Is Dionysius's Christian Platonism Incoherent? Thomas Aquinas Versus Étienne Gilson on How to Interpret Dionysius's Metaphysics of *Esse* in *De Divinis Nominibus*

Patrick Zoll, S.J.
Munich School of Philosophy
Munich, Germany

Introduction

Christian philosophers and theologians such as Origen, Augustine, Proclus, Dionysius, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas made use of Plato's thought—or interpretations of it by philosophers such Aristotle, Plotinus, and Porphyry—to explain Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of creation.[1]

However, critics object that any such attempt is doomed to fail because Platonic metaphysics is incompatible with a Christian account of the creation. In other words, critics claim that something which is usually called "Christian Platonism" is an incoherent view. For example, having presented

[1] Contemporary scholars usually call the author of the book *De divinis nominbus* "Pseudo-Dionysius" to mark the difference between the unknown author of the book from the sixth century and the person called Dionysius whose encounter with the Apostle Paul is mentioned in Acts 17:34 and whose name the author uses as a pseudonym. Furthermore, many contemporary scholars distinguish between "Platonism" and "Neoplatonism." In this article, I do not take a stand on these issues. For the sake of simplicity, I follow Aquinas's usage and use the name Dionysius to refer to the author of *De divinis nominibus* and terms such as "Platonist" or "Platonic" to refer to persons or views this author deals with in that work.

what he considers to be the Platonic doctrine of being (*esse*)[2] and Proclus's project to use Plotinus's interpretation of the latter to explain the Christian doctrine of creation, Étienne Gilson judges:

> This is straight Neoplatonism: the first principle is the One, and being comes next as the first of its creatures. Now this is, though self-consistent, yet absolutely inconsistent with the mental universe of Christian thinkers, in which being cannot be the first of all creatures for the good reason that it has to be the Creator Himself, namely, God. Psychologically speaking, one can philosophize as a Neoplatonist and believe as a Christian; logically speaking, one cannot think, at one and the same time, as a Neoplatonist and as a Christian.[3]

In Gilson's view, the attempt to make use of the Platonic metaphysics of *esse*—in its Plotinian interpretation in this case—to explain the Christian doctrine of creation is doomed to fail because the former conflicts with the latter, according to which God is identical not only with the Platonic One but also with *esse* as the first principle and cause of everything created. In other words, a Christian Platonism which combines the Platonic doctrine of *esse* with a Christian account of creation is incoherent because the former conflicts with the Christian commitment to how God has revealed himself, namely, as someone who can be referred to with the name "He Who Is" (Exod 3:14).[4]

Even worse, Gilson continues, Christian Platonists who made heavy use of Plotinus's interpretation of the Platonic doctrine of *esse* such as Marius Victorinus or Dionysius distorted the Christian views on creator, creation, and their relation.[5]

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2 I leave the terms *esse* (existence, being) and *ens* (a being) untranslated because any translation—e.g., translating *esse* as "existence"—might have unwelcome connotations which would make it more difficult to understand what Aquinas's view on the matter is.

3 Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2 ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 30–31.

4 Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 30–31, 33.

5 Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 33–34. It is important to note that, on a traditional understanding of the relation between creator and creature, the relation is a participatory relation in which God as cause remains unparticipated by creating. According to Aquinas, this means that the participatory relationship between creatures and God is a mixed relation: a real relation (*relatio realis*) in creatures but only a relation in idea (*relatio rationis*) in creatures. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 13, a. 7, corp. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* [*SCG*] II, chaps. 11–14.

With respect to Dionysius, Gilson writes:

> He certainly was a Christian, yet he did not hesitate to posit the Good even above being, with the unavoidable consequence that, once more, the Christian God had to be conceived as the supreme non-being. True to the leading principle of Plotinus, Dionysius maintains that God must not be what He gives, in order precisely that He may give it: "If, as is indeed the case, the Good is above all being , then we are bound to say that what itself is without form gives form; that He who remains in Himself without essence is the acme of essence; that, being a lifeless reality, He is supreme life; that, being a reality without intelligence, He is supreme wisdom, and so on, since any form denied to the Good points out His informing power" [Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, IV, 3]. As a Christian, Dionysius knows that God has claimed for Himself the name of Being, but since, as a Platonist, he knows that God is even above being, all he can do is to see in this highest of all "divine names" the supreme denomination of God as known from His effects. God is not being *qua* God, but in so far as He is the author of being, which is the first of His creatures. In Dionysius' own words: "God Himself is not being, but He is the being of beings" [*Ibid*., V, 4], which means: He is that because of which beings are. And what is it that accounts for the being of all beings? Once more, it is the Good. . . . Whoever he was, Dionysius was certainly thinking along the same lines. To this Christian, *He Who Is* is the cause of all beings, only because He Himself is not.[6]

Thus, according to Gilson's interpretation of Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* (*DDN*), Dionysius's Christian Platonism is incoherent for three reasons. First, the Platonic view that the Good is above *esse* and that the latter is subordinated to the former conflicts with the Christian view that God is identical with *esse*. Second, the Platonic view that the cause of all beings must be a non-being—that is, the Good, a *non-ens*—conflicts with the Christian view that God as the cause of all created *entia* is an *ens* which is *esse* by its essence. Third, the Platonic view that the Good is the cause of the *esse* of created *entia* only insofar as the Good is the cause of *esse*, which in turn is the cause of the *esse* of created *entia*, conflicts with the

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[6] Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 34 (italics original). In the original the references to Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* are in footnotes.

Christian view that the cause responsible for the creation of *entia*,—that is, the fact that created *entia* have the *esse* they have but could also not have—is uncreated. In other words, according to Platonic metaphysics, a multiplicity of causes is involved in the creation of things, while on the Christian account of creation there is only one cause responsible for the creation of everything.

However, if Gilson's interpretation of *DDN* is correct, it is difficult to make sense of this work's history of reception within the Christian tradition. For example, if the metaphysics of *esse* to which Dionysius is committed in *DDN* is in fact incompatible with Christian faith, it is puzzling that an eminent scholar such as Thomas Aquinas, who otherwise is so perceptive of views which conflict with Christian doctrine, seems not to have noticed the incoherence of Dionysius's Christian Platonism when he made ample use of *DDN* in his on exposition and defense of Christian faith. In other words, if Gilson is correct, it seems that generations of Christian scholars were wrong in their appreciation of *DDN* and other Christian Platonic works.

