Aristotle and the Ontology of St. Bonaventure

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Chapter 2

The Theory of Forms in Thomas Aquinas

Before turning our attention to the thought of Bonaventure, I would like to provide a contrast, an alternative route to the one we will see taken by Bonaventure – one which comes in the texts of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas provides us with a foil to what we will see in Bonaventure in two ways: (1) his notion of the ontological status of the forms generally speaking and (2) his use of both Aristotle and Augustinian/Neoplatonic influences in developing this notion.

With regard to the first point, while Bonaventure indeed seeks to maintain the equation of being and form, despite the difficulties involved, there is, of course, another option: simply to abandon such a commitment to this equation of form and being, in favor of a philosophy which would more plainly avoid any worries about mediation between forms and God, and one which wholly embraces the (more Augustinian) claim that, not the forms, but God is primary being. This is, of course, the option chosen by Aquinas.

The second contrast concerns Aquinas’ “Aristotelianism,” particularly with regard to his hylomorphism, which includes the position that the forms are ontologically dependent on their own composition in creatures. This naturally raises the question of what Aristotelianism was in the scholastic period. Indeed, the original division in scholarship, which we will examine and question further in the following chapters, was that among medieval philosophers there are Aristotelians and Augustinians. On this view, it would be correct, at least very generally speaking, to call Aquinas an “Aristotelian” – in the sense that Aquinas, like other medievals such as Albert the Great, embraces much of Aristotle’s foundational metaphysics in developing his own. According to those who maintain this division between Aristotelians and Augustinians, Bonaventure, in contrast to Aquinas, more or less rejects Aristotle in favor of the traditional Augustinian/Neoplatonic system. While in the following chapters I highlight Bonaventure’s use of Aristotle, in this chapter I would like to highlight the fact that Aquinas’ Aristotelianism is but one option when it comes to interpreting Aristotle. In fact, as we will see, the foundational position in Aquinas’ thought is one which is more explicitly found in Augustine than Aristotle: that God is primarily a principle of being – indeed, the claim that God is being for Aristotle we would attribute to an interpretation of Aristotle rather than to Aristotle himself. Thus, in Aquinas we find not a pure Aristotelianism, but one brand of medieval Aristotelianism which consists in a synthesis of a certain interpretation of Aristotle, which is brought into accordance with the Augustinian notion of God, coupled with more traditional Christian sources.
Returning now to Aquinas’ notion of the ontological status of the forms per se, most important for our discussion are the questions of (1) the ontological status of the forms, including how they are able to cause both sensible things and human knowledge; and (2) how the forms themselves are caused by God – precisely insofar as these are the two points which Bonaventure, in developing his own notion of forms, targets for critique of a position very similar to Aquinas’. Accordingly, I first of all discuss Aquinas’ understanding of the composition of creatures and the ontological status of forms, as well as how Aquinas uses Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* to support his positions. Here, I note what is perhaps the key problem with Aquinas’ notion of extra-mental forms: that they, while not defined clearly either as universals or particulars, seem most likely to be the latter, a position which causes a number of problems, particularly with regard to human knowledge.

I then show how Aquinas’ understanding of forms, coupled with his position that God is primarily a principle of being (along with other convertible terms, i.e. the transcendentals), shapes Aquinas’ view of the causal relationship between God and creation. My purpose here is to inquire how God can be said to cause the forms, or the intelligibility of sensible things, particularly in light of Aquinas’ commitment to the view that it is God, not the forms, who possesses being in the primary sense. Contrary to the position of some Thomists, I argue that there is no direct participation between creatures and God via the formal content of creatures to be found in Aquinas’ thought – rather, there is only participation within the order of being, leaving unclear where the intelligibility of creatures comes from. I proceed by examining three key places in Aquinas’ corpus where scholars look for evidence of a direct causal link between creatures and God via formal content: (1) the (brief) discussions of participation in the *Commentary on Boethius’ De Hebdomadibus* and the *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, (2) the argument for the existence of God in the Fourth Way, and (3) his (notably sparse) references to exemplar causes.

