

Aquinas's Aristotelian Science of Metaphysics and Its Revised Platonism

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Introduction

IS AQUINAS AN ARISTOTELIAN THINKER? To consider Aquinas as an Aristotelian does not, of course, do full justice to his greatness and originality in the field of philosophy, but that the basic orientation of his thought is to be characterized as “Aristotelian” seems to me beyond dispute.¹ That is how he saw it himself, that is how his contemporaries saw it, and that was the judgment of the later Thomistic school, which invented the tradition of the *philosophia aristotelico-thomistica*.² Indirectly the epithet “Aristotelian,” by suggesting some alternatives

¹ Cf. the judgment of McInerny in his article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: “As a philosopher, Thomas is emphatically Aristotelian.” Ralph McInerny and John O’Callaghan, “Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010), ed. Edward N. Zalta. By way of contrast one can mention Wayne Hankey who claims that Thomas Aquinas was less of an Aristotelian than is commonly supposed; in his many publications he draws attention to the influence of Neo-Platonism on Thomas’ thought. See his contribution to *The Oxford Handbook to Aquinas*, ed. by Brian Davis and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) under the title “Aquinas, Plato, and Neo-Platonism.”

² For instance, Josephus Gredt, *Elementa Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae*, 2 vols. 6th ed (Freiburg: Herder, 1932). However, see Mark Jordan, who argues—rightly in my opinion—that Aquinas is not a philosopher whose position is an ‘Aristotelianism’ in a neo-Scholastic way, as some sort of doctrinal system. M.J. Jordan, *The Alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas*, Toronto, 1992 (The Etienne Gilson Series, 15).

such as “Aquinas the Augustinian,”³ touches on the question of the many sources and influences which have shaped Aquinas’s thought, and how the diversity of influences has been received according to a new and unique patron or, as the principle says, “according to the manner of the receiver.” From the viewpoint of the receiver the question of the precise impact of Aristotle’s philosophy on Aquinas is complex and multilayered. The mode of reception entails the questions of *identity*—what was Aquinas’ view of Aristotelianism?—of *valuation*—how did he value Aristotle’s philosophy?—and of *use*—what kind of use did he make of Aristotle? With respect to this last point one should realize that during the thirteenth century Aristotle—the *Philosophus*—became the privileged representative of philosophical reason. The distribution and reception of Aristotle’s writings within the academic milieu of the medieval university had made an important contribution to the process of “scientification” of human knowledge. Thomas stood right in the center of this Aristotelian-inspired process of redefinition and transformation of knowledge as *science*, that is, as an organized body of knowledge derived from principles which are known self-evidently in the light of human *natural* reason. His specific “use” of Aristotle must be seen, as I will argue, in the light of his search for a “science of God,” a science of the first cause of everything, which does justice to the nature and principles of human (sense-bound) reason.

In this article I will look at some aspects of Aquinas’s reception of Aristotle’s philosophy, especially the way he expands Aristotelian metaphysics by integrating ideas from Neoplatonic sources (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Liber de causis*) in this “science of the divine.” Aquinas’s version of the “science of the divine” is specifically structured according to the indirect way God is knowable to the human *sense-bound* intellect, thus in line with the distinctive Aristotelian approach to the question of the intelligibility of reality. At the same time, however, in developing the transcendent part of metaphysical science, Aquinas uses several Neoplatonic elements taken from Dionysius and the *Liber* and integrates them within the framework of metaphysics. So the questions I want to investigate are, firstly, how did Aquinas view the Aristotelian method in philosophy, and, secondly, how precisely did he succeed in transforming/reinterpreting the Platonism of Dionysius and the *Liber* so that their ideas about Being and the Good would fit into the Aristotelian framework of his science of the Transcendent.

³ Michael Dauphinais, Barry David, Matthew Levering (eds.), *Aquinas the Augustinian*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 2007.

I shall begin by discussing the thesis of the unicity of substantial form, which was commonly seen by contemporaries as typical of the Aristotelianism of Thomas. Here we have an important debate in which one's basic philosophical view of reality is at stake, and which Thomas himself clarifies in terms of the fundamental opposition between Aristotle and Platonism. Then, after having explained Aristotle's position with regard to the dependency of all knowledge on the senses, I turn my attention to the two central sources of Platonism in the thought of Aquinas, namely Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* and the *Liber de causis*. Here I will try to find out how Aquinas succeeds in integrating several Neoplatonic elements into his basically Aristotelian philosophical worldview.

The Unicity of Substantial Form

In the years after his death, one of the most controversial themes, which was considered to be characteristic of the Aristotelianism of Aquinas, was the doctrine of the unicity of substantial form.⁴ Adherents of the older Augustinian tradition regarded this doctrine as typical of the "innovations" Aquinas had brought about in theology. So when, in 1270, the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, proscribed thirteen problematic theses, among which was the denial of the plurality of substantial forms, what was at stake in this condemnation was the systematic use of Aristotle that Aquinas had introduced into theological debate. In the view of conservative theologians the "new philosophy" of Aristotle posed a serious threat to the way certain truths of the Christian faith were traditionally formulated.

For Thomas himself, however, it was quite clear that the "Aristotelian" defense of the unity of substantial form was not so much opposed to Christian faith itself but rather to certain Neoplatonic principles and presuppositions which underlay the "traditional" ideas of his opponents. For him, the controversy originated in a crucial difference at the level of philosophical principles, and it is here that the problem must be solved.

One may find such a fundamental discussion of the philosophical principles underlying the question of the unicity of form in the third article of *De spiritualibus creaturis*. Here we see Thomas not only defending the Aristotelian view of substantial unity as grounded in the single substantial form of an individual thing, but he even points out that the

⁴ See Weisheipl: "In the fifty years following Thomas's death, the crucial issue was not the real distinction between essence (*quod est*) and existence (*esse*), as might have been expected, but the unity of substantial form." (*Friar Thomas d'Aquino*, 338).

traditional view held by his antagonists can in fact be traced back to the variety of Platonism found in the *Fons vitae* of Avicbron.⁵ He ultimately reduces the discussion to the contrast in philosophical method between Aristotle and Plato.

