

The Doctrine of God and the Analogy of Being

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AS A PHILOSOPHIC MATTER, the doctrine of God is founded upon understanding of the *analogia entis*. After all, no other foundation is possible, as outside being there is nothing. The analogicity of being and its foundational character are conspicuous. First, in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle affirms that being is not a genus, as it must contain all its differences, whereas a genus cannot contain the difference that is the foundation of species because then all beings of that genus would necessarily be of that species. Nor yet could being be a species as though it modified a substratum defined in terms of nonbeing. Thomas very clearly concurs with this teaching and develops it with great precision. As Thomas puts it, “nothing is able to be outside that which is understood by being, if being is included in the understanding/concept of the things of which it is predicated.”¹

¹ *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 25, no. 6: “Quod autem ens non possit esse genus, probatur per Philosophum in hunc modum: Si ens esset genus, oporteret differentiam aliquam inveniri, per quam traheretur ad speciem; nulla autem differentia participat genus, ita scilicet quod genus sit in ratione differentiae; quia sic genus poneretur bis in definitione speciei. Sed oportet differentiam esse praeter id quod intellegitur in ratione generis. Nihil autem potest esse quod sit praeter id quod intelligitur per ens, si ens sit de intellectu eorum de quibus praedicatur; et sic per nullam differentiam contrahi potest. Relinquitur ergo quod ens non sit genus” (“But that being cannot be a genus, is proved by the Philosopher in this way: If being were a genus, we would need to find a difference through which to contract it to a species. But no difference shares in the genus in such a way that the genus may be included in the nature of the difference [*ratione differentiae*]; because thus the genus would be placed twice in the definition of the species. But the difference needs to be outside/beyond that which is understood in the nature of the genus. But nothing is able to be outside that which is understood by being, if being is

Another way to understand the foundational relation of the analogical formality of being for the doctrine of God is the realization that there can be nothing in the conclusion of our reasoning that is not implicitly and actually present in the premises. Thus *if* “being” means only “being material” in the *premises* that found our reasoning to the existence of God, *then* “being” can only mean “being material” in our conclusion. Hence the analogical character of being is *prior to, and the foundation for*, the philosophic judgment that God exists, although some recognize the nature of this premise only after realizing the conclusion they have drawn. But the judgment that being is intrinsically analogous is not something solely available following the proof that God exists. This is to say, the second sense of *separatio* famously adverted to by St. Thomas in his *Commentary on Boethius’s De Trinitate*² refers not to intrinsically spiritual being, but to the immateriality of proportionate being as passing through, and irreducible to, any given genus or species of being: which notionally *but not really* could admit the thesis that there is only material being.

The judgment that being is only material being is possible in a notional or merely conceptual sense because this is imaginable; this judgment is not valid, because the causal inference to God is warranted. But this causal inference to God is itself possible because “to be” or “being” does not originally *mean* merely and exclusively “to be material” or “material being” and—if it did—no conclusion from the given premises would be possible: axiomatic atheism would necessarily be implied. It suffices to observe that the difference is not contained in the genus, so that if being were held formally to mean merely “material being” then the *differentiae* of material being would be held not to be real:³ which is contrary to fact, showing that being is irreducible to any genus or species.

The present essay first addresses the foundation of the Aristotelian and Thomistic doctrine of God in the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, understood in terms of the division of being by act and potency. Second,

included in the understanding/concept of the things of which it is predicated; and thus it can be contracted by no difference. It follows therefore that being is not a genus).”

² See the conclusion of his *respondeo* in q. 5, a. 4, of his *Commentary on Boethius’s De Trinitate*.

³ But yet it is imaginable that while “being” does not *mean* merely material being, that still we might not be able to discover anything but material being. The contingent imaginability of this, however, does not suffice to limit the meaning of “being” from the outset in a way that prevents the inference to God. Further, the evidence requires such an inference, although manifestly some do not see the truth of this.

it considers the foundations of metaphysics and the real distinction of essence and existence. Third, it concludes by considering how this understanding provides the rational foundation for an account of God as infinite in every transcendental and pure perfection and as transcendent cause of finite being.

Analogia Entis

The formality of being is an analogical formality. Aristotle articulates the roots of the analogy of being in the division of being by act and potency in chapter 6 of book 9 of the *Metaphysics*:⁴

Our meaning can be seen in the particular cases by induction, and we must not seek a definition of everything but be content to grasp the analogy—that as that which is building is to that which is capable of building, so is the waking to the sleeping, and that which is seeing to that which has its eyes shut but has sight, and that which is shaped out of the matter to the matter, and that which has been wrought to the unwrought. Let actuality be defined by one member of this antithesis, and the potential by the other. But all things are not said in the same sense to exist actually, but only by analogy—as A is in B or to B, C is in D or to D; for some are as movement to potency, and the others as substance to some sort of matter.

