Aquinas on the History of the Philosophy of Being

Rupert Mayer, O.P.
International Theological Institute
Trumau, Austria

Aquinas wrote a "short history of being" or "a short history of the philosophy of being" in the era of ancient Greek philosophy. Many historians of philosophy commented on it.[1] This short history paints the picture of a development from the study of being or the whole of being *as such being* or as accidental being (by the sophists), and *as this being* or substance (by Aristotelian physics and Plato's philosophy), to the study of the whole of being *as universal being* (by Aristotle's, Plato's, and Avicenna's

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 44, a. 2. See Jan A. Aertsen, "La scoperta dell'ente in quanto ente," in *Tommaso d'Aquino e l'oggetto della metafisica*, ed. Stephen L. Brock (Rome: Armando, 2004), 35–48; Étienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy. An Introduction* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1993), 11–23; Rollen Edward Houser, "Avicenna, aliqui, and Thomas Aquinas's Doctrine of Creation," *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 80 (2013): 17–55; John F. Wippel, "Aquinas on Creation: A Philosophical or Theological Issue?," *Thomist* 78 (2014): 1–36; Rudi A. te Velde, *Metaphysics between Experience and Transcendence: Thomas Aquinas on Metaphysics as a Science* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2021), 90–98; Serge-Thomas Bonino, *Dieu, Alpha et Omega: création et providence* [*De Deo creante et gubernante*] (Paris: Paroles et Silence, 2022), 110–26 (see esp. his list of studies of Aquinas's text, at 116n41); Seth Kreeger, "Aquinas' Attribution of Creation *Ex Nihilo* to Plato and Aristotle: The Importance of Avicenna," *Studia Gilsoniana* 11 (2022): 377–410. Anselm Ramelow locates Aquinas's approach to metaphysics within the history of philosophy ("Aquinas within the History of Philosophy," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 20 [2013]: 307–36). Translations of the works of Thomas Aquinas come from the publications of the Aquinas Institute (aquinas.cc), sometimes modified, with sources of the Latin often following in parentheses (Leonine ed., Marietti ed., etc.) when significant.

metaphysics).[2] The present contribution enquires especially into the presuppositions which enable Aquinas to describe this development of philosophical thinking toward metaphysics. At first, Aquinas has a specific understanding of the development of knowledge which roots itself in first principles known by all human beings. Then, his history of being must be read in the light of the understanding of these principles. Further, his distinction among sophistry, dialectics, and first philosophy as sciences studying "being" or "everything" elucidates the early development of thinking toward metaphysics and the different objects studied by these sciences. At last, the development of thinking comes to rest when the highest science is reached. Therefore, Aquinas's understanding of metaphysics is pivotal regarding the early development of the sciences. Without a grasp of his conception of metaphysics and its special way of cognizing "universal being qua universal being," the development converging toward metaphysics and its way of thinking would remain obscure.

The Development of Human Learning of the Truth

According to Aquinas, human learning wholly depends on the naturally known first principles, which he compares to a seed sown into the human heart by God.[3] This seed enables man to judge any *acquired* knowledge and all things.[4] The understanding of first principles characterizes the whole human species: it is an operation of mankind, not only of the singular

---

2 Regarding the study of the whole of being by metaphysics, dialectics, and sophistry, see Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 4, nos. 573–74 (Marietti ed.).

3 See Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 11, a. 3: "Now, God in a most excellent way causes man's knowledge in both of these ways. For he adorned the soul itself with intellectual light and imprinted on it the cognition [*notitiam*] of the first principles, which are, as it were, the seeds of the sciences, just as he impressed on other physical things the seminal principles for producing all their effects." Cf. a. 1, where Aquinas describes learning in relation to the first principles, through which we know everything else contained universally in the principles. See also Christoph Schönborn, "Die Autorität des Lehrers nach Thomas von Aquin," in *Christian Authority: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Gillian R. Evans [Oxford: Clarendon, 1988], 101–26). Regarding *natural cognition*, see, e. g., Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 12; q. 84, a. 3; *Summa contra gentiles* [*SCG*] I, chap. 7; *De ver*., q. 18, a. 4.

4 See Aquinas, *De ver*, q. 8, a. 7, ad 13: "The soul is united with the eternal ideas inasmuch as there are certain imprints of the eternal ideas on our mind, such as the principles we know naturally and by which we judge all things. In angels these imprints are the likenesses by which they know things" (Leonine ed.). Regarding the judgment of acquired knowledge, see q. 1, a. 4, ad 5; q. 10, a. 6, ad 6; a. 8, q. 11, a. 1, ad 1; *In* I *post*. *analyt*., lec. 44; *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8.

human being.[5] Thus, natural cognition characterizes the human nature or the nature of thinking and is instilled in us by God, the author of nature.[6] Inasmuch as being (*ens* or *ens universale*) is the foundation of the other principles and the natural object of the mind,[7] known first in everything or included in everything we know,[8] the nature of human thinking is to understand being, or more precisely, being that is first by universality, universal being, or the essence of universal being.[9] Universal being comprehends everything. This or that being, on the other hand, excludes every other being from itself and is perceived through the senses. Therefore, Aquinas presupposes the necessity to determine and to unfold the original or natural understanding of being through sensual perception.[10] This seed

---

5 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 5, ad 3: "Now, to know the first intelligible principles is the action belonging to the human species. Wherefore all men enjoy in common the power which is the principle of this action: and this power is the agent intellect."

6 See Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 7: "Now, the cognition of naturally known principles is instilled into us by God, since God himself is the author of our nature" (Thomas Aquinas,). Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 90, a. 4, ad 2: "The natural law is promulgated by the very fact that God instilled it into man's mind so as to be known by him naturally" (cf. q. 91, a. 3, corp.; ad 1; ad 2).

7 Aquinas, *In* I *sent*., d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 8. Cf. *SCG* II, chap. 83: "Since nature is always directed to one thing, of one power there must naturally be one object, as color of sight, and sound of hearing. Hence, the intellect, being one power, has one natural object, of which it has knowledge essentially and naturally. And this object must be one under which are included all things known by the intellect; just as under color are included all colors essentially visible. Now, this is none other than being [*ens*]. Our intellect, therefore, knows being naturally, and whatever essentially belongs to being as such; and upon this knowledge is founded the knowledge of first principles, such as the impossibility of simultaneously affirming and denying, and the like. Thus, only these principles are known naturally by our intellect, while conclusions are known through them."

8 Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

9 See Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 10, a. 11. ad 10: "Being which is first by universality." See also q. 21, a. 1: "There is no thing of nature which is outside the essence of universal being, though some thing may be outside the essence of this being" (cf. *In* V *metaphys*., lec. 9, no. 889).

10 See Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 8, a. 15: "But because our intellect shares in a defective intellectual light, it is not actuated with regard to all the intelligibles which it can know naturally. It remains perfectible, nor could it reduce itself from potency to act had not its knowledge with respect to some things been actuated by nature. Consequently, there necessarily are some things in our intellect which it knows naturally, such as first principles—even though in us this knowledge is not determined unless we receive something through our senses. Therefore, the relation of our intellect to those principles is similar to that which an angel has to all that he knows naturally. And since the knowledge we have of principles is the highest form of our knowledge, it is evident that, on this summit of our nature, we reach to some extent the lowest point of the angelic nature." This text uses the term "natural knowledge" in a twofold way. On the one hand, only the first

of the sciences is given to the whole of mankind and develops within the minds of all human beings. In the language of the first *Quaestio disputata de veritate*, we might say: the mind understands only being or the essence of being, its universal modes (or the transcendentals) and its special modes (which are the different grades of being).[11]

Hence, the truth—naturally understood by the human species—remains always the same in its substance because the first principles contain the whole truth implicitly. The later generations of humanity may unfold this truth known by all more explicitly.[12] If, on the other hand, the intellect were initially a *tabula rasa* on which nothing is written, the understanding of truth would change with every acquired "part" of the whole truth. There would be no measure of thinking or of the truth common to all human beings unless we reached the highest and unchangeable truth in God as highest cause and judged everything by it, as Aristotle writes.[13]

Thus, truth, at first known in a most universal and vague way, becomes more and more explicit through the common effort of men, which begins with an implicit and confused knowledge of all things.[14] The substance of

---

principles are known naturally or belong to the human nature. On the other, every acquired knowledge is natural knowledge because it does not transcend that which we can know naturally or without revelation.

11 Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 1, a. 1.

12 See Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 7: "The articles of faith stand in the same relation to the doctrine of faith, as *per se* known principles to the teaching based on natural reason. Among these principles there is a certain order, so that some are contained implicitly in others; thus, all principles are reduced, as to their first principle, to this one: 'The same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time.' . . . In like manner all the articles are contained implicitly in certain primary matters of faith, such as God's existence, and his providence over the salvation of man. . . . Accordingly, we must conclude that, as regards the substance of the articles of faith, they have not received any increase as time went on: since whatever those who lived later have believed was contained, albeit implicitly, in the faith of those Fathers who preceded them. But there was an increase in the number of articles believed explicitly, since to those who lived in later times some were known explicitly which were not known explicitly by those who lived before them." See Guido Vergauwen, "Zustimmung und Stimmigkeit: Die Rationalität theologischer Rede," in *Glaubenswissenschaft? Theologie im Spannungsfeld von Glaube, Rationalität und Öffentlichkeit*, ed. Peter Neuner, Quaestiones disputatae 195 (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 99–124, at 113. In general, Aquinas understands the first human being as perfect teacher of the human species. Therefore, Adam would have known everything through infused knowledge (*De ver*., q. 18, a. 4).

13 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 2.1.993b19–31.

14 Regarding the learning of mankind, see Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 18, a. 4: "Natural human cognition can extend to those things which we can cognize under the guidance of natural reason. And there is a beginning and a term of this natural cognition. It has its beginning

truth or truth as a whole remains always the same. However, it shows itself more explicitly through its parts, if it is understood through the measure of the first principles. If understanding seeks the truth by following the guidance of fallible signs and not by the guidance of the first principles, falsities will develop and hide the truth from the mind of mortal human beings.[15]

Aquinas—contrary to Kant[16] or Averroes—does not conceive of a human person whose end is to contribute to the development of the intellectual capacity or of a separate intellect. The singular human being does not exist for the sake of a (quasi-)universal intellect. On the contrary, the intellect exists for the sake of man and not the other way around. But we may say that man exists for the sake of being inasmuch as he belongs to an ordered world and contributes to it as its part. But being is not a subsisting entity. Ultimately man belongs to God, whose providence cares for man and orders all things in the universe in such a way that—theologically speaking—they procure the good of those who love God.[17] This theological interpretation of the whole universe clarifies man's relation to the whole of being.

Thus, the natural end of mankind is to grow in the understanding of truth, especially the truth of God.[18] Aquinas will even say that human nature tends implicitly to the beatific vision and is able to understand this inclination to a certain extent.[19] The truth of the principles becomes more

---

in a kind of confused cognition of all things, insofar as man naturally has within him a cognition of the universal principles in which, as in seeds, there virtually preexist all the knowable things which can be cognized by natural reason. This cognition reaches its term when the things which are virtually in the principles are expressed in act, as animal generation is said to reach its term when the animal, with all its members perfect and distinct, is developed from the seed of the animal in which all its members pre-existed virtually."

15 See Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 18, a. 6: "The Commentator also says that a false opinion has the same place in matters of knowledge as a monstrosity has in physical nature. For a false opinion is one which originates without being intended by first principles, which are the seminal powers, as it were, of knowledge, just as monstrosities originate without being intended by the natural power which is at work. . . . The proper mover of understanding, however, is that which contains infallible truth. Consequently, whenever the understanding is moved by some fallible sign, there is some disorder in it, whether the movement is complete or incomplete."

16 Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, Akademie-Ausgabe, 8:18–19.

17 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 22, a. 2, ad 4.

18 Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

19 Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 2, a. 8, q. 3, a. 8. On the one hand, Aquinas determines *philosophically*

and more explicit with the increments of time, and all of our predecessors contribute to it. Together with Aristotle, Aquinas is grateful to all the thinkers having lived before him inasmuch as they entered into the search for truth through the same first principles. Some contribute directly to the truth by understanding and communicating it to the further generations. Others err and contribute indirectly to the truth inasmuch as their writings are an occasion for the following generations to study the truth in a deeper way than their predecessors.[20] This way of proceeding is impossible without the first principles as measure of everything known by human beings. The principles determine whether knowledge is true or false and deceiving. Thus, the singular human being does not depend only on his or her teachers. Indoctrination is impossible as long as we measure knowledge by the first principles. However, if we uncritically receive any truth into our mind without measuring it by the first principles we will fall prey to many falsities bearing the semblance of truth.[21]

Further, we have the principles through a natural habit which is determined through sensual experience; the principles stem partly from nature and partly from an extrinsic source.[22] If the understanding of principles were wholly natural, there would not be any history of being. Every human being would understand being in exactly the same way. But the determination of our understanding of being through the senses opens the way for distinct interpretations of being.[23] The question is: which understood

---

that only the apprehension of the divine essence can be the last end of human beings. In this sense, he speaks of the intellect's natural desire to see God (*SCG* III, chaps. 51, 57). On the other, he maintains that the beatific vision as revealed last end exceeds human understanding. Therefore, this revelation is necessary to guide human beings to the last end. For instance, nobody could know without revelation that the beatific vision consists in the apprehension of the Trinity (*In Boetii de Trin*., q. 3; a. 1; *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1).

20 See Aquinas, *In* II *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 277: "For it is difficult to know what the interior of a house is like, and a man is easily deceived in such matters; but just as no one is mistaken about the entrance of a house, which is evident to all and is the first thing that we perceive, so too this is the case with regard to the knowledge of truth; for those truths through which we enter into a knowledge of others are known to all, and no man is mistaken about them. Those first principles which are naturally apprehended are truths of this sort: 'It is impossible both to affirm and deny something at the same time'; 'Every whole is greater than each of its parts'; and so on. On the other hand, there are many ways in which error may arise with respect to the conclusions into which we enter through such principles as through an outer door." (cf. nos. 287–88).

21 Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 18, a. 6.

22 Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 51, a. 1.

23 See Aquinas, *In* II *sent*., d. 24, q. 2, a. 3: "Whence I say that synderesis is not distinguished from practical reason by the substance of the power, but by the habit, which is in some

reality do we identify with "being"? In this way, human beings enquire into the meaning of being. But the question is whether they understand being as "universal being," which is the first principle of any thinking and of any being. Aquinas says of this principle: "Wherefore it is evident that that which I call existence [*hoc quod dico esse*] is the actuality of all acts, and therefore the perfection of all perfections."[24] Did any thinker prior to Aquinas call existence the actuality of all acts or essences on the grounds that there is no essence in things unless it is actual through existence?[25]

Sometimes, Aquinas treats the first principles as if every human being understood them in the same way. Though a pagan does not share the same belief regarding scripture, Christians and pagans have the same presuppositions of natural reason or the same principles in common. These principles force us to accept cogent arguments. Therefore, we can overcome the errors of the pagans regarding God and convince them by obvious arguments. The corresponding procedure does not enquire into the presuppositions of pagan philosophy, but—due to the common basis in

---

way innate in our mind from the light of the agent intellect, just as the habit of speculative principles—such as 'Every whole is greater than its part,' and such things—although we need the senses and memory for the determination of the cognition of these things, as is said in *Analytica posteriora* II. And therefore, they are immediately cognized when the terms are cognized, as is said in *Analytica posteriora* I. . . . And therefore, I say, that 'synderesis' names either the habit alone, or at least the power subject to the habit as innate in us." His later commentary on Aristotle repeats that the habit of principles does not preexist in us *as determined* through the senses: "Hence, he concludes that there do not preexist any habits of principles in the sense of being determinate and complete, neither do they come to be anew from other better known preexisting principles in the way that a scientific habit is generated in us from previously known principles; rather the habits of principles come to be in us from preexisting sense" (*In* II *post. analyt.*, lec. 20). If we read this commentary in the context of Aristotle's *Analytica posteriora*, the *habit of principles would be reduced to experience of real things through the senses*. Aristotle derives the principles from sensual experience. The context of Aquinas's own works reduces *the determination of the habit of principles to sensual experience*, though the habit itself is natural. Therefore, our intellect resembles the intellect of an angel regarding the first principles, except for the necessity to determine the principles through sensual experience (*De ver.*, q. 8, a. 15, quoted in note 10 above; cf. a. 7, ad 13). Aquinas finds the difference between a natural and an acquired habit in the determination of knowledge: "However, a natural habit is like the understanding of first principles in that it requires the cognition to be determined through the senses, which acquired habits do not need, because, when they are acquired, they receive their determination through their act" (*In* III *sent.*, d. 23, q. 3, a. 2, ad 1). Therefore, he can also write that the habit of indemonstrable principles is acquired through the senses (*SCG* II, chap. 83).

24 Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9.

25 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4.

the first principles—seeks to refute errors in singular matters. Nevertheless, Aquinas notes that it would be better to interpret the pagan beliefs within their own background and teaching.[26]

On the other hand, Aquinas and Aristotle "define" metaphysics as the highest philosophical science, disputing with those who deny the first principles. In this sense, Aquinas is aware of the different interpretations of the first principles and the necessity to discuss them with other philosophers.[27] Though the first principles are understood without error,[28] this protection against error is valid for interior reason alone. Exterior reasons, for instance in the thought of Heraclitus, can contradict the first principles. Philosophers may try to find arguments and words denying the first principles, even though their interior reason convicts them of their error.[29]

---

[26] See Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 2: "To proceed against individual errors, however, is a difficult business, and this for two reasons. In the first place, it is difficult because the sacrilegious remarks of individual men who have erred are not so well known to us so that we may use what they say as the basis of proceeding to a refutation of their errors. This is, indeed, the method that the ancient Doctors of the Church used in the refutation of the errors of the Gentiles. For they could know the positions taken by the Gentiles since they themselves had been Gentiles, or at least had lived among the Gentiles and had been instructed in their teaching. In the second place, it is difficult because some of them, such as the Mohammedans and the pagans, do not agree with us in accepting the authority of any Scripture by which they may be convinced of their error. Thus, against the Jews we are able to argue by means of the Old Testament, while against heretics we are able to argue by means of the New Testament. But the Muslims and the pagans accept neither the one nor the other. We must, therefore, have recourse to the natural reason, to which all men are forced to give their assent. However, it is true that, in divine matters the natural reason has its failings" (cf. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8).

[27] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8: "However, it is to be borne in mind, in regard to the philosophical sciences, that the inferior sciences neither prove their principles nor dispute with those who deny them, but leave this to a higher science; whereas the highest of them, namely metaphysics, can dispute with one who denies its principles, if only the opponent will make some concession; but if he concede nothing, it can have no dispute with him, though it can answer his objections."

[28] See Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 6: "In this operation of the soul there is no error, even as there is clearly no error in the understanding of first principles which we know by simple intuition" (cf. *Super In de divinis nominibus*, chap. 4, lec. 7, no. 376).

[29] See Aquinas, *In* I *post. analyt.*, lec. 19: "A postulate and a supposition can be confirmed by an exterior reason, that is, by some argumentation; but a common conception in the mind does not bear on exterior reason (because it cannot be proved by any argument), but bears on that reason which is in the soul, because it is made known at once by the natural light of reason. That it does not bear on any exterior reason is shown by the fact that a syllogism is not formed to prove such common conceptions of the mind. Furthermore, that these are not made known by an exterior reason but by the inward he proves by the fact that it is possible to contest an exterior reason, either truly or apparently, but

Therefore, the history of being does not primarily consider singular arguments of the philosophers. On the contrary, it enquires into the principal presuppositions of their philosophies founding the whole philosophical edifice. The procedure of this history focuses especially on the determinations of "being" and "truth" in the light of the highest principle pursued in a certain kind of philosophy. The goal is not the refutation of another position, but an understanding of its presuppositions and their primary consequences in the light of the essence of universal being.[30]

As was said, the understanding of the first principles is the operation common to the human species. Hence, human beings can understand each other because they share in the same principal understanding of being. Aquinas calls being "the fountain and origin of all [interior] words" or conceptions.[31] In this sense, "being" and the other first principles are the common, interior language of all human beings. This interior language corresponds to interior reason or the nature of the intellect, which naturally understands the principles known through themselves in the light of the agent intellect. However, the determination of the principles through sensual experience of real things belongs to exterior reasons. Therefore, human beings can determine their understanding of "being" in different ways. In this way, they coin different ways of thinking in dependence of their specific determination of being.

Aquinas's Short History of Being in the Greek Era

To a large extent, Aquinas's understanding of the early history of philosophy—without considering his knowledge of neo-Platonic and Arabic sources—derives from Aristotle. Therefore, he describes the following development of human thought in the Greek era:

---

it is not always possible to do so with the inward reason. This is so because nothing is so true that it cannot be denied orally. (For even this most evident principle that the same thing cannot be and not be has been orally denied by some). On the other hand, some things are so true that their opposites cannot be conceived by the intellect. Therefore, they cannot be challenged in the inward reason but only by an outward reason which is by the voice. Such are the common conceptions in the mind" (cf. *De ver*., q. 10, a. 12, sc 2; *In* XI *metaphys*., lec. 5, nos. 2212, 2221).