In the text from *De spiritualibus creaturis* Thomas explains and defends Aristotle's position with regard to the unity of the human individual, composed of body and spiritual soul. Aristotle himself often put forward his view about the substantial unity of the individual within the polemic context of his critique of Plato's doctrine of ideas. The hypothesis of a plurality of ideas would lead, Aristotle argues in many places, to the loss of the intrinsic unity of sensible things. We will see now how Thomas describes and understands the Aristotelian approach in philosophy, and how he reconstructs the "Platonism" behind the doctrine of the plurality of forms.

Thomas begins by introducing the two opinions regarding the question of how the human soul relates to the body and what the subject of the (spiritual) soul is. According to the first opinion—the one found among his opponents—one must assume a series of intermediate forms between the substrate of matter and the ultimate form which is the rational or spiritual soul. The presupposition is that the spiritual soul of man cannot be immediately responsible for the corporeal and sensitive properties of the composite human being, and that, consequently, one must assume another, lower, form which constitutes the body and all that pertains to the bodily and sensitive life of man. One must, therefore, accept a plurality of forms, lower and higher, as the many constitutive principles making up the ontological complexity of the human being. These forms correspond with the many predicates which can be said of this individual human being: this individual is a *man*, is an *animal*, is a *living* being, is a *corporeal* being, etc., culminating in the ultimate predicates of *substance* and *being*. Thus, each of the intelligible determinations, expressed by the essential predicates, stands for a proper and distinct form in this individual. Behind this view, one recognizes a dualistic conception of body and spirit, which some thought to be more consanguine to

⁵ See D.A. Callus, "The Origins of the Problem of the Unicity of Form," *The Thomist* 24 (1961): 120–49; see also his *The Condemnation of St. Thomas at Oxford*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1955). The classic study of the influence of Avicbron on many of the thirteenth century Augustinian theologians, including Bonaventure, remains the monograph of G. Thery, "L'Augustinisme medieval et le problem de l'unité de la forme substantielle," in *Acta hebdomadae augustinianae-thomisticae* (Torino-Roma: Marietti, 1931), 140–200.

the Christian understanding of man's spiritual soul.

The other opinion, based on the principles of Aristotle's philosophy, says that in one individual there can be only one substantial form, and that this single form, which is the human form (*forma humana*), is the reason why this individual is a *man*, an *animal*, a *living* being, and a *corporeal* being. It is the single substantial form which makes this individual a being as such—the first and most common determination—and a being of a particular kind—the ultimate species. According to this view, the plurality of predicates in the logical order does not correspond to a real plurality of forms; it is the one and single substantial form which grounds the unity of a thing's substantial being, the concept (definition) of which includes a logical manifold of predicates.

For Thomas, the difference between these two opinions has its origin in a fundamental difference in how philosophy itself must be conceived. What is at stake is the philosophical approach to the truth of reality and the corresponding concept of philosophical science:

The diversity of these two opinions comes from the fact that when inquiring into the nature of things, some philosophers proceeded from the proposition of intelligible essences, and this was peculiar to the Platonists, and others from the starting point of sensible things, and this was peculiar to the philosophy of Aristotle, as Simplicius says in his Commentary on the *Categories* [Preface].⁶

In characterizing the fundamental difference in method between the Platonists and Aristotle, Thomas refers to the preface of Simplicius's Commentary on the *Categories*. The Platonists are said to proceed *ex*

⁶ *De spir. creat.* a. 3: "Harum autem duarum opinionum diversitas ex hoc procedit, quod quidam ad inquirendam veritatem de natura rerum, processerunt ex rationibus intelligibilibus, et hoc fuit proprium Platoniorum; quidam vero ex rebus sensibilibus, et hoc fuit proprium philosophiae Aristotelis, ut dicit Simplicius in commento super praedicamenta." Aquinas appears to be referring to Simplicius' *Commentary* at vol. 1, prologus, 8, 1.70—9, 1.85 (Simplicius, *Commentaire sur les Catégories d'Aristote*, Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke, ed. A. Pattin, 2 vols: vol. 1, Louvain, Paris 1971, vol. 2, Leiden 1975 (Corpus commentariorum in Aristotelem Graecorum, 1 and 2). See Michael Chase, "the Medieval Posterity of Simplicius' Commentary on the Categories: Thomas Aquinas and al-Fârâb," in Lloyd A. Newton, ed., *Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle's Categories* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, vol. 10), 9–29. Wayne Hankey, "Thomas' Neoplatonic Histories: His Following of Simplicius," *Dionysius* 20 (2002): 153–178.

rationibus intelligibilibus, by way of “abstract essences,” while Aristotle proceeds *ex sensibilibus*, in reference to reality as disclosed in sense experience. It is the characteristic method of the Platonists which Thomas subsequently explicates in detail in order to reconstruct the theoretical background of the thesis of the plurality of forms. First, we will follow him in his critical presentation of “Platonism,” and then we return to the Aristotelian approach “*ex sensibilibus*.”

First of all, what is meant by “*rationes intelligibiles*”? The Platonists, Thomas explains, focus on the intelligible objects of thought which are ordered in such a way that the more universal (*superior*) can be understood without the less universal (*inferior*), for instance, “man” (*species*) can be understood without “this man” (*individuum*), and “animal” (*genus*) without “man” (*species*), and so on. The “*rationes intelligibiles*” are abstract essences which can be thought separately from sensible things and which are, consequently, posited to exist separately in themselves, since the Platonists do not distinguish between the abstract manner in which something is conceived and the manner in which it exists in reality. For Thomas, following Aristotle, the intelligible objects of species and genus only exist in thought; they express the way something is conceived by us. Aristotle argues for the need to differentiate between the order of being and the order of thought, contrary to the basic assumption of the Platonists, which is that all that the intellect considers abstractly exists abstractly in reality (*quidquid est abstractum in intellectu, sit abstractum in re*).⁷ This way of hypostasizing objects of thought leads to the view of a hierarchy of abstract objects, which are ordered in such a way that the inferior is always more particular than the superior, in the nature of which the inferior participates. At the top of the hierarchy stand the most universal notions, “being,” “one” and “good,” which are considered by the Platonists as the “highest power of things” (*summum rerum virtutem*).