At the beginning of chapter 9 of book 11, Aristotle further explains the metaphysical universality of the act–potency distinction, and the metaphysical extension of the term “motion”: “Each kind of thing being divided into the potential and the fulfilled, I call the actuality of the potential as such, movement.”⁵ St. Thomas of course alike holds that being is divided by act and potency,⁶ and that movement refers to the reduction of anything whatsoever from potency to act.⁷ This foundational division of being by act

⁴ *Metaphysics* 9.6.1048a35–b9 (English translation from the *Metaphysics* is my own).

⁵ *Metaphysics* 9.9.1065b15–16: “There are as many kinds of motion and change as there are of being. Each kind of thing being divided into the potential and the fulfilled, I call the actuality of the potential as such, movement.”

⁶ The teaching is found throughout Thomas’s work. Thus, to cite one place merely, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 77, a. 1, resp.: “Cum potentia et actus dividant ens et quodlibet genus entis, oportet quod ad idem genus referatur potentia et actus” (“Since power and act divide being and every kind of being, we must refer a power and its act to the same genus”).

⁷ ST I, q. 2, a. 3: “Movere enim nihil aliud est quam educere aliquid de potentia in

and potency is intelligible according to the analogy of proper proportionality: as potentially walking is to actually walking, so is potentially understanding to actually understanding, although walking and understanding are simply different: a *likeness* of *diverse* proportions. Normally we reduce likeness to one univocal aspect: for example, “circularity” is said of different circular things, where “circular” has but one *ratio*. But *being* is, and can be, and “is” can be thought and said, in *many* ways, something that is discernible through simple rational induction.

In Aristotle’s account of physical beings, he achieves an analysis whose principles are actually and implicitly of metaphysical scope but which are initially worked out in the explanation of physical being and change. What is not commonly realized is the metaphysical valence of Aristotle’s analysis, the foundational character of the analogical division of being by potency and act, and indeed the understanding of *motion* as *any reduction of a thing from potency to act*—all of which as noted above are expressly shared by St. Thomas Aquinas. The metaphysics of God derives from the objective evidence of proportionate being, and the analogicity of being comes to light in the division of being by act and potency, dividing being as such. *In this light, two principles are paramount: the application of the principle of noncontradiction to being, and the analogical division of being by act and potency.*

As for the principle of noncontradiction, Thomas himself is very clear in affirming that “as sound is the first audible, being is the first intelligible.”⁸ Thus any denial that being is universally intelligible leaves precisely nothing intelligible, since outside of being there is nothing. The very principle of noncontradiction in its chief and metaphysical formulation—that being is not nonbeing—is according to St. Thomas in *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 94, a. 2, the basis for the logical principle of noncontradiction that one does not speak meaningfully in simultaneously affirming and denying one thing of another. Thomas, in referring to the logical principle of noncontradiction, adds: “quod fundatur supra rationem entis et non entis”—“which is based on the nature of being and nonbeing.” This is a universal principle pertaining to being as such, and if it were not, then fundamentally there could be no such thing as objectivity because the mind would have no root capacity to conform to what is the case.

The principle of noncontradiction articulates a real distinction, although not a real relation, between being and nonbeing. It is not a real

actum” (“For to move is nothing other than to reduce something from potency to act”).

⁸ ST I, q. 5, a. 2, resp.

relation, because what does not exist cannot have a real relation. But it is a real distinction, because by virtue of the character of being as such it is contrary to nonbeing. Similarly, for example, even were there no creatures it would be true that God is not a finite being, because by the very nature of God he cannot be finite. Being is real, and so is really distinguished from its negation which is not real.

Precisely because of the ontological nature of the principle of noncontradiction, this principle raises the specter of monism, as visible in the teaching of Parmenides and other forms of monism. Parmenides taught that being is one, immobile, and unlimited: one because there is nothing other than being and being is identical with itself; unchanging because being could not change into anything other than nonbeing, and nonbeing is not; and unlimited because nothing exists outside being that could actually limit it. Of course, one might look up into the air and see a flock of birds flying by—which are real beings; note that there are many of them; observe the change with respect to their local position and bodily action; and, likewise, observe that they are all limited by other things (the ground, the air, trees, and so on). It would be easy to stop here, with the simple rejection of monism. But Aristotle realized that an account must yet be given explaining how the principle of noncontradiction as pertaining to being could be reconciled with manyness, limit, and change: otherwise it would seem that sensible being is simply and radically unintelligible. It is one thing to realize *that* the Parmenidean account is incongruent with real evidence; it is another to understand how the real evidence is compatible with the principle of noncontradiction as an ontological principle, without which objective knowledge of the real would be impossible.

