

“Being and Essence—A Happy Accident”

In Latin, Aquinas’ title *On Being and Essence* reads *De Ente et Essentia*. *Ente* is either a participle or a neuter noun, while *essentia* is a feminine noun that looks like a participle, but is not. Both are from the verb “to be.” It is as if Aquinas has entitled the book, *On Being and Being*. At first the difference seems to be primarily one of gender, but *ens*, the nominative of *ente*, is ambiguous. It could be a participle of indeterminate gender or a neuter noun that means “being,” understood as a “thing” in reality. This is an ambiguity inherent in participles, which are verbal nouns or adjectives, like the English word “being.” About *essentia*, on the other hand, Aquinas himself tells us that it is equivalent to the Greek word *ousia*.¹ This may well be true of its substance, but not of its form, since *ousia* is based on a feminine participle, *ousa*, while *essentia* is a noun masquerading as a participle, and it appears to have been totally invented by Cicero. On the surface, one could say that, while *ens* tells us about realities, *essentia* tells us what is essential about realities. This is something like the difference between a subject and a predicate. I can say, “Aristotle is a philosopher” and, in doing so, I link a particular being to what I take to be his essence. Yet, this requires that I also invoke a third form of being in the word “is.” What is the status of “is”? Or rather, insofar as being and essence are both being, what is the being of the being of which they are both a species? Could such a being even have being? That *ens* is a participle that becomes a noun, while *essentia* is a noun that impersonates a participle, suggests that whatever is in both must be both liquid and fixed. Good thing we have spent so much time on something so small, since the first paragraph of Aquinas’ text warns us of the following:

¹ Paragraph 19.

A small error in the beginning is a big one in the end, following (*secundum*) the Philosopher in the first book of *On the Heavens and the Earth*. And as Avicenna says in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, being, and, moreover, essence, are what is *first* conceived by the intellect.

Are these two allusions connected? First of all, is it that Avicenna says that both “being, and, moreover, essence,” are *first* conceived by the intellect at the same time, or does one precede the other? Aquinas (and/or Avicenna) has gone out of his way to alert us that being and essence are plural by doubling the conjunction that joins them. One might wonder if this is an example of a small error in the beginning or if it is an example of how to begin correctly. The adage on the relative size of error, on the other hand, is given “following” (in Latin, *secundum*) the Philosopher in his *first* book of *On the Heavens and the Earth*. *Secundum* can mean “following” or “second.” It is unclear whether it refers to a mere coincidental sequence or a domino of cause and effect. Aquinas seconds what the Philosopher says first both in his first book and in relation to Aquinas. I could make a joke here about “who’s on first, what’s on second,” but I think Aquinas is already funny enough. It has something to do with Avicenna’s statement that being and also essence are what is *first* conceived by the intellect. Are we beginning with the order in which being is known to the intellect or the order in which being actually is? That we learn about error second suggests that we ought to be suspicious of anything we first conceive.

This applies to “The Philosopher” as well, by which Aquinas does not mean Avicenna but Aristotle. To be sure, this is Aquinas’ regular (and meaningful) moniker for Aristotle, but it is particularly funny given the topic at hand, since Philosopher would be something like Aristotle’s essence, or the form in which he appears. Avicenna, on the other hand, is called by his family name; he is literally, “Son of Sina” (Ibn/bin Sina). We

are thus given two types of beings—one identified by a species; the other identified by his genus.

In the next paragraph, Aquinas continues,

Thus, to avoid erring out of ignorance of them, and to reveal the difficulty of these, it must be said what is signified by the *name (nomen)* of being and essence and how it is found in diverse things, and how it holds in relation to the logical intentions: genus, species and difference.