In what follows, I argue that this puzzle is solved if we contrast Gilson's modern interpretation of Dionysius's metaphysics of *esse* in *DDN* with the medieval interpretation which Thomas Aquinas offers in his commentary on *DDN* (*In DDN*).[7] According to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius's metaphysics of *esse* in *DDN* is perfectly compatible with Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of divine simplicity. Thus, Aquinas's commentary helps to see why generations of Christian scholars thought they were right in their appreciation of *DDN*. Furthermore, I show that Aquinas's commentary helps one to understand why—from Aquinas's point of view—critics of Dionysius's Christian Platonism such as Gilson misread works such as *DDN*.[8]

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[7] For *DDN* citations below, the final numbers are those from the Marietti ed.

[8] It is important to note that in this article I confine myself to a reconstruction and explanation of Aquinas's interpretation of Dionysius's views on *esse* in *DDN*. Furthermore, I explain why, according to Aquinas's reading of *DDN*, Gilson's interpretation of *DDN* is distorting Dionysius's views. I do not take a stand on whether Aquinas's interpretation of *DDN* accurately reflects Dionysius's thought. Whether the author of *DDN* actually held the views that Aquinas attributes to him is a question of historical scholarship I am not pursuing in this article. I am thankful to Eric D. Perl for making me aware of the need to clarify this point.

The Relation Between Goodness and *Esse*

Aquinas comments on Dionysius's Platonic metaphysics of *esse* in the three lectures of chapter 5 of *In DDN*. Especially the first lecture helps to see why Aquinas thinks that Dionysius's metaphysics of *esse* is perfectly compatible with Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of divine simplicity. Let us begin with Aquinas's interpretation of Dionysius's view on the relation between the Good and *esse*.[9]

Aquinas notes that Dionysius takes over the distinction between a being (*ens*) in actuality and a good (*bonum*) *ens* from Platonic metaphysics:

> After Denys has treated the good in chapter 4, here in chapter 5 he determines about being [*ente*], about which he determines first after the good, because the good in a certain way extends itself to more things, as the Platonists said: for even what is not existing actually, which is being in potency [*ens in potentia*], from the very fact that it has an order to the good, has the ratio of the good; but it participates the causality of being [*entis*] when it is made a being actually [*ens actu*].[10]

Being a good *ens* is not coextensive with being an *ens* in actuality because there are *entia* in potentiality which are good only insofar as they are ordered towards becoming a good *ens* in actuality but which are not yet a good *ens* in actuality, but only potentially a good *ens* in actuality. *Entia* in potentiality are good precisely because they are in potency to *esse*, in potency to become an *ens* in actuality which is good in actuality by participating in *esse*.[11]

However, it is important to note that, according to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius does not accept the Platonic idea that the Good and *esse* are distinct as causes of everything which is good in actuality. Rather, the distinction between actuality (*esse*) and goodness is an effect of God's

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[9] In this article, I focus on the metaphysics which is presupposed by Aquinas's interpretation of Dionysius's view on the relation between the Good and *esse*. For a detailed explanation of the role that Aquinas's terminist semantics plays in his attempt to reconcile the idea that "the Good" is the principal name of God with the view that *esse*/*ens* or "He Who Is" is the most proper name of God, see Gregory T. Doolan, "Aquinas on 'The Good' as the Principal Name of God: An Aristotelian Reading of Dionysius," *Analogia* 18–20 (2023): 7–32.

[10] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 606. All English translations of Aquinas's works in this article are from the Aquinas Institute, available at aquinas.cc.

[11] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 610.

creative activity and an expression of his providential care, which orders everything to its perfection.[12] In Aquinas's view, Dionysius explicitly rejects what Gilson attributes to him: the Platonic view that *esse* as cause of everything created is distinct from and subordinated to the Good—that is, God, as cause of everything that is good.

> Then when he says, *yet it does not say that the good*, he excludes an error of certain Platonists who reduced universal effects to more intelligible causes. And because they saw that the effect of the good is the most universal, they said that its cause is the good itself which pours out goodness into all things, and under it they placed another cause that gives life and thus concerning the others, and they called principles of this sort gods. Therefore Denys himself excludes this, saying that the present speech *does not say that the good* itself *is one* principle, *and existing* itself *another*, *and life another*, and *wisdom* another. *Nor* does the present speech say that there are *many causes* and diverse deities productive of diverse things, of which certain are *exceeding* and certain inferior, according to all processions of perfections in creatures.[13]

According to Dionysius, Aquinas argues, there is only *one* principle and cause who is identical with *esse*, goodness, life, wisdom, and so forth—God—but a *multiplicity* of distinct perfections (e.g., *esse*, goodness, and so forth) found in creatures.[14] The Platonists correctly see that there is a multiplicity of distinct perfections and that goodness is the most universal perfection, that more things are good than there are actual things. However, they wrongly infer from these facts that there is a multiplicity of hierarchically ordered forms such as goodness, *esse*, life, wisdom, and so forth, which exist in separation from good things, actual things, and so forth, and that the Good is distinct as cause from *esse*. Thus, the Platonic view which Dionysius *rejects* is that a hierarchy of causes is involved in the creation of a multiplicity of creatures and their perfections: the Good is responsible for the goodness of creatures, *esse* accounts for their existence, life causes living things to have life, and so forth.[15]

Due to the fact that there are more good *entia* than *entia* in

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12 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 611.

13 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, nos. 612–13.

14 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 613.

15 As Rudi te Velde has pointed out, such a view of creaturely perfections and their causes conflicts with an Aristotelian substance ontology and Aquinas's commitment to the

actuality—namely, *entia* in potency which are good insofar as they are ordered to become *entia* in actuality which are good in actuality—"the Good" is the most universal name for God, the name which most universally manifests God's providential caring for his creation.[16]

However, it does not follow, as the Platonists believe, that names such as *esse*, "life," and "wisdom" are names of separated forms distinct from God. Rather, all these names are names of God. They just manifest more determinate effects of God's providential caring.[17] Thus, according to Aquinas's interpretation of Dionysius, it is *not* true that Dionysius adopts the Platonic views that God is identical with the Good but not with *esse*, that the latter is subordinated to the former, and that God is therefore only as *non-ens* the cause of everything created.

God Is a *Non-Ens*

In Aquinas's view, it is also not true that Dionysius "is a Christian theologian who, because he still conceives being after the manner of Plato, cannot even understand the very name of his God."[18] Aquinas explains that Dionysius—after having clarified the relation between goodness and *esse*—shows that God is the universal cause of that which is common to a plurality of creatures and that, as this cause, he is most properly named from *esse* itself: God is most properly called an *ens* in line with the biblical revelation of Exod 3:14.[19] However, this way of talking about God invites the fallacy of inferring from the fact that there obtains a causal relation

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doctrine of the unicity of substantial form ("Aquinas's Aristotelian Science of Metaphysics and Its Revised Platonism," *Nova et Vetera* [English] 13, no. 3 [2015]: 743–64).

