Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them in Aquinas: The Chimera, The Phoenix, and God*

Gregory T. Doolan
The Catholic University of America
Washington, DC

Introduction

Throughout the corpus of St. Thomas Aquinas, we find mention of numerous animals. He asks us to consider such natures as those of a man and a horse; the birds and the bees; lions and tigers and bears (*O mi!*). "All animals," Aquinas tells us, "are equally animals. Nevertheless," he is careful to add, "they are not [all] equal animals. Rather, one animal is greater and more perfect than another."[1] In other words, all animals equally belong to the genus ANIMAL,[2] but their differences make all the difference, resulting

* This paper was first presented as the 2025 Aquinas Lecture at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, LA. A subsequent version was presented later that year at the seventh Symposium Thomisticum in Vienna, Austria. I would like to thank the following people for their suggestions and feedback in conversation: Thérèse-Anne Druart, Nathaniel Taylor, Therese Cory, David Twetten, John O'Callaghan, Michael Gorman, Andrew Davison, Giovanni Ventimiglia, and Brett Kendall.

1 *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, q. 2, a. 9, obj. 16 and ad 16: "Omnia animalia sunt equaliter animalia, non tamen sunt equalia animalia, set unum animal est altero maius et perfectius; et similiter non oportet quod omnia peccata propter hoc sint paria" (Leonine ed., 23:54 [lines 98–101]; 23:56 [lines 322–26]). Unless otherwise credited, all translations are my own.

2 *De principiis naturae*, chap. 6 (Leon. ed., 43:46 [lines 19–26]). In what follows, I will employ the convention of using single quotation marks to indicate a term (e.g., 'animal' or 'horse,' with all punctuation following closing quote marks, as in the linguistics field); roman type when discussing an instance of what the term signifies (e.g., an animal or a

in grades and an order among the species, with man ranked above the other animals.[3] There is, however, a certain type of animal that he considers on occasion to which these observations are not relevant at all: a type to which the name does not equally apply and does not even appear among the ranks of species within the genus. I am speaking here of fictional beasts.

Thus, we find, in addition to the names of the real animals that I have noted, the names of such fictions as the Chimera and the Sphinx; unicorns, centaurs, and griffins; basilisks and mermaids; the dragon that breathes fire; the salamander that lives in fire; and the Phoenix that is consumed by it.[4] The names of all of these animals also appear in the book *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, by the author Newt Scamander, better known to us as J. K. Rowling. Early in that work, the question arises as to what a beast is. The answer is given in the negative by way of contrast to a *being* which, for the wizarding world, is "any creature that has sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws." By contrast, a *beast* is any living creature that is *not* a being.[5] A question arises, of course, regarding the status of muggles (nonmagical folk) such as you and me, but suffice it to say that, either way, we would not be classified as "*fantastic* beasts," since those are beasts with magical powers.[6]

---

horse), and small caps to indicate the *ratio*, notion, nature, formality, etc. that the term signifies (e.g., ANIMAL or HORSE).

3 *Summa contra gentiles* [*SCG*] IV, chap. 24 (Marietti ed., 2–3:296 [no. 3618]; *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 22, a. 11, corp. (Leon. ed., 22/3:638–39 [lines 130–46]); *In* II *Post. an.*, lec. 20 (Leon. ed., 1*/2:244 [lines 103–11]).

4 One can spot these "fantastic beasts" in Aquinas's writings, among other places, in the following locations: **Chimera** (*In* I *Sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, corp.); **Sphinx** (*In* IV *Phys.*, lec. 1, no. 407); **unicorn** (*Super Iob* 39); **centaur** (*In* II *Post. an.*, lec. 1); **griffin** (*Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I-II, q. 102, a. 6, ad 1); **basilisk** (*De ver.*, q. 26, a. 3, ad 4); **mermaid (siren)** (*Super Isa* 13); **dragon** (*Super Isa* 13); **salamander** (*In* II *Sent.*, d. 15, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1); **Phoenix** (*De ente*, chap. 4). Although today we recognize all of these beasts as fantastical (i.e., fictional), some of them Aquinas himself in fact accepted as reported to be real, as will be discussed below regarding the Phoenix.

5 J. K. Rowling, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (New York: Arthur A. Levine / Scholastic, 2001), 11: "Naturally, the matter has not rested there. We are all familiar with extremists who campaign for the classification of Muggles as 'beasts.'" The book originates as a school textbook in the *Harry Potter* book series and has been used as the title for a spinoff 2016 film and the series title of its two sequels, all three written by Rowling and directed by David Yates.

6 Of course, there are the exceptional cases of muggles who have magical powers despite being muggles (Hermione Granger comes to mind), who are derisively called "mudbloods" by certain "pure-blood" wizarding supremacists.

For Aquinas, who did not live in the Harry Potter universe, the terms 'being' and 'beast' carry rather different meanings. A being (*ens*) is anything that exists, whether fish or fowl, animal or plant, living or nonliving, substance or accident. A being is primarily and properly a *habens esse:* a haver of existence. By contrast, the term 'beast' (*bestia*) for Aquinas signifies a nonrational animal, which he also calls a 'brute animal' (*animal brutum*).[7] For the purposes of this paper, I will follow Aquinas's use of the term 'being' but will use the term 'beast' more broadly to speak of any animal, and the description 'fantastic beast' to speak in general of a fictional entity, and in particular of a fictional animal.[8]

The consideration of Aquinas's treatment of fictional animals may seem at first like a frivolous endeavor, but as we will see, it is in fact revealing of his metaphysical views regarding the treatment of such topics as natures, metaphysical possibilities, and the philosophical consideration of God. Indeed, for many atheists, the consideration of God and his divine nature is no different than the consideration of any other fantastic beast, such as the satirical Flying Spaghetti Monster (or FSM), which is the deity worshipped in the parodic religion of Pastafarianism.[9] The expression of this light-hearted parody is fundamentally rooted in a thought experiment presented by Bertrand Russell known as "Russell's Teapot," in which he hypothesizes someone believing, without evidence, that "between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit."[10] Given the limits of the power of telescopes in Russell's day, he notes that nobody would be able to disprove such a belief; nevertheless, Russell insists, that fact does not mean that the burden of proof falls on the one who rejects its existence. By his estimation, a parallel situation exists with belief in the existence of God: without evidence (he contends), God's existence is merely asserted, and the nonbeliever is (supposedly) challenged by the theist to disprove it.

---

7 At other times, however, he will use the word *bestia* in a restricted way to speak of wild land animals, as opposed to domestic ones, such as lions and bears, called such because of their cruelty: *In* II *Sent.*, d. 15, q. 3, a. 3, expos. (Mandonnet-Lethielleux ed., 2:392); *ST* I, q. 72, a. 1, ad 2 (Leon. ed., 5:184); *In* I *Pol.*, chap. 3 (Leon. ed., 48:88 [lines 260–62]).

8 I use the term 'beast' in this broader sense because some fictional animals are presented as having reason, such as centaurs, sphinxes, and mermaids.

9 Wikipedia, "Flying Spaghetti Monster," wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster (accessed March 29, 2025). See also Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, "Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster," spaghettimonster.org (accessed March 29, 2025).

10 Bertrand Russell, "Is There a God?" (1952), in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 11, *Last Philosophical Testament, 1943–68*, ed. John G. Slater (London: Routledge, 1997), 542–48.

What is interesting in this thought experiment of Teapotism is that Russell provides us with an example that is implicitly presented as a metaphysical possibility: in principle, there *could* be a teapot orbiting the sun. But the idea is fanciful. We find the same approach presented by so-called Pastafarians in a more outlandish way about the FSM: this fiction is all the more dubious because all the more fanciful, but it is not presented as an impossibility if the satire is to work at all: "*My* god is just as possible as yours, but look at how fantastical they both are! Despite that possibility, it's foolish to believe in either. And neither can be shown actually to exist."

Of course, the God of the believer is far from as fanciful as the FSM, and philosopher theologians such as Aquinas maintain that there is evidence for the existence of the former but none for the latter. As it turns out—if we consider his frequent observation that, in this lifetime, we can know only *that* God is but neither *how* nor *what* he is—the knowledge claims of the Pastafarian about the FSM are much stronger, presenting its possible nature as one consisting of noodles, sauce, and meatballs.[11] In fact, with fictional entities in general there seems to be a claim about their natures, most generally that they are kinds of animals, but more specifically types of birds, quadrupeds, and so on. To get a better sense of all of this and of what is at stake, we first need to consider Aquinas's account of fictional entities and their metaphysical status in general. Again, doing so will give us some insight into Aquinas's views regarding our knowledge of natures, metaphysical possibilities, and his philosophical theology.

The Being of Fictional Entities

When considering fictional entities, Aquinas's paradigmatic example is the Chimera. In Greek mythology, this beast was a fire-breathing hybrid composed of different animal parts, usually depicted as a lion with the head of a goat protruding from its back and a snake for a tail. Given the composite nature of this mythological beast, the name "Chimera" would later become a term to describe any fictional animal composed of parts from other animals. Hence, Aquinas tells us that both the Sphinx and the Greek tragelaphus, or goat-stag (*hircocervus* in Latin), are fictions like the Chimera. Thus, like the Chimera, they do not exist.[12]

---

[11] Regarding Aquinas's limited knowledge claims about God, see *ST* I, q. 3, prol. (Leon. ed., 4:35). Regarding the Pastafarian claims about the FSM, see the "Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster" website.

