

- 8 Ibid., 'Some Lessons from Bitburg', *Perspectives* (May 1985), p.4. For Greenberg's political positions see *ibid.*, 'On the Third Era in Jewish History: Power and Politics', *Perspectives* (New York: National Jewish Resource Center, 1980), p.6 and *ibid.*, 'Power and Peace', *Perspectives* 1 (December 1985): 3,5.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 'The Ethics of Power', in publication (March 1988).
- 10 For an extended discussion of Holocaust theology see Ellis, *Jewish Theology*, pp.7–24.
- 11 An example of liberal Christian Zionism is found in the work of Paul M. van Buren. See *A Christian Theology of the People Israel* vol. 2 (New York: Seabury Press, 1983). For my discussion of developing a critical solidarity see Ellis, *Jewish Theology*, pp. 119, 120. This analysis points to a new ecumenical dialogue based on solidarity in the struggle for liberation rather than the status quo of Christian and Jewish institutional life.
- 12 The strains of this highly problematical and emotional relationship have increasingly come to the surface in recent years. Witness the upheavals in North American Jewish life relating to the Lebanese War, the massacres at Shabra and Shatila, the Pollard Spy Case and now the Uprising. My point is simply that the relationship between Jews in Israel and Jews outside of Israel cannot remain as it is without ultimately dividing the community at its very roots.
- 13 This ability to discuss the issue of Jewish self-identity assumes the possibility of moving beyond the typical epithet of being a self-hating Jew.
- 14 For Hannah Arendt's prophetic understanding of the choices facing the Jewish settlers in Palestine see a collection of her essays *Hannah Arendt; The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978).
- 15 Michael Lerner, 'The Occupation', p.7

Thomas Aquinas and the Real Distinction: a re-evaluation

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Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of the real distinction between essence and existence in all beings other than God has been the focus of much debate among Thomists. And this is how it should be, for all agree to its central importance in Aquinas's metaphysics. Is the distinction a deduction we make from our knowledge of God's essence, or an insight drawn from our experience? And if it is the latter, is this insight from multiplicity to unity based on the inevitable mental distinction we draw between the concept of essence and that of existence, or is it the fruit of a metaphysical penetration of the material things we meet within our world? Let us look first at the argument based on an intuition into God's simplicity and a deduction from that intuition, and then turn to an

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examination of the arguments which move from the diversity of our experience to the simplicity of the source of that experience.

In the first argument, the claim is that we have a direct insight into being as being, into existence itself, that is, God. 'Being (*esse*), insofar as it is being, cannot be diverse.'¹ If it differs, it must be by something other than it, that is, by particular essences. Is this the main-line argument for the real distinction? Many commentators (among them O'Brien and Fabro) have thought that it is. However, I believe they are mistaken. For the proof as it stands is incomplete, not in failing to offer a conclusion, but in failing to ground its major premise. How do we know that there is such a thing as self-subsisting existence? Do we assume we know explicitly prior to experience what being (*esse*) as being, or existence itself, is? It seems more to the truth that we know beings (*entia*) explicitly, the material things with which we are in contact, and through knowing them as finite and dependent in various ways conclude to the existence of infinite or self-subsisting being. It seems true enough that *if* there were a self-subsisting whiteness, then all white things would be white by participating in it; and analogously, *if* there were a self-subsisting being, all other beings would participate in it. But how do we know such a thing in the first place? I would argue that Aquinas's mature position on this issue is to distinguish essence and existence in material things first, and then to deny that distinction of God. After all, in both *Summas* and his work *De Potentia Dei (On the Power of God)* where he treats this issue in detail, the first presentation is always by way of denying that in God existence is distinct from essence. This denial implies that they are already recognised to be distinct in the material things we know. The simplicity of God is not immediately self-evident; it is not a given: it is reached by explaining the composition we find in creatures. In order to explain the way creatures are, it is necessary to suppose a perfectly simple cause of all things, and this is what we call 'God'. Thus, we deny that there can be any composition in God. As Aquinas says in the preface to question three in his *Summa Theologiae (Prima Pars)*, we do not know what God is, but what he is not.