16 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 613.

17 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 613.

18 Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 33. Gilson refers here to Marius Victorinus, but the immediately following sentences and presentation of Dionysius make clear that Gilson thinks that this assessment also applies to the case of Dionysius.

19 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, nos. 619–20. Giovanni Ventimiglia has pointed out that—contrary to what Gilson claims—it is not the original contribution of Aquinas to identify the Dionysian *ens* as a name for God with the biblical name *Qui est* revealed in Exod 3:14; rather, it has been shown that Aquinas relied on Latin translations of *DDN* which interpreted the relevant passages of chapter 5 in light of and in line with Exod 3:14 ("Ist Gott das Sein selbst? Von Platon zu Anthony Kenny (über Thomas von Aquin und Gottob Frege)," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 63, no. 2 [2016]: 320–46, at 326–28). I am thankful to Ventimiglia for making me aware of his article.

between God—an *ens* which is identical with *esse*—and any created *ens* that God is an *ens* which exists in a *mode* like any created *ens*.[20]

According to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius uses the Platonic idea that God is a *non-ens* to stay clear from this fallacy and to safeguard the biblical revelation that God is an *ens* (Exod 3:14) from a serious possible misinterpretation. The Platonic view that God is a *non-ens* does not conflict with the biblical view that God is an *ens*, but rather gives expression to something which a correct understanding of the latter needs to consider: God is a *non-ens* in the sense that he is an *ens* who, as the cause of every created *ens*, does not exist in a *mode* like any created *ens*.

Aquinas makes use of his favorite example of the form of whiteness to help the reader see why it is impossible that God, the universal cause of everything which pertains to the existence of an existing thing, is an *ens* who exists in a mode like the *entia* which result as effects from his causal activity as creator:

> Then when he says, *for God is not existing in a certain mode*, he shows that all things befit God, in a certain way. For the evidence of which it must be considered that every form, received in anything, is limited and bounded according to the capacity of the receiver; whence, this white body does not have the whole of whiteness according to the whole ability of whiteness. But if there were separated whiteness, nothing would be lacking to it which pertains to the virtue of whiteness. Yet all other things, as has been said above, have received and participated being, and for this reason they do not have being according to the whole virtue of being, but God alone, who is subsisting being itself, has being according to the whole virtue of being; and this is what he says: that for this reason God can be the cause of being for all things, because he *is not existing in a certain mode*, that is, according to any finite and limited mode, but universally and infinitely he *receives in himself the whole of being and pre-receives* it, because in him it preexists as in a cause and from him it is derived to other things. And for this reason he is called in 1 Timothy 1:17: *King of the Ages*, because *in himself* he has the whole of being and every substance and all existing things, and again just as *around* him, inasmuch as they are derived from him.[21]

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[20] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, nos. 629–30.

[21] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 629.

Aquinas starts his argument with the premise that every form which is received in something is limited and determined by the capacity of that in which it is received. If this general metaphysical principle is accepted and applied to the case of whiteness, it follows that the form of whiteness which is received in something, perhaps a whale, is limited and determined by the capacity of the material nature of the whale in which it is received. A white whale is not the form of whiteness itself and consequently does not have the whole power which the form of whiteness has. The form of whiteness can whiten a whale only to the degree its material nature permits it. However, if there were, hypothetically speaking, a separated whiteness, subsisting whiteness itself as the Platonists believed, such a form would have the whole power the form of whiteness has. Nothing would limit the whiteness of that separated form.

In line with Aristotle, Aquinas rejects the view that such separated forms or ideas of material substances exist. However, Aquinas thinks that this hypothetical scenario helps to understand Dionysius's point that it is impossible that God is an *ens* who exists in a mode like the effects of his causal activity. The *esse* which creatures have and receive from God is not a form. Nevertheless, the metaphysical principle that everything which is received in something is limited and determined by the capacity of that in which it is received applies also to the case of *esse*. Any created *ens* is not *esse* by its essence or nature, but only by participation; it only has only *esse* which is limited and determined by the essence or nature of the *ens* in which it is received. The essence or nature of an *ens* which participates in *esse* limits and determines the *esse* it participates in by adding a mode to it. For example, the *esse* of a whale is whale *esse*, the *esse* of a human being is human *esse*, and so forth.[22] Due to this limitation and determination of *esse* through a mode which is added to it, the power of *esse* is restricted and limited. A whale has the power of *esse* its whale form permits it to have, and a human being has the power of *esse* its human form permits it to have, and so on. Any created *ens* in virtue of being a created *ens* does not have the whole power of *esse*.[23]

Thus, according to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius adopts the Platonic idea that God is a *non-ens* to give expression to the true thought that it is impossible that God—the universal cause of everything which pertains to the existence of an existing thing—is an *ens* who exists in a

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[22] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *SCG* II, chap. 52.

[23] For a more detailed account of this point, see Fran O'Rourke, "Virtues Essendi: Intensive Being in Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas," *Dionysius* 15 (1991): 31–80.

particular mode. Any *ens* which exists in a particular mode cannot be the universal cause of everything which exists in a particular mode, because such an *ens* lacks the whole power of *esse* a universal cause of everything which exists in a particular mode requires to have. Thus, the causal relation whose obtaining is supposed to explain that an *ens*, which could also lack *esse*, has the *esse* it has must be a relation between an *ens* which exists in no mode—a *non-ens*—and an *ens* which exists in a particular mode.

God Is the Being of Beings

In Aquinas's view, Dionysius's Platonic claim that God is the "being of beings" ("sed ipse est esse existentibus") must be interpreted accordingly, namely, as a causal claim. God is not the *esse* of *entia* in the sense that he is a separated form in which all the forms of created *entia* participate. This would amount to the untenable view that God is the formal *esse* of that which exists (*esse formale existentium*), a kind of pantheism. Rather, God is the being of beings insofar as any *esse* which *entia* have is an effect of God's causal activity.[24]

The ontological dependence of any *ens* which exists in a mode on a cause existing in no mode—God as *non-ens*—is not limited to the moment in which an *ens* begins to exist. At every moment of its existence, a created *ens* depends on its cause—God as *non-ens*—which constantly causes that *ens* to have the *esse* it has, to be the *ens* it is. In short, the causal relation to an external source of its *esse*—God as *non-ens*—is constitutive for the existence and persistence of any *ens* whose essence is not *esse*.[25]

Aquinas argues that, due to this causal interpretation of the Platonic idea that God is the "being of beings," Dionysius can explain why it is possible that God is the universal cause of everything which pertains to the existence of existing things. This is possible because created things and everything which pertains to their existence are effects of God's creative power and, as effects, they virtually preexist in God as effects (pre-)exist in the power of their cause to produce these particular effects.[26] Creatures are manifestations of God's power, and God can be the universal cause of all created things and that which pertains to their existence because it is within God's power to create that which exists.