Aristotle affirms a real principle in things accounting for the susceptibility of being to manyness, limit, and change, a principle that is not identical with act, and yet is not merely nonbeing: namely, *potentia*, *potency*. We know *that* monism is incorrect if we trust our senses; we understand *why* monism is incorrect when we understand that potency is a *real capacity* founded upon act while not being itself actual. The marble is only *potentially* sculptable, but it is of its actual *nature* to be so. The principle of noncontradiction would necessitate denying manyness, limitation, and change only if *potentiality* did not pertain to real being. Hence the principle of noncontradiction applies to real being, even when limited by potency. Each being, whose actuality is limited by its potential principle, is limited in relation to that potency. Thus all the diverse analogical participations of being—all the various *rationes* or proportions of act as limited by potency—are what they are and not another thing.

While Aristotle does not bring out the implications of this analysis

in every respect, among other things what is at stake is the metaphysical axiom manifest in St. Thomas's teaching that *act is not self-limiting*. This axiom is in a way implied by the principle of noncontradiction—that being is not nonbeing. Likewise, St. Thomas's account of the participation of being by finite creatures is intelligible only in relation to the limitation of act by potency. As George Klubertanz notes in his work on analogy,⁹ after the *Scriptum on the Sentences* Thomas always explains that the totality of any *participated* perfection is not possessed in its entirety by the participating subject because the participated perfection can be received *only according to the limitation of potency in the participating being*. St. Thomas situates a doctrine with Platonic and neo-Platonic origins—the doctrine of participation—firmly within an Aristotelian analysis.

The perception that being is and can be, and is and can be said, in many ways, according to the likeness of *differing rationes* or proportions of act as limited by potency, involves as John of St. Thomas will say a *confusio* or “fusing together” of differing modes of being, each of which is what it is and not another thing, but each of which is by induction able to be grasped precisely as a certain measure of act in relation to *potentia*. So understood, being is not univocal, but transcends generic and specific unity.

As Thomas notes in *ST* I, q. 88, a. 2, ad 4, only the logical genus of substance, but no *natural genus*, unites the separate substance with material things, the angel with the butterfly: there is no natural genus of “angel-butterfly.”¹⁰ “Substance” is not univocal, for it is, and can be; and is, and can be said, in many essentially varied ways, from the butterfly even to God.¹¹ Yet there is an analogical likeness of diverse perfections of act:

⁹ George Klubertanz, *Saint Thomas Aquinas on Analogy: a Textual Analysis and Systematic Synthesis* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960).

¹⁰ *ST* I, q. 88, a. 2, ad 4: “Ad quantum dicendum quod substantiae immateriales creatae in genere quidem naturali non conveniunt cum substantiis materialibus, quia non est in eis eadem ratio potentiae et materiae, conveniunt tamen cum eis in genere logico, quia etiam substantiae immateriales sunt in praedicamento substantiae, cum earum quidditas non sit earum esse. Sed Deus non convenit cum rebus materialibus neque secundum genus naturale, neque secundum genus logicum, quia Deus nullo modo est in genere, ut supra dictum est” (“Created immaterial substances are not in the same natural genus as material substances, for they do not agree in power or in matter; but they belong to the same logical genus, because even immaterial substances are in the predicament of substance, as their essence is distinct from their existence. But God has no connection with material things, as regards either natural genus or logical genus; because God is in no genus, as stated above [I, q. 3, a. 5]”).

¹¹ I have sympathy for the view that being is analogical even within species wherein there is a generic and specific univocity: for one blade of grass *is* not another;

the angel and the butterfly, and the existences of the angel and butterfly, are simply different. Yet as existence is to the angel, so is existence to the butterfly. *Being* is not univocal like “circularity,” which signifies one thing however disparate its instances, but is intrinsically analogical with the analogicity of proper proportionality. This does not reduce to the merely mathematical, such as 2 is to 4 as 3 is to 6, which reduces to one mathematical object, namely 1 to 2. For example, light is to the eye, as is truth to the mind, but light is not truth, the eye is not the mind, and the illumination in question is not univocal. This is a likeness of things that are different, and that need not be generically or specifically identical.

It must also be noted that in *De veritate* (q. 2, a. 9) St. Thomas expressly identifies the analogy of being, true, and good, with that of proper proportionality—a proposition¹² which he nowhere retracts—while later on he uses the term “proportion” of creature to God exclusively in the sense of what in *De veritate* he called an *analogy of transferred proportion*.¹³ Such *transferred proportion* is not a commensuration in a reciprocal determined relation, but does allow for a “one way” proportioning of creature to God¹⁴ and is not,

despite the generic and specific identity each has its own existence which is different from that of the other.

