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## What Is Most and Least Relevant in the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Today?

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**M**Y PURPOSE in this paper, written for a Symposium at Fordham University commemorating the 700th anniversary of the death of St. Thomas Aquinas (1274), is to attempt a critical sifting and reassessment of the rich metaphysical heritage handed down by St. Thomas in order to discern what is most relevant and fruitful in it for the philosophical thinking of our own day. Such an attempt also implies, inevitably, a negative discernment as to what is less relevant, less fruitful, less accessible for contemporary thought—if indeed still valid at all—in this heritage. Both facets of this enterprise are bound to be controversial, but more especially the second.

Yet I think the risk must be taken. The substantive content of St. Thomas' metaphysical vision is extremely rich and profound, as I think anyone will agree who has been willing to take the time and effort to make himself at home in it. But it also seems to me a fact, as a teacher, that there is a serious block to the accessibility of this content for the ordinary educated contemporary thinker, even Christian, who has not submitted himself to long scholarly specialization in the texts of St. Thomas, the history of medieval philosophy, and the subsequent history of Thomism. Thus students ordinarily find St. Thomas one of the most difficult of Western philosophers to approach directly on their own in his own texts, without the help of very ample introduction and detailed commentary.

This arises from the fact that St. Thomas' thought comes to us encased in a whole tightly knit technical framework of Aristotelian logic, terminology, methodology of scientific knowledge (in the Aristotelian meaning of science), and scientific world view (philosophy of nature), which was once the common patrimony of the thinking West but is now so difficult of access without a long apprenticeship that few contemporary thinkers are willing to invest the time and effort required, especially since the limitations of the technical framework are now more evident. What is needed, therefore, if the substance of the thought of St. Thomas is to enter in any significant way into the bloodstream of contemporary philosophical

reflection, is an operation of "detechnicalizing" this thought, i.e., of lifting it out of its forbidding technical armature to put it in simpler terms more directly accessible to the ordinary lived experience and language of reflective Western man today. I am well aware that the profound rethinking and retranslating necessary to carry out this detechnicalizing successfully is itself quite a difficult and tricky business, and one that might be rejected in principle by those who believe on philosophical grounds that content and a given technical methodology and language are in principle interdependent and inseparable. Still, I think the risk is worth taking, and that something like it has been going on in fact with most of the great thinkers of the past whose thought have become part of our intellectual heritage, like Plato, Aristotle himself, Kant, etc. I do not mean by this, however, that the thought of St. Thomas can ever become easy to assimilate without a profound effort of rigorous and systematic thinking, or that his *general* methodology of proceeding from observable experience to hidden explanatory principles and causes, by means of first principles, should be laid aside—this is in fact one of its greatest strengths. I mean rather that the technical apparatus required should be revised or built up anew in simpler and more streamlined terms, as arising more naturally out of our own contemporary experience and language. For all conceptual frameworks must be embedded in some concrete cultural form of life, and such forms of life are bound to change significantly over a period of centuries. The present essay is a modest attempt to assist along this difficult but, I think, highly fruitful enterprise, from the viewpoint of one who has meditated on both Thomistic and modern thought for some thirty-five years.

The main themes I would like to single out as the most relevant and fruitful for nourishing our philosophical thought today are the following:

1) The intrinsic correlativity, or connaturality, that exists between the human spirit, in its two main facets of intellect and will, on the one hand, and the realm of being, on the other. This correlativity is summed up in the two first principles of the *intelligibility of being* and the *goodness of being*, and constitutes a basic matrix of harmony within which the destinies both of man and of the material universe take on their full meaning.

2) The *existential meaning of being* as focused on actual existence conceived as an inner act and the immanent source of all perfection in a being, an act diversified in different beings according to diverse modes of essence. Stemming from this is the close relation between *being and action*, where action is seen as flowing from real being as its natural self-manifestation and therefore becomes the criterion for distinguishing real from merely mental or merely possible being.

3) The explanation of the *one and the many* within being which is solidary with the above conception of being, namely, the theory that all finite beings participate in the act of existence as central unifying perfection of the universe, through composition with diverse limiting modes of es-

sence, all deriving from a single ultimate Source, which is pure unlimited plenitude of existence.

4) The notion of *person as the highest mode of being*, being become *self-possessing* through self-consciousness and self-determination (freedom).

5) The *dynamic notion of substance* as unifying center of attributes and operations and active principle of self-identity through change.

6) The notion of *substantial potency* as the condition of possibility of the intrinsic unity of complex wholes in nature.

7) The theory of *efficient and final causality*, which binds together the universe into a system of interacting, goal-oriented agents, giving to and receiving from each other by means of the central bond of all communication, which is action.

8) The *relation to God the ultimate Source and Goal of all being*, the keystone which holds the whole universe together in a unity of being, intelligibility, and goodness.

In the brief time at my disposal I shall obviously not be able to develop all these themes in detail. I shall be content to call your attention to their centrality and point out some key implications.

#### I. THE NATURAL CORRELATIVITY OF SPIRIT AND BEING

At the root of the whole Thomistic vision of the universe and its systematic articulation are the dual principles of the intelligibility and the goodness of being. This means that spirit—all spirit, and therefore human spirit too in its modest analogous way—is intrinsically oriented by its very nature toward being, i.e. has a natural aptitude and drive to know all being (being as intelligible) and to be fulfilled by it (being as good). It means also that the reciprocal is true: being itself has a natural intrinsic aptitude to unveil itself to mind, to be brought into the light of consciousness, and to fulfill the drive of the spirit towards its self-actualization or self-perfection. This double correlative aptitude, this connaturality between spirit and being, is the fundamental matrix of harmony which makes possible the unfolding of the entire *intellectual life* of man in all its forms, including the whole enterprise of science, and the entire *practical and moral life* of man in his search for happiness. "Being is intelligible" is the first dynamic principle of the intellectual life, and "The good is to be done and evil avoided" is the first principle of the moral life, presupposing of course as its implicit foundation that being itself is good. In what follows we shall focus on the first principle of the intellectual life, the intelligibility of being, as more immediately germane to our purposes of the construction of a metaphysics.

There is no doubt that St. Thomas holds this basic principle, and that it is the secret dynamo energizing the whole movement of his thought to work out a systematic explanation of the world, as the transcendental Thomist movement has so convincingly shown. And in this he shows a

profound kinship with St. Bonaventure and most if not all other medieval thinkers. But there are two main difficulties which modern thinkers run into in trying to get at and critically evaluate this doctrine when they approach him through his own texts. The first is that he rarely lays out the whole doctrine and its implications formally in a single synthetic presentation for its own sake. Rather he presupposes it as a common background already known and lived out of, constantly using it as a supporting principle, which he formulates often enough but usually piecemeal in the form of technical expressions such as "Being is the formal object of the intellect," "Truth (i.e. ontological truth, or intrinsic intelligibility) is a transcendental property of all being," etc., with an occasional synthetic sweep such as in the splendid article 1 of the *De Veritate*. What is needed for our day is to lay out this whole underlying doctrine clearly and as a unit, and in more general and easily accessible terms than the technical vocabulary of St. Thomas, which does not always allow the vast scope of the doctrine and its dynamic view of intelligence to shine through.