30 As was said, Aquinas calls that which first falls in the mind *essentia entis universalis* (*De ver*., q. 21, a. 1). The categories are, therefore, deduced from the essence of being and are a consequence of the first principle of thinking (*In* V *metaphys*., lec. 9, no. 889).

31 Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen*., lec. 5 (Leonine ed. of 1989; aquinas.cc has this Latin text, corrected from the 1882 original edition, and has accurate English translation).

> The ancient philosophers gradually, and as it were step by step, advanced to the knowledge of truth. At first being of grosser mind, they failed to realize that any beings existed except sensible bodies. And those among them who admitted movement, did not consider it except as regards certain accidents, for instance, in relation to rarefaction and density, by union and separation. And supposing as they did that the substance of bodies itself was uncreated, they assigned certain causes for these accidental changes, as for instance, friendship, discord, intellect, or something of that kind.
>
> An advance was made when they understood that there was a distinction between the substantial form and matter, which latter they imagined to be uncreated, and when they perceived transmutation to take place in bodies in regard to essential forms. Such transmutations they attributed to certain universal causes, such as the oblique circle [the zodiac], according to Aristotle, or ideas, according to Plato.
>
> But we must take into consideration that matter is contracted by its form to a determinate species, as a substance, belonging to a certain species, is contracted by a supervening accident to a determinate mode of being; for instance, *man* by *whiteness*. Each of these opinions, therefore, considered being by a particular consideration, either as *this being* or as *such being*; and so, they assigned particular efficient causes to things.
>
> Then others arose to the consideration of being qua being, who considered the cause of things, not insofar as they are *these* or *such*, but insofar as they are beings. Therefore, that which is the cause of things insofar as they are beings, must be the cause of things, not only according as they are *such* by accidental forms, nor according as they are *these* by substantial forms, but also according to all that belongs to their existence in any way. And thus it is necessary to say that also prime matter is created by the universal cause of things.[32]

Though Aquinas had said that all the philosophers enter into the truth through the first principles,[33] which are understood by the common operation of the human species, he refines this thesis now due to the different determinations of universal being by the ancient philosophers. The early

---

[32] Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 44, a. 2. Cf. *De pot*., q. 3, a. 5 (includes the Arabic philosopher Avicenna in the history of being); *De substantiis separatis*, chap. 9; *In* VIII *phys*., lec. 2; *SCG* II, chap. 37; Aertsen, "La scoperta," 35–48.

[33] Aquinas, *In* II *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 277.

philosophers understand only sensible bodies as beings. But this means that they understand the *whole of being* or *universal being* by a particular consideration and fail to realize universal being or being as such: "Each of these opinions, therefore, considered being [i.e., universal being] by a particular consideration, either as *this being* or as *such being*." In the words of Parmenides: they mistook everlasting, universal being for something changing, which once was not.[34]

In the eyes of Aquinas, the error of the early philosophers is to identify the whole of being or first principle of understanding with a particular, sensible being because every particular bears the likeness of the essence of being.[35] Further, they considered the matter of all things as uncreated substance underlying every change. Hence, change is only accidental and not substantial. The sensible bodies are not subsisting things but accidents or accidental configurations of uncreated matter: they exist accidentally in the everlasting change of matter. In this sense, the early philosophers enquire into being as such being; they consider matter in its accidental qualities and quantities. Being is, therefore, accidental being in this consideration.

In general, Aquinas excludes Parmenides from the forgottenness of universal being, though Parmenides belongs to the ancient philosophers. But Aquinas repeats the Aristotelian critique, which says: Parmenides understands the unity of the essence of being as similar to the unity of a genus or species or nature, so that the whole universe is understood as a singular thing.[36] Hence, even in Aquinas's eyes, the above history of being is not exact. Parmenides understands the nature or *ratio* of being to a certain extent and does not mistake it for this or that being that is only an

---

[34] Parmenides, *Fragment* 8.38–40.

[35] See Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 1, a. 10, ad 6: "A thing is said to be false insofar as, by its nature, it is likely to deceive. When I say *deceive*, however, I mean an action that brings on some defect; for nothing can act except to the extent that it is being, and every defect is nonbeing. Moreover, everything has some likeness to the true to the extent that it is a being; insofar as it does not exist it, departs from this likeness. Consequently, this *deceiving* as implying action arises from likeness; but the defect it implies (and in which the intelligible character of falsity formally consists) arises from unlikeness. Hence, Augustine says that falsity arises from unlikeness." Thus, every particular being has nonexistence or does not exist inasmuch as it lacks the fullness of the actuality of all acts and its truth (q. 2, a. 3, ad 16). Nevertheless, the particular being resembles the essence of being and, therefore, may deceive us, so that we mistake this being for the first principle of understanding.

[36] Aquinas, *In* I *metaphys*., lec. 9, nos. 137–39 and 142–44. Cf. *In* II *sent*., d. 17, q. 1, a. 1; Louis-Bertrand Geiger, *La Participation dans la Philosophie de S. Thomas d'Aquin*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1942, 1953), 214–15.

accidental state of uncreated matter.[37] Therefore, the error of Parmenides should be discussed in metaphysics and not in physics because he enquires into the nature of immobile being.[38]

The critique of Aquinas and Aristotle must ask whether Parmenides describes being as a "genus." His text considers being as the unique whole of reality without any connotation to the logic of genus and species. Nevertheless, he is not yet able to formulate an analogous unity of being. His philosophical poem makes a sharp distinction between the everlasting nature of being and changing particular beings existing here and now, which once did not exist and after a while will not exist. But does his poetic language speak of a univocal genus which is determined by differences? Parmenides understands that all thoughts exist in being—being is even the existence of thoughts and is not a thought.[39] In the same sense, the particular things *exist* in being. Hence, being cannot be a genus or concept or representation of our thinking. Nothing exists in or through our representations. Aristotle himself maintains that Parmenides mistakes the universal concept of being for real being and considers the universe as one entity (which does not exclude that being is a genus in the language

---

[37] See Aquinas, *In* I *metaphys*., lec. 9, no. 134: "There were certain philosophers who spoke 'of the whole,' i.e., of the universe, as if it were of one nature, i.e., as if the whole universe were a single being or a single nature." See also no. 138: "Parmenides, who was a member of this group, seems to touch on unity according to *ratio*, i.e., according to form; for he argued as follows: besides being there is only nonbeing, and nonbeing is nothing. Therefore, besides being there is nothing. But being is one. Therefore, besides the one there is nothing." The latter argumentation, which identifies particular beings with nothing, does not appear in Parmenides's text. Aquinas continues: "In this argument he clearly considered the *ratio* itself of being, which seems to be one, because nothing can be understood to be added to the concept of being by which it might be diversified. For, whatever is added to being must be other than being. But anything such as this is nothing. . . . But they were mistaken in this matter, because they used being as if it were one in *ratio* and in nature, like the nature of any genus. But this is impossible. For, being is not a genus but is predicated of different things in many ways" (nos. 138–39; cf. *In* I *phys*., lec. 3, no. 21). Though Aquinas speaks himself of the essence or nature of being, he understands it as an analogous nature and interprets Parmenides's ratio of being as a univocal genus.

[38] Aquinas, *In* I *phys*., lec. 2, nos. 13, 15, 19. Aquinas calls the sophists considering only mobile things 'ancient natural philosophers' and distinguishes Parmenides from them because he studied immobile being.

[39] Parmenides writes that we cannot find thinking (apprehension) without being, in which something (thought) is as spoken (*Fragment* 8.34–36).

of Plato).[40] Aquinas's Aristotelian interpretation of Parmenides repeats the same critique.[41]

According to Aquinas's short history of being, the early philosophers or sophists consider matter as eternal or remaining substance of things. Therefore, motion regards only accidents of matter or the states of matter, such as density.[42] The lack of insight into the essence of things entails that early philosophy does not study the essence of motion as actuality of something potential as such. In Aquinas's eyes, only later philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato consider substantial change or the generation of substances. Things "become" subsisting things in their philosophies. The whole world is no longer substantial matter under changing accidents. Nevertheless, they still view matter as uncreated, despite their insight into substantial forms and the subsistence of things.[43] These considerations do not rise above the insight into particular causes of particular things or particular states of things. As long as mankind limits itself to a comprehension of universal being in this or that existing thing without any insight into the essence of being, the universal cause of being as such remains hidden. Aristotelian physics studies only being as this movable being, not as universal being.

But according to Aquinas, Plato and Aristotle do not only enquire into matter and form as causes of this or that thing,[44] or into the heaven as motor of generation. They are the first philosophers considering universal being qua universal being and its unique efficient cause, which is the universal cause of being. Plato arrives at this insight by reducing the multitude of beings to its unity in *per se* being (which Aquinas calls being

---

40 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.5.986b10–987a2.

41 Aquinas himself had no access to Parmenides's text.

42 The account of the early history of philosophy in chap. 9 of Aquinas's *De substantiis separatis*, distinguishes between ancient philosophers defining matter as uncreated substance of the world and others describing the coming *to be* of things as congregation of material parts. In the latter case, things would be substances; in the former, accidents.

43 According to Aquinas, Plato understands matter as uncreated. Only Aristotelian prime matter is not generated though created (see *ST* I, q. 46, a. 1, ad 3). In general, Aquinas interprets Aristotle as if the Stagirite spoke of creation from nothing instead of eternal motion underlying the endless cycle of generations (*In* VIII *phys*., lec. 2, nos. 974–75; lec. 3, nos. 995–96). Thus, the Greek philosopher would maintain, that the world is eternal and, nonetheless, depends on God regarding its existence—i.e., the world is created.

44 Aquinas interprets Plato as if he attributed to things their own form by participation in the ideas. Though Plato believes in different human souls, his teaching regarding other things is much less clear. They seem to be changing matter partaking in the ideas. Further, we do not find a clear distinction between substance and accidents in Plato's dialectic.

by essence, especially regarding Avicenna).[45] Aristotle ascends through the different grades of beings to the highest being: that which is most true or exists in the highest way is the cause of existence and truth in all the beings of a lesser degree.[46]

---

[45] See Aquinas, *Super Ioan*, prolog, no. 5: "Still others came to a knowledge of God from the dignity of God; and these were the Platonists. They noted that everything which is something by participation is reduced to what is the same thing by essence, as to the first and highest. Thus, all things which are fiery by participation are reduced to fire, which is such by its essence. And so, since all things which exist participate in being and are beings by participation, there must necessarily be at the summit of all things something which is its existence through its own essence, i.e., whose essence is its existence. And this is God, who is the most sufficient, the most eminent, and the most perfect cause of the whole of existence, from whom all things that are participate in existence. This dignity is shown in the words *on a high throne*, which, according to Dionysius, refer to the divine nature (*Cael. hier.* 13.4). *The Lord is high above all nations* (Ps 112:4)." Aquinas attributes the reduction of all beings by participation to one being by essence to Dionysius and not to Plato himself. Therefore, the idea of the good is missing in this reference to the Platonists. Nevertheless, Aquinas speaks of a reduction of all good things to the idea of the good by Plato (see e. g., *De ver.*, q. 21, a. 4). He considers also the Dionysian idea that the universal causality of the good extends further than that of being because the good refers also to the potential of matter (see e. g., *ST* I, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1). However, Aquinas does not know the text of Plato's *Republic* reducing knowledge to the idea of the good (whose image is the sun enabling the eye to see through light), which refers the mind to the ideas through the idea of being. Therefore, Aquinas quotes Themistius regarding the Platonic cause of knowledge: "Plato, since he held the active intellect to be a separate substance, indeed compares the active intellect to the sun, as Themistius says in his commentary on the *De anima*" (*De malo*, q. 16, a. 12, ad 1, cf. *ST* I, q. 79, a. 4).

[46] Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 44, a. 1. Cf. q. 2, a. 3; *De pot*., q. 3, a. 5 (which includes Avicenna in this consideration); *Super Ioan*, prol., no. 5. The connection between the first two articles of *ST* I, q. 44, was overlooked by Aertsen in his description of Aquinas's history of being. Then, the first philosophers studying being qua being are not necessarily Plato and Aristotle according to Aquinas's text. Avicenna appears to be the first thinker introducing the understanding of creation into the science of being qua being (*Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 151–56). Gilson, on the other hand, views Plato, Aristotle, and Avicenna as representatives of metaphysical studies (*Christian Philosophy*, 11–23, contrary to his previous remarks, which deny Aquinas's attribution of creation to Aristotle and Plato in *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes [London: Sheed & Ward, 1950], 69, 439–44). Obviously, Aquinas attributes the understanding of creation to Aristotle and Plato in *ST* I, q. 44, a. 1, because Plato reduces the multitude of things to something one and Aristotle calls that which is being to the highest degree the cause of all beings of a lesser degree (cf. also *De substantiis separatis*, chap. 9, where Aquinas attributes an understanding of being by participation to Aristotle). This must be kept in mind when we interpret *ST* I, q. 44, a. 2 (cf. Serge-Thomas Bonino, *Dieu, Alpha et Omega*, 110–26).

According to Aquinas, metaphysics or the science understanding being qua being studies all the possible aspects of being or all the modes of existence and the divine intellect contains all the modes of being (in an intelligible way).[47] This description of a science studying all the modes of being considers "being" as actuality of all things, of all forms, both substantial and accidental, or of all acts and natures.[48] In a certain sense, the less precise texts on the history of being written by Aquinas attribute this position to other philosophers who never shared in his understanding of being. Nevertheless, he may say of the actuality of all acts: it is "that, which I call existence [*esse*]."[49] Thus, Aquinas seems to be aware of the fact that his understanding of being differs from that of other authors.

For instance, Aristotle does not understand the gods or the God as efficient cause(s) of being qua being. He denies the existence of a moving or efficient cause regarding being qua being, which has only a final cause.[50] Further, he does not understand existence as an interior principle of things. Material things exist due to the composition of matter and form. Their existence is "to be composed."[51] Form is the first cause of existence,[52] which is nothing in things beyond their composition. The Stagirite calls substance "being qua being" and reduces all the accidents, which exist in another, to substance, which exists separately.[53] On the other hand, the science of "being qua being" studies the immovable and is opposed to physics enquiring into movable being as such.[54]

Plato, on the other hand, practices the science of dialectics and tries

---

47 Aquinas, *De substantiis separatis*, chap. 9.

48 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3; q. 5, a. 1; *De pot*., q. 7, a. 2, ad 9; *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5.

49 Aquinas, *De pot.*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9.

50 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.17.1041a25–32. Aquinas's commentary seeks to attribute creation or the gift of existence to the Aristotelian god or gods, i.e., he denies that Aristotle has no understanding of an efficient cause of existence: "Now the Philosopher is speaking here of natural substances. Hence, his statement here must be understood to apply only to a natural agent, which acts by means of motion. For, the divine agent, who communicates being without motion, is the cause not only of becoming but also of existence" (*In* VII *metaphys*., lec. 17, no. 1661).

51 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 9.10.1051 b 9–17. Regarding 'being' as interior principle, see Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 5, a. 2, ad 2, and Alain Contat, "Existe-t-il une métaphysique thomiste?," *Salesianum* 87 (2025): 33–73, at 52–53, 63–65.

52 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.17.1041b27–28.

53 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 11.3.1061a7–15. This book of the *Metaphysics* may be written by a student of Aristotle. But the Stagirite identifies 'being' and 'substance' also in 7.1.1028 b 2–7.

54 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1.1026 a 6–32.

to reduce every being to the unique idea of the good (through the idea of being) by participation. The idea of the good "gives" existence to all things and to all ideas through the idea of being.[55] Plato does not yet describe the universal emanation of being from the good by which the highest idea gives existence to all existing things. But his position resembles the later understanding of creation developed by Aquinas.

Aquinas refers especially to a later development within Platonism. Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of the emanation of being in all its different modes—including thoughts—from the cause of all things.[56] Thus, Aquinas's own insight into the universal cause of being develops through the contact with Platonic thought. Nevertheless, his metaphysics is unique in its understanding of being as actuality of all acts and as first known. Therefore, we must look into his more precise texts on the history of being to unravel the different interpretations of being by the philosophers.

Being Deceived by the Appearance of Being

The great difference between Aquinas's and Plato's thought appears in his commentary on the *Metaphysics* when Aquinas comments on the Aristotelian distinction among metaphysics (or "philosophy"), dialectics, and sophistry: "Dialecticians and sophists assume the same guise as the philosopher inasmuch as they resemble him in some respect."[57] Thus, the different ways of philosophizing are similar to a certain extent and our study of them must reveal the differences between these ways of thinking. Otherwise, we might mistake the appearance of philosophy for true philosophy. At first, all of these "philosophies" dispute everything or the whole of reality. However, they cannot have the same subject matter unless they consider all things under the same aspect. The formal object determines the different sciences. The only subject matter in which all things agree is being (and the transcendental modes of being). Hence, metaphysics, dialectics, and sophistry consider "being," or the whole of being.[58]

---

[55] See Plato, *Republic* 6.509b: "In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power" (cf. 7.517 b–c). See Karl Bormann, *Platon* (Munich: Karl Alber, 1973), 51–64.

[56] Aquinas, *Super Ioan*, prol., no. 5; *In de div. nom.* 5, lec. 2, nos. 655, 660. See Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 133–48.

[57] Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 4, no. 572.

[58] See Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 4, nos. 573: "Dialectics resembles philosophy in that it

Probably Aquinas would agree that Plato and the sophists were not aware of formal objects yet. At this point, we must remember that—according to Aquinas—"being" is the mind's natural object, which every intellect apprehends first in everything, both formally and materially. But the understanding of being differs in philosophers, dialecticians, and sophists:

> The dialectician, however, proceeds to treat all of the above-mentioned [common attributes of being] from probable [premises], and thus he does not acquire scientific knowledge of them but a kind of opinion. The reason for this difference is that there are two kinds of beings: namely being of reason and being of nature. The expression being of reason is applied properly to those intentions which reason derives from the objects it considers such as the intention of genus, species, and the like, which are not found in the nature of things but are a consequence of the consideration of reason. And this kind of being, the being of reason, is the proper subject of logic. But intelligible intentions of this kind are equal to beings of nature, because all beings of nature fall under the consideration of reason. Hence the subject of logic extends to all things of which "being of nature" is predicated. Therefore, [Aristotle] concludes, that the subject of logic compares to the subject of philosophy, which is being of nature. Now the philosopher proceeds from the principles of being of nature to prove that which must be considered regarding these common accidents of being. But the dialectician proceeds to consider them from the intentions of reason, which are extrinsic to the nature of things. Hence it is said that dialectics is tentative, because in trying it is proper to proceed from extrinsic principles.[59]

---

is also the office of the dialectician to consider all things. But this could not be the case unless he considered all things insofar as they agree in some one respect; because each science has one subject, and each art has one matter on which it operates. Therefore, since all things agree only in being, evidently the subject matter of dialectics is being and those attributes which belong to being; and this is what the philosopher also investigates. And sophistry likewise resembles philosophy; for sophistry has 'the semblance of wisdom,' or is apparent wisdom, without being wisdom. Now anything that takes on the appearance of something else must resemble it in some way. Therefore, the philosopher, the dialectician, and the sophist must consider the same thing."

[59] Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 4, no. 574; cf. *In* I *post*. *analyt*., lec. 20. See Rudi te Velde, "Metaphysics, Dialectics and the Modus Logicus according to Thomas Aquinas," *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 63 (1996): 15–35, at 19–23; Gregory T. Doolan, "Aquinas on the Metaphysician's vs. the Logician's Categories," *Quaestiones Disputatae* 4 (2014): 133–55, at 134–40; Rupert Mayer, "What Is Metaphysics? A Possible Dialogue

> [Aristotle] says that, since accidental being is in a sense being only in name, Plato in a way was not wrong when, in allotting different sciences to different kinds of substance, he assigned sophistical science to the realm of nonbeing. For, the arguments of the sophists are concerned chiefly with the accidental, since hidden paralogisms have the fallacy of accident as their principal basis.[60]

Thus, the dialectician mistakes the essence of being for a being of reason or determinable genus. Whereas Aristotle considers the essence as an interior principle of things, the dialectician judges things in accord with an intention of reason which is extrinsic to things. The sophistic understanding of being refers to accidental being, to the accidental connection of the realities signified by the subject and predicate of a judgment. This kind of being is close to nonbeing. In both cases, some kind of being takes on the guise of the whole of being. The mind moving within the oblivion of being is deceived by the appearance of some kind of being. In other words: the guise of the philosopher found in dialecticians and sophists is due to a different guise of being studied by them.