The difficulty of “these” *plural* must be said by signifying the meaning of the name, *singular*, of “being and essence.” As a “name,” being and essence are one rather than two. We still do not know what they are, but Aquinas now seems to imply they are nominally a unit. “Name,” *nomen* in Latin, can mean either common noun or particular thing. It can refer to the species or genus in which a thing participates, or it can refer to the particular thing as differentiated from genus and species. *Ens* and *essentia* are thus in *nomen* one and the same thing. I can call Aristotle “the Philosopher” or I can call Avicenna “Avicenna,” but in both cases I am not referring to a being by particularity but by way of a category. Alternatively, I can refer to Aristotle by his particular name—that is, I could just call him “Aristotle”—but this would immediately be able to be transformed into a class of Aristotles. I could then refer to Aquinas as “the Aristotelian.” In fact, it is possible to transform any proper name into a common noun, since, to define a being by way of a predicate, even if the predicate is a unique name, will sacrifice its peculiar being to a class of beings that could potentially follow the same pattern.

This is all we are given by way of an introduction. Chapter one begins with how Aquinas thinks we ought to proceed. He speaks in passive periphrastics, of impersonal necessities, of what is to be done, as if the argument had a being of its own. I’ll read the

first two paragraphs in their entirety because I want to make a few crucial changes to the standard translation:

Since *in truth* we ought to acquire knowledge of what is simple from what is composed, and come to what is prior from what is posterior, so that, beginning with what is easier, learning may come to be more suitably (conveniently), one must proceed from the meaning of “being” to that of “essence.”

One must notice, therefore, that “being” (*ens*) by itself is said doubly, as the Philosopher says in the fifth book of the *Metaphysics*. In one way, it is divided into ten *genera*; in another way, it is used to signify the *truth* of propositions. The difference of these is that in the *second* (*secundum*) way everything about which we can form an affirmative proposition can be called a being (*ens*), even though it posits nothing in reality (*re*). It is in this way that privations and negations are called beings; for we say that affirmation *is* opposed to negation, and that blindness *is* in the eye. In the *first* way, however, only what posits something in reality can be called a being. In the *first* way, therefore, blindness and the like are not beings.

So, while being and essence had at first seemed to be two, we now learn that being (*ens*) by itself is double. What is more, *ens* which breaks into the ten *genera* of Aristotle’s categories has as its first category “*ousia*”—that is, Aquinas’s essence. This seems quite complicated. The initial doubleness is the following: there are some beings—such as the truth of propositions—that do not correspond to anything in reality. They tell us that such and such *is* the case but this “*is the case*” doesn’t refer to an actual existence. In the same way, privations and negations—that is, things which are not—can be said to be, even though they must borrow their existence from that of which they are the privation; so, we can speak of blindness as if it *existed* in the eye, not by giving blindness actual existence, but rather by appealing to the existence of the fact that sight is not. This then leads us to attribute a presence to *not-sight*, but it is an elusive existence only gained by way of the truth of a negative proposition.

Now, since Aquinas had begun his first paragraph by telling us what “in truth” we ought to do first, namely, to move from complex to simple, we need to be concerned

about the status of the being of Aquinas' own inquiry. Is it like the being of the truth of a proposition? Also, what can it mean that we move from complex to simple because it's "more suitable"—literally, "more convenient"—for learning? That suggests that the manner in which we learn may be different from the way things are. At the end of this paragraph, Aquinas reminds us twice that the "first" way of being is what posits something in reality. The word for the "second" way, again *secundum*, which can also be translated as "following," had before indicated Aristotle's proposition about the gravity of small errors. The mention of Aristotle's ten *genera* doubles the problem. While these categories tell us the many ways that being is called "being," they do so by giving being "names," and these names are distinct from actual existences. For example, the category of quantity is found in particular beings, but as a form it would be difficult to locate quantity as such without grounding it in a substance. Essence is thus the most complex of all the categories because it is so simple. As a category, it appears to be a follower of being rather than its equal. But as that category which is the principle behind all being, it must be the same as the being of which it is a part. The translation of *ousia* in Greek as either essence or substance reflects this duality.