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[24] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 630.
[25] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 631.
[26] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 631. This point will be explained in more detail below.

God Is an *Ens*

According to Aquinas's interpretation of *DDN*, it would be a serious misinterpretation of Dionysius to infer from the fact that Dionysius adopts the Platonic view that God is a *non-ens* to the conclusion that Dionysius accepts the claim that "God is not being *qua* God,"[27] a claim which conflicts with how the Christian God has revealed himself, namely, as someone who can be referred to with the name "He Who Is" (Exod 3:14).[28]

On the contrary, in Aquinas's view, Dionysius offers arguments in favor of the view that a Platonic metaphysics of *esse* is compatible with the Christian view on creation, arguments in favor of the view that the revealed name "He Who Is" (*qui est*) of the biblical God signifies the same as the Platonic *non-ens* which is the universal cause of the *esse* of the multiplicity of existing *entia*.[29] As we have seen above, the Platonic view that this universal cause is a *non-ens* does not imply a rejection of the biblical idea that God as cause of everything created is an *ens* or a rejection of the Christian idea that God is an *ens* whose essence is *esse*, but only a rejection of the idea that God as creator is an *ens* who exists in a mode.

According to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius provides two arguments for the claim that God is fittingly called *ens*, "He Who Is." With respect to the first argument, Aquinas states:

> The first argument is thus: if any cause should be named from its effect, it is named most fittingly from the principal and most worthy of its effects. Yet *being itself* among the other effects of God is more principal and worthy. Therefore God, who cannot be named by us except through his effects, most fittingly is named by the name of being. Therefore this is what he says: that *being* itself has been *proposed* to creatures for participating *before* the *other participations* of God. For whatever perfection a creature should have, it is made through this in the participation of God, who as it were is proposed and offered to all for participating; but first he is participated as regards being itself, before whatever other perfection: and *per se being itself is older*, that is, first and more worthy, *than that which is to be* per se *life and that which is to be* per se *wisdom and that which is to be* per se *divine likeness*.[30]

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27 Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 34 (italics original).

28 Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 30–31, 33.

29 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 632.

30 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 633.

Aquinas reconstructs Dionysius's first argument as follows:

> 1. A cause should be named by the principal and most noble of its effects.
> 2. The *esse* creatures have is the principal and most noble of all the effects of God.
> 3. God cannot be named by us except by his effects.
>
> Therefore, God is most fittingly named by the name '*ens*.'

The crucial premise is 2. Why is *esse* the principal and most noble of all effects of God? According to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius thinks that this is the case for the following reason. Let us consider a creature who possesses *per se esse*, *per se* life, and *per se* wisdom as perfections. A creature has all the perfections it has in virtue of participating in God. In other words, all perfections of a creature are participations of God, effects of the causal participatory relationship between the creator and the creature. What must be shown is that *per se esse* is prior to any other perfection, such as *per se life* or *per se* wisdom.

But Aquinas makes the reader aware that, before this can be shown, it must be clarified how Dionysius's account of perfections such as *per se esse*, *per se* life, and *per se* wisdom differs from the account proposed by the Platonists. According to the Platonic account, perfections such as *per se esse* or *per se* life which are participated in by composite things exist not only *in* composite things but also *before* (*ante*) composite things; that is, they exist in separation from composite things and by themselves. For example, in addition to human beings who participate in humanity, there exists in separation from all human beings a separate and immaterial human being—subsisting humanity—in which particular material human beings participate and in virtue of which they are human beings. However, on the Platonic account, perfections such as *per se esse*, *per se* life, and *per se* wisdom exist not just before and in separation of particular living, wise, or existing things. These separated principles are also diverse from and subordinated to the first principle, to that which is *per se* good and *per se* one. Thus, there is a plurality of perfections which exist by themselves in separation from particular material substances which exhibit these perfections; the separated perfections are principles of the perfections

material substances possess; and the plurality of separated perfections is hierarchically ordered with *per se* goodness and *per se* oneness at its top.[31]

According to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius rejects the Platonic idea of a multiplicity of perfections which exist before (*ante*), in separation from, particular things which have these perfections. There exists only one separated principle of the perfections particular things have—namely, God, who is identical with *per se esse*, *per se* life, and *per se* wisdom.[32] Consequently, there is not a plurality of separately existing principles or causes for the perfections in creatures, but only one such external principle or cause. In Aquinas's view, Dionysius clearly rejects the idea that the *esse* which causes created *entia* to have *esse* is a separated form which is not identical with God or goodness.

It is uncontroversial that Dionysius makes use of the Platonic metaphysics of participation according to which composite material substances have perfections such as *per se esse* or *per se* life in virtue of participating in separately existing *per se esse* or *per se* life. However, it would constitute a fallacy to infer from this fact that Dionysius is therefore also committed to a Platonic ontology according to which perfections such as *per se esse* or *per se* life exists as separated principles which are diverse from and subordinated to the first principle which is *per se* good and *per se* one: God. According to Aquinas's commentary on *DDN*, such an interpretation misrepresents Dionysius's thinking because it does not take into account that Dionysius distinguishes between two ways of predicating perfections such as *per se esse* or *per se* life:

> Therefore when there is said *per se* life, according to the thought of Denys, this can be understood in two ways: in one way, according as the *per se* imports discretion or real separation, and thus *per se* life is God himself. In another way, according as it imports discretion or separation only according to reason, and thus *per se* life is what is in living things, which is not distinguished from living things according to the thing, but according to reason only. And there is the same *ratio* concerning *per se* wisdom and thus concerning the others.[33]

First, if a perfection such as *per se* life is predicated of God, the predication implies a separation in reality (an existence *ante rem*), a separation between

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[31] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 634.
[32] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 634.
[33] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 634.

God—who is identical with perfections such as *per se* life and who exists *ante rem* as the separated cause of created perfections such as *per se* life in creatures—and created perfections such as *per se* life which exists *in* creatures as participations, as effects of God's causal activity.