But once one attempts to do this from a strictly philosophical point of view a second difficulty arises. This is a methodological problem which St. Thomas himself, writing as a theologian *using* an already presupposed underlying metaphysics, did not have to face, and in any case did not face explicitly, although he gives many indirect hints. How does one establish *philosophically* such a radical *a priori* as the correlative aptitude of mind for being and being for mind, which is the presupposed condition for the whole quest of philosophy itself, and indeed for any meaningful use of intelligence, whether theoretical or practical? St. Thomas himself, writing as theologian able to draw upon all of philosophy as he wishes, grounds it in the doctrine of the creation of all things by God as *Logos*: all being is intelligible because the Source of all being is identically both the fullness of being and the fullness of intelligence, and all other beings proceed from Him by an act of free creative intelligence and love. Thus there is nothing in their being which has not been first thought through and through by this divine intelligence, making them apt to be rethought, however imperfectly, by all finite intelligences. This doctrine is available to St. Thomas both from Christian Revelation and as the final conclusion of metaphysics. But neither source is available to the philosopher to help him validate this principle as the *a priori* condition of all philosophy at the *beginning* of his quest. And formal proof is obviously out of the question, since all proof presupposes it.

The only way left is the way that St. Thomas himself seems at times to be practicing but never formally expounds, that is, the way of unveiling, uncovering, what is already present or accepted as existentially lived, as a "form of life," the commitment to which is an indispensable condition for rational human living and the denial of which involves one in implicit or "lived" contradictions. This method was occasionally practiced by the an-

cients and medievals, in particular by Aristotle and St. Thomas in defending the principle of contradiction against would-be deniers. But the generalization of this method, especially the linking it up with the notion of a form of life, has come into clearer focus in our own day, through the work of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and other existential phenomenologists, and in particular by the school of Transcendental Thomism, initiated by Joseph Maréchal in the 1930's and followed up by Rahner, Coreth, Lonergan, Donceel, etc. To sum up, the strength of St. Thomas' thought here lies in the recognition and content of the principles of the intelligibility and goodness of being as the dynamic lived *a priori* of the human mind and will; its weakness lies in his own mode of presentation and justification.

## II. THE EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS OF BEING

Under this heading I would like to single out two main points that render St. Thomas' conception of being distinctive in the history of metaphysics and also highly relevant today. The first is its uncompromisingly *existential character*, which has given rise to the term "Thomistic existentialism," coined in the 1940's when Gilson and others first brought into the open this long-neglected aspect.<sup>1</sup> The second is the close link of *action* with being, so that action (in the widest sense) flows naturally from any actually existing being—and only from such—and hence serves as the necessary and sufficient criterion for distinguishing real from merely mental or possible being.

By the existential analysis of being I mean St. Thomas' interpretation of the immanent constitutive structure of real being as a synthesis of essence as determining mode and the act of existence (*esse*, the "to-be" of a thing) as the central core of perfection in every being and the bond of similarity that links it in community with every other being in the universe. The stress on the act of existence as ultimate immanent or intrinsic principle of perfection in every being, including God, is what is distinctively new in the doctrine: "Ens dicitur ab actu essendi" (being receives its name and meaning from the act of existence).

Other notions of being in the history of metaphysics have tended—and outside of the existentialists still tend—to analyze the positive perfection of being and its intelligibility almost exclusively in terms of form and essence, the *what-it-is* of a being. The aspect of actual existence, or actual *presence*, of things, if given any explicit attention at all, is treated as a kind of indispensable but intellectually opaque fact impervious to any further intrinsic analysis. If any further analysis is offered, it usually

<sup>1</sup> E. Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), Chap. I: Existence and Reality. For a history of the rise of this existential Thomism, cf. Sr. Helen James John, "The Emergence of the Act of Existing in Recent Thomism," *Internat. Phil. Quarterly*, 2 (1962), 600-25.

proceeds from what I might call an extrinsic point of view, i.e., either (1) from the point of view of the relation of a being to a knower who affirms the *fact* of its existence as "outside" or independent of the knower's own knowledge of it; or (2) from the point of view of the relation of a being to its *cause*: something is real if it exists as a fact "outside of its cause(s)," or, in the case of God, if it exists "of its own essence, as uncaused," to cite traditional scholastic expressions. I might add that it is a source of endless wonder to me to observe how this apparently obvious dimension of actual presence has been either ignored, or acknowledged and then brushed under the rug without further development, or reduced to essence, intelligibility, or some other attribute, by most of the great metaphysicians in the history of thought. Even Aristotle, committed realist that he is, after clearly affirming that the prime analogate of being is singular, existing, active substance, proceeds to carry on his entire explicit analysis of being in terms of substance, form and matter, change, and efficient and final causes. Existence plays no further technical role in his metaphysics.

The two main advantages of St. Thomas' existential interpretation of being which seem to me most significant for us today are the following: 1) In penetrating beyond the mere *fact* of existence of some being, affirmed by a knower distinct from it, to the inner *act* of existence *within* the being itself, which objectively grounds the true affirmation about it, he has provided a far more intrinsic analysis than hitherto available in more essence-oriented, essence-dominated, conceptions. For the first time the fact of actual existence as immanent act and perfection is formally and technically integrated into the metaphysical analysis of the constitutive structure of being, being thereby "unveiled" as constituting the very root of all the ontological perfection within a being, including of its intelligibility, which now appears as the very light of existence itself shining through the manifold prism of essences recognized as diverse modes of active presence.

Such a conception of being is required, it seems to me, if we are to do justice to the legitimate insights and exigencies of the personalist and existentialist movements, which quite justly insist on the unique concrete individuality of every real thing—especially persons—as actually existing centers of action and irreducible to anything universal or abstract or merely intelligible. At the same time, since this conception of being includes form and essence as interior modes determining the act of existence, hence as also intrinsically constitutive of the real, it avoids the sharp dichotomy between essence as principle of intelligibility, on the one hand, and existence as irrational brute fact, on the other, which we find in so many forms of existentialism. In a word, what St. Thomas has succeeded in doing is to shift the center of gravity in the constitution of the real from form and essence to actual existence as inner act, without thereby letting go of the intelligibility of being; for existence itself, as the direct participation in God's own essential perfection, has now become the

root of intelligibility itself, mediated to our finite intelligences through the spectrum of finite forms.

2) In focusing on the supra-formal, supra-essential factor of the act of existence as the root of all perfection and the all-pervasive bond of unity in all beings, St. Thomas has also made it possible to include the entire range of reality—from the most evanescent subatomic particle, that burns out its being in a micro-second flash, to the infinite and eternal plenitude of God himself—under one completely positive viewpoint, yet without being forced to constrict the mystery of the divine Infinity into our own limited categorical concepts. For the notion of God as pure Subsistent Act of Existence, transcending all limited forms and essential modes, is by that very fact clearly *understood* as transcending all our limited categories which allow of direct conceptual representation yet at the same time without breaking the radical bond of similarity between Himself and all finite beings as diverse participations in the one all-pervasive perfection of existence.

