nature of something is shown, in St Thomas' text, by the argument that that would mean that it

²² Omne autem quod convenit alicui vel est causatum ex principiis naturae suae, sicut risibile in homine, vel advenit ex aliquo principio extrinseco, sicut lumen in aere ex influentia solis (4.127–30).

²³ Oportet quod sit aliqua res quae sit causa essendi omnibus rebus eo quod ipsa est esse tantum; alias iretur in infinitum in causis, cum omnis res quae non est esse tantum habeat causam sui esse, ut dictum est (4.139–43).

brought itself into existence, which is absurd. Nothing, it is insisted here, can be the efficient cause of its own existence (just as the phoenix argument implied that nothing could be the formal cause of its own existence).

But if *esse* here is existence, what are we to make of the notion of subsistent *esse*? There seems to be an absurdity in saying of anything that its essence is pure existence. The problem was well brought out, many years ago, by Peter Geach in a dialogue which he imagined between a theist and an atheist:

Theist: There is a God.

Atheist: So you say: but what sort of being is this God of yours?

Theist: Why I've just told you: There *is* a God, that's what God is.

I believe that Geach's criticism is effective in disposing of the notion of subsistent existence; but (as Geach himself says) there may be ways of understanding the idea that God is his own *esse* which do not involve the nonsensicality just exposed.²⁴

Let us consider the relation between the Latin verb 'esse' and the English expressions that correspond to it. The Latin verb can be used to indicate existence, as the English verb 'to be' can in such sentences as 'there is a virus that causes pneumonia' or 'there are sea-going mammals' or 'Caesar is no more'. The Latin verb can be used as the grammatical predicate to indicate the existence of what corresponds to the subject term, as in 'Deus est', 'There is a God'. The equivalent use in English is rare and archaic: it can be found from time to time in the King James Bible, as in Hebrews 11:6: 'he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.'

²⁴ G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1961), 87.

Existence itself, as the examples above illustrate, can be attributed in more than one way. When we use ‘exists’ in a way corresponding to the English ‘there is a’ or ‘there are’ construction, we are saying that there is something in reality corresponding to a certain description or instantiating a certain concept—for instance ‘black swans exist’ or ‘there are plants that devour insects’. We might call this ‘specific existence’; it is the existence of something corresponding to a certain specification, something exemplifying a species, for instance, such as the insect-eating plant. But when we say ‘Julius Caesar is no more’ or ‘Julius Caesar no longer exists’, we are not talking about a species: we are talking about a historic individual, and saying that he is no longer alive, no longer among the inhabitants of the universe. We might call this ‘individual existence’ by contrast with the specific existence considered earlier.

The Latin verb ‘*esse*’ can be used to indicate either kind of existence. Thus, ‘*Deus non est*’, literally ‘God is not’, could be used to assert either that there is no such thing as God (God is and always has been a mere fiction of human imagination) or that God is no more—i.e. that God is dead in the quite literal sense that the creator of the world has passed away (a possibility entertained by a character in one of Hume’s dialogues).

Philosophers in recent centuries who have considered existence have concentrated on specific existence, and since the time of Frege it has been customary to cast statements of specific existence in the ‘There is a . . .’ form. For logical purposes, a sentence of the form ‘Fs exist’ is rewritten with the aid of a quantifier as ‘There is at least one x such that x is F’, or more simply as ‘Something is F’. An advantage of this form is that it makes more perspicuous the import of negative existential propositions such as ‘extra-terrestrial intelligences don’t exist’. If we take this as a straightforward subject–predicate sentence we seem to get into a muddle: for if the sentence is true there isn’t anything in the universe for the subject expression ‘extra-terrestrial intelligences’ to refer to, and so it is

obscure *what* we are predicating non-existence of; whereas if we say 'There is no *x* such that *x* is an extra-terrestrial intelligence' or 'nothing is an extra-terrestrial intelligence', that problem disappears.

Since Kant, many philosophers have quoted with approval the slogan 'existence is not a predicate'. Here again, it is important to distinguish between specific and individual existence. It is correct to say that statements of specific existence are not to be regarded as predications about any individual. Statements of individual existence, on the other hand, are genuine predications about what their subject-term stands for—as in 'The Great Pyramid still exists, but the Library of Alexandria does not.'²⁵

Now let us ask whether, when it is said that God's essence is existence, it is specific or individual existence that is in question.²⁶

The fact that the doctrine is supported by the phoenix argument suggests that Aquinas had specific existence in mind; but as Peter Geach has shown, if interpreted as referring to specific existence, the thesis is an absurdity. Statements of specific existence can be rephrased in terms of the quantifier: so if God is pure existence, then 'God' must be equivalent to 'For some *x*, *x*. . . .'—a quantifier with a bound variable attached to no

²⁵ The point is very clearly made by Geach, who calls individual existence 'actuality', in his 1968 paper 'What Actually Exists': 'Actuality is attributable to individual objects; the existence expressed by "there is a . . ." is not. When we ask whether there is a so-and-so, we are asking concerning some *kind* of objects whether anything at all *is* that sort of thing; and we cannot ever sensibly affirm or deny existence, in this sense, of an individual object, any more than we can sensibly ask whether a *thing*, rather than a kind of things, is frequent or infrequent' (in Geach, *God and the Soul*, 65).

²⁶ Failure to ask this question nullifies much of the scholastic discussion about whether the distinction of essence and existence in creatures is real or only notional, and accordingly undercuts controversies such as that between Owens and Wippel as to whether the real distinction can be established before or only after a proof of the existence of God (J. F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1984, 117).

predicate. So understood, the thesis reduces the divine name to an ill-formed formula.

Suppose we weaken Aquinas' thesis from the claim that God's essence *is* existence to the claim that God's essence *entails* his existence. In other words, if we correctly understand the definition of 'God', we will see that there is such a thing as God. This thesis is most naturally understood as concerning specific existence. It is a thesis that we will explore when we come to deal with Aquinas' treatment of Anselm's so-called ontological argument. In the present context it is more fruitful to ask whether we can make sense of the essence = existence doctrine if we interpret existence not as specific but as individual existence.

It can certainly be argued that individual existence is essential to God in a way in that it is not in the case of creatures. Animals may die, and mountains may be swallowed up in an earthquake; but God cannot cease to exist. Whatever Hume may fantasize, a God that could cease to exist would not be a real God. Furthermore, a being, however grand, that had come into existence at some time in the past would not be God. If there is ever a God, there is always a God.

However, the fact that everlasting existence is an essential attribute of Godhead does not mean that there is, in fact, a God. Interpreted in this way, the doctrine that existence is essential to God can be cheerfully endorsed by an atheist. If there were a God, the atheist may agree, he would indeed enjoy everlasting existence. But there isn't a God, the atheist maintains: there just isn't anything in the universe that exists for ever. All of us can agree that Homer's gods were by definition immortal: but the immortal ones, happily, were only a myth. For that matter our friend the phoenix is in its own way immortal; but there isn't any such thing as a phoenix.

Moreover, there is a difference between saying that existence is essential to God and saying that in God essence and existence are identical. Everlasting existence might be part of

the essence of God, without being the whole of it. The thesis that in God essence is existence makes it sound as if we know the answer to the question, 'What is God's essence?'—namely, existence. It sounds more respectful, as well as more plausible, to say that we do not know what God's essence is, but we do know that, whatever it is, it must entail everlasting existence.

A defender of St Thomas' doctrine might appeal to the theorem that if 'F' gives the essence of x, then for x to continue to exist is for x to continue to be F. For living things, to be is to be alive, as Aristotle said. So for God to exist is the same thing as for God to be God: by existing, he as it were exhibits or exercises his essence (whatever that may be). Thus understood, the doctrine of the identity of essence and existence comes to the same as the allegedly more modest theory enunciated in the previous paragraph.

The difficulty now is that the doctrine seems to apply to creatures as well as to God. For what are we to make of the distinction between existence and essence in creatures? Can we say that Fido's essence and Fido's existence are distinct? If a real distinction between A and B means that we can have one without the other, then it seems that the answer must be in the negative. For a dog to continue to exist is simply for it to go on being a dog, and for a human being to continue to exist is for it to go on possessing its human nature or essence. Peter's continuing to exist is the very same thing as Peter's continuing to possess his essence; if he ceases to exist, he ceases to be a human being and vice versa.

But would Aquinas agree with the statements we have just made? Avicenna, whose influence was heavy upon him in *On Being and Essence*, may perhaps have believed that there were individualized essences of non-existent beings; that long before Adam and Eve were created there were already such things as the essence of Adam and the essence of Eve, and that the creation of Adam and Eve consisted precisely in God giving existence to these essences, actualizing these potentialities.

This was an error which Aquinas, later in life, would explicitly reject as mistaken; but it is not clear whether at this stage he had seen through its confusions. Someone who thinks in this way will regard the relation of existence to essence as being exactly parallel to that of form to matter or accident to substance—all three cases will be in the same way instances of the actualization of a potentiality. And that is indeed how Aquinas speaks in this context:

Whatever receives something from another is in potentiality with respect to it; and what is received in it is its actuality. Therefore the form or quiddity, which is an intelligence, is in potentiality with respect to the *esse* which it receives from God; and that *esse* is received in the manner of an actuality. Thus there is actuality and potentiality in the intelligences, though not form and matter.²⁷

Later in life Aquinas was quite clear that creation does not involve the actualization of any pre-existent potentiality. Just as he insisted against Plato that there cannot be any actualization without individuation (whatever exists in the world is individual, not universal), so too he insisted against Avicenna that there can be no individuation without actualization (only what actually exists can be identified, individuated, counted).²⁸ But once this is made clear, then the real distinction between essence and existence in creatures appears unintelligible, or at best vacuous.

In chapter five Aquinas draws some corollaries from the doctrine that God's essence is his *esse*. Some philosophers have said that God has no essence: this is correct if all it means is that he does not have an essence that is distinct from his *esse*. God does not fall under any genus; no doubt God and creatures are both

²⁷ Omne autem quod recipit aliquid ab alio est in potentia respectu illius, et hoc quod receptum est in eo est actus eius; ergo oportet quod ipsa quidditas vel forma quae est intelligentia sit in potentia respectu esse quod a Deo recipit, et illud esse receptum est per modum actus; et ita invenitur potentia et actus in intelligentiis, non tamen forma et materia (4.147–54).

²⁸ See below, p. 116.

beings, but 'being' does not denote a genus.²⁹ Everything there is has *esse*; in saying this we make use of a universal concept of *esse*. But in saying that God is pure *esse* we do not mean that he is this universal. For the universal concept neither includes or excludes the addition of other characteristics: for instance, if, like Descartes, I say that I *am*, this neither affirms nor denies that I am an animal with a body.

The *esse* which God is is of such a kind that no addition can be made to it: and thus it is *esse* distinct from all other *esse* by its sheer purity.³⁰

If we take *esse* as meaning existence, as the previous context suggests, then there is something entirely baffling about the notion of *esse* to which no addition can be made. When we try to formulate what we mean when we say that God exists, we can start off with 'For some x, x . . .', but we are not allowed to proceed further: that would be making an addition to existence. We seem once again to be brought face to face with an ill-formed formula: a quantifier with a bound variable occurring in an empty void. Later, in contexts in which Aquinas spells out his meaning more fully, we shall explore other ways of construing this thesis that, whereas cats are cats and dogs are dogs, God just plain *is*, period. At this point we may merely note that Aquinas hastens to add that, even though God is pure *esse*, this does not mean that he does not possess other perfections; it is just that all of them are identical with his single simple *esse*.

²⁹ This is the reason that Aquinas commonly gives for saying that God is not in a genus. The reason given in the present passage is different, and puzzling. *Quidditas vel natura generis aut speciei non distinguatur secundum rationem naturae in illis quorum est genus vel species; sed esse est diversum in diversis (5.10-14)*. But surely two different species of animal—cats and dogs for instance—*do* differ in nature and not just in *esse*.

³⁰ *Hoc enim esse quod Deus est, huiusmodi conditionis est ut nulla sibi additio fieri possit, unde per ipsam suam puritatem est esse distinctum ab omni esse (5.18-20)*.

The rest of Aquinas' fifth chapter is taken up with setting out, in the footsteps of the *Liber de Causis*, a hierarchy of forms reaching down from the topmost intelligences to the lowly souls of human beings. Pure intelligences are individuated by their place in this hierarchy; souls are individuated by the matter of their bodies. Following Avicenna, Aquinas goes on to qualify this last statement: a soul depends on a body for its original individuation, but it can remain individuated after the death of the body:

Though it has absolute *esse* by acquiring individuated *esse* as the form of this body, its *esse* always remains individuated.³¹

Aquinas seems to be tacitly appealing to the notion that the effects of a cause may remain after the cause has disappeared. It may be the body that causes the form to be individuated, he suggests, but the individuation can remain after this cause is no longer there. However, this seems to involve an insouciant passage from one kind of causation to a very different kind. Individuation is surely something logically prior to relationships between physical causes and effects.

In the sixth and final chapter of the treatise, we return from the heaven of the intelligences to the everyday world of compound substances and their accidents. Accidents, we are told, have essences too, which, like other essences, are expressed by a definition. The definition of an accident must contain a reference to its possessor. (Aquinas has in mind the 'of Socrates' in 'the wisdom of Socrates' and other such expressions). This is because

Accidents do not have an *esse* independent of their subject; but, just as from form and matter, when compounded, there results a substantial

³¹ Cum habeat esse absolutum ex quo acquisitum est sibi esse individuum, ex hoc quod facta est forma huius corporis, illud esse semper remanet individuum (5. 63–8).

esse, so from accident and substance, when the accident arrives in the subject, there results an accidental *esse*.³²

This may not seem to mark a distinction between accidental and substantial form, since a substantial form, too, must contain in its definition (e.g. the soul of this body) a reference to its possessor. The difference is this: in the case of substantial form, the matter too has no *esse* prior to the conjunction of the two, whereas in the case of accidental form it takes up its residence in something that is already a complete substance.

The supervenience of the accident does not cause that *esse* which gives the thing its subsistence, which makes it a being of itself, but causes only a secondary *esse* without which the thing can be conceived of as being and subsisting.³³

Accident plus subject form only an accidental unity, and so the two of them together do not constitute a single essence in the way that the matter and form of compound substances do. Accidents are beings, and have essences, only in a secondary sense (*secundum quid*). Of the accidents that belong to a substance, some derive from its form (e.g. in human beings, thinking and feeling); others derive from its matter, whether in relation to specific form—such as maleness or femaleness in animals—or in relation to generic form—such as, we might expect, size and weight, which belong to all kinds of bodies as well as to animals. The actual example Aquinas gives is the blackness of an Ethiopian; and to prove that this arises from generic rather than specific form he points out that it remains in the skin after the Ethiopian has died.

The accidents that follow matter, Aquinas says, are peculiar to individuals and vary from one to another. Those that follow

³² Non habent esse per se absolutum a subjecto; sed sicut ex forma et materia relinquitur esse substantiale quando componuntur, ita ex accidente et subjecto relinquitur esse accidentale quando accidens subjecto advenit (6.9–13).

³³ Accidens superveniens . . . non causat illud esse in quo res subsistit, per quod res est ens per se; sed causat quoddam esse secundum, sine quo res subsistens intelligi potest esse (6.36–40).

form may be characteristics of the species, such as, in human beings, the capacity to see a joke. Accidents, like substances, can be grouped into genera and species; but the difference is that substances are thus ordered in the concrete, accidents only in the abstract. What Aquinas means is that whiteness is a species of colour, but the white is not a species of the coloured: if you have a white object, what species it belongs to will depend on the nature of the object (is it a plane? Is it a bird?).

3 COMMENTARY ON THE *SENTENCES*

THE *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, a twelfth-century Bishop of Paris, was a collection and discussion of texts from authoritative church documents and revered Christian writers. St Thomas' principal task during his four years as a bachelor at the University of Paris (1252–6) was to lecture on this work. His commentary on the *Sentences* was written during the same period of his life as *On Being and Essence*.¹ Unlike that work, it does not contain a systematic treatment of the philosophy of being. However, in the course of treating theological questions Aquinas addresses a number of relevant philosophical issues which illuminate and expand his early thought on these topics.²

Several texts clarify the relationship between universal and particular essences, and firmly reject any Platonic idea of extra-mental universals. One of the fullest is the following from a discussion of the nature of truth.

Of the things which are signified by names there are some which are extra-mental in respect of their whole complete *esse*: these are complete entities such as a man or a stone. Others have no extra-mental counterpart, such as dreams and chimeric imaginings. But there are some cases where the formal element of a concept is the work of the mind even though they have an extra-mental foundation in reality;

¹ The editors of the Leonine edition of the *De Ente et Essentia* record the view of P. Roland-Gosselin that its composition must have occurred shortly after St Thomas reached distinction 25 of the first book of the *Sentences*.

² Page references are given to the edition of the *Sentences* by P. Mandonnet and M. Moos (Paris, L  thellieux, 1929–33).

such is clearly the case with universals, for humanity is something in reality, but in reality it does not have the property of universality, since outside the mind there is no humanity that is common to many.³

If we ask, therefore, whether an essence such as humanity is or is not real, Aquinas will reply: universal humanity is not real; real humanity is not universal. There are as many real humanities as there are real human beings: a human essence is individuated by its possessor.

In creatures, Aquinas tells us, the numerical multiplicity of essences is consequent on the multiplicity of the things that have the essences. (The technical term he uses for the things which have the essences is 'supposit', a supposit being the thing for which the subject-term of a sentence stands.) The example he gives is that the humanity of Socrates is numerically different from that of Plato.⁴ (In 'Socrates is a man', the man Socrates would be, in Aquinas' terminology, the supposit.) So, in the real world, we have Socrates and Socrates' humanity, and Plato and Plato's humanity: there is not, in the real world, any humanity common to both Socrates and Plato.

It is true, of course, that human beings not only share the name 'human', they also derive their humanity from other human beings. The individual humanities of Cain and Abel were derived from the individual humanities of Adam and Eve. None the less, Aquinas says, a child's essence is quite distinct in *esse* from the essence of a parent; for the *esse* of a creature's

³ Eorum quae significantur nominibus . . . quaedam . . . sunt quae secundum esse totum completum sunt extra animam; et huiusmodi sunt entia completa, sicut homo et lapis. Quaedam autem sunt quae nihil habent extra animam, sicut somnia et imaginatio chimaerae. Quaedam autem sunt quae habent fundamentum in re extra animam sed complementum rationis eorum quantum ad id quod est formale, est per operationem animae, ut patet in universali. Humanitas enim est aliquid in re, non tamen ibi habet rationem universalis, cum non sit extra animam aliqua humanitas multis communis (I Sent. 19, 5, 1, MM, 486).

⁴ In omnibus enim creaturis ita est quod ad multiplicationem suppositorum sequitur multiplicatio essentiae secundum numerum, sicut alia humanitas est numero in Socrate et Platone (I Sent. 2, 1, 4, MM, 73).

essence is simply to be the essence of a particular creature. In the case of creatures, St Thomas says:

An essence has *esse* only because of its relationship to what has the essence; and so when a creaturely essence is shared, it is shared only in concept and not in *esse*, because in respect of that *esse* it exists only in one single possessor.⁵

In a previous chapter I argued that in *On Being and Essence* the discussion of the real distinction between essence and existence was vitiated at some points by a failure to distinguish between individual and specific essences. Some authors have defended the treatise by denying that St Thomas ever countenanced the idea of individual essences of human beings.⁶ But these contemporary passages from the *Sentences* make quite clear that during this period Aquinas believed in individual essences, and attributed to them greater reality than specific essences or universals.

One may well ask, however, what is the relationship between an individual essence and its possessor, and in what way are they distinguished from each other. Aquinas does offer an answer to this, but it is an answer that gives rise to further questions.

A nature or essence has a relationship to two things: to its possessor, and to that of which it is the source. Between the essence and the possessor there is no room for any power to mediate the actuality of the essence in respect of its possessor, which is *esse*; the essence itself gives *esse* to its possessor, and this actuality is as it were its first actuality. But

⁵ In creatura differt essentia rei et esse suum, nec habet essentia esse nisi propter comparisonem ad habentem essentiam; et ideo quando essentia creata communicatur, communicatur tantum secundum rationem suam et non secundum esse, quia secundum illud esse non est nisi in uno tantum habente (I Sent 2, 1, 4, ad. 1, MM, 74).

⁶ So Scott MacDonald, reviewing my *The Heritage of Wisdom* in the *Philosophical Review*, 99 (1990), 141, says 'In most contexts the notion of an individualized essence makes no sense for Aquinas. . . . So if Peter and Paul are two human beings, Peter's humanity and Paul's humanity cannot be two different individualized essences.'

there is also another actuality going out from the essence, which is both the act of its possessor considered as an agent, and also the act of the essence, as the source of action; and this is a second actuality, and is called operation. Between the essence and the operation there is room for a power which is distinct from each.⁷

Without an example, this is rather baffling. What Aquinas has in mind is something like this. Peter exists by courtesy of his essence: for Peter, to be at all is to be a human being. His humanity, then, gives him being; and being human is the very first thing about him, his first actuality. Being human, however, is, *inter alia*, being rational. Peter's rationality is the source of his ability to think: and any actual thinking that Peter does is his second actuality, his activity or operation. In order to think intellectual thoughts of the kind peculiar to humans, however, it is not enough merely to be a human being, as a newborn baby is: you need to acquire the ability to use language. This is the skill (which Aquinas calls a 'virtus', a power) that is distinct both from the essence (being human) and from the operation (actually speaking or thinking on a particular occasion). For our purposes, the point of this passage is the contrast drawn between essence and power. An individual does not have to acquire his essence as he has to acquire powers and skills: the essence is there as long as the individual is.

As in *On Being and Essence*, we are left puzzled by the exact relationship between an essence and its possessor. The contrast between essence and power is well taken; but it leaves us wondering why one should distinguish between a thing and its

⁷ Natura vel essentia comparatur ad duo: ad habentem, et ad id cuius natura est principium. Inter essentiam et habentem non cadit aliqua potentia media quantum ad actum ipsius essentiae in habentem, qui est esse; sed ipsa essentia dat esse habenti: et iste actus est quasi actus primus. Egreditur etiam ab essentia alius actus, qui est etiam actus habentis essentiam sicut agentis, et essentiae, sicut principium agendi: et iste est actus secundus, et dicitur operatio; et inter essentiam et talem operationem cadit virtus media differens ab utroque (I Sent. 7, 1, 1, ad. 2, MM, 177).

essence. Peter's powers are clearly distinct from Peter in the sense that they may come and go while Peter remains: it took him time to learn language, and he may lose the power of speech before he dies. But nothing similar can be said about Peter's humanity. One thing we are told that marks a difference between Peter and Peter's humanity: Peter has *esse*, but his humanity does not. Aquinas applies to natures and essences what Aristotle says of accidents: their being is being *of*.⁸ This warning against a reification of essences is welcome, but we still seem to be left with a mysterious human trinity in unity: Peter, Peter's essence, and Peter's *esse*. We will have to look beyond Aquinas' early works to find an elucidation of the precise nature of their distinction and their unity.

One thing is clear: all three of these items are individual, not universal. Repeatedly in the *Sentences*, we are told that whatever exists in reality is individual. One passage among many occurs when Aquinas, discussing the complexity of creatures, tells us that there are two sorts of creatures, self-standing and non self-standing. The latter class is described as follows:

There are creatures which do not have *esse* in themselves, but only in something else, such as prime matter, or any form, or a universal; for in nature nothing has *esse* except self-subsistent particulars.⁹

Alongside these robust anti-Platonic statements, however, we occasionally meet passages that suggest a certain Platonism at one remove. Aquinas insists, as we have seen, that it is not correct to say that Peter and Paul are both human because they share a common humanity; for the humanity of Peter is not identical with the humanity of Paul. But suppose we go on to ask: what makes the humanity of Peter and the humanity of

⁸ Nec natura rei nec partes eius dicuntur proprie esse . . . similiter autem nec accidentia, . . . unde etiam Philosophus dicit . . . quod accidens magis proprie est entis quam ens (III Sent. 6, 2, 2, MM, 239).

⁹ Est etiam creatura quae non habet esse in se, sed tantum in alio, sicut materia prima, sicut forma quaelibet, sicut universale; non enim est esse alicuius nisi particularis subsistentis in natura (I Sent. 8, 5, 1, MM, 227).

Paul both humanities? Aquinas sometimes answers that they are both individuations and determinations of the same common nature.¹⁰ This seems to make sense only if the common nature is something extra-mental like a Platonic idea.

On the question of the distinction between *esse* and essence in creatures, Aquinas in the *Sentences* brings to bear an Aristotelian distinction which he did not employ in *On Being and Essence*. Aristotle, he tells us, makes a distinction between two different acts of the mind, two different intellectual operations. One is the understanding of simple ideas; the other is belief in a positive or negative proposition. The first operation, Aquinas says, is concerned with the quiddity of a thing, and the second with its *esse*.¹¹

The distinction between the grasp of a concept (which is expressed by the mastery of the use of a word) and the possession of a belief (which is expressed by the employment of a sentence) is, on the face of it, unproblematic. Two things are to be noted, however. The first is that in this context an understanding of the quiddity must mean simply a grasp of the meaning of a word, not a scientific understanding of the nature of what the word stands for. Second, *esse* cannot here mean existence, since existential statements are only a tiny fraction of the number of sentences that we compose and employ. The relationship to *esse* stated here is no more than the occurrence of the copula, which marks the difference between single words and complete sentences.¹²

¹⁰ In illis enim in quibus aliud est essentia quam hypostasis vel suppositum, oportet quod sit aliquod materiale, per quod natura communis individuetur et determinetur ad hoc singulare (I Sent 34, 1, 1, MM, 788).

¹¹ [est] duplex operatio intellectus. Una . . . quam philosophus . . . nominat intelligentiam indivisibilium, quae consistit in apprehensione quidditas simplicis . . . alia est quam dicunt fidem, quae consistit in compositione vel divisione propositionis; prima operatio respicit quidditatem rei, secundum respicit esse ipsius (I Sent. 19, 5, 1, ad. 7, MM, 489).

¹² There is a complication involved in the expression 'compositio vel divisio', which St Thomas often uses as equivalent to 'positive and negative propositions'. Are not subject and predicate put together in a negative proposition no less than

There are, of course, other senses of *esse* in the *Sentences*. Three of them are distinguished from each other in an important passage:

'*Esse*' has three senses. In one sense '*esse*' means the actual quiddity or nature of a thing, as we say that a definition is an expression signifying what the *esse* is. In the second sense '*esse*' means the actuality of the essence; as living, which is the *esse* of a living thing, is an actuality of the soul: not its second actuality, which is its operation, but its first actuality. In the third sense '*esse*' means what signifies the truth of a propositional complex, which is why '*est*' is called a copula.¹³

The first sense here given to '*esse*' is one that we have not met before. The Aristotelian expression '*quid est esse*' was glossed differently in *On Being and Essence*. Here, the word is a synonym for 'essence'. Clearly, this is not a sense we need to pursue in seeking to elucidate Aquinas' teaching on being. If '*esse*' is used in this sense, then it becomes a tautology to say that not only in God, but in anything whatever, essence is identical with '*esse*'. The sense is listed here by Aquinas only as a precaution against confusion with other senses which he deploys throughout his works.

The third sense is the one that we encountered a short time ago when discussing the two different operations of the mind. What is new here is the reference to truth: *esse* is what signifies the truth of a proposition. This is puzzling. Surely the copula occurs in false propositions as well as in true ones, in 'Socrates

in a positive one? When he later reflected on this problem, St Thomas agreed, but went on to explain that in a positive proposition the subject–predicate complex is, as it were, put alongside reality, and in a negative one it is put asunder from it. See *In Libros Peri Hermeneias*, ed. R. M. Spiazzi (Turin, 1955), p. 26, I, 3, and my *Action, Emotion and Will*, pp. 226–7.

¹³ *Esse dicitur tripliciter. Uno modo dicitur esse ipsa quidditas vel natura rei, sicut dicitur quod definitio est oratio significans quid est esse; definitio enim quidditatem rei significat. Alio modo dicitur esse ipse actus essentiae; sicut vivere, quod est esse viventibus, est animae actus; non actus secundus, qui est operatio, sed actus primus. Tertio modo dicitur esse quod significat veritatem compositionis in propositionibus, secundum quod 'est' dicitur copula (I Sent. 33, 1, ad. 1, MM, 766).*

is a donkey' as well as in 'Socrates is a human'. Well, it might be replied, even false propositions are put forward as being true, and that is what the copula indicates. But even that is not correct. Sure, to assert a proposition is to put it forward as true; but not all propositions are asserted; propositions may occur unasserted in disjunctions ('Either the butler is the murderer, or the chauffeur is') or in conditionals ('If this is gold, then it is soluble in *acqua regia*'). Predication, that is to say subject–predicate complexity, occurs in all propositions, whether or not they are asserted, and the copula seems to be the mark of predication, not assertion.¹⁴

However, unasserted propositions have truth-values; that is to say, they are either true or false as the case may be. So we could charitably interpret St Thomas' statement that the copula signifies the truth of a propositional complex as meaning that a copula indicates that the complex has a truth-value. But no sign inserted in a proposition could guarantee that proposition's truth: truth, as St Thomas often insists, is not something internal to a sign, but a relation between a sign and reality.

It is the second of the three senses of '*esse*' that is most relevant to our inquiries: *esse* as first actuality of essence. A thing's essence, we might say, is not what it has, and not what it does, but what it *is*. Fido is a dog, a living thing, an entity of a certain kind. Aquinas tells us that his *esse* and his living are one and the same. But what exactly, in this context, is meant by his 'living'? Is it simply his belonging to the category of living things, as plants do and stones do not? Or is it his life, his history, his life story?

¹⁴ Of course, there are many propositions that do not contain the copula, such as 'Mary swims'. Aquinas often seems to assume that for logical purposes all such propositions could be written in subject–copula–predicate form as e.g. 'Mary is a swimmer'. Modern logicians, following Frege, regiment language in the opposite direction, construing a predicate as being what is left when you remove a name from a simple sentence, so that the copula is swallowed up in the predicate, e.g. '... is a swimmer'.

That the second is the correct answer is suggested by a number of passages elsewhere in the *Sentences*. In discussing the *esse* of Christ, St Thomas says that *esse* is the actuality of an entity resulting from its fundamental elements, in the way that shining is the actuality of a light.¹⁵ Elsewhere, discussing the sense of the Latin expression ‘quo est’ (literally, ‘that by which is’) Aquinas says that that by which one is is *esse*, the actuality of being, just as that by which one runs is the activity of running.¹⁶

Not all is clear in these opaque sentences, but the comparison of *esse* with verbs of activity is suggestive. It would be wrong to conclude from the idiom of such passages that Aquinas regards being as some form of activity that is universally indulged in by everything that there is—as Gilbert Ryle once put it, something like breathing, only quieter. The Latin word ‘*actus*’ when applied, say, to running is naturally translated ‘activity’; but it has a very general application to actualities of various kinds. Being blue, or being square, would for Aquinas be actualities, no less than speaking or skipping, but they are actualities of very different kinds. It is to guard against mistaken assimilations that Aquinas makes the distinction that we have already seen between first and second actualities.

None the less, clearly, *esse* in this sense is being treated not as a copula but as a fully fledged predicate. This throws some light on the key doctrine that God is pure *esse*, the doctrine that we found baffling in *On Being and Essence*. In the *Sentences*, as in that treatise, the relationship between supposit, essence, and *esse* is very different in God from the way it is in creatures. God is really identical with his essence, though a conceptual difference can be drawn. Those familiar with Frege may be tempted to expound this as stating that ‘God’ and ‘God’s

¹⁵ Et hoc quidem esse in re est, et est actus entis resultans ex principiis rei, sicut lucere est actus lucentis (III Sent. 6, 2, 2, MM, 238).

¹⁶ Potest etiam dici ‘quo est’ ipse actus essendi, scilicet esse, sicut quo curritur est actus currendi (I Sent. 8, 5, 2, MM, 279).

essence' have different senses but the same reference. But Aquinas' thesis is not quite the same. It is the essence of God that gives the sense (*significatio*) to the word 'God'; but the same word refers (*supponit*) to what has the essence, namely the divine person (or persons).¹⁷ God's essence is not only the same thing as God, but also the same thing as God's *esse*.¹⁸

It is when we ask what sort of *esse* is in question here that we find the treatment of the word as a predicate illuminating. God, we are told, is pure *esse*, because his being has no admixture of privation or potentiality, just as pure gold is gold that has no admixture of any other metal.¹⁹ God's *esse* is *esse* without addition. Other things, that is to say, are what they are; God just is, period. This puzzling doctrine, as soon as it is put forward, meets with an objection.

Being to which no addition is made is common being, predicated of every thing of which nothingness can be truly denied. But God is not like that. Therefore some addition must be made to his *esse*.²⁰

In reply, Aquinas says that the predicate that is common to all things is one that is neutral in respect of any addition: he means that this common 'is' applies equally to what is a horse and what is a star and what is a sneeze. In the light of the analogy between

¹⁷ *Essentia et suppositum sunt in Deo idem re, nihilominus tamen differunt ratione* (I Sent. 2, 1, 4, ad. 2, MM, 74). *Quamvis hoc nomen deus significet essentiam, tamen, quantum est de se, supponit habentem essentiam, et rem naturae, etiam non intellectis personis, quas fides distinguit* (I Sent. 4, 1, 2, ad. 2, MM, 135).

¹⁸ *Divina autem essentia est idem quod suum esse; et ideo quando communicatur essentia communicatur etiam esse* (I Sent. 2, 1, 4, ad. 1, MM, 74).

¹⁹ In I Sent. 8, 4, 1, ad. 1, MM, 195. In Deo autem ipsum esse suum est sua quidditas; et ideo nomen quod sumitur ab esse proprie nominat ipsum. St Thomas goes on to explain the sense of 'proprie' as follows: *secundum quod excluditur omne extraneum a natura praedicati, ut cum dicitur, hoc proprie esse aurum quia non habet admixtionem alterius metalli; et hoc modo esse dicitur proprium Deo, quia non habet admixtionem divinum esse alicuius privationis vel potentialitatis* (MM, 196).