Aquinas continues by explaining the Platonic roots of the thesis of the plurality of forms; and then, in a second move, he argues that this view is impossible and contrary to the “true philosophical principles adopted

⁷ It is because of this difference between the order of thought and the order of being that Aristotle can distinguish between the science of the real (physics, metaphysics) and the science of the rational (logic). For him there is a certain legitimate use of logic within metaphysics, but only preliminary and with a heuristic purpose. See my “Metaphysics, Dialectics and the *Modus Logicus* According to Thomas Aquinas,” in *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale* 63 (1996): 15–35.

by Aristotle.”⁸ Thus, the contemporary debate on unity versus the plurality of forms is set within the wider perspective of the fundamental contrast between Platonism and Aristotle's philosophical approach. And what is, in Thomas's view, at stake in this debate is ultimately the issue of the unity of being. No individual substance would be truly one if its form, which is the principle of its being and unity, were to be multiplied according to the many abstract *rationes* the intellect distinguishes in thinking that object.⁹

The kind of Platonism behind the scholastic doctrine of the plurality of forms is then identified as having its origin in the *Fons vitae* of Avicbron. Not Augustine himself but the Platonism of Avicbron is the source of the untenable thesis of the plurality of forms. In Thomas's reconstruction Avicbron's way of thought is characterized by an extreme realism. The ontological constitution of reality immediately reflects the logical order of the definition. In “defining” an object one begins by positing an indeterminate substrate—which is called “universal matter”—which receives, first of all, the form of substance. In other words, in our concept of reality something is first conceived to be a substance, by reason of the form of substance. An indeterminate something understood as substance is then distinguished in, on the one hand, corporeal substances—by reason of the “form of corporeity”—and in spiritual substances on the other hand. Through addition of subsequent and less universal forms the division will then finally result, like the tree of Porphyry, in the most particular species of reality.¹⁰

Behind the extreme realism of Avicbron Thomas recognizes a certain Platonic conception of the intelligible causes of reality. Accepting a transcendent hierarchy of causes, the Platonists hold that the more universal and formal a cause is, the more deeply underlying (*substrata*) its perfec-

⁸ *De spir. creat.* a. 3: “Sed haec positio, secundum vera philosophiae principia, quae consideravit Aristoteles, est impossibilis.”

⁹ *Ibid.*: “. . . si multiplicarentur multae formae substantiales in uno individuo substantiae, individuum substantiae non esset unum simpliciter sed secundum quid, sicut homo albus.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: “. . . ; positio Avicbron in libro *Fontis vitae*; posuit enim materiam primam absque omni forma, quam vocavit materiam universalem, et dixit eam communem substantiis spiritualibus et corporalibus, cui dixit advenire formam universalem quae est forma substantiae. Materiam autem sic sub forma substantiae existentem in aliquo suo dixit recipere formam corporeitatis, alia parte eius, quae pertinet ad spirituales substantias, sine huiusmodi forma remanente; et sic deinceps posuit in materia formam sub forma secundum ordinem generum et specierum usque ad ultimam species specialissimam.”

tion in the constituted reality will be. For Aquinas, the whole notion of a transcendent hierarchy of formal causes is problematic, because the assumption of a plurality of causes, according to the many *rationes intelligibiles*, would necessarily lead to a plurality of forms in sensible reality as constituted by those causes. Below we will see that the principal modification of Platonism in Dionysius and in the *Liber de causis* concerns exactly this point of plurality within the transcendent realm of causes.

The *Ex Sensibilibus* as Condition of the Movement towards Transcendence

Let us now turn to the Aristotelian way of proceeding in philosophy, which was characterized by Simplicius as *ex sensibilibus*. In his inquiry into the truth of reality Aristotle proceeds from *sensible things*. It is not immediately clear how this “*ex sensibilibus*” must be taken. As contrasted with the “*rationes intelligibiles*” of the Platonists, it must concern the specific approach to the question of the intelligibility of reality.¹¹ For Aristotle, the senses are the permanent condition of our access to the intelligibility of reality as expressed initially in the first principles of all knowledge. The human intellect is not able to grasp the truth of things immediately by means of intellectual vision, but arrives discursively at the knowledge of the truth of its object on the basis of the sensible (changeable, particular) appearance of that object. This is what seems to me essential to the Aristotelian approach in philosophy. Any unmediated access to the intelligible truth of things must be denied.

But then the question will immediately arise of whether this position allows for metaphysical knowledge of super-sensible reality. If human knowledge depends on the senses in a more than accidental way, how then will knowledge of the divine and the transcendent be possible?

Aquinas often asserts, as a fundamental principle, that human knowledge takes its beginning (*principium*) from the senses.¹² Sense perception is the permanent condition of intellectual knowledge in the sense that our intellect cannot understand anything except by turning to what is given to the senses (*phantasmata*). The notion of *conversio ad phantasmata*—with its anthropological implication of the human soul as “form of the body”—is an essential part of Aristotle’s doctrine of knowledge.¹³ Contrary to Plato, Aristotle holds that intellectual cognition, although

¹¹ Thomas uses the expression “ad inquirendam veritatem de natura rerum”; this seems to me a fitting formula for what classical philosophy was about.

¹² Cf. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 10: “Naturalis nostra cognitio a sensu principium sumit.”

¹³ *De anima*, III, c. 7, 431a16; cf. Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 84, a. 7.

essentially different from sense cognition, is intrinsically bound up with the senses. We cannot have knowledge of what a thing is except on the basis of its sensible appearance. Our cognitive access to reality is, thus, mediated by the senses.