Now let us turn to the arguments which conclude from a distinction recognized in our experience to the existence of a being which is perfectly simple. The focus for this discussion of the real distinction has tended to be an early work, *De Ente et Essentia (On Being and Essence)*², and commentators have disagreed over whether or not he succeeds here in establishing the real distinction. The passage in question contains three distinct arguments. The first is the *intellectus essentiae* argument, in which one is asked to consider the essence of any one thing and to recognize that its existence is not contained in its essence: Walter Patt thinks that this establishes the real distinction. The second stage, or supporting proof, is the one outlined and rejected in the previous

paragraph; that is, one is asked to distinguish between one being in which essence and existence are identical (being as being) and all other beings in which essence and existence must necessarily be distinct: John Wippel considers this sufficiently to prove the real distinction. In the third argument, God is proven to exist as the cause of all other things: Joseph Owens considers that only at this stage is the distinction real.³ The question is whether the distinction established is mental or real. Owen thinks that the distinction is merely mental until the existence of God is proved. Wippel agrees with Owens that the first stage of the overall argument (the *intellectus essentiae* argument) only establishes a mental distinction; but he holds that proving God to exist is not prerequisite to knowing the real distinction, for the insight into the impossibility of there being more than one being for whom essence and existence are identical provides adequate real support. Patt considers the distinction to be really established in the initial argument.

What I would like to argue is that these early passages fail to establish the real distinction, but that Aquinas succeeds in later works. In the consideration of one thing we do not recognize a real distinction. Nor do we have any direct insight into being as being. And far from requiring the existence of God to justify the real distinction, the insight into the real distinction of essence and existence in the material things we experience is really at the heart of the insight that God exists. Let me first briefly sketch out what I think is lacking in *On Being and Essence*, and then present what I think is the successful argument from Aquinas's later works.

The first argument is most explicitly based on a mental distinction and runs as follows. Whatever is not included in the concept of an essence must be joined to it to form a composition, for knowledge of an essence includes knowledge of its parts. But existence is not part of an essence, for I can understand the essence of man or phoenix while not knowing whether either exists. Therefore, there is a composition of essence and existence in everything we experience. Consider the notion of conceptual distinction itself. A conceptual distinction must by definition be between two concepts. But we have no authentic concept of existence.⁴ True, when we speak of my dog Spot (who eats and sleeps and barks) and my dog Spot (whom I imagine), we recognise a difference. But the difference is not essential, but existential. It is not conceived but judged. The difference is not between two concepts or terms but between two relations or statements. For there is no difference in meaning between 'dog' and 'existing dog'. Existence does not add any conceptual content to essence, but it does determine whether the statement 'I have a dog named Spot' is true or false. Grasping existence is an act of knowing, but it is not definition.

Aquinas goes on to say (second argument) that this distinction is

true of all things *unless* there be one whose essence is to exist. This would have to be unique, and therefore in every other being essence would *really* be other than existence. What needs to be emphasized here is the hypothetical nature of supposing that a being exists whose essence is existence: we can distinguish in all things between essence and existence ‘unless perhaps’ there is one whose essence is to exist. What grounds do we have for saying that there is such a self-subsisting being? At this point we have a hypothetical mental distinction, deduced from an unsubstantiated claim that we have a concept of being as being. What we need, in order to be consonant with the fabric of Aquinas’s metaphysics, is a real basis in sense experience.⁵

The third argument is also based on a conceptual distinction, and proceeds to prove the existence of God. Whatever belongs to something is caused either by its essence or by an outside cause. Existence cannot be caused by the essence, for then the thing would be before it is, that is, it would have to be and not be at the same time — the ultimate contradiction. Therefore, existence (which has been shown not to be a part of the essence, and thus derivative) must be from an outside cause. But we cannot have an infinite series of essentially subordinated causes of existence, or there would now be nothing in existence. Therefore, there must be a being which is uncaused, self-subsisting existence. Here the direction appears to be more consistent with Aquinas’s metaphysical principles in that the move is from a recognized distinction of essence and existence in things to the need for a thing in which there is no distinction. However, the argument still dwells in the realm of concept and essentialism.