In paragraph five, Aquinas seems to give essence substance by saying that the name "essence" should be associated with what signifies a real thing. Privations, therefore, lack essence, because they must borrow it from other existences. Still, by the end of chapter one Aquinas has modified his definition even further to say that essence is that which is "signified by the definition." Is this to say that essence is the real thing or that essence is defined by definition—or both, which would mean that essence, insofar as it points to existence, simply is existence? Put differently, does essence exist? If not,

then how is Aquinas able to define the essence of privations by their lack of essence? To add to the difficulty, essence goes by more than one name. In paragraph seven we learn that philosophers sometimes call it “quiddity,” and *the Philosopher*, that is, Aristotle, calls it “what it was to be”; Avicenna calls it “form,” while Boethius refers to it as “nature.” But all indicate that it indicates what is signified by the definition. Through it and in it a real being has existence. But to signify what is signified by a definition must mean essence defines definition. It points to what is pointing. This is the essence of essence, or the being of essence, but it seems to lack the actual being of which it had at first appeared a species. For to be able to define something is not the same as to bring it into being, even if in and through a definition a real thing has existence. This is a huge limit for knowledge, which if it is to know with certainty must speak its definitions with such precision as to close the gap between reality and intellect and between being and essence in order to make them one rather than two. To the degree to which the intellect remains removed, it is able to define reality, but at the price of its incompleteness. But again, what is the status of the intellect in this process? If essence points to what is pointing, what is the status of Aquinas or any Philosopher as the pointer?

Let us look at the problem from another angle. If essence simply were existence, the problem of the deviation of an essence from an existence would be immediately solved. This is the same problem as whether Plato’s forms have an existence independent of the things that through them and in them gain definition. It is as if Plato is the author, while the forms are his characters; but these characters cannot be understood to have lives of their own, at least not without being parasitic on things in reality. Aquinas seconds this and also has his own peculiar modification. There is one

being whose existence is the same as its essence, and that is the “First Being.” While “first” had originally referred to what was first conceived by the intellect, it now refers to a solid foundation for the origin of existence. Presumably, the goal of truth is to get at what is truly first and not just what is first to the mind; but to do this requires a definition that can manifest its existence without recourse to anything outside of it. This would be the First Being, that is, God, but God must therefore necessarily lie outside of the realm of inquiry. As Aquinas progresses in his argument we learn that what is exterior to the proper content of being is called “accident.” Consequently, while it had appeared as if what is first to the intellect is that being is double—for it thinks in terms of predications, which fracture being into “this” and “that”—what is second to the intellect is the realization that the first thing would seem to defy being conceived of as first. God’s presence must appear accidental or second rather than essential and first to the argument. Contrary to how it may appear, this has nothing to do with the existence of God and everything to do with the nature of the Philosopher. The subject of *On Being and Essence* is “The Philosopher,” not understood as Aristotle, but understood as the essence of Aquinas’ very own inquiry.

One last thing: Aquinas tells us that privations, like accidents, borrow their essence from that of which they are the privation. Now, errors appear to fall into this category, too. Do they borrow their essence from truth? Aquinas says that the fact that privations do not have an essence literally, “lies open.” There is something about the blindness of a privation that reveals to us essence. Errors and privations force us to confront the closedness of being retroactively. Identifying an error cannot then reveal the true particularity of the world so much as the nature of our understanding. That is to say,

revelation must always be partial insofar as it has as its predecessor hiddenness. A small error in the beginning is a big one in the end, but perhaps this is because there is no other way of proceeding than by error. Even predication, which appears to reveal to us the identity of reality, forces us to deviate from subject to predicate. Our error, or wandering (*errare*), would be great, only if we were to believe that what we get in a predication is indeed a perfect identity rather than a perfect accident—or perhaps I should call it a coincidence.