Second, if a perfection such as *per se* life is predicated of a composite thing—a living thing—that predication implies no separation in reality, no existence *ante rem*: a perfection such as *per se* life does not exist in separation from—*ante rem*—living things, but exists only *in* living things (*in rem*); that is, the perfection exists only insofar as it is participated.[34]

Thus, if we predicate something *per se* of something else—for example, "*per se* life" of a living thing—this way of predication might suggest that *per se* life exists in reality in separation from the living thing (*ante rem*). However, *per se* life exists in reality only in the living thing and is only in thought separated from the living thing in which it exists. If "*per se* life" is predicated of living things, it signifies the life which is in living things, a participation or perfection of something composite, and not life which exists by itself in separation from living things.[35]

After this brief excursus, Aquinas returns to the defense of premise (2) of Dionysius's argument: the question of why *esse* is the principal and most noble of all effects of God's causal activity. Aquinas identifies two reasons Dionysius gives to support this claim. First, perfections or powers such as *per se* life or *per se* wisdom are themselves participations which participate in *esse* itself.[36] Any perfection or power is a perfection or power only insofar as it has *esse*. Being alive, being wise, and so on are all modes of being; they presuppose being (*esse*). Consequently, *esse* is the principal and most

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[34] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 634. For a slightly different interpretation of this passage of Aquinas's commentary, see Pasquale Porro, *Thomas Aquinas: A Historical and Philosophical Profile* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 195–98.

[35] Porro's interpretation seems to suggest that participated perfections such as *per se* life are only logical entities (*Thomas Aquinas*, 195, 197–98). However, this interpretation conflicts with the view that such perfections participate in *esse*, to which Aquinas is committed, as we will see in due course. In other words, according to Aquinas, perfections of creatures are principles of creatures which really exist in creatures; i.e., they are not only logical entities. According to my interpretation, the Platonic error consists not in the fallacy of inferring from a mode of predication that perfections such as *per se* life exist in themselves, i.e., in reality. Rather, the Platonic error is to infer from the fact that perfections such as *per se* life are predicated of living creatures that these perfections exist in separation from the things of which they are predicated and in which they exist in reality.

[36] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 635.

noble of all effects of God because any other perfections or powers as gifts of God presuppose God's gift of giving *esse* to a creature.

Second, *esse* is the principal and most noble effect of God because a creature's *esse* and any other perfection or power a creature might have (e.g., life) are related as that which is participated (*esse*) and that which participates (*ens*), as actuality to potentiality.[37] Thus, we have the following hierarchical ordering: creatures participate in certain powers or perfections such as *per se* life or *per se* wisdom. However, any such powers or perfections in creatures which are named "*per se* life" or "*per se* wisdom" are themselves only *entia* which participate in *esse*. The powers or perfections in which creatures participate are themselves only participations of *esse* itself. Consequently, *esse* is the principial and most noble of God's gifts, and *ens*—"He Who Is"—is therefore the most fitting name for God in accordance with the biblical testimony of Exod 3:14.[38] In other words, in Aquinas's view, this argument shows that Dionysius's Christian Platonism is perfectly coherent because Dionysius makes use of the Platonic metaphysics of participation to explain why creatures have the perfections they have without committing himself to the Platonic idea of separately existing ideas or forms in which material substances participate.

This brings us to the second argument for the claim that God is fittingly called *ens*, "He Who Is":

> Then when he says, *for prepossessing* [*praehabit*] *and super-possessing* [*superhabit*], he posits a second argument which is thus: if another cause should be named from its effect, it is necessary that it should be named more principally from the first effect through which it made them all; yet being is of this sort; therefore God is named more principally through being itself. Therefore this is what he says: that God himself prepossesses and super-possesses *pre-being* [*praeesse*] *and super-being* [*superesse*].[39]

Aquinas reconstructs Dionysius's argument in the following way:

> 1. If a cause should be named from its effect, the cause should be named more principally through the first effect through which the cause made all things (*per quem omnia fecit*).

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37 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 635.
38 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 635.
39 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 636.

> 2. *Ens* is the first effect through which all things are made by God.
>
> Therefore, God is more principally named through *esse* itself (*per ipsum esse*).

Since God is the cause of the *esse* in virtue of which all things are *entia*, the term *ens* is not predicated in the same sense of the cause—God—and the effect, namely, created *entia*. *Ens* is predicated eminently or excessively of God in comparison to created *entia*. Aquinas argues that Dionysius says for this reason that God is an *ens* that not only has a different *esse* than creatures—namely, *praeesse* and *superesse*—but also is an *ens* that has *esse* in a different *way* from creatures, in the sense of *praehabet* and *superhabet*.

To illustrate what Dionysius means by this, Aquinas distinguishes between two ways in which the priority or superiority of something A (its being first) over something B can be grounded:

> Therefore here it must be considered that one thing can be preferred to another in two ways, namely: as regards the what it has [*ad hod quod habetur*] and as regards the mode of having [*ad modum habendi*].[40]

First, A is superior or prior to B if A has more of that which makes a thing excellent. For example, an educated human being is prior or superior to an uneducated human being with respect to knowledge because the former possesses a greater quantity of knowledge. Second, an angel is prior or superior to an educated human being with respect to wisdom not only because the former possesses a greater *quantity* of wisdom but also because an angel's *mode* of having that wisdom is more excellent than any educated human being's mode of having wisdom. To sum up, the priority or superiority of A over B can be grounded in A's excess of quantity of that which makes A and B excellent or in A's superior way of having that which makes A and B excellent.

In an analogous way, the priority and superiority of God's *esse* and God's mode of having *esse* in comparison with a creature's *esse* and a creature's mode of having *esse* can be explained:

> And likewise as regards the mode of having, there can be understood the *ratio* of order and dignity, and for this reason he says,

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[40] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 637 (trans. slightly altered).

> *prepossessing and super-possessing*. And therefore God, having being more eminently from himself, through a certain likeness among his other effects, first made *what is* to be, that is, *being itself according to itself, and through being itself he made* all things whatever are *to subsist*: for through this each thing is caused by God: through its being from God, and not only do other existing caused things participate being, but also those *principles of existing things participate being*, inasmuch as they *are and are principles*. *And first* being according to itself applies to them and *afterwards* that they should be *principles* of other things.[41]

The *esse* which God has (*id quod habet*) is prior and superior to the *esse* which any creature has (*id quod habet*) with respect to order and dignity. Consequently, that which God has (*id quod habet*) can be predicated excessively only of God. Aquinas argues that Dionysius says for this reason that God's *esse* is *praeesse* and *superesse*. God's *esse* is prior and superior to any creature's *esse* with respect to order and dignity in virtue of God's prior and superior mode of having *esse*: God's *praehabet* and *superhabet* of *esse*.