¹² *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 9: “Quandoque vero nomen quod de Deo et creatura dicitur, nihil importat ex principali significato secundum quod non possit attendi praedicatus convenientiae modus inter creaturam et Deum; sicut sunt omnia in quorum definitione non clauditur defectus, nec dependent a materia secundum esse, ut ens, bonum, et alia huiusmodi” (“At other times, however, a term predicated of God and creature implies nothing in its principal meaning which would prevent our finding between a creature and God an agreement of the type described above. To this kind belong all attributes which include no defect nor depend on matter for their act of existence, for example, being, the good, and similar things”; all translations from *De veritate* are my own).

¹³ Cf. *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 7, ad 9.

¹⁴ *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 11, ad 1: “Ad primum igitur dicendum, quod sicut Dionysius dicit in IX cap. de divinis nominibus, Deus nullo modo creaturis similis dicendus est, sed creaturae possunt similes Deo dici aliquo modo.”—“To the first it should be said, that as Dionysius says in chapter IX of the *Divine Names*, God can in no way be said to be similar to creatures, but creatures can in some sense be said to be similar to Him.” Also, and tellingly, *De veritate*, q. 23, art. 7, ad 9: “Ad nonum dicendum, quod homo conformatur Deo, cum sit ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei factus. Quamvis autem propter hoc quod a Deo in infinitum distat, non possit esse ipsius ad Deum proportio, secundum quod proportio proprie in quantitativibus invenitur, comprehendens duarum quantitatum ad invicem comparatarum certam mensuram; secundum tamen quod nomen proportionis translatus est ad quamlibet habitudinem significandam unius rei ad rem aliam, utpote cum dicimus hic esse proportionem similitudinem, sicut se habet princeps ad civitatem ita gubernator ad navim, nihil prohibet dicere aliquam proportionem hominis

strictly speaking, a “proportion” that could determine God in relation to the creature. The analogy of proper proportionality—as distinct from any analogy of proportion—does not *require* proper reciprocal proportion to exist between the things analogically likened to one another. It *allows* such an analogical proportion where it may be found—as it is found among finite created analogates—but it does not *of itself* require it, and it transcends generic and specific unity. Thus the analogy of being as an analogy of proper proportionality can extend to God, who is infinitely transcendent of the creature. The creature is really ordered to God, but *not* the converse: and the analogy of proper proportionality alone permits intrinsic attribution of God without implying any determinate real relation of God to creature. In Thomas’s later works, when he speaks of “proportion” between creature and God, he is very clear that this term means merely any relation of one thing to another, but that it must expressly *negate* real order of God to the creature.¹⁵

ad Deum, cum in aliqua habitudine ipsum ad se habeat, utpote ab eo effectus, et ei subiectus.”—“Man is conformed to God since he is made to God’s image and likeness. It is true that, because man is infinitely distant from God, there cannot be proportion between him and God in the proper sense of proportion as found among quantities, consisting of a certain measure of two quantities compared to each other. Nevertheless, in the sense in which the term proportion is transferred to signify any relationship of one thing to another (as we say that there is a likeness of proportions in this instance: the pilot is to his ship as the ruler to the commonwealth), nothing prevents us saying that there is a proportion of man to God, since man stands in a certain relationship to Him inasmuch as he is made by God and subject to Him.” *Nota bene*: his illustration here as likewise when he considers the semantic alternative of not using the term “proportion” at all (both in *De veritate*, q. 23, art. 7, ad 9), is the same: proper proportionality. In the first case, the illustration is that the pilot is to the ship as the ruler to the commonwealth; in the second (the semantic option of not referring to this as proportion at all, but only a likeness of two proportions, or proportionality) his example is: “...as the infinite is equal to the infinite, so is the finite to the finite. And in this way there is a likeness between the creature and God, because the creature stands to the things which are its own as God does to those which belong to Him”—“...sicut infinitum est aequale infinito, ita finitum finito. Et per hunc modum est similitudo inter creaturam et Deum, quia sicut se habet ad ea quae ei competunt, ita creatura ad sua propria.”

¹⁵ See *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 10, ad 9: “Ad nonum dicendum, quod si proportio intelligatur aliquis determinatus excessus, nulla est Dei ad creaturam proportio. Si autem per proportionem intelligatur habitudo sola, sic patet quod est inter creatorem et creaturam; in creatura quidem realiter, non autem in creatore” (“If by proportion is meant a definite excess, then there is no proportion in God to the creature. But if proportion stands for relation alone, then there is relation between the Creator and the creature: in the latter really, but not in the former”; translation mine). See also *SCG* III, ch. 54: “Proportio autem intellectus creati est quidem ad Deum intelligendum, non secundum commensurationem aliquam proportionem existente, sed

Creation itself is not even an accident with respect to God as *Actus Purus*, who is so perfect that creating or not creating designates *no change in God but only in the creature*.