Ultimately, I wish to highlight the two main issues which Bonaventure, and indeed later thinkers such as Ockham, would find with Aquinas’ account of the relationship between forms and being: (1) the claim that forms are not being in themselves (since that is what God is) and are rather ontologically dependent upon the composite, which makes it difficult to see how the forms can be the causes either of sensible things or of human knowledge; and (2) that this claim results in an unsurpassable divide between God and creation within the order of essence/form, insofar as God, as a principle of being, cannot be said to cause the forms themselves directly but can only cause the fact that the forms happen to exist in this or that sensible thing. This is not to say that these problems could not be addressed by Aquinas, but rather that these are the weak spots in his account which a fellow scholastic thinker would target – as we indeed will see Bonaventure himself do in the following chapters.
1. **The Structure of Creation**

To begin with a position in Aquinas which is well known: for Aquinas, each creature is composed of form and matter.\(^{138}\) Form and matter come together to form a single hylomorphic composite (i.e. a substance).\(^{139}\) For Aquinas, it is the composite which is substance and which exists, not the forms. He writes: “[S]o the essence, according to which, a thing is called a being, cannot be either the form alone or the matter alone, but both.”\(^{140}\) The forms certainly do not appear to have any kind of Neoplatonic transcendence of being in themselves; rather they exist only as part of a composite.

Yet, Aquinas goes on to say that, while not existing in itself, the “form alone is in its own way the cause of this being [i.e. the being of the composite].”\(^{141}\) What does Aquinas mean when he says that the form alone does “in its own way” cause existence? Does he intend, after all, some kind of ontological priority here such as we find in the Neoplatonists? No, indeed. While the role of forms, for Aquinas, is to “make things actual,”\(^{142}\) this is not to say that forms are actualities unto themselves. Aquinas calls forms “actualizations or acts” not in the sense of having their own act of existence, apart from the composite, but in the qualified sense that they are necessary for the composite to be actually. The forms themselves are only actualized when they enter into composition: “[E]ven though form is not separable and a particular thing, it nevertheless becomes an actual being by means of the composite itself.”\(^{143}\) The form is what allows a particular cat to become an actual cat, and in this sense forms are called “acts” – but the form cat does not exist as an actuality independent from the composite, i.e. the form does not have any ontologically prior actuality in itself. Here, Aquinas draws a clear distinction between form and actuality, or form and being.

This brings us to Aquinas’ distinction between form and being, i.e. his essence/existence distinction. Aquinas’ stance on this point is made most clear in a context perhaps odd to the modern reader: his response to the question of whether angels have a material component. For Aquinas, angels exist as pure intelligences (i.e. pure forms), not as composites of form and matter. Perhaps we might think that angels,

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\(^{138}\) I am assuming this is already known by the reader, but I am summarizing these points because we will see Bonaventure argue against positions similar to those of Aquinas regarding the composition of creatures.

\(^{139}\) **DEE** 1.6 (p. 33 of Maurer’s translation). Here we are referring to material substances, not angels or God.

\(^{140}\) **DEE** II.3 (p. 36). “Unde oportet quod essentia, qua res denominatur ens, non tantum sit forma neque tantum materia, sed utrumque....”

\(^{141}\) **DPN** I.17-18 (pp. 80-81). “Et quia forma facit esse in actu, ideo forma dicitur esse actus.”