With respect to order, God's mode of having *esse* is prior and superior in comparison with a creature's mode of having *esse* because God has *esse* by himself (*esse habens ex seipso*): his having *esse* is uncaused (because he is *esse*). In contrast, any creature has *esse* by God (*ex Deo*); a creature's having *esse* is caused.

With respect to dignity, God's mode of having *esse* is prior and superior in comparison with a creature's mode of having *esse* precisely because God's having *esse* is uncaused and any creature's having *esse* is only an effect of God's creative activity. In other words, the *esse* which creatures have (*id quod habet*) bears only a certain likeness (*similitudinem*) to the *esse* which God has, as an effect of God's creative power. Furthermore, God's mode of having *esse* has a greater dignity than any creature's mode of having *esse* because God does not have *esse* by participation; that is, his subsistence is not mediated by or does not depend on a participation in *esse*. Rather, God subsists in virtue of being *esse*.

In contrast, any subsisting creature subsists in virtue of a double mediation or participation in *esse*: First, a creature's *esse*—created *per se esse*—is the first effect of God's creative power and participates in God like an effect participates in the power of its cause. Second, a creature's principles of existence and subsistence (e.g., its substantial form and its powers or

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41 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 638.

perfections such as *per se* life or *per se* wisdom) participate in created *per se esse*, the *esse* which a creature has from God (*ex Deo*).[42]

To sum up, according to Aquinas, Dionysius's second argument for the conclusion that God is more principally named through *esse* itself (*per ipsum esse*)—that God is fittingly called *ens*—is that all principles or perfections of a created *ens* such as a living thing's *per se* life are themselves participations of created *per se esse*. Look at it this way. Regardless of what an *ens* is, what kind of form and perfections it possesses—in which way or mode it possesses *esse*—any form or perfection can be a principle of *esse* of that *ens* only if that *ens*, with its form and perfections, has *esse*. An *ens*'s mode of having *esse* presupposes that *ens*'s being an *ens*—that *ens*'s having *esse* in the first place.

Platonic Metaphysics of Causality and Divine Simplicity

According to Aquinas's commentary, Dionysius addresses next the question of in which sense all creaturely perfections are not only *from* God but also *in* God.[43] The view that creaturely perfections not only derive from God and exist in creatures but also exist in God follows from the Platonic doctrine that all effects of a cause (pre-)exist in their cause: the Platonic metaphysics of causality.[44]

However, it seems, Aquinas observes, that Dionysius's acceptance of this Platonic view makes his Christian Platonism incoherent for the following reason. Creaturely perfections exist in themselves only in an imperfect mode because they are caused, they are finite, they are limited, and they are mutually exclusive. In other words, creaturely perfections exist in themselves in a mode which admits opposition, diversity, and multiplicity.[45] For example, the form of a human being exists in itself in a human being in such a way that it excludes the coexistence of the form of a donkey.

But, if creaturely perfections exist in themselves in this imperfect mode, it seems that Dionysius—a Christian committed to the doctrine of divine simplicity according to Aquinas's interpretation—is obliged to reject the Platonic claim that creaturely perfections (pre-)exist also in the universal cause of everything created, God's power. The doctrine of divine simplicity conflicts with the view that there is multiplicity, limitation, diversity, and so forth in God. But there is multiplicity, limitation, diversity, and so forth

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42 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 638–39.
43 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 640.
44 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 631.
45 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 641.

in God if creaturely perfections (pre-)exist in God or God's power in the way they exist in themselves.

In Aquinas's view, Dionysius solves this problem by distinguishing between the mode in which creaturely perfections exist as effects of God's power in themselves, as participations of *esse* in creatures, and the mode in which they (pre-)exist in God, who is *esse* by his essence and identical with his power according to the Christian doctrine of divine simplicity. Thus, Dionysius claims that creaturely perfections do not exist in God as they exist in themselves, in creatures. Rather, creaturely perfections (pre-) exist in God in such a way that they are identical with God's essence.[46]

According to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius explains the latter view with the help of examples and provides an argument in support of it. A first example is about the modes in which oneness (*unitate*) exists in number and number in oneness.[47] Number exists in oneness in one and the same mode (*uniformiter*), namely, the mode of oneness because everything that exists in another exists in it by the mode of that in with it exists. Whatever numbers might exist—such as even or uneven numbers, square numbers, or cube numbers—they all are numbers in virtue of the fact that they participate in oneness.

In turn, oneness exists in number by its power (*virtute*) because oneness has the power to produce any number. For example, oneness exists in the square number 2^2 by its power because 2^2 is the product of the multiplication of the number 2 with the number 2, and the number 2 in turn is the result of adding the number 1 to 1. In other words, the square number 2^2 is different from the number 2, the square number 3^2, and the cube number 2^3. *In themselves*, as products or effects of oneness, these numbers are finite, limited, diverse, and so forth. However, since these numbers *in themselves* are products or effects of oneness, they (pre-)exist virtually *in oneness*. *In oneness* they do not exist in a limited, finite, diverse, and so forth way, because in oneness these numbers all exist in the same mode (*uniformiter*)—namely, the mode of oneness—and are therefore identical with the essence of oneness.

A second example is about the modes in which the principles (*rationes*) of a nature exist in a universal nature and a particular nature.[48] According to Platonists, a universal nature is a separated form, such as humanity. According to Aristotelians, the generative power of the sun is an example

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[46] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 641.
[47] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 644.
[48] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 646.

for the universal nature of generable things. However, whatever a universal nature is, the principles of a nature exist *in themselves*, as effects of a universal nature in a particular nature, in a finite, diverse, limited, and so forth mode. For example, according to an Aristotelian cosmology, the principles of the generative power of the sun exist in the particular nature of a tree only in limited and finite way because the sun has not only the power to cause the generation of trees but also the power to cause the generation of animals. However, in the generative power of the sun—a universal nature—the principles of all generated natures (pre-)exist in a unified mode (*modum unitionis*); they virtually (pre-) exist in that power as effects of the generative power of the sun. In other words, the principles of nature which exist in a finite, diverse, and limited way in a particular nature (pre-)exist in a universal nature in an unlimited and unified way.