As was said above, beings of reason result from the mind's consideration. For instance, the abstraction from the individual arrives at the species, the genera result from the abstraction from the differences. The species *as universal* does not exist in things, though the species signifies the real essence of things. Genera do not belong to the real constitution of things; that is, they do not signify an additional form in things beyond the essence.[61] Thus, they are *nothing* in things. The logical consideration constituting the genus "animal" abstracts, for instance, from the differences "rational" and "irrational." The resulting genus "animal" has imperfect "existence" regarding man and lion. Contrary to the terms "man" and "lion," it does not signify anything actually existing in the nature of things. The potential existence signified by the genus results from the consideration of matter, which is actualized by a form, though not considered in the state of complete actualization. Aquinas describes this potential existence as follows:

> In the case of things composed of matter and form, the genus is obtained from the matter and the difference from the form, yet

between Thomas Aquinas and Plato about Dialectics and Metaphysics of Participation," in *Intellektualität und Gnade? Das Aufeinandertreffen von Platonismus und Christentum*, ed. Michael Wladika (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2016), 159–98, at 165–70.

60 Aquinas, *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 2, no. 1177.

61 Aquinas, *In* I *sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3; q. 19; q. 5, a. 1.

> in such a way that by matter is not understood prime matter, but matter according as it receives through the form a certain existence [*esse*], imperfect and material in comparison with specific existence [*esse*]; thus, for instance, the existence [*esse*] of animal is imperfect and material in comparison with man. Still, that twofold existence [*esse*] is not the consequence of two different forms, but of one form, which confers on man not only animal existence [*esse*] but human existence [*esse*]. Now, the soul of another animal confers on it only animal existence [*esse*]. Hence, the "common animal" is not one numerically, but by account [*ratione*] only, because it is not from one and the same form that a man and an ass are animals.[62]

Accordingly, the common account "animal" results from the consideration of distinct forms or souls actualizing matter. Therefore, the common account is not one numerically: it does not refer to one and the same form actualizing "matter." All those philosophies which refer to a common form of "animality" are deceived by the appearance of a being of reason resulting from the mind's consideration. They mistake nothing for something. If we consider "being" in this way, it becomes an empty genus abstracting from every other form and difference. This empty genus is not even a being of reason in Aquinas's philosophy. If we conceive of "being" as empty abstraction, this is a philosophical error.

In a similar sense, propositions are beings of reason due to the mind's composition of subject and predicate, which is not in things.[63] For instance, the composition of the terms "animal" and "rational" does not imply that the real form "rationality" determines the underlying subject "animal." On the contrary, "rational" and "animal" describe the one human essence as form of the whole thing "man." One and the same form gives sensual and intellectual life to the human being. Only accidental predicates determine the real subject as matter is determined by form, such as "this ball is white." Essential predicates, on the other hand, determine the *propositional* subject logically but unfold the *real* subject regarding its content. The logical predicate is always formal regarding the logical subject.[64] Nevertheless, the essential predicates unfold the content of the essence: for example, "animal" signifies the sentient nature of man, and "human being" his

---

62 Aquinas, *De spiritualibus creaturis*, q. 1, ad 24.

63 Aquinas, *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 4, nos. 1230–36.

64 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 13, a. 12: "Predicates are to be taken formally, and subjects materially." In this sense, predicates determine the logical subject.

rationality.[65] Dialectics overlooks this difference between a logical and a real subject; it thinks of the subject only as something determinable.[66] In a similar sense, the logic of the sophists is deceptive because they do not distinguish between *per se* and *per accidens* predication and the corresponding manifestation of *per se* and *accidental* being. For instance, they might construct a false syllogism (paralogism) by raising the question of

> whether the musical and the grammatical are the same or different. Let us construct such a paralogism. The musical differs from the grammatical; but the musical is the grammatical; hence the musical differs from itself. For the musical differs from the grammatical essentially speaking, but the musical is the grammatical by accident. Little wonder, then, that an absurd conclusion follows, for what is accidental is not distinguished from what is essential . . . It is also evident that, in this argument, the first statement is true of something that has being essentially, whereas in the second something is assumed that has being only by accident. And it is similar in all such argument based on the fallacy of accident; for, accidental being seems to be close to nonbeing; and therefore the sophistic, which is concerned with the apparent and non-existent, deals chiefly with the accidental.[67]

A sophistic syllogism might maintain that the musical (*musicum*) and the grammatical (*grammaticum*) are distinct. Metaphysics would speak of an essential distinction relating to *per se* being. Nevertheless, these two accidents may be accidentally united in one and the same human subject. Then the musical thing is the grammatical thing inasmuch as these accidents belong to the same thing or subject. Metaphysics calls this identity or unity accidental. Thus, if we do not distinguish between *per se* being and *per accidens* being, the fallacy of accident may result from a syllogism. The

---

65 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 13, a. 12: "The same applies when I say, *man is an animal*, since the same thing which is man is truly animal; for in the same suppositum there is sensible nature by reason of which he is called animal, and the rational nature by reason of which he is called man; hence here again predicate and subject are the same as to suppositum, but different as to ratio."

66 In the case of essential predication, Kant's transcendental and general logic, which he identifies with ontology, speaks of analytical judgments, but understands them as categorical judgments, i.e., the subject always underlies the accident. For instance, the circle is round.

67 Aquinas, *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 2, no. 1178.

syllogism turns into a paralogism having the appearance of truth despite the absurd conclusion that the musical differs from itself.

The above remarks refine Aquinas's early history of being. We cannot limit the history of being to a discussion of the true arguments of a specific philosophy. For instance, Aquinas's short history of being mentions only the truth of Plato's argument regarding the idea of being (without mentioning its origin in the idea of the good). Thus, "per se being" would be a name for God or the highest idea[68] and "being" signifies the act of existing as actuality of all acts. However, Plato thinks being as empty, determinable, and common genus—as a being of reason, which is nothing in things according to Aquinas. Further, the empty genus of "being" is a philosophical error because "being" signifies the actuality of all acts and not the abstraction from every kind of actuality.

Therefore, a second step must unveil the dialectical background of Platonic thought. Then, being is one of the highest genera. On the one hand, this genus determines everything participating in it as something existing or having a whatness (Plato identifies being with essence [*οὐσία*], Being [*εἶναι*], the "is," that [something] is, and the "what" or something[69]). On the other hand, all the other ideas determine being, which is not diversified without partaking in other ideas. Being itself is a determinable genus which partakes in the other genera. Further, Plato derives his understanding of being also from the copula. In this sense, being is nothing else but the ability-to-be-together of the different genera or ideas; that is, being is a pure potential of synthesis.[70] Thus, the Platonic philosophy determines the whatness of being logically. The dialectical way of thinking identifies the logical description of being with reality: reality appears as empty, determinable potential even though a logical genus is nothing in reality.

The Essence of Universal Being as Measure of Human Thinking in Metaphysics

Aquinas's short history of being asks a question: how does a certain philosophy understand universal being or the essence of universal being?

---

[68] Aquinas, *Super Ioan*, prol., no. 5.

[69] Plato, *Theaetetus* 186 a–b; *Sophist* 244 b. See Martin Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit. Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet*, 2nd ed., Gesamtausgabe 34 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1997), 188–91, 199, 220–23, 228–229.

[70] Plato, *Sophist* 247d–e, 248b, 253c. See Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 328–36, 361–69 (cf. Gesamtausgabe 19, 474–86, 522–34).

The presupposition is that the human mind understands being naturally or necessarily, though in an undetermined way. Different philosophies may determine universal being in different ways. Therefore, the sophists understand universal being as "being" qualified by certain accidents, such as matter in its accidental change under different forms. The physics of Aristotle enquires into material substances: universal being appears as this or that movable being, which is a substance that comes to be and ceases to be. Only metaphysics studies universal being qua universal being[71] that neither comes to be nor ceases to be. What is the precise meaning of this phrase in Aquinas's philosophy?

At first, Aquinas's philosophical vocabulary distinguishes between the essence of universal being (*essentia entis universalis*) and being by essence (*ens per essentiam*). The latter is God. Being by essence, whose essence is existence, is opposed to being by participation (*ens per participationem*).[72] This implies that God is subsisting existence: neither participated existence nor existence received by a subject.[73] Thus, being by essence or God is the cause of universal being or the essence of being. Hence, God (being by essence) is not contained in universal being. The latter partakes in God, though every creature partakes in universal being.[74] Therefore, the term "essence of universal being" refers to the essence of participated existence, not to divine existence. Participated existence does not subsist, though it actualizes created substances.[75] It is always the existence of the subject that partakes in existence. Existence itself is a principle in things, which—contrary to God—may receive a further determination:

> Something is said to be "without addition" in two ways. Either it belongs to its ratio that nothing is added to it—and in this way this is said of God, for that must be perfect in itself which does not receive any addition. Nor can this be something common, since everything common is preserved in what is proper, where an addition is made to it. Or it does not belong to its ratio that addition is made to it, but neither does being without addition belong to its

---

71 See Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 1, nos. 532: "No particular science considers universal being as such. . . . But the common science considers universal being as being, and therefore it is not the same as any of the particular sciences."

72 Aquinas, *SCG* II, chap. 15; III, chap. 66; *ST* I, q. 4, a. 3, ad 3; q. 104, a. 1, *Super Ioan*, prol., no. 5.

73 Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae* I, chap. 68.

74 Aquinas, *In de div. nom*., chap. 5, lec. 2, no. 660.

75 Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 1, a. 1; *ST* I, q. 45, a. 4.

> ratio. And in this way common being is "without addition"; otherwise, addition could never be made to it, since it would be against its ratio. And therefore it is common, because in its ratio it does not indicate any addition, but addition can be made to it, so that it might be determined to what is proper. For example, as "common animal" is said to be without reason, since having reason does not belong to the idea of it, but neither does not having reason; on the other hand, a donkey is said to be without reason because within the idea of it is included the negation of reason, and thereby it is determined according to its proper difference. In this way, so too is the divine existence determined in itself and divided from all other things, through the fact that no addition can be made to it.[76]

Aquinas says of the determination of universal being or the essence of being: "We must not think that that which I call "existence" [*esse*] can have anything added to it that is more formal and determines it as act determines potency, because existence, which is such [actuality of all acts] *differs by essence* from that to which it is added and by which it is determined."[77] In other words: participated or universal existence shows itself as an essence which is distinct from every other reality or essence in this world that is added to existence. The contraction of universal existence happens by a limited potential or capacity of reception, not by a form which would actualize a potential in unlimited actuality. In this sense, "being" is wholly distinct from an empty, logical genus. The essence of created existence is to actualize every created reality, primarily every created substance. It is distinct from the nature or essence of every creature.[78]

Most of the Thomists describe being—together with Aquinas—as "that

---

[76] Aquinas, *In* I *sent*., d. 8, q. 4, a. 1, ad 1; cf. *De ver*., q. 21, a. 1, where Aquinas describes the determination of being also as addition to the essence of universal being. This addition to being is the way of composition as opposed to the way of resolution, which resolves a determined thing into its interior principles, ultimately into being.

[77] Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9. Cf. *In Boetii de hebdomadibus*, lec. 2: "Existence itself [*ipsum esse*] has nothing mixed in beyond its essence."

[78] See Aquinas, *In* II *sent*., d. 1, q. 1, a. 1: "For, the nature of entity [*natura entitatis*] is found in all things, more noble in some of them and less so in others, but still such that the natures of these things are not themselves the existence [*esse*] that they have. Otherwise, existence would pertain to the idea of every whatness, which is false, since the whatness of any given thing can be understood even without knowing whether the thing exists. Therefore, they must have existence from something else, and we must arrive at something whose nature is itself its own existence. Otherwise, we would proceed to infinity. And this is what gives being to all things and cannot be but one, since the nature of entity

which is" or "that what is" (*id quod est*).[79] However, they interpret this term as distinction between a specific essence (*quod*) and existence (*est*). Then, the term "being" contains this distinction. Every real, created being has an essence, which is distinct from its existence. Étienne Gilson would add that we understand existence through judgment.[80] But Aquinas's terminology speaks of being qua being, of the essence of being or of universal being (*essentia entis universalis*). In other words: being is an essence falling in apprehension or the mind's first operation. We do not refer only to this or that being whose existence is understood by judgment or the mind's second operation. Further, the term "that which is" signifies a subject or being having the act to be or existence, not an essence that exists. Existence is that by which a being is. Essence is also like a form belonging to a subject—it is that by which a thing or subject is what it is.[81] Hence, the phrase "that which is" does not refer to an existing essence. It indicates a being or thing having existence by which it is. The same thing has also an essence by which it is what it is.

The Essence of Universal Being as a Common Thing

Aquinas writes in his commentary on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* regarding universal being:

> Certain sciences use the common principles [*utuntur principiis communibus*] in a manner other than has been described. Dialectics is concerned with common *principles* [*est de communibus*], and a certain other science is concerned with common *principles*: first philosophy, whose subject is being and which considers the things which follow upon being as the proper attributes of being. Yet it

---

has one notion in all things analogously. For the unity of a caused thing requires unity in the essential cause."

79 Aquinas, *In Boetii de hebd.*, lec. 2.

80 See Alain Contat, "Le figure della differenza ontologica nel tomismo del Novecento (prima parte)," *Alpha Omega* 11 (2008): 77–129, at 86–115. Regarding Gilson and Jacques Maritain, see Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 224; Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*, 180; John F. Wippel, "Being," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies, Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 77–84.

81 See Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 17, a. 2: "Now existence pertains both to the nature and to the hypostasis—to the hypostasis as to that which has existence and to the nature as to that whereby it has existence. For nature is taken after the manner of a form, which is said to be a being because something is by it; as by whiteness a thing is white, and by humanity a thing is man."

> should be noted that dialectics is concerned with common *principles* under an aspect different from logic and first philosophy. First philosophy is concerned with common *principles* because it considers the common things themselves [*ipsas res communes*]—being and the parts and attributes of being. But because reason deals with all things that are in nature and logic studies the operations of reason, logic will also be concerned with that which is common to all things, with reason's intentions, which refer to all things, but not in such a way that logic has the common things themselves as its subject; for logic considers as its subject the syllogism, enunciation, predication, and things of that type."[82]

The focus of this text lies on being as a common thing or reality, which is distinct from a common ratio, concept, or intention, though we also have natural concepts of the first principles, such as "being."[83] Metaphysics studies "being" as a common thing; logic also studies "being," but as a common intention or concept predicated of everything. The Platonic dialectics, on the other hand, studies common intentions—like logic—and identifies them with realities in things by describing reality in a logical way.[84] Thus, we can see why Plato's arguments regarding universal being

---

82 Aquinas, *In* I *post*. *analyt*., lec. 20.

83 See Aquinas, *In* IV *sent*., d. 33, q. 1, a. 1: "Among those things that participate in reason, the principles of acting are cognition and appetite. For this reason, it is necessary that in the cognitive power there be a natural concept, and in the natural appetite a natural inclination, by which an activity befitting the genus or the species is rendered proportionate to its end." See also *Quodlibet* VIII, q. 2, a. 2: "Similarly, in the intellect there are for us naturally certain conceptions known by all, as of being, of one, of the good, and of things of this sort from which the intellect proceeds to knowing the quiddity of each thing in the same way through which it proceeds from principles known per se to knowing conclusions. . . . And because natural knowledge is a certain likeness of the divine truth impressed upon our mind, according to Psalm 4:6: *the light of your face has been signed upon us, O Lord*; for this reason, Augustine says, in the tenth book of *On the Trinity*, that habits of this sort are known *in* the first *truth*."

84 See Aquinas, *In* I *post*. *analyt*., lec. 20: "But although the part of logic which is demonstrative is engaged in teaching about common intentions, the use of a demonstrative science does not consist in proceeding from common intentions to show anything about the things which are the subjects of the other sciences. But dialectics does this, for it goes from common intentions and argues to things that pertain to other sciences, whether they be proper or common [principles], but mainly common [*communia*]. Thus, it argues that hatred is in the concupiscible appetite because love is, on the ground that contraries are concerned with the same thing. Consequently, dialectics is concerned with common [principles] not only because it treats the common intentions of reason,

and the reduction of all beings to universal being are not completely false. Universal being is a common thing, not only a common intention, and the whole reality reduces to it as potency reduces to act. Nevertheless, we have a concept of it signifying the essence of being. Aquinas's metaphysical reduction or resolution of every reality to being, which compares to everything as act compares to potency,[85] arrives at the plenitude of the actuality of all acts and essences. Plato's logical and dialectical reduction treats "being" as if it were the most empty and abstract concept. In truth, we cannot reduce the whole of reality to it, because the whole of reality is not contained in the empty idea of being. Nevertheless, Plato identifies the logical reduction to a most universal concept predicated of everything with a reduction to a real principle. Aquinas praises especially Plato's reduction of the whole reality to God.[86]

Thus, if we speak of a common thing, the name "actuality of all forms" manifests the reality of being in a deeper way. We may compare it to a common intention in the mind. A common ratio or a universal in thinking is a "one in many or outside of the many" and abstracts from particular matter—that is, from time, space, and the individual.[87] Therefore, this

---

which is common to all logic, but also because it argues about that which is common to things [*communia rerum*]."

85 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4: "Existence is that which makes every form or nature actual; for, goodness and humanity are spoken of as actual only because they are spoken of as existing. Therefore, existence must be compared to essence, if the latter is a distinct reality, as actuality to potentiality" (cf. q. 4, a. 1, ad 3).

86 See Aquinas, *In de div. nom.*, proem.: "For the Platonists, wishing to reduce composed or material things to simple and abstract principles, posited separated species of things, saying that there is man beyond matter, and likewise horse, and thus concerning the other species of natural things. They said, therefore, that this sensible singular man is not the very what-man-is itself, but is called man by participation of that separated man. . . . Nor by an abstraction of this sort did the Platonists consider only about the ultimate species of natural things, but also about the most common things, which are the good, one, and being. For they posited a first one that is the very essence of goodness and of unity and of being, which we call God, and that all other things are called good or one or beings through derivation from that first. Whence they named that first the good itself or *per se* good or principal good or supergood or also the goodness of all good things or even goodness or essence and substance, by that mode in which it is expounded concerning separated man. This *ratio* of the Platonists, therefore, does not accord with the faith nor with the truth, as regards what it contains concerning separated natural species. But as regards what they said concerning the first principle of things, their opinion is most true and consonant with the Christian faith." Cf. Rudi te Velde, "Aquinas's Aristotelian Science of Metaphysics and Its Revised Platonism," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 13 (2015): 743–64, at 753–59.

87 See Aquinas, *In* II *post. analyt.*, lec. 20: "For if many singulars are taken which are without

universal does not contain the individual reality from which it abstracts. Inasmuch as analogy is a mode of being common,[88] analogous being is also one universal thing in many. However, all the different natures contract or limit it in their way, so that existence becomes the act of this or that nature as distinct from the actuality of every nature.[89] The question is whether universal being *as common thing* must be without matter. Aquinas seems to say so, because the location of unlimited and not contracted universal being is the intellect:

> That which is common to many is not something besides those many except by reason alone. Thus "animal" is not something besides Socrates and Plato and other animals except by the intellect, which apprehends the form of animal as divested of all that specifies and individualizes it. For man is that which is truly an animal, otherwise it would follow that, in Socrates and Plato, there are several animals [namely, animal in general, man in general, and Plato himself]. Much less, therefore, common existence itself [*ipsum esse commune*] is something apart from all things that have existence [*esse*], except only as apprehended by the mind. If, therefore, God is common existence [*esse commune*], he will not be an individual thing, except as apprehended in the mind. Now, it has been shown above that God is something not merely in the intellect, but in reality. Therefore, God is not the common existence of all [*esse commune omnium*].[90]

Upon reading this text, we might immediately think of common being as a universal intention in the mind. The comparison between the genus "animal" and common existence suggests such an interpretation. In the

---

differences as to some one item existing in them, that one item according to which they are not different, once it is received in the mind, is the first universal, no matter what it may be, whether it pertains to the essence of the singulars or not" (cf. *ST* I, q. 85, a. 1, ad 2, *Expositio De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 2). He continues in lec. 20: "Furthermore, he says that it is one outside the many, not according to real existence but according to the consideration of the intellect, which considers a nature, say of man, without referring to Socrates and Plato."

88 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 13, a. 5.

89 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 7, a. 2: "If, however, any created forms are not received into matter but are self-subsisting, as some think is the case with angels, these will be relatively infinite, inasmuch as such kinds of forms are not terminated, nor contracted by any matter. But because a created form thus subsisting has existence, and yet is not its own existence, it follows that its existence is received and contracted to a determinate nature."