In a word, this allows God to remain at once radical Mystery but yet not "Wholly Other," as the various traditions of the so-called "negative theology" have been forced to characterize Him. Without in any way denying the rich and fruitful insights which these various negative theology traditions have contributed to metaphysical and religious thought, I still submit that one of the main reasons why they have felt it necessary to characterize the Transcendent as "beyond being," and hence in primarily negative terms, is their insufficiently critical presupposition—quite explicit in the West, more vague and implicit, though still at work, in the East—that all positive attributes, including being itself, must be understood as somehow implying determinate essence or form. Once this position is adopted, it follows inevitably that Ultimate Reality, as Infinite, can only be characterized negatively, as "Beyond Being," or "Non-Being," or the "Void," or, perhaps even more consistently, simply pointed to, as the Buddhists do, in utter silence, as the Goal of all longing. St. Thomas, with his notion of *esse* as a supra-formal, yet, positive, perfection, is not caught in quite the same bind, though he too still stresses strongly the mystery aspect of this positive knowledge of God and the need for an accompanying negative corrective.

#### *The Self-Revelation of Being through Action*

The second main point I would like to single out in St. Thomas' existential conception of being is the close connection between being and action, so that action becomes the natural self-manifestation of a being, both of its presence (its act of existence) and its modes of presence (its essence). As he never tires of repeating, *agere sequitur esse* (to act follows upon, or naturally flows out of, to be). Here real being is conceived as a dynamic inner act of presence, which has a natural aptitude and tendency to flow

over into activity proportionate to and expressive of its nature. Every act, he says, is naturally communicative of its own perfection, according to the degree in which it is in act.<sup>2</sup> Since *esse* is the supreme act, the higher and more intense is the act of existence in a being, the more it is connatural to it to pour out and express its perfection more richly and generously, both within itself and to others.

What St. Thomas has actually done here, as Fr. Geiger has very perceptively pointed out, is to incorporate into his metaphysics of being as act the basic thrust of the whole Neoplatonic tradition of the self-diffusiveness of the Good: *bonum est diffusivum sui*. But he has reversed the order of priority of the terms. For Neoplatonism the Good is primary and being is a derivative of the Good. For St. Thomas goodness cannot be absolutely primary, since it implicitly presupposes the actual existence of what is good. Goodness is an intrinsically relative term—goodness of \_\_\_\_\_ and for \_\_\_\_\_, hence it must be grounded in the most radically immanent, ultimate act that grounds all else, the act of existence itself. But the same inner dynamism of self-diffusiveness, self-communication, self-sharing, is incorporated here, not as a strict law of metaphysical necessity but as a connatural aptitude under the control of freedom, if the being in question is a person.

Let me point out two highly significant consequences which flow from this conception of being as naturally self-communicative through action. First, we now have a decisive criterion, both necessary and sufficient, for recognizing real being and distinguishing it from merely mental, possible, or ideal being. If a being acts in some way (interpreting activity in the widest possible sense, as including both immanent and transient activity), this is a sure sign, the primary sign, of its real presence as an actual existent, both to itself and to others. If it does not act at all, there is no way of knowing that it is actually present at all rather than a mere content of thought, no sufficient grounds for affirming it as real. Even the non-active elements in a being can be known only as inferred from the kind of nature it has, which in turn is known only as manifested by its characteristic activities. Something that would be totally non-active in any way at all would be totally unmanifested, either to itself or to others, and the totally unmanifested, as such, cannot be affirmed at all, would remain totally unknowable, would make no difference to itself or anything else whether it were present or not, and hence would be literally indistinguishable from nothing.

Action thus reveals itself as the primary communication system of the universe: all communication of any kind is linked to action, and all action, since it flows from and is also manifestive of the particular being from which it emanates, is intrinsically and necessarily a communication, a reve-

<sup>2</sup> *De Potentia*, q. 2, art. 1: "It is in the nature of every act to communicate itself insofar as it is possible." Cf. *Summa contra Gentes*, II, 6-8, and the whole rich study on this point, J. de Finance, *Etre et agir* (2nd ed.; Rome: Gregorian Univ. Press, 1961).

lation, of this being. All action is communication, and all communication is action. This opens up a magnificent metaphysical vision of the universe as a vast communication system, linked together precisely as a universe by the universal dynamic bond of action and interaction, through which the inner act of presence of one being is made known, or makes a difference, to another while leaving intact the distinct identity of each.

Let me remind you that all through the history of metaphysics this has been a central and thorny problem, even when a thinker does not formally and explicitly come to grips with it: what does a philosopher take as his criterion for recognizing the *authentically real*? I know of few more challenging and illuminating questions to put to a metaphysician, for his answer will shed a unique light on the sources of inspiration and the general lines of orientation of this whole system. Thus the whole Platonic tradition has been plagued with ambiguity, to my mind, once Plato made the fateful step of choosing self-identity and immutability as the criterion of the really real. Since ideas qualify eminently over agents as the really real in terms of this criterion, the whole Platonic tradition, including Christian Platonists, has always had trouble distinguishing the logical and conceptual from the ontological order. And it becomes quite a dilemma for a Christian Platonist to hold, on the one hand, that the divine ideas are real, and many, and in the mind of God, and yet on the other hand that the ontological being of God is absolutely simple (aside from the unique multiplicity of the divine Persons). Whitehead, on the other hand, is here very close to Aristotle and St. Thomas in his stress on activity as the mark of any actual entity and in his consequent refusal to classify his eternal objects as real in themselves, although he differs from them in not identifying actual entity with perduring *substance*.

The second significant consequence of this linking of action with being as its natural manifestation is that it provides the basic grounding for a realistic epistemology, especially to the key question: "How can I know the existence and nature of anything real outside my own mind, as it is in itself?" The only possible link between two distinct beings across which knowledge can pass is that of action. One being can know another only if it either actively produces the other or consciously receives the action of the other. Indeed, if pushed hard, we might sum up the whole of Thomistic epistemology as resting on this one principle: "All knowledge of real being is an interpretation of action," whether through direct awareness of a being's action on the knower, or through inference to causes through observed effects.

It is the failure to take into account this basic communication channel of action that has caused so much of the trouble which modern epistemologists since Descartes have had in holding onto, let alone justifying, the ability of the human mind truly to know, albeit imperfectly, the real world outside of its own thoughts. Once we take human knowledge to be a set of images and representations already given within the mind like a

collection of paintings hanging on the walls of a museum, and try to reconstruct their relation to the real merely in terms of their immanent content within the mind, the problem has become insoluble. It is only by being aware of other beings as actively expressing themselves within us and to us as knowers, by acting on us in determinate ways varying characteristically with each agent, that we can discern not only the presence but the natures of the real beings that surround us. No single action, it is true, at least of a finite being, can reveal exhaustively its whole essence or nature, and in addition each action, with its immanent message-content, can be received in the knower only according to the mode and capacity of the receiver. Hence the necessarily limited, incomplete, and perspectival character of all human knowing. But still, no matter how much an action-message is coded and recoded within the receiving system, there is no action which of its very nature as action is not in some way genuinely communicative of both the existence and nature of the source from which it flows.<sup>2a</sup> Non-communicative action is a contradiction in terms.

Hence we genuinely know the other in its own reality, as the proportioned source from which flows this particular, determinately structured self-expression that is its action. What more, in fact, do we know, or *need* to know, about the real natures of the so-called "things-in-themselves" than that they are the *perduring centers of such-and-such characteristic actions on me*, and on the surrounding world as manifested to me—centers which must be proportioned in their "private" inner perfection to the kind and degree of perfection they express in their actions? What else in fact does a nature *mean* than *this kind of actor*? The conception of being, therefore, as self-expressive through action lies at the very root of the Thomistic theory of knowledge—and must, I submit, lie at the root of any realistic theory of human or divine knowledge.