²⁰ *Ens enim cui non fit additio, est ens commune, praedicatum de omnibus de quo nihil potest vere negari. Sed Deus non est huiusmodi. Ergo ad esse suum fit aliqua additio* (I Sent. 8, 4, 1. Obj. 1, MM, 218).

the actuality of being and the activity of running, drawn earlier, it seems that Aquinas looks on the relation of 'being' to 'being a horse' as parallel to that of 'running' and 'running slowly': the extension of the predicate is a modification or limitation of the unextended predicate. But when 'is' is predicated of God, it is essential that no addition be made to it: no further continuation of the predicate is allowed.²¹ To a modern philosopher, used to treating the 'is' in 'is a horse' or 'is running' as an inseparable part of the predicate, this is very difficult to make sense of.

The doctrine of *esse* without addition, or of pure being, is undoubtedly a very difficult one, and the *Sentences* do not tell us enough about it to decide whether it is an incoherent notion or one that is merely obscure. On the face of it, the notion of an undiluted element (which is the clue we are given by the comparison with pure gold) is quite different from the notion of a contentless predicate (which is what is suggested by the predicate without a complement). A full discussion of the doctrine must wait until we encounter a fuller statement of it in the *Disputed Questions on Power*.²²

One thing, however, seems clear from the outset. If we treat being as a predicate—whether as a common predicate which belongs to anything whatever, or as an absolute predicate which belongs to God alone—then being, so treated, is something quite different from existence. This is clearest in the case of the common predicate. A phoenix, for instance, is not only a bird, but also a living thing, and a being. Yet there is no such thing as a phoenix. Someone might say that what does not exist does not have any predicates true of it at all. Let us waive this: all that is necessary to make my point is that, in whatever sense a phoenix is a bird, it is also a being. In Aquinas' terminology, at

²¹ Aliquid esse sine additione dicitur dupliciter. Aut de cuius ratione est ut nihil sibi addatur: et sic dicitur de Deo Aut ita quod non sit de ratione eius quod fiat sibi additio, neque quod non fiet, et hoc modo ens commune est sine additione (I Sent. 8, 4, 1, resp. ad. 1, MM, 219).

²² See Chapter 10 below.

this stage of his life, being is part of the quiddity of phoenix; in a more modern terminology, we might say that *being* is a component of the concept *phoenix*.

The same goes for the absolute predicate which is the defining characteristic of God. Whatever this mysterious predicate signifies, it is clear that it belongs to God whether He exists or not. Even if we deny the existence of God, then, according to the theory of pure being, what we are denying is the existence of something possessing the absolute predicate. And when we affirm the existence of God, we are affirming that something in reality does possess this unique characteristic. Being enters into the quiddity of God as it does into the quiddity of phoenix, with this difference: that being is the *only* thing that enters into the quiddity of God, so that it can be said to be identical with it. But this being is something quite different from actual existence: it enters into the quiddity of God whether or not there is such a thing as God.

Once this is appreciated, the *On Being and Essence* argument from phoenixes to the real distinction between essence and *esse*, can be seen to be fatally flawed. Indeed, in his later writings Aquinas ceased to make use of it. He does not yet, however, seem to have thought his way through its confusions, and it makes an appearance in the second book of the *Sentences*:

There are some natures whose concept does not involve their *esse*, which is clear because you can understand what they are without knowing whether they exist, such as a phoenix or an eclipse.²³

Here the phoenix argument is used in exactly the same way as in *On Being and Essence*, except that a further example is given, which perhaps is intended to show that the argument is meant to apply to individual existence (the occurrence of a particular eclipse) as well as to the generic existence of a species.

²³ Quaedam enim natura est de cuius intellectu non est suum esse, quod patet ex hoc quod intelligi potest cum hoc quod ignoretur an sit, sicut phaenicem, vel eclipsim (II Sent. 3, 1, 1, MM, 87).

In the *Sentences*, as in *On Being and Essence*, we are told that immaterial creatures differ from God because their essence is not identical with their *esse*, and that their essence or quiddity is a potentiality of which the *esse* is the actuality.²⁴ As examples of immaterial creatures, however, we are given angels, as befits a theological treatise, rather than the intelligences that betrayed the influence of Avicenna.

²⁴ In angelo est potentia et actus, non tamen sicut partes quidditatis, sed potentia tenet se ex parte quidditatis, et esse est actus eius (II Sent. 3, 1, 1, ad. 4, MM, 89).

4 DISPUTED QUESTIONS ON TRUTH

DURING the academic year 1255–6, Aquinas was ordered to proceed to the degree of Master and to take up the chair of theology in Paris. For the next three years his principal duty was to lecture on the Bible; but he also had the task of presiding over the formal disputations that constituted an integral part of the academic curriculum. Such a disputation, on a thesis announced in advance, would last over two days: on the first, a bachelor would receive and reply to arguments from the audience against the master's thesis; on the second, the master would summarize the arguments on both sides, and give his own overall solution to the question in dispute. A record was kept of these proceedings, and the texts of many of Aquinas' disputations survive. The Parisian ones are traditionally known, from the topic of the first of them, as *Disputed Questions on Truth (De Veritate)*.¹ In the course of these disputations, we can see Aquinas consolidating and developing his account of being.

In the early disputations of this collection, a number of positions with which we are now familiar are reaffirmed in terms similar to those we have already seen. Avicenna and Boethius are quoted in support of the thesis that God is his own *esse* but all creatures are distinct from their *esse*.² Whatever has an *esse*

¹ Page references are given to the Marietti edition of the *De Veritate*, ed. R. Spiazzi (Turin, 1949).

² 1, 1, 3 and ad. 3 (SS. 2 and 4); 2, 2 (S. 28).

distinct from its essence is caused by something whose essence is identical with his *esse*, namely God.³

In the tenth disputed question, entitled ‘Of the mind, which contains the image of the Trinity’, there are significant new developments. In the twelfth article the question at issue is whether it is self-evident that there is a God. In this article, as in all similar disputations, a number of arguments (here, ten) are put forward for the affirmative conclusion, then a number of arguments (here, ten again) are put forward for a negative conclusion, and finally, the master gives his own account of the issue, confirming or rejecting the individual original arguments as appropriate.

Three out of the ten arguments in favour of the proposition that the existence of God is self-evident are drawn from the notion of being. The second argument is an abbreviation of Anselm’s famous argument in his *Proslogion*, commonly, if not altogether accurately, known as the ‘ontological argument’:

God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. But that which can be thought not to be, is less great than that which cannot be thought not to be. Therefore God cannot be thought not to be.⁴

In order to respond to this, Aquinas distinguishes between two sorts of self-evidence: things that are self-evident in themselves, and things that are self-evident to us. A proposition is self-evident in itself if the predicate is an element in the concept of the subject, so that one cannot conceive the subject without seeing that the predicate belongs to it: for instance, it is self-evident that a whole is greater than any part of itself. But the subject of a proposition may be something that not everyone can grasp, and so the proposition will not be self-evident to everybody: an example of this, drawn from Boethius, is the thesis that non-corporeal objects have no location.

³ 8, 8 (S. 158).

⁴ Deus est quo maius cogitari non potest, ut Anselmus dicit. Sed illud quod potest cogitari non esse, est minus illo quod non potest cogitari non esse. Ergo Deus non potest cogitari non esse (10, 12, 2, S. 218).

Applying this to the case in point, Aquinas maintains that the proposition that there is a God is self-evident in itself, but not to us. To show that the proposition is self-evident in itself, he appeals to the special nature of God's *esse*:

Esse is not in its perfection an element in the concept of any creature . . . but in God his *esse* is an element in the concept of his quiddity, because in God what he is and *esse* are the same, as Boethius and Dionysius say, and the answer to the question 'is he?' and 'what is he?' are the same, as Avicenna says.⁵

For this argument to work, *esse* must mean 'existence', and not the mysterious absolute predicate identified in the *Sentences*. Moreover, it leads to the absurd conclusion, pilloried by Geach, that the answer to the question 'What is God?' is 'There is one'. However, in order to show that the existence of God is not self-evident to us, Aquinas makes a very different suggestion: that the answer to the question 'What is God?' is something that we simply do not know.

Because the quiddity of God is not known to us, therefore so far as we are concerned the proposition that there is a God is not self-evident but in need of demonstration. But in our heavenly home, where we will see his essence, the existence of God will be better known to us than the principle of non-contradiction is in our present life.⁶

Applying this, Thomas says that Anselm's argument would succeed if the proposition's failure to be self-evident were something that could be attributed to God; but the failure is due not to him but to the deficiency of our cognitive faculties.

⁵ Hoc autem quod est esse, in nullius creaturae ratione perfecte includitur . . . Sed in Deo esse suum includitur in eius quidditatis ratione, quia in Deo idem est quid esse et esse, ut dicit Boethius et Dionysius; et idem est an est et quid est, ut dicit Avicenna; et ideo per se et secundum se est notum (10, 12c, S. 220).

⁶ Sed quia quidditas Dei non est nobis nota, ideo quoad nos Deum esse non est per se notum, sed indiget demonstratione. Sed in patria, ubi essentiam eius videbimus, multo amplius erit nobis per se notum Deum esse, quam nunc sit per se notum quod affirmatio et negatio non sunt simul verae (10, 12c, S. 220).

So the fact that it is possible to think that he does not exist does not prevent him being that than which no greater can be thought of. Aquinas may be thought of as responding to the premiss 'That which can be thought not to exist is less great than that which cannot be thought not to exist' by making a distinction:

That which can be thought by an ideal intellect not to exist is less great than that which cannot be so thought not to exist, I agree.

That which can be thought by a feeble human intellect not to exist is less great than that which cannot be so thought not to exist, I do not agree.

This response to the argument seems to me a fair one, and a more convincing refutation than other better known responses which St Thomas was to give later in his career. The effectiveness of the response is independent of the particular method, which I have just criticized, by which St Thomas sought to show that an ideal intellect would find God's existence self-evident.

The fourth argument for the self-evidence of God's existence goes like this.

God is his own *esse*. But it is impossible to think that *X* is not predicated of *X*, e.g. that a man is not a man. Therefore it is not possible to think that God is not.⁷

St Thomas's response to this is to deny that the first premiss is itself self-evident. In this life, when we do not see God's essence, we do not see intuitively that deity is God's *esse*; in order to accept that thesis, we need either faith or proof. He believes, of course, that he has offered such a proof in the writings that we have so far examined: but there is a difference between a conclusion that is validly proved and a truth that is

⁷ Deus est ipsum esse suum. Sed non potest cogitari quin idem de se praedicetur, ut quod homo non sit homo. Ergo non potest cogitari Deum non esse (10, 12, 4, S. 218-19).

self-evident. St Thomas does not draw attention to the equivocation latent in the fourth argument, in that the *esse* that appears in the premiss is the absolute being that is represented by the mysterious predicate we have discussed, whereas the ‘is’ in the conclusion is the ‘there is’ of existence which is best analysed by means of the quantifier.

Finally, we should note the seventh argument, which echoes Augustine and foreshadows Descartes:

God has a truer *esse* than the human soul has. But the soul cannot think that it does not exist. Therefore, *a fortiori*, it cannot think that God does not exist.⁸

Here, the same ambiguity infects the first premiss. On the one hand, we may say that anything that is God possesses the absolute predicate to a greater extent than a human soul; on the other hand, if there are human souls and there is no God, then God does not have a truer existence than the human soul. But Aquinas, interestingly, attacks not the first but the second premiss by drawing attention to an ambiguity in ‘thinks’. To think something may mean merely to entertain a thought, or it may mean to assent to it. I can entertain the thought ‘I do not exist’ just as I can entertain the thought ‘I once did not exist’; the thought contains no contradiction, unlike ‘the whole is less than its proper part’. But though I can entertain the thought ‘I do not exist’, I cannot assent to it—not because of anything to do with its content, but because, in thinking any thought, I perceive my own existence.⁹

When we move on to the ten arguments in the disputation, which are presented in favour of the negative conclusion, we find two more that are relevant to the understanding of divine being. The fourth argument runs thus:

⁸ *verius esse habet Deus quam anima humana. Sed anima non potest cogitare se non esse. Ergo multo minus potest cogitare Deum non esse* (10, 12, 7, S. 219).

⁹ *Nullus potest cogitare se non esse cum assensu: in hoc enim quod cogitat aliquid, percipit se esse* (10, 2, ad, 7, S. 220).

It is not possible to know of something that it is, unless what it is is already known. But in the present life we cannot know of God what he is. Therefore his *esse* is not known to us; therefore it is not self-evident, either, that there is a God.¹⁰

This is a highly interesting argument. The disputant who presents it makes a distinction between God's being (*Dei esse*) and there being a God (*Deum esse*). This seems to be just the distinction that we have found lacking in Aquinas' previous discussions of the topic. Development of this distinction would have enabled him to avoid some of the confusions we claim to have detected in the arguments for the identity of essence and existence in the Godhead. However, in his response, Aquinas does not advert further to the distinction between two senses of *esse*, but introduces a distinction between two understandings of quiddity. In the passages we have considered hitherto, the quiddity has been treated as identical with the essence, and as something that is expressed by a definition. Now Aquinas makes a distinction between the quiddity that is expressed by a definition and the quiddity that is the meaning of a word. In order to know whether something exists, he says, we do not need to know what it is by definition, but only what is signified by its name.¹¹ Henceforth, in writing about our knowledge of God Aquinas will consistently stress that we can know what the word 'God' means, even though we cannot know the essence of God or give it a formal definition.

The ninth argument for the negative conclusion contains the assertion that in God there is a conceptual distinction between *esse* and essence. If so, it is argued, then the one can be thought of without the other, and hence God's existence is not

¹⁰ Non potest sciri de aliquo ipsum esse, nisi quid ipsum sit cognoscatur. Sed de Deo in praesenti statu non possumus cognoscere quid est. Ergo eius esse non est nobis notum; ergo nec Deum esse est per se notum (10, 12, 4 in contra, S. 219).

¹¹ Ad hoc quod cognoscatur aliquid esse, non oportet quod sciatur de eo quid sit per definitionem, sed quid significetur per nomen (10, 12, ad. 4 in contra, S. 221).

self-evident. In reply, St Thomas agrees that, if A is conceptually distinct from B, then A can be thought of without B being thought of. But that does not mean that we can coherently think of A-without-B. So, even though there is a conceptual distinction between God and his *esse*, that does not by itself show that God can be thought not to exist.¹²

St Thomas further advances his theory of divine being in the twenty first disputation of this series, which is devoted to the topic of goodness. The fourth article asks whether all good things derive their goodness from the primary good, which is God. The details of this discussion need not concern us, but one of the arguments uses as a premiss the claim that *esse* is proper to God. If this is so, the disputant alleges, then there is nothing else except God. In response, St Thomas clarifies:

When it is said that *esse* is proper to God, this is not to be understood as meaning that there is no other *esse* except uncreated *esse*. Rather, what is meant is that only that *esse* is properly called *esse* because in virtue of its immutability it knows neither past nor future *esse*.¹³

Some creatures are, but were not; some were, but are not; some are, but will not be; and some will be, but are not yet. But God is and always was, is and always will be: the changes that past and future tenses mark have no place in Him. This passage is significant because it is the first place in which Aquinas so explicitly links the special nature of God's being with God's relation to time and change. This theme, which Aquinas will later develop, helps to elucidate the mysterious notion that God's *esse* is *pure* being. The same notion is further glossed in

¹² Ea quae sunt a ratione distincta, non semper possunt cogitari ab invicem separata esse, quamvis separatim cogitari possint . . . unde licet in Deo distinguantur quod est et esse ratione, non tamen sequitur quod possit cogitari non esse (10, 12, ad, 9 in contra, S. 221).

¹³ Cum dicitur: esse est proprium Deo; non est intelligendum quod nullum aliud esse sit nisi increatum; sed quod solum illud esse proprie dicitur esse, in quantum ratione suae immutabilitatis non novit fuisse vel futurum esse (21, 4, ad, 7, S. 383).

the succeeding article ('whether creatures are good by their essence') when we are told that the difference between created essence and divine essence is that, whereas creatures share in *esse* communicated from outside, God is pure *esse* because he is his own self-standing *esse*. Here God's independence is given as the ground of the purity of his being.¹⁴

In the succeeding article, it is rather God's infinity that seems to be the basis for ascribing pure being to him. Creatures, we are told, because they are not identical with their *esse*, have a received *esse*, and this means that their *esse* is finite and limited by the measure of that in which they are received.¹⁵ The same thought occurs in the twenty ninth disputation, where the question is whether Christ's grace is infinite. There we read:

Only God is infinite in essence, because his essence is not limited to any determinate perfection, but includes in itself every mode of perfection to which the concept of entity can apply; this infinity cannot belong to any creatures, because the *esse* of every creature is limited to the perfection of its proper species.¹⁶

It is not easy to understand the idea that belonging to a species is a limitation. To be sure, an elephant has many limitations: there are many things that elephants can't do that humans can do, not to mention whatever angels may be able to do. But an elephant is surely not limited simply by being an elephant rather than a gadfly: indeed, if it weren't an elephant there wouldn't be anything to have the limitations. It

¹⁴ *Essentia cuiuslibet rei creatae non est suum esse, sed esse participans ab alio. Et sic in Deo est esse purum, quia ipse Deus est suum esse subsistens* (21, 5c., S. 385).

¹⁵ *creaturae . . . habent esse receptum; et per hoc eorum esse est finitum et terminatum per mensuram eius in quo recipitur* (21, 6c., S. 387).

¹⁶ *solus Deus infinitus est secundum essentiam; quia eius essentia non limitatur ad aliquam determinatam perfectionem, sed in se includit omnem modum perfectionis, ad quam ratio entitatis se extendere potest . . . haec autem infinitas nulli creaturae competere potest: nam cuiuslibet creaturae esse est limitatum ad perfectionem propriae speciei* (29, 3c., S. 557).

may be suggested that all St Thomas means is that an elephant, however perfect, can only be a perfect elephant: it cannot be a perfect gadfly. But God cannot be a perfect gadfly either; so that cannot be the point he has in mind. The underlying idea of St Thomas' text seems to be not so much that an individual creature's *esse* is limited, as that *esse* itself is limited by being possessed by the creature. It is almost as if *esse* were a vast expanse of liquid, portions of which take the shape of the receptacle into which they are poured, so that some *esse* comes out elephant-shaped, and other *esse* comes out gadfly-shaped. But such a fantasy is surely a Platonic one, unworthy of the official anti-Platonic position that St Thomas commonly defends.¹⁷

With this we may leave the consideration of the *Disputed Questions on Truth*. This series of disputations came to an end in 1259, when St Thomas stepped down from his Paris chair and left for a six-year sojourn in Italy. In the next chapter we will consider the major work of his Italian period, the *Summa contra Gentiles*, known in English translation as *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*.

There remain, however, other texts from the Parisian period which cast light on St Thomas' understanding of being. In addition to the regular structured disputations of the series on Truth, St Thomas also presided over impromptu disputations, called *quodlibets*, held during Advent and Lent, in which the topic for discussion, instead of being predetermined by the master, was initiated by members of the audience, who could choose any topic they pleased. The eighth set of quodlibets is dated by scholars to Christmas 1257,¹⁸ and the first article in this series, under the unpromising title 'Is the Number Six the

¹⁷ There are occasional hints of Platonism in the *De Veritate*, for instance in 27, 1, c (S.512) when, in discussing the nature of grace, St Thomas seems to suggest that two individuals of the same kind share a common quiddity and differ only in *esse*.

¹⁸ References to quodlibets are given to the lines in the Leonine edition, vol. 25.

Creator?' has a concise statement of Aquinas' attitude, at this period, to Platonic realism.

Following Avicenna,¹⁹ Aquinas tells us that there are three ways of considering any given nature. We can consider it in respect of the *esse* it has in individuals, or in respect of the *esse* it has in the mind; or we can consider it absolutely, in the abstract, without reference to either *esse*.²⁰ The nature of horse, for instance, occurs in individual horses, and we can study it by examining these individuals, Bellerophon or Eclipse or Red Rum. We can consider also the concept *horse* as it occurs in the mind: as when we say that the concept horse is a concept easily attained. But we can also consider in the abstract what is involved in being a horse: and this is what Aquinas calls the absolute consideration of the nature of horse. It is important to note that he is not saying that there exists any such thing as the abstract nature of horse: the only *esse* that the nature of horse has is (as particular) in individual horses and (as universal) in the mind. The absolute consideration is not the consideration of an abstract entity in some third realm: it is a consideration that abstracts from the only two kinds of *esse* that Aquinas is willing to attribute to specific natures.

None the less, the nature considered in the abstract does, for Aquinas, have a certain priority over the nature existing in individuals:

Socrates is rational, because man is rational, and not vice versa; so that even if Socrates and Plato did not exist, rationality would still be a characteristic of human nature.²¹

¹⁹ There is a useful collection of the relevant texts from Avicenna in J. Owens, 'Common Nature', *Medieval Studies*, 19 (1957): 1-9.

²⁰ [T]riplex est alicuius naturae consideratio. Una, prout consideretur secundum esse quod habet in singularibus; sicut natura lapidis in hoc lapide et illo lapide. Alia vero est consideratio alicuius naturae secundum esse suum intelligibile; sicut natura lapidis consideretur prout est in intellectu. Tertia vero est consideratio naturae absoluta, prout abstrahit ab utroque esse (Quodl. VIII, 1, c, 54-60).

²¹ Socrates est rationalis, quia homo est rationalis, et non e converso; unde dato quod Socrates et Plato non essent, adhuc humanae naturae rationalitas competeret (Quodl. VIII, 1, c, 108-10).

How can this be, if there are no universals existing outside the mind? Aquinas' solution is to invoke the divine mind. There are really four, not three, ways of considering natures: first, as they are in the mind of the creator; second, as they are in the abstract; third, as they are in individuals; and finally, as they are in the human mind. The natures considered in the abstract and in individuals, he says, provide the standard by which the human concept is judged.

The ninth quodlibet, most likely debated in Easter 1258, contains, no less than the eighth, important evidence for Aquinas' theory of being. It is devoted to the question 'Whether in Christ there is only one *esse*?'

According to Christian orthodoxy, Christ is a single person, the Son of God, who has two natures: one divine and one human. Christ always existed as God, but began to exist as a human being. Hence, the question arises whether in his case there is only a single *esse*, corresponding to the single person, or whether there are two *esse*, corresponding to the duality of natures. St Thomas' answer is that in Christ there is a single substantial *esse* even though there are many accidental *esses*. But as an objection to this he says: If you can ask of a thing whether it is [*an est?*] then you can attribute *esse* to it. But you can ask *an est?* of Christ's human nature; so it has an *esse* distinct from that of its divine nature. In order to prepare the way for dealing with that objection, Aquinas recapitulates the now familiar distinction between two ways in which *esse* is spoken of:

In one way it is the verbal copula indicating the complexity of any proposition which the mind forms: this *esse* is not anything in nature, but only in the act of the mind forming affirmative and negative propositions; and in this way *esse* can be attributed to anything about which a proposition can be formed, whether it is a being or a privation of being; for we say that there is blindness. In the other sense *esse* is the act of a being in so far as it is a being, that is, that by which something is called a being in actuality in the nature of things; and in this sense *esse* is only attributed to those things which are in the ten

categories, so being in this sense of *esse* is divided into the ten categories.²²

When it is argued that, since we can ask *an est?* of Christ's human nature, it must have a separate *esse*, St Thomas says that the argument is using *esse* in the sense in which to say that a thing *is* is merely to say that true propositions can be formed of it.

Peter Geach has used this passage, among others, to argue that in his mature work Aquinas grew out of the confusions of *On Being and Essence* and adopted an understanding of *esse* which corresponds to the present-day representation of existence by the quantifier. The clearest indication of this change of mind, he says, is given by the mention of privations such as blindness:

Blindness is not an *ens* and has no *esse*; for it is not among the things that are, being on the contrary precisely the absence of what would be an existing thing, viz. the absence of sight from an eye. All the same, we can truly say that there is blindness in a given eye, which is an affirmative answer to an '*an est?*' question. Thus the existence asserted in this case by saying 'there is . . .' is quite different from Aquinas' *esse*.²³

We have already encountered more than once a difference between existence and *esse* in Aquinas: but it is wrong to take passages such as the one just quoted as indicating that Aquinas anticipated the modern quantifier analysis, whereby 'Fs exist' is rewritten as 'Something is an F'. In the first place, if we apply the analysis given here to the example of the phoenix, we

²² Uno modo secundum quod est copula verbalis significans compositionem cuiuslibet enuntiationis quam anima facit: unde hoc esse non est aliquid in rerum natura, sed tantum in actu animae componentis et dividitatis; et sic *esse* attribuitur omni ei de quo potest propositio formari, sive sit ens, sive privatio entis; dicimus enim caecitatem esse. Alio modo *esse* dicitur actus entis in quantum est ens, idest quo denominatur aliquid ens actu in rerum natura; et sic *esse* non attribuitur nisi rebus ipsis quae in decem generibus continentur, unde ens a tali esse dictum per decem genera dividitur (Quodl. IX, 2, 2[3], ll. 34 ff.).

²³ G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 88–9.

find that what Aquinas would translate into ‘Something is a phoenix’ is not ‘a phoenix exists’ but ‘pheonixhood exists’. But in any case, it would be wrong to take the analysis of privations as offering a general account of existential statements according to which the apparent subject of any such statement is to be replaced by a logical predicate, as in the quantifier analysis. The answer to the objection about Christ’s human nature that we have just seen from the ninth quodlibet does indeed suggest that the blindness analysis can be applied, not only to privations but also to *entia* which have a real *esse*. But even this does not involve an analysis of existential propositions similar to a quantifier. The part of the blindness analysis that can be applied to all terms whatever is simply that part that states ‘*X is = a proposition can be formed about X*’. But there is another part of the blindness analysis, which is that the proposition is one in which the term X appears not in subject but in predicate place. And this, it turns out, is not applied to any kind of substance.

Aquinas goes on in the quodlibet to explain that a distinction has to be made among the things that have *esse* in the second sense as items in one or other of the Aristotelian categories:

This *esse* can be attributed to something in two ways. In one way, as to that which properly and truly has *esse* or is; and in this way it is attributed only to self-subsistent substance. But things which are not self-subsistent, but exist in and with something else, whether they are accidents or substantial forms, or any kind of parts, do not have *esse* so that they really are, but *esse* is attributed to them in a different way, that is, as that by which something is. Thus whiteness is said to be, not because it is subsistent in itself, but because to it something else owes it that it is white.²⁴

²⁴ Hoc esse attribuitur alicui dupliciter. Uno modo sicut ei quod proprie et vere habet esse vel est; et sic attribuitur soli substantiae per se subsistenti . . . Omnia vero quae non per se subsunt, sed in alio et cum alio, sive sint accidentia sive formae substantiales aut quaelibet partes, non habent esse ita quod ipsa vere sint, sed attribuitur eis esse. Alio modo, idest ut quo aliquid est; sicut albedo dicitur esse, non quia ipsa in esse subsistat, sed quia ea aliquid habet esse album (Quodl. IX, 2, 2(3), 46–57).

Thus, where X is not a complete substance, but a form, then the proposition 'X is' will be analysed in the same way as for privations: to attribute *esse* to the wisdom of Socrates is to say that Socrates is wise. (The wisdom of Socrates is = Socrates is wise). But when the X in question is a complete substance, the proposition whose truth is asserted by the proposition 'X is' is that proposition itself. It is true, as we shall see later, that Aquinas regarded this proposition as capable of further analysis; but it is not capable of any analysis that shifts the 'X' from subject place. It is not because they are existential propositions that 'blindness is' and 'wisdom is' are analysed in the switching-round way characteristic of the quantifier analysis. It is because they are propositions whose subjects are not complete substances. Hence Geach's account fails.

Consideration of the ninth quodlibet is, none the less, rewarding to anyone who wishes to understand Aquinas on being. We can see that the doctrine of the incarnation forces Aquinas to modify two of the Aristotelian principles that in philosophical contexts underpin his account of *esse*. One is the dictum that the *esse* of living beings is their life; the other is that substantial change results in a new substantial *esse*.

According to Christian teaching, Christ lives with two lives: an uncreated divine life, and a human life from birth to death. So if life = *esse*, must he not have two *esses*? Not so, St Thomas replies: life is a particular form of *esse*, specified by the relevant living principle; so if one person has two principles of life, he will live two lives and yet have only one *esse*.

Again, Christ, as man, was the result of a human generation. But generation is one of the Aristotelian forms of substantial change, and so surely it must have resulted in the production of a new *esse*. St Thomas, instead, prefers to treat the incarnation as similar to accidental change; there is not a new substantial *esse* belonging to the human nature; rather, the eternal divine person acquires a new *esse* by becoming a person having a human nature.

The final text to be considered from St Thomas' first Parisian sojourn is his commentary on a theological treatise of Boethius, the *De Hebdomadibus*. The general topic of the tractate is the relation between being and goodness; it is the second lecture of the commentary that is most relevant to our concerns.

This starts from the position that *esse* is something common and indeterminate; it becomes determinate both from the side of its subject and from the side of its predicate. The 'is', in 'S is P', in other words, indicates both the being *of something* (S) and *some kind of being* (P).²⁵ What most interests Aquinas at this point, however, is not the significance of the copula, so much as a contrast between being in the abstract (*esse*) and a concrete being (*ens* or *id quod est*). The verbal noun 'running' (as in 'running is good for you'), is an abstract noun like 'whiteness'; the corresponding concrete noun is 'runner'. A runner runs, but we cannot say that running runs. Syntactically, 'esse' is parallel to 'running', and we can no more say that *esse* is than we can say that running runs. The formulation that Aquinas prefers is that a runner *participates* in running, and that a particular being *participates in esse*.²⁶

Well, what does 'participate' mean? To participate, Aquinas tells us, is to have a share of. So once something is a particular instance of something that belongs also generally to other things, it participates in it: Socrates participates in man (he is a man, but there are other men too); and man participates in animal (men are animals, but there are other animals too).

²⁵ Circa ens autem consideratur ipsum esse quasi quoddam commune et indeterminatum, quod quidem dupliciter determinatur, uno modo ex parte subjecti quod esse habet, alio modo ex parte praedicati, utpote cum dicimus de homine vel quacumque alia re non quidem quod sit simpliciter, sed quod sit aliquid, puta album vel nigrum (Lect. II, ll. 19–25; references to the Boethius commentary are given to lecture and lines of vol. 50 of the Leonine edition).

²⁶ Sicut non possumus dicere quod ipsum currere currat, ita non possumus dicere quod ipsum esse sit . . . sicut possumus dicere de eo quod currit sive de currente quod currit in quantum subicitur cursui et participet ipsum, ita possumus dicere quod ens sive id quod est sit in quantum participet actum essendi. (II, 47–59).

What is participated here appears to be a kind of concrete universal: all the men there are form a part of all the animals there are. But it is not only concrete things that participate in concrete things, Aquinas tells us: abstract entities can also participate, as whiteness participates in colour (whiteness is one among the totality of colours).

What, then, of being: does that participate or is it participated? *Esse*, St Thomas tells us, does not participate. Its abstractness, as we have seen, is not a problem: what prevents it participating is that it is utterly common.²⁷ Presumably, that means that every abstract entity is a type of *esse*, so there is nothing left over, once we have counted all the *esses* there are. We might expect the same to be true of concrete being: surely *entia* must exhaust the furniture of the universe, leaving no remainder. St Thomas agrees that *ens*, like *esse*, is likewise utterly common; but this, he says, does not prevent it from participating in *esse*, not in the way that something less common participates in what is more common, but in the way in which a concrete thing participates in an abstract one. But *what* this way is is left quite unexplained.²⁸

St Thomas goes on to use the notion of participation to explain how, even in immaterial forms, there is a distinction between form and *esse*: a form is not *esse*, but has *esse*:

Plato posited an immaterial form that was the idea and concept of material humans, and another form that was the idea and concept of horses. On this account, it is clear that the subsistent immaterial form, since it is determined to a species, is not the common *esse* itself, but participates in it.²⁹

²⁷ *Ipsum esse est communissimum, unde ipsum quidem participatur in aliis, non autem participet aliquid aliud* (II, 94–7).

²⁸ The only clue we are given is the comparison with running. Perhaps an individual runner possesses a little bit—a share—of all the running that is going on.

²⁹ *Puta secundum opinionem Platonis, ponens formam immaterialem subsistere quae sit idea et ratio hominum materialium, et alia forma quae sit idea et ratio equorum, manifestum erit quod ipsa forma immaterialis subsistens, cum sit quiddam determinatum ad speciem, non est ipsum esse commune, sed participat illud* (II, 230 ff.).

Well, and good: but what are those of us who are not Platonists to make of the notion of subsistent immaterial forms? St Thomas does not help us, but hastens to his conclusion (familiar since *On Being and Essence*), that there can only be one item in which *esse* is not participated, but is self-subsistent. ‘And this simple, single, and sublime entity is God himself.’

5 *SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES*

THE *Summa contra Gentiles* was the major achievement of the middle period of St Thomas's life, begun just before he left Paris for Italy in 1259 and completed while he was living in Orvieto around 1265. Its title, literally translated, means *Summary*, or *Synopsis, against Unbelievers*; its most frequently used English translation bears the title *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*. I shall refer to it by its Latin title.¹ According to a fourteenth-century tradition, now often discounted by scholars, the book was a missionary manual, written at the request of the Spanish Dominican Raymond of Peñafort, who was evangelizing non-Christians in Spain and North Africa. Whatever the truth of this story, the book differs from St Thomas' other major treatises in taking its initial stand (throughout the first three of its four books) not on Christian doctrine, but on philosophical premisses that could be accepted by Jewish and Muslim thinkers versed in Aristotelian learning. It is a work not of revealed theology, but of natural theology; and natural theology is a branch of philosophy. This makes it, naturally, a treatise particularly attractive to philosophers, even though Aquinas's more theological works contains a great deal of philosophical interest.²

¹ References in this chapter are to the *Summa contra Gentiles* (ScG) unless otherwise specified. References are given to the book, chapter, and paragraph number in the Marietti edition by C. Pera (Turin, 1961), which derives from the Leonine edition.

² On the likely purpose and readership of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, see Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa contra Gentiles I*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 43–51.