[12] *In* IV *Phys.*, lec. 1: "Quod non est, nusquam est, idest in nullo loco est: non enim est dare ubi sit tragelaphus aut sphinx, quae sunt quaedam fictitia sicut chimaera"—"What does

In short, fictions are nonbeings. But Aquinas is careful to clarify the sense according to which the term 'nonbeing' (*non ens*) is used here, noting that the term can be said in two ways. In one way, something is called a nonbeing because nonexistence (*non esse*) is included in its definition, as is the case with a privation such as blindness (the absence of sight) and evil in general (the absence of a good that ought to be present).[13] The same, we might add, is the case with a simple negation, such as a donut hole at the center of an intact donut: although we say that "The hole is there! On the interior of the donut," in actual fact the hole as such is nothing, conceptually including this nonexistence in its definition as the relevant non-donut on the interior of the donut.[14]

Although fictional animals likewise do not exist, Aquinas explains that they are not called 'nonbeings' in the manner that privations and negations are called such. Even though fictional beasts cannot be found in reality (literally, *in rerum natura:* "in the nature of things"), their definitions do not include the privation of being. To illustrate his point, we might consider the unicorn, for which we could offer the nominal definition of "one-horned horse." No mention of nonexistence is made in this definition; thus, Aquinas observes, "nothing prevents imagining [such] nonbeings and conceiving of their forms."[15] By contrast, with privations and negations,

---

not exist is nowhere, that is, it exists in no place: for we cannot say where a goat-stag or the Sphinx might be, which are certain fictions like the Chimera" (Leon. ed., 2:146 [no. 2]).

13 *De ver.*, q. 3, a. 4, ad 6: "Ad sextum dicendum quod aliquid dicitur non ens dupliciter: uno modo quia non esse cadit in diffinitione eius, sicut caecitas dicitur non ens, et talis non entis non potest concipi aliqua forma neque in intellectu neque in imaginatione, et huiusmodi non ens est malum; alio modo quia non invenitur in rerum natura quamvis ipsa privatio entitatis non claudatur in eius diffinitione, et sic nihil prohibet imaginari non entia et eorum formas concipere"—"To the sixth objection it must be said that something is called a nonbeing in [one of] two ways: in one way because nonexistence falls within its definition, as blindness is called a nonbeing. Of such a nonbeing no form can be conceived either in the intellect or in the imagination, and evil is this kind of nonbeing. In another way, something is called a nonbeing because it is not found in reality although in its definition there is not included a privation of being. In this way, nothing prevents imagining such nonbeings and conceiving of their forms" (Leon. ed., 22/1:111 [lines 113–23]). Blindness, Aquinas explains, is the negation of sight in that which is suited by nature to see; see, e.g., *In* II *Sent.*, d. 34, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2 (Mandonnet-Lethielleux ed, 2:873).

14 Why is the donut hole a negation rather than a privation? Because, I would argue, it is not a lack in the donut, since donuts as such are not supposed to have any pastry in their center. (Of course, a donut is artificial. As a parallel from nature, we might think of the ear canal or nostril of an animal, which is structurally supposed to lack flesh and bone).

15 *De ver.*, q. 3, a. 4, ad 6 (Leon. ed., 22/1:111 [lines 113–23]). For the Latin, see note 13 above. For Aquinas's treatment of these different senses of 'nonbeing,' see Robert W.

there are no forms to imagine or consider, since, definitionally, they are *absences* of form. And yet, as he presents it, these absences still have a connection to extramental reality in a way that fictions do not.[16]

Considering how our concepts relate to the real world, Aquinas notes that one type of concept is the likeness of a thing outside of the mind, such as with the concept HUMAN as the likeness of human nature existing outside the mind in real individuals. Such concepts have, as he puts it, an immediate foundation in real things. By contrast, our concepts of logical (second) intentions—such as the intention GENUS—do not follow simply from the consideration of things outside of the mind, but instead from a consideration *of that consideration* based on a mode of understanding (*modus intelligendi*). Consequently, there is nothing extramental that immediately corresponds to them. When we go to the zoo, for example, we will encounter neither the pure logical intention called GENUS nor even the genus ANIMAL, but rather individual animals: *this* lion or *that* zebra. And yet, despite this fact, Aquinas is careful to note that this sort of concept is not false: even though it has no *immediate* foundation in a real thing, it does have what he terms a "remote foundation"—a genuine basis in real things for the mind to form such concepts. As with logical intentions such as the notion of GENUS, so too, Aquinas says, with the consideration of mathematical objects.[17] And the same is the case for our consideration of privations and negations: although they do not have an immediate foundation in reality, they nevertheless have a remote foundation. Thus, even though blindness is neither a form in a thing nor even a form conceived by the mind, the concept of blindness in our mind still ultimately has a foundation in reality, inasmuch as real eyes can truly lack sight, allowing the mind to consider that lack conceptually.

Aquinas next contrasts the prior two sorts of concepts with the consideration that can be had of a fiction such as the Chimera. This sort of concept, he maintains, has *no* foundation in reality: "For it is neither the

---

Schmidt, S.J., *The Domain of Logic according to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 77.

16 See, e.g., *De ver.*, q. 1, a. 8, corp. (Leon. ed., 22/1:27–28 [lines 97–148]).

17 *In* I *Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, corp.: "Aliquando vero id quod significatur per nomen, non habet fundamentum in re, neque proximum neque remotum, sicut conceptio chimerae: quia neque est similitudo alicujus rei extra animam, neque consequitur ex modo intelligendi rem aliquam vere [Parma ed.: *naturae*]: et ideo ista conceptio est falsa. Unde patet secundum, scilicet quod ratio dicitur esse in re, inquantum significatum nominis, cui accidit esse rationem, est in re: et hoc contingit proprie quando conceptio intellectus est similitudo rei" (Mandonnet-Lethielleux ed., 1:67). Cf. d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, corp. (Mandonnet-Lethielleux ed., 1:486).

likeness of anything outside of the mind, nor does it follow from a mode of understanding some real nature [*res naturae*]. Therefore, that [Chimeric] conception is false."[18] This claim might seem surprising given that we could not conceive of the Chimera if it were not for our grasp in the first place of real extramental natures—LION, GOAT, and SNAKE—from which we compose a Chimeric concept. In fact, Aquinas acknowledges this sort of recombination by the mind, explaining that fictional natures are cognized in the way that an inventor thinks up the form of some new invention: not out of thin air but based upon the forms of things that she already knows. Thus, Aquinas explains, the mind composes and divides preserved images to devise a new form that has never been perceived by the senses, such as a gold mountain or, again, the Chimera.[19]

If our concepts of real animals and their parts have an immediate foundation in reality, we might wonder why our concepts of fictions, constructed out of these other concepts, do not. The answer for Aquinas seems to be that the constructed fictional animal is presented *as though* it has its own distinctive nature as a species. If the legend of the unicorn were merely of a horse that happened to have a horn on its head, there would be nothing much distinctive about it as a fictionalized animal, since this construct would entail merely an accidental difference between the unicorn and other breeds of horses. Instead, the legend intends to convey much more—namely, that this fictional beast has its own distinctive nature (even if related to other breeds of horses). And it is *that fictional nature* that has no foundation in reality. To say of such a nature that it is fictional, then, is to say that, properly speaking, it is not a nature at all; instead, it is what I will refer to as a "pseudo-nature."

Regarding the pseudo-nature of beasts acknowledged to be fictional, Aquinas follows Aristotle who, in his *Posterior Analytics*, asks:

> How will you prove what something is? Anyone who knows what a man or anything else is must also know that it exists. (Of that which does not exist, no one knows what it is. You may know what the account of the *name* means when I say 'goat-stag,' but it is impossible to know what a goat-stag is.)[20]

---

[18] *In* I *Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, corp. (Mandonnet-Lethielleux ed., 1:67); see note 17 above for the Latin.

[19] *Deleta contra gentiles* I and II (*Del. SCG*), primae redactiones I, chap. 53 (Leon. ed., 13: 20* [appendix]).

[20] In *Posterior analytics* 1.7.92b4–12, Aristotle concludes this point by saying, "But if you are to prove what something is and also that it exists, how will you prove them by the

Commenting on this passage, Aquinas explains that there is no quiddity, or essence, of a nonbeing. Thus, no one can know the whatness of what is not. Someone may object, of course, saying, "But we *do* know what a goat-stag is! It's an animal that's half goat and half stag!" To which Aquinas would reply, with Aristotle, that, although we can indeed know what we mean by the *name* 'goat-stag,' this is not the same thing as knowing a nature. And the reason we cannot know such a nature is that there is no nature for us to know: the goat-stag is not *in rerum natura*.[21]

Inasmuch as the natures of fictional entities are pseudo-natures, they are like counterfeit money with no genuine value. Just as it is as meaningless to ask what the exchange rate is of counterfeit dollars to real euros, so it is pointless to ask what the diet or mating habits are of the unicorn.[22] Or

---

same argument? Definitions make a single thing plain, and so do demonstrations; but what a man is and that men exist are different" (trans. Jonathan Barnes in *Complete Works* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912–1954]).

21 One might further object and say that, as regards fictions such as the goat-stag or unicorn, we at least know that it is an animal, but in fact we do not even know that, since there is no "it" there to be an animal or anything else. The "it" is entirely in the consideration of the intellect. For Aquinas, see *In* I *Post. an.*, lec. 6: "Dicit ergo primo quod non uidetur esse possibilis aliquis modus quo aliquis demonstret 'quod quid est esse' hominis, et hoc ideo quia *necesse* est quod quicunque scit 'quod quid est esse' hominis uel cuiuscunque alterius rei, quod sciat rem illam esse. Quia enim non entis non est aliqua quiditas uel essencia, de eo *quod non est nullus* potest scire 'quod quid est,' set potest scire significationem nominis, uel rationem ex pluribus nominibus compositam, sicut potest aliquis scire quid significat hoc nomen '*tragelaphus*' uel '*yrcoceruus*' (quod idem est), quia significat quoddam animal compositum ex yrco et ceruo; set *inpossibile est* sciri 'quod quid est' yrcocerui, quia nihil est tale in rerum natura"—"He [Aristotle] says first, therefore, that there does not seem to be any possible way by which someone could demonstrate the WHAT-IT-IS-TO-BE of MAN, and this is because it is *necessary* that whoever knows the WHAT-IT-IS-TO-BE of MAN or of any other thing, must know that that thing exists. For since there is no quiddity or essence of a nonbeing, concerning *that which does not exist, no one* can know the WHAT-IT-IS. Still, one can know the signification of the name, or the *ratio* composed of several names. For example, someone can know what this name 'tragelaphus' or 'goat-stag' (which is the same) signifies, because it signifies a certain animal composed of a goat and a stag; but *it is impossible* to know the WHAT-IT-IS of GOAT-STAG because there is no such thing in reality" (Leon. ed., 1*/2:194 [lines 12–26]).