I have outlined above what seem to me the most relevant and fruitful aspects of the Thomistic understanding of being: its focus on the immanent act of existence as the root of perfection in every being and its linking of being with action as the natural overflow and self-expression of being. But before passing on to the next point I must balance the picture by calling attention to what seem to me serious weaknesses in St. Thomas' own presentation of this doctrine, at least from our perspective today as highly sensitized to philosophical method and to the psychological genesis of basic concepts.

The first weakness is St. Thomas' almost casual brevity and reticence on how we actually come to psychological awareness of existential being as such, in a word, on the *phenomenology* of our *discovery* of being as such. He seems to take this for granted as a pre-philosophical acquisition which he can refer to as already familiar to his readers. The roots of his own discovery of being seem to lie hidden in his meditative reflection as a

<sup>2a</sup> Cf. *Sum. con. Gentes*, II, 94 and II, 79: "The operation of a thing shows forth both its existence and its nature."

Christian on the mystery of creation as the gift of being and on the name of God as revealed in Exodus: "I am Who am," interpreted as a metaphysical statement that God is pure being. This may have been enough in his own day, when the notion of creation lived so vividly in the habitual consciousness of a religious culture (Christian, Jewish, Moslem). But with the disappearance of such a religious culture in our own day, we need a new propaedeutic to metaphysics to help us reawaken to an explicit awareness of the depth and density and wonder of being as actual existential presence standing out from the nothingness that all finite things might have been. Since we cannot find this propaedeutic in St. Thomas himself, we must reconstruct it for ourselves out of the rich materials available in contemporary thought, e.g. in Kierkegaard, Buber, Heidegger, Marcel, Transcendental Thomism, etc., as well as in art and literature.

The second main weakness in St. Thomas' presentation of how we come to the metaphysical notion of being as the object of metaphysics is the use of the schema of the so-called Three Degrees of Abstraction. This schema implies that we come to the metaphysical notion of being as transcendental and analogous by passing through three levels of abstraction: (1) being considered as changeable (the perspective of the philosophy of nature), (2) being considered under the aspect of pure quantitative extension (the perspective of mathematics), and finally (3) being considered as abstracting from all matter and motion (the perspective of metaphysics). Although it may be possible with considerable explanation and rather profound adaptation to render this classical Thomistic doctrine still meaningful, still it seems to me that as it stands it is not only one of the least relevant parts of historical Thomistic metaphysics but is positively misleading if not false, because, if for no other reason, it builds upon a radically defective theory of the nature of mathematics as the result of abstraction from the concrete material world. In fact I see no methodological reason even for passing through the philosophy of nature to arrive at the metaphysical notion of being; a much more simple and direct elaboration of the notion of being seems to me not only possible but desirable, although I am aware that the contemporary followers of the more classical Dominican Thomistic school would disagree with me here.

### III. PARTICIPATION IN BEING: ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE

The third doctrine I shall single out is the celebrated Thomistic solution to the problem of the one and the many in terms of the participation of all finite beings in existence as the central unifying perfection of the universe, "the act of all acts, the perfection of all perfections," as St. Thomas calls it. This participation is mediated through the metaphysical composition of *esse*, the act of existence, and essence as particular limiting mode—a composition found in all beings save one, the Infinite Source, who alone possesses this perfection in unlimited intensive plenitude as pure Subsist-

tent Act of Existence. This undoubtedly is at once the most central and the most original doctrine of St. Thomas' metaphysics, put forward by him as his response to what metaphysicians generally agree is *the* central problem of all metaphysics, the problem of the one and the many: i.e. how to reconcile the two apparently antinomical truths, that on the one hand the universe is undeniably multiple and diverse in the *kinds* and *instances* of being that force their reality upon us from all sides, and that on the other there must be some underlying bond of unity which all must somehow share as being *actually present* to each other in the real order, standing out together from nothingness. Since my remarks on St. Thomas' conception of being as existential have already overlapped deeply into his doctrine of universal participation in existence through essence, I will not attempt to develop in further detail here this position that is already so well known to most of you.<sup>3</sup> Let me content myself with a few selective observations.

If we leave out radical monisms, which eliminate half of the problem, all metaphysical systems which attempt to come to grips with the problem of the one and the many are either non-participation doctrines or participation doctrines. The former undertake to unify the universe in terms of what I might call an "extrinsic" bond of *origin* from some common source. But such theories are forced to leave unexplained or in the shadow any intrinsic bond of *similarity* which binds all together in terms of something common that is immanent in all at once, in addition to and perhaps flowing from, their common source. All theories which admit and try to explain an immanent bond of similarity can be reduced down to some form of participation theory, i.e. a theory of participation in some unifying perfection common to all. Let us divide such theories into those which identify existence itself as the basic perfection, as St. Thomas does, and those which select some other attribute, such as goodness, unity, form, matter, consciousness, etc., as is the case with most non-Thomistic systems. The difficulty that all explanations of the latter type run into is that they are left at the end of their analysis with an unreduced residue of duality: the basic perfection they have chosen, say goodness, plus the affirmation of actual existence about this perfection: "The good is, is real. All things *are* truly good." Since unreduced duality cannot be an ultimate explanation of the bond of similarity that links all things, one must finally

<sup>3</sup> Cf., in addition to the works in note 1, the standard treatments of participation, L. B. Geiger, *La participation dans la philosophie de S. Thomas* (Paris: Vrin, 2nd ed., 1953); my own articles: "The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas," *Proceedings of Amer. Catholic Phil. Assoc.*, 26 (1952), 147-57, and "The Limitation of Act of Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?" *New Scholasticism*, 26 (1952), 157-94, with the works mentioned therein; and "What Cannot Be Said in St. Thomas' Essence-Existence Doctrine," *New Scholasticism*, 48 (1974), 19-39; also C. Fabro's synthesis of his years of research in participation, "The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation," *Review of Metaphysics*, 27 (1973-74), 449-90.

either reduce existence to a mode or property of goodness, or reduce goodness to a property or dimension of existence. As St. Thomas saw it, it is impossible to reduce existence to anything more radical and ultimate than itself, since all other attributes implicitly presuppose the act of existential presence by which they stand out from nothingness or from mere idea. The genius of St. Thomas is to have concluded that if you can't reduce existence to anything else more basic, why not turn the tables completely and reduce all other perfections to that apparently so lowly and easily overlooked, yet strangely unbanishable, "is" of existence, conceived now not as a minimum brute fact but as the intensive plenitude of all perfections? The result is one of the most radically unified and daringly simple metaphysical visions of the unity of the universe, short of monism, that one can find anywhere in the history of thought, whether in the West or the East.

What seems to me most fruitful and relevant in this essence-existence doctrine is the notion of diverse participation in the central perfection of existence through the varied limiting modes of essence. Essence and its primary constituent form, here no longer play the role of primary repositories of perfection, as in essentialist metaphysical systems like that of Aristotle himself, but take on rather the secondary, derivative role of principles of limitation and hence of partial negation of a deeper, supra-formal perfection: "Omnis determinatio est negatio," as Spinoza has so well said. Diverse participation in existence according to limiting modes of essence, all derived from a single supra-essential Source that is pure unparticipated, hence unlimited, Act of Existence: this seems to me the irreducible positive core of St. Thomas' vision.