There is another way in which the book differs from Aquinas' other major treatises. It takes the form neither of a commentary (like the *Sentences*) nor of a scholastic disputation (like the *Summa Theologiae*), but instead is written like a modern textbook. It consists of four books of a hundred or so chapters each, amounting to some 300,000 words in all. It is as densely packed with argument as any disputed question; but the structure of the reasoning is more linear and less dialectical. That makes it easier for some modern readers to assimilate.

Aquinas scrupulously distinguishes between those truths about God and creatures that he believes can be established by reasoning independent of any alleged revelation, and those that are provable only by appeal to divine authority communicated either through the Bible or through the teaching of the Church. The first book is about the nature of God, the second is about the created world and its production by God, and the third book is about the way in which rational creatures are to find their happiness in God. In these three books, biblical and ecclesiastical texts are used only as illustrations, never as premisses of arguments. Only in the fourth book does Aquinas turn to specifically Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Sacraments, and the final fate of humanity after the resurrection of the dead.

Aquinas explains his method as follows:

Muslims and pagans do not agree with us in accepting the authority of any scripture we might use in refuting them, in the way in which we can dispute against Jews by appeal to the Old Testament and against heretics by appeal to the New. These people accept neither. Hence, we must have recourse to natural reason, to which all are forced to assent.³

³ Mahumetistae et pagani non conveniunt nobiscum in auctoritate alicuius Scripturae, per quam possint convinci, sicut contra Iudaeos disputare possumus per Vetus Testamentum, contra haereticos per Novum. Hi vero neutrum recipiunt. Unde necesse est ad naturalem rationem recurrere, cui omnes assentire coguntur (I, 2.11).

Even those truths that in theory are open to reason, such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, must in practice, St Thomas believed, be accepted by many people by faith on authority (just as they accept doctrines like the Trinity). This is because to establish them by philosophical argument demands more intelligence, leisure, and energy than can be expected from the majority of mankind. The *Summa contra Gentiles* is aimed at the fortunate minority.

Most of the passages that concern our topic of being occur in the first part, where, having drawn the boundaries between reason and faith, Aquinas inquires what reason has to say about the existence and nature of God. The essential foundation of the whole work is to establish that there is a God; without this, he says, the whole of theology would collapse. As in *On Truth*, he first addresses the question whether it is self-evident that there is a God, and again he takes as his starting point the arguments of St Anselm in the *Proslogion*. Though this time the Saint is not named as the source of the argument, the presentation of it is fuller and more faithful to his text. Whereas in *On Truth* the arguments of the second and third chapters of the *Proslogion* were conflated, here they are separated out. The argument of chapter two is reported thus:

Under the name of God we understand something than which nothing greater can be thought. But this is formed in the intellect by a person who hears and understands the name of God: so that God must exist at least in the intellect. But he cannot exist only in the intellect: because what exists both in the intellect and also in reality, is greater than what exists only in the intellect, while the very concept attached to the name shows that nothing can be greater than God. The upshot is that it is self evident that there is a God, as is made clear by the very meaning of the name.⁴

⁴ Nomine Dei intelligimus aliquid quo maius cogitari non potest. Hoc autem in intellectu formatur ab eo qui audit et intelligit nomen Dei: ut sic saltem in intellectu iam Deum esse oporteat. Nec potest in intellectu solum esse: nam quod in intellectu et re est, maius est eo quod in solo intellectu est; Deo autem

This presentation, as I have said, is closer to Anselm's text than the earlier presentation in *On Truth*, and the first five lines can be regarded as a very fair synopsis of the *Proslogion* argument in chapter two. But when it comes to showing that God cannot exist in the intellect alone, there is a significant difference between the reason given in Aquinas' summary and the reason given in Anselm's text. Aquinas has 'because nothing can be greater than God'; Anselm has 'because if so that than which nothing greater can be thought, is something than which something greater can be thought'.⁵ The *reductio ad absurdum* presented by Anselm's text is omitted from Aquinas' summary; and this is a serious omission. In response to Aquinas' version of the argument, an atheist might simply deny, without any apparent incoherence, that nothing is greater than God: indeed, the most insignificant existing thing is, in one sense, greater than a non-existent God. Thus, Aquinas, in the following chapter, criticizes Anselm by saying 'there is no incoherence, whatever object you take in reality or in the intellect, in its being possible to think of something greater than that object, unless you already agree that there is, in reality, something than which nothing greater can be thought'.⁶ What Aquinas says here is very likely true: the notion of 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' is probably an incoherent one, like that of 'the greatest possible natural number'. But Aquinas has not shown this, nor has he tackled Anselm's argument head on.

Aquinas next summarizes the argument of the third chapter of the *Proslogion*: if God could be thought not to exist, then one could think of something greater than him, namely, some-

nihil esse maius ipsa nominis ratio demonstrat. Unde restat quod Deum esse per se notum est, quasi ex ipsa significatione nominis manifestum (I, 10.60).

⁵ Si ergo id quo maius cogitari non potest, est in solo intellectu: id ipsum quo maius cogitari non potest est quo maius cogitari potest (*Proslogion* 2).

⁶ Non enim inconueniens est quolibet dato vel in re vel in intellectu aliquid maius cogitari posse, nisi ei qui concedit esse aliquid quo maius cogitari non possit in rerum natura (I, 11.67).

thing that could not be thought not to exist. His response to this argument is essentially the same as the one he gave to Anselm on *On Truth*: the possibility of thinking that God does not exist arises not from any defect in God, but from the weakness of our intellect.

The belief that God's existence is self-evident, Aquinas suggests, results mainly from people's being accustomed to hearing talk about God since their earliest childhood. But again, as in *On Truth*, he distinguishes between things that are self-evident in themselves and things that are self-evident to us. 'In the absolute', he says, 'that there is a God is self-evident, since the very thing that God is is his *esse*. But because we cannot conceive in our minds the very thing that God is, it remains unknown so far as we are concerned.'⁷ In itself God's existence shines out; but our feeble minds are like owls blinking in the sunlight.

Once again, we meet the confusion between being and existence. If the *esse* that is the very same thing as God is equated with being rather than existence, then, for all we know, God, the fullness of being, may not exist. If the *esse* that is the very same thing as God is equated with existence, rather than being, then not only is God's existence not self-evident, it is inconceivable, since we cannot conceive that very thing that God is.

If the answer to the question 'Is there a God?' is the same as the answer to the question 'What is God?' then, since we do not know what God is, we do not know whether there is one. However, though in discussing whether the existence of God is self-evident Aquinas seems to accept the identity of these two questions,⁸ he qualifies his acceptance when, in chapter

⁷ Simpliciter quidem Deum esse per se notum est: cum hoc ipsum quod Deus est, sit suum esse. Sed quia hoc ipsum quod Deus est mente concipere non possumus, remanet ignotum quoad nos (I, 11.66).

⁸ The third argument for self-evidence includes this passage: [Dei] esse est sua essentia, ac si idem sit quod respondetur ad questionem quid est et ad quaestionem an est (I, 10.62). This is not queried when, in the next chapter, Aquinas responds to this argument.

twelve, he comes to consider, and to reject, the contrary hypothesis that God's existence is unprovable.

Those who maintain this, he says, sometimes do argue that, since reason cannot achieve knowledge of what God is, it equally cannot prove that God is. But this, he now says, depends on a misinterpretation of the doctrine that essence and *esse* are the same in God:

This thesis is to be understood of the *esse* by which God is self-subsistent, which is no less unknown to us than his essence is. But it is not to be understood of the *esse* which signifies the composition of the intellect. For that God exists is the subject of proof when as a result of demonstrative reasons our mind is led to form the kind of proposition about God by which we express that God is.⁹

This important passage casts both new light and new darkness. It is the clearest recognition we have yet met in Aquinas of a distinction between being and existence: between the being of God on the one hand, which is equivalent to the life of God, which is something of which here below we can have no inkling; and on the other hand the existence of God, which is a matter of fact that we can establish by mundane methods of proof. If, having distinguished between the two, a present-day philosopher wanted to bring out the relationship between the two, he could do it by using a quantifier and a predicate.

God exists = For some X, there is an X which has divine being.

This is not, however, what St Thomas does. Instead, he says that the *esse* of existence—the *esse* that answers the question *an sit?*—is the copula that indicates the intellectual composition expressed in positive and negative propositions. This introduces a new puzzling feature in his account. On the face of it,

⁹ Hoc intelligitur de esse quo Deus in seipso subsistit, quod nobis quale sit ignotum est, sicut eius essentia. Non autem intelligitur de esse quod significat compositionem intellectus. Sic enim esse Deum sub demonstratione cadit, dum ex rationibus demonstrativis mens nostra inducitur huiusmodi propositionem de Deo formare qua exprimat Deum esse (I, 12. 78).

neither ‘*est*’ in ‘*Deus est*’ nor ‘exists’ in ‘God exists’ is a copula: for a copula is what links subject and predicate, and in those sentences there is no predicate to be linked to the subject. And indeed, in this context, as elsewhere, Aquinas regularly treats ‘*Deus est*’ as a subject–predicate sentence, with ‘*est*’ as the predicate.¹⁰ So Aquinas’ solution to the problem that has hitherto troubled us leaves us with a further problem unresolved.

Having established to his satisfaction that God’s existence is neither self-evident nor undecidable, Aquinas goes on to consider ways in which it might be proved. For our present purposes, we fortunately do not need to investigate the long and complicated arguments for the existence of God which Aquinas presents in chapter 13 from the nature of motion. We must, however, look closely at a different argument that occurs in chapter 15. This argument, it has often been noticed, bears a close resemblance to a better known argument in the *Summa Theologiae* which is the third of St Thomas’ famous Five Ways of proving that God exists. Here, however, the argument is presented not as a proof of God’s existence, but as part of a proof that God is eternal. It runs as follows (I have added numbers to facilitate discussion):

(1) We see in the world some things that have the possibility both of *esse* and of non-*esse*—things that can be generated and corrupted. (2) Everything which is a merely possible *esse* has a cause: because, since in itself it is indifferent to two things, namely *esse* and non *esse*, if *esse* attaches to it it must be on the basis of some cause. (3) But one cannot go on to infinity in a series of causes, as was shown [in an earlier chapter] by a proof of Aristotle’s. (4) Therefore we must posit something which is a necessary *esse*. (5) Now everything necessary either has the cause of its necessity from elsewhere, or it does not but is necessary of itself. (6) But one cannot go on to infinity in a series of necessary things that have their cause of necessity from elsewhere.

¹⁰ For instance, I, 10.62: cum dicitur Deus est, praedicatum vel est idem subiecto, vel saltem in definitione subiecti includitur.

(7) Therefore we must posit some necessary thing that is necessary of itself. (8) And this is God.¹¹

This important passage is not easy to translate.¹² The ambiguity of *esse* has led us, as a matter of principle, to leave it untranslated throughout the book, so as not to beg the question of whether, in any particular passage, it is being or existence that St Thomas has in mind. Here, when St Thomas speaks of *possibile esse* and *nesesse esse*, it may be that he is adopting a use frequent in the Latin translations of Avicenna and using ‘*esse*’ to mean a thing or entity, so that ‘*nesesse esse*’ means a necessary entity and ‘*possibile esse*’ means a possible, or contingent, entity. Still, however the text should be literally translated, the general drift of the argument is clear even though its metaphysical presuppositions need to be teased out.

The starting point of the argument is the undeniable premiss that there are some things in the world that come into and go out of existence. Asked to give examples, St Thomas would think, as we would, of individual plants and animals, and the bodies and artefacts of human beings. We could give further examples, which he might hesitate to offer: whole species of living beings on earth arise and vanish, and so do planets and stars in the heavens. St Thomas believed that in fact heaven and earth and all that was in them had been created, so that they had not existed for ever but had come into

¹¹ Videmus in mundo quaedam quae sunt possibilis esse et non esse, scilicet generabilia et corruptibilia. Omne autem quod est possibile esse, causam habet: quia, cum de se aequaliter se habeat ad duo, scilicet esse et non esse, oportet, si ei approprietur esse, quod hoc sit ex aliqua causa. Sed in causis non est procedere in infinitum, ut supra probatum est per rationem Aristotelis. Ergo oportet ponere aliquid quod sit necesse esse. Omne autem necessarium vel habet causam suae necessitatis aliunde; vel non, sed est per seipsum necessarium. Non est autem procedere in infinitum in necessariis quae habent causam suae necessitatis aliunde. Ergo oportet ponere aliquid primum necessarium, quod est per seipsum necessarium. Et hoc Deus est (I, 15.124).

¹² There is a very careful study of the passage in Kretzmann’s *Metaphysics of Theism*, 95–112. In my discussion of it I am partly following, and partly contesting, his analysis.

existence a long time ago. But he believed this on the authority of the book of Genesis; he did not think it could be shown by natural reason, either by *a priori* argument or by scientific investigation. In a work aimed at a philosophical rather than a theological audience, he had to leave open the possibility that terrestrial species and heavenly bodies had always existed and would always exist unchanged.

The contingent entities from which his argument begins, then, are the entities that in Aristotelian terms are generated and corrupted: that is to say, entities that come into existence *from* something else and go out of existence *into* something else. A world that is created by God out of nothing is not generated; and if God were to annihilate the world that would not be a case of corruption. But that there are, within the world, things that are generated and corrupted is beyond dispute, and so we can accept without cavil proposition (1).

The next proposition is more problematic. We may well be inclined to agree that whatever begins to exist must have a cause. However, if that is what Aquinas is claiming, the reason given in (2) seems odd. What, we may ask, is the possible entity that is indifferent between *esse* and *non-esse*? Is it a *merely* possible entity, an entity as it were waiting to come into existence but undecided whether or not to do so? Surely this is absurd. My dog Stigger was a contingent, corruptible entity: but before Stigger was conceived there was no such entity as a merely possible Stigger, awaiting actualization. In his later work, as we shall see, Aquinas shows himself aware of the absurdity of this kind of suggestion. But perhaps in the present passage he had not yet shaken off the influence of Avicenna, who seems to have embraced the absurdity of merely possible individuals.¹³ However, there are alternative ways of reading (2).

¹³ Not all contemporary philosophers agree about the absurdity of merely possible individuals, as is shown by the late 20th-century proliferation of treatises on possible worlds. Fortunately, in discussing Aquinas, there is no need to elaborate on the philosophical issue.

Perhaps, for instance, Aquinas is here thinking not of coming into existence, but of going on existing. This proposal, however, does not make the argument more convincing. It is true that Stigger, at every moment of his life, was mortal and vulnerable and might, with bad luck, have been killed long before he actually died. But it would be quite untrue to say that throughout his life he was 'indifferent to existing or not existing': on the contrary, he had a strong instinct for self-preservation. Not only living things, but all the everyday objects in the universe seem to possess what Norman Kretzmann has aptly called 'existential inertia', namely, a tendency to continue to exist, other things being equal.

A third possibility is that in talking of *esse* here Aquinas is not talking of existence at all, but of being: that is, that he is looking for the explanation not of something's existing, but of its being of a certain kind. On this interpretation, the entity that is possible-to-be-and-not-to be and is indifferent between *esse* and *non-esse* is not an individual substance like a dog, but the underlying matter which is the substratum of generation and corruption: matter that, for example, can be either cream or butter, and is, of its own nature, indifferent between being cream or butter. '*Esse*' would thus mean not 'existence', but the 'being' that occurs in 'being cream' or 'being butter'.

Close examination of (2) itself cannot settle, I believe, whether Aquinas has in mind coming into existence, continuing to exist, or being F (for some appropriate F). None of the interpretations can be initially ruled out. But each interpretation will result in a different reading of the concluding demand for a causal explanation, and therefore of the nature of the regress that proposition (3) seeks to exclude.

If we take the first interpretation, then (3) is ruling out the possibility of a series of causes in which A is brought into existence by B, B is brought into existence by C, C is brought into existence by D, and so on *ad infinitum*. An argument against such an infinite series does indeed occur in the *Summa contra*

Gentiles in book II, chapter 38, paragraph 1140. Our world cannot be eternal, it is there argued, because it would mean an infinite series of efficient causes, with father generating son, grandfather generating father, and so on. This argument is not accepted by Aquinas: he makes clear that he sees no incoherence in the notion of such an infinite series:

What philosophers say is that it is impossible to have an infinite series of agent causes that act simultaneously, because the effect would have to depend on an infinite number of synchronous actions. These causes are intrinsically infinite, because their infinity is required for the effect to come about. But in non-synchronous causes [an infinite series] is not impossible, according to those who believe the series of generation to go on for ever. For the infinity here is something inessential to the causes: it is inessential to the father of Socrates whether he is or is not the son of another. But it is not inessential to a stick's moving a stone that it is moved in its turn by a hand: for the stick moves only to the extent that it is moved.¹⁴

The distinction Aquinas is here making we may call a distinction between essentially ordered and inessentially ordered causes. A series of causes is essentially ordered if not only does A cause B and B cause C . . . (as in the father–son series), but also A causes B to cause C and B causes C to cause D . . . (as in the stick and stone series). Though Abraham caused Isaac (by begetting him), he did not cause Isaac to cause (beget) Jacob. But when I use a stick to poke a stone off the lawn, the movement of my hand not only causes the stick to move but also causes the stick to move the stone. It is only an infinite series of

¹⁴ Causas agentes in infinitum procedere est impossibile, secundum philosophos, in causis simul agentibus: quia oporteret effectum dependere ex actionibus infinitis simul existentibus. Et huiusmodi sunt causae per se infinitae: quia earum infinitas ad causatum requiritur. In causis autem non simul agentibus, hoc non est impossibile, secundum eos qui ponunt generationem perpetuam. Haec autem infinitas accidit causis: accidit enim patri Socratis quod sit alterius filius vel non filius. Non autem accidit baculo, in quantum movet lapidem, quod sit motus a manu: movet enim in quantum est motus (II, 38.1147).

essentially ordered causes that Aquinas thinks to be impossible. But a series of terrestrial generators giving rise to each succeeding generation would be only an inessentially ordered series. Accordingly, it is unlikely that the first of the interpretations of (2) given above is correct, even though at first sight it seemed the most plausible reading of the text.

Let us, therefore, assume that what Aquinas is ruling out in (3) is a series of synchronous causes, and that what he has in mind in (2) is either the continuation of actual substances in existence, or the persistence of matter under various forms. The question now becomes: do these items need a cause, and if so what kind of cause? What corresponds here to the stick and the hand in the series of essentially ordered causes?

It is not clear that there is any need, in general, for an efficient cause. Sure, a contingent entity needs a cause to bring it into existence, but once brought into existence it does not seem to need anything, other than its own existential inertia, to keep it in existence. Again, a cause will be needed for a transformation of matter from one state to another; but do we always have to be looking for an explanation of why matter remains in the state it is in? Some philosophers have believed that every contingent being is re-created at each moment by a fresh act of divine will, so that each moment of a thing's history is an independent and separate entity, like successive frames of a continuous motion picture. But this, if true, could at best be a corollary of a proof of God's existence, not a premiss or a step on the way to it. And in any event, it does not seem to have been Aquinas' view: he accepts genuine continuity in the existence of substances, and recognizes their tendency to continue in existence. (e.g. *Summa contra Gentiles*, book 1, chapter 37, paragraph 306).

Of course, living things have life-cycles, and some non-living things have an inbuilt tendency to decay. But a thing suffers the relevant changes and dissolutions because of the kind of thing it is: in Aristotelian terms, it is a matter of formal,

not efficient, causation.¹⁵ This is quite different from the series of synchronous movers. It is not that the series cannot go on for ever; it is that it does not even get started. What would it be to look for a cause of a dog being a dog, or of uranium being uranium? No doubt we can look back in history for explanations of why there are dogs at all, or why uranium is among the elements: but in this passage Aquinas is talking about synchronous causes.

Norman Kretzmann proposes that we interpret the argument in terms of sustaining causes: the conditions that must obtain if a thing is to continue in existence. A contingent being is by definition something whose existing is utterly dependent on the fulfilment of many necessary conditions. We can think of the totality of conditions necessary for the continuing existence of all contingent entities as forming a single, synchronous whole. To identify the necessary conditions, we would look to natural science; and, because of the progress of science between the thirteenth century and the twenty-first, the examples that we would give of such conditions would differ markedly from those that Aquinas would give. But the difference at the level of physics need not invalidate the thrust of the metaphysical argument. The continued existence of an individual is explained by pointing to its sustaining causes; the continuance of these causes in its turn needs explanation; and we can ask whether this explanatory series can proceed *ad infinitum*. Kretzmann writes:

Your presently existing needs the earth's atmosphere as part of its explanation; a mountain's or a star's presently existing doesn't Moving up several levels in the explanation of your continuing to exist, the existing of the earth's atmosphere requires earth's gravity, and so does the mountain's continuing to exist—though not the star's. And, moving up many more levels of explanation all at once,

¹⁵ It might, perhaps, be argued that, since an essence brings with it existential inertia and a commitment to a life-cycle, it is in a manner of speaking an efficient cause. But I do not find this argument in the ScG.

the continuing existence of earth's gravity and of the star and of every other dependent being 'we see . . . in the world' has the continuing existence (or obtaining) of natural laws as a necessary condition.¹⁶

If this essentially ordered series of causes lacks a first member, Kretzmann argues, then the continued existence, whether of the individual effect or the series as a whole, is simply a brute fact, theoretically inexplicable. There is no ordinary existing thing about which we could tolerate the blithe announcement that there simply is *no* reason for its existence. Therefore, rationality forbids our abandoning the principle when the existing thing in question is extraordinary or all-pervasive—a thing such as the universe, or matter.

Kretzmann's discussion is highly interesting, but it is very different from Aquinas' argument. There is no reason to regard the interlocking web of necessary conditions for my continued existence as forming an essentially ordered series of causes: gravity does not make the atmosphere make me go on living in the way that my hand makes my spade make the soil turn. Nor could Aquinas reject the possibility that the series of necessary conditions could be an endless one, since the series of human ancestors too is a series of necessary conditions (had my grandfathers not existed, nor should I) and he is willing to allow that to be infinite. Moreover, the things that Aquinas felt needed causes, and the causes he invoked, were concrete entities, not anything like natural laws. (The bracketed words 'or obtaining' in Kretzmann's text give the game away!) Aquinas believed that the sun and the moon and the stars were active agents in terrestrial generation and corruption; things on earth when they reproduced their kind were acting as instruments of the heavenly bodies.

It is indeed the heavenly bodies that are the necessary entities of proposition (4). They are not subject to generation and corruption; they are not 'indifferent between *esse* and *non esse*'.

¹⁶ Kretzmann, *Metaphysics of Theism*, 104.

They are incorruptible and indestructible by natural means: if they can cease to exist, it is only by being annihilated by God. In this respect, the heavenly bodies resemble the immaterial intelligences or angelic spirits. Later in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, he writes as follows:

There are among created things some whose *esse* is absolutely necessary without any qualification or condition. For the *esse* of any thing is necessary if it has no possibility for *non-esse*. Now some things have been brought into being by God in such a way that in their nature there is a power for *non-esse*. That is because the matter in them is in potentiality to another form. Those things, therefore, in which there is no matter, or if there is, in which the matter has no possibility of taking another form, have no power for *non-esse*. Their *esse* is therefore necessary without any qualification or condition.

It may be said that things which come from nothing have a tendency, so far as in them lies, to return to nothing; and thus all creatures have a power for *non-esse*. But that is manifestly a bad argument. It is said that created things tend to return to nothing in the same way as they come from nothing. But to say that they come from nothing is simply to refer to the power of the creator. So created things do not, as such, have a power for *non-esse*, but there is a power in the creator either to give them *esse* or to cease to pour *esse* into them.¹⁷

The final section of Aquinas' original argument (propositions (6)–(8)) is designed to show that behind the causation of necessary beings there must lie an ultimate causation, that of

¹⁷ Sunt enim quaedam in rebus creatis quae simpliciter et absolute necesse est esse. Illas enim res simpliciter et absolute necesse est esse in quibus non est possibilitas ad non esse. Quaedam autem res sic sunt a Deo in esse productae ut in earum natura sit potentia ad non esse. Quod quidem contingit ex hoc quod materia in eis est in potentia ad aliam formam. Illae igitur res in quibus vel non est materia, vel, si est, non est possibilis ad aliam formam, non habent potentiam ad non esse. Eas igitur absolute et simpliciter necesse est esse. Si autem dicatur quod ea quae sunt ex nihilo, quantum est de se, in nihilum tendunt; et sic omnibus creaturis inest potentia ad non esse:—manifestum est hoc non sequi. Dicuntur enim res creatae eo modo in nihilum tendere quo sunt ex nihilo. Quod quidem non est nisi secundum potentiam agentis. Sic igitur et rebus creatis non inest potentia ad non esse: sed Creatori inest potentia ut eis det esse vel eis desinat esse influere (II, 30.1063–6 ff.).

God. Before following that argument, two things should be noted about the passage just quoted. First, it shows that in Aquinas' thought we must make a sharp distinction between potentiality and possibility, even though he often uses the word '*possibile*' to mark the possession of a potentiality. For the possibility of being annihilated by God is surely a genuine possibility, even if it is not a potentiality and not the possession of a tendency. It is true that to say that God can make a planet out of nothing does not mean that there is something, called 'nothing', that has the possibility of being made by God into a planet, nor that there is a possible planet which God can actualize into existence. But it does not follow that, when there *is* a planet, which does exist, and which God can annihilate, that planet does not have the possibility of not existing. Second, while in my translation I have conformed to my regular practice of leaving '*esse*' untranslated, it is clear that throughout this particular passage it could be unambiguously translated 'existence'—until we come to the final line. Later, in another context, we can ask what St Thomas could mean by 'pouring being' into something.

The final section of the argument holds no great interest for modern secular thinkers who do not believe in the existence of angelic spirits and who do not regard celestial phenomena as exhibiting a different set of natural necessities from those that obtain on earth. None the less, Aquinas cannot be faulted for seeking to rule out, as the ultimate explanation of the universe, something that is at least an *a priori* possibility, namely a necessary entity that was something less than God. So he distinguishes between necessary entities that have the cause of their necessity from elsewhere and an entity that is necessary of itself. To prove that not all necessary beings can be of the first kind, Aquinas makes his familiar appeal to the impossibility of an infinite regress of causal explanation.

How does Aquinas know that celestial bodies like the sun do not have the cause of their necessity in themselves? What,

indeed, is it for something to be necessary of itself? An answer he might give is that, for something to be necessary in itself, its existence must be entailed by its essence, and that the heavenly bodies do not have an essence of the appropriate kind.

We should proceed, then, to chapters twenty-one and twenty-two of the first part of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, where Aquinas presents afresh his doctrine of the relationships between God, his *esse*, and his essence. The twentieth chapter maintains that God is identical with his essence, quiddity, or nature; and the twenty-first chapter that God's essence is identical with his *esse*. Aquinas does not devote a separate chapter to showing that God is identical with his *esse* since this follows, by the transitivity of identity, from the other two theses.

Aquinas presents five arguments for identifying God with his essence. The first two can be briskly stated in a single sentence. If there were anything in God other than his essence, then God would be composite, and the extra element would be an accident; but neither of these conclusions is acceptable. The third argument is in effect a summary of the teaching of *On Being and Essence* about individuation. It goes like this: other essences cannot be predicated of their subjects, because there is needed something other than the essence to individuate them: but the divine essence is self-individuating. The fourth and fifth arguments, however, introduce new considerations, and we should examine them.

The essence of a thing, the fourth argument runs, either is the thing itself, or is in some kind of causal relation to it. But nothing can be the cause of God. Therefore, God's essence must be God himself. To prove the first premiss, Aquinas says that a thing gets its species from its essence: an example would be that it is my humanity that makes me a man. To prove the second premiss, he appeals to the argument we have considered at length to establish a first cause of all necessary existence. There seems to be an equivocation here in the notion of 'cause'. The regress of causes that terminated in God was a

series of efficient causes; the causation by which an essence assigns its owner to a species is formal causation. Formal causation does not involve dependence: someone who says that God's essence entails his existence does not make God dependent on something other than himself. To be sure, God's essence is not a *part* of God; but that does not mean that it is the whole of him, either.

The fifth argument is similar and similarly flawed. It goes as follows. If X is not X's essence, then X contains something that is in potentiality to X's essence. But in God there is no potentiality. Therefore God is God's essence. To prove the first premiss, Aquinas says that finite essences are 'signified in formal mode'. This seems to mean that they are indicated by abstract nouns, for the example he gives is 'humanity'.¹⁸ Considered purely linguistically, the argument is unpersuasive, since God's essence too can be referred to by abstract nouns like 'Deity' or 'Godhead'. I am not my humanity, I am that which *has* my humanity; but this syntactic point does not of itself imply a relationship of potentiality between myself and my humanity. There is, in fact, no such relationship: I can neither acquire nor lose my humanity. If I were not human, I would not exist; there would be no such person as me.

The arguments of chapter twenty-two are more interesting. They start from a definition of God as 'quod per se necesse est esse'. Because of the ambiguity of 'esse', this may be translated either as 'that which of itself necessarily exists' or 'that that of itself is a necessary being'. Which translation is preferable is something that must emerge from a consideration of the way the argument develops. But first we should look closely at the conclusion to which the argument is intended to lead, which is stated in the very first paragraph of the chapter: God's essence is none other than his *esse*.¹⁹

¹⁸ [P]er modum formae significatur essentia, ut puta, humanitas (I, 21.201).

¹⁹ in Deo non est aliud essentia vel quidditas quam suum esse (I, 22.202).

It has been suggested that this thesis can be interpreted simply as meaning that God's essence entails his existence. This is certainly a claim that has been made by philosophers other than Aquinas. Leibniz, for instance, ended one of his proofs for God's existence by saying that there exists 'a necessary Being, in whom essence involves existence, or in whom it suffices to be possible in order to be actual'. Other philosophers have denied that essence can ever entail existence, on the grounds that a concept can never determine its own exemplification. But this denial has been questioned, by Arthur Prior among others.²⁰ We can distinguish between the necessary and contingent *non*-exemplification of concepts: it is contingent that the concept of *unicornhood* is not exemplified; it is necessary that *square circularity* is not exemplified. So why, Prior argued, should there not be a similar distinction between *exemplified* concepts? However, if we try to produce an instance, the only uncontentious examples we seem able to produce of necessarily exemplified concepts are drawn from mathematics. Norman Kretzmann has written

It's only among mathematical entities that we seem to be able to find well-recognized cases of an entity that 'exists through its own essential nature'. The nature *even prime number*, for instance, is a nature that is necessarily instantiated, and everybody who fully knows that nature knows on that basis alone that it must be instantiated, and that there must be exactly one instantiation of it.²¹

²⁰ In 'Is necessary existence possible?' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1955), pp. 45–7. A similar point was later made by John F. Wippel: 'Two different situations should be distinguished: one, wherein one reasons from the content of a positive concept to its realization in actuality . . . another, where one reasons from the impossibility of something (based on the incompatibility or contradictory character of the notes it would involve) to its non-existence in reality' (*Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1984: 166).

²¹ Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism*, 122–3, where Kretzmann explores the possibility that ScG I, 22 can be interpreted in terms of the entailment of existence by essence.

Mathematical entities, however, which do not exercise any causal influence upon the world, cannot provide a serious analogue for the divine essence or the divine existence.

Whether or not the notion of an essence entailing an existence is a coherent one, it soon becomes clear that this is not what Aquinas has in mind in chapter twenty-two. The problem is not simply that *esse* cannot be unequivocally identified with existence: it is that Aquinas expressly rejects the idea that God has *esse* or being *because of* his essence. His longest argument for the identity of *esse* and essence can be paraphrased as follows. If God's *esse* is not identical with his essence, then either it is a part of it, or it is something distinct. It cannot be a part of it, because God's essence has no parts. If it is something distinct from it, but united to it, then there must be a cause of this union. This cause must be either the essence itself, or something else. It cannot be anything else, or God would not be the first uncaused cause. But can it be the essence itself—as it would be if *esse* were entailed by essence? No, Aquinas argues:

The essence is determined by the *esse*, so it follows, on this account, that something is its own cause of being. But this is impossible, because the being of a cause is conceptually prior to the being of an effect, so if something was its own cause of being it would be conceived of as being before it had being, which is impossible.²²

What is meant by saying that essence is determined by *esse*? Not, clearly, that essence is determined by existence, but that to have a certain essence is to have a certain kind of being, to be in a certain way. The determination is not, of course, one of

²² *Essentia autem est secundum illud esse: sequitur quod aliquid sit sibi ipsi causa essendi. Hoc autem est impossibile: quia prius secundum intellectum est causam esse quam effectum; si ergo aliquid sibi ipsi esset causa essendi, intelligeretur esse antequam haberet esse, quod est impossibile (I, 22.207).* Aquinas goes on to concede that one can cause one's own accidental *esse*: though I cannot cause my substantial *esse*, my being human, I can, for instance, cause my being brown, by going into tropical sunlight. Accidental *esse* of course cannot apply to God.

efficient causality; it is a conceptual determination. When Aquinas argues that the non-identity of essence and *esse* would mean the priority of an effect over cause, he is not concerned with temporal priority: even in the case of efficient causality, he was prepared to admit that an effect could be dependent on a cause even though it was contemporaneous with it. It is conceptual priority that worries him: if A entails B, he thinks, A must be conceptually prior to B. But this is surely an unnecessary worry: there may be a relation of mutual entailment between A and B, and which of the two we learn of or think of first is immaterial to this logical relationship. If the identity of essence and being in God simply means that the two mutually entail each other, there can be no objection to the doctrine. Only, it is a doctrine that applies to every kind of substance and not just to God. As I said above, my continuing to be and my continuing to be human stand or fall together.

Aquinas has other arguments, however, for an identity that is special to the case of God. One depends on God's unique freedom from any kind of compositeness:

Whatever cannot be without the concurrence of more than one thing is composite. But nothing in which the essence is distinct from the *esse* can be without the concurrence of more than one thing, namely essence and *esse*. Therefore, every thing in which the essence is distinct from the *esse* is composite. But God is not composite; so his *esse* is his essence.²³

The arguments that St Thomas has deployed elsewhere to establish that God is not composite were based on the idea that whatever is composite has elements that may come apart, or that need holding together by some external cause.

²³ Omne illud quod non potest esse nisi concurrentibus pluribus, est compositum. Sed nulla res in qua est aliud essentia et aliud esse, potest esse nisi concurrentibus pluribus, scilicet essentia et esse. Ergo omnis res in qua est aliud essentia et aliud esse, est composita. Deus autem non est compositus, ut ostensum est. Ipsum igitur esse Dei est sua essentia (I, 22.209).