22 Here I gratefully borrow counterfeit money from Gyula Klima, who provides this excellent analogy to shed light on the status of beings of reason: "Therefore, to ask, 'What are nonexistent beings of reason?,' where that question is understood as asking about the nature of a curious kind of being, namely, beings that do not exist, is just as misguided as asking about the actual currency exchange rate between, say, yen and forged dollars. But again, this does not mean that we cannot understand what we mean by the phrase 'beings of reason'" ("The Semantic Principles Underlying Saint Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics of Being," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 [1996]: 96).

perhaps it is better to say that these pseudo-natures are like the pretend money of board games like Monopoly, which has pretend value within the pretend world of those games. Just as we agree to the rules of those games, similarly, when we read fiction like the Harry Potter series, we suspend our disbelief and agree to the rules of the pretend world in which fictional natures are presented as though existing. As such, fictions are not what Aquinas would term 'beings of nature' (*entia naturae*), but instead 'beings of reason' (*entia rationis*).[23] Still, we need to be careful even with that language, since it could easily be misread. In saying that fictions are beings of reason, Aquinas does not mean to indicate that, even though the Chimera and unicorns do not exist in reality, at least they exist in the mind. Since these pseudo-animals have no genuine nature, there is no nature of them to exist even in the mind.[24]

A common question that students ask upon hearing Aquinas's position is whether Aquinas would at least hold that unicorns are *possible*. In other words, granting that they do not *actually* exist, the question that students want answered is whether he thinks that they *could* exist. (Surely God could have made the unicorn!). But if we consider again the pseudo-status of the natures of fictional beasts, we will realize that this sort of question is in fact a pseudo-question: If there is no genuine nature at play for us to know, how can we answer whether or not it could possibly exist? Later

---

[23] I have not found Aquinas ever explicitly saying that fictions are *entia rationis*, but neither have I seen him explicitly indicate that they are not beings of reason. Schmidt identifies them as such, together with second intentions such as GENUS and SPECIES, as well as with nonbeings such as privations and negations. He identifies both fictions and second intentions as what he terms "positive rationate being" and clarifies that logic has as its subject matter the latter sort, which has a remote foundation in reality. As he explains, since fictions have no foundation in reality (whether immediate or remote), there can be no science of them (see *Domain of Logic*, 75–93). Klima, by contrast, holds that, because fictions have no foundation at all in reality for Aquinas, they should not be classified even as beings of reason (see "Semantic Principles," 125–27). It strikes me that both assessments are correct if we consider what it is that we are and are not identifying as the relevant being of reason when we are speaking of fictions such as the Chimera, as will be noted in what follows.

[24] For a thorough analysis of how Aquinas addresses truths about nonbeings in the context of his theory of truth as adequation of intellect and thing, see Gloria Wasserman, "Thomas Aquinas on Truths about Nonbeings," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 80 (2007): 101–13. (Wasserman now publishes under the name Gloria Frost). Wasserman examines how Aquinas accounts for the truth of propositions about nonbeings (such as "blindness is in the eye" and "no chimeras exist") without compromising his fundamental adequation theory of truth.

Scholastics will in fact present these fictions as impossibilities.[25] But I think it is safer to say that, for Aquinas, it is not that they are impossibilities (as though intrinsically contradictory), but rather that they *non*possibilities: The question about possibility is irrelevant because there is no nature for us to ask the question about.[26]

It is important to clarify here what is being denied. The question of whether unicorns could possibly exist is very different from the question of whether it is possible for there to exist an animal that has features of the beast described in the myth of the unicorn. Perhaps there could be such a thing, but it would not have the *nature* of a unicorn for the very reason that there is no such nature to be had. On this point, I think, Aquinas would be sympathetic with Saul Kripke's observation that, "if archeologists or geologists were to discover tomorrow some fossils conclusively showing the existence of animals in the past satisfying everything we know about unicorns from the myth of the unicorn, that would not show that there were unicorns."[27] As Kripke explains, "If we suppose, as I do, that the unicorns of the myth were supposed to be a particular species, but that the myth provides insufficient information about their internal structure to determine a unique species, then there is no actual *or possible* species of which we can say that it would have been the species of unicorn."[28]

I should note that none of the points I have been making should be seen as denying the possibility of there being species of animals that have never to date existed and, perhaps, never will. Aquinas himself makes clear his view not only that there are such genuine possibilities, but also that they are within God's power and that God has ideas of these possible natures.[29]

---

25 Fourteenth-century logicians come to treat fictions like the Chimera as implicitly contradictory terms. See E. J. Ashworth, "Existential Assumptions in Late Medieval Logic," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1973): 141–47; Klima, "Semantic Principles," 126n74.

26 It is like a category error but worse, in a way, since these pseudo-natures are in no category at all.

27 Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 24.

28 Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 157 (emphasis added).

29 See, e.g., *De ver.*, q. 2, a. 8; q. 3, a. 6 (Leon. ed., 22/1:69–74, 112–13); *ST* I, q. 14, a. 9; q. 15, a. 3 (Leon. ed., 4:181, 204). Regarding God's knowledge of possibles, see John F. Wippel, "The Reality of Nonexisting Possibles According to Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and Godfrey of Fontaines," *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1981): 729–58. For a response to Wippel, see James Ross, "Aquinas's Exemplarism: Aquinas's Voluntarism," *New Scholasticism* 64 (1990): 171–98. For replies to Ross's response, see Armand Maurer, "James Ross on the Divine Ideas: A Reply," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1993): 497–511; Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "St. Thomas, James Ross, and Exemplarism: A

The point is simply that *we* cannot know the natures of these possibles.[30] On this point, we should recall that Aquinas follows Aristotle's position that we must first know *that* something is if we are to know *what* it is—in other words, if we are to know a nature as a genuine nature.[31] When considering the various names for 'essence' (notably, 'quiddity' and 'nature') in chapter 1 of the *De ente et essentia*, Aquinas explains that a being's essence accounts for its definability, which follows from its intelligibility, and that intelligibility is made known to us through observing the being's proper operations. And, of course, for us to be able to observe those operations, the being must first of all exist.[32]

Some distinctions need to be made here, though, to clarify Aquinas's position. To say that, for us to know *what* something is, we need to know *that* it is does not mean that the nature must be presently existent, nor that we all must have firsthand experience of it. Here, we should turn to consider Aquinas's views regarding the role of testimony in knowing the essences of things.

Testimony and Belief in Genuine Natures

In the *Summa contra gentiles*, when addressing whether God can know nonbeings, Aquinas draws a comparison with our own knowledge that is useful for our considerations. As he explains, "Our intellect, according to that operation by which it knows the *what-it-is* [of things] can have knowledge even of those that do not exist in act. For it can comprehend the essence of LION or of HORSE even if all such animals were killed."[33] The clear indication is that, if those species were to go extinct, our concepts of LION and HORSE would not suddenly be false in the manner of our concept of the Chimera: in knowing LION and HORSE under such circumstances, we would still be knowing genuine natures.[34]

Reply," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1993): 221–34. For Ross's reply to these replies, see his "Response to Maurer and Dewan," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1993): 235–43.

30 At least through natural means.

31 Aristotle, *Post. an.* 1.7.92b4–12.

32 *De ente et essentia*, chap. 1 (Leon. ed., 43:369–370 [lines 27–52]).

33 *SCG* I, chap. 66, no. 5: "Amplius. Intellectus noster, secundum illam operationem qua cognoscit *quod quid est*, notitiam habere potest etiam eorum quae non sunt actu: potest enim leonis vel equi essentiam comprehendere omnibus huiusmodi animalibus interemptis" (Marietti ed., 2:76–77 [no. 545]).

34 This raises, of course, complex questions regarding personal vs. simple supposition that I will not address here.

We might ask, however, whether it is Aquinas's position that we need to have had experience in the first place of things with those essences in order to know those natures. It seems not. Consider that it is quite likely that Aquinas himself never encountered a lion, and yet he clearly acknowledges LIONHOOD as a genuine nature.[35] How is this possible? We find something of an answer in the *De veritate*, in a consideration of whether Adam, in the state of innocence, had knowledge of all creatures. In reply, Aquinas explains that there are two ways in which something can be known in its proper nature. In one way, it can be known through a judgment about the thing when that thing is in fact existing in its proper nature. We are told that Adam did not know all creatures in this way, since not all creatures yet existed. Aquinas then explains that, in a second way, something can be known in its proper nature through knowing its definition. "And in this way even a nonexisting thing can be known in [its] proper nature. For example," he adds (speaking in the first-person singular), "if all lions were dead, I could [still] know *what* a lion is." Similarly, Aquinas concludes, Adam could know the proper natures of things independently of experience—namely, by knowing their definition.[36] But how did Adam know those definitions? Aquinas tells us: he knew them through the knowledge of grace by which God spoke internally to him.[37]

In sum, to know the definition of a species of being is to know its essence, whether or not one has had firsthand experience of that being or has acquired knowledge of this definition from another. But where does that knowledge come from? I suspect that, just as it is unlikely that Aquinas ever encountered a lion firsthand, it is also unlikely that his knowledge of the *definition* of LION resulted from God speaking internally to him in the manner that Aquinas tells us that God spoke to Adam. How, then, could

---

35 If in fact he did encounter the lion, we may substitute the example for the many other species that he talks about but likely did not have firsthand experience of, such as the rhinoceros.