What seems to me less relevant and crucial for our day, though still an important problem for specialized technical discussion, is whether or not the best way to express this participation-through-limitation doctrine is by the technical theory of a *real* composition or distinction between essence and the act of existence in each finite being. Such an expression tends to say too much by implying that essence is somehow a positive principle in its own right added on to existence, whereas all positivity resides in the act of existence. On the other hand, there is an objective irreducibility of some kind in the real order between a limiting principle and the real perfection which it limits, mirrored in the intractable irreducibility of our concepts and words expressing the two aspects. Hence to say that existence and its limiting mode of essence are simply identical would be saying too little. But what precisely is the reality of limit as such (and I mean here the kind of limit that brings about a *qualitative restriction* in a perfection capable of higher degrees of intensity, not limit merely as the coming-to-an-end of a purely quantitative extension)? It may be that our concepts are incapable of grasping more closely the being of limit as such, and it would be wiser to content ourselves with speaking of a real limited participation in existence through essence as limiting

mode, without trying to press further and determine what is the precise "reality" of this "composition" between the act of existence and its limiting essence.<sup>4</sup> But I am willing to admit that I may be running the risk of letting go something essential in thus playing down the traditional "real distinction" aspect of St. Thomas' doctrine and the role of essence as positive subject distinct from the act of existence that it is traditionally said to "receive and limit." I am still open on this question.

#### IV. THE PERSON AS THE PRIMARY MODEL OF BEING

This is a typical case of a central underlying theme in St. Thomas' metaphysics which clearly permeates his thought when we carefully analyze it, but which is rarely thematized with full explicitness as a central doctrine. Hence it can easily escape the notice of those who are not on the watch for it. One of the main reasons for the unobtrusiveness of this theme is that the principal technical categories which St. Thomas uses to elaborate his thought are drawn originally not from the inner personal world but from the outer world of nature—and principally biological nature—following the lead of Aristotle. Yet Fr. Johannes Metz has written a whole book on person as the basic "thought-form" (*Denkform*) underlying St. Thomas' entire thought.<sup>5</sup> There is much truth in what he says, but he himself admits that it is a thought-form which has not yet found its adequate vocabulary of expression. Hence, unless it is highlighted and reformulated in more explicitly personalist terms by contemporary Thomists, it will not be able to enter effectively into the bloodstream of our contemporary thought.

The principal point I would like to single out here is the relation of person to being. For St. Thomas, the person is not a peculiar mode of being added on from the outside, so to speak, to what would be the normal non-personal mode of being. On the contrary, if being is allowed to be itself above a certain level of limitation, which disperses its act of presence into parts external to each other (matter), it naturally flowers out into the perfection of a person, i.e., its act of presence becomes luminous and transparent to itself, it becomes presence to and for itself (self-consciousness), and master of its own actions (freedom). Thus the fullness of being, which is act of presence, is of its very nature personal, or self-possessing presence, and the nature of the person, on its side, is nothing else than to be an active self-possessing presence, present both to itself and to others—to the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. my art. above in n. 3, "What Cannot Be Said in St. Thomas' Essence-Existence Doctrine," and W. Carlo, *The Ultimate Reducibility of Essence to Existence in Existential Metaphysics* (Hague: Nijhoff, 1966) with my Preface. The position of Carlo, which I tentatively lean toward with some adaptation, has been strongly criticized by Fabro, in note 115 of his article cited in n. 3 above, and by not a few other Thomists, including Joseph Owens.

<sup>5</sup> *Christliche Anthropozentrik* (Munich: Kosel, 1962).

whole world, in fact, if its act of presence is intense enough.<sup>6</sup> "The person is that which is the most perfect in all of nature,"<sup>7</sup> St. Thomas tells us; and since the act of existence is the root of all perfection for him, being naturally turns into person wherever its restricting level of essence allows it to be intensely enough, transcending the dispersal of matter. Once this perspective of the correlativity (though not full co-extensivity) of being and person is achieved, the human person can be taken as the primary model or analogue for us of all the basic metaphysical concepts, such as unity, activity, efficient causality, act and potency, etc.—the privileged vantage point from which we know *from within* what each concept stands for and from which we extend it by analogy both below and above us. But it is only honest to admit that the richness and fruitfulness of this personalist view point on being has not been given adequate thematized treatment by St. Thomas himself; this remains one of the major tasks for contemporary Thomists.

#### V. THE DYNAMIC NOTION OF SUBSTANCE

By this I mean the notion of substance as the principle of perduring self-identity of a being throughout the succession of its changes—a traditional Aristotelian doctrine—yet substance understood not as an inert underlying substratum in the manner of the later Lockean conception, but as a dynamic center of activity and receptivity. Substance has gotten quite a bad name for itself in modern philosophy, principally because of the Cartesian and Lockean conceptions of it which were commonly accepted as the primary models of this so-called traditional doctrine. The Cartesian notion is that of a self-enclosed entity needing only God in order to exist. The Lockean notion is that of an inert, static, unknowable, "pin-cushion"-like substratum in which the changing accidents are inserted for support.

Both of these conceptions have been the butt of strong attack by process philosophers such as Whitehead—and quite justly so. For in fact every finite substance we know or can conceive of is intrinsically relational, set in the matrix of the world-system as a whole. And nothing real that we know or can conceive of is purely static and inert. But most modern philosophers, especially process thinkers, seem unaware of an older tradition of substance, lost for the most part from Ockham on, which is not burdened with either of the above deficiencies. This is the authentic Aristotelian one of dynamic substance, highlighted considerably more clearly by St. Thomas himself. Here substance is conceived precisely as the in-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. W. Dych (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), pp. 68-71: "The Original Unity of Being and Knowledge as Being-Present-to-Itself"; also J. de Finance, "Being and Subjectivity," *Cross Currents*, 6 (1956), 153-78.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologia*, I, q. 29, art. 3.

tegrating center of a being's activities, a center which is constantly pouring over into self-expression through its characteristic actions and at the same time constantly integrating or actively assimilating all that it receives from the action of other substances on it. St. Thomas is not afraid to say that the substance is totally oriented towards its operations.<sup>8</sup>

It must be clearly affirmed that such a perduring active center in a changing being is *not* without qualification unchanging, though it is self-identical. Of course the substance itself changes, otherwise it would be totally unaffected by and indifferent to all that it does and receives—which does not make sense. But it does not change so radically that it loses its active self-identity. In a word, in technical language, the substance itself changes, but not substantially, only accidentally (or non-essentially). This is not the same as to say, according to a common misinterpretation, that only the accidents change. Substance and accident, as metaphysical co-principles, ontologically interpenetrate each other, each affecting the other more or less profoundly, as the case may be. The Thomistic substance remains self-identical only by constantly being at work, so to speak, actively expressing itself through its own actions and actively assimilating and transmuting into itself—i.e. imposing its own characteristic unity on—whatever else the surrounding world of agents presents to it in the vast interacting system which is the real world. Thus reality is indeed “through and through togetherness,” as Whitehead so well puts it and as any alert Thomist should be glad to accept.