\(^{142}\) **In Meta.** VII.1293 (p. 437 in Rowan’s translation). “Forma autem, etsi non sit separabilis, et hoc alicui, tamen per ipsam compositum fit ens actu, ut sic posset esse separabile, et hoc alicu.”
lacking materiality and being pure forms, would also be pure being and pure actuality. To the contrary, Aquinas asserts: “Substances of this kind, though pure forms without matter, are not absolutely simple; they are not pure act but have a mixture of potentiality.”\textsuperscript{144} Were angels pure actualizations, they would simply be God – since God alone is pure act. Thus, while not combined of form and matter, they rather are combined of being and form: “But there is in them a composition of form and being. That is why the commentary on the Book of Causes says that an intelligence is that which has form and being; and by form is here understood the quiddity itself or simple nature.”\textsuperscript{145} And again: “[The being of intellectual substances] is other than their essence, though their essence is without matter.”\textsuperscript{146} Something can be pure form without being pure existence or without being pure actuality – here, the decisive break with Neoplatonism! For Aquinas, all substances (except God) acquire their existence from another. Forms in themselves, rather, only have the potentiality for existence. Aquinas writes: “Everything that receives something from another is potential with regard to what it receives, and what is received in it is its actuality. The quiddity or form, therefore, which is the intelligence, must be potential with regard to the being it receives from God, and this being is received as an actuality.”\textsuperscript{147}

The question now is: from where does the form acquire esse, existence? And the answer: from God, who is pure esse and pure actuality.

With this distinction between essence and existence, we can see even more clearly that the form, for Aquinas, is not sufficient for giving being to the composite. For, as we see above, the form has no existence to give.\textsuperscript{148} While a heart is necessary for a human being to exist actually, it does not give a human being existence in the first place: one’s parents do this. Similarly, while the form is necessary for the substance to exist actually, it does not confer being itself to the substance; rather, God does this as he is the first cause of being.

This hylomorphism in Aquinas, as we will see, is very different from the reading which Bonaventure will provide. Indeed, while Bonaventure takes Aristotle to mean that the forms themselves are what exist (i.e. have esse), Aquinas takes quite the opposite to be the case. While we will leave the task of examining how Bonaventure

\textsuperscript{144} DEE IV.6 (p. 55). “Huiusmodi ergo substantiae quamvis sint formae tantum sine materia, non tamen in eis est omnimoda simplicitas nec sunt actus purus, sed habent permixtionem potentiae.”

\textsuperscript{145} DEE IV.2 (pp. 52-53). “Unde in anima vel in intelligentia nullo modo est compositio ex materia et forma, ut hoc modo accipiat essentia in eis sicut in substantiis corporalibus, sed est ibi compositio formae et esse. Unde in commento IX propositionis libri de causis dicitur quod intelligentia est habens formam et esse, et accipitur ibi forma pro ipsa quiditate vel natura simplici.”

\textsuperscript{146} DEE V.4 (p. 63). “Secundo modo invenitur essentia in substantiis creatis intellectualibus, in quibus est aliud esse quam essentia earum, quamvis essentia sit sine materia.”

\textsuperscript{147} DEE IV.8 (p. 57). “Omne autem quod recipit aliquod ab alio est in potentia respectu illius, et hoc quod receptum est in eo est actus eius. Oportet ergo quod ipsa quiditas vel forma, quae est intelligentia, sit in potentia respectu esse, quod a Deo recipit; et illud esse receptum est per modum actus.”

\textsuperscript{148} An exception to this would be the form of the human soul, which does have being independently of the body. See, for example, the position developed in Quaestiones de anima, q. 1.
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draws his reading out of Aristotle for our later chapters, let us here look at how Aquinas develops his reading.

While someone of a Bonaventurian mindset would see Aristotle’s claim that substance (taking substance to mean “form”) possesses separability and individuality as indicating an ontological priority of the forms, Aquinas rather qualifies this claim with respect to the forms: “[E]ven though form is not separable and a particular thing, it nevertheless becomes an actual being by means of the composite itself; and therefore in this way it can be both separable and a particular thing” – i.e. as a particular sensible composite. The form’s “separability” (or better, “independence”) thus is not as form per se but only insofar as the form is part of the composite substance, which is to say that form, at its core, has no ontological independence from the composite.