Piecemeal construction of this kind is obviously incompatible with the dignity of the first uncaused cause; but conceptual complexity is quite a different matter. The argument seems based on a confusion between logical relationships and causal efficacy, or, in Aristotelian terms, between formal and efficient causation.

The most promising of Aquinas' arguments in chapter twenty-two takes its start from the conclusion of the argument concerning the existence of a necessary being which is of itself necessary. What, Aquinas inquires, could be the relationship of this *esse*, which necessarily is (or which is necessary), to any quiddity that was something other than it is itself?²⁴ He considers four possibilities and rejects each in turn. The first is that (1) the quiddity might be incompatible with such an *esse*. The second three start from the supposition of compatibility; and they are (2) that the *esse* depends on the essence, (3) that the essence depends on the *esse*, and (4) that both *esse* and essence depend on some third thing.

It seems clear enough that a self-subsistent necessary being cannot attach to any quiddity that is incompatible with it: but the example that Aquinas gives of an incompatibility between a quiddity and an *esse* may make us troubled about his whole method of approach. Existing on its own, he says, is something that is incompatible with the quiddity of whiteness; the only kind of *esse* that is appropriate for whiteness is existence in something else. Whiteness, in other words, must be the whiteness *of* something. We may agree with this: to reject self-subsistent whiteness is simply to reject the Platonic Idea of white. But Aquinas' approach makes it look as if he is not opposed to Platonic Ideas on general or logical grounds, but merely has qualms about particular examples of such Ideas.

²⁴ Hoc igitur esse quod necesse est, si est alicui quidditati quae non est quod ipsum est . . . (I, 22.203). The Latin text here is of doubtful grammaticality.

The evidence of this passage, however, is not enough by itself to show that Aquinas' theory of necessary being commits him to Platonism. Let us therefore explore the three other possibilities he suggests of a non-identity between self-subsistent necessary *esse* and the essence of such a being. The dependence proposed in (2) and (4), he says, conflicts with the notion of a self-subsistent necessary being, which is in the nature of the case independent. We are left with (3), that the essence depends on the *esse*. But if the essence is subsequent to the *esse* it is something accidental, and therefore, absurdly, not an essence.

In subsequent paragraphs (I, 22.204–5) Aquinas offers further complex hypotheses which might be put forward by someone who wished to deny the identity of essence and being in God. His arguments are not easy to follow, but we may take his word for it that these hypotheses involve absurdities, and that the half-dozen proposals that he considers exhaust the alternatives to conceding the identity thesis. What we really want to do is to understand what is meant by the thesis itself. For this purpose, the most instructive of the proofs he offers is one that occurs near the end of the chapter:

'*Esse*' is the name of an actuality: for something is said to be not on the basis of what it is in potentiality, but on the basis of what it is in actuality. But everything to which there pertains some actuality that is a distinct existence from itself, is related to it as potentiality to actuality: for actuality and potentiality are correlatives. Therefore, if the divine essence is something other than its *esse* it follows that essence and *esse* stand in the relation of potentiality to actuality. But it has been shown that there is nothing potential in God, but that he is pure actuality.²⁵

²⁵ *Esse actum quendam nominat: non enim dicitur esse aliquid ex hoc quod est in potentia, sed ex eo quod est actu. Omne autem cui convenit actus aliquis diversum ab eo existens, se habet ad ipsum ut potentia ad actum: actus enim et potentia ad se invicem dicuntur. Si ergo divina essentia est aliud quam suum esse, sequitur quod essentia et esse se habeant sicut potentia et actus. Ostensum est autem in Deo nihil esse de potentia sed ipsum esse purum actum. Non igitur Dei essentia est aliud quam suum esse (I, 22.208).*

If actuality and potentiality are correlatives, it might seem more appropriate to mark out the unique status of God by saying not that he is pure actuality, but that the distinction between actuality and potentiality does not apply in his case. But perhaps it is the statement that actuality and potentiality are correlatives that needs correction: in Aquinas' view, every potentiality is the potentiality for some actuality, but not every actuality is the actualization of some potentiality.

In broad outline, it is not difficult to see what is meant by saying that God is pure actuality, in contrast to creatures like ourselves whose life is one of constant change. I am no longer what I once was; there are many things I will be that I am not yet; much that I could have done I did not do, and I never will do everything that is in my power to do. Each period of my life is distinct from every other, with its own limitations and its own context. Nothing of the kind could be said of God: for him no petty pace creeps in from day to day, and even the immortals of Greek legend were able to combine the power of youth and the wisdom of age. God's life is not a life-cycle; his existence is not fragmented; he has no history.

Considerations of this kind, no doubt, lie behind the insistence that God is pure actuality. The question is whether this is well expressed by saying that his essence is his *esse*. If his essence was other than his *esse*, Aquinas says, then his essence would be in potentiality to his *esse*. Is this so? On Aquinas' view, my essence is other than my *esse*: but is it in potentiality to it? Certainly not, if *esse* is existence: it is not as if before ever I was conceived my essence was already there waiting for me to pop into existence and actualize it. But even if we take *esse* as equivalent to life (taking our cue from the slogan *vita viventibus est esse*) it does not seem that my essence is in potentiality to *esse*. My essence is not something that can possess or not possess my life: my life and my essence run entirely parallel. For me to go on living is for me to go on being the human being that I am. So, once again, Aquinas' thesis about essence

and *esse* seems to fail so far to make the distinction he wants between creatures and the creator.²⁶

When we turn from chapter twenty-two to twenty-three, however, the thesis seems to undergo a significant change. In the earlier chapter, it is stated thus: God's essence is his being (*suum esse*). In the later chapter, it is stated thus: God's essence is being itself (*ipsum esse*). At this point, the gulf between God and other things becomes clear. My essence may be difficult to distinguish from my being: but my essence is certainly not pure being, whatever that may be.

The new version of the thesis is first stated in the course of an argument to show that in God there are no accidents:

Nothing is more formal or less composite than *esse*: and thus pure *esse* can have no share in anything other than its essence. But the divine substance is pure *esse*. So it has nothing that does not belong to its substance. Therefore, no accident can belong to it.²⁷

There is nothing untoward in the conclusion that God has no accidental features (difficult though this may be to reconcile with the doctrine that God created the world freely and not by any necessity of his nature). It is the argument rather than the conclusion that is puzzling: what can be meant by saying that the divine substance is pure *esse*? It cannot mean that it is pure existence, as is widely recognized by philosophers.²⁸ It seems to mean a kind of being that, in some way, cannot be

²⁶ One might seek to distinguish between essence and *esse* in humans in this way: my life, and therefore my *esse*, may come to an end; but it will never cease to be true that I was the kind of thing I was, i.e. that I had a certain essence. This seems to me a dubious argument, and in any case I can find no trace of it the ScG.

²⁷ Nihil enim est formalis aut simplicius quam esse. Et sic ipsum esse nihil participare potest. Divina autem substantia est ipsum esse. Ergo nihil habet quod non sit de sua substantia, ScG (I, 23.214). The 'ipsum esse' formulation occurs also in 24.223, 25.229, 25.232, and 27.252.

²⁸ Thus Christopher Hughes, in *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 21, endorsed by Kretzmann, *Metaphysics of Theism*, 127: 'nothing subsistent could be just existence; a merely existent substance is too thin to be possible'. The problem, of course, is not that existence is too thin a predicate, but that existence is not a predicate at all.

further specified. My being is being human, Stigger's being is being a dog, but God's being is just being, full stop. The reason that there is no intrinsic incompatibility between the two formulations, 'God's essence is his being' and 'God's essence is pure being', is that God's being simply is pure being. But the new formulation takes us a step further in Aquinas' theory, and in subsequent chapters he sets out to explain what he means.

In order to follow his explanation, we may start from the fact that we can sometimes give non-tautologous accounts of the essences of creatures. It may serve a philosophical purpose in particular contexts to call the essence of a human being 'humanity' or the essence of a dog 'caninity'; but clearly, such tautologous formulations do not give any information. In some cases, however, we can do better than that, as when we say that a human being is a rational animal. In the case of God, however, Aquinas believed, we cannot go beyond tautologous expressions (like 'deity' or 'divinity'). If we try to construct a sentence 'God is F' to parallel 'Socrates is a rational animal', we are bound to fail. No 'F' can be found, and we have to stop at 'God is . . .' And this is not due to our ignorance (for some F, God is F, but we cannot know what 'F' is): it is in the nature of the case.

In Aristotelian terminology, 'animal' is the word for of a genus, and 'rational' is the word for a differentia.²⁹ In chapters twenty-four and twenty-five, Aquinas seeks to show that no predicate for a differentia or genus could be applied to God and thereby substitute for the variable 'F' in the schema above. There is no need to follow all of his arguments in detail, since most of them seek to show, in one way or another, that any such predication would involve some kind of compositeness in God, and that any kind of compositeness is incompatible with being self-subsistently necessary. One argument in each chapter, however, is worth exploring.

²⁹ See Chapter 1 above, p. 17.

In chapter twenty-four, Aquinas argues that nothing can be a pure genus: any existing animal, for instance, must be either rational or irrational. (Hence, he says, there were no Platonic ideas of genera, only of species.) If something can have a differentia predicated of it, therefore, its existence is subject to a necessary condition other than itself (as rationality is a necessary condition for a human being to exist). But God's existence cannot have any necessary conditions attached to it.

In chapter twenty-five, he argues that God is not in any genus. Whatever belongs to a genus does so in virtue of its quiddity. Since God's quiddity is *esse*, the only genus he could belong to is that of Being (*ens*). But Aristotle has shown, Aquinas says, that Being is not a genus. Hence no generic predicate can attach to God. We can say, if we like, that God is an *ens*, and indeed Aquinas often calls him the first or primary *ens*. But in doing so we are not adding anything to the statement that he is.³⁰

Since we had earlier been convinced that no accidental predicate could be predicated of God, and since any predicate in the category of substance must be reducible to either a generic or a differential predicate, we seem to be left with the conclusion that no predicates can be applied to God. But does not that leave us with 'God is . . .' as an incomplete sentence? What is the 'is . . .' if it does not cry out to be completed with a predicate? To put the point less metaphorically, what is 'is F' if it is not an unbound variable which cannot function unless something can be substituted for it?

One possibility that may suggest itself is that 'is' can function as a predicate by itself. In 'Socrates is white' and 'Socrates is human' and 'Socrates is an animal' it functions as a copula, and therefore needs a predicate for it to link to the subject. However, one might urge, the verb 'to be' can be used quite

³⁰ We do not at this point have to discuss the validity of Aristotle's argument (Met. B. 3.8, 998b), ultimately deriving from Parmenides, that being cannot be a genus because any differentia is itself a being of some kind. See below, p. 123.

differently to denote an activity, or rather an actuality, which belongs, all the time, to everything that there is. (Something, to quote Ryle again, like breathing, only quieter.) Thus, Socrates not only is white and is human, he also just is; and so is anything else, whatever you may choose. It is this universal and common predicate, one might conjecture, that applies to God; and this is the *only* predicate that applies to God.

Aquinas disposes of this fantasy in chapter twenty-six, which is devoted to ‘confuting the error of those who say that God is nothing other than the formal *esse* of each thing’. He agrees that things do not differ from each other in respect of *esse* and that this is something they all share. What makes them differ from each other, he says, is that they have specifically different natures, which acquire *esse* in different ways. But the statement that everything has *esse* in common needs to be qualified.

What is common to many things is not something in addition to those many things except in the mind. Thus, *animal* is not anything in addition to Socrates and Plato and other animals, except in the intellect which grasps the form of animal denuded of all individuating and specifying conditions. It is the man that is really the animal. Otherwise it would follow that in Socrates and Plato there were several animals, namely, the common animal, the common human, and Plato himself. Much less, therefore, is common *esse* itself anything in addition to all existing things, except in the intellect alone. So if God were common *esse*, God would not be anything except something in the intellect alone.³¹

This is a most interesting paragraph. It is an explicit rejection of Platonism in respect of *esse*: what is common to all

³¹ Quod est commune multis, non est aliquid praeter multa nisi sola ratione: sicut animal non est aliud praeter Socratem et Platonem et alia animalia nisi intellectu, qui apprehendit formam animalis expoliata ab omnibus individuantibus et specificantibus; homo enim est quod vere est animal; alias sequeretur quod in Socrate et Platone essent plura animalia, scilicet ipsum animal commune, et homo communis, et ipse Plato. Multo igitur minus et ipsum esse commune est aliquid praeter omnes res existens nisi in intellectu solum. Si igitur Deus sit esse commune, Deus non erit aliqua res nisi quae sit in intellectu tantum (I, 26.241).

existing things is not something that is distinct from them and over against them. Yet it does not rule out that the *esse* of which God is the pure instance is that predicate which attaches to all existing things. All that it rules out is that what makes both God and creatures entitled to the epithet '*ens*' is something that is over against both God and creatures. Yet does not the thesis that God is pure *esse*, *esse* which is not the being of anything, nor being of any particular kind, involve a Platonism of its own? Here, as often in Aquinas, we meet a combination of an explicit anti-Platonism with a climate of ideas that seems really at home only in Platonism.³²

In this chapter Aquinas uses arguments of two different kinds to show that God is not the common *esse*. He may take something that is true of the common *esse*, and show that it cannot be true of God—as in the passage we have just quoted. Or he may take things that are true of God, and show that they cannot be true of the common *esse*. Thus, God is eternal, but the common *esse* cannot be eternal, or everything would have existed for ever and nothing could come into or go out of existence.

Aquinas' clinching argument turns up as a comment on a quotation from the book of Wisdom (14, 21). Idolaters, the text complains, have taken the unshareable name of God and attached it to stocks and stone. If God is the *esse* of everything, Aquinas says, then 'this stone is God' is every bit as true as 'this stone is a being'.

Aquinas goes on to suggest four reasons that have led people to put forward this strange thesis that God is the common *esse*. His most interesting suggestion is the second: that they have misunderstood the expression that the divine *esse* is being without addition (*esse cui nulla fit additio*). A common term, or universal, he says, is not something that *exists* without addition,

³² Another instance occurs when in ch. 30 Aquinas suggests that the fact that in this world forms are not subsistent is due not to the logical incoherence of a Platonic subsistent form, but to the imperfection of sublunar entities.

but only something that is thought of without addition. Any real animal is either rational or irrational, but we can think of *animal* without thinking of rationality or irrationality. But even in thought, the term for a genus remains, he says, 'susceptible to addition': terms can be added to it without incongruity. Not so with the divine *esse*:

The divine *esse* is without addition, not only in thought, but also in the nature of things; and not only without addition, but without any susceptibility to addition. So from the very fact that it does not receive, and cannot receive, any addition, one can conclude not that God is the common *esse* but rather that he is a unique *esse*: it is by this very fact that nothing can be added to it that his *esse* is distinguished from all others.³³

Aquinas has good reason for denying that God, and the *esse* that is identical with him, is simply a pure case of a predicate that attaches to anything whatever. But the steps that he takes to distinguish God's *esse* from this common predicate appear to make it utterly incomprehensible. In order to prevent God's *esse* from being the applicability of a totally uninformative predicate, he turns it into the applicability of a predicate that is no predicate at all. When he says that other things' *esse* allows of addition, but God's does not, what he says comes to this. When we say, of anything but God, that it is, we mean that for some F (to be specified in the particular case) it is F; when we say of God that he is, we mean the same except that no predicate may be substituted for the F that occurs in the formula. God isn't anything of any kind, he just is. But this is surely nonsense. For the only meaning that attaches to a formula such as 'God is F' is that if you substitute a genuine predicate

³³ Divinum autem esse est absque additione non solum in cogitatione, sed etiam in rerum natura: nec solum absque additione, sed etiam absque receptibilitate additionis. Unde ex hoc ipso quod additionem non recipit nec recipere potest, magis concludi potest quod Deus non sit esse commune sed proprium: etenim ex hoc ipso suum esse ab omnibus aliis distinguitur quod nihil ei addi potest (I, 26.247).

for the dummy letter F, you will get a meaningful sentence. If you forbid such a substitution, you must delete the variable letter (which is, as it were, a permission to make a substitution), and you are left simply with ‘God is . . .’, which is just an incomplete sentence. So interpreted, the incommunicable name, as we saw in Chapter 2, seems to be just an ill-formed formula.

In later works Aquinas returned to the topic of ‘*esse* without addition’, and we should postpone until after consideration of them a judgement as to whether the criticism I have just stated is decisive. But before leaving the *Summa contra Gentiles*, there are two further topics to be considered in relation to Aquinas’ theory of being: divine perfection, and the analogy of being.

Aquinas states that God is universally perfect, that is, that he has every kind of excellence. To prove this, he argues as follows:

Any excellence of any thing attaches to it in accordance with its *esse*. No excellence would attach to a man from his wisdom unless it were the case that because of it, he *is* wise, and so on in other cases. The mode of a thing’s excellence is therefore in accordance with the manner in which it has *esse*: for a thing is more or less excellent in accordance with the way in which its *esse* is restricted to some greater or lesser specific mode of excellence. So if there is something to which the whole power of being belongs, that thing cannot lack any excellence that is appropriate to anything.³⁴

The background to this argument is a hierarchical view of the universe, with non-living things at the lowest level, and plants, animals, humans, heavenly beings and God at higher levels, with higher degrees of excellence or ‘nobility’. The

³⁴ Omnis enim nobilitas cuiuscumque rei est sibi secundum suum esse: nulla enim nobilitas esset homini ex sua sapientia nisi per eam sapiens esset, et sic de aliis. Sic ergo secundum modum quo res habet esse, est suus modus in nobilitate: nam res secundum quod suum esse contrahitur ad aliquem specialem modum nobilitatis maiorem vel minorem, dicitur esse secundum hoc nobilior vel minus nobilis. Igitur, si aliquid est cui competit tota virtus essendi, ei nulla nobilitatum deesse potest quae alicui rei conveniat (I, 28.260).

merits of this world-view need not concern us in the present context; but what is of interest is what the passage has to tell us about the concept of *esse* being used here.

Consider the statement about the relation between wisdom (the specifically human excellence) and its possessor's *esse*. Commenting on this passage, Norman Kretzmann has written:

I don't think Aquinas means to suggest that someone might *have* wisdom but not *be* wise. . . . None the less, it is wisdom's being truly predicable of the person that marks the excellence's belonging to him, and wisdom (or any other excellence) is predicable of its subject by means of the verb 'to be'. And so the predication 'Socrates is wise' is in theory more fundamentally revealing than the apparently equivalent 'Socrates has wisdom' because the 'is wise' formulation tells us something about the kind of *being* Socrates has.³⁵

The point Aquinas wants to make, Kretzmann says, is that for a thing really to have a certain excellence is for it to be in a certain way. Two things need to be remarked here. First, this analysis of 'Socrates is wise' is quite different from the one that treats 'is' as a copula joining the subject 'Socrates' to the predicate 'wise'. Secondly, if a sentence containing a predicate after 'is' indicates the subject to be in a certain way, then a sentence containing 'is' with no addition indicates the subject to be in no way. Once again, the consideration of pure *esse* seems to lead us to a void.

Also worth noticing is the implication in the passage just quoted that having a specific mode of being, such as being a plant, is a form of *restriction* on being. The idea that what is more general is more basic, and that what is more specific is a confined version of the general, is surely a Platonic idea at the opposite extreme from Aquinas' usual Aristotelian insistence that the universal has no existence outside the mind. This impression is confirmed when we find Aquinas, in order to

³⁵ Kretzmann, *Metaphysics of Theism*, 135.

prove that God has '*esse* in accordance with the whole power of being', offering an explicitly Platonic example in support.

Similarly, if there were a separated whiteness, it could not lack any of the power of whiteness; for any actual white thing lacks some of the power of whiteness because of a defect in the subject receiving the whiteness, which receives it in its own manner and no doubt not in accordance with the whole capacity of whiteness.³⁶

Hence, Aquinas concludes, God, who is his own *esse*, cannot lack any excellence that attaches to anything else. The comparison of pure *esse* with pure whiteness sheds more darkness than light on the matter in hand. It is surely a strange procedure, in order to show a difficult concept to be intelligible, to compare it with another notion which on one's own account is absurd. But in one way it does clarify the notion of pure *esse*: it reveals it as the Platonic Idea of being.

³⁶ Sicut, si esset aliqua albedo separata, nihil ei de virtute albedinis deesse posset; nam alicui albo aliquid de virtute albedinis deest ex defectu recipientis albedinem, quae eam secundum modum suum recipit, et fortasse non secundum totum posse albedinis (I, 28.260).

6 QUESTIONS DISPUTED IN ROME

THE *Summa contra Gentiles* was completed at Orvieto in 1264. In 1265 St Thomas went to Rome, to establish a Dominican institute at Santa Sabina. While acting as regent master there, he presided over a number of disputations. The first group of these, *Disputed Questions on Power* (DP), probably dates from 1265–6. Several important passages in these questions throw light on Aquinas' theory of being.¹

A particularly long question, the third question of nineteen articles, is devoted to the topic of creation.² The first of these articles is entitled 'Can God create anything from nothing?' and begins with seventeen arguments for a negative answer. St Thomas, of course, on the basis of the book of Genesis, believed that the answer was positive; and in his responses to the negative arguments he displays great skill in disentangling the complexity and ambiguity of phrases like 'making out of nothing' and 'coming to be from nothing'.

Consider, for instance, the seventh argument:

If something comes to be from nothing the preposition 'from' either indicates a cause or a sequence. If a cause, it can only mean efficient or material cause. But nothing cannot be either an efficient or material cause of being, and so in this context it cannot mean a cause. Nor can it mean a sequence, because, as Boethius says, there is no

¹ Page references to these disputed questions refer to the 1949 Marietti edn of R. Pession, R. M. Spiazzi, and others (Turin, 1949).

² Creation out of nothing was discussed earlier by Aquinas in ch. 26 of the ScG. But the present passage is much richer for our purposes.

sequence between being and non-being. So there is no way in which anything can come to be from nothing.³

In response, Aquinas makes a number of subtle linguistic distinctions. The sentence ‘X comes into being from nothing’ varies in meaning in accordance with the scope of the negation implicit in ‘nothing’. If we make this negation explicit, we get ‘X does not come into being from anything’, and we can interpret this in three different ways:

1. It is not the case that X comes into being from anything. This sentence is true even if X is God, since God does not come into being, period.
2. It is the case that X comes into being, but not from anything. This is the sense that is true of creatures.
3. X comes into being from what is not anything. This is false if ‘from’ indicates a cause, true if ‘from’ indicates a sequence. But it is true only in a highly qualified sense:

It is true if it indicates nothing but a sequence, so that what is being said is that something comes into being from nothing because it comes into being after nothing, which is true even in creation.⁴

Boethius’ remark is to be taken as ruling out any genuine relationship between being and non-being, or as ruling out that the being of creatures and the non-being that preceded them are two points in a single time sequence. Time before creation, Aquinas goes on to explain, is only imaginary time (just as space beyond the limits of the universe is only imaginary space), and real time and imaginary time are not in the same series (ad. 10, P, 40).

³ Si ex nihilo aliquid fiat, haec praepositio *ex* aut notat causam aut ordinem. Causam autem non videtur notare nisi efficientem, vel materialem. Nihil autem neque efficiens causa entis esse potest, neque materia; et sic in proposito non denotat causam; similiter nec ordinem, quia, ut dicit Boetius, entis ad non ens non est aliquis ordo. Ergo nullo modo ex nihilo potest aliquid fieri (3, 1, 7, P, 38).

⁴ Verus autem si importet ordinem tantum, ut dicatur aliquid fieri ex nihilo quia fit post nihilum, quod etiam verum est in creatione (3, 1, ad. 7, P, 40).

It is notable that, in all the long treatment of creation in the *De Potentia*, there is no suggestion that creation is the actualization of individual pre-existence essences, as sometimes seemed to be implicit in Aquinas' earlier treatment of the relationship between essence and existence.⁵ Even the objectors, who deny the possibility of creation out of nothing, argue not that entities come into being from previous individual essences, but that they come from pre-existent matter. Consider the second negative argument:

Whatever comes to be, before it was in existence, had the possibility of being. For if it was impossible for it to be, it was not possible for it to come into being; for nothing can change into what is impossible. But the power by which something can be must belong to some subject, unless it is itself a subject; because there cannot be an accident without a subject. Therefore, whatever comes into being, comes into being from matter or a subject.⁶

Aquinas offers two responses to this. The first is to say that the possibility of the world's existence, before it existed, was simply a logical possibility; that is to say, all it amounts to is that there was nothing conceptually incoherent in the notion of a world's coming into being. The second is to say that before the coming into being of the world, there was a real and not just a logical possibility of this; but the real possibility was located in the active power of the Creator, not in the passive power of any pre-existent matter.

The seventh question of the *De Potentia* is devoted to the simplicity, that is to say the non-complexity, of God, and the

⁵ Indeed, the idea of pre-existent essences is explicitly rejected shortly afterwards: *ex hoc ipso quod quidditati esse attribuitur, non solum esse, sed ipsa quidditas creari dicitur; quia antequam esse habeat nihil est, nisi forte in intellectu creatoris, ubi non est creatura, sed creatrix* (3, 5, ad. 2, P, 66).

⁶ *Omne quod fit, antequam esset, possibile erat esse: si enim erat impossibile esse, non erat possibile fieri: nihil enim mutatur ad id quod est impossibile. Sed potentia qua aliquid potest esse, non potest esse nisi in aliquo subjecto; nisi forte ipsamet sit subjectum; nam accidens absque subjecto esse non potest. Ergo omne quod fit, fit ex materia vel subjecto* (3, 1, 2, P, 37).

second article of that question is devoted to the relation between God's essence and his *esse*. Eleven arguments are offered to show that these are not the same. Many of them go over old ground. The second argument, for instance, goes like this. There are two different questions, 'Is there a God?' and 'what is God?' We know the answer to the first question, but not to the second; but *esse* is the answer to the first and essence is the answer to the second, so the two must be distinct. The response draws on the familiar distinction between *esse* as the act of being (*actus essendi*) and *esse* as the mark of a true proposition. It is *esse* in the second sense that we know; in the first sense God's *esse* is as unknown to us as his substance.

So far, all this is familiar. However, the ninth objection, while accepting that it is not *esse* as copula which is God's essence, claims that the other kind of *esse* cannot be the substance of God either. For God is the most perfect thing, and *esse* is the most imperfect, since it is something that needs to be made determinate through belonging to a particular category.⁷ In response, Aquinas maintains that, so far from being imperfect, *esse* is the most perfect thing of all, in virtue of the principle that actuality is always more perfect than potentiality:

Any given form is not thought of as actual unless it is supposed to *be*. Humanity, or fieriness, can be considered as latent in the power of matter, or in the power of an agent, or even just in the mind: but by having *esse* it becomes actually existent. From which it is clear that this *esse* is the actuality of all actualities and the perfection of all perfections. It must not be thought that to this *esse* something gets added that is more formal, which determines it, in the way that actuality determines potentiality: for this kind of *esse* is essentially different from that to which it is added to be determined. But nothing can be added to *esse* which is extraneous to it, because nothing is extraneous to it except non-being, which cannot be either form or matter. Hence *esse* cannot be determined by something else as potentiality is

⁷ *esse, cum sit imperfectissimum, determinari habet per omnia propria praedicamenta* (7, 2, 9, P, 191).

determined by actuality, but rather as an actuality is determined by a potentiality.⁸

This is a difficult passage to understand. It will help to clarify it if we begin with the consideration of a transition from potentiality to actuality that is more straightforward than the actualization of humanity or fieriness. When a person who knows Latin starts to speak Latin on a particular occasion, this is, for Aquinas, the actualization of a potentiality. First, we have someone who *can* speak Latin, then we have someone who *is* speaking Latin. Here the verb ‘to be’ marks a contrast between potentiality and actuality, and this is an instance of the kind of thing Aquinas has in mind when he says that *esse* is the actualization of actualizations.

However, a number of problems at once present themselves. First of all, it seems to be an accident of linguistic idiom whether or not the verb ‘to be’ or its equivalents is used to mark the transition from potentiality to actuality. After all, in the Latin language itself, the transition we have used as an example would not naturally be marked by any part of the verb ‘esse’ since Latin does not form the present tense, as English does, by the use of the auxiliary. Second, if we take one of Aquinas’ own examples, there is a transition from combustibility to actual burning, which he describes as being the actualization of the form of fieriness. But we can say of something that it *is* combustible just as naturally as we can say that it *is*

⁸ Quaelibet autem forma signata non intelligitur in actu nisi per hoc quod esse ponitur. Nam humanitas vel igneitas potest considerari ut in potentia materiae existens, vel ut in virtute agentis, aut etiam ut in intellectu: sed [ex] hoc quod habet esse, efficitur actu existens. Unde patet quod hoc quod dico *esse* est actualitas omnium actuum, et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum. Nec intelligendum est, quod ei quod dico *esse* aliquid addatur quod sit eo formalius, ipsum determinans, sicut actus potentiam: *esse* enim quod hujusmodi est, est aliud secundum essentiam ab eo cui additur determinandum. Nihil autem potest addi ad esse quod sit extraneum ab ipso, cum ab eo nihil sit extraneum nisi non ens, quod non potest esse nec forma nec materia. Unde non sic determinatur *esse* per aliud sicut potentia per actum, sed magis sicut actus per potentiam (7, 2, ad. 9, P, 192).

burning. The transition Aquinas has in mind when he speaks of something being human ‘in the potentiality of matter’ is presumably the change by which whatever Miss T eats turns into Miss T. But the potentiality in question can be marked by saying that certain products *are* edible, or *are* fit for human consumption; whereas there is something odd about describing the result of the change by saying, for example, that that pork pie now *is* human. It is only by a very careful choice of examples, in any language, that one can say that the verb ‘to be’ or one of its equivalents is used to mark the actualization of a potentiality.

A second problem is this. Even in a case, such as our example ‘Thomas is speaking Latin’, where there is a genuine actualization in question, the actualization is indicated not just by the verb ‘is’ but by the predicate ‘speaking Latin’. It is that which shows *which* actualization has taken place: speaking Latin, as opposed to skiing, or sleeping, or snoring. The verb ‘to be’, even when it is used to mark an actualization (and is therefore, for purposes of Aquinas’ argument, most perfect), is still in need of supplementation if it is to have any content (and is therefore, in terms of the objector’s argument, most imperfect). So Aquinas, in discussing actualization in response to the objector, is not so much answering the objection as changing the subject. Perhaps this is what he has in mind when he says that this kind of *esse* is essentially different from that to which it is added as a determinable.⁹

In the main body of the article, however, Aquinas is quite clearly talking about the kind of *esse* that the objector had in mind. There he says: wherever causes whose proper effects are diverse produce also a common effect, the additional common effect must be produced in virtue of some superior cause of which it is the proper effect. For example, he says, pepper and

⁹ I am uncertain about this, because the Latin text ‘est aliud secundum essentiam ab eo cui additur determinandum’ may be corrupt.

ginger, besides producing their own proper effects, have it in common that they produce heat: they do this in virtue of the causality of fire, of which heat is the proper effect. Again, in the heavens, the different planetary spheres have their own proper motions, but they also have a shared common motion which is due to a superior sphere rotating them all in the daily round.

All created causes, while having their own proper effects which distinguish them one from another, also share in a single common effect which is *esse*. Heat causes things *to be* hot, and a builder causes there *to be* a house. They have in common therefore that they cause *esse*, and differ in that fire cause fire and a builder causes a house. There must, therefore, be some superior cause whose proper effect is *esse* and in virtue of which everything else causes *esse*. And this cause is God.¹⁰

This passage is not often quoted by admirers of Aquinas. Perhaps this is because the two examples he gives are so heavily dependent on medieval chemistry and astronomy. At first sight, indeed, the first example seems unfortunate even in medieval terms: surely even in the thirteenth century it was clear that pepper and ginger are hot in quite a different sense from that in which a coal fire is hot! But on reflection, the example may have been chosen precisely because ‘hot’ is here an analogous term; for Aquinas believed that ‘being’ too was analogous, when applied to God and creatures. However that may be, it is important not to let the quaintness of the illustrations distract us from the clear import of the passage in respect of the significance of *esse*.

Esse or being is here treated as a common attribute that is possessed automatically by anything that possesses any sub-

¹⁰ Omnes autem causae creatae communicant in uno effectu qui est esse, licet singulae proprios effectus habeant, in quibus distinguuntur. Calor enim facit calidum esse, et aedificator facit domum esse. Conveniunt ergo in hoc quod causant esse, sed differunt in hoc quod ignis causat ignem, et aedificator causat domum. Oportet ergo esse aliquam causam superiorem omnibus cuius virtute omnia causant esse, et cuius esse sit proprius effectus. Et haec causa est Deus (7, 2c, P, 191).

stantial or accidental form. One might be tempted to think that it was a disjunctive attribute, such that to have being is either to be hot or to be a house etc. But this cannot be what is meant. Being hot is not the same as being either ginger or pepper, etc.; and if it were, it would be ridiculous to ask for a cause of being in addition to a cause of being hot, and being a house. 'Esse', as understood in this argument, seems to be the thinnest possible kind of predicate: to be, so understood, is to have that attribute which is common to mice and men, dust and angels, aches and colds. It seems to deserve the objector's complaint that it is the most imperfect of all things. Yet Aquinas' argument is meant to show that it is the proper effect of God.

Aquinas goes on to argue as follows. The proper effect of any cause proceeds from it in accordance with the likeness of its nature: heat causes heat, and in general like causes like. Therefore, *esse*, which is God's proper effect, must be his substance or nature. But the attribute that the argument purported to identify, being common to every substance and every accident, could hardly constitute the particular essence of any subject.

Once again, Aquinas explicitly denies that God's *esse* is the *esse* that is common to stocks and stones. The fourth argument against the identity of essence and *esse* in God goes as follows: *esse* cannot be the substance of any distinct thing, since it is common to everything; so if God was *esse* he would not be distinct from everything else. The response to this objection is simply that God's *esse* is not the common *esse*. But this response is inconsistent with the argument that we have just followed in the body of the article. If God differs from the common *esse*, it is only by being the Platonic Idea of that *esse*, an *esse* that is the *esse* of nothing even though it is the *esse* of everything.