In any case, it is upon the analogical formality of being as a likeness of diverse proportions of act—a nonunivocal object less subject to precision than the objects of the positive sciences—that the analyses of physical motion and change, of substance and accident, of the four causes, of human nature and the human person, and of the derivation of all finite being from God, reposes. The distinction of potency and act is found in many ways: for example, substance is to accident as potency is to act; matter is to form as potency to act; essence is to existence as potency to act; and so on. It is precisely as a further development of the division of being by act and potency that Thomas's doctrine of the real distinction of essence and existence is properly understood.

The analogical divisibility of being into potency and act is thus also the foundation of the causal resolution of limited, finite being into the unlimited, infinite First Cause of all creatures. Before turning to the doctrine of God straightforwardly, a few words must be spoken about the foundations of metaphysics, and the real distinction of essence and existence.

Metaphysics

The Subject Matter of Metaphysics and Causal Reasoning

Much has been written about the foundation of metaphysics. Jan Aertsen in his famous *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*¹⁶ considers that Aquinas abandoned his teaching in *De veritate* regarding analogy of proper proportionality. Nonetheless, I am strongly sympathetic with aspects of his analysis. Aertsen writes:

secundum quod proportio significat quamcumque habitudinem unius ad alterum, ut materiae ad formam, vel causae ad effectum. Sic autem nihil prohibet esse proportionem creaturae ad Deum secundum habitudinem intelligentis ad intellectum, sicut et secundum habitudinem effectus ad causam” (“Now, the proportion of the created intellect to the understanding of God is not, in fact, based on a commensuration in an existing proportion, but on the fact that proportion means any relation of one thing to another, as of matter to form, or of cause to effect. In this sense, then, nothing prevents there being a proportion of creature to God on the basis of a relation of one who understands to the thing understood, just as on the basis of the relation of effect to cause”).

¹⁶ Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 295–96.

The distinctive feature of [St. Thomas's] transcendental way of thought is that it moves in two directions, toward the transcendental of being and toward that which is common by causality. The first movement is a resolution by which things are reduced to what is most common in them. In this reduction the specific determinations of things are left outside of consideration. They are considered not as this or that being, but as beings. Being as such does not signify dependence, nor does it imply any restriction. It is indeterminate with respect to every mode of being. Being is common to all genera and is therefore called "transcendental." The first resolution moves on a horizontal plane; it is an intrinsic analysis of that which is. The formal principle whereby a thing is being (*ens*) is its act of being (*esse*). The inner resolution is the condition for another resolution, the ascent to the most universal cause. Given the first resolution, it is clear that the most universal cause can only be the cause of being, for its causality is transcendental. The origin of being in general is understood as creation and explained in terms of participation. Being is the proper effect of God. He himself transcends being in general; God does not belong to the domain of the *maxime communia*. Thomas's transcendental way of thought seeks both the inner principle and the extrinsic cause by which a thing is being.¹⁷

Yet while God does not fall within *ens commune* or the being affirmed of substance and the categories, nonetheless being is affirmed of God in its full perfection, without potency: proper proportionality permits genuine affirmation that God is Pure Act, Infinite Being, True, Good, and so forth. Without proper proportionality, the affirmation of God would either reduce God to finitude, or involve no genuine cognitive content whatsoever: the resolution to God would be unintelligible. God does indeed transcend "being in general" or *ens commune*, but nonetheless we do affirm that God is the full perfection of being, and this affirmation must be intelligible. Hence the analogical formality of being is necessarily that of proper proportionality. Analogy of proper proportionality does not imply reciprocal real proportion or determined relation to the creature—permitting the affirmation of infinite perfection in God—while nonetheless it is consistent with real proportion or determined relation where these actually obtain, amongst diverse analogical perfections in created being.

Thus as the angel is to its being, so is the butterfly to its—simple

¹⁷ Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy*, 433.

diversity—while yet we can affirm that the angel is of a superior grade of actuality to the butterfly. We can see real analogical diversity and relations of *determined finite perfections*, but it is not the real analogical character of their relation that requires this determinacy of reciprocal proportion, but rather the finite determinacy of their perfection of act. By contrast, God is not merely first in a series, separated from the others by a limited gradation of perfection: God is “first” as *infinitely transcending* the creature.