36 *De ver.*, q. 18, a. 4, ad 10: "Alio modo dicitur aliquis cognoscere rem in propria natura per modum diffinitionis dum scilicet cognoscit aliquis quid sit propria natura alicuius rei; et sic etiam res non existens potest in propria natura cognosci, ut si omnes leones essent mortui possem scire quid est leo: et sic etiam res tunc non existentes Adam in propria natura cognoscere poterat"—"In another way, someone is said to know a thing in [its] proper nature through the mode of definition, namely when someone knows what the proper nature of some thing is. And in this way even a nonexisting thing can be known in [its] proper nature. For example, if all lions were dead, I could [still] know *what* a lion is. Thus, Adam was able to know in their proper nature even things not then existing" (Leon. ed., 22/2:543 [lines 290–338]; emphasis added in trans.).

37 *De ver.*, q. 18, a. 4, corp. (Leon. ed., 22/2:542 [lines 222–33]).

he come by the definition of LION that he provides when commenting on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, noting that its genus is ANIMAL and its differentia is WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF DARING (*cum abundantia audaciae*)?[38] The answer is that he could accept this account by an act of faith. Not, of course, an act of theological faith, but rather what Aquinas terms "faith broadly taken" (*fides communiter accepta*). As he explains, this cognitive attitude entails believing something either because we have a strong opinion about it or because of the testimony of another.[39] Belief is a cognitive act, but one where the understanding is determined to a position neither because it is self-evident nor through demonstration, but because the will chooses to assent to it as fitting or useful.[40] "For example," he tells us, "a man believes those [things] that he does not see upon the testimony of some good man who sees what he does not himself see."[41]

As regards a number of animals that Aquinas discusses, he accepts both their reality and the account of their nature based on the testimony of authorities such as Aristotle, Isidore, and his own teacher, Albert. It might surprise us to discover that it is on the basis of such testimony that Aquinas believes in the existence and nature of the unicorn—but only because he follows others in taking the name 'unicorn' to be a synonym for 'rhinoceros.' Commenting on the Book of Job, which mentions this beast, Aquinas identifies the following traits of the nature of the rhinoceros: It is a wild (i.e., nondomesticated) four-legged animal, having a single horn in the middle of its forehead which, because of its ferocity, cannot like the ox be easily tamed.[42] This account is not exhaustive, nor is it determinate, but it certainly conveys *something* of the nature of the rhino. We get an even more detailed account of the rhinoceros from St. Albert in his *De animalibus:*

> It has a terrifying bellow, the body of a horse, the feet of an elephant, a pig's tail, the head of a deer, and in the middle of its forehead it bears a horn which is beautiful for its wondrous splendor. The horn is four feet long and is so sharp that it easily pierces everything it strikes with one blow. The animal is almost never able to be tamed

---

38 *In* VII *Metaphys.*, lec. 12 (Marietti ed., 373–74 [no. 1549]).

39 *De ver.*, q. 14, a. 2, corp. (Leon. ed., 22/1:442 [lines 236–39]).

40 *De ver.*, q. 14, a. 1, corp. (Leon. ed., 22/1:437 [lines 129–42]).

41 *In* III *Sent.*, d. 23, q. 2, a. 2, qla. 2, sol.: "Sicut homo in his quae non videt, credit testimonio alicujus boni viri qui videt ea quae ipse non videt" (Moos-Lethielleux ed., 3:727 [lines 148–49]).

42 *Super Iob* 39, nos. 1–12 (Leon. ed., 26:209–10 [lines 113–54]).

> and hardly ever comes into the power of men while still alive, for seeing itself beaten, it kills itself in a rage.[43]

For both Albert and Aquinas, the concept that they had of rhinoceros was thus what we might call a "constructed concept," relying on the conceptual likenesses of other animals combined to form an indirect likeness of the rhino.[44] However indirect and imperfect that likeness is, it still provided them with an understanding of that nature to some degree. Indeed, even the person who *has* seen a rhino—including the rhinocerologist—has a limited knowledge of that nature. As Aquinas reminds us on more than one occasion, the essential *differentiae* of natures are unknown to us not only as regards immaterial beings that we cannot sense at all, but even of beings that we *can* sense. Thus, for sensible things, we signify their essential differences through proper accidents that arise from those *differentiae*, naming them as causes from their effects.[45]

In his commentary on the Apostle's Creed, Aquinas notes both the limitation of our knowledge and the need for faith in knowing things:

> One might say that it is foolish to believe what is not seen and that these [things] *should not* be believed. I answer, first, by saying that [a consideration of] the imperfection of our intellect removes this concern. For if man could perfectly know on his own all things visible and invisible, it would [indeed] be foolish to believe what we do not see. But our knowledge is so weak that no philosopher could ever perfectly investigate the nature of a single fly. Hence, we read that one philosopher spent thirty years in solitude so that he could know the nature of the bee. . . . Secondly, one can respond to this [concern about faith] by supposing that a certain master had said something in his own discipline [*scientia*], and some uneducated person [*rusticus*] were to declare that *not* to be the case because

---

43 Albertus Magnus, *On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, bk. 22, trans. K. F. Kitchell, Jr. and I. M. Resnick (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 2:1521. The rhinoceros entry is no. 71, "Monocerus."

44 On the notion of a constructed concept for Aquinas, together with the example of the rhinoceros, see Therese Scarpelli Cory, "Is Anything in the Intellect That Was Not First in Sense? Empiricism and Knowledge of the Incorporeal in Aquinas," *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 5 (2018): 111–14, 137–39.

45 *De ente*, chap. 4 (Leon. ed., 43:379 [lines 72–84]).

> he did not understand, that person would be considered much the fool.[46]

Consider that most people outside of Australia have never seen firsthand a living platypus.[47] Nevertheless, they can have some understanding of its nature when told that it is a small, beaver-like, otter-footed mammal with a duck-like bill, and a venomous spur on its hind foot, and that it gives birth by laying eggs. This combination might seem quite fantastical and bordering on the fictitious, and in fact the reality of this beast as a genuine nature was initially doubted in Europe when preserved specimens first arrived in England in 1799. Some people wondered whether the platypus was a hoax, like the famous Fiji mermaids that had for long been taxidermically fabricated from the upper bodies of monkeys and the hind parts of fish. But after investigation, it was found to be a real species of animal with a genuine nature.[48] Still, for most people even today, we rely on the testimony of others who have seen and investigated the platypus. In sum: it is reasonable to accept the testimony of others about these natures.

Still, we might ask at this point what the difference is between the concepts we construct about fictional beasts based on myth, such as the unicorn and the goat-stag, and concepts we might construct about real animals such as the platypus and the electric eel? Why is it impossible, as Aquinas contends, to know the whatness of a goat-stag by means of a constructed concept of a goat and a stag when, by means of my constructed concept of platypus, I can know (at least indirectly and to a degree) the nature of the platypus? It strikes me that the answer is simple: in the case of the fictional beast, we have acknowledged from the outset that it is fictional. If we grant that, we implicitly grant that there is no nature for us

---

[46] *In Symbolum Apostolorum, scilicet "Credo in Deum" expositio*, prol.: "Sed dicit aliquis: Stultum est credere quod non videtur, nec sunt credenda quae non videntur. Respondeo. Dicendum, quod hoc dubium *primo* tollit imperfectio intellectus nostri: nam si homo posset perfecte per se cognoscere omnia visibilia et invisibilia, stultum esset credere quae non videmus; sed cognitio nostra est adeo debilis quod nullus philosophus potuit unquam perfecte investigare naturam unius muscae: unde legitur, quod unus philosophus fuit triginta annis in solitudine, ut cognosceret naturam apis. . . . *Secundo* potest responderi, quia dato quod aliquis magister aliquid diceret in sua scientia, et aliquis rusticus diceret non esse sicut magister doceret, eo quod ipse non intelligeret, multum reputaretur stultus ille rusticus" (*Opuscula theologica*, Mareitti 2nd ed., 2:193 [nos. 864–65]).

[47] At the time this paper was written in 2025, the only platypuses outside of Australia are two that live at the San Diego Zoo in California.

[48] Ann Moyal, *Platypus: The Extraordinary Story of How a Curious Creature Baffled the World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), xi–xiii; 74–88.

to know, and hence that there is nothing verifiable. By contrast, when we accept the testimony of others about an animal such as the platypus, it is in principle possible for us to verify whether our constructed concept about it is indeed the indirect likeness of a real nature. Of course, such testimony can be mistaken, or we can be mistaken about it. Such exceptions, however, should not be seen as detracting from the fact that we can and do have concepts by which, to some degree, we have some understanding of the essences of things through belief founded on the testimony of others.[49]

So far, I have drawn a distinction between genuine natures of real beings and pseudo-natures of fictional beings. But it strikes me that there is a third treatment of natures that Aquinas would acknowledge: what I will call "hypothesized natures."

Hypothesized Natures

In a way, I have already discussed a sort of hypothesized nature: from the perspective of the believer reliant on the testimony of another, that nature that she accepts as real is accepted on the hypothesis that the testimony is accurate. As Aquinas would say, it is accepted *ex suppositione fidei*.[50] Such is the case for most of us with our acceptance of the platypodian nature. Of course, whether or not you or I believe testimony about the platypus has no bearing on the genuineness of its nature. What I have in mind when I speak of a hypothesized nature again entails consideration of a constructed concept of a nature that does not exist. In this respect, it is like a fictional nature. As I have noted, however, a fictional nature is a pseudo-nature.

---

[49] We find a parallel with Aquinas's account of how we conceptualize and name singulars. For Aquinas, a proper name such as 'Socrates' is not a Russellian disguised definite description (e.g., "the teacher of Plato who drank hemlock"). Instead, as Aquinas explains, the name of a designated singular signifies what distinguishes the singular in a determinate way, including (in this case) its determinate matter, such as *this* flesh and *these* bones. Thus, the name 'Socrates,' for Aquinas, can directly reference the individual as such, in its individuated nature, even if we have never had direct experience of that singular. Presumably, the same would hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for our conceptualization and naming of *natures* for which we may never have had direct experience, such as the nature of the platypus. Just as a proper name can refer to a real individual without requiring direct acquaintance, our concepts can refer to real natures like that of the platypus—while concepts of fictional entities like the goat-stag or unicorn lack this foundation in reality. See *ST* I, q. 30, a. 4, corp. (Leon. ed., 4:341). Cf. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 257–84.