In the body of the following article, in order to show that God is not in any genus, Aquinas offers an argument that seems to move in a quite contrary direction:

Nothing is located in a genus on the basis of its *esse*, but by virtue of its quiddity. That is clear from the fact that the *esse* of each thing is proper to it, and distinct from the *esse* of any other thing. The concept of substance, on the other hand, can be common, and that too is why Aristotle says that being is not a genus. But God is his *esse*: therefore he cannot be in any genus.¹¹

Aquinas adds, for good measure, that God is not a species or an individual, and that he has no differentia or definition.

Leaving on one side for a moment the consideration of God, should we conclude that the *esse* of creatures is something that they all share, or something that is proper to each individual? If we are to reconcile the passages we have just considered, the answer must surely be that everything shares the thin and universal predicate—it is the very same predicate that is true of each and every item—but that each thing has its very own individual instance of that predicate. In the same way, if two peas are as alike as two peas can be, they will share the very same shade of green, but none the less the greenness of the pea on the right of my plate is a different entity from the greenness of the pea on the left of my plate.

If we now return to God, where quiddity and *esse* are identical, we might wonder why the argument cited above concludes as it does. Instead of arguing that because his quiddity is his *esse* God cannot be located in a genus, could we not equally well have argued that because his *esse* is his quiddity God can be located in a genus? No, not if we are to believe Aristotle that being is not a genus—though Aristotle argued this not on the basis that being was too individual, but on the basis that it was too common. Being was not a genus, he argued, because a genus is divided into species on the basis of differentiae that

¹¹ Nihil ponitur in genere secundum esse suum, sed ratione quidditatis suae; quod ex hoc patet, quia esse uniuscuiusque est ei proprium, et distinctum ab esse alterius rei; sed ratio substantiae potest esse communis: propter hoc etiam Philosophus dicit quod ens non est genus. Deus autem est ipsum suum esse: unde non potest esse in genere (7, 3c, P, 193).

are not part of the genus; but everything whatever is a being, and therefore cannot differentiate the genus into species. But should we accept this argument? It might seem to show that colour is not a genus, since what differentiates green from red is a difference of *colour*. But surely colour is the genus of which red and green are species.

Aquinas in fact has a better argument for not placing God in a genus, which we shall consider later in a different context. But before leaving *De Potentia*, we may take a brief look at a passage in the fifth article of question seven, which discusses the divine being while considering the significance of the divine names. Because of the words spoken to Moses from the burning bush (Exod. 3:13–14), ‘He who is’ was regarded by many Christian theologians as having pride of place among the names of God.¹² Aquinas comments

The name ‘He who is’ is particularly appropriate to God, because it does not determine any form for God, but signifies *esse* indeterminately. And this is what St John of Damascus says, that ‘He who is’ signifies the infinite ocean of substance.¹³

The metaphor is significant. Many passages in Aquinas, as we have seen and shall see again, suggest that *esse* is thought of as a vast reservoir of liquid that is given particular shape and form by being captured in various receptacles. You and I, and the ants and the planets, are small buckets of this universal fluid; God is the vast, limitless ocean.

Some of the issues with which we have become familiar are revisited by St Thomas in the second series of disputed questions that date from his Roman period: the questions *De Malo*, on badness or evil, which are commonly assigned to the academic year 1266–7. The first such question is devoted to badness

¹² For a recent attack on this tradition, see J.-L. Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago University Press, 1994).

¹³ *Nomen Qui est maxime Deo competit, quia non determinat aliquam formam Deo, sed significat esse indeterminate. Et hoc est quod dicit Damascenus, quod hoc nomen Qui est, significat substantiae pelagus infinitum* (7, 5c, P, 199).

in general; and its first article, which is the one most relevant to our concerns, inquires whether badness is anything real. Twenty arguments to that effect are presented before St Thomas gives his reason for a negative answer. The last two are of interest to us.

The nineteenth argument runs as follows. If goodness were not something real, there would be nothing good. In the same way, therefore, if badness were not something real, then there would be nothing bad. But it is obvious that there are many bad things. Therefore badness is something real. In reply, St Thomas, as so often, makes a distinction between two kinds of *esse*. As usual, he says that *esse* in one sense signifies something belonging to one of the ten categories. But he describes the second kind of *esse* not by saying that it is the mark of the copula, as he usually does, but by saying that it is the kind of *esse* that answers the question ‘*an est?*’ (is there . . . ?). There is badness (e.g. blindness) in the second sense, but not in the first sense; and only what has *esse* in the first sense (*esse* corresponding to the question ‘*quid est?*’ or ‘what is?’) is something real.

Shall we say then that badness is not a real thing (*ens reale*) but only a mental entity (*ens rationis*)? Against this, an objector (in the twentieth argument) points out that Aristotle had said that good and evil are in things, but truth and falsehood are in the mind. St Thomas responds that evil is indeed in things, but as a privation, not a reality; however, it is a mental and not a real entity, because it is only in the mind, and not in nature, that it is a reality. Of course, as he explains in the body of the article, a blind person is a real thing, and he is really blind; but his blindness is not a positive entity like the ability to see, but a lack of that positive entity.

These passages are of interest because it appears that as St Thomas grew older he became more interested in these *entia rationis* which have reality only in the mind. We shall see later how he places in this category problematic entities of various kinds, and not just privations like blindness.

A further set of disputed questions from this period is devoted to the discussion of spiritual creatures. The first article treats of a currently controversial topic which concerned Aquinas throughout his life: whether angels are composed of matter and form. The strength of contemporary interest in this topic is shown by the occurrence in the article of no less than twenty-five arguments in favour of treating angels as hylomorphic compounds. St Thomas, as is his custom, decides for the opposite view, though there are only fourteen arguments presented in favour of it.¹⁴

Many of the arguments on either side cover ground with which we are already familiar. However, one of the arguments for hylomorphism (no. 22) returns to a topic that puzzled us when we were considering the commentary on Boethius' *De Hebdomadibus*. It goes as follows:

Boethius says . . . that what is can contain an alien element, but *esse* itself cannot contain an alien element of any kind; and we can say the same of all concrete and abstract terms. For in a human being there can be more than just humanity, say whiteness or the like; but in humanity itself there cannot be anything else than what pertains to the concept of humanity. So if spiritual substances are abstract forms, there cannot be anything in them that does not pertain to their species. But if a thing loses what pertains to its species, it is destroyed.¹⁵

Aquinas has no problem with the idea that a spiritual creature is indestructible: the problem presented by this objection is that, if it contains nothing except what pertains to its species,

¹⁴ References to the *Quaestiones Disputatae de Spiritualibus Creaturis* are to the edition of L. Keeler (K) (Rome: Gregorianum, 1946).

¹⁵ Boethius dicit . . . quod id quod est, aliquid aliud potest habere admixtum; sed ipsum esse nihil omnino aliud habet admixtum; et idem possumus dicere de omnibus abstractis et concretis. Nam in homine potest aliquid aliud esse quam humanitas, utpote albedo, vel aliquid huiusmodi; sed in ipsa humanitate non potest aliud esse nisi quod ad rationem humanitatis pertinet. Si ergo substantiae spirituales sunt formae abstractae, non poterit in eis esse aliquid quod ad eorum speciem non pertineat. Sed sublato eo quod pertinet ad speciem rei, corrumpitur res (K, 6).

it is not only indestructible, but altogether unchangeable, which goes against what he believed to be true of angels. He does not provide any answer to this objection, except to reaffirm that angels could change in respect of the activities of their intellects and wills.

An interesting pair of arguments concerns the notion of intentional being. When a form is thought of, according to Aquinas' general teaching, it has immaterial, intentional, *esse* in the intellect. Two things follow from this doctrine, according to the author of the tenth and eleventh objection. First, if an angel's form were not in matter, then it could only be in the intellect; and therefore an angel that was pure form would cease to exist if no one thought of it. Secondly, if all angels were pure forms, then they would be entirely transparent to each other. In response to the first objection, Aquinas denies that existence in matter and in the intellect are the only two options open to forms. To the second, he has this reply:

The concept that is in the mind of an angel thinking differs from the angel he is thinking about not as abstract differs from concrete, but as an intentional entity differs from one whose *esse* is rooted in nature, as the image of colour in the eye differs from the colour in the wall itself.¹⁶

This interesting but puzzling thought was to be developed, as we shall see, when Aquinas came to write the *Summa Theologiae*.¹⁷

Perhaps the most important objection is the very first one: the simple statement drawn from Boethius that a simple form cannot be a subject of predication. Thomas provides no real answer to this: to do so would have involved exploring the possibility, not that angels were composed of matter and form, but

¹⁶ Species intelligibilis quae est in intellectu angeli intelligentis, differt ab angelo intellecto non secundum abstractum a materia et materiae concretum; sed sicut ens intentionale ab ente quod dicit esse ratum in natura; sicut differt species coloris in oculo a colore qui est in pariete (K, 17).

¹⁷ See p. 167 below.

that there was a logical incoherence in the notion of spiritual substance.

None the less, the main body of the disputation contains a useful clarification about the relationship of essence, matter and form:

In composite things we must consider two kinds of actuality and two kinds of potentiality. First of all, matter counts as potentiality in respect of form, and form is its act; and again the nature composed of the matter and form is in potentiality with respect to the being it receives.¹⁸

In saying this, he goes on to add that he is not suggesting that the nature is separable from the actuality: it is always accompanied by its actuality. This helpfully makes clear that the thesis that nature, or essence, is in potentiality to *esse* does not commit one to the occurrence of pre-existent essences. But it does, once again, call into doubt the sense of any doctrine of a real distinction between essence and existence.

One more document from St Thomas' Roman period that we should look at is the *Compendium Theologiae*, which he began probably between 1257 and 1267, but never completed. It is a brief work, resembling the *Summa contra Gentiles* in that it was written in chapters, but resembling the *Summa Theologiae* in presenting itself as a work of revealed theology (built around consideration of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.) The first part, on Faith, can be viewed as a brisk summary of earlier work, but it does contain one or two passages which vary from what we have seen on the topic of being.¹⁹

¹⁸ In rebus compositis est considerare duplicem actum, et duplicem potentiam. Nam primo quidem materia est ut potentia respectu formae, et forma est actus eius; et iterum natura constituta ex materia et forma, est ut potentia respectu ipsius esse, in quantum est susceptivum eius (K, 12).

¹⁹ References to the *Compendium* (CT) are given to chapters and lines of the Leonine edn, vol. 42.

Chapter ten sets out to prove that God is his essence. The proof goes like this:

The essence of each thing is what is signified by its definition. But this is the same as the thing whose definition it is, except *per accidens*, as when something supervenes to the defined being other than its definition. Thus whiteness supervenes to a man in addition to what is a rational and mortal animal. Hence, rational and mortal animal is the same as man, but not the same as white man *qua* white.²⁰

Several things are puzzling about this passage. It is unusual for St Thomas to refer to an essence in concrete rather than abstract terms: the essence of a human being is normally not said to be rational animal, but rationality and animality, i.e. humanity. If the essence is stated in a concrete manner, then it seems easy to agree that the essence is the same as the thing that is defined in terms of it. Looking at Socrates, we can say ‘this man is the very same thing as this rational animal’. But surely, since Socrates is a white man, we could equally well say ‘this man is the very same thing as this white rational animal’; but was not this supposed to be just what we cannot say? Moreover, if a thing is the same as what is signified by its definition, and what is signified by its definition is its essence, then it seems that anything whatever, and not just God, is identical with its essence.

We may wonder what sort of identity is in question here. To help us, St Thomas goes on to draw a distinction between *per se* beings and *per accidens* beings. ‘Rational animal’ signifies a being *per se*, he implies; ‘white rational animal’ signifies only a being *per accidens*. The ground of this distinction is not stated here, but it seems to be on the following lines: Socrates, the

²⁰ *Essentia enim uniuscuiusque rei est illud quod significat definitio eius. Hoc autem est idem cum re cuius est definitio, nisi per accidens; in quantum scilicet definito accidit aliquid quod est praeter definitionem ipsius; sicut homini accidit album praeter id quod est animal rationale et mortale, unde animal rationale et mortale est idem homini; sed non idem homini albo in quantum est album (CT, 10, 2–9).*

rational animal, is a being *per se* because he cannot cease to be a rational animal without ceasing to exist. White Socrates, on the other hand, is a being *per accidens*, because he might continue to exist while losing the accident of whiteness. While Socrates is white, however, he is both the *per se* being and the *per accidens* being. It is this that makes a contrast between creatures and God. In God, Aquinas says, we cannot find two things of which one is a *per se* being and the other is a *per accidens* being. Hence his essence is the very same thing as himself. So proved, the thesis really amounts to no more than the claim that in God there is not a composition of substance and accident.

In the second argument of the same chapter, Aquinas reverts to his more customary mode of referring to essences by abstract terms. Wherever a thing has an essence distinct from itself, he argues, there is a distinction between potentiality and actuality: 'for an essence stands in a formal relationship to that of which it is the essence, as humanity does to a human being'. Established by this route, the identity of God with his essence seems to be simply a question of the exclusion from his makeup of the composition of matter and form.

Chapter eleven offers two proofs that God's essence is no other than his *esse*. Both proofs follow familiar lines. The first argument runs thus:

In any entity where the essence is one thing, and its *esse* another, there must be a distinction between that by which a thing is, and that by which it is something: for it is by its *esse* that it is said of anything that it is, and by its essence that it is said of anything what it is—that is why the definition signifying the essence is what shows what a thing is. But in God there is no distinction between that by which he is and that by which he is something, since there is no complexity in him.²¹

²¹ in quocumque enim aliud est essentia, et aliud esse ejus, oportet quod illud alio sit et alio aliquid sit: nam per esse suum de quolibet dicitur quod est, per essentiam vero suam de quolibet dicitur quid sit: unde et definitio significans essentiam, demonstrat quid est res. In Deo autem non est aliud quod est, et aliud quo aliquid est; cum non sit in eo compositio (CT, 11, 2-10).

As in the previous chapter, the Latin is rather different from Aquinas' usual mode of writing, and it is difficult to be sure of the precise meaning. It is not clear whether the *esse* that is in question here is existence, or the *esse* that is a universal predicate. There is no need to repeat the steps by which I showed earlier that both modes of attempting to establish an identity of essence and *esse* in God are blind alleys.

The second argument makes use of the concept of *esse* as ultimate actualization:

God is pure actuality without any admixture of potentiality. His essence, therefore, must be the ultimate actualization; for any actuality which is short of the ultimate, is in potentiality to the ultimate actualization. But the ultimate actualization is *esse* itself.²²

That *esse* is the ultimate actuality is here proved by the argument that every motion tends to *esse*, which all things desire.

²² Deus est actus purus absque alicuius potentialitatis permixtione. Oportet igitur quod eius essentia sit ultimus actus: nam omnis actus qui est citra ultimum est in potentia ad ultimum actum. Ultimus autem actus est ipsum esse (CT, 21, 12–17).

7 *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE* I

IN following the chronological order of St Thomas' writings, we have now reached the time when he wrote the work through which most readers will have made their acquaintance with his theory of being, the *Summa Theologiae*. This massive work, of over two million words, is divided into three parts, of which the first, which is the most informative for our purposes, was written during the latter part of his period as regent master at the convent of Santa Sabina in Rome.

In style, the *Summa* falls between the *Summa contra Gentiles* and the Disputed Questions: it is not a record of live scholastic disputation, but it is, like a disputation, divided into questions and articles, not into chapters. However, the multiple arguments for and against a particular thesis that introduce a genuine disputation are replaced by an introductory triad of difficulties against the position that Aquinas intends to take up in the body of the article. These objections are followed, usually, by a single, almost ceremonial, argument for the other side, beginning with the words 'But on the other hand' (*sed contra*) and usually consisting of the citation of an authoritative text. It is after this, in the main body of the article, that Aquinas sets out his own position with the reasons that support it. Each article then concludes with the solution of the difficulties set out in the introductory objections.¹

Most of the 119 questions of Part I cover the same ground as Books I and II of the *Summa contra Gentiles*; but as St

¹ Because there are many editions of this *Summa* available, I cite simply by part, question, and article. I follow the text of the Marietti edition of 1948, which derives from the Leonine.

Thomas is now writing a work of theology for Catholic students, rather than a work of philosophy capable of use against infidels, he feels free to appeal to biblical texts and church documents, and to treat of dogmas such as the Trinity as well as the truths of natural theology. But as we shall see, on the topic of being he covers much philosophical ground that is by now very familiar.

The portions of Part I that most interest us are the second and third questions.

The second question concerns the existence of God and in its three articles raises three issues. First, is the existence of God self-evident? Answer: no, not in this life. Second, is the existence of God provable? Answer: yes, by arguing from his effects in the world. Third: Does God exist? Answer: yes, as is proved by the famous Five Ways, of which the third and the fourth are, in different ways, important for our quest.

The third question is entitled 'The simplicity of God' and its several articles inquire whether there is any kind of complexity in the divine nature. Each article treats of a different kind of complexity, and reaches the negative conclusion that no such complexity can be attributed to God. For our purposes, the important articles are the third (that God is the same as his essence or nature) and the fourth (that God is not only his essence, but also his *esse*).

In the first article of the second question, Aquinas addresses attempts to show that the existence of God is self-evident. The consideration adds very little to the treatments of this issue we have already seen in the *De Veritate* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*.² The main theses are the same. 'God is' is treated as a subject-predicate proposition which is self-evident in itself but not self-evident to us in this life. Anselm's proof of God's existence from the notion of that than which nothing greater can be thought is once again rejected. Perhaps the most significant

² See above, pp. 65-70 and 83-5.

new nuance is the explicit recognition, in the *sed contra*, that there is nothing internally incoherent in the denial of God's existence.

In fact, the consideration of Anselm in the *Summa Theologiae* is more perfunctory and even less convincing than the earlier treatments. Even if a person agrees, St Thomas says, that 'God' means that than which nothing greater can be thought,

it does not thereby follow that he thinks that what is signified by the name exists in the nature of things rather than in the conception of the intellect alone. It cannot be argued that it exists in reality unless it is already granted that there is in reality something than which nothing greater can be thought.³

This criticism simply ignores Anselm's *reductio ad absurdum*—the claim that there is an incoherence in the idea that that than which nothing greater can be thought exists only in the mind. If Anselm is right about this, then somebody who begins by not granting that such a thing exists in reality can be brought by reflection to see that he must grant that it exists in reality. Aquinas not only fails to face up to the strong point of the Anselmian argument, he also, in this passage, fails to criticize its weak points, namely that the concept of *greatness* involved needs scrutiny, and that the notion of that than which nothing greater can be thought may itself be incoherent, and therefore incapable of genuinely existing even in the mind alone. Aquinas' response to Anselm is so weak that defenders of his reputation have seized on the fact that Anselm is not mentioned by name in this article, and have suggested that it may be a second-hand version of the argument that is being attacked. It has even been proposed that perhaps Aquinas had never himself read the

³ Dato etiam quod quilibet intelligat hoc nomine *Deus* significari hoc quod dicitur, scilicet illud quo maius cogitari non potest; non tamen propter hoc sequitur quod intelligat id quod significatur per nomen, esse in rerum natura; sed in apprehensione intellectus tantum. Non potest argui quod sit in re, nisi daretur quod sit in re aliquid quo maius cogitari non potest (Ia, 2, 1, ad. 2).

Proslogion.⁴ But in the light of the explicit citations that we have encountered in Aquinas' earlier works, this seems implausible.

Having argued that God's existence is not self-evident, Aquinas in the second article of the question goes on to argue that it something that is capable of proof. He has to defend this proposition against both theological and philosophical arguments. Some theologians argue that the existence of God is something that has to be taken on faith. Aquinas responds that it is not an article of faith, but a 'preamble' or preliminary to the articles of the creed. Some philosophers argue that if you are to prove anything about X you need to know what X is; but we do not know what God is, only what he is not. In response, Aquinas says that if you wish to prove that X exists, you do not need to know the essence or quiddity of X, but only what the word for 'X' means. It is only once you know that X exists that you can undertake the kind of study that is necessary to discover the essence of X.⁵ Because the words we use to name God are all drawn from his creatures, we can use them in establishing the existence of the first cause from the existence of his effects.

In the third article of the question, St Thomas offers five ways of proving the existence of God. The first proof from motion, and the second proof from the nature of efficient causality, do not throw light on the theory of being; nor does the fifth way, which is based on the teleology of final causes. However, the third proof, based on contingency and necessity, and the fourth proof, drawn from grades of being, both deserve close attention.⁶

⁴ See Brian Davies. *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 24, n.17.

⁵ Ad probandum aliquid esse, necesse est accipere pro medio quid significet nomen, non autem quod quid est; quia quaestio quid est, sequitur ad questionem an est (Ia, 2, 2, ad. 2).

⁶ I have examined the third and fourth ways at length in chs. IV and V of my *The Five Ways* (London: Routledge, 1969).

The Third Way resembles the proof of the existence of a self-subsistent necessary being which we examined in the fifteenth chapter of the *Summa contra Gentiles*.⁷ Like the ‘ontological’ argument of St Anselm, this cosmological argument is not as well presented in the later as in the earlier *Summa*. However, whereas in the treatment of the ontological argument the later Aquinas omitted some essential points, in the treatment of this argument he includes material that would have been better omitted. Part of the argument runs as follows:

Some things we encounter have the possibility of being and not being, since we find them being generated and corrupted, and accordingly with the possibility of being and not being. Now it is impossible for all that there is to be like that; because what has the possibility of not being, at some time or other is not. If therefore everything has the possibility of not being, at one time there was nothing. But if this were the case, there would be nothing even now, because what is not does not begin to be except through something which is; so if nothing was in being, it was impossible for anything to begin to be, and so there would still be nothing, which is obviously false.⁸

There seem to be a number of fallacies in this argument, which does not have a counterpart in the slimmer version of the proof in *Summa contra Gentiles*. We may well question the premiss—however natural it may have seemed to Aquinas—that what has the possibility of not being, at some time or other is not. Why cannot there be something that has the power not to exist, but as a matter of fact always does exist?

⁷ See pp. 87–97 above

⁸ Invenimus enim in rebus quaedam quae sunt possibilis esse et non esse: cum quaedam inveniuntur generari et corrumpi, et per consequens possibilis esse et non esse. Impossibile est autem omnia quae sunt talia, semper [?] esse: quia quod possibile est non esse, quandoque non est. Si igitur omnia sunt possibilis non esse, aliquando nihil fuit in rebus. Sed si hoc est verum, etiam nunc nihil esset: quia quod non est, non incipit esse nisi per aliquid quod est; si igitur nihil fuit ens, impossibile fuit quod aliquid inciperet esse, et sic modo nihil esset: quod patet esse falsum (Ia, 2, 3c).

But even if we waive this objection, it does not seem to follow that if everything has the power of not being then at some time or other there is nothing.

(1) Each thing at some time or other is not

is not equivalent to, and does not entail

(2) At some time or other, everything is not.

To pass from (1) to (2) is to commit a fallacy known to logicians as the quantifier-shift fallacy.⁹ Its fallaciousness may be brought out by the parallel argument that, since every road leads somewhere, there is some place (e.g. Rome) to which every road leads.

Why should not corruptible beings overlap with each other, so that each one comes to be and passes away, but there is never any time when nothing at all exists? Aquinas says that on the supposition that everything is corruptible there was a time when nothing existed. We may wonder what entitles him to think that the time of general non-existence was in the past, rather than something yet to come? Perhaps Aquinas is tacitly directing his argument at Aristotelian philosophers who believed that the world had always existed: this was something he always accepted as a logical possibility, even though he believed that it had been revealed to us that the world was created a finite time ago. A possibility that has not been realized in an infinite time, he may be thinking, is not a real possibility, so that, if the corruptibility of each individual thing in the world involves the corruptibility of the whole world, this second possibility too must have been realized by now if infinite time has already elapsed. But if this is the argument, it too is fallacious. From

⁹ Because if written symbolically the argument involves an illicit change in the order of the quantifiers, from $(x)(\exists y)Fxy$ to $(\exists y)(x)Fxy$.

(3) Each thing has the possibility of corrupting
it does not follow that

(4) There is a possibility of everything's corrupting.¹⁰

Again, the fallacy can be exhibited by offering a parallel counterexample. In a fair contest, each competitor has the possibility of winning the whole first prize: it is not possible for every competitor to win the whole first prize.

Some have sought to defend Aquinas by suggesting that a universe wholly composed of corruptible things might itself be regarded, in its totality, as the necessary being whose existence this part of the argument is intended to establish. Certainly, there seems nothing obviously incoherent in the suggestion that a universe composed of temporal beings might itself be everlasting. But Aquinas would reject this way out, since he held it to be impossible that many contingent things might make up one necessary being.¹¹ Hence he would regard his arguments as having established the impossibility of a universe in which the only necessary being was a totality of contingent beings.

Aquinas goes on to argue that, if there was once nothing, there would still be nothing, because what does not exist cannot begin to exist without being brought into existence by something already in existence. This principle, it should be noticed, is much less sweeping than the claim sometimes made by philosophers that every event has a cause. Aquinas' principle is also weaker than the principle that nothing can come from nothing, a principle to which Aristotle subscribed. Aquinas believed that in creation things did indeed come from

¹⁰ The fallacy here is analogous to a quantifier-shift fallacy, but involves a shift between a quantifier and a modal operator.

¹¹ Ex multis contingentibus non potest fieri unum necessarium; quia sicut quodlibet contingentium per se deficere potest ab essendi, ita et omnia simul (ScG III, 86). The argument seems to involve the fallacious passage from (3) to (4).

nothing, in the sense that they did not come into existence out of any pre-existent matter; but they did not come into existence without a cause, because they were brought into existence by the eternally existent God. Aquinas' position conflicts on the one side with the Aristotelian principle, and on the other side with the Humean principle that it is possible for something to come into existence without a cause.¹² Aquinas offers no proof of his principle, but it has a strong intuitive plausibility.¹³ If it can be established without appeal to revelation that the material world has not always existed, then the principle appears to offer a swift method of establishing the existence of a creator. The problem with the Third Way is that because of the fallacies in this part of the argument, it fails to establish that there was once a time when there was nothing contingent in existence.

The argument quoted above is not intended by Aquinas to establish the existence of God, but only to establish the existence of some necessary beings. As we saw when considering the *Summa contra Gentiles*, this category includes for him not only God, but also celestial bodies and heavenly spirits. These are necessary beings, which, unlike sublunary entities, have no tendency to go out of existence, but they do not have in themselves the cause of their own necessity. If we are to avoid an infinite regress of caused necessities, we must postulate a necessary being that is necessary of itself, and that is God. This latter part of the argument follows closely the lines of the proof in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, and therefore need not be discussed in detail here.

¹² It is, Hume says, 'easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle. The separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence, is plainly possible for the imagination; and consequently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity' (*Treatise of Human Nature* I, 3.3).

¹³ A powerful argument in its favour is mounted by G. E. M. Anscombe in 'Times, Beginnings and Causes', in her *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, ii (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 152–62.

The fourth of the Five Ways is the one that is nowadays least popular with Aquinas' admirers, for several reasons. However, of all the proofs, it is the one that is most instructive for those who wish to grasp Aquinas' theory of being. It is a proof based on gradation found in things, and it runs as follows:

Some things are discovered to be more or less good, or true, or noble, than other things, and so on. But things are said to be more or less F to the extent to which they approach to something that is most F: for example, things are hotter the more they approach what is hottest. There is therefore something that is truest and best and noblest of things, and consequently most being; for Aristotle says that the truest things are the things most being. Now whatever is most F is the cause of whatever else is F, just as fire (as Aristotle says in the same book) is the hottest thing and the cause of all other hot things. Therefore there is something that causes *esse* and goodness and every perfection in all things; and this we call God.¹⁴

One thing is immediately clear: if we can talk of degrees of *esse*, then *esse* must be something different from existence. In the Third Way, 'existence' could be used throughout as a translation of the Latin; but here we are in a different world. Things either exist or they do not; there is no halfway house between existence and non-existence. Of course, things may exist for longer or shorter periods, but they cannot exist to a greater or lesser degree.¹⁵

¹⁴ Invenitur enim in rebus aliquid magis et minus bonum, et verum, et nobile: et sic de aliis huiusmodi. Sed magis et minus dicuntur de diversis secundum quod appropinquant diversimode ad aliquid quod maxime est: sicut magis calidum est, quod magis appropinquat maxime calido. Est igitur aliquid quod est verissimum, et optimum, et nobilissimum, et per consequens maxime ens: nam quae sunt maxime vera, sunt maxime entia, ut dicitur II Metaphys. Quod autem dicitur maxime tale in aliquo genere, est causa omnium quae sunt illius generis; sicut ignis, qui est maxime calidus, est causa omnium calidorum, ut in eodem libro dicitur. Ergo est aliquid quod omnibus entibus est causa esse, et bonitatis, et cuiuslibet perfectionis; et hoc dicimus deum (Ia, 2, 3c).

¹⁵ Elsewhere in this *Summa*, Aquinas seems prepared to accept that there cannot be degrees of *esse*: see Ia, 5, 1 obj. 3 and reply.

The participle of the verb ‘*esse*’, namely ‘*entia*’, has accordingly been translated above not as ‘most existent’ but as ‘most being’. Even this seems awkward and incomplete: one wants to ask ‘most being *what?*’ The translation that reads most naturally is ‘most real’. But the comfort that this idiom brings is illusory. It is as difficult to construct a consistent scale of greater or lesser degrees of reality as it is to construct a scale of being. For the adjective ‘real’—like ‘true’ and ‘good’—acquires its content from the noun that follows it. There is no single criterion for being real, any more than for being true, or being good: how you tell whether something is a real X, or a true Y, or a good Z depends on what X, Y, and Z are.

We can, of course, and Aquinas often does, arrange things in hierarchies. We can say that humans are superior to other animals, and that animals are superior to plants, in virtue of the cognitive powers that plants lack and in which humans outclass dumb animals. But this provides a scale of beings, not a scale of being. Socrates is not more real than his dog, and his dog is not more real than his cactus.

Even if we waive difficulties about the gradations from which the Fourth Way takes its start, there is a problem about the notion of approaching a maximum. We may ask whether the maximum is supposed to be something ideal or actual. Is the maximum of heat, for instance, the hottest possible thing, or the hottest actual thing? Is the maximum of goodness the best possible thing, or the best actual thing? Suppose we take it to mean the best possible thing: then no doubt it is plausible to identify it with God. The existence of degrees of goodness, however, does not seem to show the actual existence of any best possible thing, any more than degrees of size show that there exists a largest possible thing. If, on the other hand, we take the maximum of goodness to be the best actual thing, then the existence of things of varying degrees of goodness will show that there are one or more *de facto* best things; but why must this be God, rather than some superlatively good human being?

Why, in any case, should the object occupying the maximum point on a scale cause other objects to occupy the points they do on the scale? After all, Mount Everest, the highest mountain, is not the cause of the height of all the lesser mountains on the earth. In support of his claim, St Thomas cites a piece of Aristotle's physics to the effect that fire is the cause of heat in objects; but what really fills the gaps in his argument seems to be an implicit appeal to Plato's theory of Ideas. On Plato's view, to be more or less F is to participate more or less fully in the Idea of F, which is the most F thing, the one and only thing that is fully F. Thus, to be more or less beautiful is to participate to a greater or less degree in the one and only Idea of Beauty (e.g. *Symposium*, 210d–211d).

The Fourth Way applies this Platonic line of thought to Being, substituting 'ens' for 'F' in the above theorem. Everything that has being to a greater or less degree owes it to that which has being to the maximum degree: and this we call God. Even those who most admire Aquinas are prepared to admit that the Fourth Way cannot be rescued from its Platonic context, and I will make no attempt to do so.¹⁶ But it is important to bear the Platonism of the Fourth Way in mind when considering the other passages in which Aquinas talks of being and essence.

Foremost among these passages are the third and fourth articles in the third question (on divine simplicity). The third article sets out to show that God is the very same thing as his essence or nature. In things that are composed of matter and form, there is a difference between the essence and the suppositum (i.e. what *has* the essence). Socrates is not the same thing as Socrates' humanity, because Socrates consists of a particular chunk of matter and has a number of individual characteristics that are no part of what make him a man. Socrates'

¹⁶ See Davies, *Thought*, 30; G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 116.

colour, weight, and so on are part of Socrates but are not part of Socrates' humanity. There is more, then, to Socrates than his humanity—his humanity is only a part of him, a 'formal part', as Aquinas says.¹⁷

Where there is no composition of matter and form, Aquinas says, where therefore forms are individuated by themselves and not by matter, the forms are themselves subsistent supposita. Since God is not composed of matter and form, God is his own divinity and his own life, and anything else that can be predicated of him.

It is striking that in this passage Aquinas links the identity of suppositum and essence immediately to the absence of hylomorphic complexity. What he says implies that not only is God identical with his own essence, but so too are any created spirits there may be. God is his own godhood or deity, but likewise Michael is his own Michaelhood, and Gabriel is identical with Gabrielity. This comes as a surprise to readers of the parallel passage in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, where it seems most natural to take the identity between suppositum and nature as something that is peculiar to God.

Modern philosophers feel very uncomfortable with sentences such as 'God is his own divinity' and 'God is his own goodness'. Many years ago Arthur Prior, in a dialogue on the philosophy of religion, placed in the mouth of a character the objection that such a sentence involved a confusion between abstract and common nouns. Often, he agreed, the same thing may be said either by abstract nouns or by common nouns, and either way does equally well. We may say either 'The people were very happy' or 'the people's happiness was great'; but we must opt for one method or the other. 'We cannot have it

¹⁷ Haec carnes et haec ossa et accidentia designantia hanc materiam, non concluduntur in humanitate. Et tamen in eo quod est homo includuntur: unde id quod est homo habet in se aliquid quod non habet humanitas. Et propter hoc non est totaliter idem homo et humanitas: sed humanitas significatur ut pars formalis hominis (Ia, 3, 3c).

both ways, and use a word as an abstract noun and a common noun at once, as you try to do in your sentence “God is his own goodness”—that’s just bad grammar, a combining of words which fails to make them *mean*—like “Cat no six”.¹⁸

Aquinas was sensitive to the discomfort aroused by the mingling of abstract and concrete in the thesis that a supposit could be identical with its nature. The first objection to the thesis of article 3 says that no thing is in itself, but the essence or nature of God, which is deity, is in God; therefore there is a distinction between deity and God. Aquinas’ response is that when we talk of non-complex entities we have to use forms of discourse appropriate to the complex things from which our knowledge begins:

And so, when we speak of God, we use concrete nouns, to signify his subsistence, because in our world only complex things are subsistent; and we also use abstract nouns, so as to signify his non-complexity. So when we say that godhood, or life, is *in* God, that is to be attributed to a difference in the structure of our understanding, and not to any difference in reality.¹⁹

It is important, when considering the relation between abstract and concrete, to keep matters of idiom distinct from matters of logic. In fact, in English ‘the deity’ is a perfectly idiomatic way of referring to God. Use of the expression, however, does not commit one to any metaphysical thesis about essence and existence, any more than calling Elizabeth II ‘Her Majesty’ implies that there is in her case no distinction between supposit and attribute. What is in question is whether there is

¹⁸ In *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. G. N. Flew and A. Macintyre (London: SCM, 1955), p. 4.