Aristotle’s further remark that it is the form which is the primary substance is then interpreted by Aquinas as referring only to forms of artefacts, not of natural things – in the sense that the forms of artefacts have a primary existence in the mind of the artisan. Aquinas writes: “[Aristotle] also calls this the ‘first substance’, i.e. the first form; and he does this because the form present in the matter of things made by art proceeds from the form present in the mind.” Nevertheless, Aquinas makes clear, “in the case of natural things, the opposite is the case” – i.e. natural forms exist in and dependent upon the matter from which, in turn, they are abstracted by a mind which knows them. It is perhaps ambiguous in the text whether Aristotle’s remark is to be applied only to the forms of artefacts or extends to natural forms as well – particularly since Aristotle himself does not provide us with the caveat to his remark as Aquinas does.

Again, when Aristotle identifies the forms with actuality, which also seems to imply an ontological priority of form, Aquinas finds a way to circumvent this conclusion: “[A] thing’s substance or form or specifying principle is a kind of actuality; and from this it is evident that actuality is prior to potency in substance or form.” Here, Aquinas first of all equates form with a “specifying principle” (i.e. the prin-

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149 *Meta.* VII.1 1028a13, VII.3 1029a27. “For it is accepted that separability and individuality belong especially to substance.” It is interesting however that Aquinas takes it for granted that the substance which is separable and individual in this passage is the forms – the easier way to take it is simply as referring to sensible composites (or God), asserting that they are separable and individual.

150 *In Meta.* VII.1293 (p. 437). “Forma autem, etsi non sit separabilis, et hoc aliquid, tamen per ipsam compositum fit ens actu, ut sic possit esse separabile, et hoc aliquid.”

151 *Meta.* VII.7 1032a32-1032b6.

152 *In Meta.* VII. 1404 (p. 468). “Et hoc etiam nominat primam substantiam, idest primam formam. Et hoc ideo, quia a forma quae est in anima nostra, procedit forma quae est in materia in artificialibus; in naturalibus autem e contrario.”

153 *Meta.* VII.1404 (p. 468). “… in naturalibus autem e contrario.”

154 *Meta.* IX.8 1050a3-4. “… evidently, therefore, substance or form, is actuality.”

155 *In Meta.* IX.1866 (p. 617). “…dicens, quod manifestum est ex praedictis, quod substantia et forma et species est actus quidam. Et ex hoc manifestum est, quod actus est prior quam potentia secundum substantiam et formam.”
principle which designates the species of the composite, for example, as the form of cat designates a cat as a cat). Secondly, Aquinas designates the form as a “kind” of actuality, meaning that the form is not actuality per se, but that it is actuality only in the sense of being the specifying principle of a composite within that composite. For Aquinas, it is clear that form is not itself actuality; rather, actuality is distinct from and “prior to potency” in form – the form possesses potency and hence is actuality only in a derivative sense. This is all to say, calling the form the actuality of the sensible composite has little ontological weight: the form does not actually exist independently of the composite and so properly speaking it is not actuality in itself. It just happens that whenever a particular exists actually, it has finally become whatever the form has designated it to be. Indeed, this undermines the claim to a great extent that forms are in any real sense the causes of sensible things. A cause has to be ontologically prior to its effects but on Aquinas’ account the forms are quite plainly ontologically posterior. While they are necessary parts of the composite, their existence is wholly dependent on the composite.

The next question to ask is whether for Aquinas these forms are individual or whether they are universal. This is not, however, a question with a simple and clear answer, for Aquinas’ notion of universals is to a great extent a disputed issue among scholars. Brian Leftow writes:

... to Copleston, [Aquinas] is a resemblance-nominalist; to Armstrong, a “concept nominalist”; to Edwards and Spade, “almost as strong a realist as Duns Scotus”; to Gracia, Pannier, and Sullivan, neither a realist nor nominalist; to Hamlyn, the Middle Ages’ “prime exponent of realism” ...; to Wolterstorff, just inconsistent.156