Within finite being there are gradations of being. Yet the analogical formality of being as such does not require determined real proportion or relation, but only the likeness of *differing* proportions of act. Thus wisdom in Solomon, and wisdom in God, are analogically diverse; and the wisdom of Solomon is a deficient but real likeness of the wisdom of God, but the wisdom of God has no real determinate relation to the wisdom of Solomon but infinitely transcends it and is in no way limited by it. Thus perfections—being, true, good—may be intrinsically predicated of God, because no reciprocal proportion with the creature is required. Even the relation of creation in the creature is founded on *habens esse*—on the creature having existence—because creation is not even an accident in God who undergoes no change or relation of dependency. As Thomas argues in his *Scriptum on the Sentences*, if creation signifies God it can signify only the immutable divine substance; if it signifies the creature, it signifies having being from another,¹⁸ which as a real relation is founded upon the creature *having being* since nonexistent creatures do not have real relations. Thus, the real foundation of the relation of createdness—the difference between God creating, and God not creating—is *the analogical formality of being in the creature*. God is infinitely transcendent of finite being.

Aertsen distinguishes the “horizontal” discovery of the being common

¹⁸ See *In II sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 2, ad 4 (I enclose the full passage, indicating that all that is prior to the creature is the active nature of God Himself—which as Thomas holds everywhere is only conceptually and not really related to the creature): “Si autem sumatur passive, sic est quoddam accidens in creatura, et sic significat quamdam rem, non quae sit in praedicamento passionis, proprie loquendo, sed quae est in genere relationis, et est quaedam habitudo habentis esse ab alio consequens operationem divinam: et sic non est inconveniens quod sit in ipso creato quod educitur per creationem, sicut in subjecto; sicut filiatio in Petro, inquantum recipit naturam humanam a patre suo, non est prior ipso Petro; sed sequitur actionem et motum, quae sunt priora. Habitudo autem creationis non sequitur motum, sed actionem divinam tantum, quae est prior quam creatura” (“If, however, [creation] is taken passively, then it is a certain accident in the creature and it signifies a certain reality which is not in the category of being passive properly speaking, but is in the category of relation. Creation is a certain relation of having being from another following upon the divine operation”; translation mine).

to substance and the categories—the *resolutio secundum rationem* as it is called—and the “vertical” resolution of finite, created being into the causality of God, the *resolutio secundum rem*, noting that the first is the “condition” for the second. But the *rationem* in Aertsen’s formulation must be taken not merely as “reason,” but as pertaining to *real ontological measure*. The reason for this is that one cannot achieve a real positive conclusion without real premises: the analogical division of being by potency and act is the condition for the ascent to the affirmation of God.

River Forest versus Existential Thomism, and Separatio

It is often proposed that only after the demonstration of the existence of God is metaphysics possible as a science distinct from the physics. Thus, it is thought, the subject matter of the metaphysics presupposes prior demonstrations in the physics. Yet Thomas does not say this. Nor does he identify the subject matter of metaphysics with God, but with *ens commune*, the being common to substance and the predicables, of which God is the principle and first cause.¹⁹ Thus God is rationally inferred as the principle of the subject matter of *ens commune*, in a causal resolution from limited being which cannot account for itself, to *Actus Purus*.

Thomas does state in the *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 12, that “if there is no knowable substance higher than sensible substance, there will be no science higher than physics.” Arguably if the existence of God were unknowable, metaphysics would not be possible. This is something quite intelligible since Thomas holds there to be *metaphysical demonstrations* of the existence of God (and of the immateriality and subsistence of the rational soul, and sound metaphysical reasons from fittingness for the existence of the separate substances). If P implies Q then not-Q means not-P.

As we have seen above, we may discover that the *subject matter* of metaphysics is *distinct from* the subject matter of the physics—which is the quasi genus of material, changing, and moving being—in discovering that material being as a genus is incapable of co-extensivity with being. This is because a genus does not include its *differentiae*, its differences, whereas being *necessarily includes all its inferiors* since otherwise they will be held not to exist. A more complete discovery of the *reason* why this is true, however, requires the later metaphysical realization *that existence overpasses the entire order of material quiddity*, that a thing is a real being not because of its *mode* of being, but because *it actually exists*.

The judgment of *separatio* is the negative judgment that the intelligibility of being as such is irreducible to the quasi-genus of “material being,”

¹⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Boethium de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4, reply.

the realm of matter and motion: which is clear from the fact that being transcends all genera. It is also clear from the truth that being overpasses material essence by reason of *esse*, and that potency and matter exist owing to *esse*, and not the converse, just as potency always exists for the sake of act and not the converse. In fact, before reaching the judgment of the real distinction between essence and existence, the reality that being is actual, and that potency has less the nature of being, makes it clear that actual being is distinct from potential being. The irreducibility of being to material being is in truth implicit in the principle of noncontradiction itself: being is not its own negation; act *qua* act is not self-limiting, but limited only by *potentia*. *This of course does not suffice to prove that God exists, but only to indicate that our initial knowledge of being cannot rule out the possibility of immaterial things, which would be the case if being from the start meant merely "material being."*