90 Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 26.

strict sense, "animal" does not even signify a form in things, because it is contained in all the species of animals and only the species, though not as universal, signifies the essence of things. A genus is a being of reason with a remote foundation in things. Thus, the term "animal" refers to beings with a sentient soul *without determination* to rationality or irrationality.[91]

However, the whole chapter of the *Summa contra gentiles* quoted from above speaks of common being as the most interior and real principle of all things caused by God.[92] The last sentence of the above passage says God is not the common existence of all things, the existence by which they exist in reality, which is the most interior and formal principle and not a concept. On the one hand, we may consider this common existence in things. Then it reflects the analogous existence of this or that thing, because everything limits existence. In this sense, Aquinas speaks of formal existence.[93] Thus, there is no universal existence or actuality of all acts in the real things of this world except as analogously common to many.[94] Every created thing has a limited act of its own essence. On the other hand, universal existence, or the actuality of all acts, "is" in the intellect as understood. Being—the common thing *as common*, and not only the common concept of being—is only in the intellect. It is in all things *as contracted and limited*. But how should the intellect be the place of universal being? Aquinas writes in his description of the possible intellect:

---

91 Aquinas, *In* I *sent.,* d. 2, q. 1, a. 3; d. 19, q. 5, a. 1.

92 See Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 26: "The principle is naturally prior to that which flows from it. Now, in certain things, existence has something by way of principle: for the form is said to be the principle of existence, and likewise the agent, which gives certain things actual existence. Therefore, if the divine existence is the existence of each thing, it will follow that God, who is his own existence, has a cause, and thus is not necessary existence in himself." Cf. *ST* I, q. 105, a. 5: "And since the form of a thing is within the thing, and all the more, as it approaches nearer to the first and universal cause; and because, in all things, God himself is properly the cause of universal existence which is innermost in all things; it follows that, in all things, God works intimately."

93 See Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 26: "If a form did not cause existence, a thing which received such a form would not be said to be generated. Hence, if God is the formal existence of all things, he will consequently be the terminus of generation."

94 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 5: "All in one genus agree in the quiddity or essence of the genus which is essentially predicated of them. But they differ in their existence [*esse*], for the existence of man and of horse is not the same, as also of this man and that man. Thus, in every member of a genus, existence and quiddity, i.e., essence, must differ" (cf. *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 11). Inasmuch as being differs in all the individuals, it is always predicated analogously.

> And thus, our act of understanding is a to-be-affected [inasmuch as whatever passes from potency to act may be said to be passive, even when it is perfected]. This is clear from the following reason. For the intellect, as we have seen above, has an operation extending to universal being. We may therefore see whether the intellect be in act or potency by considering the relation of the intellect to universal being. For we find an intellect whose relation to universal being is that of the act of all being: and such is the divine intellect, which is the essence of God, in which originally and virtually all being preexists as in its first cause. And therefore, the divine intellect is not in potency, but is pure act. But no created intellect can be in act in relation to the whole universal being; otherwise, it would be an infinite being. Wherefore, every created intellect is not the act of all things intelligible by reason of its existence, but compares to these intelligible things as potency to act.[95]

In this sense, Aquinas describes an intellect whose receptivity refers primarily to universal being and not to this or that intelligible species: "Now the intellect is a passive power in regard to the whole universal being."[96] Universal being emanates from God in the act of creation: "We must consider not only the emanation of a particular being from a particular agent, but also the emanation of all being from the universal cause, which is God; and this emanation we designate by the name of 'creation.'"[97] Thus, Aquinas identifies being qua being or universal being as object of the intellect and as formal object of creation.[98] The mind is, therefore, receptive to the efflux of being from God's mind. Though "being caused by God" does not belong to the ratio of being, which is *per se* known and not explained by a cause,[99] Aquinas speaks sometimes of the meaning of the term "being"

---

95 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 2. Cf. *SCG* II, chap. 98; *In* III *sent.,* d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, qcla. 2.

96 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 2, ad 3.

97 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 45, a. 1. Cf. a. 4, ad 1; *De pot*., q. 3, a. 1; *SCG* II, chap. 21.

98 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 45, a. 4, ad 1: "In the phrase 'the first of created things is existence,' the word *existence* does not refer to a created subject, but to the proper ratio of the object of creation." In other words: the world is created under the formal aspect of universal being and God is the cause of being *qua being* (q. 44, a. 2).

99 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 44, a. 1, ad 1: "Though the relation to its cause is not part of the definition of being which is caused, still it follows, as a consequence, on what belongs to its essence; because, from the fact that a thing has existence by participation, it follows that it is caused. Hence, such a being cannot be without being caused, just as man cannot be without having the faculty of laughing. But, since to be caused does not belong to the *ratio* of being as such, therefore is it possible to find a being uncaused." Aquinas

by describing it as the proper effect of the highest cause: "Now to know the ratio of being and nonbeing, of whole and part, and of other things consequent to being . . . is the function of wisdom: since universal being is the proper effect of the supreme cause, which is God."[100] On the one hand, the efflux of universal being from God is the existence of each and every thing in this world, while on the other, the intellect receives this efflux as a "common thing" that does not subsist in itself.[101]

The Intellect Receives Being Qua Intelligible Being

The intellect is a passive or receptive power regarding universal being. Universal being is not a subsisting thing or idea outside of all the other things.[102] It refers to the existence by which all things exist, but also to that which is first known by the mind. The mind's receptivity regarding universal being can be compared to the receptivity of other things or principles as follows:

> Of different things there are different matters: for, the matter of spiritual things is not the same as that of corporeal things, nor that of heavenly bodies the same as that of corruptible bodies. This is evident from the fact that receptivity as a property of matter is not of the same kind in the aforesaid. For receptivity [*receptio*] in spiritual things is intelligible. Thus, the intellect receives the species of intelligible objects, but not according to their material existence [*esse materiale*], while heavenly bodies receive newness of situation,

---

maintains that something first in the order of knowing cannot be understood through something prior to it, though we may consider it in relation to its effects: "Now primary things cannot be understood by anything anterior to them, but by something consequent, as causes are understood through their proper effects. But, since good properly is the moving principle of the appetite, good is described as movement of the appetite, just as motive power is usually manifested through motion. For this reason, he says that the philosophers have rightly declared that good is what all desire" (*In* I *eth*., lec. 1). In this sense, existence is the most interior formal cause and its effect is the actuality of all things: "Now, being implies only the relation of a formal cause, either inherent or exemplar; and its causality does not extend save to those things which are actual" (*ST* I, q. 5, a. 2, ad 2).

100 Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 66, a. 5, ad 4.

101 See Aquinas, *In* VII *metaphys*., lec. 16, no. 1639: "Yet being and unity are substance to a greater degree than principle, element, or cause, since they are closer to the substance of things. For principle, element, and cause signify only the relationship of one thing to another, but being and unity signify something proper to a thing by reason of its own substance. Yet neither being nor unity is the substance itself of a thing."

102 See Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 1, a. 1: "'Existence' [*esse*] denotes something complete and simple, yet nonsubsistent."

> but not newness of existence [*innovationem essendi*], as lower bodies do. Therefore, there is not one matter that is in potency to universal existence [*esse universale*]. But God's activity regards all existence universally [*Deus est totius esse activus universaliter*]. Therefore, no matter corresponds proportionately to him. Therefore, he does not require matter of necessity.[103]

Once more, Aquinas speaks of the relation between matter or receptivity and universal existence. There is not a singular receptivity responding to the actuality of all acts; that is, no natural thing has an infinite essence. However, the intellect's receptivity is intelligible. This implies that the species of things do not have material and natural existence in the intellect, but intelligible existence.[104] In other words: the fullness of being called "universal existence" contains both natural, or real, and intelligible existence. Otherwise, universal being could not be received in the intellect, whose receptivity is intelligible. In this sense, Aquinas can write:

> The proper object of the intellect is intelligible being, and this includes all possible differences and species of being, because whatever can be can be understood. Now, since all knowledge is caused by some kind of likeness, the intellect is unable to know its object wholly unless it has in itself the likeness of all being and of all its differences.[105]

Intelligible existence contains all the genera, differences, and species of being. Even privations and negations, which lack natural existence, are known and intelligible through intelligible existence.[106] Thus, "things" that are not or lack natural existence are, nonetheless, present to the mind and understood through intelligible existence. Genera, differences, and even species as universals are beings of reason, which do not exist in things. They are not natural beings. Only the species signifies the real essence of things by abstracting from individual matter. In other words: the genera and differences are not contained in the actuality of all acts regarding

---

103 Aquinas, *SCG* II, chap. 16.

104 Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 55.

105 Aquinas, *SCG* II, chap. 98.

106 See Aquinas, *SCG* III, chap. 59: "Intelligible existence [*esse intelligibile*] is not of less, but may be of greater extent than natural existence [*esse naturae*]: for the intellect is naturally adapted to understand all the things in the universe, as well as things that have no natural existence, such as negations and privations."

natural existence, though they belong to intelligible existence and are understood. Natural existence and intelligible existence are two different orders of being which are one in universal being. Whereas natural existence concerns the absolute existence of things in themselves, intelligible existence characterizes their manifestness or actual intelligibility relative to the intellect's act of understanding.[107] How did Aquinas discover this twofold order of being? He writes:

> The object of the intellect is something common—namely, being and the true—under which the act of understanding itself is comprehended. Wherefore the intellect can understand its own act. But not at first, since the first object of our intellect, according to the present state of life, is not every being and everything true, but "being" and "true" as considered in material things, as we have said above, from which it acquires knowledge of all other things.[108]

The human mind, which comes to know reality through the senses, focuses at first on "being" as participated in material things, especially in substances as the only things having the act of existence, or more precisely the act of *natural* existence. If our knowledge were limited to these things, we would understand neither universal being as common thing nor our own act of understanding. Our understanding of being would be universal or would refer to many individual beings, but it would not concern the essence of universal being. "Universal being" would be a concept signifying all sensible beings in their natural existence, not more and not less.

---

[107] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 13, a. 7: "Sometimes the relation is a natural thing in one of the extremes and is merely a thing of reason in the other. And this occurs whenever the two extremes are not of one order. For example, sense and science are related to the sensible (thing) and to the knowable (thing), which, inasmuch as they are certain things existing in natural existence, are outside the order of sensible and intelligible existence; and, therefore, in the science and in the sense there is a real relation, inasmuch as they are ordered toward knowing or sensing things; but the things themselves, considered in themselves, are outside this order. Hence, in them there is no relation really to science and sense, but only according to reason, inasmuch as the intellect apprehends them as terms of the relations of knowledge and sense." The problem can also be phrased regarding actual knowledge: "The knowable is said according to potency, but knowledge according to habit or according to act. Therefore, the knowable, according to its mode of signification, exists prior to knowledge. But, if we understand the knowable according to act, then it is simultaneous with knowledge according to act: for nothing is known unless there is knowledge of it" (*ST* I, q. 13, a. 7, ad 6). In this case, the actually intelligible exists relative to the intellect.

[108] Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 87, a. 3, ad 1. Cf. II-II, q. 25, a. 2; *In* I *sent.,* d. 17, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3.

However, universal being as a common thing or principle enables us to understand our own understanding as a being among other beings. The actuality of all acts contains also the act of understanding. Thus, understanding is contained in the object of the intellect and can be understood or is intelligible by its participation in universal existence. The universal reality of being, and not only the universal concept of being, is present in the mind.

Aquinas and Parmenides have the same experience of the reality of being regarding understanding: thinking is contained in being. This does not imply only that the universal concept of being comprehends material things and understanding. Thinking is itself a being whose actuality must be reduced to the actuality of all acts or to being as a universal thing. And this thinking is the understanding of being having "being" as its natural object. Inasmuch as thinking abstracts from the material conditions of things and considers them universally, it must be immaterial.[109]

However, Aquinas can express this experience in a way unknown to Parmenides. Understanding relates to its proper object or exists relative to its object, which is intelligible being. But something is *actually intelligible* relative to the act of understanding. Actual intelligibility is that by which the whole of universal being or *absolute* being in itself appears *relative* to the mind. Absolute being falls first in the mind, which can ignore the intelligibility by which being manifests itself to the mind.[110] Nevertheless, universal being does not become relative to the intellect. The whole of reality does not only include the intellect. It is not relative to anything, because nothing is outside of it (with the exception of God).

The distinction of the mind's *first* object (or material being) from the mind's *proper* object or universal being[111] in the above text enables us to understand Aquinas's history of being in a deeper way. The ancient sophists did not distinguish between the senses and the intellect. Thus, they considered sensible beings or bodies only in their accidental movement; the

---

[109] See Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 44: "Again, a thing is intelligent because it is without matter. A sign of this is the fact that forms are made understood in act by abstraction from matter. And hence the intellect deals with universals and not singulars, for matter is the principle of individuation. But forms that are understood in act become one with the intellect that understands them in act. Therefore, if forms are understood in act because they are without matter, a thing must be intelligent because it is without matter."

[110] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 16, a. 3, ad 3: "For being cannot be understood, unless being is intelligible. Yet being can be understood while its intelligibility is not understood." Cf. *In* I *sent.,* d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 2.

[111] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 5, a. 2: "Being is the proper object of the intellect, and is the first intelligible."

sensible bodies appeared to be accidental configurations of eternal matter. Nevertheless, this way of thinking is a universal way of studying being as such being or as accidental being.

Further, some sophists held that things exist only relative to the senses, by appearing to them. The senses perceive only their own perception. But Aquinas characterizes the intellect's intelligible species as the principle by which a real thing appears to the mind and is understood by it.[112] This phenomenon grounds ultimately in universal being and the intelligibility contained in it. The intelligibility of being is that by which universal being appears to the mind and is understood by it.

Aristotle's physics arises from an understanding guided by the distinction between senses and intellect. Therefore, he studies the invisible and unchangeable substance or whatness of things underlying the sensible accidents. The substance or form of things is unchangeable as such, though it comes to be and ceases to be in this or that thing. In this way, Aristotle approaches more closely to the mind's first object or being in material things and studies this or that subsisting being—being as *this* being. With Aquinas we might add that these material substances have their own act of existence or are beings by participation in existence.

However, these studies of "being considered in material things" fall short from an enquiry into universal being *as such*. "Being" as universal concept abstracted from material things refers us to each and every material being without any consideration of "being" as a universal thing. We might distinguish between essence and existence in things, but our representation of "being" would refer universally to the existence differing in each and every thing and not to the one common thing. The usual procedure of sciences considers real things through concepts and does not study a common thing immediately present in the mind. As long as being is not understood as a common thing in the mind, the necessity to reduce each and every reality to the actuality of being cannot manifest itself.

Only a reflection on the mind's own act discovers thinking as something which is by participation in universal existence. However, this reflection enables us also to discover the essence or nature of thinking as apprehension of universal being or the essence of being. As long as we fall short of this cognition of universal being *within apprehension*, we cannot think metaphysically: we cannot reduce every reality to the actuality of all acts. Metaphysics cannot connect to its subject matter without considering it in the act of thinking as a common thing or reality. Hence, universal being

---

[112] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 85, a. 2.

is the intellect's natural object known first in everything we apprehend. Nevertheless, we must come to know this universal thing through the experience of material things and a reflection on our own apprehension. Aquinas writes regarding the transcendentals and their addition to being:

> But the other three [transcendentals: one, true, and good] must add something that is not a contraction of being: for, if they contracted being, they would no longer be first notions. Now, this is impossible unless that which they add were only [a being] of reason, and this is either a negation which is added by the one as already stated or a relation or something which by its very nature is universally referable to being: and this is either the intellect to which the true bears a relation or the appetite to which the good bears a relation, for the good is what all things seek.[113]

Aquinas considers the intellect in a *universal* relation to being. This relation is real because the intellect depends on the apprehended object. It is universal because the intellect apprehends universal being in itself and in all beings inasmuch as they partake in universal being. In the same sense, being as intelligible, or true being, relates universally to the intellect. This relation is not real. Usually, Aquinas calls it a relation of reason because a real thing exists in itself and does not depend on the created intellect knowing it. The case of universal being is different because—contrary to singular, material things—it contains intelligible existence as relation to the intellect. Nevertheless, universal being does not depend on the intellect because it contains the whole actuality of the world including the intellect's actuality. Thus, being as a whole cannot depend on anything outside of it because nothing is outside of it. However, universal being manifests primarily itself to the intellect by its actual intelligibility, and secondarily all beings inasmuch as they partake in it. Therefore, being relates *universally* to the intellect.

"Being" signifies the actuality of all acts containing every form, every relation, and every activity in itself. Hence, the actuality of all acts comprehends the act of understanding and its actually intelligible object as relating to one another. The universal relation of the intellect to being presupposes a universal manifestation of being to the intellect. Being shows itself to the intellect under every possible aspect or mode of being, and, thus, relates everything to the mind.

---

[113] Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 9, a. 7, ad 6.

Inasmuch as every nature reduces to existence as potency reduces to act, the universality of being is analogous and receives the name "actuality of all natures." No natural thing, which has *this* actuality and excludes every other actuality, can receive the plenitude of being. But the intellect receives it in an intelligible way to understand it or to relate to it universally. If this consideration of the intellect's relation to being is missing, universal being, which is a common and spiritual "thing" without subsistence, cannot be understood. Universal being *as such* "is" only in the intellect.

The Apprehension of Universal Being

To think universal being as a common thing we must turn our usual thinking upside down. Aquinas says regarding the essence of limited things:

> Therefore, the nature of man considered absolutely abstracts from every existence [that is, in the intellect and in reality], though it does not preclude any one of these either. And the nature thus considered is the one predicated of each individual.[114]

> But every essence or quiddity can be understood without understanding anything about its existence: I can understand what a man is or what a phoenix is, and nevertheless not know whether either has existence in reality. Therefore, it is clear that existence is something other than the essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there is something whose quiddity is its very own existence.[115]

> Now, that which is existence is not included in the ratio of any creature, for the act of existence of every creature is something other than its quiddity. Hence, it cannot be said of any creature that its existence is immediately evident even in itself.[116]

> Existence is the actuality of every form or nature; for goodness and humanity are not signified to be in act unless inasmuch as we signify them to be. Therefore, existence must be compared to the essence, which is distinct from it, as actuality to potentiality.[117]

---

[114] Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, chap. 3. Cf. *Quodlibet* VIII, q. 1, a. 1; *De pot*., q. 5, a. 9, ad 16.

[115] Aquinas, *De ente et ess.*, chap. 4; cf. *In* II *sent.,* d. 1, q. 1, a. 1.

[116] Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 10, a. 12.

[117] Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4.

Thomists criticize Aquinas's *intellectus essentiae* argument for the real distinction of essence and existence in created things. They ask: Why should the phenomenon in thought that no concept of a limited essence reveals the essence's existence in reality enable us to distinguish between essence and existence? If this were the case, we would speak of a conceptual distinction instead of a real distinction.[118] This critique departs from the usual Thomistic understanding of being or "that which is." According to many Thomists, the common concept "being" signifies both a limited essence and its existence. But Aquinas himself refers the concept to the essence of universal being.

Thus, the critique overlooks that Aquinas understands existence (*esse*) as a special essence, distinct from every other essence.[119] Hence, the conceptual distinction implies a real distinction in things. The consequence is that our thinking necessarily abstracts from existence in the apprehension of created essences. This abstraction occurs "by way of simple and absolute consideration; thus we understand one thing without considering the other."[120] Such an abstraction does not deny the actual existence of an essence in a real thing. But it considers the essence without this existence, because existence does not belong to the essence's definition.[121] The limited essence is a potential that does not actually exist without the act of existence. Only an existential judgment signifies that this thing actually exists.[122] And, therefore, the essence of this thing is also signified as actual.

---

118 John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas. From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 137–50.

119 Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 7, a. 2, ad 9; cf. *In Boetii de hebd*., lec. 2.

120 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 85, a. 1, ad 1.

121 See Aquinas, *Quodlibet* II, q. 2, a. 1: "But it must be known that there are two ways to participate in something. One way is to participate in it as something included in the substance of thing, just as a species participates in a genus. Yet a creature does not participate in existence [*esse*] in this way. For the substance of a thing includes that which is in its definition. But being [*ens*] is not in the definition of a creature, since being is neither genus nor difference. Hence, a creature participates in existence as something not arising from the essence of a thing. And for this reason, 'whether it is' is one question and 'what it is' is another. Hence, since everything which is outside the essence of a thing is called an accident, existence [*esse*], which pertains to the question 'whether it is,' is an accident." This consideration looks at "being" that is not the part of a thing's essence and definition. Nevertheless, "being" signifies the actuality of the thing's essence and is not accidental in this way (*In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 2, no. 558). See also *De pot*., q. 5, a. 4, ad 3: "If we speak of substantial existence, then existence is not described as an accident as though it were in the genus of accident (for it is the act of an essence), but by a kind of similitude; for like an accident, it is not part of the essence."

122 See Aquinas, *In* II *peryermen*., lec. 2: "To clarify this, we must note that the verb 'is'

Nevertheless, the essence is not that which exists. The essence is that interior principle by which a thing is what it is.[123] Therefore, a thing is that which is and the essence is that by which a thing is.[124] These remarks entail that our conceptions of created essences refer to things that may or may not exist. Potential essences are representable in the absence of the things having these essences because existence does not belong to their essence. If existence belonged to their essence, the real things would be present to the mind by being understood in their essence. Aquinas's account of thinking expresses this characteristic of thinking in greater detail and calls the conception also *intention*:

> The intellect, having been informed by the species of the thing, by an act of understanding forms within itself a certain intention of the thing understood, that is to say, its *ratio*, which the definition signifies. This is necessary because the intellect understands a present and an absent thing indifferently. . . . But the intellect has this characteristic, . . . that it understands a thing as separated from material conditions, without which a thing does not exist in reality. But this could not take place unless the intellect formed the above-mentioned intention for itself.[125]

In general, the mind refers to present and absent things indifferently. The species received through abstraction from the material conditions of things is the principle *by which* we understand real things: the real thing is immediately present to the mind through the species.[126] But, in

---

itself is sometimes predicated in an enunciation, as in 'Socrates is.' By this we intend to signify that Socrates really is. Sometimes, however, 'is' is not predicated as the principal predicate, but is joined to the principal predicate to connect it to the subject, as in 'Socrates is white.' Here the intention is not to assert that Socrates really is, but to attribute whiteness to him by means of the verb 'is.' Hence, in such enunciations, 'is' is predicated as added to the principal predicate. It is said to be third not because it is a third predicate, but because it is a third word posited in the enunciation, which together with the name predicated makes one predicate. The enunciation is thus divided into two parts and not three."