This principle has important consequences for the question of how far scientific knowledge extends. Simplicius's phrase of the "ex sensibilibus" may have reminded Aquinas of the famous text at the end of the *Posterior Analytics*. Here Aristotle argues that the first principles of all knowledge and sciences are accepted by way of "induction" (*epagoge*) from the senses.¹⁴ What is now the implication of this for the range of speculative or scientific knowledge? For Aquinas, the knowledge belonging to a science does not reach farther than the principles of that science allow. Now, given the fact that the first principles of all sciences are taken from the senses, one must conclude that the "consideration of the speculative sciences cannot extend farther than the knowledge of sensible reality can lead."¹⁵ We see that, according to Aquinas, scientific knowledge is not restricted to sensible reality, but neither has it an independent access to supersensible reality. The first principles, which virtually contain all possible knowledge, are known immediately and spontaneously by the intellect (the faculty of *nous* in Aristotle; the *habitus principiorum* of Aquinas); they articulate, one can say, the *a priori* openness of the intellect to being in its universal extension. But the intellect exercises its *a priori* openness to being in relation to a given sensible object. The consequence is that the human intellect does not have immediate access to the intelligibility of things; concepts necessarily relate to reality as mediated by the senses.

What does this imply for the possibility of metaphysical knowledge? According to the Aristotelian view, the science of sensible and changeable nature, physics, has priority with respect to the human mode of knowing. In the order of human knowledge metaphysics comes "after" (*meta*) the science of physics. The question is now how the human intellect is able to transcend the domain of physics. How does it go "from sensible things" to beyond sensible things?

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle is investigating the basic structure of all that is (*to on*). In what is called 'first philosophy' he inquires into the

¹⁴ *Analytica Posteriora* II, c. 19. Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 6: "Prima principia scientiarum speculativarum sunt per sensum accepta; ut patet per Philosophum in principio *Metaphys.* et in fine *Poster.*"

¹⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 6: "Unde tota consideratio scientiarum speculativarum non potest ultra extendi quam sensibilibus cognitio ducere potest."

nature of *being* and *substance*, and into the nature of the principles and causes of all being. Being in its primary sense is substance (*ousia*), and the substance we are familiar with is sensible substance. Thus, Aristotle starts his philosophical analysis of substance with “sensible substance,” composed of form and matter. It is only at the end of his investigations—in book—that the question is raised of whether another kind of substance exists “without matter.” Such a—divine—substance must be incorruptible and unchangeable, since it is pure form. According to Aristotle, the evidence we possess with regard to the existence of such non-sensible substances can only be derived from what is implicated in our knowledge of sensible substance. In other words, one must proceed *ex sensibilibus* to the knowledge of that which exists beyond sensible and changeable reality. And he does so by arguing that, ultimately, sensible substances cannot be understood as substance and as being unless they are reduced to a higher and non-sensible kind of being as their principle. This higher, non-material kind of being—Aquinas speaks about “God and the angels”—comes into the picture insofar as its existence is implicated by our knowledge of material beings.

The dynamic structure of this way of arguing from sensible reality to the existence of a transcendent and divine principle can be recognized in the proofs for the existence of God at the beginning of the *Summa theologiae*. They should not be seen as empirical or *a posteriori* proofs. That would be a misunderstanding of the role the notion of being plays here. We apprehend reality as it falls under the senses first of all as “being.” By grasping an object as being, it is posited in itself as intelligible. Thus we affirm objects of sense experience to be “beings,” but the intelligibility implied by “being” cannot be accounted for in terms of these sensible and changeable objects alone. Their intelligibility as beings cannot be accounted for unless they are reduced to non-sensible objects as their causes. For instance, when we speak of things which are in motion—and such things do exist in fact, as it is evident from the senses—their being-in-motion cannot be explained as *being* (this is the formal perspective of metaphysics) unless it is reduced to a principle of motion which is not moved itself, an *unmoved mover*.¹⁶

The Aristotelian principle “*ex sensibilibus*” appears to be of fundamental importance for how Aquinas understands the transcending movement of metaphysics. He connects this principle with Aristotle’s view about the difference between “what is better known to us” and “what is

¹⁶ For a more extensive analysis of the Aristotelian proof “*ex parte motu*,” see my *Aquinas on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 48.

better known in itself.” With regard to the knowledge of God, even if God is intelligible in the highest degree, the human mind is not able to grasp this intelligibility immediately in itself but must proceed indirectly from what is better known to us—that is, sensible reality—to what is better known in itself, the first principle from which all things derive their being and truth. The formal structure of the way we have to go in our knowledge of God is indicated in the following text:

Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our intellect cannot be led far enough by sense to see the essence of God. . . . But because sensible things are his effects and depend on him as their cause, they can lead us far enough to know whether God exists, and to know what must necessarily belong to him as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by him.¹⁷

Here we have Aquinas's view on the dynamic ascent in our knowledge of the divine starting from sensible reality, *ex sensibilibus*, as opposed to the Platonic way of *rationes intelligibiles*.

The Prooemium of the Commentary on *De divinis nominibus*

In the previous section we saw that Aquinas, following Aristotle, rejects the Platonic doctrine of ideal forms, since the very plurality of separate forms would result in the absence of intrinsic unity in the particular sensible things of our experience. Rather than using Plato's dialectical philosophy of intelligible forms (*rationes intelligibiles*) Aquinas opts for Aristotle's first philosophy, which proceeds from sensible reality in its investigation of the transcendent causes of being. What this “Aristotelian way” means for our knowledge of God is clearly and frequently stated by Aquinas: “our knowledge [of the transcendent causes of being] can go as far as it can be led by sensible things.”¹⁸

Now, if Aquinas is in this sense a real “Aristotelian” in his philosophical approach, the question becomes urgent as to how he actually succeeds in reconciling his highly valued Platonic sources, such as Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* and the *Liber de causis*, with the principles of Aristotelian metaphysics. As a theologian, Aquinas is interested most of all in the

¹⁷ ST I, q. 12, a. 12. See *Aquinas on God*, 75.