To say that a small mistake in the beginning is a big one in the end is to talk quantitatively about more or less privation, as if one understood the measurements of one's own ignorance. But it is really not so clear that some kind of essence isn't guiding the words here. Having defined essence as that which is signified by the definition, it would appear that being must now be subjected to its own act of definition, if it is to be knowable. Essence is one of the *genera* by means of which we put things into diverse *genera* and *species*. It signifies something common to all natures—but it is also one of the natures of being, since being encompasses both being and essence. What is more, essence is in its naming indistinguishable from the being it types. When we think of things, we cannot help but type them in order to get to know them, whether it is by classifying them as Montagues or Capulets, or Philosophers. One can say Romeo is a Montague. And a Montague is a human. And humans are animals. Or one can say this animal is a human. This human is a Montague. This Montague is Romeo. Romeo is six feet tall, and so on. But in each case Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? From the particular to the universal, the universal always becomes a new ground for particularity. And it is the particularity of the thing—the “this”ness that is indicated by

pointing to it and attempting to define it—that follows the “is-ing” in each case. This is what allows one to glue the subject and predicate together. Aquinas gave the predicate the being of the *genera* and the subject the being of actual existence. But there is a third thing, the gluing or “is-ing” of subject and predicate that happens when we say, “this is that” and try to make things one by expressing them as two. We call that trying to understand. But as soon as one gets to “that” from “this” one appears no longer to have “what it *is* to be,” but rather Aristotle’s “what it *was* to be.” The illusion of “is” is of an atemporal identity, which conceals the sequence by which we come to learn it. It is this sequence of learning that Aquinas has been highlighting. It may be convenient, but it is not altogether true.

In chapter two, Aquinas introduces “substances.” “Being,” he tells us, is used absolutely and with priority of substances, and only posteriorly and “in some way” with qualification of accidents. Note the qualification here: “in some way.” Is thinking to be understood as accidental? Unless thinking is entirely substantiated, it must fall into the category of an accident. One can think nothing without qualification. “I think” is the paradigm of a qualifier; its very format of expressing its activity—“I think”—is not so separable from “maybe.” And this is no accident, since in chapter seven Aquinas gives as an example of an accident, “to understand” or *intelligere*.

Essence is in simple substances in a “truer and more noble” way, according to which—or following (*secundum*)—they also have a more noble existence, because they are first, and so, the cause of complex or composed substances. The essence of simple substances, however, are “hidden” from us, so we ought to begin, says Aquinas, with composed substances, so as again to progress in learning more suitably or, again literally,

“more conveniently.” Simple substances *plural* suggests there is more than one—and that seems complex—though what is first—which is here identified as “God”—is that which causes everything else or that to which everything else is *secundum*, following. While it may be that being follows God, Aquinas follows Aristotle. So again, how are we to distinguish between that which is first conceived by the intellect and that which actually is first—the order of knowing versus the order of being? Aquinas makes it look like this is only a matter of convenience. But notice that “second,” *secundum*, suddenly refers to actual causation rather than an unrelated sequence. Before we were simply following the Philosopher, following along. But now the truer and nobler are said to be that following which other things are what they are. It is not so clear that to follow being forward into reality is not to move backward into thought.

In composed substances, we are told that there is form and matter. In man, this is soul and body. This means that God cannot have soul or body. As simple, God must be in principle unknowable and without definition, since Aquinas specifies that it is through essence that a real thing is knowable and assigned to a species or genus. Matter by itself is neither a principle (*principium*) of knowledge nor is it that by which (literally, following which, *secundum*) something is assigned to a genus or to a species; rather a thing is so assigned *secundum*, following, its being something actual. Matter is neither a *principium* nor a *secundum*—it neither leads nor follows. By itself it is too amorphous—though one has to wonder what matter without form would look like, since even an amorphous amoeba seems to have shape. The substances that have the least matter also seem to be the most fantastical—in chapter five we are told that these are phoenixes, “intelligences” or “angels” (which are cognate to the word Aquinas uses for the accident

of the “understanding”), and, surprisingly, men. For these three substances, existence is something other than form. That is to say, it is not enough that the form exist for the being to exist. The gravity of the claim is clear: it implies that the soul by itself is not enough to guarantee man existence. His existence would be something accidental to his form, for nothing in his form would require that he be any more than a phoenix can be. The next question, then, is what the relation is between essence and form.