It is fair, however, to say that Aquinas does not maintain that universal forms have an existence in themselves, independent from their composition in sensible things. Does this mean that universals qua universals exist in particulars? Probably not.157 It rather seems that Aquinas wishes to say that only individual forms (i.e. particularized universals) exist. Nevertheless, his position is at least a conceptualism (or a nominalism less “austere” than Ockham’s), insofar as from this individual form we can abstract to universal forms, which exist only in the mind (i.e. as concepts). This, however, was considered by many scholastic thinkers to be far from a satisfactory answer to the problem of universals. To Ockham, both the position that the universal itself exists in the sensible (which does not seem to be Aquinas’ position) as well as the position that only a particularized/individualized form exists in the composite, from which we abstract to a universal (which does seem to be Aquinas’

157 In certain places Aquinas very explicitly denies that universals exist anywhere outside of the mind. In other places he is more unclear as to whether the forms of things are universal or individual. The clearest place where Aquinas seems to indicate that forms are individual is when he argues that angels are pure form – if forms were universal, this would be incoherent since one angel cannot itself be a universal.
position), are positions which may be easily dismissed: universals cannot exist in particulars since something cannot be both universal and particular at once, and an individual form is insufficient for abstraction to the universal.\footnote{There is much more to both of these arguments, which we will address in chapter 4. I am assuming that the reader, however, is fairly familiar with Ockham’s objections to Aquinas. See: \textit{Ordinatio} I, d. 2, q. 7 and 8.} Bonaventure himself will make arguments to a very similar effect, as we will see in chapter 4, targeting the following two questions which are left somewhat unanswered in Aquinas’ account: (1) if the forms have no ontological standing in themselves (i.e. as actuality) and are not in any way prior to the sensible thing, how can they be said to be the cause of any sensible thing? and (2) if they are particular, how can they ground knowledge of universals?

2. Participation

Given that Aquinas does not consider universals in themselves to have being independent of the composite in which they are instantiated, what becomes of his understanding of participation? Due to the fact that Aquinas often seems vague on exactly what he means when he discusses participation and that his use of the word “participation” itself is rather sparse, the concept of participation in Aquinas’ philosophy has been the subject of much debate in secondary scholarship. Accordingly, in this section I discuss not only Aquinas’ own texts pertaining to the concept of participation but also contemporary commentators on this concept in Aquinas, in order to argue for my own position, namely that there is no way to skirt around the impossibility in Aquinas’ thought of a direct participation of creatures in God via their intelligible nature, as some scholars have attempted to do.

In his commentary on Boethius’ \textit{De Hebdomadibus}, Aquinas provides his most detailed account of participation. Aquinas defines participation quite succinctly in the following way: “For ‘to participate’ is, as it were, ‘to grasp a part.’”\footnote{\textit{BDH} II.70 (p. 18). “Est autem participare quasi partem capere.”} He continues to say that when a creature ‘receives in a particular way that which belongs to another in a universal way, it is said ‘to participate’ in that, as human being is said to participate in animal because it does not possess the intelligible structure of animal according to its total commonality; and in the same way, Socrates participates in human.”\footnote{\textit{BDH} II.70 (p. 18). “Et ideo quando aliquid particulariter recipit id quod ad alterum pertinet universaliter, dicidut participare illud, sicut homo dicitur participare animal quia non habet rationem animalis secundum totam communatatem; et eadem ratione Socrates participat hominem.”} Aquinas then notes that creatures can be something either through their essence (\textit{per essentiam}), i.e. simply having an essence, or through participation (\textit{per participationem}). Furthermore, he asserts that “to be \textit{per essentiam} and \textit{per participationem} are opposites.”\footnote{\textit{BDH} III.40 (p.32). “... in ista quæstione supponitur quod aliquid esse per essentiam et per participationem sunt opposita.”} In the first case, \textit{per essentiam}, a cat can be a cat
only if it possesses the essence of cat, and thus it is a cat through its essence, per essentiam. Here, we may note that for a Neoplatonist of course a cat is a cat rather per participationem.