¹⁸ Ibid.

transcendent part of metaphysics—the doctrine of the First Cause and its causality with respect to all things; but it is precisely with respect to this aspect of metaphysics that Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is not very informative! Aristotle himself does not offer a substantial account of the causality of the first principle. But Dionysius does, in line with Neoplatonic thought. The question arises, therefore, of how Aquinas succeeds in aligning Dionysius's account with the basic principles of Aristotelian philosophy? In what sense can Dionysius be saved from the criticism of the Platonic doctrine of forms?

In looking for an answer to these questions we will turn now to the introductory text of Thomas's *Commentary on De divinis nominibus*. Dionysius—or rather the unknown Christian and Neoplatonic author of the late fifth century who hides behind the name and authority of Dionysius, the pupil of St. Paul himself—is held in high esteem by Aquinas.¹⁹ The *De divinis nominibus* is one of the main sources of his doctrine of God, and in particular of his view of how God can be named by names derived from the perfections which creatures participate from God as the transcendent source of all perfections. Dionysius is a Christian author, a Catholic theologian of great reputation, and as such is, for Aquinas, an authoritative source of what the faith teaches.

In the Prooemium to his *Commentary* Aquinas sets out to introduce the writings of Dionysius to his readers and to clarify his philosophical allegiance. One of the difficulties one will experience in reading the books of Dionysius, Aquinas explains, is caused by the fact that he frequently uses a Platonic style and way of speaking which is no longer customary in our times (*apud modernos*).²⁰ Dionysius's philosophical language is Platonic in character. But that does not make him, apparently, a full-blood Platonic thinker who subscribes to the basic positions of Platonic philosophy. In a subtle manner, Aquinas argues that Dionysius distances himself from those aspects of Platonism: in particular the doctrine of the ideal forms, which are contrary to the Christian faith and to (rational) truth. The Platonism of Dionysius is, Aquinas wants to

¹⁹ Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

²⁰ In *De div.nom.*, Prooemium: "...quia plerumque utitur stilo et modo loquendi quo utebantur platonici, qui apud modernos est inconsuetus." Cf. W.J. Hanky, "Dionysian Hierarchy in St. Thomas: Tradition and Transformation," *Denys l'Areopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident, Actes du Colloque international Paris, 21-24 septembre 1994*, ed. Ysabel de Andia (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 1997) (Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité, 151), 405-438.

show, a revised Platonism, which does not fall under the critique of Aristotle; a revised Platonism which not only concords with the Christian faith but, moreover, is to be seen as an important contribution to that part of metaphysics which studies the divine cause of being.

Aquinas explains that the hypostasizing of formal principles is characteristic of the Platonic way of thought. Platonists hold that the species of things exist in themselves and separately. Thus, they say, for instance, that this singular and sensible human being is not essentially a human being, but is said to be a man by participation in the "separated man." Since the species of things can be thought separately from its individualizing and material conditions, they must also exist separately. The order of thought (the realm of the *rationes intelligibiles*) coincides immediately with the order of being. This hypostasizing way of abstraction is not only applied to the species of things, but also to the most common predicates such as "good," "one," and "being"—in other words, to the transcendental properties of being.²¹ We see now that with the help of this distinction between categorical forms (*species, genus*) and transcendental forms (*being, good, one*) Aquinas is able to grant a relative truth to the position of the Platonists:

The Platonists not only considered abstraction of this kind regarding the ultimate species of natural things, but also concerning the most common features, which are 'good', 'one', and 'being'. . . .

This reasoning of the Platonists concords neither with faith nor with the truth in so far as it concerns the separateness of natural species, but regarding what they say concerning the first principle of things, their opinion is most true and consonant with the Christian faith.²²

With respect to the species of natural things, Aquinas definitely rejects the possibility of a separate existence. He fully endorses the critique of

²¹ See for the doctrine of transcendentals, Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) (Brill Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 52).

²² *In De div. nom.*, prooemium: "Nec solum huiusmodi abstractione Platonici considerabant circa ultimas species rerum naturalium, sed etiam circa maxime communia, quae sunt bonum, unum et ens. . . . Haec igitur Platoniorum ratio fidei non consonant nec veritati, quantum ad hoc quod continet de speciebus naturalibus separatis, sed quantum ad id quod dicebant de primo rerum principio, verissima est eorum opinio et fidei Christiana consona."

Aristotle that the real separateness of the species and genera would mean the loss of the essential unity of sensible things. Socrates would not be *essentially* a human being if the species were distinct and separate from the concrete individual reality of Socrates. However, the case is different if we consider the most common predicates *bonum*, *unum*, and *ens*. Here, at the level of the *transcendentia*, the hypostasizing abstraction of Platonism does have an acceptable and legitimate sense.²³ The Platonists posit something primary, which is the “essence of goodness,” the “essence of unity” and the “essence of being,” and this we call “God,” Aquinas says; all things are said to be *good*, or *one*, or “*beings*” by way of derivation from that primary principle.²⁴ This is, *in nuce*, the Platonic doctrine of the first principle and its participative causality as present in the theology of Dionysius, and which is judged by Aquinas to be most true (*verissima*) and consonant with the Christian faith.

The same hermeneutic strategy with respect to Platonism by making a distinction between categorical forms (universals) and transcendental forms (*maxime communia*) is followed in a text about the divine goodness in the *Summa theologiae*. Here Aquinas deals with a question, the Platonic background of which will be recognizable to the reader, which concerns the relationship between “good things” and “divine goodness”: “are all things good by the divine goodness?”²⁵ The alternative would

²³ In his Commentary on Boethius’ *De trinitate* (q. 5, a. 3), Thomas introduces the famous notion of ‘separatio,’ the particular kind of abstraction by which the objects of metaphysics are formally constituted. In contrast with the usual method of ‘abstraction,’ by which something is considered by the intellect without something else, though both are connected in reality, the act of ‘separatio’ posits a separation in reality itself. Through the act of separation certain intelligible aspects of things (such as ‘being’ and ‘substance’) are disclosed to the consideration of the intellect as purely intelligible in themselves, independent of matter, so that the existence of ‘beings’ and ‘substances’ without matter is revealed as possible. Aquinas then makes the observation that the Platonists fell into error because they failed to distinguish properly between ‘separatio’ and ‘abstractio’. The Platonists treat the results of ‘abstractio’—the abstraction of universals from particulars—as if they were really separate. From this it appears that the Platonic kind of abstraction (*separatio*) is regarded by Aquinas as valid with respect to the *maxime communia*, the objects of metaphysics.