The focus in this argument, as in the first, is on one being in whom by examination we are to find two components — essence and existence. Existence is spoken of as belonging to something, as an accident or appendage which is super-added to essence in the way Avicenna spoke of the relation between essence and existence.⁶ What is happening here is that analysis is brought to bear on a general notion of ‘something’ rather than actually existing things. A mental distinction we make concerning any *one* thing is the ground for the analysis rather than (as in Aquinas’s mature works) the experience of actually existing things (plural), which provides the fuel for a recognition of real distinction of essence and existence and the consequent insight into the existence of God the Creator. There may very well be this distinction, and it may be the inevitable result of our thinking about things, but it is not the origin of the real distinction, but derivative from it.

There is no question about the existence being the highest principle in Aquinas’s metaphysics, and to show how one becomes aware of existence is of critical importance to that metaphysics. But existence is ultimate act, and a discussion which distinguishes between the concept of a thing’s

essence and that of its existence is approaching the issue in a static way. Existence is here being compared with essence on the same level. It is crucial in understanding metaphysical principles to recognize that they are not on the same ontological level. If they were, they could not be simultaneously in the same real thing. They are always related as act to potency, one perfecting the other. In the same way as one ought not to speak of the form of an apple as extraneous to its matter or a man's soul as extraneous to his body, so one ought not to speak of existence as extraneous to essence, as a different kind of thing. Form is the act and perfection of matter; existence is the act and perfection of essence. Things extraneous to one another can somehow exist apart from each other, but not metaphysical principles. They are principles precisely because they are not optional or alternative aspects of a thing; they are simultaneously required and exist together in a relationship of act and potency.

Even after these objections, if we still claim that there is a 'concept' of existence (grasped by reflex simple apprehension of the object of our own act of judging) which we consider to be distinct from that of essence, we may ask in what way does this distinction prove that there is a real distinction in actually existing things? Aquinas is very clear in his rejection of such proofs as try to go from thought to thing, as witnessed in his rejection of Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. Just because we have two distinct concepts, there is no warrant for claiming that such a distinction applies to extramental reality. The content of thought is derived from reality, not *vice versa*. As Aquinas himself writes: 'It is not necessarily true that what the mind separates is separate in reality; for the mind apprehends things in its own way, which need not be the way things exist.'⁷

Although the conceptual distinction fails to establish the real distinction of essence and existence in things, the distinction is successfully established in Aquinas's mature works through a metaphysical penetration of concrete existing things. Our experience of existing things reveals for us *what* they are, which is found to be explained in proximate causes within their immediate environment and ultimately in the necessary universal causes or laws of the universe. These 'whats' are many and diverse. But our experience also reveals an act in which all things share, in which they are in some way one: this is their existence, the dynamic fact *that* they are rather than there being nothing at all. Things are the kinds of things they are due to causes *within* the universe; they are at all due to the cause *of* the universe.⁸

The key text in which I think we can find Aquinas's mature and successful argument for the real distinction and thus for the existence of God is from his work *De Potentia*.⁹ In this text the argument is based on an examination of the effects of secondary causes (i.e., causes we experience within the world) and the analogy of existence as some kind of effect. Now

this raises some problems since the effects with which we are familiar are of the order of some form, either substantial or accidental, coming to be in a subject. A rabbit causes baby rabbits to come into being; fire causes water to be hot. But existence is not a form; that is, it is not any particular kind of 'what' at all. Since the effects we know are particular kinds of 'whats', we shall always tend to think of existence, when spoken of as an effect, as a kind of thing. In general, we tend to think of effects as quantifiable 'things', whether substantial (rabbits) or accidental (heat). But an effect can also be dynamic, such as the act of knowing or loving. Existence spoken of as an effect is more like these, except that, unlike these, it is not an accident but the core of the existing thing. Thus, existence may be called an effect only by analogy. Keeping this in mind, I think the argument can be accepted, and is powerful.