A third example is taken from Aristotle, according to whom an animal's soul is the efficient, formal, and final cause of the whole body and the powers of its bodily parts: the power of the eyes to see, the power of the nose to smell, and so forth.[49] *In themselves*, as effects of the power of the soul, the powers of the bodily parts are multiple, diverse, finite, limited, and so forth. However, as effects of the soul, these powers (pre-)exist virtually in the soul. Since the soul is the common cause or root (*radix*) of all the powers of the body or the bodily parts, these powers are *one* in the soul and (pre-)exist in the soul in an unlimited and infinite way.

According to Aquinas's interpretation, these examples are all examples which illustrate how certain effects which exist *in themselves* in a multiple, diverse, limited, and so forth way exist in their causes in a different way, namely, in such a way that they are one, unlimited, and infinite. These are all examples of how effects all (pre-)exist virtually in their causes.

In Aquinas's view, Dionysius continues his exposition by arguing that the relation between God as universal cause of any creaturely perfection and the creaturely perfections which exist as effects in creatures is analogous to the relation which obtains between particular causes and their effects depicted in the preceding examples. As effects of God's causal activity, creaturely perfections exist in themselves—in creatures—in a multiple, diverse, limited, and finite way. However, creaturely perfections (pre-)exist virtually in God—their universal cause—in such a way that they are one, unified, unlimited, and infinite. In other words, creaturely perfections which are contrary to each other when they exist in themselves, such as the form of a human being and the form of a donkey, do not conflict with

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[49] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 647.

each other or do not limit each other when they (pre-)exist virtually in God. Thus, by an analogy of proportion, it can be claimed that creaturely perfections exist in God as the universal cause of everything existing in the same way as effects (pre-)exist virtually in their particular causes.[50]

Later in his commentary, Aquinas explains this analogy of proportion in the following way:

> Then when he says, *for if our sun*, he manifests what he had said through a sensible example; and he says that *our* sensible *sun*, *existing* as *one* and uniformly, light by infusing all things, all sensible things both as regards *substances and* as regards *qualities*, it *renews*, by generating other things anew when certain things have corrupted, as is apparent in plants and in vines stricken by frost; *and nourishes* all living things; *and guards*, that is, conserves all things universally, both living and non-living; *and perfects*, that is, leads to life and due perfection; *and discerns*, that is, distinguishes the diversity of sensible things; *and unites*, by establishing one from many; and *makes* plants in the winter dried up through cold *to flourish again*, even enclosed under covers, *and makes* them to seed, and by its virtue plants and animals are generated; *and changes those things* that are changed in the nature of things; *and gathers*, that is, makes each thing firmly to be and to thrive in its place or even in its principles; again, *from plants* it *makes to go forth* fruits and seeds and other plants; *and moves* food *upwards* from the root of the plants to their heights; a*nd vivifies all things* that live; *and each* of all natural bodies, according to *its propriety*, *participates* the virtue of one and the same sun.[51]

Dionysius uses the sun as an example for a particular cause. The sun is the cause of every living thing insofar as it pours light into everything (*lumen infundendo omnibus*) in virtue of which living things are generated, subsist, persist, and flourish.

The light which living things have and which serves in living things as an intrinsic principle of generation, subsistence, persistence, and flourishing

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[50] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 648.

[51] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 2, no. 662. Aquinas's interpretation of the analogy presupposes of course an Aristotelian cosmology which cannot be explained here even in passing. However, it is interesting to note that the Latin verb *infundere* and the noun *infusio* which Aquinas frequently uses in this context are the same terms he uses in his exposition of the Christian doctrine of grace, such as in *ST* I-II, q. 113.

is an effect of the causal activity of the sun. Living things participate in the sun as the cause of light insofar as the light which is poured into them by the sun participates in the power that the light of the sun has, namely, the power to generate, to vivify, to renew, to perfect, and so forth.

The different natures of living things limit or restrict to which degree the light of the sun can be received by the living creature, to what extend the power of the sun can be effective in the enlightened or illuminated creature. However, this way of participation of a living thing in the power of the sun does not restrict or limit the power of the light of the sun or the active potentiality of the sun as the cause of light, that is, its power to generate, to vivify, to renew, to perfect, and so forth.

The analogy between the sun as the particular cause of the light which creatures have and God as the universal cause of the *esse* which creatures have is that the relevant plurality of effects can participate in the power of their cause only because these effects (pre-)exist virtually in their cause, that is, because the effects exist in one and the same mode (*uniformiter*) in their cause.

The underlying idea is this: the different effects of light (e.g., generation, subsistence, persistence, flourishing, and so forth) which take place in living things in virtue of their participation in light are different modes of light. What the reception of light effectuates depends on that in which it is received. In the power of the sun as the cause of light there is no such differentiation of light by modes. Rather, all these different effects of light (pre-)exist in one and the same mode (*uniformiter*) in the sun's power to produce light. In other words, the light produced by the sun's power has the causal power to generate, to vivify, to renew, to perfect, and so forth. All the possible effects of light (pre-)exist virtually in one and the same mode in the power of the sun and become multiple effects in actuality which exclude each other only in virtue of light being received in and participated in by things with different natures.

Thus, according to Aquinas's interpretation of *DDN*, Dionysius uses the analogy between God and the sun to make the following point: If all the effects of the sun's power (pre-)exist in one and the same mode (*uniformiter*) in the power of the sun, one must concede that all things (pre-)exist (as exemplars) in God's creative power which is identical with God. This conclusion follows because Dionysius accepts the premise that a universal cause is in the same way related to its effects as a particular cause is related to its effects.[52]

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[52] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 2, no. 662.

Consequently, from Aquinas's point of view, Dionysius's Christian Platonism is not incoherent because the Platonic metaphysics of causality which Dionysius accepts and uses to explain the Christian doctrine of creation fits nicely with the doctrine of divine simplicity to which he is committed as an orthodox Christian according to Aquinas's interpretation.