²⁴ In *De div. nom.*, Prooemium: “Ponebant, enim, unum primum quod est ipsa essentia bonitatis et unitatis et esse, quod dicimus Deum et quod omnia alia dicuntur bona vel una vel entia per derivationem ab illo primo.”

²⁵ ST I, q. 6, a. 4: “Utrum omnia sint bona bonitate divina”. The immediate background of this discussion is Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus*; see my book *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 46), ch.1.

be that all things are good by an intrinsic form of goodness, not by an extrinsic goodness. In his conclusion, Aquinas wants to have it both ways; he argues that all things are good by the transcendent goodness of God as well as by an immanent form of goodness of their own. He wants to reconcile, thus, the aspect of transcendence and the aspect of immanence: the first associated with Plato, the latter with the position of Aristotle.

The construction of the argument requires a precise and close reading. Aquinas starts by describing the essentials of Plato's position, in particular his view with regard to the first principle, or the supreme good. Then he gives a critical assessment:

Although this opinion appears to be unreasonable in affirming that there are separate forms of natural things subsisting of themselves—as Aristotle argues in many ways—still, it is absolutely true that there is something primary which is essentially being and essentially good, which we call God. . . . Aristotle agrees with this.²⁶

Here we see Aquinas employing a hermeneutical strategy quite similar to the one he uses in the introduction to his *Commentary on De divinis nominibus*. With respect to the claim that the species of natural things exists separately in themselves, Platonism must be rejected. In this respect Aquinas fully accepts Aristotle's criticism of Plato's doctrine of ideas. But another part of Platonism can be retained, namely what it says about the most universal forms ("being," "one") which admit of a separate or absolute existence, and as such to be identified with "God." Thus in Aquinas's view, Plato and Aristotle agree in their opinion that something primary exists which is essentially being and essentially good, and as such the cause of the being and goodness of all other things.²⁷ Even for Aris-

²⁶ ST I, q. 6, a. 4: "Et quamvis haec opinio irrationabilis videatur quantum ad hoc, quod ponebat species rerum naturalium separatas per se subsistentes, ut Aristoteles multipliciter probat; tamen hoc absolute verum est, quod aliquid est primum, quod per suam essentiam est ens et bonum, quod dicimus Deum, ut ex superioribus patet. Huic etiam sententiae concordat Aristoteles."

²⁷ In this connection one can refer to the "fourth way" of Thomas; see ST I, q. 2, a. 3: "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 *Metaph.* (...) Ergo est aliquid quod omnibus entibus est causa esse, et bonitatis, et cuiuslibet perfectionis: et hoc dicimus Deum." The fourth way is often characterized as "Platonic." For Thomas, however, the argument is based

tote, something primary exists which is *maxime ens* and as such the cause of all subsequent beings.²⁸

The alleged concordance between Plato and Aristotle with respect to the existence of a primary and absolute being is, for Aquinas, not so much a simple historical fact but rather a hermeneutical claim and construction. Aquinas wants to show that Plato, especially in the form of the Platonism he finds in Dionysius, has important things to contribute to the metaphysical doctrine of the first principle and its (participative) causality; and these valuable aspects of Platonism can be understood as an integral part of the essentially Aristotelian project of the metaphysical science of being and its transcendent causes.

Now, what are the “Aristotelian” elements in this text? As said above, Thomas wants to reconcile the aspect of transcendence and the aspect of immanence. The transcendent goodness of God cannot be merely an “ideal form,” separated from the lower reality; it must exercise a real and efficient causality as a consequence of which good things receive in themselves an immanent form of goodness. Thus, the supreme Good of Plato must be thought as an Aristotelian *agens*, a real principle with an effective power. For Thomas, God can only be thought to be an efficient agent by reason of his “being.” The divine attribute of “being” is associated with God’s efficient causality just as the attribute of “good” expresses in God the aspect of final causality. The special emphasis on “being” is exactly what we see happening in our text. First, Thomas gives a rough sketch of Plato’s doctrine of ideas: “Just as [Plato] laid down separate Forms of man and horse which he called absolute man and absolute horse, so likewise he laid down separate Forms of *being* and of *one*, and these he called absolute being (*ens per se*) and absolute oneness (*unum per se*), and by participation in these, everything was called *being* or *one*.”²⁹ Thomas does not mention that in Neoplatonism the Form of being is considered to be inferior to the highest principle of the One, and that even in Plato’s *Republic* the Good is said to be “beyond being.” For Thomas “being” and “one” belong together. The next step in our text is the identification of absolute being and absolute

on a much quoted passage from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, alpha minor (993b30).

²⁸ Cf. *In LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, l.19): “Cui sententiae concordat quod Aristoteles dicit in II *Metaphysicae* quod id quod est primum et maxime ens est causa subsequentium.”

²⁹ *ST*, I, q. 6, a. 4: “Et sicut ponebat ideam hominis et equi separatam, quam vocabat *per se hominem* et *per se equum*, ita ponebat ideam entis et ideam unius separatam, quam dicebat *per se ens* et *per se unum*: et eius participatione unum-quodque dicitur ens vel unum.”

one with the highest good. Then, Thomas says the following: "And because good is convertible with being, as is also one, he (Plato) called the absolute good God, from whom all things are called good by way of participation."³⁰ I take this to be the crucial step in Thomas's argument. The good is convertible with being (*ens et bonum convertuntur*), so the "absolute good" (*ipsum per se bonum*) is not without being, it is identical with "absolute being," and because of its identity with being, the absolute good may be called "God." The assumption here is that the name "God" stands for a *real* principle. Thus, only as identical with "being" can the absolute good be understood to be God in the sense of a real and effective principle which gives "being" to creatures, and together with this "being," an intrinsic form of goodness.