Yet one is in no position to derive metaphysical judgments except from proportionate being, and this for human creatures largely but not exclusively designates the world of changing, moving things. It is no accident that the metaphysical principles necessary to respond to Parmenides are also the principles necessary for the analysis of mobile being. The principles discovered in the physics are implicitly and actually of metaphysical import from the start: form, matter, agent cause, final cause, substance, and—*of course!*—act and potency. The difference is whether these principles are derived solely for the sake of analyzing physical motion and change, or whether they are derived to analyze being and motion *as such*—remembering that *motion* is an analogical term that Thomas with Aristotle holds to pertain to the actualization of potency *as such*, universally. While metaphysics is not merely Aristotelian physics on steroids, nonetheless the philosophy of nature is, in the order of learning, and of analytic resolution,²⁰ prior to the metaphysics. Yet it does not give metaphysics its subject, which is presupposed to the physics (because the object of physics is real, *exists*).

The discovery of the subject matter of metaphysics occurs when one becomes aware of the intrinsic analogicity of being: *but much more is needed to pursue this subject matter than its mere recognition*. Working through the proportionate applicability of metaphysical principles is heuristically necessary. Nonetheless, physical beings are beings, *not* because they are physical, but because they *are*, and being is not a genus—not even the quasi-genus of physical motion and change. Act is not act *because* it is

²⁰ See *In Boethium de Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1, reply to third question: "Propter quod dicitur metaphysica quasi trans physicam, quia post physicam resolvendo occurrit."

joined to potency. Being is intrinsically analogical, consisting in a likeness of diverse proportions of actuality: this is the created corollary of the truth that *the divine essence is imitable in many ways*.

It ought also be observed that Thomas expressly affirms that metaphysics gives the principles to all the other sciences—they all presuppose *being*—and receives reciprocally from them only the particular limitations and causal implications derivative from their particular objects, all of which presuppose *being*.²¹ It is very clear that Thomas does not think that metaphysics is formally *dependent* on physics but the other way around, because being is presupposed to physical being. If the material limitation of physical being were taken as most formal (a contradiction in terms), then either the being of physical things would resolve into nothing but potency (but act is most formal in being, and without it potency can neither be nor be known), or else it would be *Actus Purus*, both of which are absurd.

The Real Distinction of Essence and Existence and Causal Resolution to God

As for the real distinction of essence and existence, it is a further development of Aristotle's distinction of act and potency. St. Thomas's account of *esse* as the *form of forms* is not explicitly found in Aristotle, although I cannot concur with the argument made by the late Fr. Norris Clarke that the metaphysical doctrine of the limitation of act by potency is not actually implicit in Aristotle's teaching.²² In my view Aristotle clearly understands that *manyness* pertains to being only owing to *potentia*, and that there can be but one *Actus Purus*; whereas *manyness* involves act as *limited* by potency.

Despite the influence of Avicenna, I do not consider the arguments of *De ente et essentia* given by Thomas to be merely Avicennian, nor does he anywhere renounce them. Finite quiddity or essence is intelligible to us. As Thomas teaches in *ST I*, q. 85, aa. 6 and 7, regarding its proper object a power is not subject to error, but only with respect to the relations of this object with other things,²³ and the proper object of the human intellect is *quiddity in corporeal matter*.²⁴ Thus the mind, in knowing essence without

²¹ See *In Boethium de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 9.

²² See W. Norris Clarke, S.J., "The Limitation of Act by Potency," in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being-God-Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

²³ See *ST I*, q. 85, a. 6.

²⁴ *ST I*, q. 85, a. 7, resp.: "Intellectus autem humani, qui est coniunctus corpori, proprium obiectum est quidditas sive natura in materia corporali existens; et per huiusmodi naturas visibilium rerum etiam in invisibilium rerum aliqualem cognitionem ascendit" ("But the human intellect, which is joined with the body, has for

in that same act of knowing formally cognizing existence, realizes that the essences of real things are distinct from their existence, and that the mode of their unity derives from the mode of their existence.

Thomas must then universalize this real distinction of essence and existence discovered in physical things to include separate substances or angels. He argues that if there were, even hypothetically, a being whose essence were identical with its actual existence, there could only be one: because all the ways in which manyess accrues to being presuppose *potentia*, and by hypothesis such a being *would lack all potency whatsoever*. Thus, *if* there were a being comprising the full perfection of act, whose essence were its existence, there *could be* only one. *A fortiori* then, even angels—of which we have no direct natural knowledge—must be such that they are composed of form and being, of essence and existence.²⁵ Thus, since *all*

its proper natural object quiddity existing in corporeal matter, and through such knowledge of the natures of visible things it rises to a certain knowledge of invisible things”).

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finite beings are composite of potency and act, of essence and existence, all such beings must receive their existence *ad extra*, from outside. And because an infinite regress in essentially subordinated causes is impossible, and because even a potential infinitude of beings which *of themselves do not exist* must receive their being from without, they can receive it only from the One Who is His own being, from God. We move from the analogical formality of being in the creature, to the causal analysis attributing the limited perfection of act as an *effect* to God Who is His own being.