¹⁹ Et ideo, de Deo loquentes, utimur nominibus concretis, ut significemus eius subsistentiam, quia apud nos non subsistunt nisi composita: et utimur nominibus abstractis, ut significemus eius simplicitatem. Quod ergo dicitur deitas vel vita, vel aliquid huiusmodi esse in Deo, referendum est ad diversitatem quae est in acceptione intellectus nostri; et non ad aliquam diversitatem rei (Ia, 3, ad. 1; see also Ia, 13, 1, ad. 2).

some logical or metaphysical boundary between abstract and concrete that is illegitimately transgressed by Aquinas' thesis.

In a number of influential writings, Gottlob Frege made a sharp distinction between objects (which were referred to by proper names) and concepts (which were expressed by predicates). In 'On Concept and Object', for instance, he wrote that what is asserted about a concept can never be asserted about an object, and if we attempt to do so we produce nonsense. Existence, or instantiation, is a property of a concept: to say that there is a square root of 4 is to say that the concept *square root of 4* is not empty, is instantiated. But the sentence 'there is Julius Caesar', he maintained, is neither true nor false, but senseless.²⁰

When Aquinas says that God is the same thing as his own divinity, is he asserting the identity of a concept with an object? God, surely, is an object; divinity, surely, is a concept, since 'divinity' is the abstract noun formed from the predicate 'is divine'. So if Frege is right to see an unbridgeable chasm between concepts and objects, has not Aquinas fallen into nonsense?

Peter Geach, an admirer of both Aquinas and Frege, regards Aquinas' pair of terms 'supposit' and 'form' as corresponding to Frege's 'object' and 'concept'. But he denies that Aquinas' theory commits him to absurdity. To see this, let us return to the ordinary forms or essences in the material world: the wisdom of Socrates, for instance, which no one will claim to be identical with Socrates. We must distinguish, Geach says, between a form in itself (the reference of the predicate '. . . is wise' or of the phrase 'the wisdom of') and an individualized form (Socrates' wisdom, as opposed to Plato's). 'Wisdom' *tout court* means nothing in heaven or earth; wisdom is always wisdom-of-

²⁰ 'On Concept and Object' pp. 50-1, in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. P. T. Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

something. Geach writes of the distinction between forms and individualized forms:

This distinction is needed in order to make Aquinas' doctrine of subsistent or separate forms logically intelligible. When Aquinas tells us that God is wisdom itself, *Deus est ipsa sapientia*, he is not meaning that God is that of which the noun 'wisdom' is a proper name; for the Platonists are wrong in thinking that there is such an object, and Aquinas says they are wrong. But we *can* take it to mean that 'God' and 'the wisdom of God' are two names of the same thing, and this interpretation does not make Aquinas guilty of the impossible and nonsensical attempt to bridge the distinction previously expounded.²¹

Of course expressions such as 'God', 'the wisdom of God', and 'the power of God' are not all equivalent to each other: in Fregean terms they have the same reference, but a different sense; in Aquinas' terms, the difference between them is not in what is signified but in our mode of signifying.

Geach's remarks are highly illuminating, and are successful, I believe, in showing that the use of a sentence such as 'God is his own Wisdom' need not commit the user to Platonism. But as an account of Aquinas' teaching, and as a comparison between Aquinas and Frege, they are a little oversimplified.

First of all, as we have seen,²² there is a difference between saying 'God is God's wisdom' and 'God is wisdom itself'. Even if the first formula can be acquitted of Platonism, the matter is not so clear with the second formula. The distinction between formulae of the two kinds will become more important when we return to considering 'God is God's *esse*' and 'God is *esse* itself'. Moreover, the ease with which Aquinas passes from the non-Platonic to the Platonic formula suggests that he was not as aware of the significant difference as a philosopher influenced by Frege would be.

²¹ 'Form and Existence', in *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. A. Kenny (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 39.

²² p. 105 above.

Second, Aquinas' metaphysical inventory is, for better or worse, too rich to be mapped on to the Fregean dichotomy of concept and object. The line of argument in the passage just quoted from Geach leads naturally to the conclusion that, unlike what is meant by 'The wisdom of', the wisdom of God is not a concept but an object. But if so, the wisdom of God is very different from other individualized forms. If we consider an ordinary individualized form such as the wisdom of Socrates, or an ordinary individualized essence such as the humanity of Socrates, we find that they do not fit into either of the Fregean categories. They are not objects, because they are not self-subsistent; on the other hand, they are not concepts, because they have histories and they have causal effects in the world.²³

It is in itself no criticism of Aquinas to say that his ontology contains items that do not fit neatly into Frege's categories. Because he was interested primarily in the philosophy of mathematics, Frege did not develop an adequate conceptual apparatus for dealing with time and modality, which must be an essential part of any adequate metaphysical system.

Moreover, Frege's distinction between object and concept does not correspond to the intuitive (and possibly confused) grasp that we have of a distinction between concrete and abstract. For Frege, numbers and classes were objects, yet they clearly lack the tangibility that attaches to squirrels and tortoises. And on the other hand, several of Aquinas' individual forms are tangible in the quite literal sense—such as the furriness of the squirrel and the hardness of the tortoise.

Later in this book I will follow up at greater length the comparison between Frege and Aquinas. For the present, let us return to the question of whether an objectionable Platonism is involved in the claim that God is his own wisdom. We can

²³ They have what Frege called *wirklichkeit*, which he distinguished from the pure objectivity of numbers and concepts. *Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), p. 20.

immediately agree that there are a number of significant differences between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of Socrates. Socrates' wisdom has a history distinct from the history of Socrates: it increased as he grew older, and it could have diminished had he been afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. Not everything he did manifested his wisdom; not only did he perform the occasional foolish act, but many of his everyday actions were neither wise nor foolish. We can surely agree that nothing similar could be said of any God worthy of the name: his wisdom must last unchangingly through his everlasting life, and every action of his will be an expression of that wisdom. If the dictum that God is his own wisdom is intended only to draw distinctions of this kind between the creator's relation to his attributes and a creature's relation to the same attribute, there is no need to press any charge of Platonism.

Let us now turn from attributes to essence. When Aquinas says that, unlike a creature, God is his own nature or essence, can we interpret his thesis in terms of similar distinctions? We cannot distinguish the history of Socrates' essence from the history of Socrates himself, in the way in which we could tell two separate stories of Socrates and his wisdom. But the second of the distinctions made above holds again. There were many things that were true of Socrates, many things that he did and suffered, which were not essential to him or expressions of his fundamental nature. If this is what is meant, then again we can agree that God is identical with his essence in a way in which human creatures are not.²⁴

In the fourth article Aquinas moves to the question of whether in God essence and *esse* are the same thing. In the body of the article there are three arguments for a positive

²⁴ It is not clear to me what Aquinas would say in this context about angelic spirits. As we have seen, the argument of article 3 suggests that they are identical with their essences since they are not composed of matter and form. On the other hand, they do not seem to have all their properties essentially. Would Aquinas have believed, for instance, that it was part of the essence of Gabriel to be sent to announce the incarnation to Mary?

conclusion. The second argument understands *esse* as actualization, and goes over the same ground as the argument that we examined earlier in the *Summa contra Gentiles*.²⁵ The third makes an explicit appeal to the Platonic notion of participation: if God is not his *esse* then he is a being (*ens*) by participation and not by essence. This is not an argument that will carry conviction to those who do not accept the Platonic framework that I discussed in connection with the Fourth Way. It is the first of the three arguments that needs close examination.

That argument runs as follows . If something is F, but it is not of its essence to be F, then its F-ness is either a consequence of its essence, or the effect of an external cause. As an example of the first case, Aquinas refers to the sense of humour possessed by human beings uniquely among animals. A sense of humour is not part of the essence of humanity, but it is a consequence of the combination of rationality and animality in that essence. As an example of the second case, he gives the warmth of water in a kettle, say, which is caused by the flame beneath the kettle. Neither *esse* nor anything else could be conferred on God in the second manner, because God is the first efficient cause. But what of the first manner?

It is impossible for *esse* to be caused only by the essential elements of a thing; because nothing suffices to be its own cause of existence, if it has a caused *esse*.²⁶

Two things seem clear about this argument. The first is that by *esse* here Aquinas must (as my translation suggests) mean existence. For it is only with regard to existence that Aquinas can assume our ready assent to the proposition that nothing can be the cause of its own *esse*. Nothing can bring itself into existence; but there are many other forms of being of which

²⁵ See p. 103 above.

²⁶ Impossible est autem quod esse sit causatum tantum ex principiis essentialibus rei; quia nulla res sufficit quod sit sibi causa essendi, si habet esse causatum (Ia 3, 4c).

their possessors are adequate causes. For instance, if Aquinas is right, I am an adequate cause of my being able to see a joke. Moreover, once I am in existence, though I need many other necessary conditions for my continued existence, my own essence is the primary cause of my continuing to live: I am fulfilling the life-pattern of a human being. The second point to note about the argument is that, in saying that *esse* cannot be caused by the essential elements of a thing, Aquinas is ruling out the position taken by many theist philosophers, that God's essence *entails* his existence. Entailment, for Aquinas, would be a form of causation; and causation, even self-causation, falls short of the identity that he believes the argument demands. God is not *causa sui*: he is uncaused.

It may be objected that Aquinas cannot mean 'existence' by '*esse*' in this argument, since earlier in the same article he has used the difference in meaning that there would be between a statement that there is a God and a statement of what God is as an objection to the doctrine that in God *esse* and nature are identical. In response, Aquinas appeals to the familiar distinction between two senses of *esse*: the act of being, and the copula, which is the mark of an affirmative proposition. We know, through the Five Ways, that the proposition 'God is' is true; but both God's essence and his *esse* (in the first sense) are unknown to us.

We have seen that in different texts Aquinas seems to take different stances with regard to the question 'What is God's essence?' Sometimes (as here and in Ia 2, 2 ad. 2) he says that we do not know the answer to the question: God's essence eludes us. This seems sensible modesty, though it is less modest than it appears, because Aquinas has such high standards of what knowledge is that it turns out that the essences of (at most) few things are known to us.²⁷ At other times he seems to suggest that we do know the answer to the question: God's

²⁷ See e.g. Ia, 29, 1, ad. 3; Ia, 77, 1, ad. 7.

essence is *esse*. And we may indeed ask what is it that we know when we know the truth of the affirmative proposition ‘God is’. ‘Is’, Aquinas says, is here the copula; but it cannot be a mere copula or the sentence is incomplete, lacking a predicate. If it is doing duty for both copula and predicate, then what corresponds to the predicate must be the divine *esse*. And must we not grasp this if we are to know that the whole subject–predicate statement is true?

In the case of God’s essence, Aquinas drew a distinction between the quiddity and the meaning of a word: we do not know what God is, but we know the meaning of the noun ‘God’. Perhaps he might wish to draw a similar distinction in the case of God’s *esse*: we do not understand God’s *esse* but we know the meaning of the verb ‘is’. The difficulty is that, as we have seen, Aquinas in different places explains the meaning of the verb in different and inconsistent ways, and that none of the ways in which he explains it seems to make sense of the idea that *esse* could be the essence of anything. In the present article, for instance, he repeats the suggestion that God’s *esse* is *esse* without addition—this in response to the objection that if God’s essence is *esse* then he is something that is predicable of anything whatever. But we have already seen that the notion of *esse* without addition is a blind alley.²⁸

In the body of the article, Aquinas constantly speaks of God as identical with *his esse* rather than with pure *esse*. On first reading someone might take this avoidance of the more Platonic formula as deliberate. Aquinas might rightly say that there is nothing inconsistent in claiming that God’s essence is identical with his *esse*, but that both of them are unknown to us. After all, a detective may have good reason to know that the murderer of the butler is the same person as the murderer of the gamekeeper, and yet not know who it is that committed either murder. However, this interpretation of this passage of

²⁸ See above, p. 110.

the *Summa* does not seem tenable when the body of the article is taken in conjunction with the objections and answers. For to claim that God's *esse* is *esse* without addition is to identify God with pure *esse*, and this amounts to a claim to know what it is about God's *esse* that marks it off from the *esse* of anything else whatever.

Aquinas returns to the topic in the first article of the following question, in which he asks whether God is perfect. An objector uses the premiss that God is *esse* itself to argue for a negative answer. '*Esse* seems to be the most imperfect thing, since it is the commonest, and is altogether determinable.' Aquinas' answer runs as follows:

esse is the most perfect of all things: it is more actual than anything else, since nothing has actuality, except in so far as it is; and so *esse* is the actuality of all things and even of all forms. It stands in relation to other things not as a container to what it contains, but as what is contained to a container. For when I speak of the *esse* of a human being, or of a horse, or whatever, *esse* itself is considered as something formal and contained, not as that which is capable of being.²⁹

To come to grips with this passage, we need to realize that the principle underlying it is one often repeated by Aquinas: everything has being through form (*omnis res habet esse per formam*). To be is to be F, where 'F' keeps a place for something that stands for a form. Sometimes being is accidental being, as where Socrates is white and has *esse album* by possessing the form of whiteness. But where the being is substantial being—*esse simpliciter*, denoted perhaps by *est* with a full stop—then the expression that takes the place of F must be an expression for the essence of the substance in question. The essence of

²⁹ ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium: comparatur enim ad omnia ut actus. Nihil enim habet actualitatem, nisi in quantum est: under ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum, et etiam ipsarum formarum. Unde non comparatur ad alia sicut recipiens ad receptum: sed magis sicut receptum ad recipiens. Cum enim dico *esse* hominis, vel equi, vel cuiuscumque alterius, ipsum esse consideratur ut formale et receptum: non autem ut illud cui competit esse (Ia, 4, 1, ad. 3).

Socrates is his humanity; so for Socrates to be is for him to be a human being, to live a human life. Consequently, if we are to know what we mean when we say 'X is', we have to be able to supply the appropriate complement 'F' to refer to the essence or nature of X. This is what the objector has in mind when he says that *esse* is the commonest predicate, susceptible of all kinds of determination, but devoid of significance in itself.

Aquinas in reply, as in response to a similar objection in an earlier work,³⁰ does not so much answer the objection as change the subject. He talks of *esse* in a different sense, the sense in which it makes a contrast between 'actually being F' and 'potentially being F' and calls for a paraphrase; whereas the objection depended on the sense of *esse* in which it is a predicate common to all substances—it is *that* predicate which is 'imperfect'.

An admirer of Aquinas will have long ago become impatient with the criticisms I have been making of his treatment of being. I have pointed out that he attaches different meanings to *esse* in different places, and that none of the senses he gives the word renders intelligible the notion that in God essence and *esse* are identical. But surely, I will be told, Aquinas himself insists that the nature of God is incomprehensible, that no term can be used of God in the same sense as it is used of creatures, and that any predicate that we use in describing God will be at best analogical. All of this, it may be claimed, is made clear by Aquinas in the thirteenth question of the first part, the question devoted to the topic of the naming of God. Let us therefore examine some of the main theses of that question.

In the third article of the question, Aquinas agrees that many of the expressions used of God in Scripture, as that he is a rock or a lion, can be understood only metaphorically. But some predicates, he maintains, are applied literally to God and not just metaphorically, such as 'living' or 'good'. It is true that

³⁰ See p. 119 above

the perfections of God are shared only imperfectly by the creatures to which we first learnt to apply the predicates; but not all the predicates are inextricably enmeshed in the material contexts in which we first learnt them:

Some nouns signify the perfections themselves in the abstract, without any particular mode of sharing them being included in their meaning. Thus are being (*ens*), good, living and the like: and these are literally applied to God.³¹

To apply a predicate literally to various different things is not necessarily to apply it univocally, however, and in the fifth article of the question Aquinas explains that when a predicate is applied both to God and to creatures it is applied not in a uniform sense, but by analogy. The words by which we describe God and creatures are not used in the same sense about each. (Similarly, to adapt one of Aquinas' examples, we do not mean quite the same thing when we call the sun 'bright' as when we call the colour of a patch of paint 'bright'). On the other hand, if we say that God is wise and that Socrates is wise, we are not making a mere pun, or using an equivocation. In Aquinas' terms, when we talk of God's goodness, or his wisdom, or his love, we are using words not univocally, or equivocally, but *analogically*.

Even when we are talking about ordinary creatures, there is no doubt that there are many terms that fit Aquinas' description of the analogical use of words. His own favourite example is 'healthy'. We call animals of many kinds healthy; but of course what constitutes health in a hedgehog is very different from what constitutes health in an eel. Again, we speak of a diet as healthy and also of a complexion as healthy: in the one case because it is a cause of health in an organism, in the other case because it is a symptom of health in an organism. It would

³¹ Quaedam vero nomina significant ipsas perfectiones absolute, absque hoc quod aliquid modus participandi claudatur in eorum significatione, ut ens, bonum, vivens, et huiusmodi: et talia proprie dicuntur de Deo (Ia, 13, 4, ad. 1).

be wrong to say that the word ‘healthy’ is used in completely different senses in all these cases: when we speak of a healthy diet and a healthy complexion, we are not employing unrelated homonyms as we are when we speak of a grassy bank and a high street bank. On the other hand, the criterion of healthiness, the way we tell whether something is or is not healthy, differs from case to case depending on what noun follows the adjective.³²

Among analogical terms there is an important set of very wide application: the terms that medieval scholastics called ‘transcendental’ because their use transcended the divisions between Aristotelian categories. ‘Good’ is perhaps the best known example of these: we can speak of a good man, a good dog, a good character, a good colour, a good time, a good place, and so on. Other popular examples in the Middle Ages were ‘real’ and ‘whole’. All these cases fit the account Aquinas gives of analogical terms. We do not need a new dictionary definition each time the word is used with a different noun, but we do have to use different criteria for deciding whether to apply the word.

Aquinas says that all terms that are used literally of both God and creatures are used analogically. With regard to most of the transcendental terms, this is not difficult to accept. We would not expect the goodness of a good God to be manifested in the same way as the goodness of a good horse or even of a good human. We would not expect the difference between a real God and false gods to be tested in the same way as the difference between a real Rembrandt and a spurious one. And among non-transcendental terms, we may well agree that when ‘wise’ is applied both to Socrates and to God it is being used analogically, just as when ‘healthy’ is applied to both me and my dog.

³² Neque enim in his quae analogice dicuntur est una ratio, sicut in univocis, nec totaliter diversa, sicut in aequivocis; sed nomen quod sic multipliciter dicitur, significat diversas proportionales ad aliquid unum (Ia, 13, 6c).

Among the terms that Aquinas claims to be used analogically of God is 'being' (*ens*). We must ask, therefore, whether the application of the theory of analogy will provide a solution to the difficulties raised hitherto about the variety of senses in which Aquinas uses the word 'esse'. When we say that God is, and that each of his creatures is, do we not have a prime example of the analogical use of words?

I believe not. The theory of analogy applies to predicates, and it is an explanation of the way in which analogical terms enjoy a peculiar semantic status (single dictionary entry, but diverse mode of application). But 'is' is something more complicated than a predicate; in my extensive close studies of the texts in which Aquinas seeks to explicate it, I have not found a consistent use of it as a predicate that answers to all his requirements of it. And the problems that we have encountered have been problems not of semantics but of syntax. The difference between 'is' as copula, 'is' as existential quantifier, 'is' as variable, and 'is' as unsubstitutable variable, are not at all comparable to the difference between 'healthy' when it precedes 'dog' and 'healthy' when it precedes 'dogfood'.

Even in the case of predicates such as 'wise', the doctrine of analogy does not fit the case of divine predication as comfortably as at first appears. The doctrine of analogy was intended to explain, *inter alia*, how the same predicate, such as 'healthy', could be attached to subject-terms of very different kinds. The merit of the explanation is that it could show how, despite the differences in the criteria used for the application of the term, the subject-predicate relationship remained intact in each instance. But in the case of the analogical application of terms to God that is not, on Aquinas' theory, any longer the case.

When we say 'Socrates is wise' we are saying that a certain predicate, '. . . is wise' is true of Socrates, or that a certain property, that of being wise, belongs to Socrates. But when we say 'God is wise' we are not, according to Aquinas, saying anything parallel at all, because God does not just *have* wisdom, he

is wisdom. 'Wise' is not a predicate that is true of God, but a name that refers to him. His wisdom does not belong to him, or inhere in him, but is identical with him.

We may indeed wonder what is left of the subject–predicate relationship if Aquinas is right in his account of 'God is wise'. And, to his credit, Aquinas raises precisely this question in the final article of question 14. He asks there whether we can at all form affirmative propositions about God. The second objection runs thus:

Boethius says, in his book on the Trinity, that a non-complex form cannot be a subject. But God is par excellence a non-complex form, as has been shown above. Therefore, he cannot be a subject. But anything about which an affirmative proposition is formed is taken as a subject. Therefore, no affirmative proposition can be formed about God.³³

In the body of the article, Aquinas sets out a number of principles about predication. In every true affirmative proposition, he says, predicate and subject, one way or another, signify something that is a single reality, but is different in conception.³⁴ This seems to suggest that in 'Linus is black' the predicate 'black' signifies Linus, which is puzzling not only in the nature of the case but also in view of other things Aquinas says about predication. However, we can agree that if it is true that Linus is black, then both 'Linus' and 'black' can be used to refer to him. (If 'Linus knocked at the door' is true, then 'A black knocked at the door' is true.) The same goes not only for accidental predicates like 'black', but for substantial predicates like 'man'. But of course, even if 'Linus', 'black', and 'man' can

³³ Boethius dicit, in libro de trin. quod forma simplex subiectum esse non potest. Sed Deus maxime est forma simplex, ut supra ostensum est. Ergo non potest esse subiectum. Sed omne illud de quo propositio affirmativa formatur, accipitur ut subiectum. Ergo de Deo propositio affirmativa formari non potest (Ia, 13, 12, 2).

³⁴ Oportet quod praedicatum et subiectum significant idem secundum rem aliquo modo, et diversum secundum rationem (Ia, 13, 12c).

be used to refer to the same individual, what each of the words means is something quite different.

Aquinas goes on to say that in a true affirmative proposition subject and predicate signify the same thing via different concepts, and this applies even in self-predication:

Even in propositions in which the same thing is predicated of itself, this principle holds to a certain extent. For when the intellect puts something in subject-place, it drags it to the side of the supposit, but when it puts something in predicate-place it drags it to the nature of the form existing in the supposit, according to the dictum 'predicates are held formally, and subjects are held materially'. The plurality of subject and predicate corresponds to the conceptual difference, while the mind's affirmation indicates the identity in reality.³⁵

This is a fascinating, but baffling, passage. The case of self-predication is obviously of interest to Aquinas in this context because it is the case that comes closest to the divine predications. But it is difficult to be sure what he has in mind, since he gives no example. We wonder whether he is thinking of, say 'Linus is Linus', 'Tully is Cicero', 'The King of Rome is the heir to the Holy Roman Empire', or perhaps even 'men are men' and 'war is war'. Quite different analyses would have to be given of these different sentences. Similarly unclear is the dictum about predicates being held formally and subjects materially; the metaphor of 'dragging' is unilluminating. The natural way to take the dictum is that in a sentence such as 'Linus is black' the subject term refers to the supposit, the human being Linus individuated by his matter, while the predicate stands for the form of blackness that inheres in him. But it is not clear how to reconcile this with the thesis stated earlier

³⁵ Sed et in propositionibus in quibus idem praedicatur de seipso, hoc aliquo modo invenitur; in quantum intellectus id quod ponit ex parte subiecti, trahit ad partem suppositi, quod vero ponit ex parte praedicati, trahit ad naturam formae in supposito existentis, secundum quod dicitur quod praedicata tenentur formaliter, et subiecta materialiter. Huic vero diversitati quae est secundum rationem, respondet pluralitas praedicati et subiecti: identitatem vero rei significat intellectus per ipsam compositionem (Ia, 13, 12c).

in the body of the article, that the predicate signifies the same entity as the subject.

However we are to understand the passage, it is clear that the upshot is that the complexity of the subject–predicate sentence need not conflict with the non-complexity of what is being talked about in the case of God. The complexity is due to the variety of the mind's concepts, to which corresponds a single and undivided reality. Boethius' objection is answered by saying that our mind cannot apprehend simple, subsistent forms (angels, therefore, and not only God) as they are in themselves. However, by the use of the subject–predicate form, the mind assimilates them to the composite entities of our material world.

To the further objection that any thought that thinks a thing to be otherwise than it is is false, Aquinas replies that the objection is ambiguous. The qualification 'otherwise' may relate either to the thing that is thought of or to the person doing the thinking. If it related to the thing thought of, then the statement is true, its meaning being this: any thought that thinks a thing to be other than it is, is false. If, however, it is related to the person doing the thinking, then the statement is false; for the way it is with our thought when we think is different from the way it is with the thing we think of in its actual being. We can think complex thoughts about a non-complex God, just as we can think immaterial thoughts about material objects (Ia, 13, 12, ad. 3).

8 SUMMA THEOLOGIAE II

THE first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, unlike the first part of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, treats not only of natural theology but also of specifically Christian doctrines. The dogma of the Trinity, in which there are three divine persons but only a single divine nature, presented Aquinas with a remarkable challenge. The cornerstone of his theory of divine being was that God was essentially simple, that any form of complexity or composition was utterly foreign to the divine nature. How is the simplicity of the divinity to be reconciled with the trinity of divine persons? Question thirty-nine of the First Part addresses this question.

God, Aquinas has so often insisted, is the very same thing as his essence. In the first article he explains how this applies once we have been told that there are three persons in one God. The solution he offers to the problem is that each person is really distinct from each other person, but none of the three are really distinct from the essence. This response is insufficiently soothing, since from all we have read hitherto we have been led to believe that essences were individuated by their possessors: A's essence was distinct from B's, because one was A's essence and the other was B's essence. We need, but do not receive, an explanation why this principle no longer applies when we are considering the divine essence.

The second article, however, does address the question of what it is for one thing to be *of* another, in the form of reflection on the Latin genitive case. Authoritative texts, Aquinas says, tell us that the three persons are of a single essence, rather than that the single essence is of three

persons.¹ He explains that in creatures a form is said to be *of* that whose form it is; the only exception is when there is an adjective involved, as when we can say that a woman is of exquisite form, or that a man is a man of perfect virtue. In the divine case we can use the genitive either way. But we must distinguish between unity of essence and unity of nature: unity of nature is unity of operation, and thus all things that produce heat have a common nature; but things can be said to have a single essence only if they have a single *esse*. This is an interesting distinction, which we have not encountered hitherto.²

The crucial mystery of the Trinity is this: if the Father is God and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are all distinct from each other, why are there not three Gods rather than one? In the third article Aquinas tries to explain:

We say that Socrates and Plato and Cicero are three men, but we do not say that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are three gods, but one God. This is because in the three supposit of human nature there are three humanities, but in the three persons there is just one divine essence.³

Once again, we wonder what criterion we are to use for the individuation of essences other than the identity of their possessors.

The contrast between the divine and human case is restated in the next article. The form signified by the noun 'human', we are told, is really divided in various supposit.

¹ Hoc nomen homousion, quod in Concilio Nicaeno adversus Arianos firmatum est, idem significat quod tres personas esse unius essentiae (Ia, 39, 2, sed contra).

² Quia natura designat principium actus, essentia vero ab essendo dicitur, possunt dici aliqua unius naturae, quae convenient in aliquo actu, sicut omnia calefacientia: sed unius essentiae dici non possunt, nisi quorum est unum esse (Ia 39, 3, ad. 2).

³ Socratem et Platonem et Ciceronem dicimus tres homines; Patrem autem et Filium et Spiritum Sanctum non dicimus tres deos, sed unum Deum: quia in tribus suppositis humanae naturae sunt tres humanitates, in tribus autem personis est una divina essentia (Ia, 39, 3c).

The unity or community of human nature is not one in reality, but only in the consideration of the mind. So this term 'man' does not refer to a common nature, unless it is made to do so by the context, as when we say 'man is a species'. But the form signified by the name 'God', namely the divine essence, is single and common in reality.⁴

For those who are philosophers rather than theologians, the interest of these articles in the *Summa* is not whether they offer convincing solutions to the paradoxes of the intractable mystery of the Trinity, but what they have to tell us about Aquinas' theory of being in more mundane cases. Article seven, for instance, provides him with an opportunity to separate out a use of 'is' which he normally does not trouble to differentiate. The article is devoted to the problem of whether it is true to say (for instance) that God is the Father. Of course, the Father is God, just as a man is an animal; but we cannot say that an animal is a man, so how can we say that God is the Father? In response, Aquinas distinguishes the 'is' of identity from the 'is' of predication:

When we say God, or the divine essence, is the Father, this is a predication of identity, not a class-membership predication, because in divine matters there is no distinction between universal and particular. So both 'The Father is God' and 'God is the Father' are *per se* and not *per accidens* true.⁵

The treatment of creation in questions forty-four and forty-five of the First Part gives Aquinas a further opportunity to clarify his teaching on being. In the first article of question forty-four, Aquinas asks whether it is necessary that every

⁴ *Unitas autem sive communitas humanae naturae non est secundum rem, sed solum secundum considerationem: unde iste terminus homo non supponit pro natura communi, nisi propter exigentiam alicuius additi, ut cum dicitur, homo est species. Sed forma significata per hoc nomen Deus, scilicet essentia divina, est una et communis secundum rem (Ia 39, 4, ad. 3).*

⁵ *Cum dicitur Deus vel divina essentia est Pater, est praedicatio per identitatem, non autem sicut inferioris de superiori; quia in divinis non est universale et singulare. Unde, sicut per se est ista Pater est Deus, ita et ista, Deus est Pater (Ia, 39, 6, ad. 2).*

existent thing was created by God. The first argument for a negative answer goes thus:

Nothing prevents a thing's turning up without what does not belong to its concept, e.g. a man without whiteness. But the relation of caused to cause does not seem to be part of the concept of existent things: for they can be understood without it. Therefore they can be without it.⁶

This argument, as Anscombe has pointed out, in some ways anticipates Hume's argument against the principle that nothing can begin to exist without a cause: it differs, however, in that it is an argument based on intelligibility, not imaginability, and in that it concerns existence rather than beginning of existence.⁷

In response, Aquinas does not deny that there can be uncaused existence. That is, indeed, what he believes that God has. In the case of everything else, however, he thinks that being caused, though not part of anything's definition, is a necessary property of it in the way that a sense of humour, though not part of the concept of humanity, none the less is a property of every human being. 'If something is a sharer of being (*ens per participationem*) then it follows that it is caused by something else.' This seems a question-begging answer: for how do we know that something is a sharer of being except by knowing that it is created?

Once again, the background seems Platonic. In the body of the article Aquinas reaffirms that that God is pure subsistent *esse* and there can only be one subsistent *esse*. To prove this, appeal is made to the theory of Ideas. If (as Plato believed) there were such a thing as subsistent whiteness, whiteness that

⁶ Nihil prohibet inveniri rem sine eo quod non est de ratione rei: sicut hominem sine albedine. Sed habitudo causati ad causam non videtur esse de ratione entium: quia, sine hac, possunt aliqua entia intelligi. Ergo sine hac possunt esse (Ia, 44, 1, 1).

⁷ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 152–3.

was not the whiteness of anything, there could be only one such. There are many whitenesses only because there are many things that possess whiteness. Before there can be many of anything—Plato is explicitly cited here—there must be one of it.⁸ Accordingly, everything that is not God is not its own *esse* but is a sharer of *esse*. Now we may agree that all ordinary things *have* being rather than *are* being, but why should we agree in advance that they are *sharing* in being, that is to say, deriving it from some other source which possesses it in its wholeness? We seem to be given no reason other than Plato's theory of Ideas, which Aquinas elsewhere denounces as mistaken.⁹

The argument of Aquinas' first objector, as we have noted, did not, like Hume's, contain any reference to *beginning* of existence. This is because Aquinas wanted to show that, even if some elements of the universe had always existed (as Aristotelian philosophers believed to be the case, and as Aquinas himself believed was logically possible) they would still need a creator. A second objector is given the following argument:

It is in order to exist that a thing needs a cause. Therefore, what cannot not exist does not need an efficient cause. But no necessary thing can not exist: because what necessarily exists, cannot not exist. Since, therefore, there are many necessary things in the world, it seems that not all beings are from God.¹⁰

⁸ Plato dixit quod necesse est ante omnem multitudinem ponere unitatem (Ia, 44, 1c).

⁹ Rudi A. Te Velde (*Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*, Leiden: Brill, 1995, 59) brings out an important qualification in Aquinas' criticism of Plato. 'It is striking that, in the places where Thomas discusses Plato's doctrine of ideas and indicates in what regard he considers the Platonic view acceptable, he consistently distinguishes between the *maxime communia* and the less universal species of things.' He draws attention to *De Veritate* 21, 4, ad. 4 where Aquinas, while rejecting in the case of species terms the self-predication characteristic of the Ideas, is prepared to countenance it with regard to the transcendentals.

¹⁰ Ad hoc aliquid indiget causa efficiente, ut sit. Ergo quod non potest non esse, non indiget causa efficiente. Sed nullum necessarium potest non esse: quia quod necesse est esse, non potest non esse. Cum igitur multa sint necessaria in rebus, videtur quod non omnia entia sint a Deo (Ia, 44, 2).