As I said, the argument is rooted in an examination of causality in the world. But instead of showing that an instrumental cause requires a first cause, as the second of the Five Ways does, it argues from the fact that there is a common effect, existence, of all agents acting in the world, to the necessity of there being a cause of this common effect which must ultimately be the cause of the world, self-subsisting existence, or God. 'When certain causes producing diverse effects produce an effect in common besides the diverse effects, they must produce that common effect by the power of some higher cause whose proper effect it is.'¹⁰ A cause produces its proper effect according to its form or nature. Thus, different natures will produce different effects. If they produce a common effect while differing essentially, then the effect is not proper to any one of the causes, but must be attributed to a higher and more universal cause. Consider Thomas's example of celestial motion. Even though Copernicus stands between our astronomy and the medieval model, the analogy, I believe, still makes its point. There is a motion, apparent to us, which all the planets share in addition to their own particular motions. This, Thomas says, is diurnal motion, producing the round of night and day. Now whether this be attributed to a superior sphere, as Aquinas held, or to the rotation of the earth, the notion is *not* explained by the particular motions of the planets, but must be attributed to another cause which stands as the universal cause of a universal effect.

Analogously, all particular causes that we experience agree in producing one effect in common — existence. Whatever kind of effect it may be, it exists. 'All created causes produce one effect in common which is existence (*esse*) although they have their proper effects in which they are distinguished.'¹¹ Heat causes something *to be* hot; the builder causes wood, stone, and glass *to be* a house; a puppy comes *to be* from its parents; an artist causes a painting *to be*. Here again language strains at the limits of what can be said. When we say that 'the dog causes a puppy' or 'the dog causes the puppy *to be*' we are saying the same thing. It makes

no sense to speak of a puppy that does not exist. Every essence is an existing essence. When Aquinas speaks of existence, he is indicating not a 'what' in the thing made, but a 'that'. Besides explaining why a thing is what it is by indicating its material cause and its particular formal, efficient, and final causes, we may wish to explain (or to signify our wonder at the lack of explanation from science and personal experience) why a thing is in the absolute sense of why there is anything at all. This question is, in a way, passed on unanswered from each particular agent to its effect. Since it is not answered for the particular agent by itself, neither is it answered for the effect. The answer, the source of all being, is a cause higher than all particular agents and effects.

Continuing the argument, Aquinas refers back to a general statement about agents which he made at the beginning of the passage: since the proper effect of a cause proceeds in likeness to its nature, and the effect in question is existence and the cause God, the nature or essence of God is existence. Every effect has existence. It shares with all other things the fact that it exists. None of the things we know is existence, or there would no plurality of things. For if it were the essence of cat to exist, then existence would equal catness, and there would be no dogs, nor stars, nor juniper bushes. Thus, every contact with beings (plural) reveals the presence of self-subsisting existence as the cause of the highest actuality, the existence, of each thing. God exists; his essence is existence; he is the cause of the existence of other beings, that is, their Creator: these three metaphysical truths are here revealed in one demonstration.