Now let us look more closely at what Aquinas means when he says that creatures can be something per participationem. Regarding per participationem, Aquinas provides us with three different cases. Generally, in the secondary literature, the first two are either grouped together\textsuperscript{162} or separated out into two different types of participation,\textsuperscript{163} while the third is universally treated as a type of participation unto itself. The first case of participation is universally acknowledged to be a “logical participation.” Aquinas gives as examples of this logical participation: man participates in animal, and Socrates in man.\textsuperscript{164} This is to say, a species participates in the wider genus, and a particular participates in a species. Scholars have called this distinction merely logical, as opposed to real, due to the fact that Aquinas, with his notion of immanent forms, doesn’t consider a species or genus to have any independent existence, e.g., animality as a universal exists only insofar as it is in particular animals. Cornelio Fabro explains this point: “[A]s far as their ontological content is concerned, genera and species are present in their respective subjects and must therefore be predicated essentially (secundem [per] essentiam) and not by participation (per participationem)” – this Fabro attributes to Aquinas’ appropriation of the “Aristotelian doctrine of immanence.”\textsuperscript{165} This is to say, for Aquinas, man is animal per essentiam ontologically, because the species animal is really present in and dependent upon him. However, logically, one may also say that man “participates” in animal because man is “participating” in a name which we give to many different creatures. In this way, logical participation and being something per essentiam may work in conjunction with one another. When only an object’s intelligible content is considered, i.e. when the object is considered logically not ontologically, species (such as man) may at the same time be said to “participate” in genera (such as animal), or particulars (such as Socrates) may be said to participate in species (such as man). Yet, ontologically speaking, Socrates is animal or man per essentiam, because the forms of animal and man are present in him and in this sense, he does not participate in them.

The position that this type of participation is only logical also makes sense of a claim which Aquinas makes in his Commentary on the Metaphysics and which seems to contradict what he says in his De Hebdomadibus: “Man is animal essen-

\textsuperscript{162} For example, Fabro and Geiger.

\textsuperscript{163} For example, Wippel and Doolan.

\textsuperscript{164} BDH II.70 (p. 18).

tially, not merely something participating in animal."\footnote{166}{In Meta. VII.1328 (p. 445). “Homo enim est animal essentialiter, non solum aliquid animalis participans. Homo enim est quod verum est animal.”} Didn’t Aquinas clearly state in his *De Hebdomadibus* that to be something by essence and to be something by participation are opposites? Then how can man be an animal by essence and participation? In order to make sense of these two seemingly contradictory statements, it must be that the participation to which Aquinas refers in the *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, i.e. man participating in animal, is only a *logical* participation – in which sense *per participationem* is not opposite to *per essentiam*, for in the one sense we are speaking logically and in the other ontologically. Socrates participates in man *logically* but is man *ontologically* (i.e. through his essence).

Turning now to Aquinas’ second type of participation, we find this one to be not merely logical but real or ontological.\footnote{167}{See: John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2000), 98. See also: Gregory Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2008), 198.} Aquinas illustrates this second type of participation by giving the examples of a subject participating in an accident and matter participating in form. This second type of participation is very similar to the first (leading some to group the two together),\footnote{168}{We will discuss more precisely why they are grouped together momentarily.} and in fact, Aquinas himself seems almost to equate the two, writing: “Socrates participates in man [i.e. the first type of participation]. Similarly, a subject participates in accident and matter in form [i.e. the second type of participation].”\footnote{169}{BDH II.70 (p. 18). “... Socrates participat hominem; similiter etiam subjectum participat accidens, et materia formam...”} The distinction between the first and the second cases of participation is that in the second matter *really* receives a form and a substance *really* receives an accident; while, in the first case, humanity doesn’t really receive animality (because neither humanity nor animality have existence in themselves), or Socrates doesn’t really receive humanity (rather, he simply is humanity *per essentiam*) – we only speak of the latter two examples as being cases of logical participation.