The answer is that, in order for something to need an active cause, it is not necessary that the effect have the power of not existing, but only that the effect would not exist if the cause did not exist. A conditional proposition with an impossible antecedent and an impossible consequent may very well be true. This seems a fair answer. However, the appeal to causal counterfactuals only shows that there is nothing incoherent in the idea of an everlasting and incorruptible entity having a cause. It does not show that such an entity must have a cause, and to show it Aquinas cannot evoke any principle that has the *prima facie* plausibility of the anti-Humean principle that every beginning of existence demands a cause.

In order to prove that necessary things have causes, Aquinas appeals to the dependence of theorems on axioms among the necessary truths of mathematics. This move seems, among other problems, to involve a change of topic from efficient to formal causation. It is not surprising, therefore, that a third objector complains that there are no efficient causes in mathematics. Aquinas replies to this that mathematical objects are abstract in concept, but not abstract in reality, and that in reality they do have efficient causes. Presumably what he means is that, while a geometrical triangle does not have an efficient cause, any actual triangular object will have one. This may be so, but it means that the existence of logical relationships between mathematical theses is insufficient to prove the existence of causal relationships between necessary beings.

If the presuppositions of question forty-four seem objectionably Platonic, it must be said that question forty-five contains one of Aquinas' most resolutely anti-Platonic affirmations. The fourth article of the question insists that the proper object of creation, the things that actually get created, are self-subsistent substances, not forms:

Creation is one way of coming into being. What coming into being amounts to depends on what being is. So those things properly come into being and are created, which properly have being. And those are

subsistent objects . . . That to which being properly belongs, is that which has being—and that is a subsistent thing with its own being. Forms, and accidents, and the like, are not called beings because they themselves are, but because by them something else is what it is. Thus whiteness is only called a being because by it something *is* white. That is why Aristotle says that an accident not so much *is* as *is of*. So, then, accidents and forms and the like, which do not subsist, are rather co-existent than existent, and likewise they should be called concrected rather than created. What really gets created are subsistent entities.¹¹

The passage as quoted is admirable as a statement of forth-right Aristotelianism against any Platonic reification of forms, whether substantial or accidental. But in that very passage, in a sentence that I deliberately omitted, Aquinas divides the subsistent entities, which alone really have being and are created, into two classes: complex material substances on the one hand, and separated substances on the other. But separated substances—angelic spirits and the like—are, as understood by Aquinas, forms that are not forms *of* anything, and his way of conceiving them seems open to all the objections an Aristotelian would make against a Platonist. It seems difficult to render Aquinas' teaching coherent in passages such as this, save by saying that he is an Aristotelian on earth, but a Platonist in heaven.

¹¹ Creari est quoddam fieri, ut dictum est. Fieri autem ordinatur ad esse rei. Unde illis proprie convenit fieri et creari, quibus convenit esse. Quod quidem convenit proprie subsistentibus: . . . Illi enim proprie convenit esse, quod habet esse; et hoc est subsistens in suo esse. Formae autem et accidentia, et alia huiusmodi, non dicuntur entia quasi ipsa sint, sed quia eis aliquid est; ut albedo ea ratione dicitur ens, quia ea subjectum est album. Unde, secundum Philosophum, accidens magis proprie dicitur entis quam ens. Sicut igitur accidentia et formae, et huiusmodi, quae non subsistunt, magis sunt coexistentia quam entia; ita magis debent dici concrectata quam creata. Proprie vero creata sunt subsistentia (Ia, 45, 4c). I have here translated *esse* as being, contrary to my usual practice, to bring out the link between *fieri* (coming into being) and *esse* (being).

The nature of angels is dealt with in articles fifty to sixty-four of the first part, and at several points Aquinas employs his theory of being to illustrate this arcane topic. Unlike several of his Catholic contemporaries, Aquinas denied that angels were composed of matter and form. This did not mean, however, that they were pure actuality: that was a prerogative of God alone. Even pure form was in potentiality with respect to *esse*, so an angel was a composite of *esse* and *quod est*. Its *esse*, Aquinas said, is that by which it *is*, ‘just as *running* is that by which a runner runs’.¹²

As in his earlier works, Aquinas draws the conclusion from the immateriality of angels that there cannot be more than one angel in any given species. Where we have numerically different individuals of the same species, the individuation is due to the matter. Once again the Platonic comparison is made: ‘in just the same way it would be impossible to say that there were two or more separate whitenesses, or two or more separate humanities.’ There is only a plurality of whitenesses in so far as the whitenesses are in different substances.

Aquinas’ assimilation of angels to Platonic forms is a blind alley: much more interesting is his endeavour to give content to the notion of non-embodied intelligence, which, as we shall see, throws light on an aspect of the theory of *esse* which we have not yet explored. In the treatise on angels, Aquinas often compares their alleged activities with those of the human mind. For instance, in discussing whether an angel can pass from one point to another without passing through points between, Aquinas reminds us that one can think of France and then of Syria without in the meantime thinking of Italy which is between the two (Ia, 53, 2, 2).

The human mind could provide Aquinas with a model for the angelic mind because human thought was, for him, itself

¹² Ia, 50, 2, ad. 3. In the next paragraph an angel is once again compared to a Platonic idea of whiteness.

immaterial in its operation. Both sense-perception and intellectual thought were, he believed, a case of the reception of forms in a more or less immaterial manner in the mind. In both perception and thought a form exists, as Aquinas put it, 'intentionally'. When I see the redness of the setting sun, redness exists intentionally in my vision; when I think of the roundness of the earth, roundness exists in my intellect. In each case, the form exists without the matter to which it is joined in reality: the sun itself does not enter into my eye, nor does the earth, with all its mass, move into my intellect. Intentional existence is one more kind of *esse*.

Intentional existence is not, as such, totally immaterial existence. Redness exists with natural *esse* in a red object, and with intentional *esse* in the eye of a beholder. But according to Aquinas, redness exists intentionally not only in my eyes, but in the lucid medium through which I see it (Ia, 56, 2, ad. 3), and even in the eye, the sensible form is a form of the matter to be found in the sense-organ. But in the intellect there is no matter for the forms to inform. The intellect indeed has no other nature than its ability to be informed by forms existing intentionally; if it had, it would be incapable of understanding whatever shared its nature, as coloured glass prevents one from discriminating between white light and light of the glass's own colour (Ia, 75, 2c and 87, 1c).

The occurrence of concepts and thoughts in the intellect is not a case of the modification of any matter: there is no moulding of mysterious mental material.

Each thing is known according to the manner in which its form exists in the knower. But the intellectual soul knows a thing in its own absolute nature: a stone, for instance, precisely as a stone. Thus, the form of stone in the absolute according to its own formal concept, is in the intellectual soul. Consequently the intellectual soul is a form in the absolute, not anything composed of matter and form. For if it were composed of matter and form, the forms of things would be received into it in all their concrete individuality, so that it would

know only the singular, as the senses so, which receive forms of things in a physical organ; for matter is the principle that individuates forms.¹³

The theory of intentional *esse* should be taken in conjunction with another theorem often enunciated by Aquinas: thought in operation and the object of thought are identical with each other (*intelligibile in actu est intellectus in actu*) (Ia, 14, 2c; 55, 1, ad. 2) The object of thought exists, intentionally, in the intellect; its *esse* is the actualization, the life, of the intellect. The actuality of the power of the object of thought is the same thing as the actuality of the power of thinking. That is to say, on the one hand the intellect is just the capacity for intellectual thought; the intellect has no structure or matter, it is just the locus of thought. On the other hand, the object of intellectual thought, a universal as such, is something that, *pace* Plato, has no existence outside thought (Ia, 79, 3c).

There is not, for instance, outside the mind, any such thing as human nature as such, human nature in the absolute. There is only the human nature of individual human beings like Peter and Paul. The humanity of individuals is form embedded in matter, and as such it cannot be the object of pure intellectual thought. The humanity of an individual, in Aquinas' terminology, is thinkable (because a form) but not 'actually thinkable' (because existing in matter). To be actually thinkable, it has to exist in a different way: through the activity of our intellect, it has to be transformed into the intellectual object, humanity as such.

¹³ Sic autem cognoscitur unumquodque, sicut forma eius est in cognoscente. Anima autem intellectiva cognoscit rem aliquam in sua natura absolute, puta lapidem in quantum est lapis absolute. Est igitur forma lapidis absolute, secundum propriam rationem formalem, in anima intellectiva. Anima igitur intellectiva est forma absoluta, non autem aliquid compositum ex materia et forma. Si enim anima intellectiva esset composita ex materia et forma, formae rerum reciperentur in ea ut individuales; et sic non cognosceret nisi singulare, sicut accidit in potentiis sensitivis, quae recipiunt formas rerum in organo corporali: materia enim est principium individuationis formarum (Ia, 75, 5c).

The form is individuated when existing with *esse naturale* in an actual example of a species; it is also individuated, in quite a different way, when it exists with *esse intentionale* in the mind of a thinker. Suppose that I think of a crocodile. There seem to be two things that make this thought the thought that it is: first, that it is a thought of *a crocodile* and not, say, of an elephant; second, that it is *my* thought and not yours or President Bush's. Other things may be true of thoughts—e.g. that they are interesting, obsessive, vague—but these seem to be the two things essential to any thoughts: that they should be *someone's* thoughts, and that they should be thoughts of *something*. The theory of intentionality is meant to set out both these features. The form of *crocodile* when existing in nature is individuated by the matter it informs; when existing intentionally, it is individuated by the person in whose mind it exists.

For Aquinas, however, as he makes clear in his treatise on angels, the distinction between natural and intentional existence is not one that has application only in the realm of material entities, like crocodiles and human thinkers. The archangel Gabriel is a form that exists immaterially and naturally in its own right; but when Raphael thinks of Gabriel, then the form that is Gabriel exists immaterially and intentionally in the mind of Raphael (Ia, 56, 2, ad. 3).

Having completed the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas returned to Paris in 1268 to take up again one of the Dominican chairs in the university. During his time in Paris he wrote the second part of the *Summa*, which is devoted to ethical theory, divided into two parts, treating of general issues and particular moral topics, respectively. This part of the *Summa* has little of interest for our concerns in this book—but in the third and final part of the massive work the consideration of the doctrine of the Incarnation, like the consideration of the Trinity in the first part, led Aquinas to some original reflections on the topic of *esse*. I select two articles by way of illustration.

The ninth article of question sixteen of the third part asks whether it would have been correct to say, pointing to Jesus, ‘This man began to be.’ The argument in favour is simple: Christ began to be a human; but to be a human is to be, period. Therefore, this man began to be, period. This argument depends on the notion of substantial being, which we have seen to be the key to many of Aquinas’ theses on the topic of being. In response, Aquinas does not in any way retract his adherence to the notion of substantial being, but instead draws attention to a particular feature of the verb ‘begin’. If to be F is also to be G, it does not follow that to begin to be F is also to begin to be G. Thus, to begin to be red is not necessarily to begin to be coloured: the object in question may have changed from being blue. Hence, even if, for human beings, to be human is to be, it does not follow that if Christ began to be human he began to be.¹⁴

The third article of the next question inquires whether in Christ there was a single *esse* or more than one. In response, Aquinas says:

Esse belongs both to supposit and to nature: to supposit as to that which has *esse*, to nature as to that by which something has *esse*. For nature is signified in the way a form is, which is called a being because by it something is, as by whiteness something is white, and by humanity someone is a human. If there is a form or nature that does not belong to the personal *esse* of a subsistent supposit, then that is not said to be the *esse* of that person without qualification, but its *esse* in a particular respect; as being white is a being of Socrates, but not *qua* Socrates, but *qua* white.¹⁵

¹⁴ Cum hoc verbo incoepit non sequitur argumentum ab inferiori ad superius: non enim sequitur: hoc incoepit esse album, ergo incoepit esse coloraum. . . . Esse autem simpliciter est superius ad esse hominem. Unde non sequitur: Christus incoepit esse homo, ergo incoepit esse (IIIa, 16, 9, ad. 2).

¹⁵ Esse pertinet ad hypostasim et naturam: ad hypostasim quidem sicut ad id quod habet esse; ad naturam autem sicut ad id quo aliquid habet esse; natura enim significatur per modum formae, quae dicitur ens ex eo quod ea aliquid est, sicut albedine est aliquid album, et humanitate est aliquis homo. Est autem considerandum quod, si aliqua forma vel natura est quae non pertineat ad esse

There is no problem in an individual having many of these *esses* in a particular respect—Socrates after all is both white and educated—but what cannot be multiplied is the personal *per se esse*, by which Socrates is human. But the new question that Aquinas raises in this passage is this: what about the *esse* by which Socrates is a body with a head, or a body with a soul? These, he answers, must all be one single *esse*.

If it happened, that after the person of Socrates was already in existence, Socrates acquired hands or feet or eyes, as happens in a man born blind, this would not mean that Socrates acquired a new *esse*, but only a new relation to these elements, in that he would now have *esse* in relation not only to his earlier attributes but to what he had newly acquired.¹⁶

Aquinas' interest in this speculation is, of course, to decide what is the appropriate thing to say about the *esse* of Christ, the Son of God, who, after existing eternally as divine, acquired at a particular moment in time a human nature. But for our purposes the interest of the passage is not a theological one, but the fact that it identifies a feature of substantial being not hitherto recognized in the texts we have been studying.

personale hypostasis subsistentis, illud esse non dicitur esse illius personae simpliciter, sed secundum quid: sicut esse album est esse Socratis, non in quantum est Socrates, sed in quantum est albus (IIIa, 17, 2c).

¹⁶ Si contingeret quod, post constitutionem personae Socratis, advenirent Socrati manus vel pedes vel oculi, sicut accidit in caeco nato, ex his non accresceret Socrati aliud esse, sed solum relatio quaedam ad huiusmodi: quia scilicet diceretur esse non solum secundum ea quae prius habebat, sed etiam secundum ea quae postmodum sibi adveniunt (IIIa, 17, 2c).

9 COMMENTARIES ON ARISTOTLE'S *METAPHYSICS*

AFTER returning to Paris in 1268, Aquinas was engaged in writing (in addition to the later parts of the *Summa*) a series of line-by-line commentaries on the works of Aristotle in Latin translations. The series began with a commentary on the *De Anima* shortly before he left Rome, and reached its climax with a commentary on the twelve books of the *Metaphysics*. This was begun shortly before Aquinas left Paris for his final academic posting in Naples, and it is this commentary that has most to teach us on the theory of being.¹ Confrontation with the text of Aristotle, and reflection on the numerous and lively examples that illustrate his thinking, forced Aquinas to sharpen and define a number of the concepts of *esse* with which he had been working.

There is a discipline called 'first philosophy', Aristotle tells us in the fourth book of the *Metaphysics* (1003a, 21 ff.), 'which theorizes about Being qua being, and the things which belong to Being taken in itself'. The scope of this discipline is universal, since being is whatever is anything whatever. 'Being' is used in many senses; but the senses are related to each other by analogy, as the senses of 'healthy' are.² The core sense of the word is that which applies to substances, and other things are beings because of their relationship to this prime analogate. Aquinas paraphrases thus:

¹ References are given to the book, lectio, and numbered paragraphs in the Cathala edn of the commentary on the *Metaphysics* (in Met.).

² See above, p. 153.

Some things are called beings, or are said to be, because they have *esse* of themselves, like substances, which are the things principally and primarily called beings. Others are so called because they are passions or properties of substance, like the accidents directly inhering in each substance. Others are called beings because they are the route to substances, comings into being and changes.³

The list continues: even destruction and negation can be said to be: we say that non-being *is* non-being, which we could not do unless a negation had some kind of being.

Aquinas tries to reduce Aristotle's motley list of beings into order, by grouping them into four categories of increasing strength. The weakest are things that have being only in the mind, like negations and privations. 'We say they have being in the mind, because the mind busies itself about them as if they were beings, making affirmations and negations about them.' Next weakest are generation, corruption, and change: imperfect actualities. Then come things that are fully actual, but have being only in other things—qualities, quantities, and other properties of substances. The fourth and supreme category consists of substances with 'a firm and solid *esse*'. The study of substance, then, is the task of the metaphysician: he studies them not as substances of a particular kind—lions, say, or oxen—but simply as substances or beings.

Aristotle moves on to consider the relationship between being and unity: and he remarks that 'man', 'one man', and 'existent man (*ens homo*)' mean the same thing. In commenting on this, Aquinas takes issue with Avicenna. Because *esse* and essence are distinct, Avicenna is reported as saying, '*ens*', which comes from *esse*, means something in addition to the substance that is called '*homo*' on the basis of its essence. Aquinas responds:

³ Alia enim dicuntur entia vel esse, quia per se habent esse sicut substantiae, quae principaliter et prius entia dicuntur. Alia vero quia sunt passiones sive proprietates substantiae, sicut per se accidentia uniuscuiusque substantiae. Quaedam autem dicuntur entia quia sunt via ad substantiam, sicut generationes et motus (in IV Met. 1, 539).

Though the *esse* of a thing is different from its essence, it is not to be thought that it is something added on like an accident; it is rather constituted by the elements of the essence. And thus this word '*ens*' which is derived from the *esse* signifies the same thing as the name which is derived from the essence.⁴

The statement that *esse* is constituted by the elements of the essence appears to differ from the accounts we have previously seen. The brief remark is difficult to interpret on its own: perhaps we should link it with a passage later in the *Metaphysics* commentary, where the text being interpreted is Aristotle's discussion of the relation between the mode of existence of things and the differences that define them. (1042b, 15 ff.). Things may differ from each other, Aristotle says, in many different ways—for instance the manner in which their elements are put together (by glue or by nails, say) or in their position (as a threshold differs from a lintel), or in their timing (as lunch and supper), or in their direction (as one wind differs from another). He goes on to say that 'is' is said in as many different senses. A threshold *is* because it is placed in such a position, and so its *esse* (*εἶναι*) is to be so placed. The *esse* of ice is to be solidified in such and such a way. The *esse* of other things will be defined in accord with the examples we have given. Aquinas' paraphrase runs thus:

Because the aforesaid differentias are constitutive of the things of which he has been talking, it is clear that the *esse* of those things will be spoken of in as many senses as the differentias. Because a differentia completes the definition which signifies the *esse* of a thing. A threshold is what it is because it is positioned in such and such a way. Its actual positioning is its *esse*, that is to say its notion. Similarly, the *esse* of ice is to be solidified in a particular way.⁵

⁴ *Esse enim rei quamvis sit aliud ab eius essentia, non tamen est intelligendum quod sit aliquod superadditum ad modum accidentis, sed quasi constituitur per principia essentiae. Et ideo hoc nomen Ens quod imponitur ab ipso esse, significat idem cum nomine quod imponitur ab ipsa essentia* (in IV Met. 2, 558).

⁵ *Quia praedictae differentiae sunt constitutivae rerum de quibus supra dictum est, manifestum quod ipsum esse praedictarum rerum toties dicitur quot sunt differentiae. Differentia enim complet definitionem significantem esse rei. Limen*

We may wonder how *esse* so understood differs from essence—indeed, Aquinas seems almost willing to identify it with essence, by paraphrasing *esse* as ‘*propria eius ratio*’. But perhaps we can take a hint from the passage from Book IV and regard the *esse* as being the combining of the elements of the essence. And a few paragraphs further on Aquinas supports this interpretation when he links the defining differences with the notions of matter and form. You can define a threshold as a piece of stone or wood in a particular position: the stone or wood is the matter, the position is the form. In the definition of ice, water is the matter and solidification is the form.

G. E. L. Owen saw a difficulty in the passage of Aristotle here discussed. First of all, he says, we are told that for ice to exist is for it to keep its solidity: the notion of solidity is used to give the relevant sense of ‘exist’. But then Aristotle goes on to use the same solidity to give the sense of ‘ice’. Lack of solidity is now part of a paraphrase not of ‘X no longer exists’ but of ‘X is no longer ice’. But how is this now relevant to the claim that the word ‘is’ is used in different senses? ‘Grant that “ice” has a different definition from “wood”, how can this have the least tendency to show that when “exists” is coupled with these words it too calls for a different paraphrase?’ Owen calls this the problem of the overworked paraphrase.⁶

Owen’s solution to the problem rests on the distinction between specific and individual existence. When a characteristic figures in the paraphrase of the specific term (e.g. ‘ice’), its function is to analyse what it is for a particular kind of thing to exist, or for a particular concept to be instantiated. When the characteristic figures in the paraphrase of ‘exist’, it tells us

enim est huiusmodi, quia ita ponitur. Et ipsum sic poni est esse ipsius, idest propria eius ratio. Et similiter esse crystalli, est ipsum taliter inspissari (in VIII Met. 2, 1694).

⁶ ‘Aristotle on the Snares of Ontology’, in G. E. L. Owen, *Logic, Science and Dialectic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 267.

what it is for an individual specimen of that kind to continue in existence. There is therefore no difficulty in accepting that to discover the relevant sense of 'exist' in particular statements of existence is the same thing as to discover what 'ice' means in general. But, Owen says, there is a price to be paid for this solution. 'We shall have to construe any assertion of existence, singular or general, as signifying that the subject is *still* in existence; and we shall have to read a denial of existence as meaning that the subject is *no longer* (or perhaps *not yet*) *in existence*.' But in many cases this is unsatisfactory. It is absurd, for instance, to take 'Centaurus do not exist' as referring to the dead or unborn members of some tribe.

This worry seems to me unfounded, and it is not easy to trace its source. Perhaps the problem is supposed to arise from the fact that Aristotle's individual existences are tensed, while statements of specific existence are best represented by means of quantifiers, which are not tensed. But surely, any adequate representation of specific existence is going to have to allow considerations of time to enter both on the side of the quantifier and on the side of the predicate.

By allowing a tense-operator to precede the quantifier, we can express the demise of the dodo thus:

It was once the case that for some x , x is a dodo, and it is not now the case that for some x , x is a dodo.

The perpetual non-existence of centaurs, on the other hand, can be rendered thus:

It is not, was never, and never will be the case that for some x , x is a centaur.

This does not commit us, or Aristotle, to a belief in unborn or defunct centaurs: all we need is the concept *centaur*.

On the other hand, we can attach indications of time and tense to predicates within the scope of the existential quantifier, as in

For some x , x was crowned in Rome on 25 December 800.

We can do so even when discussing non-existent entities like phoenixes, as in the false sentence

For some x , x is a bird with a life-span of six hundred years.

We need to do so not only when talking of contingent beings with limited life spans but equally when talking of the existence of everlasting necessary beings, like Aristotle's heavenly bodies:

For some x , x is, x was, and x always will be a heavenly body.

This analysis can be used for statements about God and God's everlasting existence. Hence Owen's objection presents no difficulty for Aquinas' account.

Book Δ of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* contains a dictionary of philosophical terms, one entry in which (1017a, 8 ff.) is dedicated to the pair of terms $\delta\upsilon\nu$ and $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$, corresponding to *ens* and *esse*. Starting from the distinction we encountered earlier between a *per se* being (e.g. a woman) and a *per accidens* being (e.g. an educated woman), Aristotle offers three kinds of *per se* being. All of them codify senses that had been in use by St Thomas throughout his lifetime, but his commentary on this text gives him an opportunity to make explicit some features of usage which he commonly leaves tacit.

The first of the three kinds of *per se* beings are those that correspond to the categories of predication.⁷ The beings that correspond to the categories are the substances and accidents we have been familiar with since *On Being and Essence*: entities

⁷ The Greek probably means 'those that are signified by the categories of predication'. The Latin translation used by Aquinas reads 'those that signify the categories of predication' (in V Met. 9, 889). There is a similar mistranslation in the next paragraph, where *esse* is said to be signified, rather than to signify.

answering to predications of quiddity, quality, quantity, and the like. But Aquinas, taking a cue from a sentence in Aristotle's text, relates the classification of the categories to the thesis that being is not a genus. The ten categories are not classifications of ten types of being, but ten different ways of predicating. As Aquinas says,

Being is delimited into different categories in accord with different ways of predicating, which depends on different ways of being. 'To the number of ways in which being is spoken of'—that is, to the number of ways in which something is predicated—'there corresponds the number of ways in which *esse* is signified'—that is the number of ways in which something is said to be . . . *Esse* has a meaning corresponding to each way of predicating. Thus, when we say 'man is an animal' the 'is' signifies substance; when we say 'a man is white' it signifies quality; and so on.⁸

Here we seem to have a problem similar to that identified by Owen in respect of *Metaphysics*, Book H—except that here we are dealing not so much with an overworked paraphrase as with an overworked denotation. We may be happy to say that in 'Socrates is white' the word 'white' stands for a quality; but why should we say that 'is' stands for the same quality, or indeed stands for, or denotes, anything at all? Perhaps here the problem is caused by the use of the English phrase 'stand for'. This may perhaps be appropriate for the relation between the predicate term and its signification, but inappropriate for explaining the function of the verb 'to be' in such a predication. The Greek and Latin words for 'signify' are much broader in their use than English words such as 'refer' and 'mean': for Aristotle and Aquinas, words signify not only the

⁸ Oportet quod ens contrahatur ad diversa genera secundum diversum modum praedicandi, qui consequitur diversum modum essendi; quia 'quoties ens dicitur', idest quot modis aliquid praedicatur, 'toties esse significatur' idest tot modis significatur aliquid esse. . . . Oportet quod unicuique modo praedicandi, esse significet idem; ut cum dicitur homo est animal, esse significat substantiam. Cum autem dicitur, homo est albus, significat qualitatem, et sic de aliis (in IV Met. 5, 9, and 890).

things we are talking about, but also the thoughts we are having about those things, and in such contexts 'express' would be a much more appropriate translation than 'mean' or 'denote'.

The objection to the Aristotelian thesis that Aquinas expects is not the objection of the overworked denotation, but rather the complaint that not all predications come in the appropriate form. If we say 'Socrates thrives', there is no overt use of the verb 'to be'. None the less, this is a predication of being, because any such verb can be analysed into the verb 'to be' plus a participle, as in 'Socrates is thriving'. So it is true to say that, in every case where a predication is made in one of the categories, being of one form or another is the topic.⁹

Contemporary philosophers, as I have noted before, treat the 'is' that precedes a noun or adjective in subject–predicate sentences as if it were a part of the predicate with no separate significance. This seems at first sight a totally different way of understanding predication; but it is not necessarily so. Both Aquinas' account and contemporary practice achieve the result that the verb 'to be' when used to copulate a predicate cannot be understood except by reference to the predicate that follows it. In each case, what is left of the sentence after the subject has been deleted from it has to be treated as a single unit for analysis.

Before leaving the topic of *per se* being of this first kind, Aquinas sets out a general account of predication in order to show that very different things are going on when predication

⁹ Quia vero quaedam praedicantur, in quibus manifeste non opponitur hoc verbum Est, ne credatur quod illae praedicationes non pertineant ad praedicationem entis, ut cum dicitur, homo ambulat, ideo consequenter hoc removet, dicens quod in omnibus huiusmodi praedicationibus significatur aliquid esse. Verbum enim quodlibet resolvitur in hoc verbum Est, et participium. Nihil enim differt dicere, homo convalescens est, et homo convalescit, et sic de aliis. Unde patet quod quot modis praedicatio fit, tot modis ens dicitur (in V Met. 9, 893). The Latin cannot be translated as it stands, because of the fact that English, unlike Latin, makes a distinction between the continuous and the habitual aspect of a verb. In English 'Socrates runs' would have to be paraphrased as 'Socrates is a runner', not 'Socrates is running'.

is made in different categories. When a predication is made in the category of substance, he says, subject and predicate are the same thing. In predications in the category of quality, quantity, and relation, the predicate is something that inheres in the subject. In predications of vesture, time and place, what the predicate refers to is quite external to the subject. In predications of action or passion, the reference of the predicate is partly internal and partly external.

There is no need to go into the detail of Aquinas' analysis of the various accidental predicates: there is no reason to question his principal point that, when we say Socrates is in Athens, we are not just saying a different thing, but are doing a rather different sort of saying, from when we say that Socrates is wise. What does call for examination, however, is what Aquinas says here about predications in the category of substance. One possible relation between subject and predicate, Aquinas says, is

When the predicate is that very thing that the subject is, as when I say, 'Socrates is an animal.' For Socrates is that very thing that is an animal. And this predicate is said to signify the first substance, which is the individual substance, of which all things are predicated.¹⁰

This is a significant change from what seemed to be the standard position in Aquinas' earlier works, where a predicate in the category of substance signified not a first, but a second substance: not a supposit, but its essence, or part of it; in the example given, not an animal, but its animality. Aquinas does not comment on this change, but he does raise a related point when he takes issue with Avicenna about the significance of accidental predicates. Avicenna was wrong, he says, to say that in 'Socrates is white' the primary significance of the predicate 'white' was Socrates. On the contrary, it signifies Socrates'

¹⁰ Uno modo cum est id quod est subiectum, ut cum dico, Socrates est animal. Nam Socrates est id quod est animal. Et hoc praedicatum dicitur significare substantiam primam, quae est substantia particularis, de qua omnia praedicantur (in V Met. 9, 891).

whiteness—it refers primarily to the quality, and Socrates comes into question only because the whiteness is signified as an accident, and therefore as a quality of *someone*. If accidental predicates primarily signified the subject, then they would, like white Socrates, belong to the class of *per accidens* beings. But an accident in itself is a *per se*, not a *per accidens*, being.¹¹

The second kind of *per se* being listed by Aristotle is explained by him in his usual cryptic, telegrammatic style:

Again, 'to be' and 'is' signifies that something is true . . . e.g. 'It is the case that Socrates is educated' says that this is true, 'It is the case that Socrates is not white' says that that is true, and 'It is not the case that the diagonal is commensurate with the side' [says] that that is false.¹²

Aristotle's point seems to be to draw attention to the use of the verb 'to be' to affirm or deny a whole proposition, as opposed to linking predicate to subject. Philosophers writing in English use the cumbersome 'It is the case that' for this purpose, but there are quite natural idioms employing the verb 'to be' that have the same effect, e.g. 'He is' used in answer to the question 'Is Socrates educated?' or 'It is not' in answer to the question 'Is the diagonal commensurate with the side of the square?' Corresponding Greek idioms lie behind Aristotle's remark.

It is not clear whether Aquinas understood Aristotle in this way. He says that '*esse*' in this sense signifies the composition of the proposition, which the intellect creates by compounding and dividing. This is the formula he commonly uses to refer to '*esse*' as the copula, not as an operator with a whole sentence as its scope. And in a subsequent paragraph he makes the point that it is the way things are in the world that causes truth or falsehood in a proposition 'which the mind signifies by this

¹¹ In V Met. 9, 894. Aquinas goes on to say that the word 'whiteness', as opposed to the word 'white' in 'is white', signifies an accident in the mode appropriate to a substance, and therefore does not have a reference to the subject at all.

¹² 1017a, 31–5. I use 'it is the case that' to catch the purpose of the inversion of normal Greek order in *ἔστι Σωκράτης μουσικός*.

word "is" in so far as it is a copulating verb'. His interest, in any case, is elsewhere than Aristotle's:

Some things which are not in themselves beings are treated by the mind as if they were beings, namely negations and the like, and therefore something can be said to be in this second sense and not in the first sense.

As often, he uses blindness as an example of something that has being in the second sense but not the first. Then he continues:

For each thing it is a supervenient matter that something should be truly affirmed about it, whether mentally or orally. A thing is not tested by people's knowledge of it, but vice versa. But the *esse* which each thing has in its own nature is substantial. So when we say 'Socrates is', if that 'is' is taken in the first manner, it belongs with substantial predicates. For being is broader than any individual being, as animal is broader than human. But if it is taken in the second manner, it is an accidental predicate.¹³

This passage is puzzling in several ways. For X to possess this accidental predicate seems to be the same thing as there being true thoughts or utterances about X. Some of the puzzle dissipates if we realise that Aquinas had a very concrete view of truth: only actual thoughts or utterances possessed truth. For us it may seem natural to think that there were many truths about Mount Everest long before there were any human beings to think or utter thoughts; but Aquinas would not agree: in his world there are no abstract propositions existing outside anyone's mind. Of course, he would agree that before there were human beings Everest had many properties, but the only truth about Everest at that time would be the one and

¹³ *Accidit autem unicuique rei quod aliquid de ipsa vere affirmetur intellectu vel voce. Nam res non refertur ad scientiam, sed e converso. Esse vero quod in sui natura unaqueque res habet, est substantiale. Et ideo, cum dicitur Socrates est, si ille Est primo modo accipitur, est de praedicato substantiali. Nam ens est superius ad unumquodque entium, sicut animal ad hominem. Si autem accipitur secundo modo, est de praedicato accidentali (in V Met. 9, 896).*

only truth in the divine mind. If we realise this, we can see why being the subject of true thoughts would be an accidental property or predicate of Everest, or of Socrates for that matter.

There remains, however, a more significant problem. If we say that Socrates has *esse* in the sense of being a possible subject of true thoughts, we seem to be making a philosophical statement of a rather abstruse kind. On the other hand, when we ask whether blindness has *esse*, in a particular community perhaps, we are making an empirical inquiry as to whether anyone in that community is blind. Two quite different proposed analyses seem to have been brought together under the single rubric of Aristotle's second type of *per se* being.

Aristotle's third type of *per se* being need not detain us long. It is the contrast between actuality and potentiality which we have often encountered. The only novelty is that the text of Aristotle stimulates Aquinas to note that the contrast applies not only within the realm of substances in the real world, but also in the realm of mental activity and among the fictions that lack *esse* of the first kind. The contrast between having and using knowledge is a potentiality–actuality contrast in the life of the mind. Again, a projectile may slow down and eventually come to rest. That is a passage from potential to actual rest: but rest, for Aristotle and Aquinas, is only an *ens rationis*: it is the absence of the genuine, if imperfect, reality that is motion.

In Book Z of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle returns to the multiple senses of being. (1028a, 10 ff.). Of the being that is divided between the categories, he says, the primary is the answer to the question 'What is it?' of a thing, which signifies substance, a thing of a particular kind. All other things—like walking, sitting, thriving—are said to be because they are things that are *of*, or belong to, substance, and are inseparable from it. They are said to be because through them a substance *is* something-or-other: is good, or is sitting, or whatever it may be. But what *is*, period, is substance. So the question, raised long ago and for

ever with us, 'What is being?' is ultimately the question, 'What is substance?'