Such a notion of substance as perduring principle of dynamic self-identity in an interacting system can go far in our day, it seems to me, toward making contact with the process philosophy tradition and assimilating much of its richness. Yet it stops well short of dissolving all centers of perduring identity into the flux of momentary actual occasions, which to my mind ends up by throwing the baby out with the bath.

#### VI. SUBSTANTIAL POTENCY AS NECESSARY CONDITION OF POSSIBILITY FOR ANY COMPLEX WHOLE

You are all familiar enough, I hope, with the classic Thomistic notion of potency, or potential principle, as the correlative opposite pole of act in the act-potency couplet that expresses the general structure of any inner metaphysical composition within a being. The two main roles of potency for St. Thomas are, first, that of *limitation* of some higher perfection, in a situation where no change is involved—e.g. the limitation of the act of existing by essence, or the limiting individuation of form by matter. This is the new dimension of potency not in Aristotle but introduced by Neoplatonism and taken over by St. Thomas. I am not here concerned with this role of potency in a participation structure. The second role is the original

<sup>8</sup> *Sum. Theol.*, I. q. 105, art. 5, etc. Cf. De Finance, *Etre et agir*, note 2 above.

one given it by Aristotle and preserved by St. Thomas: namely, potency as *the subject of continuity in change*, possessing the real inner aptitude or capacity to take on some new mode of being and form an intrinsic unity with it. It is the significance of this role of potency, especially at the profoundest substantial level, that I would like to highlight here.

What precisely is the significance of acknowledging this admittedly elusive, because never directly observable, mode of being that we call “potentiality,” i.e. a real aptitude for some mode of being that is not now actualized but could be? Ivor Leclerc in a brilliant and challenging recent study, *The Nature of Physical Existence* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972) has traced the fortunes of the Aristotelian notion of potency with respect to the efforts of modern science and philosophy to explain our world of complex material wholes. Modern science began, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by rejecting the Aristotelian potency-and-act theory, whereby lower elements have the potency to be taken over by unifying higher acts and made into new wholes in which the original elements no longer exist autonomously as such. It substituted instead a theory of the make-up of all bodies by discrete atomic actualities which combine to form aggregates according to mathematical laws, while remaining essentially intact all through their transformations. Our contemporary physics, however, has finally come back again, especially in quantum theory, to admit the necessity of the potential in order to make sense out of the behavior of subatomic particles. Thus we have the notions of potential energy, potential location of subatomic particles, not to mention the many applications to the biological and human worlds. Much logical and linguistic analysis has made it abundantly clear, it seems to me, that it is impossible to reduce the “can,” “could,” or “-able” aspects of our description of the world to any combination of simply actual “is,” “was,” or “will be.” Hence “potency” must refer to some irreducible ingredient of the real world.

But in addition to this general point, which I think is important enough in itself, I would like to call your attention to the very specific point highlighted so well by Leclerc, namely, the indispensable role of potency as a condition of possibility for the existence of any complex *whole* that is not a mere aggregate. The point is a simple but profound one, laid down first clearly by Aristotle, but elaborated much more explicitly by St. Thomas, namely, to use his own words, that “out of two entities in act it is impossible to make a natural or intrinsic unity (an *unum per se*).”<sup>9</sup> Such a combination can only be an aggregate, a society, with a unity of order perhaps, but not coalescing to form a genuine new being.

In order to form a *per se* unity, without which of course there cannot be *one* being present in any meaningful sense of the term, all the lower ele-

<sup>9</sup> *On Spiritual Creatures*, art. 3; *Sum. Contra Gentes*, I, 18.

ments in a composite must have the potentiality to be taken over and unified by a single higher act. This means that all these lower components must have an innate "plasticity" or determinability at the substantial (not merely accidental) level, by which they are intrinsically apt to be taken over by a higher principle of unity, without being totally destroyed but nonetheless losing their normal autonomy of being and action. If they do not undergo this profound modification of surrendering their inner autonomy to a higher unifying principle, then there is no reason at all to assert that there is present anything more than an aggregate or society of many beings. One cannot have it both ways. If the components do not lose their autonomy, then they can only form an aggregate. If they do form a genuine intrinsic unity, then they must have surrendered their autonomy to a higher unity. Their independent actuality has dropped back into latent potency (not simply non-being, of course) and their previously existing latent potentiality to be taken over by a higher has now been actualized by a new higher act.

Without this ingredient of substantial plasticity there can be no adequate metaphysical theory of the unity of complex beings, and we are at the mercy of a radical reductionism of all higher levels of material being to the lowest level of the most elementary particles, grouped in accidentally unified aggregates. There will then be no such *being* as man, but only a complex chemical factory, directed, if you wish, by a single "engineer," the soul or mind, which becomes an autonomous entity in its own right. The issue is clear-cut, although all too many philosophers, especially scientist-philosophers, have either failed to see it or tried to blur the lines: either radical reductionistic atomism must be accepted, or the reality of potency at the deepest substantial or essential level, what I prefer to call "substantial potency." In the light of our new stress today on "holistic thinking," i.e., the recognition of organic wholes in nature as essentially different from machines and other aggregates, this ancient notion of substantial potency must come—and I believe is coming—back into honor in philosophical circles today. A metaphysics which holds the ingredients of the real to be nothing more than actualities plus relations is incapable of making sense out of ontological wholes. Such a metaphysics, I submit, has shown itself incapable of being an adequate instrument for contemporary thought in any area touching the real.

The alert reader will not have failed to notice that I have not used the traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic term of "pure potency" or "primary matter." This is the notion of a potency, or potential subject, that is pure or unqualified potentiality, lacking any determination whatsoever. My reason is that I am not sure it is necessary to go this far in order to do justice to the intelligibility of substantial change, which was the basic reason for positing this mysterious and endlessly controverted principle of primary matter in the first place. The traditional argument is simple, clear-cut, and apparently impregnable. Since in any single being with a

single nature or essence there can be only one actual substantial or essential form at any one time, both at the beginning and the end of a substantial change there is present only one substantial form. Since by the very definition of a substantial change the first form is replaced by the second, then what passes over as the potential principle providing the continuity cannot be another substantial form but only some real subject entirely lacking any substantial form. This is the principle of pure potency, totally lacking form, hence called "primary matter." It is therefore of itself unintelligible, but indirectly known through forms as what underlies form in beings capable of substantial change. Yet it is clear enough that in all the organic wholes we know which emerge out of transformation processes, the component elements which are integrated into the new higher unity do not have their characteristic structures and activities entirely wiped out down to pure indetermination, but abide somehow in a latent subordinate way, which St. Thomas himself describes as a "virtual presence," such that they can reappear again if the higher complex breaks down. This virtual presence, which St. Thomas admits under pressure of answering objections, is not simply pure potency with no qualification at all. It includes many determinate potencies, not merely one totally indeterminate one, abiding within the new unity, even though at the same time St. Thomas is quite correct in insisting that there can only be one fully actual substantial form at one time in a complex whole that is a true intrinsic ontological unity.