For Thomas "being" and "good" are *transcendentia*, universal notions which extend to all things. As transcendentals they are in the first place *communia*, they are common to all things. As consequent upon a thing's being, they must be attributed, even in the highest degree, to the first and universal principle of the being of all things. Thus, in this way, Thomas can say that all things, insofar as they *are* and are *good*, assimilate the first principle which has the fullness of being and goodness. Here Thomas employs a metaphysical scheme which he thinks to be genuinely Aristotelian, although modern scholars would consider the notion of "fullness of being" as stemming from the Platonic tradition.

The Monotheism of the *Liber de causis* and the Doctrine of the Unicity of Form

One of the most important and appreciated Neoplatonic sources of Thomas Aquinas's thought is the *Liber de causis*.³¹ The identity of the author of *Liber de causis* remains an issue still debated by scholars. When the work began to be circulated at the Latin universities during the thirteenth century under the title *Liber de Expositione Bonitatis Purae* (Book of the Exposition of Pure Goodness), it was attributed to Aristotle himself and it was commonly understood to be the completion of Aristotle's metaphysics.³² In the eyes of the medieval thinkers it filled

³⁰ Ibid.: "Et quia bonum convertitur cum ente, sicut et unum, ipsum per se bonum dicebat esse Deum, a quo omnia dicuntur bona per modum participationis."

³¹ For his commentary on the *Liber* see: *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Super librum de causis expositio*, ed. H.D. Saffrey (Fribourg: Société philosophique, 1954). Translated into English by V. Guagliardo, C. Hess, and R. Taylor, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Commentary on the Book of Causes* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

³² Cf. the remark of Saffrey in the introduction in his edition of Thomas's

out Aristotle's otherwise deficient account of the ultimate causes of the universe as presented in *Metaphysics* XII. Even Thomas considered Aristotle to be its author for a long time, at least until Proclus's *Elements of Theology* became available to him in the translation of his fellow Dominican William of Moerbeke. Then he discovered, as he explains in the preface to his commentary, that the *Liber de causis* is the work of an unknown Arabic author who had excerpted it from Proclus's *Elements of Theology*.³³ Aquinas no longer thinks, thus, that the work is Aristotle's own theology. Nevertheless it seems to me that he continues to regard the *Liber de causis* as a kind of supplement of the science of metaphysics as propounded by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*. To say it more carefully: together with Dionysius, the *Liber de causis* was the main source from which Thomas borrowed the necessary elements for constructing a metaphysical account of the First Cause (God), free from the problematic aspects of Neoplatonism, in particular, its polytheistic implications, and compatible with the project of metaphysics as defined by Aristotle. As Hankey writes, "Thomas found that the doctrine of the *De divinis nominibus* was a monotheistically modified Platonism like that of the *Liber de causis*."³⁴ And that "monotheistically modified Platonism" was, I would suggest, perfectly acceptable in Aquinas' eyes as the theological supplement of the Aristotelian science of metaphysics.³⁵

It is not my intention to provide here a full discussion of the *Liber de causis*. I will focus on Aquinas's exposition of the third proposition of the *Liber*. Here he first offers a presentation of the Neoplatonic hierarchy of divine Forms and then he goes on to explain that both Dionysius and the author of the *Liber* correct this position of pagan Platonism with respect to the plurality of divine Forms.

Commentary on the *Liber de causis*, p. xix: "One voit que dès cette époque, dans l'université, le *Liber* est rattaché à la *Métaphysique* d'Aristote."

³³ *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, preface: "And in Greek we find a book handed down by the Platonist Proclus, which contains 211 propositions and is entitled *The Elements of Theology*. And in Arabic we find the present book which is called *On causes* among Latin readers, known to have been translated from Arabic and not known to be extant at all in Greek. Thus, it seems that one of the Arab philosophers excerpted it from this book by Proclus, especially since everything in it is contained much more fully and more diffusely in that of Proclus."

³⁴ W. Hankey, "Aquinas and the Platonists," in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages: A Doxographic Approach*, ed. by Stephen Gersch and Maarten Hoenen, Walter de Gruyter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 311.

³⁵ Cf. *In LC*, prop.13 (ed. Saffrey, 83, l.8): "quia vero secundum sententiam Aristotelis quae in hoc magis catholicae doctrinae concordat, non ponimus multas formas . . . sed unam solam quae est causa prima."

In order to clarify the complex system of Proclean metaphysics Aquinas begins with the basic position of Platonism. Plato posited universal forms that were separate and *per se* subsistent. Because such universal forms exercise a certain causality over particular things that participate in them, he calls such forms "gods." Furthermore, among these forms he assumed a certain order according to the principle that the more universal any form is, the more simple and prior a cause it is, for it is participated by later forms. In this order of ideal Forms the first is the separate One and Good itself, which he calls "the highest god" and the "first cause of all things." In Proclus these divine Forms are called the "henads," the order of intelligible forms prior to the lower hypostatical orders of intellects, souls and bodies.

Now, Aquinas continues, Dionysius has corrected this position of the plurality of ideal Forms. There are not many forms so that one would be *per se* goodness, another *per se* being, another *per se* life, and so on with regard to the others. According to Dionysius, they are all one and identical with the first cause of all things.³⁶ This Dionysian "modification" results in what is the very essence of Aquinas's understanding of God: God is *being itself*, and the very essence of goodness, and thus whatever belongs to the perfection of goodness and being belongs essentially to him as a whole, so that he is the essence of life, wisdom, power, and the rest.³⁷ God himself contains all the formal perfections in simple unity, so that he possesses the universality of causality with respect to the lower reality.

The author of the *Liber* follows Dionysius in his monotheistic correction of pagan Platonism. He does not speak of a multitude of Gods

³⁶ In his Commentary on Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus* he describes in the same way how Dionysius distances himself from the polytheistic implications of Platonism; see especially the following passage: "The Platonists, whom Dionysius imitates much in this book, (...) posited separated realities 'per se'. (...) Indeed, they laid down these separated principles as mutually distinct in respect to the First Principle which they called the 'per se' Good, and the 'per se' one. Dionysius agrees with them in one way, and disagrees in another. He agrees in that he too posits life existing separately 'per se', and likewise wisdom, and being, and other things of this kind. He dissents from them, however, in this: he does not say that these separated principles are diverse entities, but that they are in fact one principle, which is God" (*In De divinis nominibus* cap. 5, lect. 1, 634).