In Aquinas' commentary on this text, the most interesting passage concerns the question whether walking and sitting, whiteness and blackness, are or are not beings. The abstract nouns, he says, seem to signify non-beings, because the abstract form seems to indicate them as subsistent independently of substances, whereas they are things whose *esse* is to belong to something else. What is happening, he says, is that the mind is treating them as independent, though they are not really so, because the mind can divide things that in nature are conjoined.¹⁴

Aristotle now sets off an inquiry into what kinds of things count as substances. Animals, plants, the earthly elements, the sun and moon and stars are beyond doubt substances; but what are we to say of surfaces, lines, mathematical entities, and Platonic Ideas? We do not need to follow him in this quest, but we should look at his preliminary examination of the various ways in which 'substance' can be used of non-controversial mundane objects. He lists four things philosophers might take it to mean: (1) the subject of predication; (2) the subject's quiddity and the (3) specific, and (4) general universals under which the subject falls. Aquinas observes that (1) is the first substance of the *Categories*, and (2) and (3) are the second substance mentioned there. The quiddity, however, is a new element in this Aristotelian context, though of course we have met it in many passages of Aquinas. It is, Aquinas says, 'neither the genus or the species nor the individual, but the formal principle of them all'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Licet autem modus essendi accidentium non sit ut per se sint, sed solum ut insint, intellectus tamen potest ea per se intelligere, cum sit natus dividere ea quae secundum naturam coniuncta sunt (in VII Met. 1, 1254).

¹⁵ Hoc autem quod quid erat esse hic ponitur, sed ibi praetermittitur, quia non cadit in praedicamentorum ordine nisi sicut principium. Neque enim est genus neque species neque individuum, sed horum omnium formale principium (in VII Met. 2, 1275).

Since the quiddity is the answer to the question 'What is it?' of a thing, we need to make precise the sense of this question, to make clear that not all answers will do.¹⁶ If I ask 'What are you?', 'A musician' is not an appropriate answer: to be a musician is not what it is to be you, even though you may well be a musician. But 'a human being', 'an animal', 'a substance', or 'rational' will all do as answers: they all pertain to your quiddity.¹⁷ The quiddity corresponds to the definition of the kind of thing you are.

In the fifth lecture of the commentary, corresponding to the sixth chapter of the text, Aquinas follows the arguments by which Aristotle seeks to answer the question of whether a thing is or is not identical with its quiddity. Aristotle's main concern is to reject the Platonic answer that the quiddity of something, what makes it the kind of thing it is, is some quite separate Idea or Form. But having dealt with the Platonists, Aristotle has an argument to show that, even if a thing's quiddity is conceived in a non-Platonic manner, the thesis that it is distinct from the thing itself leads to absurdity. Aquinas paraphrases his argument thus:

A horse is a thing which has the quiddity of horse. If this is a different thing from the horse, let us call it A. A, too, then, is a thing, and it will have a quiddity other than itself, just as the horse did. Thus the quiddity of the horse will have another quiddity which is absurd. . . . If someone says that the quiddity of the quiddity of the horse is the very same substance as the quiddity of the horse, what stops us from saying from the outset that there are some things that are their own quiddity?¹⁸

¹⁶ In the discussion of this passage I will use the word 'quiddity' as the equivalent of the Latin 'quod quid erat esse' and the Greek 'τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι'.

¹⁷ Si enim quaeritur, tu quid sis, non potest responderi quod tu sis musicus. Et ideo sequitur quod musicum esse non est tibi esse. . . . Illud ergo pertinet ad quod quid est tui, quod tu es secundum teipsum, idest quia de te praedicatur per se et non per accidens; sicut de te praedicatur per se homo, animal, substantia, rationale (in VII Met. 3, 1311).

¹⁸ Equus est quaedam res habens quod quid erat esse equo. Quod quidem si sit alia res ab equo, habeat haec res quoddam nomen, et vocetur A. A ergo, cum sit quaedam res, habebit quod quid erat esse, alterum a se, sicut equus; et ita huic, quod est equo esse, erit aliud quod quid erat esse: quod patet esse absurdum . . . Et

If we are to avoid an infinite regress, we must say that things like men and horses are identical with their own quiddity.

How can Aquinas agree to this, since we have seen him so often say that it is a property unique to God to be identical with his own essence? In the final sections of his lecture, he explains how the Aristotelian thesis is to be reconciled with his own. The key point is to remember that the quiddity is what is signified by the definition:

A definition is predicated of what is defined, and so the quiddity must be predicated of what is defined. So the quiddity of a human being is not humanity, because humanity is not predicated of a human, but is mortal rational animal. For if you ask 'What is a human?' you do not get the answer 'humanity' but the answer 'a mortal rational animal'. However, humanity is the formal principle of the quiddity.¹⁹

We have here an interesting change of terminology: previously Aquinas was often happy to say that in a sentence like 'Peter is a man', humanity was predicated of Peter. We now have a new distinction: Peter's humanity, which has hitherto been regarded as identical with his essence, is now distinguished from his quiddity. It remains, however, that which makes him a human, and it remains distinct from Peter.

Humanity is not altogether the same as the human being, because it denotes only the essential principles of the human and excludes all the accidents. For humanity is what makes a human a human; but none of the accidents of a human being are what makes a human a

si aliquis dicat quod quid est esse quidditatis equi, est ipsa substantia, quae est quidditas equi, quid prohibet statim a principio dicere, quod quidem sunt suum quod quid erat esse? (in VII Met. 5, 1374).

¹⁹ Cum definitio praedicetur de definito, oportet quod quid est esse de definito praedicari. Non igitur est quod quid est esse hominis humanitas quae de homine non praedicatur, sed animal rationale mortale. Humanitas enim non respondetur quarentibus quid est homo, sed animal rationale et mortale. Sed tamen humanitas accipitur ut principium formale eius, quod est quod quid erat esse (in VII Met., 5, 1378).

human, so all the accidents of a human are excluded from the signification of humanity.²⁰

Peter differs from his humanity in this: that Peter contains all his accidents, whereas his humanity does not. Peter is the whole, Aquinas says; humanity is only a part of him.

We are left, therefore, in creatures with a new distinction between their quiddity and their essence. The difference between creatures and the creator is no longer that only God is his own quiddity: it is rather that in the case of God there is no difference between the concrete quiddity and the abstract essence.²¹

In *On Separate Substances*, a small treatise written during this last period of his life, and left incomplete at his death, Aquinas returned once more to the topic of hylomorphism in angels. The most interesting part of the treatise for our purposes is chapter eight, where he answered arguments of Avicenna to show that angels have matter, and in particular an argument that they would not be distinct from each other if they did not have matter. As is his custom, Aquinas says that, though angels do not have matter, they have potentiality, in so far as they are not *esse* but participate *esse*.²² The *esse* that creatures participate, he explains, is the utterly common *esse* which is broader in its extension than any species and any genus. Everything other than the first subsistent *esse* is a substance that possesses *esse* as an act. So far this is very familiar: but now the explanation takes a new turn.

Someone might say that whatever participates X in itself lacks X: as a surface, which is of a kind to participate in a colour, considered in

²⁰ *Humanitas autem pro tanto non est omnino idem cum homine, quia importat tantum principia essentialia hominis, et exclusionem omnium accidentium. Est enim humanitas qua homo est homo: nullum autem accidentium hominis est, quo homo sit homo, unde omnia accidentia hominis excluduntur a significatione humanitatis* (in VII Met. 5, 1379).

²¹ In VII Met. 5, 1380.

²² References to *De substantiis separatis* are given to the chapter and line of the Leonine edn (vol. XL).

itself is not a colour and is not coloured. Similarly, therefore, that which participates *esse* must be a non-being.²³

St Thomas' reply to this is that the things that participate *esse* from the first being do not participate it according to the universal mode of being in which it is in the first principle, but in a particular manner according to the determinate mode of being appropriate for particular genera and species. So they do not lack being, as such; they are not nonentities. Forms, whether forms of material objects, or self-subsistent forms (as Aquinas believed angels were), participated in the *esse* proper to it:

If 'non-being' negates only *esse* in actuality, a form considered in the abstract is non-being, but participates *esse*. If, however, 'non-being' negates not only *esse* in actuality, but also the actuality or form by which something participates *esse*, in that sense matter is non-being, but subsistent form is not non-being, but is an actuality, namely the form that participates in the ultimate actuality that is *esse*.²⁴

This passage is surprising in two ways. First of all, St Thomas here seems to be asserting what he earlier strenuously denied, i.e. that the *esse* that is identical with God is the *esse* that is common to all entities. Secondly, whereas hitherto, in the case of creatures, he identified *ens* with *participans esse*, he now says that what participates *esse* is *non-ens*. It is hard to know what motivates these changes: but it surely illustrates that even at the very end of his life St Thomas was dissatisfied with his theory of being and was constantly experimenting with new modes of expression.

²³ Potest autem quid dicere quod id quod participat aliquid est secundum se carens illo, sicut superficies quae nata est participare colorem, secundum se considerate, est non color et non colorata. Similiter igitur id quod participat esse, oportet esse non ens (8, 189 ff.).

²⁴ Si igitur per hoc quod dico 'non ens' removeatur solum esse in actu, ipsa forma secundum se consideratur est non ens sed esse participans. Si autem 'non ens' removeat non solum ipsum esse in actu, sed etiam actum seu formam, per quam aliquid participat esse; sic materia est non ens, forma vero subsistens non est non ens, sed est actus, qui est forma participativus ultimi actus, qui est esse (8, 235-40).

10 CONCLUSION: TWELVE TYPES OF BEING

AT the end of our close study of the principal texts in which Aquinas addresses the topic of being, we are forced to conclude that it is not possible to extract from his writings a consistent and coherent theory. None the less, we have encountered, over and over again, examples of his extraordinary analytical ability as a philosopher, exercised above all in the skill with which he can draw distinctions in order to solve antinomies. We find, in fact, that, in the course of the texts we have considered, no less than twelve different senses of *esse* have been identified and contrasted with each other. Before setting out the reasons why I believe Aquinas failed to produce a coherent overall account of being, it is worth while to tabulate the twelve types of being, or twelve senses of the verb 'to be', that are examined in the course of his work.

First, there are two senses of '*esse*' which correspond to the word 'exist'.

1. *Specific existence*, as in 'there are extra-terrestrial intelligences'. This is the existence that philosophers since Kant have insisted 'is not a predicate' and which is commonly rendered nowadays by the use of the quantifier, as in 'For some X, X is an extra-terrestrial intelligence.' Statements of being of this kind affirm that a particular concept is instantiated.¹

¹ See p. 41 above. In the Latin translations of Avicenna this kind of being is called 'anitas': it is what answers to the question 'an est?' = 'is there a . . . ?' just as quidditas is what answers to the question 'quid est' = 'what is a . . . ?' M. T. d'Alverny, in her learned article 'Anniya-Ānitas' in *Mélanges offerts à*

2. *Individual existence*, as in ‘The King is no more’ or as in Wordsworth’s poem ‘she lived unknown, and few could know/when Lucy ceased to be.’ This kind of being *is* a predicate, which belongs to individuals, who may come into and go out of existence. Statements of this kind of existence are tensed like other subject–predicate sentences. The Great Pyramid still exists, while the Pharos of Alexandria does not.²

After the two types of existence, we may list ten other types of being, the first of which coincides with the second type of existence.

3. *Substantial being*. Aquinas believed that in statements of individual existence, ‘S is’ was equivalent to ‘S is P’, where ‘P’ is a predicate in the Aristotelian category of substance: e.g. ‘Lucy is no more’ = ‘Lucy is no longer a human being’. Hence individual existence can be, in Aquinas’ scheme of things, identified with substantial being.³

4. *Accidental being*, as in ‘Peter is tall’ or ‘Socrates is wise’. Here the verb ‘to be’ is followed by a predicate in one of the other Aristotelian categories. Socrates’ wisdom is, for Aquinas, an accident that inheres in Socrates; as a result of its inherence Socrates himself enjoys a particular kind of being. Being wise is, then, his accidental being.⁴

5. *Common being*. There are things in the universe of many different kinds: mice and men, storms and seasons, times and places, virtues and vices. From time to time St Thomas will tell us that all these entities *are*: being is something they all have in common with each other. Being in this sense is a predicate: a very thin and universal predicate.⁵

6. *Actual being*. A caterpillar has the capacity to become a butterfly, but as long as it remains a caterpillar *it is* not a butterfly.

E. Gilson (Toronto, 1959), appears not to have realized that this was the way the word was coined by the Latin translator.

² See p. 41 above.

³ See p. 74 above.

⁴ See p. 74 above.

⁵ See p. 60 above.

When the magic day comes, we can point and say, 'Look, now it is a butterfly.' The verb 'to be' is thus used to mark the transition, as Aristotle and Aquinas would say, from potentiality to actuality. It can be used to mark any such actualizations, including very undramatic ones, such as the moments when I not only can speak French, but actually *am* speaking French.⁶

7. *Absolute being*. In all the cases of being so far listed, Aquinas will claim that the verb 'to be' is equivalent to 'to be P', where some appropriate predicate is as it were tacitly attached. But there is one type of being where no predicate can be attached, where something just is, full stop. This type of being is unique to God.⁷

8. *Intentional being*. According to Aquinas, when I think of X, X comes to be intentionally in my mind. When I think of a horse, for example, the form of horse exists intentionally in my thought. This contrasts with the natural being which the form of horse has when it is the substantial form of some actual horse.⁸

9. *Fictional being*. A privation such as blindness, according to Aquinas, does not have any of the kinds of being hitherto identified: it is rather the absence of a particular kind of being. But it is treated mentally as if it were a real being: it is, in his terms, an *ens rationis*, a creation of the mind. Species and genera, as well as negations and privations, fall into this category.⁹

10. *Possible being*. Some philosophers believe there are such things as merely possible entities. On this view, before Julius Caesar existed there was possible Julius Caesar, with all his properties and characteristics, lacking only the perfection of existence, and then God stepped in and conferred actual being, and behold we had actual Julius Caesar, with the very same properties and characteristics, only existent now instead of possible. There are a few passages in Aquinas, particularly

⁶ See p. 58 above.

⁷ See pp. 60, 111 above, where I argued that this is not a genuine sense of 'be'.

⁸ See p. 167 above.

⁹ See pp. 4, 75 above.

during the period when he was much influenced by Avicenna, that might suggest that he countenanced this notion.¹⁰

11. *Predicative being.* In Latin as in English, the verb 'to be' is used as a copula, joining a predicate to a subject. Aquinas very often draws attention to this usage, usually in order to contrast it with one of the other types of being we have listed.¹¹

12. *Identical being.* Occasionally Aquinas separates out for consideration the 'is' of identity. This is distinguished from the other predicative uses of 'is' by its reversibility. If the 'is' is the 'is' of identity, then 'A is B' entails 'B is A' and vice versa.¹²

Aquinas, I submit, failed to bring into a consistent whole the insights he displayed in identifying these different types of being and different senses of 'esse'. There are, in my view, three principal defects in his treatment of the topic.

First, there is no satisfactory recognition of the difference between being and existence. The identification of individual existence with substantial being is sound enough; but there is at no stage of Aquinas' career a clear awareness of the profound syntactic difference between the 'there is' of specific existence and the other types of 'is' he discusses.

Secondly, the theory that there are spiritual substances that are pure forms or essences involves a celestial Platonism of a kind that Aquinas rightly rejects at the sublunar level. Philosophers since Aristotle—and indeed, since the time of Plato's own dialogue *Parmenides*—have exposed the incoherence of the theory of Ideas or pure Forms. This is not the place to develop their arguments—I have tried to do so elsewhere¹³—but the objections that have been marshalled over the centuries tell against Aquinas' account of created spirits no less than against Plato's Ideas. The notion of form, in both

¹⁰ See p. 45 above. I am myself doubtful whether Aquinas ever believed in possible being, but he sometimes seems to leave himself open to the charge (or, as some philosophers would maintain, the compliment).

¹¹ See p. 56–7, 74 above.

¹² See p. 161 above.

¹³ In my *The Five Ways* (London: Routledge, 1969), 70–7.

Aristotle and Aquinas, is that of an entity corresponding to a true predication. The way in which the notion is introduced leaves no room for the notion of a pure form, a form that would correspond to a predicate that was not a predicate of anything.

Thirdly, there is a deeply disturbing problem about Aquinas' identification of God with subsistent being. Throughout his life, there is an ambiguity as to whether the *esse* of which God is the pure example is common being or absolute being. If it is common being, then God seems to be the Platonic Idea of the thinnest possible predicate; if it is absolute being, then the divine name seems to be equivalent to an ill-formed formula. Aquinas seems aware of the problems with each of these versions of the notion that God is subsistent *esse*, but he solves them only by veering from one version to the other, depending on which is under pressure from particular objectors.

Someone who is convinced that Aquinas is confused on the topic of being may well wonder how so great a philosopher could fall into such great error. Three reasons, I believe, may be suggested in explanation.

First, the topic of being is one of the most difficult of all metaphysical questions. Frege, whose work I consider in the Appendix, saw more clearly than Aquinas on the relationship of being to existence; but his own work on the topic contains lacunae and inconsistencies which his followers labour to fill out and resolve. Contemporary philosophers, standing on the shoulders of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Frege, are still a long way from having solved the problems connected with the conceptual network surrounding the verb 'to be' and its equivalents in other languages.

Secondly, Aquinas was a swift and fecund writer. It is not surprising that one can find unresolved inconsistencies in the work of a philosopher who wrote more than eight million words in a working life of thirty years. It is much more difficult, say, to catch out Descartes in flagrant inconsistency; but then

Descartes' total output is only a fraction of that of Aquinas. To keep in one's head throughout a massive corpus the twelve types of being we have identified, and to make sure that one wove them all into a consistent whole, is a task that could daunt even the greatest genius.

Thirdly, Aquinas was a victim of his own virtues. One of the attractive features of his writing is the ecumenical approach he takes to other philosophers. He is anxious always to bring out the best in those whose work he discusses, to give an interpretation of their work that will bring out their sayings as true. This means that he is sometimes oversympathetic to erroneous philosophical positions, and too much influenced by the writings of authoritative thinkers. In the case of being, he shows himself to have been too vulnerable to neo-Platonic theorizing, and in particular to neo-Platonic interpretation of scripture.

In conclusion, it is important not to exaggerate the scope of the criticisms I have made in the course of this study. Even if it should turn out that Aquinas' theory of God as subsistent being is nothing but sophistry and illusion, his other contributions to the conceptual analysis of language about God still entitle him to rank among the very greatest natural theologians there have ever been.

APPENDIX: FREGE AND AQUINAS ON EXISTENCE AND NUMBER¹

AMONG the problems that we have identified with Aquinas' theory of *esse* the most fundamental is the failure to make a clear distinction between existence on the one hand, and being in its multiple forms on the other. In the history of philosophy this distinction was most sharply emphasized by Gottlob Frege, who taught us to distinguish, under pain of gross fallacy, between first-level concepts corresponding to predicates and second-level concepts corresponding to quantifiers. If we are to relate Aquinas' teaching to contemporary philosophy, it is the work of Frege that provides the most useful point of comparison. Frege can claim to be the founder of modern analytical philosophy; and many of his theoretical positions, as was pointed out long ago by Peter Geach, have a strong resemblance to those adopted by Aquinas. It will be rewarding, at the end of a book on Aquinas in which Fregean assumptions have often been implicit, to bring out more explicitly the points of similarity and difference between the two philosophers.

We may begin our comparison by looking at the way in which the two philosophers treat certain key terms. The notion of identity provides a convenient starting point. An

¹ An earlier version of this appendix was presented to a Frege conference under the auspices of a group of Swiss universities at Munchenwiler in June 2000.

identity proposition of the form $A = B$ is dealt with by Aquinas by saying that A and B are identical in reality but different in concept (*sunt idem re, differunt ratione*). Frege deals with the same type of proposition by saying that 'A' and 'B' have the same reference (*Bedeutung*) but a different sense (*Sinn*). Consider, for example, a passage in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, where Aquinas asks whether all the names of God are synonymous. An argument in favour of an affirmative answer goes like this:

Synonymous names are those which have exactly the same meaning. But these names used of God all have exactly the same meaning, because the goodness of God is his essence and likewise his wisdom.²

Against this, if all the names of God were synonymous, then 'Good God' or 'Almighty, eternal God' would be simply repetitive babble. The answer to the problem is to be found in saying that the different names of God signify the same reality but by means of different concepts (*rationes*), and that words are synonymous only if they signify a single thing by means of a single concept.

In his essay 'Sense and Reference' Frege says that a statement of identity can be informative only if the difference between the signs corresponds to a difference in the mode of presentation of what is designated.³ Compare Aquinas' statement: 'the concept expressed by a name is the intellect's notion of the reality referred to by the name'. In each author we have a three-tier system:

² *Synonyma nomina dicuntur quae omnino idem significant. Sed ista nomina dicta de Deo omnino idem significant in Deo. Quia bonitas Dei est eius essentia et similiter sapientia (S.T. Ia, 13, 4).*

³ G. Frege, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy*, ed. B. McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 158.

Nomen	Name
Ratio	Sinn
Res	Bedeutung

Frege and Aquinas alike apply this scheme to both proper names (like ‘Socrates’) and common nouns (like ‘homo’ or ‘Mensch’). But both of them also make a distinction between names and concept words. In making this distinction both take their start from the distinction in ordinary language between subject and predicate. Each of them develops and modifies this distinction. Frege develops it into the distinction between argument and function, Aquinas develops it into the distinction between supposit and forma.⁴ For both philosophers, both particular and general terms have something corresponding to them *in re*: the contrast between *suppositum* and *forma* is paralleled by the distinction between *Gegenstand* and *Begriff*.

Compare the following passage of Aquinas with the two subsequent ones from Frege:

Every form existing in a particular supposit that individuates it is common to many, either in reality or only in concept: thus human nature is common to many both in reality and in concept, but the nature of the sun is not common to many in reality, but only in concept, for the nature of the sun can be thought of as existing in many supposits. This is because the mind thinks of the nature of each species by abstraction from the individual. Thus, to be in a single supposit or in many is something external to the understanding of the nature of the species. Thus, while preserving the understanding of the nature of the species, it can be thought of as existing in more than one individual. But the individual, as an individual, is distinct from all other individuals. So every name whose purpose is to signify a particular individual is unshareable both in reality and in concept: you cannot even form the idea of the plurality of this individual. So no name that signifies a particular individual can be shared in any literal way by others, but only by comparison. Thus someone can

⁴ Terminus in subjecto positus tenetur materialiter, in praedicato tenetur formaliter (S.T. 1a, 13, 4).

metaphorically be called an Achilles if he shares one of the properties of Achilles, namely courage.⁵

The name of a thing is a proper name. An object cannot be repeated, but many objects fall under a single concept. . . . A concept does not cease to be a concept even if only a single thing falls under it, which is fully determined by it. Such a concept (e.g. satellite of the earth) has attached to it the number 1, which is a number in just the same sense as 2 and 3. With a concept there is always the question whether anything, and if so what, falls under it. With a proper name such questions are senseless.

[In the sentence ‘There is only one Vienna’] we must not let ourselves be deceived because language often uses the same word now as a proper-name, now as a concept-word; in our example, the numeral indicates that we have the latter; ‘Vienna’ is here a concept word, like ‘metropolis’. Using it in this sense we may say ‘Trieste is no Vienna’.⁶

From these passages we see that both philosophers hold in common the following theses:

1. A proper name, a name of an individual, is unshareable in principle.
2. A nature, or a concept, may be common to more than one individual. (The individual shares the nature, or falls under the concept.)

⁵ Omnis forma in supposito singulari existens, per quod individuatur, communis est multis, vel secundum rem vel secundum rationem tantum: sicut natura humana communis est multis secundum rem et rationem, natura autem solis non est communis multis secundum rem, sed secundum rationem tantum; potest enim natura solis intelligi ut in pluribus suppositis existens. Et hoc ideo, quia intellectus intelligit naturam cuiuslibet speciei per abstractionem a singulari: unde esse in uno supposito singulari vel in pluribus est praeter intellectum naturae speciei: under, servato intellectu naturae speciei, potest intelligi ut in pluribus existens. Sed singulare, ex hoc ipso quod est singulare, est divisum ab omnibus aliis. Unde omne nomen impositum ad significandum aliquid singulare, est incommunicabile et re et ratione: non enim potest nec in apprehensione cadere pluralitas huius individui. Unde nullum nomen significans aliquid individuum est communicabile multis proprie, sed solum secundum similitudinem: sicut aliquis metaphorice potest dici Achilles, in quantum habet aliquid de proprietatibus Achillis, scilicet fortitudinem (S.T. Ia, 13, 9).

⁶ The two passages from Frege come from *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, §51 and ‘On Concept and Object’, *Collected Papers*, 51.

3. There is nothing in a nature (concept) which determines how many individuals it is common to.
4. There are some natures (concepts) which as a matter of fact are peculiar to one individual (e.g. the Sun and the Moon). These are shareable in principle.⁷
5. If a proper name seems to appear as a predicate, it is really a word for a property or concept (Achilles; Vienna).

In comparing Aquinas and Frege, we may now turn from logic to mathematics. Frege attacks Mill for trying to explain number as a property of visible aggregates. Mill's approach, he complains, fails to take account of the universal applicability of number. If it was taken literally it would mean that it was incorrect to speak of three peals of a bell, or three methods of solving an equation. Aquinas, like Frege, insists on the universal applicability of number. 'One (*Unum*)' is a transcendental, like 'ens' or 'Gegenstand'.

Every plurality is consequent on some division. But there are two kinds of division. One is material division, which takes place through the division of a continuum and this produces the plurality which is a kind of quantity. Number of this kind is to be found only in quantified material things. There is another kind of division, formal division, which is due to opposite or different forms. The multiplicity consequent upon such division is not in one particular category, but transcends all.⁸

Frege's positive account of numbers as second-order functions (or, alternatively, as the reference of second-order functions) is not to be found in Aquinas. But several elements of it are

⁷ In this context Frege makes great play with the definite article, which of course does not exist in Aquinas' Latin.

⁸ *Omnis pluralitas consequitur aliquam divisionem. Est autem duplex divisio. Una materialis, quae fit secundum divisionem continui: et hanc consequitur numerus qui est species quantitatis. Unde talis numerus non est nisi in rebus materialibus habentibus quantitatem. Alia est divisio formalis quae fit per oppositas vel diversas formas; et hanc divisionem sequitur multitudo quae non est in aliquo genere sed est de transcendentibus (S.T. Ia, 66c).*

present. For instance, Frege propounded an analogy between number and existence.

In this respect existence is analogous to number. An affirmation of existence is in fact nothing other than a denial of the number zero. Because existence is a property of concepts the ontological argument for the existence of God fails to conclude. But uniqueness is not a component characteristic of the concept God any more than existence is.⁹

An affirmation of existence, such as ‘Angels exist’, is an assertion that a concept has something falling under it. And to say that a concept has something falling under it is to say that the number that belongs to the concept is something other than zero. It is because existence is a property of concepts, Frege says, that the ontological argument for the existence of God breaks down. That-there-is-a-God cannot be a component of the concept God; nor can it be a component of that concept that-there-is-only-one-God. But if in fact there is one and only one God (at most one God and at least one God), then that, in Frege’s terminology, is a property (eigenschaft) of the concept God.

Two texts of Aquinas that we saw earlier in *On Being and Essence* relate number to existence in a manner similar to Frege’s thesis. The first text tells us that number is a property (an accidental, not an essential property) of a nature:

A nature or essence can be considered in two ways. First, it can be considered according to its own nature and concept, and this is the consideration of it in the abstract. . . . If it is asked whether this nature can be called one or many, you should answer neither, because both singularity and plurality are something external to the understanding of humanity, and either might be attached to it. For if plurality was part of its concept, it could never be singular, as it is in Socrates. Equally, if singularity was part of its concept and understanding, then the nature of Socrates and the nature of Plato

⁹ Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, §54.

would be one and the same, and it could not exist in the plural in many men.¹⁰

In this text, the things that belong to a nature in the abstract, as forming part of its definition, are what Frege calls the characteristic components (*merkmale*) of a concept. How many things there are of a certain kind is something that is true not of the nature considered in itself, but of the nature considered in the individuals to which it belongs, and is therefore accidental, or external, to the nature itself.

The second text, a familiar one, tells us that, just like number, existence is something external to nature:

Every essence or quiddity can be conceived without anything being understood with respect to its existence; for I can understand what a human being is, or what a phoenix is, and yet be ignorant whether they have existence in the nature of things.¹¹

But in Aquinas two things are lacking which are important elements in the way in which Frege related existence to number. First of all, Aquinas does not explain existence in Frege's manner by the use of a quantifier. Such a procedure was not totally unknown in the Middle Ages. Abelard had said that in the sentence 'a father exists' we should not take 'a father' as standing for anything; rather, the sentence is equivalent to 'something is a father'. Aquinas, on the other hand, as we have seen, consistently analyses 'God exists' as a subject-predicate sentence with 'God' as the subject and 'is' as the predicate. This prevents him from dealing with the ontological argument as briskly as Frege does.

¹⁰ *Natura autem vel essentia potest dupliciter considerari. Uno modo secundum naturam et rationem propriam, et haec est absoluta consideratio ipsius. . . . Unde si quaeratur utrum ista natura sic considerata possit dici una vel plures, neutrum concedendum est: quia utrumque est extra intellectum humanitatis, et utrumque potest sibi accidere. Si enim pluralitas esset de ratione eius, numquam posset esse una, cum tamen una sit secundum quod est in Socrate. Similiter, si unitas esset de ratione eius, tunc esset una et eadem Socratis et Platonis nec posset in pluribus plurificari (*On Being and Essence*, c. 3, 37-43).*

¹¹ Cf. p. 34 above.

The second point is that, though Aquinas thinks of existence/number as something that is external to a form, he does not develop the notion of second-order function as Frege does. He does indeed have the concept of a second-order predicate, and employs it when discussing species and genera in *On Being and Essence*:

A nature has a double *esse*, one in individuals, and the other in the mind. In individuals the nature has a multiple *esse* corresponding to the diversity of the individuals, but none of these *esses* belong to the nature in its proper, abstract consideration. . . . It cannot be said that universality belongs to the nature taken in the abstract, because it is part of universality to be single and shared. But neither of these things belongs to human nature considered absolutely. . . . It transpires that the concept of species attaches to human nature according to the *esse* which it has in the mind.¹²

When I say that man is a species, I am, on Aquinas' view, using a second-order predicate.

It is important to note that in Aquinas' system the second-order predicate holds not of the nature in itself, but of the nature in the mind. A significant difference between Aquinas and Frege here is that with regard to numbers and species Frege is a realist, a Platonist, and Aquinas is not, even though, as we have seen, his theological inquiries constantly tempted him into a residual Platonism.

The following passage comes from Frege's late period, but it is in accord with his lifelong position:

The upshot seems to be: thoughts are neither things in the external world nor ideas. A third realm must be recognised. Anything that

¹² [N]atura habet duplex esse, unum in singularibus, aliud in anima. . . . In singularibus [natura] habet multiplex esse, secundum singularium; et tamen ipsi naturae secundum propriam considerationem, scilicet absolutam, nullum istorum esse debetur. . . . Nec tamen potest dici quod ratio universalis conveniat naturae sic acceptae, quia de ratione universalis est unitas et communitas. Naturae autem humanae neutra horum convenit secundum absolutam suam considerationem. . . . Relinquitur ergo quod ratio speciei accidat naturae humanae secundum illud esse quod habet in intellectu ('On Being and Essence', c.3, 66–77).

belongs to this realm has it in common with ideas that it cannot be perceived by the senses, but has it in common with things in the world that it does not need an owner to whose consciousness it belongs. Thus, for example, the thought we have expressed in Pythagoras' theorem is timelessly true independently of whether anyone takes it to be true. It needs no owner.¹³

Aquinas agrees that number is nothing to do with 'ideas', items of consciousness, which Frege called 'Vorstellungen', and for which his own term was 'phantasmata'. Like Frege, he thought that geometry involved imagination but not the study of transcendental numbers. With regard to arithmetic, Aquinas ruled out any role for the imagination, just as Frege did for the best part of his life:

The wildest visions of delirium, the boldest inventions of legend and poetry, where animals speak and stars stand still, where men are turned to stone and trees turn into men, where the drowning haul themselves up out of the swamp by their topknots—all these remain, as long as they remain intuitable, still subject to the axioms of geometry. Conceptual thought alone can after a fashion shake off their yoke.¹⁴

St Thomas too sharply distinguished between imagination (phantasmata) and conceptual thought (intellectus). But he did not believe in Frege's third realm. He attacked the error of the Platonists in positing mathematical objects distinct from the objects of the senses. The mathematicians' abstractions, he said, had no existence outside the mind, and mathematical objects could not be either the origin or the terminus of any motion or change.¹⁵

¹³ Frege, 'Der Gedanke', *Philosophical Writings*, 69.

¹⁴ Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, §14.

¹⁵ Quidam . . . inciderunt in errorem, ut ponerent mathematica et universalia a sensibilibus separata, ut Pythagorici et Platonici . . . Mathematicus considerat res abstractas in consideratione tantum; et ideo illa res prout cadunt in consideratione mathematici non possunt esse principium et finis motus (Boet. *De Trin*, V, 3, ad. 1 (Leonine edn, vol. 50, p. 149)).

But perhaps even here the difference between Aquinas and Frege is not as great as it appears. Though Frege believed that mathematical objects had independent objectivity, he agrees with Aquinas that they could not initiate any causal activity (which he called '*wirklichkeit*'). And, in insisting that an absolute number was only in the intellect, Aquinas was not disagreeing with Frege's critiques of psychologism, nor of his downgrading, against empiricist philosophers, the role of images in arithmetic. Moreover, as we have seen throughout this volume, in spite of his robust official anti-Platonism, Aquinas constantly has difficulty avoiding Platonic assumptions once he leaves the sublunar world of contingent and changeable objects.

Nothing in Aquinas corresponds to Frege's Platonic array of numbers and concepts—except the mind of God. The divine mind and its ideas are Aquinas' third realm. Because the ideas are in the divine mind, it is true that the objects of mathematics do not exist anywhere outside the mind—but it is not true that they exist only in the human mind, as a modern anti-realist might believe. To decide how far there is a radical difference between Frege's Platonism and Aquinas' anti-Platonism would need a study of the mind of God—which would be the subject of a different book.

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