We are told that essence is not the same as form—despite the fact that in paragraph nine of chapter one we found that Avicenna refers to it as “form.” This is a mistake that we only learn retroactively on his behalf. But it is difficult to retract the initial impression. In paragraph sixteen, the reason why essence cannot lie in form is that essence is what is signified by the definition; as such, it is not identical to the definition. If it were, there would then be no distinction between mathematical and natural substances. But natural substances have both matter and form. And matter is not added to substance, as if it were outside of it or accidental to it. Apparently, not all composed substances are to be thought of as accidental coincidences of form and matter. What distinguishes an accident is its lack of a perfect essence. Accidents do not follow the expected course, and so always look a little funny, requiring qualifications in order to stay in line and fit the standard. Essence, however, to be essence, must entail a perfect match; it must *define* the thing so much that the definition becomes difficult to wrest from its actual existence—in fact, going so far as to threaten to turn it into a figment of one’s imagination. If we could cut free our imaginative flights of fancy from our real world encounters, it would be much easier to make not only the distinction between the true and the real, but also between form and matter. However, to the degree to which we

cannot separate form from matter, our experience is laced with likenesses. We associate reality with “stuff.” And we categorize “stuff” by creating groups of like objects. This is an idealization that allows us to define things; and definitions always come with the gloss of identity. That gloss, for which the being of our own knowing seems to be responsible, conceals the degree to which the definition of a thing does not completely hit the identity of the thing—that is, the degree to which the essence cannot be a full-blown essence, but is somehow always imperfect.

For this reason, it is worth noting that Aquinas has been proceeding by telling us what essence *cannot* be. Rather than say what it *is*, we identify it by its difference from what it is *not*. This seems to be easier and more convenient than saying what it actually is. So then, what is the relation between the privation of knowledge and knowledge? Does privation accidentally or essentially inform us of that of which it is the privation? Everything depends upon this, because if privations are not a straight absence, but an incidental statement of absence, it will not be so clear that they teach us the whole truth. They would put us in touch with the essence of existence but not with any particular existence. Existence entails particularity, which is why the being whose existence is his essence defies all definition. What is more, since understanding *is* one of Aquinas’s examples of an accident, we would have no way of predicting when it will grace us with its presence.

About the relation between essence and accident, Aquinas says this:

Further, neither can it be said that essence signifies some relation between matter and form or something added to them, because this would of necessity be an accident or something extraneous to the real thing, and the real thing would not be known through it, all of which things convene (*conveniunt*) for essence.

“Convene” seems a coincidental choice of word. It literally is *conveniunt*, and is cognate to the word Aquinas had used twice to speak of what was convenient for learning. The word is here being used to refer directly to what traits assemble for an essence; although one would think an essence by itself would treat every trait only as a member of its general assembly, perhaps that is why the traits suggested here are absences of traits. Aquinas goes on to say that it is through form that matter becomes actual and individual. That is, matter supervenes to make “such” an actual existence rather than to make an actual existence simply, as he says, “accidents also make/do,” as “whiteness” makes something actually white.” “As” is referring to the Latin word *ut*, which Aquinas is using to refer first to the similarity of accident to matter, and then to one example of how accidents collide, namely how form and matter lead to an actual individual by way of whiteness making something actually white. But isn’t this just what all examples do—that is, aren’t they coincidences of form and matter that actualize our knowledge? As the example of whiteness actualizes our knowledge not of a white thing but of the supervening of matter, examples seem to be accidental existences that masquerade as essences. They are coincidentally available at just the time we need them, and they seem to make our knowledge of essences somehow such as it is. But they themselves are always radically particular, and so, radically gloss or skew the essence in question. They are exceptional instances, which are thus the greatest exceptions to a rule that can never fully include them. Think, for example, of the Standard Poodle. This is not necessarily an Exceptional or Exemplary Poodle—*that* poodle would be one that really sets the standard—that defines it by defying it. Aquinas follows his own example with a series of exemplary individuals who are in agreement with him: Boethius,