However, Aquinas makes the reader aware that there are also important disanalogies. God or God's power as universal cause influences (*influit*) his effects far more than any particular cause (e.g., the sun or the sun's power) because God is the cause of all existing things, the cause of all particular causes such as the sun and its power.[53] Thus, all existing things (pre-)exist virtually—in one and the same mode (*uniformiter*)—in God's creative power precisely because they are existing things, products of God's causal activity. God's influence on his effects exceeds the influence of any particular cause on its effects because any kind of created causality presupposes the first effect of God's causal activity, namely, *esse commune*.[54]

According to Aquinas, Dionysius supports the conclusion he draws from this analogy and the examples presented above with the following argument:

> Then when he says, *for he is the principle of existing things*, he proves the same through reason, through which the abovesaid proof is confirmed. For all the many things that are from one principle preexist unitedly in the first principle. And therefore it is clear that all things are unitedly in God, since he is the *principle* of all things.[55]

Aquinas's interpretation of the Dionysian argument can be reconstructed as follows:

> 1. In any multitude, things are determined in themselves through the fact that they are distinct from each other.[56]
> 2. If a multiplicity of things is caused by one cause or originates from one principle (*ex uno principio*), the things of that multitude which in themselves exist as being distinct from each other (pre-)exist

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[53] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 2, no. 662. Another important disanalogy is that the relation between God and creatures is a mixed relation while the relation between a particular cause such as the sun and its effects is not. See footnote 5 above for a more detailed explanation of this point.

[54] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 2, no. 660.

[55] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 649.

[56] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 650.

> unitedly in that cause or principle; they (pre-)exist in that cause or principle in such a way that they are not distinct from each other.
> 3. God is the one cause or principle of the multitude of all existing things, the multiplicity of existing things which are determined in themselves through the fact that they are distinct from each other.[57]
>
> Therefore, all existing things exist unitedly in God; that is, they (pre-) exist in God as the cause or principle of their existence in such a way that they are not distinct from each other.

This argument supports not only the claim that Platonic metaphysics of causality—especially the claim that all effects of a cause (pre-)exist in the power of that cause—does not conflict with the Christian doctrines of divine simplicity and creation, that is, that Dionysius's Christian Platonism is coherent. Rather, an additional benefit of this argument is that it nicely explains what aspects of Platonic metaphysics of *esse* are rejected by Dionysius. According to Aquinas's interpretation, Dionysius rejects the Platonic view that there exists a hierarchy of separated forms such as *per se esse*, *per se* life, or *per se* wisdom which as causes are involved in the creation of a plurality of creatures which distinguish themselves from each other. Rather, such creaturely perfections exist in themselves only in creatures and (pre-)exist in God in such a way that they are identical with the divine essence.[58]

Consequently, according to Dionysius's Christian Platonism, there is only one cause—namely, God, who is the cause of any creaturely perfection by which creatures distinguish themselves. For example, God is the cause of any life one finds in living things, the cause of any wisdom and knowledge one finds in rational creatures, the cause of any power one finds in creatures, and so forth.[59] Thus, in contrast to Platonists such as Plotinus, Dionysius finds that the plurality and distinctiveness of creatures is not something bad—the product of a kind of "fall" from oneness and unity—but something good: it is an effect of God's causal activity, an effect of influent the will of God who can only will the good.

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[57] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 650.
[58] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 641.
[59] *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 650.

Aquinas on How (Not) to Read Dionysius's *DDN*

Up to this point, we have seen that, in his commentary on *DDN*, Aquinas offers an interpretation of Dionysius's metaphysics of *esse* which is perfectly compatible with Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of creation or the doctrine of divine simplicity. Thus, according to this interpretation, Dionysius's Christian Platonism is coherent and can be defended against objections advanced by critics such as Gilson.

However, Aquinas's commentary helps also to understand why—from his point of view—critics of Dionysius's Christian Platonism such as Gilson misread works such as *DDN*. In his preface of *In DDN*, Aquinas concedes that Dionysius's works in general and *DDN* in particular are difficult to understand and prone to misinterpretations for a couple of reasons.[60] One of these reasons is that in *DDN* Dionysius makes use of resources provided by the Platonic philosophical tradition to explain the fact that a certain likeness of perfections such as goodness, oneness, and *esse* predicated of God is found in material substances: there exists one separated form which is essentially goodness, oneness, and *esse*, in which material substances which exhibit these perfections participate like an effect participates in its cause.[61] Thus, Dionysius makes use of the Platonic metaphysics of participation to explain why creatures exhibit perfections or a likeness of perfections which are attributed to God.

Confusions and possible misinterpretations of Dionysius's *DDN* might arise, Aquinas argues, because Platonists use this metaphysics of participation also to explain essential similarities and differences between material substances. For example, in the Platonic view, Aristotle and Plato are similar in an essential way because they both belong to the same species—*rational animal*—and they both belong to this species in virtue of participating in a common substantial form—*humanity*—which exists in separation from and addition to Aristotle's and Plato's participated humanities. However, Aquinas argues, it constitutes a fallacy to infer from the fact that Dionysius uses the Platonic metaphysics of participation to explain why common perfections such as goodness or *esse* are found in a multiplicity of creatures that Dionysius is therefore also committed to a Platonic ontology according to which separated forms of material substances exist.[62]

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60 *In DDN*, prooemium.

61 *In DDN*, prooemium.

62 *In DDN*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 634.

As the previous sections have made plain, it seems that Gilson makes a similar error in his interpretation because he does not sufficiently pay attention to the fact that Dionysius carefully disentangles elements of Platonic metaphysics compatible with a Christian worldview from those which are not. For example, as we have seen above (see section "God Is a *Non-Ens*"), Dionysius uses the Platonic idea that God is a *non-ens* to defend the Christian view that God is not an *ens* which exists in a mode like any created *ens*. Gilson infers wrongly from this fact that Dionysius rejects the Christian idea that God is an *ens*, that Dionysius is also committed to a Platonic view which conflicts which Christianity, namely, the view that God is identical with the One and goodness but not with *esse*. However, Aquinas's interpretation of *DDN* makes clear that the opposite is the case (see section "God Is an *Ens*"): Dionysius offers arguments in favor of the view that Platonic metaphysics of *esse* is compatible with the Christian view on creation; he gives arguments for the claim that the revealed name "He Who Is" (*qui est*) of the biblical God signifies the same as the Platonic *non-ens* which is the universal cause of the *esse* of the multiplicity of existing *entia*.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reconstructed how Aquinas interprets Dionysius's metaphysics of *esse* in his commentary on *De divinis nominibus*. Two important lessons can be learned from Aquinas's interpretation.

First, Aquinas's commentary teaches us how Dionysius's metaphysics of *esse* can be interpreted in a way that it is perfectly compatible with a commitment to Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of creation or the doctrine of divine simplicity. If Dionysius's *DDN* is interpreted in this way, there is nothing puzzling about the appreciation which *DDN* and other Christian Platonic works enjoyed within the Christian tradition.

Second, Aquinas's commentary helps us understand why—from Aquinas's point of view—critics of Dionysius's Christian Platonism such as Gilson misread *DDN* and conclude that such a view is incoherent.