123 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 3: "'Humanity' connotes all that is included in the definition of man, for it is by this that man is man, and it is this that humanity signifies, that, namely, whereby man is man."

124 See Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 17, a. 2: "Now existence [*esse*] pertains both to the nature and to the hypostasis; to the hypostasis as to that which has existence, and to the nature as to that whereby it has existence."

125 Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 53.

126 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 85, a. 2.

the absence of things, the mind relates to the conception as *that which* is understood.[127] A further necessity for the mediate representation of things lies in the abstraction of the essence from its material conditions, which is expressed by the *ratio*. Though the ratio exists in things as individualized by matter or as attached to this quantity of matter, the mind must represent what it understands as such, the ratio abstracting from this or that thing's material conditions.[128]

This indifferent relation of the mind to absent and present things changes in the case of the conception of being: "Truth is founded upon being [*ens*]. Hence, as it is known through itself, that being is in general [*ens esse in communi*], so it is also known through itself that truth exists."[129] Though the conception of universal being does not signify the existence of this or that individual thing, it reveals that being is in general. We must keep in mind that "being" is a common or universal thing and not only a common conception. Only a singular judgment of existence can manifest explicitly that this or that thing is which partakes in universal existence.[130] Nevertheless, we have a universal understanding of actual existence without immediate reference to the existence of this or that thing. The description of the corresponding signification of "being" maintains:

> Nevertheless, that which I call being seemed [to signify that something is] to the highest degree because being is nothing other than that which is [*quod est*]. And thus, it seems to signify both a thing, when I say "that which" [*quod*], and existence [*esse*], when I say "is" [*est*]. And if this saying [*dictio*] "being" [*ens*] signified existence [*esse*] principally as it signifies a thing having existence, without a doubt it would signify that something is. But the word "being" [*ens*] does not principally signify the composition that is implied in saying "is" [*est*], but co-signifies it inasmuch as it signifies the thing having existence. Such co-signification of composition is not sufficient for truth or falsity because the composition in which truth or falsity consists cannot be understood unless it connects the ends of a composition [of subject and predicate].[131]

---

127 Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 9, a. 5.

128 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 85, a. 1.

129 Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 10, a. 12, ad 3.

130 Aquinas, *In* II *peryermen.*, lec. 2.

131 Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5 (trans. according to the corrected text of the Leonine edition).

At first sight, "being" signifies "thing having existence." However, another text opposes this understanding of the term "being": "But the term 'being' (*ens*) signifies existence (*esse*) itself."[132] Nevertheless, the previous text indicates that "existence" is not the *principal* meaning of "being" (*ens*), which should be "thing having existence." Does Aquinas contradict himself? Many times, he speaks of signification *as in the categories*. Then, the term "white [thing]" (*album*) signifies *only* the quality (*solam qualitatem*) and not the substance, which is white. A quality exists by inhering in a substance. Hence, it co-signifies the substance as that in which the quality is. Thus, the secondary meaning of "white [thing]" is the co-signified substance. In other words: "white [thing]" *signifies a quality as inhering in a substance*.[133]

Though existence as actuality of the substance or essence is not an accident,[134] we must apply the same rules of signification. Hence, "being" (*ens*) signifies *only existence* according to its categorical meaning. However, it signifies real, participated existence as formal cause by which a thing is.[135] The consequence is that "being" signifies existence as existence of a thing partaking in existence. Our human intellect is limited to the cognition of existence inhering in things.[136] Therefore, Aquinas writes that the signifi-

---

[132] Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 2, no. 556.

[133] Aquinas, *In* V *metaphys*., lec. 9, no. 894; VII, lec. 1, no. 1255.

[134] See Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 2, nos. 558: "Even though a thing's existence is other than its essence, it should not be understood to be something added to its essence after the manner of an accident, but something established, as it were, by the principles of the essence. Hence the term 'being,' which is applied to a thing by reason of its very existence, designates the same thing as the term which is applied to it by reason of its essence." On the other hand, we may also consider existence as not belonging to a thing's essence, because a thing partakes in existence as something not arising from the thing or contained in its definition and essence (see *Quodlibet* II, q. 2, a. 1).

[135] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 75, a. 5, ad 4: "But, in intellectual substances, there is composition of actuality and potentiality, not, indeed, of matter and form, but of form and participated existence. Wherefore, some say that they are composed of that 'by which they are' and that 'which they are;' for, existence itself is that by which a thing is."

[136] See Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 7, a. 2, ad 7: "The mode of signification of the names we give things is consequent upon our mode of understanding, for names signify the concepts of our intellect. . . . Now, our intellect understands existence according to the mode in which it finds it in things here below from which it gathers its knowledge, and wherein existence is not subsistent but inherent. Now, our reason tells us that there is a self-subsistent existence: wherefore, although the term "existence" has a signification by way of concretion, yet our intellect in ascribing existence to God soars above the mode of its signification, and ascribes to God the thing signified, but not the mode of signification." See also *In librum de causis expositio*, lec. 6, no. 175: "Now, the first cause according to the Platonists indeed is beyond being, in as much as the essence of

cation of "being" is "thing having existence." But this does not imply that the *thing* having existence would be *primarily* signified. "Being" always refers to existence. Nevertheless, the subjects of existence are co-signified, because the human mind knows participated existence only in partaking things.

Due to participation, every being is a composite thing implying at least a subject of existence and existence itself.[137] The proposition "Socrates is" expresses this composition explicitly which is implicitly signified by the term "being" or "thing having existence." Thus, Socrates is one of the many subjects signified universally by "thing having existence." Only if we refer existence explicitly to him is he known to exist. Nevertheless, it is still true to say that "being" reveals that something *is in common*. "That being is" is *per se* known in the term "being."

This general understanding of real existence is due to a universal thing in the mind, to universal being. Aquinas speaks of the essence of universal being: the ratio of the essence of being contains existence in a universal way. This universality is distinct from the universality of a Platonic genus. "Being" is neither an empty, determinable genus nor univocal. The actuality of all acts is a singularity and relates to everything in an analogous way.[138] The mind cannot represent "being" as it represents the possible essences of things. That which contains existence in its ratio must be present through itself and not through the mind's representing act, though it

---

goodness and unity, which is the first cause, exceeds even separated being itself . . . but, according to the truth of the matter, the first cause is beyond being, inasmuch as it is infinite existence itself. Now being is called that which participates existence and this is proportionate to our intellect, whose object is the 'what is.' . . . [Hence,] only that which has a quiddity participating existence can be grasped by our intellect; but God's quiddity is his very existence, whence it is beyond understanding."

137 See Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 38: "Again, that which is can participate in something, but the act of existence can participate in nothing. For that which participates is in potency, and existence is actuality." See also *In Boetii de hebd*., lec. 2: "Boethius says that, in everything composite, existence and the composite itself differ, which participates in existence itself."

138 See Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 1, nos. 536: "It must also be noted that the one thing to which the different relationships are referred in the case of analogical things is numerically one and not only according to one *ratio*, which is the kind of oneness designated by a univocal term. Hence, he says that, although the term being has several senses, still it is not predicated equivocally but in reference to one thing; not to one thing which is one merely in meaning, but to one which is one as a single definite nature." Though the one thing guiding the analogy of being regarding natural things is substance, we can understand 'being' as one common thing, which is analogously common, and not only a common *ratio* in the mind.

signifies presence in a common way, which can be determined to this or that real presence of something. "Being" is not a subsisting, real thing, though it contains the real existence of all subsisting things and the intelligible existence of all thoughts.

Whereas "being" is a universal thing that presences in the mind through itself, we need conceptions of material essences to represent material things outside of the mind because they are possible and not actual. In other words: the concept of an essence represents something that is indifferent regarding present and absent real things. These essences are represented in their possible existence through a conception. The essence of being is not something possible, but rather the universal, undetermined actuality of all things.

Despite this immediate presence of "universal being" in the mind, Aquinas declares in the above quotation: "And if this saying [*dictio*] 'being' [*ens*] signified existence [*esse*] principally as it signifies a thing having existence, without a doubt it would signify that something is. But the word 'being' [*ens*] does not principally signify the composition that is implied in saying 'is' [*est*], but co-signifies it inasmuch as it signifies the thing having existence." Obviously, "something" refers to a particular subject having existence. "Universal being" does not explicitly signify the composition of existence and a particular subject of existence, but co-signifies it. Due to this co-signification, the subject of existence remains undetermined and the existence signified is the undetermined actuality of all acts. This signification of the term "being" refers to "being" as a noun.

In a further step, Aquinas describes the "is" belonging to "being" first falling in the mind. This does not imply that "is" falls in the mind qua "is." The mind's formal object is being (*ens*). Therefore, the representation of existence (*esse*) itself appears to us qua being (*ens*), as something existing.[139] However, the resolution of understanding leads to the "is" by which being is.[140] The consideration of the term "is" reveals that it signifies "actuality" falling first in the mind: "The verb 'is' . . . signifies that which first falls in

---

[139] See Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 9, a. 7 (*ad ea quae in oppositum obiiciuntur*): "Now, seeing that being is the first thing conceived in the intellect, it follows that whatever falls in the intellect is understood as being [*ens*], and consequently as one, true, and good. Wherefore, since the intellect apprehends essence, unity, truth, and goodness in the abstract, it follows that being and the other three concretes must be predicated of each of them. Thence it is that they denominate themselves, whereas things that are not convertible with being do not" Cf. *De ver*., q. 21, a. 4, ad 4; *ST* I-II, q. 55, a. 4, ad 1.

[140] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 4, ad 3: "The created intellect is naturally capable of apprehending the concrete form, and the concrete being abstractedly, by way of a certain resolution."

the mind in the mode of actuality absolutely; for 'is' said simply, signifies to be in act, and therefore signifies in the mode of a verb."[141] Though this abstract actuality is not the actuality of this or that thing and we do not understand something existing by it, it is the universally understood nature or essence of existence[142] or actuality, which is to communicate itself inasmuch as this is possible.[143]

Despite being a verb, the term "is" does not primarily signify a synthesis. The principal signification of "is" *said by itself or absolutely* refers to "to be in act."[144] "Is" signifies, therefore, actuality that is a common thing in the intellect and not a represented conception. Further, the actuality of all acts signified by "is" contains each and every particular existence;[145] the *determination* of being happens through a thing's limited receptivity for existence. There is no actuality that could *determine* the actuality of all acts as act determines potency. Therefore, the potency of the subject of existence limits pure actuality, because it has only a finite capacity for existence.

By signifying "to be in act," "is" signifies by mode of a verb. Verbs co-signify the composition of a proposition. The "is" as copula is the principal composition, because every finite verb implies "to be"—for example, "to run" means "to be running."[146] Aquinas derives the co-signification of composition—which is a common characteristic of verbs—from the principal meaning of the "is." The term "is" signifies principally the actuality of all substantial and accidental forms which are actual by inhering in their subject. Hence, we use the term "is" as copula to signify the actual inherence of a form in a subject universally.[147] The plenitude of existence is the

---

141 Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5. Thomas expounds further here that the term 'is' signifies in the mode of a verb and not of a noun. Hence, it co-signifies time and the composition of a proposition. However, this composition cannot be understood perfectly without adding the subject and the predicate synthesized by the copula. Thus, the 'is' remains always the 'is' of a subject.

142 See Aquinas, *In Boetii de hebd.*, lec. 2: "Existence itself [*ipsum esse*] has nothing mixed in beyond its essence."

143 See Aquinas, *De pot.*, q. 2, a. 1: "It is the nature of every act that it might communicate itself as far as possible."

144 See Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5: "For Aristotle proves through the verb 'is' that no verb signifies that a thing exists or does not exist, since 'is' said by itself does not signify that a thing exists, although it signifies existence."

145 See Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5: "However, the actuality which the verb 'is' principally signifies is the actuality of every form commonly, whether substantial or accidental."

146 Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5.

147 See Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5: "Therefore, he says that the verb 'is' signifies with composition, for it does not signify composition principally but consequently. It primarily

actuality "behind" every other actuality. Thus, when an accident partakes in the actuality of the substance underlying the accident, the ultimate source of this actuality is universal existence as given by God. When a substantial form actualizes matter, a thing exists in act. This act of existence is universal existence limited by matter and form. In this way, existence as actuality of all acts contains also the synthesis of all forms and their subjects. Human language bears witness to this meaning of "being" and "is."

Further, a closer study of the text reveals that Aquinas describes the impossibility to represent "being" by the mind's activity: "The verb 'is' . . . signifies that which first falls in the mind in the mode of actuality absolutely."[148] "Being" signifies actuality absolutely and falls in the mind *in the mode of actuality*. In other words: "being" includes the actuality of the mind and is also actual intelligibility relative to the mind. The essence of being is not a possible essence, which is indifferent to the absence and presence of things, because it refers to the essence of actuality universally, not to this or that actuality of individual things. Therefore, "being" is a universal thing in the mind or a reality upon which the mind touches immediately, and primarily not something represented through a concept, though we have a natural conception of being.

The presence of being is all-comprehensive and includes all time.[149] Therefore, the mind in its relation to temporal things presupposes the remaining presence of being in all its acts and apprehends being first in all things. Nevertheless, we can predicate the "is" temporally due to the limited reception of existence in things. As long as our understanding of being focuses on limited, material things or the mind's *first* object, the plenitude of being remains hidden. Then, Aquinas does not seem to speak of universal being received in our mind. However, he characterizes the intellect as potential understanding, which, in its actuality, must be reduced to the actually intelligible object that is received in the intellect. Therefore, he writes regarding the mind's *proper* object:

> Then [Dionysius] enumerates those things which seem to pertain to existence [*esse*]. And first he posits two universals, namely that

---

signifies that which is perceived in the mode of actuality absolutely, for 'is,' said simply, signifies to be in act, and therefore signifies in the mode of a verb. However, the actuality which the verb 'is' principally signifies is the actuality of every form commonly, whether substantial or accidental. Hence, when we wish to signify that any form or act is actually in some subject, we signify it through the verb 'is.'"

148 Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5.

149 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 75, a. 6.

> which exists [*existens*] and mind,—that is, the intellect, for mind is comprehensive of all existence. But since mind, the intellect, is not understanding in act except through participation of the intelligible which is that which exists itself [*ipsum existens*], the Platonists posited that that which exists itself, which they posited as separate, is above the first created intellect, just as the intelligible is prior to the intellect and the participated before the participant. And, because of this, Dionysius here says that God is both the cause of that which exists itself and the cause of mind itself.[150]

This commentary on Dionysius's text presupposes a wrong translation. Instead of rendering ὑπάρξεως as "of existence," the translation speaks of "mind" and gives Aquinas the possibility to unfold his own understanding of the relation between mind and being not mentioned by Dionysius.[151] In this context, "that which exists itself" (*ipsum existens*) is another name for universal being,[152] or for the emanation of the whole created being that does not subsist, though it contains the actual existence of each created substance. "That which exists itself" is a universal and intelligible. Thus, universal being is not only absolute being, and it does not comprehend only the natural existence of things. The actuality of all acts can be received in the intellect because it is actually intelligible through itself. The receptivity of the intellect is intelligible receptivity, not natural receptivity.[153] In other words: universal being contains also the order of intelligible existence relative to the mind.[154] No mode of existence must be excluded from universal existence.

---

150 Aquinas, *In de div. nom.*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 625.

151 Cf. the Latin and the Greek text of Dionysius, no. 262, in Aquinas, *In de div. nom.*, 229.

152 See Aquinas, *In de div. nom.*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 618: "And because, as he has said already, it is not of his intention to manifest the ineffable essence of God according as it is in itself, but according as the name of being, said of God, manifests the procession of being from God into creatures; for this reason, first, he shows the universal procession of being into all things; second, he shows that from the divine being there flow out also singulars in particular." Cf. 5, lec. 2, nos. 658–60.

153 See Aquinas, *SCG* III, chap. 42: "The form of the intellect, as intellect, is the intelligible, just as the form of the sense is the sensible: for the intellect does not receive a thing, properly speaking, except intelligibly, as neither does the sense, except sensibly."

154 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 13, a. 7: "Sense and science refer respectively to sensible things and to intellectual things; which, inasmuch as they are realities existing in nature, are outside the order of sensible and intellectual existence. Therefore, in science and in sense a real relation exists, because they are ordered either to the knowledge or to the sensible perception of things; whereas the things looked at in themselves are outside this order, and hence in them there is no real relation to science and sense, but only a relation of

Further, the universal thing "being" is in the intellect through itself and not through an intelligible species because it does not depend on matter and motion. In this sense, the actuality of all acts signified by the verb "is" falls first in the mind and is intelligible or manifest through itself. The term "is" signifies the actuality of all acts or forms after the resolution of every reality to existence itself.[155] In this context, Aquinas speaks of the intellect's participation in the intelligible thing,[156] which is a reality in the case of being. Accordingly, being as a universal thing characterizes the mind's receptivity.[157] Only the divine intellect is active regarding universal being. Every created intellect is receptive of universal being as a common thing.[158]

These remarks shed a new light on the question of natural conceptions

---

reason, inasmuch as the intellect apprehends them as terms of the relations of science and sense." Though material things as existing in themselves by natural existence have no real relation to the mind, the *actually* intelligible thing in the act of understanding relates to the mind by intelligible existence, i.e., the relation is real on both sides or simultaneous: "To know whether relations are simultaneous by nature or otherwise, it is not necessary to consider the order of things to which they belong but the meaning of the relations themselves. For, if one in its idea includes another, and vice versa, then they are simultaneous by nature: as double and half, father and son, and the like. But if one in its idea includes another, and not vice versa, they are not simultaneous by nature. This applies to science and its object; for the object knowable is considered as a potentiality, and the science as a habit, or as an act. Hence the knowable object in its mode of signification exists before science, but if the same object is considered in act, then it is simultaneous with science in act; for the object known is nothing as such unless it is known" (ad 6).

155 See Aquinas, *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 5: "For it [the word 'is'] signifies that, which first falls in the understanding by the mode of actuality [understood] absolutely (sc. actuality as not being relative to something). For 'is,' if it is said absolutely [*simpliciter*; the simple 'is' in itself and not with respect to something else], signifies to be in act. Hence, it signifies in the mode of a verb. But because actuality which this word 'is' signifies in principle is commonly the actuality of every form or act, either substantial or accidental, it follows that, when we want to signify that any form or act actually is in a subject, we signify this through the word 'is': absolutely in the present tense, under a certain respect in the other tenses. Hence, this word 'is' signifies the composition as a consequence [of its own meaning]."

156 See Aquinas, *Super Col.* 1, lec. 4, no. 42: "For one thing can participate in another in three ways: first, it can receive what is proper to the nature of what it is participating in; second, it can receive a thing insofar as it knows it; and third, it can somehow serve the power of a thing. For example, a doctor participates in the art of medicine either because he possesses in himself the art of medicine, or because he has received a knowledge of the art, or because he serves or devotes himself to the medical art. The first way of participating is greater than the second, and the second way is greater than the third."

157 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 2, ad 3: "Now the intellect is a passive power in regard to the whole universal being."

158 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 2.

impressed upon the mind by God. Aquinas does not conceive of a spontaneous production of a priori or innate categories. The human intellect is receptive regarding universal being in its actual intelligibility. Nevertheless, this intellect also needs to express actively what it receives in an intelligible way. Therefore, it has the natural conception of being and the other first principles.[159] As was said, the intellect's receptivity regarding universal being is immediate because there is no intelligible species, which would actualize the actuality of all acts relative to the mind. Thus, we naturally apprehend being in its immediate presence or as immediate presence of everything understood and we naturally express this understanding of being.

Neither the real presence of "being" in the intellect as common thing nor the universality of being is possible through an acquired conception. Every conception of created essences signifies potential essences and abstracts from any kind of existence. Further, every acquired conception abstracts from the individuality of things. "Being" does not abstract from individuality but contains each and every individual actuality in itself; the universality of "being" is distinct from the universality of common, univocal concepts abstracting from existence. On the one hand, the essence of being cannot abstract from actual existence. Actual existence (*esse*) belongs to the essence of being (*essentia entis*). On the other, "being" is not a univocal conception. The universality of being is analogous.[160] The univocal term "human being" signifies the same humanity, which is numerically distinct in all human beings. The term "being" signifies existence, which is distinct in each and every individual despite being common to them.[161] An early text of Aquinas describes analogy as follows:

---

[159] See Aquinas, *In* IV *sent*., d. 33, q. 1, a. 1: "Among those things that participate in reason, the principles of acting are cognition and appetite. For this reason, it is necessary that in the cognitive power there be a natural conception, and in the natural appetite a natural inclination, by which an activity befitting the genus or the species is rendered proportionate to its end." Cf. *Quodlibet* VIII, q. 2, a. 2.