Avicenna and the Commentator (otherwise known as Averroes). But the Philosopher, Aristotle, is left out. In paragraph twenty, we are told that even “reason” is in agreement with this. Either Aristotle is utterly unreasonable or Aristotle is Reason incarnate, The Philosopher, understood as the standard. What is being agreed to by Reason is that where existence must be a composite, essence must reflect the composite, since it is that *secundum* (following or according to which) the real thing is said to be. Aquinas has now dropped the word “signifies” and replaced it with *secundum*. He ends by saying that the form alone is in its own way the cause of such existence. But what is the form? Is *secundum* the form? It seems to refer to a second skin that causes the *suchness* of an existence—that is, existence as a type. But isn’t this essence? Regardless, form is not the same as that which makes an essence individuated; matter, according to Aquinas, is the “principle (*principium*) of individuation.” By principle of individuation we are not referring to matter qua matter but to what Aquinas calls “designated matter,” not matter as such but such matter. Designated matter is matter with determined dimensions. Such matter is,

...Not placed in the definition of man as man, but it would be placed in the definition of Socrates, if Socrates had a definition. Rather it is non-designated matter that is placed in the definition of man; for this bone and this flesh are not placed in the definition of man but bone and flesh absolutely.

After Aquinas casts doubt on whether a being such as Socrates has a definition at all, which would render him as inscrutable as God, Aquinas makes what looks like a reference to Plato’s *Phaedo*. Perhaps if we were to look for Socrates’ definition, we would need to look there. In the passage referred to, Socrates tells his friends that it would be a mistake to follow Anaxagoras, who might attribute the cause of his being in jail to his bones and sinews being contracted and relaxed in his flesh rather than to give

the real cause, namely that the Athenians deemed it best to condemn him and that he decided it was best to undergo the penalty. By attributing causation to his bone and flesh Anaxagoras—who at first had appeared to champion the causation of mind—would have confused the form of the intellect with the matter of the body. What Aquinas is here calling “designated matter”—that is, “this” bone and “this” flesh—is subject to the same illusion. He is not identifying matter as the principle of individuation but instantiated or designated matter, otherwise known as *informed* matter, otherwise indistinguishable from form.

This is made all the more potent at the beginning of chapter four, which deals exclusively with Socrates as a composed essence. Yet shouldn't we already doubt, since Aquinas himself doubted, that Socrates has a definition? Wouldn't it be a fool's errand to define the Philosopher? He seems to defy being conceived. In paragraph fifty-two, Aquinas denies that forms such as genus or species belong to a real thing outside of a singular thing, separate from things like Socrates. In paragraph fifty-three he says that,

The notion of the genus or of the species belongs to an essence, according as (*secundum*) it is signified as a whole, *as* by the name “man” or “animal,” *as* it contains implicitly and indistinctly everything that is in the individual.

He then states that nature or essence as signified as a whole can be considered in two ways. This doubleness that allows one to treat the whole partially seems to be a reduplication of the original doubleness of being and essence.

Aquinas here gives another example, but unlike every other example he has so far given in this text, he uses the Latin phrase *verbi gratia* to introduce it. This literally means “by the favor/grace of a word.” So, he says, “by the favor of a word (*verbi gratia*) to man as man belong rational and animal and whatever else falls (*cadunt*) in his

definition.” Whatever else is attributed to man is outside of the content of man as such, that is, outside of what Aquinas calls “humanity”; humanity is “manness” and the sorts of things that are not part of it are white or black or anything of this sort. Aquinas seems to be speaking of essential versus incidental attributes—and yet, that which “falls into” the definition, “*in cadunt*,” looks suspiciously like an uncompounded form of the word *accident*. Incidentally, this is “thanks to word” or speech, which is essential to knowing, and provides knowing with substance by way of examples. It would surely be no small error to read examples or accidents as if they signified the whole of an essence, for that seems to be the way Aquinas’s own argument proceeds. He tells us,

Whence if one should ask whether the nature so considered can be said to be one or many, neither should be allowed.... For if plurality were of its content, it could never be one, as it is in Socrates. Similarly, if oneness were of its content, then the nature of Socrates and Plato would be one and the same, and it could not be plurified into many individuals.