Hence it seems to me that there remains considerable ambiguity in the traditional doctrine of pure indeterminate matter underlying change. If "pure potency" means only that there is no *properly actual* substantial form in what passes over in a substantial change and abides within the new whole, then this claim seems to me an impregnable one. If "pure potency" means that what passes over is totally denuded of any determination whatever, then it seems to me it goes beyond what is required to handle the problem. But if "pure potency" does not mean the latter, then the term is dangerously misleading. That is why I prefer the terms "substantial potency," or "determinability at the substantial level." This more restrained term implies that reality is not quite that susceptible of being fitted into clearly distinct categories as we would wish. We cannot lay down absolute alternatives, such as that the unity of a genuine complex whole is *either* an unqualified unity allowing of no ontological plurality of component elements remaining within the whole, *or else* the unity is merely accidental and the lower elements continue present as actually existing and operating substances in their own right. Each alternative goes too far. What reality seems to present us with is rather a spectrum of more or less imperfect but still substantial unities. Complex unities are so strong that the lower elements integrated within them are not merely accidentally united; the unifying substantial form penetrates deep into the very substances of the components, so that they lose their *autonomy* of

being and action. Yet these components can still retain some latent plural presence, not totally dominated and integrated, which is precisely "in-between" pure indetermination (or pure determinability) and merely accidental determinability. There seems to be no adequate term for this somewhat messy, but I believe more realistic, "in-between" state in the Thomistic system.

I must, however, add in all honesty that Fr. Joseph Donceel, in a very penetrating critique of my attempt to dispense with pure primary matter understood in an absolutely unqualified sense, has given me serious second thoughts as to whether such a principle is not still needed, not so much to explain substantial change, as from the point of view of human *cognitional theory*. Following the Maréchal school of Transcendental Thomism, he points out the undeniable fact that there is always in our cognition of material things some kind of opaque residue that seems in principle never directly accessible to intelligence. All our intellectual knowledge of material things is in terms of forms, or intelligible structures, of something underlying beyond form that we can only identify indirectly as extended-matter-stuff, quantitative spatial extension, or the like. This "other-than-form" can be known only through contact with our material senses in sensible images, in which in virtue of the substantial union of soul and body, hence of intellect and sense, the intellect can discern the immanent formal intelligibilities and know *that* these are structures of an ultimate non-formal "something," not susceptible of further analysis in terms of form. From this point of view we might well have to posit an ultimate dimension or ingredient of the material world that is pure non-formal, indeterminate "matter," not reducible to form but never without some form. This principle, however, would not necessarily have to be identified as the ultimate *subject* by itself of all substantial change, but only a *dimension* of radical potentiality or determinability characterizing all lower entities that can be taken over into large intrinsic unities. Such substantial determinability, in fact, would be one way of defining what we mean by a "material being," since such an aptitude is lacking in spiritual substances. Spirits can indeed join together to form very intimate societies, but they cannot surrender their ontological autonomy of being and action to become non-autonomous—hence non-personal—parts of any larger whole.

#### VII. EFFICIENT AND FINAL CAUSALITY

There is neither time nor need to develop here these basic and well enough known notions. They are simply the fuller elaboration of the conception of the world as a vast system of interacting agents, actively communicating to each other out of their richness and passively receiving from, or dependent on, each other out of their poverty, their lack of self-sufficiency—all under the universal influx (i.e. the communication of ex-

istence) of the one self-sufficient Source of all existence. Let me just mention a few key points: (1) Efficient causality is understood by St. Thomas not merely as the causing of *change*, as was the case for Aristotle, for whom the existence of the world was given eternally and only its transformations required explanation, but more profoundly as the causing of *being*, the *communication of existence* according to a certain mode or form. (2) Efficient causality is not, as for Hume and for so many modern philosophers after him, even non-empiricists such as Kant, Paul Weiss, etc., a succession of two events in time, linked by some bond of necessity, mental or real. It is a *single event*, which is precisely the production-of-the-effect as by the agent. This takes place, not back in the cause, but *in* the effect as *from* the cause (*actio est in passio*). Causing and being caused constitute one single reality with two distinct relations, one to the effect and the other to the cause. The important corollaries follow that cause *as such* and effect are simultaneous, and that to cause implies of itself no change in the cause, but only in the effect.<sup>10</sup>

3) Final causality is simply the inner orientation of every agent toward some determinate effect-to-be-produced. And since such orientation or dynamic predetermination of the agent at the moment of beginning its action is toward a not-yet-existent future, the ultimate sufficient reason or ground for any final causality, hence for any action whatsoever in the universe, must be sought in an intelligence; for intelligence is the only power that can make the non-existent possible or future *present* as a guide for action now. Thus all final causality and therefore all action requires either a consciously thought idea-goal in the agent itself, or a participation in idea, imprinted by intelligence somewhere along the line, in agents which do not themselves possess intelligence. At the beginning of all action, therefore, is the Word. All action in the universe is ultimately the expression, direct or mediated, of a *Logos*, an ordering Mind.

#### VIII. THE NATURE OF GOD AS PURE SUBSISTENT ACT OF EXISTENCE

The crown of the entire Thomistic vision of the universe is the notion of God as infinitely perfect pure Plenitude of Existence, ultimate Source and Goal of all other being. This notion of God receives its philosophical meaning as the keystone of a universal participation structure, in which all finite beings participate the basic common perfection of the universe, existence as intensive act, in diverse limited degrees, according to the modes of their respective essences, all deriving from a single ultimate infinite Source, which possesses the perfection of existence in pure unlimited, unparticipated plenitude. There is no need for me to develop this aspect of St. Thomas' metaphysics, since Fr. McCool will take it up as his main task. I shall content myself with calling attention to a few key points.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. my essay, "Causality and Time," in *Experience, Existence and the Good: Essays in Honor of Paul Weiss* (Carbondale; S. Illinois Univ. Press, 1961), 143-57.

1) This participation doctrine centered around the act of existence allows for a radically unified vision of the universe, with no ultimate unreduced dualities left around as loose ends, such as happens when one chooses any perfection less ultimate than existence as universal unifying principle.

2) Since it places God beyond all form and limiting essence, it permits at once a doctrine of God in positive terms, yet one that leaves intact the full mystery of God as ineffable and beyond any direct representation of His *mode* of being (or essence) by our limited concepts and categories. Since this positive knowledge is so vague, St. Thomas can say that the most perfect knowledge of God we can have in this life is to realize that while we can know *that* God is, and that He is infinite plenitude of perfection, we cannot know at all *what* He is, His own proper essence or infinite mode of being. Hence St. Thomas' notion of God is one of the very few in the West that are not simply "negative theologies" but yet allow for a profound rapport with Hindu, Buddhist, and other Eastern notions of God as the utterly Ineffable beyond all form and concept. Despite the latter's characteristic negative descriptions of the Ultimate in terms of "Void," "Non-Being," etc., St. Thomas' supra-formal Pure Act of *Esse* functions in his system in a highly analogous way to the Void in theirs. His notion also serves as a very illuminating metaphysical grounding for the typical mystical experience of God in all traditions as pure Presence beyond all form, and hence beyond all conceptual grasp or expression.