[160] Analogy is a mode of being common (Aquinas, *In* I *sent.,* prol., q. 1, a. 2, ad 2; *De ver*., q. 2, a. 11; *ST* I, q. 13, a. 5).

[161] See Aquinas, *In* I *sent*., d. 35, q. 1, a. 4: "Nothing can be said univocally of God and creature. The reason is that, because there are two things to consider in a thing—the thing's nature or whatness and its existence—in all univocal things there must be some community according to the nature's account, and not according to existence, since one existence can belong only to one thing; whence the possession of humanity is not in two men according to the same existence. And therefore, whenever the form signified by the name is existence itself, it cannot univocally belong [to several]; on account of this also 'being' is not predicated univocally." Cf. *De ver*., q. 2, a. 11, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 5.

> Something is said according to analogy in three ways. One is with respect to the intention alone, and not to existence. And this is when one intention is related to many things as prior and posterior, while it nevertheless has existence only in one. For example, the intention of health is referred to the animal, the urine, and the diet in diverse ways, according to priority and posteriority, and yet not according to a diverse existence; for the existence of health is only in the animal. A second is with respect to existence, and not intention. And this happens when many things are equivalent in the intention of something common but that common thing does not have an existence of one account in all of them. For example, all bodies are equivalent in the intention of corporeity; this is why the logician, who considers only intentions, says that this name "body" is predicated of all bodies univocally. But the existence of this nature is not of the same account in corruptible and incorruptible bodies; whence, as regards the metaphysician and natural scientist, who consider realities according to their own existence, neither this name "body" nor anything else is said univocally of corruptible and incorruptible things, as is clear . . . according to both the Philosopher and the Commentator. The third is with respect to both the intention and the existence. And this is when it is equivalent neither in a common intention nor in existence; for example, "being" is said of both substance and accident. Of such things the common nature must have some existence in each of the things of which it is said, but it differs according to the account of greater or lesser perfection.[162]

We may discard the second possibility, analogy regarding existence and not regarding intention. The example concerns an Aristotelian hypothesis regarding a species of bodies whose everlasting existence is never experienced. Nevertheless, Aristotle developed the theory of heavenly bodies which exist eternally without generation and corruption. This hypothesis speaks of the real existence of things which is not present to the mind through an intention of an essence, one which abstracts from existence. It is impossible to speak of a common *ratio*—such as of "body"—and to assume that bodies of a wholly different essence are present to our mind through this intention unless the difference in existence is experienced.

However, the analogy regarding intention and not regarding existence is possible. As Aristotle maintains, there is no health in the healthy

---

[162] Aquinas, *In* I *sent*., d. 19, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1.

medicine or diet, though there is health in a healthy animal. Hence, language includes analogous concepts without reference to an analogous reality. Nevertheless, we speak of health analogously because of the analogous intention in our mind. The third possibility—analogy regarding intention *and* real existence—concerns the concept of being itself, which refers to an analogous participation in being found in all things and intentions. In other words: the nature of being pervades both the mind and real things, though we have also a natural concept of being. The concept and the reality are analogous, and both concern intelligible existence in the mind and real existence in things. Even beings of reason are included in the metaphysical understanding of being and its analogy.[163]

Thus, the reflecting mind does not discover only the act of understanding as a being in relation to universal being.[164] The greatest discovery within understanding is the all-comprehensive common thing called "being," which makes reflection possible by containing the existence of understanding. Obviously, Aquinas does not speak of a subsisting thing, but of the most formal principle within all things and within all thoughts. Contrary to the Thomistic and Aristotelian way of thinking, Aquinas's metaphysical inquiry into being does not focus only on the natural existence of things. He extends his metaphysics to thinking and its object, which is universal being, especially in its actual intelligibility unknown to Aristotelian philosophy. Therefore, Aquinas can integrate thinking and the reflecting self-consciousness into being instead of turning to a human understanding that integrates the category of existence into self-consciousness, as Immanuel Kant will do.

The Metaphysics of Universal Being

Scholars interpret Aquinas's metaphysics in different ways. Some interpreters focus especially on the texts of Aquinas which demonstrate the universality of being by a negative judgment of separation. Thus, we learn of the immateriality of being by proving the unmoved mover's existence or by considering the immateriality of the intellect and the intellectual soul. The interpreters proceed as follows: if we can prove the existence of a substance that is pure act, then the conception of universal being extends also

---

163 See Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 540: "But it must be noted that the above-mentioned modes of being can be reduced to four. For one of them, which is the most imperfect (negation and privation) exists only in reason. We say that these exist in reason because the mind busies itself with them as kinds of being while it affirms or denies something about them."

164 See the *Intellect Receives Being Qua Intelligible Being* subsection above.

to immaterial beings and not only to material beings. In this sense, Aquinas writes that the divine science or metaphysics uses the negative judgment of separation as its procedure. For instance, we must demonstrate that the divine reality or the intellectual soul *are not* material. The primary example is the proof of the existence of an unmoved mover. Only this procedure through negative judgments enables us to think being qua being or being in its complete universality.[165]

Other interpreters stress the importance of the method of resolution because Aquinas describes metaphysics as resolution of the intrinsic causes or forms to universal existence and of resolution of the extrinsic efficient causes to the Creator. Accordingly, the understanding of being qua being is possible without a proof of the unmoved mover because it concerns only the resolution of intrinsic causes to universal existence. Therefore, the knowledge of the immateriality of being is not a precondition of metaphysics in its consideration of being qua being. Even if being were only material, we could consider being qua being and resolve all the essences to existence as the most universal interior cause of things in *ontology*. This ontology does not depend on the immateriality of being.

Only the resolution of being qua being to its efficient cause would prove God as author of being. Hence, the *theological* part of metaphysics leads to the mode of being which is immaterial. When Aquinas describes being qua being as that which can exist without matter, this understanding of being implies a theological synthesis after the proof of God's existence. Nevertheless, the ontology studying being qua being precedes this theology. If separation from matter and the proof of God's existence were necessary to understand being qua being, we would interpret metaphysics as theology because it derives its understanding of immaterial being from the proof of God's existence. Thus, when Aquinas comments on Aristotle's text and affirms the necessity to prove God's existence for the sake of thinking metaphysically, he does not express his own opinion, but rather limits himself to the exposition of Aristotle's words.[166]

---

165 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 85, a. 1, ad 1 and ad 2; *In Boetii de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 3. See Louis-Bertrand Geiger, "Abstraction et Séparation d'après S. Thomas: In De Trinitate, q. 5, a. 3," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 31 (1947): 3–40; Mark Jordan, *Ordering Wisdom: The Hierarchy of Philosophical Discourses in Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1986), 158–60; Pasquale Porro, *Thomas Aquinas: A Historical and Philosophical Profile* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 111–15.

166 Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys.*, proem.; *In Boetii de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 4; q. 6, a. 1, III. See Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*, 124–36; John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 44–62 (he includes the negative judgment of separation in the method of metaphysics, which concludes to a potential immateriality of being without necessitating

> Someone can doubt whether first philosophy is universal inasmuch as it considers being in general, or whether it investigates some particular class or a single nature. Now this does not seem to be the case. For this science and the mathematical sciences do not have one and the same method; because geometry and astronomy, which are mathematical sciences, deal with a special nature, whereas first philosophy is universally common to all [as study of common being]. Yet the reverse seems to be true—namely, that it deals with a special nature—because it is concerned with things that are separable from matter and immobile. . . . [Aristotle] answers this question, saying that, if there is no substance other than those which exist in the way that natural substances do, with which the philosophy of nature deals, the philosophy of nature will be the first science. But if there is some immobile substance, this will be prior to natural substance, and therefore the philosophy which considers this kind of substance will be first philosophy. And since it is first, it will be universal; and it will be its function to study being as being, both what being is and what the attributes are which belong to being as being. For the science of the primary kind of being and that of common being are the same.[167]

According to Aristotle, we must demonstrate the existence of the gods first. The term "being in general" does not relate to something immovable without reference to the gods. In other words: physics or natural philosophy enquires into movable beings or substances as such. If we want to extend this inquiry to immovable beings or substances as such, we must prove their existence. Therefore, the metaphysics of the Stagirite studies primarily the divine substance and is theology. It is first philosophy because it considers the first or immovable substance. This theology is also the universal science because it studies being qua being.[168] The analogical enquiry of ontology considers especially the forms of movable things because these forms *as such* neither come to be nor cease to be. In this sense, they are immovable and can be studied by metaphysics as universal science.[169]

---

the proof of the actual existence of any immaterial reality); Rudi te Velde, *Metaphysics*, 67–89.

167 Aquinas, *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 1, nos. 1169–70.

168 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1.1026a23–32.

169 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.8.1033a24–b19. See Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*: *A Study in the Greek Background of Mediaeval Thought*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 455–73. According to *Physics*

At first sight, this section of Aquinas's commentary reflects a picture of metaphysics which is primarily theology and not ontology. Metaphysics studies a special kind of being—namely, immovable being—and extends this science of the gods to other things insofar as something immovable is in them.

If we knew only this section of the commentary and the ontological description of metaphysics in Aquinas's own works, we would necessarily limit this text to a literal commentary which does not reflect Aquinas's own position. Aquinas's metaphysics studies primarily being qua being, and God only as cause of being qua being. But this is also the position in this section of the commentary mentioned a few lines prior to the above-quoted text.[170] In this sense, ontology (the science of being qua being) should be independent from theology and the study of God and his existence. The method of ontology reduces every reality to the actuality of being. Why then should Aquinas maintain that we must prove God's existence prior to thinking metaphysically?

According to Aquinas, the universality of the understanding of being depends on the existence of an immaterial reality. If there is only material or movable being, then philosophy of nature or physics is the first science; there is no ontology studying being qua being. The science enquiring into movable being as such suffices in this case. The term "being qua being" as subject matter of metaphysics implies immovability and immateriality. Hence, we need to prove the existence of God for the sake of understanding immaterial being. Then, metaphysics appears to be primarily theology, though Aquinas describes it primarily as ontology. The negative judgment of separation is necessary because we must extend our formal object to being which *is not* material.

The above alternatives focus on different aspects of Aquinas's metaphysics that appear to exclude each other. Either we prove first God's existence and the immaterial reality of God, in which case metaphysics is primarily theology studying the immovable existence of God and ontology is not prior to theology, with God appearing to be one of the many beings signified by the universal concept of being, *or* we consider material being as such, even in its material existence and essence, in which case this enquiry belongs to physics and does not reach the level of metaphysics.

1.9.192a13–25, matter strives for form as something divine, i.e., as something immovable. In this sense, form needs to be studied in first philosophy, which considers the immovable substance and not the movable substance (1.192 a35–b 2).

170 See Aquinas, *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 1164: "Hence, there are causes of beings as beings, which are investigated in first philosophy."

The text of Aquinas's commentary seems to say that being as such is always immaterial by referring to a genus of beings to which the God belongs: "If something divine exists in any genus of things, it exists in such a nature, in immobile being and separate from matter, which this science studies."[171] Though, according to Aquinas, God is not included in the subject matter of metaphysics, he must belong to immobile being or being qua being. Being qua being is immobile or immaterial, because "being" belongs not only to material things but also to immaterial things.[172] The question is whether Aquinas's remark regarding universal being as a common thing which—as universal—exists only in the intellect can shed light on this aporia concerning the science of metaphysics.

At first, Aquinas's metaphysics is the common science studying the object that is common to all the sciences. Strictly speaking, metaphysics considers universal being qua universal being.[173] Hence, this science does not enquire only into this or that being in its participation of universal being, though such studies lie within the scope of metaphysics.[174] It studies also movable or sensible being qua being.[175] However, universal being is both the material and the formal object of this science. The focus of metaphysics lies on the essence of universal being itself—on a common thing or reality, not only on a common *ratio* or concept. Despite this focus on universal being, Aquinas can also prolong the metaphysics of substance known from Aristotle because metaphysics studies also this or that being in its participation in universal being:

> Absolute being [*simpliciter ens*] may be understood in two ways: in one way as meaning that which is the first among the predicaments

---

171 Aquinas, *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 1167.

172 Aquinas, *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 1164.

173 See Aquinas, *In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 532: "No particular science considers universal being as such, but only some part of it separated from the others, and it studies the proper accidents of this part. For example, the mathematical sciences study one kind of being, quantitative being. But the common science considers universal being as being, and therefore it is not the same as any of the particular sciences."

174 See Aquinas, *In Boetii de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 6: "The metaphysician deals with individual beings too, not with regard to their proper *ratios*, by which they are such and such a being, but insofar as they partake in the common ratio of being. And in this way matter and motion also fall under his consideration."

175 See Aquinas, *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 1165: "However, we must remember that, even though things which are separate from matter and motion in being and in their ratio belong to the study of first philosophy, still the philosopher not only investigates these but also sensible things inasmuch as they are beings."

> of being, meaning substance, but in another way as meaning universal being, which includes all the predicaments.[176]

> On the one hand, since the axioms are most universal and are the principles of everything that is treated in any of the sciences, it seems that the science which deals with such principles is the most important one. Yet, on the other hand, since substance is the first and principal kind of being, it is evident that first philosophy is the science of substance. And if it is not the same science which deals with substance and with the axioms, it will not be easy to state to which of the other sciences it belongs to consider the truth and falsity of these axioms if it does not belong to first philosophy, which considers substance. The Philosopher . . . says that the study of the axioms belongs chiefly to the philosopher inasmuch as it pertains to him to consider being in general, to which first principles of this kind belong *per se*, as is most evident in the case of the very first principle: it is impossible for the same thing both to be and not to be.[177]

Thus, metaphysics considers being universally that contains all the categories. Nevertheless, substance is the only thing to which natural existence belongs and is absolute being in this sense. We can study material substances *qua being*—that is, inasmuch as they partake in the actuality of all acts. Further, the study of the axioms of being, such as the principle of noncontradiction, belongs to the science considering being in general. Every being *qua being* cannot both be and not be. Thus, metaphysics is the science of common being.

On the other hand, the Creator is the cause of being qua being or of universal being and does not partake in common existence. His essence cannot be derived from universal being because he transcends created being. Therefore, metaphysical theology knows of him that he is—as cause of being qua being—and not what he is.[178] The difference between ontology and theology is founded upon the understanding of being, which we have prior to the proof of God's existence. Aquinas writes in an early text regarding the object of first philosophy:

---

[176] Aquinas, *In* I *de generatione et corruptione*, lec. 6, no. 46.

[177] Aquinas, *In* III *metaphys*., lec. 5, nos. 391–92; cf. VII, lec. 11, no. 1526.

[178] Aquinas, *In* I *post*. *analyt*., lec. 41.

> And likewise, where a thing is common [*ubi res est communis*], the object's *ratio* is particular and proper, as, for example, first philosophy, although it considers being as common to all, is a special science precisely because it considers being under a special *ratio*, insofar as it does not depend on matter and motion.[179]

> In the realm of sciences, perfection is imparted to all the other sciences by a single special science distinct from them, first philosophy, insofar as its object is common in reality to the objects of all the other sciences [inquantum obiectum suum est commune secundum rem obiectis omnium aliarum scientiarum].[180]

Being as studied by metaphysics is a common thing, *not only* a common *ratio* and conception by which we consider this or that being. Aquinas's usual example for a common thing is the one divine essence in the three persons: one reality in many distinct subjects. The term "person" in the Trinity is a common *ratio* belonging to distinct persons only because there is no common personality in God. However, the universality of the divine essence is distinct from universal being because the latter can be determined or limited by the addition of other principles and God is undeterminable.[181]

Thus, the metaphysician must distinguish "being" as common thing which—as common—is only in the mind[182] from a common concept or *ratio* in the mind. The usual common concept—and not the natural

---

[179] Aquinas, *In* III *sent*., d. 27, q. 2, a. 4, qcla. 2.

[180] Aquinas, *In* III *sent*., d. 27, q. 2, a. 4, qcla 2, ad 1. The above translation follows the text of the Piana ed. The Mandonnet ed. writes: "inquantum obiectum suum est commune secundum rationem obiectis omnium aliarum scientiarum." Then this text would not speak of the common thing mentioned in the main body of this solution. Being would be a common intention, not a common thing in the reply to the first objection. Aquinas writes regarding the object of charity or the divine good in the main body: "sed tamen hoc quod est commune secundum rem, habet specialem rationem" ("But, nevertheless, that which is common according to reality, has a special *ratio*"; Piana ed. and Mandonnet ed.). Therefore, the reply to objection 1 must repeat the phrase "commune secundum rem" regarding being. Further, we must take into consideration that being is analogously common "secundum intentionem et secundum esse" (*In* I *sent*., d. 19, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1), i.e., common as an intention in the soul and in reality. The term "commune secundum rationem sive intentionem" does not make sense if we understand it exclusively with respect to the intention of being, which is also a common thing.

[181] Aquinas, *In* I *sent*., d. 34, q. 1, a. 1, corp. and ad 4; *De pot*., q. 9, a. 4, ad 4; *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4, ad 1.

[182] Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 26.

conception of being—is common by abstraction from individual matter, time, and space. This abstraction arrives at a univocal representation of the timeless essence of things. Even analogous concepts such as "healthy" are primarily univocal, regarding for instance the "health of animals." But we may apply these concepts to other things analogously, such as to a healthy exercise or medicine. The things understood through the common *ratio* are material and temporal, though their essence as such does not change. Humanity remains always humanity despite existing accidentally in this or that human being.[183] Accordingly, humanity is not an actual reality outside of the individual human beings. We cannot signify an actual humanity unless we signify it *to be* in this or that human being.

Hence, a common, univocal concept or *ratio* is a one in many, one conception signifying formally the *ratio* or definition of an essence and materially the many things in which it is actual. Thus, there are many numerically distinct humanities in the different human beings, though there is only one humanity specifically.[184] This one humanity as abstracting from motion and matter is an intention in the mind representing the many material humanities in things.[185]

The case of a *commune secundum rem*, or common thing, is different because it is one common reality and not only a common intention referring to an individual reality. The reality of universal being does not depend upon matter and motion, as Aquinas writes. Hence, the subject of metaphysics is separate from motion and matter through itself and not

---

183 See Aquinas, *In Boetii de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 2: "Natures of this sort, thus abstracted, can be considered in two ways. First, in themselves; and then they are thought of without motion and determinate matter. This happens to them only by reason of the existence they have in the intellect. Second, they can be viewed in relation to the things of which they are the natures; and these things exist with matter and motion. Thus, they are principles by which we know these things, for everything is known through its form. Consequently, in natural science, we know mutable and material things existing outside the soul through natures of this kind—that is to say, natures that are immobile and considered without particular matter."

184 See Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 20, a. 3, ad 3: "When a thing is derived by one thing from another, as from a univocal efficient cause, then it is not the same in both: thus when a hot thing heats, the heat of the heater is distinct from the heat of the thing heated, although it be the same specifically.

185 Nevertheless, Aquinas writes regarding the forms of things: "Again, form is made finite by matter, inasmuch as form, considered in itself, is common to many; but when received in matter, the form is determined to this one particular thing" (*ST* I, q. 7, a. 1). Universality belongs to forms *considered in themselves*. However, forms are not actual unless they actualize matter; i.e., no form of material things exists without matter and the corresponding individualization.

because of the proof of God's existence or the intellectual soul's existence. If being is a common or universal, essential reality in the intellect, then it must be without matter and motion. This reality remains always the same reality though infinitely many beings partake in it and particularize it. Even material beings partake in it. Nevertheless, universal being itself or in its own essence is immaterial.

Hence, the science of universal being qua universal being is the enquiry into something immovable and immaterial, though material and movable things can be studied in their participation in universal existence. We may repeat the above text: where a *thing* is common, the object's *ratio* is particular and proper; for example, first philosophy, although it considers being as common to all, is a special science precisely because it considers being under a special *ratio*, insofar as it does not depend on matter and motion. If we study primarily a common thing as such, i.e., universal being *qua universal being*, we consider it in a special science. The common thing as such or universal being as such necessarily abstracts from matter and motion. Otherwise, it would not be common to many and remain the same common thing in all the participants. Nevertheless, material and movable things can partake in it.