Aquinas here drops essence and speaks only of nature. Man as man may be fractured into Socrates or plurified into Socrates and Plato. But it is worth wondering what exactly the relationship is between Socrates and Plato. Is it species and genus (genus and species?), teacher and disciple, character and author—or are they both “The Philosopher”? Surely insofar as Socrates is a Platonic character, he *is* one and the same as Plato. Author and character would be the same if what makes something what it is were the same as what it is—that is, if the cause were the same as its many instantiations, whatever Platonic character one is invoking. If Socrates is a Platonic accident, he will be distinct from Plato. While if he is essential to Plato, it will be difficult to separate the two. Aquinas goes on to say that what takes on accidental properties can be used of a universal (one can say that man is white because Socrates is

white), but only insofar as man includes “a man,” which it does, thanks to Latin, since there are no definite articles in Latin, and so nothing to distinguish “*the* man” from “a particular man.” We seem to be encountering being as consistently eccentric to itself; where it follows even its own principle, its leadership is immediately transformed into one of many examples. Accidents, on the one hand, steer us away from essence, and, on the other hand, substantiate the being of our inquiry by way of examples.

It is critical that within the realm of accidents are included “errors” of the understanding; the concern from the beginning has been to prevent our errors from becoming tragic. In paragraph seventy-seven, Aquinas tells us this about knowledge of what something is: knowledge of, for example, man or phoenix need not require the thing’s existence. In this respect, all objects of knowledge are equal, and men are equivalent to mythical birds. Existence is other than form; that is to say, when knowledge knows, it is not necessarily in contact with existence. It casts the net of form around an object, and as such touches only the glue of its own grasp, even if it is gluing its grasp around an actual actuality. As a result, it looks as if existence will be outside of the realm of knowing, and so, accidental, or perhaps it is better again to say coincidental, to it. Existence would be a possibility suggested by an essence—an informed guess (a guessence?)—but not a necessity. Still, grasping makes no sense, unless there is some “otherness” present. It is the otherness of the matter that requires that when one knows the essence, backhandedly, one also knows something about existence, even if all one knows is that the existence is “other.”

The otherness of existence is very important to Aquinas’ account of the infinite regress of causation, in which one thing can be caused only by something extrinsic to, or

other than, it. This applies to everything other than the First Being, which is the First Cause, and also, in the very last paragraph of this book, referred to as the First Principle (*principium*). Aquinas has been using *principium* throughout to refer to both beginnings and principles. The former appears to set things in motion, while the latter is a continual standard of how things move. The First Principle, akin to saying the First First, is the only thing whose existence is identical to its essence. But Aquinas couches it in hypothetical language, saying that “if perhaps there is such a thing,” and “if we posit it,” *then* that is the only thing that could be one. Moreover, he warns us that if all causation were extrinsic, this would lead to an infinite regress, *unless* there is a First Cause. So, we postulate it because we must stop infinite regress. Anything other than this hypothetical First Cause must entail form plus existence, which immediately qualifies it as a candidate for further breakdown. Its unity will be suspect, and its source something that cannot be found in it. The question for the human soul will be how dependent its essence is on existence. If its essence is dependent on existence to subsist in reality, then death—the breakdown of body and soul into separate components—will also be the breakdown of soul. Aquinas has suggested the only thing that would be unbreakable is existence alone. This is a thing about which one could never inquire, since to predicate it means to dissect it and it must be indivisible. It does not appear that such an indivisible thing could think. But, I am wondering, then—admittedly it is perverse—if the really unbreakable thing is thinking itself. For it is thinking that breaks everything else apart in the interest of putting it together; and in every breakdown it is forced to confront itself as the yet-to-be-cracked particular being that stands in the way of the completion of its inquiry.