[50] For an example of his use of this expression, see *In* III *Sent.*, d. 21, q. 2, a. 3, ad 2 (Moos-Lethielleux ed., 3:648 [line 90]).

Thus, asking whether the mythological unicorn could possibly exist is a pseudo-question, since we do not (indeed cannot) know *of what* it is asked. I think that Kripke is quite right that part of the problem is that the myth does not provide sufficient information about the physiological structure of the legendary unicorn. Consider by contrast, however, the question of whether it is possible for there to exist some animal with a nature that we do not know but that, as I noted earlier, might have traits *like* the unicorn of myth. Consider further that we start describing some of its physiology, noting that what we are hypothesizing is a mammal, with such and such organs, and so on. On this hypothesis, could it exist?

This sort of question is very relevant in this day and age with the reality of genetic engineering. But we can also see its relevance historically with the simple case study of the possibility of interbred species. Aquinas himself observes that, "Some animals of a new species result from the mixture of animals of diverse species, as the mule is generated from a donkey and a mare."[51] Or, again, the liger, which results from the breeding of a male lion and a tigress. It is clear from the present (and reported) actuality of such beings that their natures are possibilities. Surely, even before these beasts were bred, it was meaningful to ask *whether* there could be such a crossbred nature. Still, what we would be asking about would not be a genuine nature as such, but rather a placeholder nature: a stand in for what we do not know but for which we can give a mere nominal definition, as with saying that *if* there could be a liger, it *would be* a crossbreed of a lion and a tigress. Moreover, while I contend that for Aquinas we can meaningfully ask in this limited way whether such a hypothesized constructed nature could possibly exist, that question can be answered only once its actual existence has been discerned, and not in advance. Or, let me rephrase that: I think that, for Aquinas, we could never be certain in advance about the proposed nature's *possibility*, although we could at times discern its *impossibility* if the hypothesized nature were indeed impossible.

What I am alluding to here is that, for the concept of a hypothetical nature to be able to signify and reference a possible genuine nature, what is hypothesized cannot be intrinsically contradictory. The risk in hypothesizing a nature is that, although what we conceptually construct might *seem* coherent, there is always the risk that there is some contradiction lurking in the background that we have neglected. Consider that, at first

---

[51] *ST* I, q. 73, a. 1, ad 3: "Animalia etiam quaedam secundum novam speciem aliquando oriuntur ex commixtione animalium diversorum secundum speciem, sicut cum ex asino et equa generatur mulus" (Leon. ed., 5:187).

glance, it might seem coherent to speak of a four-legged animal possessed of reason. Nevertheless, Aquinas contends that the parts that compose the definition "rational quadruped animal" are in fact mutually exclusive, and the definition therefore intrinsically false.[52] Why? The answer would likely not be apparent to many people, but Aquinas makes clear that the sort of body that is suited to a rational animal is one that is upright, bipedal, and possessed of hands, which are the tool of reason.[53] In many of these cases of hypothesized animal natures, it would likely be apparent only to the specialist whether the nature is physiologically impossible.[54]

In sum, I would argue that, for Aquinas, we can sometimes successfully establish analytically the impossibility of some hypothesized nature, but we cannot in a parallel way safely establish the absolute *possibility* of its existence.[55] The only way to know, for example, whether the once hypoth-

---

[52] *ST* I, q. 17, a. 3, corp. (Leon. ed., 4:221).

[53] See, e.g., *ST* I, q. 76, a. 5, ad 4 (Leon. ed., 5:228); q. 91, a. 3, ad 2 and ad 3 (Leon. ed., 5:394).

[54] In short, their impossibility would be what Aquinas describes as evident (*per se notum*) to the "wise," rather than to all (see, e.g., *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1, corp. [Leon. ed., 4:27–28]). For example, there are issues regarding size-scaling of animals and their metabolic rates according to biological principles such as Kleiber's Law that would make a giant gorilla like King Kong or a giant dog like Clifford the Big Red dog metabolic impossibilities and, thus, disguised *metaphysical* impossibilities.

[55] Someone might object that, if we can coherently conceptualize noninstantiated geometric figures, such as Descartes's chiliagon, it should similarly be possible for us to coherently conceptualize possible animal natures. There is, however, a key difference between such geometric figures and natural species. As Aquinas notes, whereas mathematical objects abstract from all sensible matter in concept and in definition, natural objects abstract from designated matter but not from undesignated, or common matter. Thus, the consideration of natural species must factor in the relevant material conditions for the possibility of their existence, which seems a tall task for the merely hypothesized. It strikes me that the best we can do, in accord with Aquinas's views, is to conceive of a nature that is a trivial possibility, such as "a species of great cat that is on average slightly larger and heavier than a tiger," which is the largest extant species of cat. But, again, this is an accidental difference and not one that gets at a genuine *differentia* or even at a *proprium.* For Aquinas on the distinction between natural and mathematical objects and how they are considered in the sciences, see *In Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 1 (Leon. ed., 50:136–42); *In* VI *Metaphys.*, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., 295–98 [lines 1147–79]).

Despite my point about animal species, it should be acknowledged that Aquinas does think that we can discern the possibility of the existence of natures that are immaterial beings (simple substances, or angels) by analyzing the nature (*ratio*) of form as such. However, this line of reasoning establishes the possibility of the existence only of a certain *grade* of being (immaterial being), which is very different from establishing the possibility of a specific nature. Moreover, it does so only by means of a *via negativa*, revealing not the *whatness* (quiddity) of such possible beings, but instead what they

esized liger nature was a genuine possibility was to breed one. This is a key point for us to remember, I would argue, when reading Aquinas: with any hypothesized natural essence, definitive knowledge of its genuine possibility can be attained only through evidence of its actuality. I will return to this point shortly.

There is one last sort of hypothesized nature to acknowledge: What I will refer to as a hypothesized *causal* nature. Consider that you hear a knocking sound at the door. That sound is insufficient to account for itself. In accord with the principle of causality that Aquinas affirms, it must have a cause.[56] In short, the existence of the effect reveals the existence of the cause, but nothing of its essence as such. In my example, we could not say whether the cause of that sound has a human, rhinoceric, angelic, or any other definitive nature. The best we could do would be to name the cause from its effect: The source of the sound is the 'door knocker.' The sort of inference I am describing here is the kind of reasoning involved in a *quia* demonstration, which entails reasoning from effect to cause.[57] This will allow us to hypothesize that, *if* there is an effect, then there must exist a being whose nature is sufficient to cause it. But, again, as with a hypothesized constructed nature, the hypothesized causal nature remains, in itself, unknown to us by means of such reasoning.

With these distinctions in place concerning questions of possibility and impossibility as pertaining to genuine natures, fictional pseudo-natures, and hypothesized natures, I will turn now to consider one of Aquinas's most famous texts—chapter 4 of his *De ente et essentia*—to examine how his argument for the real distinction between essence and existence builds upon these metaphysical foundations.

The Phoenix and God

The context for that argument is Aquinas's consideration of essence in immaterial substances, referred to in this passage by the Avicennian term

---

would *not* be, i.e., material; see, e.g., *De ente*, chap. 4 (Leon. ed., 43:76 [lines 42–50]). Aquinas, of course, also offers arguments to prove the *actual* existence of created immaterial substances (angels). See Gregory T. Doolan, "Aquinas on the Demonstrability of Angels," in *A Companion to Angels and Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Tobias Hoffmann (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 13–44.

56 *ST* I, q. 104, a. 1, corp.: "Omnis enim effectus dependet a sua causa, secundum quod est causa eius"—"Every effect depends upon its cause inasmuch as it is its cause" (in Leon. ed. vol. 5.).

57 *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2 (Leon. ed., 4:30).

"intelligences," which Aquinas elsewhere identifies with the angels.[58] Such substances are simple, inasmuch as they lack the composition of form with matter, but they are not entirely simple so as to be pure act (like God), because their essences are still composed with their existence (*esse*). To prove this composition, Aquinas provides a three-stage argument for the real distinction between essence and existence in actually existing simple substances. In the first stage, he asks us to consider the content of essences insofar as they can be understood, notably giving the examples of the essences of a man and the Phoenix; in the second stage, he asks us to consider the nature of a hypothesized being whose essence is identical with its existence. In the third stage, he proves not only that this hypothesized being actually exists but that it is the cause of the existence of all other beings. Let us briefly consider each of these stages in turn.

The first implicitly presumes what Aquinas told us in chapter 1 of this work: the essence of a being makes it both intelligible and definable. Hence, he makes the confident claim here in chapter 4 that whatever does not belong to the understood content (*intellectus* [an alternate translation could be "concept"]) of an essence, or quiddity, comes to it from outside of the essence, making a composition with it, because no essence can (properly) be understood without its parts. For this reason, this stage of the argument is often referred to as the "*intellectus essentiae* argument." Speaking in the first person, Aquinas then famously observes that "I can understand what a man is or what the Phoenix is and nevertheless not know whether either has existence [*esse*] in reality [*in rerum natura*]."[59] Thus, he concludes, it is clear that, in these beings, *esse* is other than essence.

In light of the theme of this paper, what likely stands out in Aquinas's examples is the Phoenix. What are we to make of it? For contemporary readers, it is tempting to assume that his intention is to offer the Phoenix as an example of a well-acknowledged fantastic beast: a fictional animal that we all agree does not actually exist. In fact, this is how the example has been traditionally read by a number of prominent Thomistic scholars.[60] More

---

58 See, e.g., *ST* I, q. 65, a. 4, corp. (Leon. ed., 5:152).

59 *De ente*, chap. 4: "Quicquid enim non est de intellectu essentie uel quiditatis, hoc est aduenies extra et faciens compositionem cum essentia, quia nulla essentia sine hiis que sunt partes essentie intelligi potest. Omnis autem essentia uel quiditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo: possum enim intelligere quid est homo uel fenix et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura; ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia uel quiditate" (Leon. ed., 43:376 [lines 94–103]).