3) Let me call brief attention now to the main point in St. Thomas' doctrine of God which seems to me to arouse so much misunderstanding and instinctive repugnance on the part of religious-minded people today that it may well be judged no longer fruitful or relevant for us today, at least in the way St. Thomas is content to express his position and then take us no further. This is the interpretation of the immutability of God in so absolute and uncompromising a way as to exclude any "real relation" on God's part toward us, whereas every creature has a non-symmetrical real relation of dependence on God. This non-symmetrical relation seems to negate on the metaphysical level one of the most cherished of our religious—at least Judaeo-Christian—notions of God: namely, His deep loving concern for us and His invitation of us into authentic interpersonal dialogue of love.<sup>11</sup>

St. Thomas' reason for this highly technical doctrine of real relation is his theory of efficient causality. To cause means to make something happen in *another*; it does not of itself imply that the cause loses or gains anything. Hence for God as perfect cause, already infinite in perfection, to create the world does not for that reason imply any increase or loss of His

<sup>11</sup> Cf. my essay discussing this whole question, "A New Look at the Immutability of God," in R. Roth, ed., *God Knowable and Unknowable* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 43-73.

own intrinsic perfection. If He cannot thus change in His own real perfection, then no new real relation can accrue to His eternal being when He makes the created universe appear in time.

The reasoning is impeccable as far as it goes. But it does not say enough. While it is quite true that sharing His goodness with others in creation does not increase or decrease the *intrinsic* plenitude of the divine ontological perfection, which is already infinite—and how could one strictly speaking add or subtract a finite amount from an infinite?—still it is the case that in the order of the divine knowledge and love, which is the order of *intentionality* (*esse intentionale* as opposed to *esse naturale*, in St. Thomas' words) as focused on *others* than himself, it makes a *distinct difference* in the divine consciousness whether He creates or not, and what are the specific mutual relations between Himself and His creatures, especially created persons. This specific focusing of His knowledge and love on the created participations of His own goodness certainly does not add to the plenitude of His own intrinsic perfection which He is sharing. Hence there is no change or real relation in the strict and strong *Aristotelian* meaning of change. But this does make a highly significant difference in *personal relations*. For it is precisely in the intentional order of knowledge and love that interpersonal relations are located. This whole domain of being simply escapes or transcends the entire set of Aristotelian categories of change, immutability, and real relation. Hence I believe we can truly say that without doing violence to his own basic metaphysical positions St. Thomas could and should say that God does have authentic mutual *personal relations* with all created persons, even though he himself would not call these by the strong technical term of "real relation."

Though one can indeed make this defense of St. Thomas, I have nonetheless found it too laborious and unfruitful an enterprise to try and explain convincingly to contemporary people that we should not say God has real relations with the world. The return is no longer worth the investment of effort. This means that a technical concept, while still theoretically defensible in itself, has outlived its effective accessibility and fruitfulness for the minds of contemporaries. Hence I think one could also follow another and much simpler strategy in handling this question of God's immutability and relations with the world. This would be to distinguish two senses of immutability. God remains immutable in the intrinsic intensity and fullness of His own being and His faithful love of us—to which, it must be remembered, He has committed Himself freely but *eternally*, in His eternal *now* (i.e., He was not *first* uncommitted, then changed to commitment.) This is the kind of immutability that we judge appropriate and necessary for a perfect *Person* (or Personal Being). But there is another sense of immutability that we cannot help but judge inappropriate for a perfect Person, i.e. that interpersonal relations of love would make no difference at all in the consciousness of the Lover. On-

going sensitive adaptation, or "mutability," if one wishes to call it this, to the mutual relations of an interpersonal dialogue are appropriate and necessary for the perfection proper to a person, without this introducing any admixture of imperfection or limitation in *our conception* of these attributes.

In other words, there is no good reason why the *human categories* in which we express the divine perfections should always remain immutable. What remains fixed in all conceptions of God is the formal notion of *plenitude of perfection*. Also for us in the Judaeo-Christian tradition the notion of God as loving Person(s) remains stable. But precisely what we judge as most *appropriate* to describe the perfection proper to a loving Person can indeed change, slowly or sometimes rapidly, as our understanding of person and personal life evolves and, hopefully, matures. Thus we have the fruitful paradox that in our philosophy of God the notions of *perfect Person* remain immutable, but the notion of *immutability* is itself a relative term not sharing the same privilege of immutability.

Let me hasten to add that St. Thomas himself did not make this "creative readjustment" of the interlocking network of our description of God. But I submit that without doing any damaging violence to the spirit and key doctrines of his own metaphysical system, this adaptation could be made, and that without this it is too difficult to make the great richness of the rest of his doctrine truly accessible, relevant, and fruitful for serious and well disposed thinkers of our own day, in particular for the large number who are at present attracted by the positive contributions they find in the process philosophy tradition.

Let me add, as a final word on the doctrine of God, that the famous Five Ways of St. Thomas for proving the existence of God seem to me, *in their present textual form*, the least adequate part of his metaphysics and certainly the least relevant for the contemporary philosopher. The first two, from motion and causality, are formally valid if the proper latent premises are supplied, but have no literal application to our world since there are no *simultaneous* causal chains in our material cosmos. The third, from contingency, is formally invalid as it stands, based on the logically invalid principle, uncritically taken over from Aristotle, that all logical possibilities must come true given infinite time. The fourth, from degrees of being, has the order of reasoning reversed from his customary reasoning to a maximum through efficient causality. The fifth does not go far enough as it stands and could be verified by any purely spiritual finite agent. The really powerful and effective Thomistic proofs for God are imbedded elsewhere in his participation metaphysics,<sup>12</sup> but are not used here because they do not depart directly from sensible data but from a metaphysical theory. I merely throw out this challenge here for future development elsewhere.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 5-6; *Sum. Theol.*, I, 44, 1; I, 65, 1; I, 93, 6; *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 14; *Sum. C. Gent.*, II, 15.

## Is St. Thomas' "Science of God" Still Relevant Today?

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CONTRIBUTION OF GILSON

THREE DECADES ago Etienne Gilson made the point that St. Thomas' philosophy of God could not be properly appreciated outside the context of his theology. At the same time Gilson made a number of further points in support of his primary one. The source of Thomas' unique metaphysics of *esse* was the name of God which Thomas came upon in the Book of Exodus. Thomas had learned the primary divine name, "I Am Who Am," neither from Plato nor from Aristotle. He owed his knowledge of it to his prayerful reading of the Scriptures as a man of faith.<sup>1</sup> Once his knowledge of the primary perfection of existence had been thematized through the epistemology of Aristotle, however, *esse* became the ground of the distinction between the formal intelligibility grasped in the concept and the existential intelligibility grasped in the judgmental affirmation.

This distinction, and the cognitive function of the affirmation required to make it, enabled Thomas to locate his science of being, a metaphysics based on the intelligibility of *esse*, at the apex of an Aristotelian hierarchy of the sciences. Physics, based on the total abstraction of a material form from a sensible singular, was the science whose formal object was the world of motion. Mathematics, grounded on the formal abstraction of the form of quantity, was the science whose formal object was the discrete quantity of arithmetic and the continuous quantity of geometry.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, although the formal intelligibilities of the latter two sciences were grasped in their universal concepts, the judgments in which their principles were expressed had to be reduced ultimately to initial concrete judgments about sensible singulars. This reduction was demanded by the dynamic law of the intellect's conversion to the phantasm in Aristotelian epistemology.

<sup>1</sup> Etienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme: Introduction à la philosophie de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1947), pp. 8-41. See also *The Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York: New American Library, 1960), pp. 52-63.

<sup>2</sup> See Armand Maurer, C.S.B., *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1953), pp. xv-xxvii.