Let's see what Aquinas says about causation. Where form is other than existence, existence is not caused by form. Ignoring the fact that form here must mean "essence" (unlike it did previously), we are forced to wonder where exactly existence comes from? The answer will be that it must come from the outside, but this seems to mean it is an accident, unless by a complete coincidence it is the First Being. Aquinas gives two possible ways in which a thing can be caused. Either it is caused by principles (*principia*) in its own nature, as the ability to laugh in man or it is caused by an extrinsic principle as light in the air by the sun. Both of these examples return in Aquinas's final chapters. The ability to laugh in man recurs in paragraph one hundred and six, where Aquinas cites it as an example of an accident following on form that nonetheless leads to the proper attribute of a species. He says, "...Man's ability to laugh follows on the form because laughter takes place by reason of the fact that a man's soul has grasped something." Insofar as man grasps, or perhaps understands, he laughs. He laughs because he is rational; he laughs when he has grasped something—but grasping or understanding was itself an example in paragraph one hundred and four of an accident that follows upon form. Is this a happy accident? The accidental character of understanding (*intelligere*) causes an appropriate or proper laugh. Is to find things funny part of the essence of to understand them? Wouldn't this be funny?

Funny has two senses in English. It can mean comic or strange. In meaning strange, it dislocates us from ourselves and makes us voyeurs on our surroundings. When we laugh very heartily and say we are "dying," there is some truth, since laughter would threaten to remove us from the world so entirely as to kill us. This is also the threat of the understanding, which requires for its own stability the death of the knower.

The perfection of knowledge is therefore like a bad joke, since man's ability to know is tied to his ability to laugh himself into cold remove to the point where his levity would put him in a grave. We wonder at the world only when we wander or *err*, *errare*, away from it. But, why should our ability to laugh be an example of something caused by the principles of its own nature? Aquinas appears to immediately rule out that this means one makes oneself laugh, and so, brings one's own laughter into existence. This would require that one be both the same and other than oneself, which is a contradiction.

Aquinas maintains that all causation must be then extrinsic, like the light that is diffused or concentrated by the sun. This example also recurs at the very end of the book in paragraph one hundred and twelve, but without reference to the sun. The sun is an interesting absence, since it is an important source of knowledge in Plato's *Republic*, and seems in Aquinas to be connected to God. Aquinas tells us that,

...Because the proper principles (*principia*) of accidents are not always manifest, we sometimes take the difference of accidents from their effects; as when concentrating and diffusing are called the differences of color. These effects are caused by the abundance and the scarcity of light, which cause the diverse species of color.

The concentrating or diffusing of light causes differences of color; that is, it causes different things to come to light. But concentrating and diffusing are in the same motion. To focus in on a particular color, one must make the rest of reality incidental; and to diffuse color would mean to broaden one's focus to a larger range. The first line of this book had indicated the relation of the abundance and scarcity of error. Are concentrating and diffusing, being and accident? Perhaps we have been talking about the same color. The understanding seems to bring being to *light* by means of focusing on a substance, but only with a simultaneous diffusing of this substance from other

substances. Hypotheses and examples are puzzles in which one finds oneself concentrating and diffusing one's understanding simultaneously.

At the far end of the spectrum, substance is concentrated into the hypothesis of the First Being, which would be existence alone. This would stop the infinite regress. But the eccentricity of the infinite regress is like a series of chuckles that lead one back to an original puzzle, the simplicity of which teases us with its inscrutability. This funniness or strangeness seems to be inherent in both reality and understanding when they come together to form a puzzle. The delight of puzzling—what Aristotle might call “wonder”—seems to often elicit a smile or a laugh. This is a feeling of which we would be deprived, were it the case that being were simply simple. To laugh involves experiencing oneself as both inside a chain of events and outside of it. Think about insight; insight entails the happy surprise of discovering something that comes at us from the outside yet is felt to be perfectly in tandem with our inside. We unexpectedly experience the coincidence of being both the cause of the origination of our knowledge and the principle through which it is originating. But this is just the beginning of philosophy; philosophy begins in wonder. It provides the ground to discover one's being by encountering it as funny or strange to one's self. The first being seems to be an eccentric version of the second, and this is a meeting of like minds by way of happy accident.

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