60 See, e.g., John F. Wippel, "Aquinas's Route to the Real Distinction: A Note on *De Ente et Essentia*," *Thomist* 43 (1979): 284. There, Wippel observes that, in this first stage of the argument, Aquinas "turns to sensible substances, one fictitious (phoenix) and one

recently, however, some scholars have questioned that reading, raising the point that it would be odd for Aquinas, in a work examining genuine essences, to present an example of what I have termed a pseudo-essence.[61] I would add, moreover, that he speaks in the first person, telling us not just that *someone* might consider it, but that *he* can understand the essence of the Phoenix. How could he understand that essence if, as with the goat-stag or Chimera, there is no essence there to be understood, and if the concept is thus false? It seems that, for Aquinas's argument to work as intended,

---

real (man), in offering evidence for his minor." This is a line that Wippel later repeats verbatim in his *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 111, although he does not repeat it in his magisterial *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 140–41. Joseph Owens critiques Wippel's interpretation of this argument in the *De ente* but nevertheless concurs that its "starting point is located in real objects such as a man, or in imaginary ones such as a phoenix" ("Stages and Distinction in *De Ente*: A Rejoinder," *Thomist* 45 [1981]: 105). Lawrence Dewan, for his part, states: "Certainly, the example of the phoenix is somewhat embarrassing, since one might well ask if it is really an essence. . . . The phoenix is at least a pseudo-essence, something conceived along the lines of an essence" ("Saint Thomas, Joseph Owens, and the Real Distinction Between Being and Essence," *Modern Schoolman* 61 [1984]: 149). Anthony Kenny would later express a similar view regarding the fictitious status of the Phoenix for Aquinas: "When he says, however, that I understand the essence of phoenix, he can only mean that I know what the word 'phoenix' means: he cannot mean that I have made a scientific study of phoenixes, as there aren't any around for me to study. I know the essence of phoenix in the sense that I have a concept of phoenix, the concept that is exhibited in my mastery of the use of the word" (*Aquinas on Being* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 35).

61 In reviewing Kenny's *Aquinas on Being*, Gyula Klima offers a number of criticisms of that volume, including Kenny's reading of Aquinas on the Phoenix. Klima observes that, "for Aquinas, the fictitious character of [the] phoenix was by no means a known fact. After all, Isidore of Seville, whom Aquinas frequently cites, discusses the phoenix along with birds known to exist (such as eagles and ostriches). Also, the examples with which Aquinas groups the phoenix-example together are obviously real, natural phenomena (man, eclipse; cf. p. 62)" ("On Kenny on Aquinas on Being: A Critical Review of Aquinas on Being by Anthony Kenny," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 [2004]: 579). Brian Davies, in his own review of that same volume, likewise criticizes Kenny's reading of Aquinas on the Phoenix, identifying "at least eight reasons for supposing that Aquinas might not have agreed with Kenny here" ("Review of *Aquinas on Being*, by Anthony Kenny," *Faith and Philosophy* 22 [2005]: 111–12). Building on Davies's review, Jack Marler has offered further arguments in support of the position that Aquinas did not present the Phoenix as an example of a fiction ("Thomistic Ornithology: A Brief Note," in Hircocervi *&* *Other Metaphysical Wonders : Essays in Honor of John P. Doyle*, ed. Victor M. Salas [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013], 229–40).

he must be treating both of these examples (of a man and of the Phoenix) as genuine essences.

In support of this reading, some scholars point to the fact that, not only does Aquinas pair the Phoenix with the example from nature of the human essence, but on another occasion he presents it together with the natural phenomenon of an eclipse, which also can be understood without knowing whether it now exists.[62] Of course, *we* today recognize the Phoenix to be a fictional beast, but it seems likely that Aquinas accepted its nature as genuine based upon the testimony of authorities such as St. Isidore of Seville, who describes this bird in his encyclopedic work the *Etymologies* when cataloging animals (most of which are real). What Isidore, and others, tell us is that the Phoenix is an Arabian bird that lives for around five hundred years and that, when it grows old, it returns to Heliopolis, the Egyptian city of the sun. There, it builds a pyre of spices and twigs and faces the setting sun; it then ignites a fire that it fans with its wings and in which it is consumed.[63] From the resulting ashes, a worm emerges, which grows into the new Phoenix.[64]

---

[62] *In* II *Sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 1, corp.: "Quaedam enim natura est de cujus intellectu non est suum esse, quod patet ex hoc quod intelligi potest cum hoc quod ignoretur an sit, sicut phaenicem, vel eclipsim, vel aliquid hujusmodi"—"For there is a kind of nature the understood content of which is not its own existence, which is clear from the fact that it can be understood without knowing whether it exists, for example, the Phoenix, or an eclipse, or some other such [thing]" (Mandonnet-Lethielleux ed., 2:87). Both this text and the *De ente* are contemporaneous, written between 1252–1256. (All dating of Aquinas's texts follows Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin: Sa personne et son œuvre*, Nouvelle édition profondément remaniée 1 [Paris: Cerf, 2015]).

[63] Notice that, in this telling, the Phoenix ignites itself through an external source rather than by the internal process of spontaneous combustion, as depicted in the case of Fawkes in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.*

[64] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* 12.7.22, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. in *The* Etymologies *of Isidore of Seville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 265. Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus libri xxvi nach der Cölner Urschrift* 23.24, ed. Hermann Stadler, 2 vols. (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1916–1920), 2:1493–94 [no. 42]. For an English translation of Albert on this, see *On Animals: A Medieval Summa zoologica*, trans. Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr. and Irven Michael Resnick, 2 vols. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). A detailed survey of ancient Greek literature on the Phoenix is provided by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), 182–84. For a thorough overview of the history of the legend of the Phoenix, from its Egyptian beginnings up through the current day, see Joseph Nigg, *The Phoenix: An Unnatural Biography of a Mythical Beast* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Regarding medieval attitudes toward its reality, Nigg observes the following: "The most startling irony concerning the cultural lives of the Phoenix is that the author most credited with introducing the bird's fable to the West did not believe it.

Suffice it to say, a key element of Isidore's description is that the Phoenix is "singular and unique in the world," meaning that it is alone in its species. Aquinas is well aware of this reported trait, noting in his Commentary on Aristotle's *De caelo* that "nothing prevents an individual that is the only one in a single [*una*] species from being generated and corrupted, as they say of the Phoenix."[65] Simplicius, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories* (a work with which Aquinas was well acquainted), thus calls the Phoenix a 'monadic' (*monadikos*) species.[66] Indeed, Aquinas explicitly references Simplicius when, commenting on the *De caelo*, he employs the Phoenix as an example of a reportedly monadic species.[67] Here we find a clear acknowledgement of reliance on testimony: with Aquinas noting that "they say" (*dicunt*) this about the Phoenix, paralleling Simplicius's own language from his commentary on the *Categories* where he states that "they report" about the bird that it is a monadic species—a report Aquinas would have found in Boethius's commentary as well.[68]

As Herodotus stated flatly, the account of 'the people' of Heliopolis 'does not seem to me to be credible.' The Greek historian's skepticism was compounded by the doubts of Pliny the Elder in the second most influential prose discussion of the bird, and the disclaimers of Tacitus, Albertus Magnus, and others. These isolated reservations notwithstanding, the Phoenix thrives in medieval and Renaissance transmission of classical lore" (271). In stark contrast to his student Thomas, Albert explicitly expressed skepticism about the reality of the Phoenix. Nevertheless, after summarizing what authors have reported about the Phoenix, Albert piously observes, "But as Plato says: 'We ought not disparage those things reported to have been written in the books of the sacred temples'" (*On Animals* 24.42 [pp. 288–89]).

65 *In* III *De caelo*, lec. 8: "Nihil autem prohibet individuum quod est unum tantum in una specie, generari et corrumpi, sicut de Phoenice dicunt" (Leon. ed., 3:255 [no. 4]).

66 *Simplicius: On Aristotle's* Categories *1–4*, on *Categories* 1b16–24, trans. Michael Chase (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, n.d.), 69–70. Before Simplicius, Boethius also gave the Phoenix as an example of a monadic species in his commentary on the *Categories* (*In Categorias Aristotelis libri quatuor* I (*Patrologia Latina* [*PL*] 64:177B–D). Aquinas would have been familiar with both of their commentaries, but he does not seem to have read the common source of this example, which is Porphyry; responding to the question of whether it is a general principle that a species is predicated of several things, Porphyry replies: "No, only for the most part. The bird species phoenix is not said to belong to several things differing in number if indeed only one phoenix ever comes to be. If it is said of several things, they differ by succession [*diadokhe*], not in number" (*On Aristotle's Categories* 82.1.35, trans. Steven K. Strange [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992], 68).

67 See note 65 above.

68 Translating Simplicius's treatment of the Phoenix, Chase asks us to "note that Simplicius does not take the easy way out and deny the existence of the phoenix, even though he seems less than totally convinced of it: *hôs historousin*, he says of the mythical bird: 'as

Still, we might wonder why in the *De ente* he chooses to employ the Phoenix as a case study to argue for the real distinction between essence and *esse*. The line of reasoning in the *intellectus essentiae* argument is Avicennian, but the example of the Phoenix is decidedly not from Avicenna. For, unlike his Greek predecessors, Avicenna was clear that he considered the Phoenix (*anqā*) to be a fiction and, as such, an impossibility with no essence.[69] It is, instead, from al-Ghazālī—whom Aquinas mistakenly took to be an Avicennian philosopher—that he gets the paired case study of a man and the Phoenix.[70] More precisely, it is from

---

it is reported'" (Simplicius, *Categories 1–4*, 137n591). In Moerbeke's translation of Simplicius, which Aquinas would have read, *hôs historousin* is translated as *narrant* (chap. 3, commentarius, 1:74 [line 17]; Kalbfleisch, p. 55; Bekker, 1b16–24], accessed from Aristoteles Latinus Database on May 17, 2024). See note 66 for reference to Boethius's commentary.