The third type of participation is also understood as real and is markedly different from the first two, inasmuch as Aquinas explains it as an effect participating in its cause. This relationship of participation is that of beings (*entia*) participating in being (*esse*),\footnote{170}{Gregory Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2008), 199. For a more detailed exposition of this concept, see: John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being for Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2000), 98–104.} i.e. creatures participating in God. This is the most important type of participation for our purposes in this chapter since it, like Neoplatonic participation, concerns the relationship between effect and cause.
Let us, then, look more in depth at how scholars have interpreted this case of participation and its relationship to the others. Fabro combines the first two cases of participation into one, calling them both “predicamental-univocal participation”; Aquinas’ third case, i.e. between cause and effect, he calls “transcendental-analogical participation.”

Of predicamental-univocal participation, Fabro writes: “[A]ll the participants have in themselves the same formality according to their essential content and the participated does not exist in itself, but only in the participants (an Aristotelian moment in Thomistic participation).”

In grouping the first two cases of participation together, as they both concern the formality of a substance, Fabro’s predicamental participation can be either ontological or logical; for Fabro, when participation refers to participation in essence (such as Socrates in man), it is logical, but when it refers to an accident participating in a subject or matter in form, the participation is ontological.

Furthermore, Fabro calls predicamental participation in Aquinas univocal because the participant (e.g., cat) entirely possesses the participated (e.g., the white) as part of its own existence; there is only one way in which white-ness exists, as part of a substance, e.g., in a cat. Thus, predicamental-univocal participation allows us to make a univocal predication: the cat is white. Logical predicamental-univocal participation, e.g., Socrates participating in man, also, quite clearly, allows a univocal predication: Socrates is a man. For Fabro, the ontological/logical distinction matters less than the point that both of these cases of participation admit of univocal predication – and this is why he groups the first two types of participation together, and it is what distinguishes them from the third.

Fabro considers Aquinas’ third case of participation, i.e. an effect participating in its cause, to be “the strongest meaning of participation” insofar as it concerns not just predication but the very cause of the existence of creatures. Fabro explains this type of participation in the following way: “[P]articipants have in themselves only a «similitudine degradata» of the participated which subsists in itself, outside of them....” This type of participation is clearly analogical because the participated is shared by all the participants according to their differing degrees and is not entirely possessed by any one of the participants. Fabro is clear here that this second type of

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172 Ibid. 317-318. “… nel primo tutto i partecipanti hanno in sé la stessa formalità secondo tutti il suo contenuto essenziale ed il partecipato non esiste in sé, ma solo nei partecipanti (momento aristotelico della partecipazione tomistina)” (my translation).

173 Ibid. “il significato più forte di partecipazione.”

participation does not mean that we consider, for example, cats as participating in varying degrees in the form of cat-ness. Rather, this participation is the way in which beings (entia) participate in esse. A cat participates more or less in esse, the more or less it exists; its formal content is not the concern of this type of participation – at least on Fabro’s reading. Fabro further makes clear how this type of participation is dependent on a real distinction between essence and existence, as well as the composition of the two in creatures. He writes: “[S]ince the essence of a creature has also its own participated act of being (actus essendi), its actualization is not merely a relation of extrinsic dependence; rather, it is based on the act of esse in which it participates and which it preserves within itself and is the proper terminus of divine causality.”

This is to say, creatures participate in God because God is present to and in them, insofar as they exist, via their esse.

Louis-Bertrand Geiger, however, provides a much more Platonic reading of participation in Aquinas’ thought. Like Fabro, he divides participation into two kinds which he calls “participation by composition” (i.e. the first two cases given by Aquinas) and “participation by similitude or formal hierarchy” (i.e. the third case). Participation by composition “is founded essentially on the duality of a subject which receives and an element which is received.” Here Geiger says, “One may define [participation by composition] in the following way: participation is the reception, by a subject playing the role of matter, and consequently the possession of an element, playing the role of form.” This account of the first kind of participation is similar to Fabro’s, except that Geiger stresses that this participation, insofar as it involves composition, results in limitation. In this case, for example, an already existing cat receives the form of white-ness, and in doing so, it limits the form of white-ness within itself.