Aquinas speaks, therefore, of something common by participation in numerically one and the same thing and distinguishes it from something common by predication. Predication attributes the same or specifically identical form to different things. All of them partake in this form, which is numerically distinct in things. The reduction to this form through predication is logical because one and the same common concept, which signifies a real, singular form in things, is said or predicated of many things. To be common by participation in one thing is different, because it presupposes a common thing and not only a common concept. Hence, the reality of things must be reduced to the one participated reality metaphysically and not only logically. Every other reality refers to being as potency compares to act.[186]

Obviously, the understanding of being as a common thing characterizes

---

[186] See Aquinas, *In* IV *sent*., d. 49, q. 1, a. 1, qc.la 1, ad 3: "Something can be said to be common in two ways. In one way, by predication; but what is common in this way is not found numerically the same in the different things [to which it is common]; and this is how the body's good has commonality. In another way something is common according to a participation of numerically one and the same thing; and in this way a more common good is more divine. And this commonality can most of all be found in those things that pertain to the soul, since what is the common good of all things, namely God, is touched through the soul."

metaphysics. If metaphysics considered all beings *only* through a common concept of being, it would try to prove the existence of something immaterial to extend its concept of being to the immaterial reality. However, the common science is the science of a common thing and, therefore, considers necessarily something immaterial and immovable first, which is the common thing and not God. The demonstration of God's existence shows that God belongs to a reality which is immaterial. But Aquinas proves first that being itself is an immaterial reality. Thus, he solves the aporia revealed by the different interpretations of his metaphysics. Being is a common thing and, therefore, necessarily studied under a special *ratio*, as something immovable. Hence, the negative judgment of separation is the necessary method of metaphysics. *We must separate the common thing itself from matter and motion*, without proving God's existence or the existence of any other immaterial substance first.

Nevertheless, the demonstration of God's existence unveils one of the consequences of our understanding of being: "Although the first cause that is God does not enter into the essence of creatures, yet being which is in creatures cannot be understood except as derived from the divine being: even as a proper effect cannot be understood save as produced by its proper cause."[187] Our understanding of the essence of universal being reveals necessarily an intrinsic participation in existence or that every being qua being partakes in universal existence. Hence, all things must partake also in an extrinsic source of existence.[188] Accordingly, participated existence points immediately to its source in being by essence. If we did not understand the essence of being as participation in existence and, therefore, as derived from God's existence, we would have a false understanding of being.

Hence, our conception of being implies participation in a threefold way. (1) Being (*ens*), the subject of existence, signifies participation in existence. Only the subject of existence exists. The act to be is not, though something exists by partaking in it. (2) The term "being" or the concrete way of signifying "to be" refers to this participation in existence signified in an abstract way. Hence, "being" and "to be" are equally universal. Nevertheless, "being" implies participation, though "to be" does not

---

[187] Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 3, a. 5, ad 1.

[188] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 44, a. 1, ad 1: "Though the relation to its cause is not part of the definition of being which is caused, still it follows, as a consequence, on what belongs to its essence; because from the fact that a thing has existence by participation, it follows that it is caused. Hence, such a being cannot be without being caused, just as man cannot be without having the faculty of laughing. But, since to be caused does not belong to the ratio of being as such, therefore is it possible to find a being uncaused."

partake in anything. (3) Further, the subject of existence can also partake in other perfections beyond existence and is, therefore, not free from any admixture. "To be itself," on the other hand, signifies the essence of "to be" abstractly and without any admixture. Though this argument proceeds at first logically or regarding intentions, Aquinas proves that being (*ens*) and existence (*esse*) are distinct in reality: being really partakes in existence.[189] This understanding of being enables him to think ontologically and to reveal that being must have an extrinsic source in which it partakes because we must seek the cause of the common thing which is universal being.[190]

In this context, the immateriality of universal being must show itself in the resolution of all forms to existence itself. On the one hand, Aquinas describes existence as act of the essence, as act of a potential.[191] The essence as such abstracts from individual matter and does not change in time. In this sense, the act of the essence is not contingent, but necessary.[192] Only an individual thing, which exists by generation, is contingent in its existence. Thus, it is contingent for the necessary essence to be the essence of this or that thing through individual matter. On the other hand, the resolution of every reality into existence leads to existence as actuality of all acts or to the plenitude of actuality containing each and every actuality even in its individuality.[193] The plenitude of actuality is without any potential which could be actualized, and therefore immaterial. It cannot be known without a negative judgment of separation. Nothing can be added to the essence of being or subtracted from it. Otherwise, we would change the essence of being. But, at first, this consideration concerns only the resolution of the essences of material things to the plenitude of *natural existence*. The immaterial essence of being is not known in its greatest depth yet.

---

189 Aquinas, *In Boetii de hebd*., lec. 2.

190 See Aquinas, *SCG* III, chap. 25: "Man naturally desires to know the cause of any known effect. Now the human intellect knows universal being. Therefore, it naturally desires to know its cause, which is God alone."

191 Aquinas, *In I Sent.,* d. 33, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1, *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 3.

192 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 46, a. 2: "The newness of the world cannot be demonstrated on the part of the world itself. For the principle of demonstration is the essence of a thing. Now everything according to its species is abstracted from *here* and *now*; whence it is said that universals are everywhere and always. Hence it cannot be demonstrated that man, or heaven, or a stone were not always."

193 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 5: "All in one genus agree in the quiddity or essence of the genus which is predicated of them as something essential, but they differ in their existence. For the existence of man and of horse is not the same, as also of this man and that man; thus, in every member of a genus, existence and quiddity—i.e., essence—must differ." Cf. *De ver*., q. 2, a. 11.

Material things partake in universal existence, which is the *per se* immaterial or immovable actuality of all acts. Thus, metaphysics considers being as common to all things. Therefore, all the sciences study "being" as material object. However, only metaphysics enquires into being qua being and has being as its proper object under the formal object "being." This proper object, universal being as universal being, is separate from motion and matter because it concerns the actuality of all things.

As was said above, this understanding of metaphysics must change the method of resolution according to *ratio* (*secundum rationem*), in accord with the interior formal cause. Though we speak of a real formal cause, the resolution proceeds according to *ratio* only. The *ratio* is the universal account of an essence in the mind signifying the specifically identical essence in many numerically distinct things:

> And the procedure in natural science is not only a movement from one thing to another distinct from it in *ratio* and not in reality, as when we go from the concept "animal" to the concept "man." In the mathematical sciences we proceed only by means of what is of the essence of a thing, since they demonstrate only through the formal cause.[194]

Whereas physics proceeds from a real cause to a real effect, mathematics considers the definition of things indicating their essence in its demonstrations. The definition of man describes him as rational animal. The term "man" and the term "animal" signify the same human form. Nevertheless, "animal" signifies the human form as determinable by rationality and not as determined by it: it signifies man in his sentient nature and without determination to rationality. Therefore, "animal" signifies nothing in real things. There is no sentient nature without determination to rationality or irrationality. If we ascend from the species to the higher genera, we abstract from more differences and arrive at further genera signifying nothing in things beyond the form as determinable by the differences.

However, the most common concept is "being." It is analogously common to all the categories. Contrary to the concept of "thing," which signifies the essence of things, "being" refers to the act of existence. We can understand "being" as the limited actuality of this thing, which is constituted by the interior principles of the essence. But we can also consider "being" in its complete universality prior to the contraction through the

---

[194] Aquinas, *In Boetii de Trin*., q. 6, a. 1, I.

interior principles. Then we study universal being qua universal being, which, as actuality of all essences, is really distinct from the essence of things and contains all the differences of being.[195] Hence, being is not a genus determined by differences.

This means that the process of resolution from one thing to another in *ratio* and not in reality becomes—in a certain sense—a resolution *both* in *ratio* and *in reality*, because "being" is a common thing and not only a common *ratio*.[196] Being as real, intrinsic principle is the actuality of the specific essence, not the actuality of the genera that are nothing in things. Aquinas speaks of an analogy according to intention and natural existence because the resolution of being leads to the most universal concept signifying the only common thing.[197]

A first question is how universal being can be one thing or reality and common to many at the same time. As was said, we must understand something common by participation in a numerically one reality. Aquinas calls existence a formal cause. Each thing has its own individual existence, which is not common but a limitation of universal existence through form and matter. Thus, there is only one universal existence: universal existence is numerically one thing or reality which is limited in infinitely many

---

[195] See Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 3, a. 16, ad 4: "Being stands to things contained under being in a different way than animal (or any other genus) stands to its own species. For a species adds to its genus (such as man adds to animal) a difference that is outside the essence of the genus; for 'animal' names merely the sensitive nature, which latter does not contain 'rational.' But things contained under 'being' add nothing to being that is outside the essence of being. Therefore, it does not follow that the cause of an animal as such is the cause of the rational as such. But it does follow that the cause of being as such must be the cause of all the differences of being, and consequently, of the entire multitude of beings."

[196] See Aquinas, *In* VII *metaphys*., lec. 17, no. 1652: "For, in the case of all things, there is one *ratio* and one cause, which cannot remain unknown, just as other common notions, which are called the common conceptions of the intellect, cannot remain unknown. And the reason is that each is one with itself. Hence, each is predicated of itself." "Being" is the first common conception of the mind. It is both a common *ratio* and a common (interior or formal) cause. Though Aquinas maintains that existence has no causality except exemplary causality (*De ver*., q. 21, a. 2, ad 2), he says also: "Now being [*ens*] implies the habitude of a formal cause only, either inherent or exemplar; and its causality does not extend save to those things which are actual" (*ST* I, q. 5, a. 2, ad 2). Accordingly, "the object of the intellect is the first principle in the genus of formal cause, for its object is being and the true" (*De malo*, q. 6). Cf. *ST* I, q. 75, a. 5, ad 4: "existence itself is that by which a thing is."

[197] Aquinas, *In* I *sent.,* d. 19, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1.

things. The universality of universal existence is analogous and relies on the plenitude of existence containing each and every singular existence.

A univocal essence considered in abstraction from actual existence and from singular things is, therefore, a *potential* for existence and not a universal *actual* thing. A common concept represents such an essence which is actual in many things. Universal existence or the essence of universal existence, on the other hand, is the actuality of all actual things, in which universal existence is contracted to the actuality of this thing. In other words: common existence itself (*ipsum esse commune*) is not "something apart from all things that have existence [*esse*], except only as apprehended by the mind."[198] The uncontracted state of universal existence reflects universal being as universal being, which is a common reality. But this common reality *as common* "is" *nowhere except in the intellect* apprehending it. It is numerically one nature and, therefore, analogously common to all things in which universal existence is contracted.[199] Hence, as universal essence of actuality, it contains every actuality.[200] In this sense, Aquinas would also describe the subsisting reality of God as containing every perfection.[201] But universal existence lacks subsistence and is the timeless emanation of the whole created existence from God. And God is existence as the extrinsic efficient or exemplar cause of the whole of existence.[202]

This metaphysical discussion of universal being reveals an immaterial

---

198 Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 26.

199 See Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 20, a. 3, ad 3: "But when a thing is derived from one thing to another, according to analogy or proportion, then it is one and the same in both: thus the healthiness which is in medicine or urine is derived from the healthiness of the animal's body; nor is health as applied to urine and medicine distinct from health as applied to the body of an animal, of which health medicine is the cause, and urine the sign." The better texts of Aquinas describe the numerically one health by referring to health as a single end even regarding the health of animals (*In* IV *metaphys*., lec. 1, no. 536). The example of health must be understood in the right sense because the analogy of health refers only to an analogously common intention, which denominates medicine and urine as healthy without signifying any real health in them. 'Being,' on the other hand, is real in all the different things partaking in it; i.e., it is analogous in intention and in reality.

200 If we abstracted a universal concept of existence from the experience of the existence of this or that thing, we would abstract from every singular actuality, ultimately from actuality itself because no concept can represent the actuality of this or that thing.

201 See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 4, a. 2: "[God] must contain within himself the whole perfection of being. For it is clear that if some hot thing has not the whole perfection of heat, this is because heat is not participated in its full perfection; but if this heat were self-subsisting, nothing of the virtue of heat would be wanting to it. Since therefore God is subsisting existence itself, nothing of the perfection of existence can be wanting to him."

202 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 3, a. 8, ad 1.

and motionless common thing which—contrary to Platonic ideas—does not subsist in itself because it is truly the common existence of all things and in all things. Only the intellect receives this common thing as common. Thus, we must think the essence of being as immaterial, though material things can partake in it. Hence, we would not think metaphysically if we tried to think of material things in their participation in existence and would not understand existence itself as immaterial.

At first, the immateriality of being is understood through the reduction of every reality to the actuality of all acts. The latter is necessarily immovable and immaterial due to the lack of any kind of potency. However, this reduction cannot explicitly understand the essence of being as spiritual or intelligible through itself. Only the inquiry into the truth of being can reveal the relation of the essence of being to the intellect. In this way, universal being reveals the depth of ontology, which extends to the actual intelligibility of being regarding thinking.

The immateriality of being excludes a certain error from the reduction to being. We cannot reduce material being to the actuality of all acts, as if the latter contained material actuality in a material way. Being is not the addition of infinitely many limited actualities which includes material actualities in a material way. At first, the reduction considers only the natural existence of real things. The corresponding immateriality of "being" negates materiality in the actuality of all acts regarding natural existence. This inquiry into being is limited by an understanding of being through material things in their natural existence. Therefore, it cannot qualify the spiritual mode of being implied by the essence of being in a positive way. However, being in itself, or the essence of being, is a spiritual reality, and the enquiry into truth must demonstrate this.

*The Science of the Proper Accidents of Being, the Case of Truth (*Verum*)*

As was said above, being as a common thing is only in the intellect. How does Aquinas describe the cognition of common being or God's effect, which cannot be unknown,[203] and is known in everything first or contained in everything we apprehend?[204]

Universal being falls naturally in the mind or is known first naturally and not only temporally. It is the natural object determining the nature of all our thoughts, which is cognition of being. The nature of

---

[203] See Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 10, a. 12, ad sc 10: "Nor is it possible for anyone to know none of his effects, since common being, which cannot be unknown, is his effect."

[204] Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

our understanding must apprehend being first and in everything because universal being is the mind's *per se* object, and this or that being is only an accidental object.[205] But we know it first in material things, in this or that being. In the order of time, material beings are known first without realization of universal being as such.[206]

Nevertheless, Aquinas maintains that being contains any kind of knowledge implicitly, though not explicitly.[207] In the beginning, the mind does not even know explicitly that being is understood universally or that existence is distinct from essence in the things we come to know. But we can see that our understanding of being must be universal by comparing it to several material beings. And we learn through experience that the whatness of things is their essence, to which the name of the thing refers. Therefore, we call a horse "horse" by intrinsic denomination, due to the understood essence in things. In the same sense, we cannot signify the essences of things as existing without signifying them "to be." The experience of an essence in thought is accompanied by an indifference regarding existence. Hence, the essence of a limited thing and the essence of existence are distinct in our experience of that which cannot be unknown.

As was said, the separation which enables us to think metaphysically must already happen on the level of universal being. Nobody can understand universal being as such without understanding its separation from matter and motion. The resolution of all beings into the actuality of all acts demonstrates the immovability of being *as such*. However, this universal, interior principle is in all things and is limited by all things, even by material things, which come to be and cease to be. Therefore, it seems to be possible to represent "being" by a universal concept without considering the presence of a common thing in the mind through itself. Only if we see that universal being is the natural object of the mind and actualizes even our thinking, which is "a being" through universal being,

---

[205] In this sense, Aquinas writes regarding the will: "The *per se* object of the will is the good; but the *per accidens* object is this or that good" (*In* IV *sent*., d. 49, q. 1, a. 3, qu.la 1, ad 1). Hence, we must say regarding creation: "Now existence [*esse*] is the first effect, and this is evident by reason of its universality. Therefore, the proper cause of existence [*causa essendi*] is the first and universal agent, which is God. But other agents are the causes not of existence simply, but of being this [*causa essendi hoc*], for example, of being a man, or of being white. But existence simply is caused by creation, which presupposes nothing, since nothing can preexist outside being [*ens*] simply. By other makings, this or such a being [*hoc ens vel tale*] is made, because this or such a being is made from an already existing being. Therefore, creation is God's proper action" (*SCG* II, chap. 21).

[206] Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 87, a. 3, ad 1.

[207] Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 1, a. 1.

we can understand that universal being is a spiritual reality without matter, present in our mind. Therefore, we may once more consider the following text under a metaphysical point of view:

> The object of the intellect is something common—namely, being and the true—under which the act of understanding itself is comprehended. Wherefore the intellect can understand its own act. But not at first, since the first object of our intellect, according to the present state of life, is not every being and everything true, but "being" and "true" as considered in material things, as we have said above, from which it acquires knowledge of all other things.[208]

Obviously, the consideration of material beings arrives at a common understanding of being in material things (first object of the mind). Nevertheless, Aquinas writes that such a common understanding of being in material things is not being as something common (proper object of the mind). We do not reach common being prior to an act of reflection which apprehends the act of understanding as a being. This does not only imply that we have a concept of being whose universality includes both material things and immaterial thinking. Being is a common thing, not only a common concept. In other words: the act of understanding in its existence must be reduced to the actuality of all acts as every other being, too, including material things. However, thinking cannot be reduced to actuality as we reduce a potential essence to its actuality in existence as act of the essence. The intellect as potential understanding must be reduced to its actually intelligible object that is received in the intellect and actualizes the intellect. This object is universal being itself. Thus, we must once more consider the participation in one and the same common thing, which is universal being. All the material and natural things are by participation in universal existence and limit it. The intellect does not limit universal being, but receives it as intelligible object, in accord with intelligible existence, by which universal being is manifest for the intellect.

As was said, universal being *as object of the mind* contains the act of understanding. This implies that the act of understanding can become its own object through being. Further, universal being is not only a common concept but also a common reality: it contains everything in the sense of a common reality, not only in the sense of a common concept. If we did not understand being in its universality, but only inasmuch as our mind relates

---

[208] Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 87, a. 3, ad 1. Cf. II-II, q. 25, a. 2; *In* I *Sent*., d. 17, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3.

to material things, we could not reflect on our own understanding, because the immaterial act of understanding would not be contained in the mind's object. This implies that being as universal thing which actualizes thinking is immediately present in and to the mind. If being were manifest only by a concept, this concept would not actualize our thinking. On the contrary, the concept would be kept in existence by our thinking, which expresses itself through the concept. Thus, being in its true nature, which actualizes thinking, shows itself only in the mind, where being is intelligible or true and separated from motion and matter. Whereas every created nature limits being, the object of the mind is infinite. Hence, the understanding coined by the object of universal being is also somehow infinite.[209]

According to Aquinas's way of thinking, universal being is at first known in material things. Hence, all the essences of things are reduced to being as potency reduces to act. This implies that being is analogously common even in individuals, because existence is distinct in each and every individual thing. But reflection realizes that the same common thing is also the actuality of thinking, though the intellect partakes in the actuality of being qua actually intelligible object, not only qua subject or accident of the soul.

Thus, universal being is the only thing or reality which is in the mind through itself. We cannot know of universal being without relating it to the mind, not without realizing the convertibility of being and the true or intelligible: if being were not intelligible, it could not be understood.[210]

---

[209] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 54, a. 2: "The action of the angel, as also the action of any creature, is not his existence. . . . There is a twofold class of action: one which passes out to something beyond, and causes passion in it, as burning and cutting; and another which does not pass outwards, but which remains within the agent, as to feel, to understand, to will, by which actions nothing outside is changed, but the whole action takes place within the agent. It is quite clear regarding the first kind of action that it cannot be the agent's very existence: because the agent's existence is signified as within him, while such an action denotes something as issuing from the agent into the thing done. But the second action of its own nature has infinity, either simple or relative. As an example of simple infinity, we have the act 'to understand,' of which the object is 'the true,' and the act 'to will,' of which the object is 'the good,' each of which is convertible with being. And so, to understand and to will, of themselves, bear relation to all things, and each receives its species from its object. But the act of sensation is relatively infinite, for it bears relation to all sensible things, as sight does to all things visible. Now the existence of every creature is restricted to one in genus and species; God's being alone is simply infinite, comprehending all things in itself. . . . Hence, the divine nature alone is its own act of understanding and its own act of will."

[210] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 16, a. 3, ad 3: "Being cannot be understood, unless being is intelligible. Yet being can be understood while its intelligibility is not understood." Cf. *In* I *sent.,* d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 2.

Only the relation to the mind called intelligibility uncovers the true nature or essence of being. Universal being as *actually* intelligible relates to the mind and also relates the mind to being in the act of understanding. The essence of being or being as such is, therefore, identical with the truth of being. However, the intentions or conceptions of the transcendentals are distinct. The intention of being is the foundation of the intentions of the other transcendentals or proper accidents of being studied by metaphysics: "being" is contained in the *ratios* of the other transcendentals.[211]

In this sense, Aquinas discusses truth as transcendental mode of being. Many times, he grounds the possibility of truth in a theological understanding of the question. Then the divine mind creates intelligible things by conforming them to the divine ideas. The *potential* intelligibility of things reduces to their conformity with God's ideas. The human mind can conform to things by making them actually intelligible through the agent intellect upon reception of their phantasm through the senses. The interpreters of Aquinas focus on this metaphysical theology, which grounds the *potential* intelligibility of things in their conformity with divine ideas, such as in the second article of question 1 in *Quaestio disputata de veritate*.[212]

However, the first article in the question considers being and the relative transcendentals true and good in relation to the human soul, and not in relation to the divine ideas, and so without a theological foundation. Usually, all the transcendentals as common concepts refer to the identical things or supposits, especially to their existence, but differ in *ratio*.[213] But being is a common thing, not only a common concept. And this common thing or essence of being is identical with the other transcendentals but

---

[211] Aquinas, *In metaphys*., prooem.; IV, lec. 1, nos. 529–31. Cf. *In* I *Sent*., d. 8, q. 1, a. 3; d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad 8: "Being is the first intention of the intellect. . . . But one, true, and good, according to their own proper intentions, are founded on the intention of being."