As Thomas explains the matter:

Everything that pertains to a thing is either caused by the principles of its nature, as risibility in man, or comes to it from an extrinsic principle, as light in the air from the influence of the sun. Now it cannot be that being itself is caused by the form or quiddity of a thing—I mean as by an efficient cause— because that thing would then be its own cause and it would bring itself into being, which is impossible. Therefore it follows that everything whose being is other than its nature has its being from another. And because everything that exists through another is reduced to that which exists through itself as to its first cause, there must be something that is the cause of being for all other things, inasmuch as it is pure being. Otherwise we would go on to infinity in causes, for everything that is not pure being has a cause of its being, as has been said. It is evident, then, that an intelligence is form and being, and that it holds its being from the first being, which

not know whether either has existence in reality. Therefore, it is clear that existence is something other than the essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there is something whose quiddity is its very own existence, and this thing must be one and primary. Because, there can be no plurification of something except by the addition of some difference, as the nature of a genus is multiplied in its species; or through this that form is received in diverse matters, as the nature of the species is multiplied in diverse individuals; or through this that one is absolute and another is received in something, as if there were a certain separate heat that was other than unseparated heat by reason of its own separation. But if we posit a thing that is existence only, such that it is subsisting existence itself, this existence will not receive the addition of difference, for, if a difference were added, there would be not only existence but existence with the addition of form; and much less could such a thing receive the addition of matter, because then it would be not subsisting existence but material. Therefore it follows that a thing that is its own existence cannot be other than one, and so in every other thing, the thing's existence must be one thing, and its essence or quiddity or nature or form another"; Latin at www.corpusthomisticum.org/oeec.html; English translation from *De ente et essentia* is my own).

is pure being; and this is the first cause, or God.²⁶

The Doctrine of God

Regarding God as Pure Act, *Ipsum Esse*, as Thomas puts it in *ST* I, q. 28, a. 2, ad 1, we find:

Nothing that exists in God can have any relation to that wherein it exists or of whom it is spoken, except the relation of identity; and this by reason of [*propter*] God's supreme simplicity.²⁷

The very conditions under which we attain to the judgment that God is, indicate that God is *Actus Purus*. This means, as Thomas puts it,²⁸ that all perfections are affirmed of God as *incomprehending* God—because God is infinite—and as *exceeded* by God. We know that all transcendental perfections—being, one, true, good—and all pure perfections, that have a floor (a lower limit, as “wisdom” does not apply to mud) but no ceiling—pertain to God without any limitation of *potentia*. Thus there is no change, no potency, no real dependence or reciprocal relation to creatures, in God. The divine essence is so perfect that creation signifies *no change in God* but only his immutably perfect reality. In the creature however, “creation” signifies “having being from another”—which of course absolutely presupposes *having being*. *Thus the relation of causal participation, and of createdness, is founded on the analogical formality of being in the creature, on the likeness of diverse actualities in creatures, existentially, substantially, in form, in operation, in accidents, in relations.*

²⁶ Cf. *De ente et essentia*, ch. 3: “Omne autem quod convenit alicui vel est causatum ex principiis naturae suae, sicut risibile in homine, vel advenit ab aliquo principio extrinseco, sicut lumen in aere ex influentia solis. Non autem potest esse quod ipsum esse sit causatum ab ipsa forma vel quiditate rei (dico sicut a causa efficiente) quia sic aliqua res esset sui ipsius causa et aliqua res seipsam in esse produceret, quod est impossibile. Ergo oportet quod omnis talis res, cuius esse est aliud quam natura sua habeat esse ab alio. Et quia omne, quod est per aliud, reducit ad illud quod est per se sicut ad causam primam, 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. Patet ergo quod intelligentia est forma et esse et quod esse habet a primo ente, quod est esse tantum. Et hoc est causa prima, quae Deus est.”

²⁷ *ST* I, q. 28, a. 2, ad 1: “Nihil autem quod est in Deo, potest habere habitudinem ad id in quo est, vel de quo dicitur, nisi habitudinem identitatis, propter summam Dei simplicitatem.”

²⁸ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 7, resp.

The analogy of being, as an analogy of proper proportionality of diverse likenesses of act and potency—which permits determinate analogical proportion among creatures, but does not require such determinate reciprocal proportion—permits intrinsic predication of God without implying real determined relation or reciprocal proportion of the Creator to the creature, or any dependence in God. St. Thomas Aquinas did very well in taking up, and perfecting, Aristotelian science for the sake of *sacra doctrina*, to augment our acquired contemplation of our provident Creator and Lord, the One Who Is. 