69 The *anqā* in Islam was not, in fact, identical to the Phoenix of the West, although it was a fantastical bird that was similar to it. As Thérèse-Anne Druart recounts, "according to a *hadith* reported by Mas'udî (d. 957) and referring to pre-Islamic times, the *anqā* was created by God with all sorts of perfections but became a plague and was eliminated by some pre-Islamic prophet. In this version of the legend it becomes an extinct species" ("Avicennian Troubles: The Mysteries of the Heptagonal House and of the Phoenix," *Tópicos* 42 [2012]: 56–57). As Druart shows, following readings of other scholars, Avicenna's view of the impossibility of the *anqā* stems not from any apparent logical contradiction, but rather from his acceptance of the Principle of Plenitude: since a fiction as such is not instantiated at any point in time, it is not a possibility. Thus, when considering universals of what could *possibly* be in many but never actually is so, Avicenna replaces Porphyry's and Simplicius's example of the Phoenix with the example of the heptagonal house (Druart, "Avicennian Troubles," esp. 52–53). See also Deborah L. Black, "Avicenna on the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," *Documenti e Studi Sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 8 (53 425AD) (1997).

70 In Aquinas's time, the Latin West had access only to the translation of al-Ghazālī's *Maqātsid al-falāsifa* (Intentions of the philosophers), in which he simply presents teachings of the philosophers, notably al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), as a preface for his famous response to the philosophers in the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (Incoherence of the philosophers). Thus, in the West, *Maqātsid* "fell victim to one of the most unfortunate misunderstandings in the history of philosophy, . . . so that the Scholastics with few exceptions were led to regard Algazel as *sequax Avicennae*" (Charles H. Lohr, S.J., "*Logica Algazelis*, Introduction and Critical Text," *Traditio* 21 [1965]: 224). In this respect, the al-Ghazālī that Aquinas took him to be turns out himself to be something of a fictional character and, thus, another fantastic beast in our consideration.

For an invaluable overview of the Avicennian influence on Aquinas's *De ente* argument for the real distinction, see R. E. Houser, "The Real Distinction and the Principles of Metaphysics: Avicenna and Aquinas," in Laudemus viros gloriosos*: Essays in Honor of Armand Maurer*, *CSB*, ed. R. E. Houser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 75–108 (esp. 94–98, on al-Ghazālī's influence on his argument).

the Latin Algazel that he finds the pairing, since the Latin translators of the *Maqātsid al-falāsifa* (Intentions of the philosophers), chose to substitute al-Ghazālī's own example of the crocodile (*timsāh*) with that of the Phoenix.[71] Thus, when reading the *Logica Algazelis*, Aquinas encountered the following lines:

> When you understand the essential and that to which it is essential, you cannot imagine or understand the subject unless you understand the essential existing in it; nor can the subject be understood in any way without it. . . . When you understand *what* man is, it is not necessary for you to understand that he exists [*eum esse*] or that he is white [*esse album*]. Nevertheless, you cannot understand man unless you understand that he is animal. Still, this example might not satisfy your intellect because *you* are a human and so are all the others who now exist. So, consider another example—such as the Phoenix or some other exotic [animal]—and then it will be made clear to you that existence [*esse*] is accidental to all things that exist [*sunt*].[72]

With his original example of the crocodile, al-Ghazālī's intention was to provide the reader with the consideration of an animal whose actual existence would not be immediately evident to the average reader. This intention is only accentuated with the Latin substitution of the Phoenix. For, as we see, the text of al-Ghazālī that Aquinas read asked him to

---

[71] For an excellent recent translation and commentary of *The Intentions of the Philosophers*, along with a catalog of al-Ghazālī's treatment of animals in that works, see Marco Signori, *The Intentions of the Philosophers [Maqātsid al-falāsifa]: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, 2 vols. (Pisa, Italy: Doctoral Dissertation, Scuola Normale Superiore, 2021). On al-Ghazālī's treatment of the crocodile in particular, as well as the Latin translators' substitution of the Phoenix for this beast, see esp. 1: introduction and 164–67.

[72] *Logica Algazelis* 247.15–33: "Cum intellexeris essentiale et id cui est essentiale, non possis imaginari subiectum vel intelligere, nisi intelligas essentiale existere in eo; nec possit ullo modo subiectum intelligi sine ilio. . . . Cum intelligis, quid est homo, non est necesse te intelligere eum esse vel esse album. Nec tamen potes eum intelligere, nisi intelligas quod est animal; quamvis non satisfaciat tuo intellectui hoc exemplum, eo quod tu es homo et omnes alii qui nunc sunt. Pone ergo aliud exemplum—sicut de phoenice vel de aliquo alio extraneo—et ibi manifestabitur tibi, quia esse accidentale est omnibus quae sunt." Following Signori's English translation of the Arabic text, we find al-Ghazālī observe in these lines that, "if your mind did not assist you in the understanding of this example, because you are an existing man and because of the multiplicity of the existence in 'man,' then replace it with 'crocodile,' or what you prefer among the animals and the other things" (*Intentions of the Philosophers*, vol. 2, *Logic*, 290 [§11]).

consider the Phoenix or, in its place, not some other *fictional* animal, but instead *de aliquo alio extraneo*: some other *exotic* (foreign, unusual) animal. In other words, it did not ask him to consider a fantastic beast, but instead a real beast with unusual traits, like our platypus.

From the foregoing, we find that Aquinas's use of the Phoenix example in the *De ente* is given neither to provide a fictional case study nor as what I termed a hypothesized constructed nature. Instead, Aquinas offers this example on a different sort of hypothesis: one based upon the testimony of reputable authorities. The fact that it turns out to be false is irrelevant, since another example could be substituted in its place. But *if* the Phoenix were indeed a genuine nature, it would be the perfect example of what he is trying to illustrate for three reasons: (1) this bird would not have been observed by most of his readers; (2) it would belong to a monadic species for which there could exist only one instance at any point in time (in this respect, its nature would be for Aquinas like that of a celestial body); (3) it would be a species that is generable and corruptible, meaning that there would be times when the Phoenix has perished but another has not been generated; hence, at such times, no Phoenix would actually exist in the world (in this respect, its nature would be *unlike* that of a celestial body, which, for Aquinas, is incorruptible).[73]

---

[73] Aquinas never explicitly answers the question of whether the Phoenix generated from the ashes is numerically the same individual as the one that was consumed in flames. Still, I would argue that we can find a clear *implicit* answer to the question if we consider his language about the lifecycle of the Phoenix, which he tells us entails generation and corruption. For Aquinas, generation is a natural change from not existing to existing (*non esse ad esse*), whereas corruption is a natural change from existing to not existing (*esse ad non esse*) (*De prin. nat.*, chap. 1 [Leon. ed., 43:40 (lines 62–66)]). If, as he notes, the Phoenix is said to be corrupted, then that individual would cease to exist entirely. Now, elsewhere, Aquinas is clear that it is impossible for numerically the same individual to be *re*generated through any natural motion or by any natural agent (see *Quodibet* IV, q. 3, a. 2 [5] [Leon. ed., 25/2:325]). If that is the case, then presumably the risen Phoenix must be numerically different from its immolated predecessor. In short, the case of the Phoenix's rising from the ashes would be one of generation, not *re*generation—of birth, not resurrection.

Aquinas also holds, more precisely, that generation is from nonbeing that is *in potency* (*De prin. nat.*, chap. 1). The appropriate potency in the case of the generation of the Phoenix would presumably be the ashes. But what would be the natural agent that moves this potency to act? Here, as before, Aquinas does not answer the question. But, here again, we can find an implicit answer, this time in his acceptance of the Aristotelian theory of spontaneous generation and the equivocal causality of universal causes—namely, the celestial bodies. Presumably, the Phoenix would be generated by just this sort of natural agent.

For Aquinas's views on the possibility of the intermittent existence of the numerically

Taking these considerations together, we can see that the Phoenix example in the *De ente* argument serves a specific purpose: if we grant the reported reality of its nature, at any given moment we cannot discern through analysis of the definition of its essence whether it is alive or dead—that is, whether the Phoenix presently exists or not. Thus, *if* the Phoenix exists, that existence is a nonessential trait that is really distinct from its nature. What I wish to emphasize here is why Aquinas likely presents the Phoenix as a case study of a genuine essence—and a distinctive one at that. For this stage of the argument to succeed, we must not only be able to understand the content of the essences under consideration (man, Phoenix) but also understand that they are essences that can indeed exist—that they are *genuine* essences. As we have seen, acknowledged fictions such as the goat-stag and the unicorn concern pseudo-natures: we cannot say of them *what* they are because there is no whatness of which to speak. Clearly, then, they do not exist, and it is a pseudo-question to ask whether they could possibly exist. Again, this is not because they are impossible as intrinsically contradictory, but rather because their existence is *non*possible, since there is no nature at stake that could exist.

Someone might object to this reading of Aquinas, however, arguing that his case study of the Phoenix is meant, instead, to be an example of what I described earlier as a "hypothesized constructed nature." Recall that, when we posit such a nature and ask, for example, "Could there be a liger?," before it was bred, or some new species biogenetically engineered from two or more other species, we are hypothesizing a nature that we do not in fact know and are precisely asking whether it is a possibility. But such a reading does not align with the presuppositions of the *intellectus essentiae* argument at play in the first stage of the *De ente* argument. As presented, it does not question the possibility of the essence of man or of Phoenix; rather; for the argument to work, it must presume that possibility. It is from that perspective that we acknowledge that, *despite* knowing that possibility, we still do not know the actuality of the natures under consideration through a mere conceptual analysis.