[212] See also Aquinas, *In* I *sent.,* d. 19, q. 5, a. 1; *ST* I, q. 16, a. 1; *In* I *peryermen.*, lec. 3; *In* VI *metaphys*., lec. 4; IX, lec. 11; *SCG* I, chap. 59, and the corresponding interpretations of Aertsen*, Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*, 243–74, Catherine Pickstock, "Truth and Correspondence," in *Truth in Aquinas*, ed. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–18, Yves Floucat, "La vérité comme conformité selon saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue thomiste* 104 (2004): 49–102 (repr. in Floucat, *La vérité selon saint Thomas d'Aquin. Le realisme de la connaissance* [Paris: Téqui, 2009]); Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, 61–68, John F. Wippel, "Truth in Thomas Aquinas," in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy 47 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 65–112.

[213] See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 5, a. 1: "Good and being are the same in reality [*secundum rem*], but differ only in ratio [*secundum rationem*]."

differs from them in *ratio*.[214] In other words: universal being in itself or absolutely falls first in the mind. We call something a being because it is considered in itself or absolutely.[215] But we call something true regarding the intellect which conforms to it.[216] If the essence of being did not contain intelligible existence, it would not be true regarding the intellect; it would not be actually intelligible. Material things lose this actual intelligibility regarding the mind; their forms are potentially intelligible and must be freed from individual matter in the light of the agent intellect for the sake of becoming actually intelligible.

Aquinas refines this consideration as follows. Only the judgments of the mind conform to things because conformity belongs to distinct things. Simple apprehension, on the other hand, does not conform to things in the strict sense, because it is identical with them.[217] The intellect in act is the intelligible in act in apprehension: one and the same intelligible form enables a thing to be actually intelligible and the mind to be actually understanding. This intelligible form is that by which we understand real things in their essence.[218] Judgments, on the other hand, are syntheses of terms, not in things. But these syntheses can conform to things when the mind identifies the thing signified by the subject term with the thing having the perfection signified by the predicate term. For instance, the proposition "this ball is white" identifies the subject "ball" with the "thing having whiteness." Thus, we understand that the ball partakes in whiteness.[219]

With regard to the natural apprehension of being and the true this implies: "A thing is prior in *ratio* insofar as it falls prior in the intellect. Now, the intellect apprehends at first being itself; secondly, it apprehends that it understands being. . . . Hence, the *ratio* of being is first, that of the true second."[220] These principles guide our understanding of the truth. We first apprehend being, the common thing, in itself. Then we apprehend that we understand being: we apprehend also being as something understood. And this reflection on our own understanding of being is the truth—the identity of being in itself and being as understood. In the case of being as a common thing, this identity is evident because universal being as such exists only in the mind and is actually intelligible through itself. Regarding

---

214 Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 21, a. 1.
215 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 39, a. 8.
216 Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 1, a. 1.
217 Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 1, a. 3.
218 Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 8, a. 6; *SCG* I, chap. 51; chap. 55, II, chap. 55; *ST* I, q. 85, a. 2.
219 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 85, a. 5, ad 3.
220 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 16, a. 4, ad 2.

the cognition of this or that thing, Aquinas would say that the universal principles are immediately understood in the particular case.[221] This consideration of transcendental truth or of intelligible being, which enables us to understand the identity of being in itself and being as understood, is unique in Aquinas's metaphysics. It manifests the greatest depth of being.[222]

Aquinas is of the opinion that the intellect is not understanding in act except through the participation of the intelligible which is universal being. Thus, we see that he views being as the primordial actualization of the intellect which understands only being and its modes, the universal modes or transcendentals and categorical being, which is limited to a certain genus.[223] Every intellect and every thought is measured by universal being regarding its true judgments concerning this or that thing. In this sense, universal being is the measure of every historical human being who relates to a time-transcendent, common thing comprehending the whole actuality of this world. If human beings did not agree in this primordial understanding of being, they could not even speak to each other. In this sense, being as common thing is a true universal, for we "call that a universal which is always and everywhere."[224]

Being itself, even as a thing, is most common and does not depend on time and motion, because it comprehends in itself any place, time, and thing.[225] It contains the objects of all the other sciences. Aquinas does not call it the essence of universal being by chance. A real essence as such does not change. Being itself, as a common thing, is therefore immaterial and immovable. Nevertheless, we can enquire into being inasmuch as other things partake in it. Even this movable being partakes in universal being, and metaphysics can study this being as being or in its participation in

---

221 See Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 17, a. 2: "In speculative matters, error does not occur when we are dealing with particular conclusions which are derived directly from universal principles and expressed in the same terms—as for instance, no one is deceived in the judgment 'This whole is greater than its part,' just as no one is deceived in the judgment 'Every whole is greater than its part.'"

222 Aertsen writes, therefore, that Aquinas's understanding of being in relation to the soul characterizes his metaphysics as unique (*Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*, 256–62).

223 Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 1, a. 1.

224 Aquinas, *In* I *post*. *analyt*., lec. 42.

225 See Aquinas, *ST* I q. 75 a. 6: "The senses indeed do not know existence, except under the conditions of 'here' and 'now,' whereas the intellect apprehends existence absolutely, and for all time." See also *De ver*., q. 21, a. 1: "For there is no thing of nature existing outside the essence of universal being, even though there might be such a thing outside the essence of this being."

universal being. Therefore, Aquinas may say that metaphysics in its consideration of all beings, movable and immovable, has a special *ratio* of being insofar as it does not depend on matter and motion. The most common thing or that which is common according to reality and not only according to reason cannot depend on matter and motion.[226] It exists only in the intellect. Thus, Aquinas's insight into being as a common thing does not determine only *what* metaphysics studies. Being as a common thing coins *his whole way of understanding* the science studying being qua being. It is the science touching immediately upon the most common thing in the intellect's apprehension.

Aquinas's understanding of being qua being and the corresponding science of metaphysics appears to be different from the interpretations of his first philosophy mentioned at the beginning of the previous section. He understands universal being as a common, immaterial thing or reality which—as common—is in the intellect only as something actually intelligible. Such a common thing is necessarily immovable and immaterial. We cannot resolve all the essences of material things into universal being without understanding it as an immaterial principle of all things both material and created immaterial. Hence, the essence of universal being is essentially distinct from all the limited perfections of material things because it is spiritual and has only the transcendental perfections. Aquinas calls this essence infinite because it contains every other existence. The existence of a stone or an apple tree lacks actual intelligibility through itself and is not spiritual despite being potentially intelligible. It is the finite existence of this or that thing which is distinct from every other existence. Thus, the question is: how does the essence of being contain every other existence? Aquinas maintains:

> Something can exist separate from matter and motion in two distinct ways. First, because by its *ratio* the thing that is called separate in no way can exist in matter and motion, as God and the angels are said to be separate from matter and motion. Second, because by its *ratio* it does not exist in matter and motion; but it can exist without them, though we sometimes find it with them. In this way, being, substance, potency, and act are separate from matter and motion, because they do not depend on them for their existence, unlike the

---

[226] Aquinas, *In* III *sent*., d. 27, q. 2, a. 4, qcla. 2.

> objects of mathematics, which can exist only in matter, though they can be understood without sensible matter.[227]

Though the *ratio* of being signifying its nature indicates something not existing in matter and motion, it does sometimes exist in matter and motion. In this sense, being contains even material things. Thus, God is a "being" without the possibility of any addition, which could determine his individual existence, because he is determined and distinct from everything else by his existence. Universal being, on the other hand, is an essence, which can receive an addition. And this addition will determine universal being to that which is proper in each thing.[228] But the addition does not determine being as potency is determined by act. It is determined as act, and is limited by the potential to receive it.[229] The text of Aquinas shows that addition or composition complements the method of resolution or analysis. Resolution resolves the composite "thing" into its principles, resolves the species into the genera. Addition begins with the first principle and adds other principles to it to arrive at the composite thing; for

---

[227] Aquinas, *In Boetii de Trin*., q. 5, a. 4. In ad 5, he clarifies: "We say that being and substance are separate from matter and motion not because it is of their nature to be without them, as it is of the nature of ass to be without reason, but because it is not of their nature to be in matter and motion, although sometimes they are in matter and motion, as animal abstracts from reason, although some animals are rational."

[228] See Aquinas, *In* I *sent*., d. 8, q. 4, a. 1: "Something is said to be without addition in two ways. Either it belongs to its account that nothing is added to it—and in this way this is said of God, for there must be perfect existence in himself, from which he does not receive any addition. Nor can this be the universal being, since everything universal is preserved in what is proper, where an addition is made to it. Or a thing to be without addition is such that it does not belong to its account that addition is made to it, but neither does being without addition belong to its account. For, in the idea of being, the condition *without addition* is not included; otherwise, addition could never be made to it, since it would be against its account. And, therefore, it is universal, because in its account it does not indicate any addition, but addition can be made to it, so that it might be determined to what is proper. For example, even the universal "animal" is said to be without reason, since having reason does not belong to the idea of it, but neither does not having reason; on the other hand, a donkey is said to be without reason because within the idea of it is included the negation of reason, and thereby it is determined according to its proper difference. In this way, so too is the divine existence determined in itself and divided from all other things, through the fact that no addition can be made to him. Whence it is clear that negations said of God do not designate any composition in him." Cf. *De pot*., q. 7, a. 2, ad 6; *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4, ad 1.

[229] Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 7, a. 2, ad 9.

instance, we may add the differences to the genera and thereby constitute the species.[230]

Thus, the common science or ontology has only a common thing as object, which does not exist in reality or is not a substance. Therefore, ontology studies the common object especially in singular substances partaking in universal existence. Further, being is understood as participation in existence. And this participation necessarily requires an extrinsic source of common existence, in which the participants share. Therefore, the understanding of being enables us to prove the existence of an efficient cause of being as such. Metaphysics *as theology* enquires into a singular, real, immaterial object. This enquiry into the cause of being qua being does not include God in being qua being. Such an inclusion would involve metaphysics in a self-causing circle of being. According to Aquinas, the analogous cause of being transcends such a circle because the divine causality extends to the whole "genus" of participated being.[231] Further, metaphysical theology must be aware of the identity of intelligible and natural existence in the common thing "being." Though God transcends the essence of universal being, his mode of existing resembles the spiritual essence of being. Therefore, Aquinas writes:

---

230 Aquinas, *In* III *metaphys*., lec. 3, no. 356. As was said, the absolute existence by which real things are (natural existence) and the relative existence by which being is manifest for the intellect (intelligible existence) are identical in universal being. But they are distinct in all creatures which limit the essence of being and are not actually intelligible except in the intellect. Each creature is, by limiting the natural existence, contained in universal existence, and each creature is manifest as a being in the context of universal being for every intellect. Hence, the existence of material things is contained in the essence of being because the interior principles of beings are added to the essence of universal being. These principles constitute the limited existence of things contained in universal existence and deprive existence of actual intelligibility by the addition of matter (IV, lec. 2, no. 558). The addition demonstrates that universal existence contains the actuality of all the created essences and things which are in act through existence. Nevertheless, existence is not material through itself and does not contain material existence in its own essence. However, the immateriality of universal being is the immateriality of a universal thing. The universal thing as universal is necessarily immaterial, though it can include the existence of material things in its universality.

231 See Aquinas, *De pot*., q. 7, a. 7, ad 7: "The equivocal [analogous] agent must precede the univocal because the latter's causality does not extend to the whole species (else it would be its own cause), but only to an individual member of the species. But the equivocal agent's causality extends to the entire species; and consequently, the first agent must be an equivocal agent."

> Whatever is in anyone in an intelligible mode is understood by him. Now the divine essence is in God in an intelligible mode, for God's natural existence and his intelligible existence are one and the same, since his existence is his act of understanding. Therefore, God understands his essence. Therefore, he understands himself, since he is his very essence.[232]

These lines imply that God's natural existence is his intelligible existence. Though he alone "is" this identity, we must not forget to distinguish the divine existence from universal existence. The latter is the proper object of every created intellect and is participated existence. But God as being by essence transcends the understanding of every created intellect.[233] His intelligible existence is far beyond the intelligible existence belonging to participated existence. Further, God understands himself due to the identity of intelligible existence and understanding in him, which are his substance. Universal being, on the other hand, does not understand anything, despite containing understanding and intelligible existence. That which neither subsists nor exists as such does also not understand anything.

Conclusion

In his short history of being, Aquinas describes a gradual development from the sophistic science considering being qua accidental being to metaphysics as the study of universal being qua universal being. This development is a true progress because humanity ultimately reaches the science of truth after a long journey through many errors. However, his longer story of being agrees that there was no gradual development. Parmenides considered being qua being or the nature of being to a certain extent at the very beginning of philosophy. His position must be discussed by metaphysics. Nevertheless, he identified the nature of being with the whole universe because the analogy of being is missing in his way of thinking. The sophists after Parmenides identified being with accidental being; others began to consider real, singular substances qua being. Ultimately, Plato and Aristotle rose to the understanding of being qua being. Thus, history contains periods of true development, but also periods of thinkers

---

[232] Aquinas, *SCG* I, chap. 47; cf. *ST* I, q. 14, a. 2, ad 3.
[233] Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 4.

who fall short of thinking the truth. Many times, the efforts of sophists, dialecticians, and metaphysicians coexist simultaneously.

If we compare Aquinas's understanding of being to that of his predecessors, it is unique. He alone was able to reduce all "things" as potency to the actuality of being. The result of this resolution is the understanding of being as actuality of all acts called universal existence. The latter contains in itself both natural and intelligible existence and can be received in the intellect as a common thing, not only as a common conception. Especially intelligible existence was not included in universal being by his predecessors, who studied neither *the existence of thought* nor the *intelligibility of things relative to the mind*.

Aquinas's approach to the history of thinking is important because it enables us to understand the history of philosophy under a single, common measure in universal being. It is the operation of the human species to understand this measure, which unites the thoughts of all human beings and gives them the ability to understand one another. Without such a common understanding, any attempt at writing the history of mankind would be meaningless, because we would not be able to understand each other, especially not the writings of previous philosophers.

Metaphysics, as the highest development of human thinking, is the chief science of the truth, considering the measure of human thinking as a real object that does not subsist as a singular thing, despite its immediate presence to the intellect. Nevertheless, universal being is the peak of the created reality because the actuality of all acts contains all things and activities in itself—that which was, is, and will be, even though actuality as such never changes. Therefore, it is the perfect measure of the history of thinking.

On the one hand, Aquinas's phrase "that which I call existence" expresses that he distinguishes his understanding of being from that of other authors. On the other, he accepts Plato, Aristotle, and Avicenna as thinkers who touched upon universal being. Plato approaches "being" through logical arguments; he thinks being dialectically. Dionysius as Plato's heir grasps being as the universal plenitude emanating from God, in which every created thing is contained. Though Aristotle never spoke of existence as universal, real, interior principle of things, Aquinas is not ready to accept the Stagirite's blindness regarding being and God as its efficient cause:

> Therefore, just as, if we should understand the production of things to be from God *ab aeterno*—as Aristotle supposed, and a number of the Platonists—it is not necessary—indeed, it is impossible—that there have been a preexisting but unproduced subject of this

> universal production; so also, in accord with the tenets of our faith, if we posit that he did not produce things *ab aeterno* but produced them after they had not existed, it is not necessary to posit a subject for this universal production.[234]

Aquinas's main reason for this interpretation of Aristotle's first philosophy is the text of *Metaphysics* 2.1, which speaks of the principles of eternal beings, of the principles of the heavenly bodies. These principles have no principle of their existence, despite being the cause of other things.[235] As was said above, Aristotle knows no efficient cause—which would be a "moving" cause, in his language—of eternal existence, only a final cause.[236] This *finality of being qua being* lies in the imitation and participation of the divine eternity by temporal beings in the process of uninterrupted generation.[237] In this sense, the substance of the world does not stem from the gods according to Aristotle. Aquinas calls this opinion an intolerable error,[238] which he does not ascribe to Aristotle. Therefore, his whole commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is written as if the Greek philosopher spoke of existence as an interior principle of things stemming from God. In the strict sense, Aquinas himself is the first philosopher to speak of being as actuality of all acts and God as its cause. Nevertheless, Dionysius comes already close to this understanding of the plenitude of being. But Dionysius does not refer to being as actuality of every other reality, lacks the corresponding reduction of every other reality to the actuality of all acts as most interior cause, and cannot distinguish between natural and

---

234 Aquinas, *In* VIII *phys*., lec. 2, no. 974.

235 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 2.1.993b23–31.

236 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.17.1041a25–32.

237 See Aristotle, *De anima* 2.4.415a26 – b7: "For any living thing that has reached its normal development and which is unmutilated, and whose mode of generation is not spontaneous, the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal toward which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible. The phrase 'for the sake of which' is twofold; it may mean either the for-the-sake-of-which of something, or the for-the-sake-of-which for something. Since, then, no living thing is able to partake in what is eternal and divine by uninterrupted continuance (for nothing perishable can forever remain one and the same), it tries to achieve that participation as much as possible, and some partake more, others less; so it remains not indeed as the self-same individual, but continues as something like itself—not numerically but specifically one." Cf. *De generatione et corruptione* 2.10.336b24–337a7; *Metaphysics* 9.8.1050b28–29. See Owens, *Doctrine of Being*, 460–64).

238 Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 46, a. 2, ad 1.

intelligible existence. Being as actuality is not part of his Platonic tradition. He does not consider the convertibility of being and true by relating being to the human mind through intelligible being. This implies also that "being" is not the first principle of understanding. Despite Aquinas's uniqueness in this regard, his view of the history of philosophy demonstrates that the philosophers of all kinds of traditions must think "being." Though the Platonic tradition does not reflect the fullness of actuality, it prepared the way for Aquinas's "definition of being."

The problem of the understanding of being lies in the universality of being. Due to this universality, we find being in the most superficial, accidental relations between things and in their exterior qualification as such and such a being, such as in their quantities and qualities. This kind of being is perceived through the senses, which were not distinguished from the intellect by the sophists. Therefore, they studied the changing, exterior appearance of "being" in its accidental connections. In this view, subsisting matter appears to be the last subject of all the qualities and quantities.

The Aristotelian understanding of being studies substance as separate being which exists by itself. Accidents, on the other hand, exist only in substance. Due to the distinction between senses and intellect, the remaining essence hidden underneath the changing accidents becomes the main subject of metaphysics. Nevertheless, philosophy of nature enquires already into movable substances. Though Aristotelian ontology is a universal science considering the remaining existence of things under the title "being qua being," the Stagirite does not understand existence as the most interior principle of things. Material things exist due to the composition of matter and form: the form or essence is both the actuality of matter and the actuality of the composite thing. Only the incomposite or immovable substance is being itself or being qua being in the strict sense of everlasting actuality without coming to be or ceasing to be.[239] In the eyes of Aristotle, there is no need for a deeper principle and actuality within things. "Substance without matter I call essence,"[240] and this substance is the form of things or the *first* cause of their existence.[241] In this sense, things are beings immediately through their form without matter and there is no other cause of their existence, neither a god nor a further formal cause.[242] Only Plato would say that the idea of the good shares existence with all things through the idea or empty genus of being. However, this genus is

239 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 9.10.1051b28–33.
240 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.7.1032b14.
241 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.17.1041b27–28.
242 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 8.6.1045b1–7.

not an intrinsic cause within things, but an exemplar outside of things or not entering the intrinsic constitution of things.

The essence of universal being discussed by Thomas Aquinas is a different intrinsic principle in things. According to Aquinas, the mind cannot rest in the superficial connection of things through accidental being. It cannot even rest in the knowledge of a thing's intrinsic essence. On the contrary, it must reduce all the different essences or intrinsic principles to their unity in being, which actualizes everything. Resolution reduces everything to this most common principle. But only being as true reveals the immaterial reality as intelligible presence in the mind, which is also actualized by being. Here, the universality of being extends to the act of understanding actualized by being as its actually intelligible object. This is the last point of resolution *in ontology*, unless we wanted to say that being as known also attracts the will and is called good.[243] If this level of resolution is reached, the level of metaphysical thinking is attained and the history of philosophy cannot develop beyond this level of the ontological resolution and the corresponding *theological philosophy*. Being is the first and the last principle, from which human thinking proceeds and to which it returns by judging its results.[244] However, the infinity of universal being cannot be exhausted by any thinker in this world. In this sense, the inexhaustible depth of being does not allow us to stop reducing everything to this common thing. Every new aspect of being will enable us to have a deeper insight into the essence of being. N·V

[243] Aquinas, *De ver*., q. 1, a. 1.
[244] Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8.