³⁷ *In LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 20, 1.16): "cum Deus sit ipsum esse et ipsa essentia bonitatis, quidquid pertinent ad perfectionem bonitatis et esse, totum ei essentialiter convenit, ut scilicet ipse sit essentia vitae et sapientiae et virtutis et ceterorum."

either, but rather establishes unity in God (*unitatem in Deo constituit*).³⁸ So the Muslim author of the *Liber* agrees with the Christian theologian on the point of unity in the divine realm. There is but one creative principle, Being itself, which is the cause of the being of all things. Aristotle agrees with this opinion (*Metaph.* II. For this reference, see note 26).

However, a difficulty remains in the text of the *Liber*. Its author uses a phrase which suggests a mediated process of creation: “the first cause created the being of the soul with the mediation of an intelligence” (*causa prima creavit esse animae mediante intelligentia*). It cannot be the case, Aquinas emphasizes, that the soul receives her essential being from the first cause, which is “Being itself,” while it subsequently receives life and intelligence from other principles, “the first Life” and “the first Intelligence.” Although this is an interpretative possibility of the text, Aquinas makes it clear that the position of a hierarchy of divine causes, each of which has its own formal effect in things, must be rejected because it is contrary to “the truth as well as to the opinion of Aristotle.”³⁹ A plurality of divine causes with respect to the constitution of sensible reality would result in individual substances being no longer essentially one: “If the soul had being from one thing and an intellectual nature from something else, it would follow that it would not be absolutely one. Therefore, one has to say that the soul not only has essence but also has intellectuality from the first cause. This accords with the opinion of Dionysius.”⁴⁰

We see that Aquinas draws Dionysius and the author of the *Liber* into an accord with each other and with Aristotle. Both Dionysius and the author of the *Liber* grant to the first cause, God, the universality of causality in the sense that God is not only responsible for the *being* all things have in common but also for the *essential difference* of each thing’s being. Only in this way, by means of an understanding of the first cause as containing in itself the fullness of perfection (life, intelligence, power, etc.), can the intrinsic unity of created things be accounted for. In devi-

³⁸ In *LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 20, l.21): “Et hoc sequitur Auctor huius libri. Non enim invenitur inducere aliquam multitudinem deitatis, sed unitatem in Deo constituit.”

³⁹ In *LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 23, l.21): “Sed etiam haec positio, si non sane intelligatur, repugnat veritati et sententiae Aristotelis qui arguit in III *Metaphysicae* contra Platonicos ponentes huiusmodi ordinem causarum separatarum secundum ea quae de individuīs praedicantur.”

⁴⁰ In *LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 24, l.1): “... si ab alio haberet [anima] esse et ab alio naturam intellectivam sequeretur quod non esset unum simpliciter; oportet ergo dicere quod, a prima causa a qua habet essentiam, habet etiam intellectualitytem. Et hoc concordat sententiae Dionysii....”

ating from pagan Platonism, the author of the *Liber* is found to be in agreement with Dionysius and with the position of Aristotle with respect to the unity in the realm of the divine:

This accords with the opinion of Dionysius, which we quoted above: that good itself, being itself, life itself, and wisdom itself are not different but one and the same thing, which is God, from whom things derive their existence, their life and their understanding, as he shows in the same place. So, too, in Book XII of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle attributes to God both understanding and living, saying that he is life and intelligence, so that he excludes the previously mentioned Platonic positions.⁴¹

Conclusion

We started our inquiry into the “Aristotelianism” of Aquinas with the debate about the unicity of substantial form. What was philosophically at stake in this discussion is explained by Aquinas by reducing its underlying principles to the methods of Aristotle and Plato, respectively. It is characteristic of Aristotle's method that he proceeds *ex sensibilibus* while Plato proceeds *ex rationibus intelligibilibus*. This approach led Plato to posit the separate existence of the species of things, which, according to Aristotle, results in the loss of the ontological integrity of sensible reality. The Platonic order of separate (abstract) principles cannot do justice to the unity of particular and composed substances. For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, the ontological integrity of sensible nature as such is at stake here. By rejecting the Platonic doctrine of separate forms Aristotle intends to reassert nature in its rightful position as something which can be the object of a distinct philosophical science: physics. Physics is the science of the categorical domain of nature, of particular realities such as ‘man’, ‘horse’, ‘tree’, which do not exist apart from their individual instances. Now, although physics may be the most familiar science to us, it is not the most fundamental one; insofar as its object—nature—participates in being, physics depends on a prior and more universal science of being, in which it is shown that the domain of nature is not all there is, but

⁴¹ *In LC*, prop. 3 (ed. Saffrey, 24, l.6): “Et hoc concordat sententiae Dionysii supra positae, scilicet quod non aliud sit ipsum bonum, ipsum esse, et ipsa vita et ipsa sapientia, sed unum et idem quod est Deus, a quo derivatur in res et quod sint et quod vivant et quod intelligent, ut ipse ibidem ostendit. Unde et Aristoteles, in XII *Metaphysicae*, signanter Deo attribuit et intelligere et vivere, dicens quod ipse est vita et intelligentia, ut excludat praedictas platonicas positiones.”

points beyond itself to a transcendent principle of the whole of nature. Understanding that, and how sensible nature refers to a super-sensible reality as its cause, requires a transcendental perspective of thought with regard to the *maxime communia*. Following what Aquinas regarded as a genuine Aristotelian way of reasoning (cf. book II of the *Metaphysics*) these common features of all things—in particular their *being* and *goodness*—must be reduced to one common cause which has the fullness of being: *ipsum esse*. This offers fruitful possibilities for a revised Platonism within the Aristotelian framework of the science of metaphysics. **N V**