By contrast, in the second stage of the argument, we *do* find Aquinas presenting what could be described as a hypothesized constructed nature. Having considered in the first stage what he takes to be known (or knowable) essences, Aquinas concludes that stage by making a general claim

---

same individual, see Turner C. Nevitt, "Survivalism, Corruptionism, and Intermittent Existence in Aquinas," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31 (2014): 1–19. For Aquinas on spontaneous generation, see Brian T. Carl, "Thomas Aquinas on the Proportionate Causes of Living Species," *Scientia et Fides* 8 (2020): 223–48.

about (actually existing) beings: "It is clear that the *esse* is other than the essence, or quiddity. Unless perhaps," he adds, "there were some thing whose quiddity *were* its very *esse*."[74] If there were such a being, he tells us, it would by its nature be *tantum esse*: a pure *esse* that Aquinas also describes here as a subsisting *esse* (*esse subsistens*). A reader who is familiar with Aquinas's writings who comes to this stage of the argument comes to it with a spoiler, knowing that he is speaking of the divine nature. And, just a few lines later in the third stage of this argument, Aquinas acknowledges that this being is indeed God. But it is important to note, as many scholars have, that, in the second stage of the argument, there is no presumption that there exists in reality a being that is pure *esse*; nor is there any presumption that this being is God. All we are given at this point is a hypothetical: *what if* there were such a being whose nature is pure *esse*? Aquinas's conclusion is that there could be only one, for it could not be multiplied in the manner either of a generic nature or of a specific nature. Hence, he concludes, in all other beings, their essences must be distinct from their *esse*—including in simple substances.[75]

In this second stage of the argument, then, Aquinas presents us with precisely what I have labeled as a "hypothesized constructed nature": he constructs the notion of a being whose nature is pure *esse* (a nature that we do not know) from the notions of beings whose natures we presumably *do* know. This hypothesized nature is conceptually composed, but it is intended to signify a nature with no composition in it whatsoever. On the surface, the conceptually constructed essence appears to be coherent, and thus we might be tempted to think is a possibility—something that, in principle, could exist. But recall my claim that, for Aquinas, with conceptually constructed essences, we cannot know their possibility until their actuality has been established. As with the concept of the liger before its first breeding, so with the concept Aquinas constructs of a being whose nature is *tantum esse*: we cannot have philosophical certitude of the possibility of its existence prior to having knowledge of its actuality. And the reason we cannot have such certitude is simple: we cannot in this lifetime have a genuine understanding of the sort of hypothesized essence he is talking about. The affirmative name *tantum esse* merely disguises what is for

---

[74] For the Latin text of the first stage of the argument, see note 59 above. See also *De ente*, chap. 4: "ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia uel quiditate. Nisi forte sit aliqua res cuius quiditas sit ipsum suum esse" (Leon. ed., 43:376–77 [lines 103–26]).

[75] For examples of scholarly agreement about the hypothetical status of the nature of a being that is *tantum esse* as it is presented in this stage, see the sources noted above in notes 60 and 61.

Aquinas the negative notion that, in such a hypothesized being, its essence would *not* be distinct from its existence. But quidditative knowledge tells us *what* a thing is, not what it is not. How can we say yet whether such a nature is possible if we do not know what it is?

Notice, moreover, that, if Aquinas's intention at this stage of the argument were to present this hypothesized nature as a genuinely possible nature, he would fall prey to the very critique he offers of Anselm's Ontological Argument.[76] For, if we could simply assert with confidence the coherence of the notion of a being whose essence is simply to exist, then we would be justified in concluding from this possibility that it *must* exist by its nature. With a quick modal argument, Aquinas could deduce the necessity of its existence from the conceptually considered possibility of its essence, foreseeing Scotus's "touching up" (*coloratio*) of Anselm's argument.[77] But, again, the problem is that we do not know that essence, and merely to assert that it is possible is not to know its genuine possibility. For Aquinas, that possibility must be proven, and it can be proven only by first proving the actuality of a being whom we subsequently discern has such an essence.

It is in the third stage of the *De ente* argument that Aquinas does just that: he proves that this hypothesized being actually exists, but not by the sort of modal argument just described. Aquinas does not treat this hypothesized nature like some sort of FSM that is first "cooked up" conceptually and then thrown against the demonstrative wall to see if it "sticks." Instead, to prove God's existence there, Aquinas entirely puts aside the hypothesized being of the second stage of the argument and employs the same methodology that he does in the Five Ways and every other argument that he offers to prove God's existence: Aquinas provides a *quia* demonstration reasoning from effect back to cause. Here, in the *De ente*, the effect that he begins with is *esse.* As he explains, "It must be the case that every such

---

76 See, e.g., *SCG* I, chaps. 10–11 (Marietti ed., 13–15); *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1 (Leon. ed., 4:27–28).

77 See Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 2, pars 1, qq. 1–2, nos. 137–38 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis), 2:208–29. Giogio Pini sums up Scotus's "touch up" argument as comprising three stages: "first, demonstration that that than which a greater cannot be thought is a possible object of thought; second, a demonstration that that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought to exist and so can exist; third, a demonstration that that than which a greater cannot be thought actually exists." Pini argues that Scotus's argument does not make an illegitimate shift from logical to real possibility ("Parody or Touch-Up? Duns Scotus's Engagement with Anselm's *Proslogion* Argument," in *Metaphysics Through Semantics: The Philosophical Recovery of the Medieval Mind, Essays in Honor of Gyula Klima*, ed. Joshua P. Hochschild et al., International Archives of the History of Ideas 242 [Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2023], 408).

thing whose *esse* is other than its nature has *esse* from another. And since everything that exists through another is reduced to that which is through itself as to a first cause, it must be the case that there is some thing that is the cause of *esse* for *all* things because it is itself pure *esse*; . . . and *this* is the first cause that is God."[78]

It is important to recall that, even in reaching this conclusion that God's essence is identical with his *esse*, Aquinas still is not claiming to know that essence. This is the limitation of this sort of *quia* demonstration: it shows *that* the cause is and no more. For this reason, shortly after presenting his Five Ways, when he reminds us of his Aristotelian scientific methodology, Aquinas notes that "once it is known *that* something is, it remains to investigate *how* it is so that we can know about it *what* it is. But, regarding God," he cautions, "we cannot know *what* he is, but [only] what he is *not*; so, we cannot consider about God *how* he is, but only how he is *not*."[79] In other words, as at the start of arguments for the existence of God, so at the end: his essence remains unknown. The nature of the God whose existence Aquinas seeks to prove is thus vastly unlike either Russell's interstellar teapot or the FSM whose essence we can conceptually construct from things that we know. Atheistic objectors who see Aquinas's treatment of God in this way misunderstand his project.

Conclusion

For a magizoologist such as Newt Scamander, the catalog of magical beasts presented in his *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is a catalog of real animals with genuine natures. But as it turns out, they are as fictional as Scamander himself, all the result of the imagination of J. K. Rowling. What, then, are we to make of the essences contained within those pages? And what bearing does this question have for the study of Aquinas's philosophical thought?

Throughout this paper, I have developed three crucial distinctions regarding how Aquinas treats different kinds of natures. First, there are

---

[78] *De ente*, chap. 4: "Ergo oportet quod omnis talis res cuius esse est aliud quam natura sua habeat esse ab alio. Et quia omne quod est per aliud reducitur ad id quod est per se sicut ad causam primam, oportet quod sit aliqua res que sit causa essendi omnibus rebus eo quod ipsa est esse tantum; . . . et hoc est causa prima que Deus est" (Leon. ed., 43:377 [lines 127–46]).

[79] *ST* I, q. 3, prol.: "Cognito de aliquo an sit, inquirendum restat quomodo sit, ut sciatur de eo quid sit. Sed quia de Deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit, non possumus considerare de Deo quomodo sit, sed potius quomodo non sit" (Leon. ed., 4:35).

genuine natures—essences of real beings that we can know through direct experience or reliable testimony. While our knowledge of these natures may be limited and indirect (as with the rhinoceros for Aquinas or the platypus for many readers of this paper), they nonetheless have a foundation in reality and can be progressively known more fully. Second, there are what I termed *pseudo-natures* of acknowledged fictional beings that in fact are not natures at all, as is the case with the Chimera and the goat-stag. Questions of the possibility of these supposed natures are meaningless because there is no genuine nature to possibly exist. Third, there are *hypothesized natures*, which are of two sorts: (1) hypothesized constructed natures, such as the conceptually constructed liger before one was bred, about which we can meaningfully ask questions of possibility but cannot know for certain until actualized; (2) hypothesized causal natures, where we infer the existence of a being from its effects without knowing its essence as such. These distinctions are not merely taxonomic exercises but reveal how Aquinas navigates fundamental questions about our knowledge of reality and the limits of such knowledge.

Acknowledging these distinctions reveals the differences between Aquinas's philosophical considerations of God and Russell's teapot or the FSM. These satirical entities are presented as conceptually constructed, allegedly possible beings whose existence cannot be disproven. The Pastafarian who claims that the FSM *might* exist describes its nature in detail (as made of noodles, meatballs, and sauce) but acknowledges we have no evidence for it. For Aquinas, such an entity would not be a genuine possibility to be taken seriously but instead a pseudo-nature akin to the Chimera. By contrast, Aquinas's approach to God's existence begins not with a conceptually constructed nature (whether Pastafarian, Anselmian, or Scotistic), but with observable effects in the world that require explanation. Through *quia* demonstration, he shows that there *must* be a first cause of existence.

Aquinas's metaphysical distinctions allow him to affirm God's existence through philosophical demonstration while avoiding both skepticism and the error of treating God as just another fantastic beast. Through Aquinas's nuanced understanding of different kinds of natures and our knowledge of them, he demonstrates that the God whose existence he proves is neither a fictional pseudo-nature nor merely a hypothetical possibility, but the necessary foundation of all that is. Unlike the Phoenix, whose nature is considered by Aquinas to be genuine but whose existence at any given moment is uncertain, God's nature is shown by him to be genuine and to exist by necessity, all while remaining unknown to us in this lifetime: a

nature not to be catalogued as yet another fantastical beast but rather to be acknowledged as the source of all that is genuine and real. N.V