As an aid to understanding this central metaphysical notion and the way in which all creatures give being as instruments of God, let us look at a passage from an earlier article in *De Potentia*. The passage in question shares with the above reference the citation from *Liber de Causis* (*Book of Causes*): 'An intelligence gives existence (*esse*) only by the power (*virtus*) of God.'¹² By thinking of existence as power instead of effect, the notion of first actuality passed on in simultaneous presence is, perhaps, more clear. 'Nothing causes something to be according to species unless by the power of the celestial bodies, nor does anything cause something to exist (*esse*) unless by the power of God.'¹³ The power to make *these* kittens belongs to Fluffy because she is Fluffy, but the power to make kittens *as* kittens and not puppies or pineapples belongs to her through sharing in a higher and more universal power, i.e., evolution, the structure and order of the universe. On an even more universal level, the power to make these kittens to exist belongs to her through a sharing in the power of God, which is the universal cause of all existence. This is the only way Fluffy or any other finite cause can be the cause of existence. Thus, every instance of something coming to be requires the power or act of God, which is existence itself. A shared effect or power requires a cause which transcends the sharers. As distinct, things have distinct powers yielding distinct

effects. If they produce a common effect, it must be due to a shared power which they receive from a more perfect and universal cause. *All* causes are causes of existence. Therefore, they all cause existence through the power of the universal cause of existence, that is, God the Creator.

In conclusion, let us call to mind once more that central pillar of Aquinas's metaphysics and of Aristotle's before him: what we know about reality is learned from our experience of sensible things. Aquinas holds that this experience reveals in them a double composition, from which we can argue to the existence of self-subsisting existence, that is, God. The material thing is made to be what it is by its form actualizing matter in a specific way; it is made to be at all by receiving, as part of the universe of things, existence from God. We do not know what God is, and therefore we cannot deduce the truth that there must be a real distinction in all other beings. Nor can we conceive of existence as an ingredient which along with essence makes up each thing. Aquinas's metaphysics is not the overflow of an intuition into the divine nature, nor a case of an extrapolation from a mental distinction. Rather, it is rooted in our direct experience of the material things around us. It is an incarnate metaphysics, not an angelic one. The doctrine of the real distinction, so fundamental in creationist metaphysics, has its origin in our meeting with and our consideration of the composite things whose presence and activities make up our immediate world of experience.

- 1 *Sum. cont. Gent.* II,52,(2). This way of presenting the issue is found in many places in the works of Aquinas, both early and late. See, for example, *De ente.* V,(3); *De Pot.* III,5,c; *De Spirit. Creat.* I,1,c; *De Sub. Sep.* VIII,(42) and IX,(48); and *Summa Theol.* I,44,1,c.
- 2 *De Ente et Essentia*, V, (3). This way of arguing the point is also found in parallel texts of other early works: *De Hebdomadibus*, Lect. 2; *In I Sententia*, d.8, q.4, a.2.
- 3 For a fuller account of this breakdown and references to the particular articles in question, see Walter Patt, 'Aquinas's Real Distinction', *The New Scholasticism* 62 (1988) 1–29.
- 4 'Existence (*esse*) cannot be defined.' *In IX Meta.*, L.5, com.1825.
- 5 When I say sense experience, I do not mean bare empirical data recording, void of understanding. Such a definition of experience is unintelligible. Rather, experience is always accompanied by thought, and intelligibility always present implicitly within experience. It is the work of metaphysics to draw out this intelligibility.
- 6 Indeed, in his early works Aquinas shows the heavy influence of Avicennian Neo-Platonism. See, for example, *De Hebdomadibus*, L.2; *In I Sent.*, d.8,q.4, a.2&3; *In II Sent.*, d.1, q.1, a.2; *De veritate* X, 12,c.
- 7 *Summa Theol.* I,50,2,c.
- 8 *De Pot.* III,17,c.
- 9 *De Pot.* VII,3. This is not the only place that Thomas argues in this way: see also, *Sum. cont. Gent.* II,15; *Substantiis Separatis* IX,(49).
- 10 *De Pot.* VII,2,c. For similar arguments in other works, see *Sum. cont. Gent.* II,15; *De Sub. Sep.* IX,(49); and *Summa Theol.* I,3,4,c.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Liber de Causis*, prop.9. This work is a medieval compilation of excerpts from the writings of the Neo-Platonist Proclus.)
- 13 *De Pot.* III,7,c; see also III,8,ad.19.