Geiger grounds his second kind of participation, referring to Aquinas’ example of the relationship between cause and effect, in the unequal statuses of perfections within the essences of creatures – here is where Geiger sees a Platonic participation

176 Nonetheless, despite the fact that there is no participation in the order of form, Fabro considers Aquinas’ concept of participation as being in continuity with Platonic participation, inasmuch as it still involves imitation of the object in which things participate, i.e. participation involves “harmony as «εἰκών», «μίμησις» which was present already in later Plato, and which Saint Thomas found supported by the continuing speculation of Neoplatonism, and of Saint Augustine in particular.” Cornelio Fabro, La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione Secondo S. Thommaso D’Aquino (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1950), 318. “…intesa come «εἰκών», «μίμησις», che era presente già nell’ultimo Platone, e che S. Tommaso trovava avvalorata dalla speculazione successiva del Neoplatonismo e di S. Agostino in particolare.”
178 Ibid., 27. “…se fonde essentiellement sur la dualité d’un sujet récepteur et d’un élément reçu....”
179 Ibid., 28. “On peut définir de la manière suivante: la participation est la réception et conséquemment la possession d’un élément, jouant le rôle de forme, par un sujet le rôle de matière.”
in Aquinas’ thought. He explains: “[P]articipation expresses the status, diminished, particularized, and, in this sense, participated, of an essence each time that it is not realized in the absolute plenitude of its formal content.” The essences of things imitate in different degrees their object of imitation (pure esse) and thus more or less participate in it. This results in a more primary limitation in beings within their very essences because this limitation allows the subject to exist in the first place. Geiger considers that his first notion of participation, participation by composition, only accounts for limitation involving subject and accident. Thus, a prior method of limitation, participation by “similitude or formal hierarchy,” is necessary to account for there being a subject in the first place which may then take on further composition. The subject must already exist in a certain way as a limitation of God’s esse, i.e. by having an essence. For example, a cat must already exist as a cat, as a limitation of esse, before it can be termed a white cat or a brown cat or a tall cat or a small cat, etc.

Of this primary limitation within the order of being, Geiger writes: “[T]he essence that participates in existence is itself a participation in the First Perfection of which it may give only a limited and fragmentary aspect.” This is all to say that before there can be any kind of composition in a subject, there must be a certain way for this subject to exist, “the way it exists” being its essence. Furthermore, in order for this essence to come about, it must participate in perfection (i.e. being), of which it has only a small aspect, of which it is a limitation. For Geiger, participation in the most important sense is thus essence participating in esse because essence is the limitation of esse, i.e. esse in only one particular way.

The key point of distinction, then, between Geiger and Fabro is their respective understandings of the way in which they account for limitation among existing things, which then leads them to have different understandings of Aquinas’ third case of participation, i.e. between cause and effect. Geiger accounts for the primary limitation in beings by looking to participation by similitude (i.e. essences more or less achieving a likeness to God’s perfection), while Fabro looks simply to the composition of essence and existence within a creature, with the existence alone of the creature participating in God’s esse. While Geiger still does certainly maintain a distinction between essence and existence and a necessary composition of the two in all creatures, he doesn’t consider it sufficient for limitation; rather, creatures are limited most directly and primarily by the fact that they are participants through their essence in God’s esse, i.e. while God is being itself, creatures are only being in a certain specific way, i.e. respective of their essence.

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180 Ibid., 29. “La participation exprime l’état diminué, particularisé, et, en ce sense, participé, d’une essence chaque fois qu’elle n’est pas réalisé de son contenu formel.”
181 Louis-Bertrand Geiger, La Participation dans la Philosophie de S. Thomas d’Aquin (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1942), 469. “... l’essence qui participe à l’existence est elle-même un participation de la Perfection Première, dont elle ne donne qu’un aspect limité et fragmentaire.”
182 Geiger seems to be missing the fact that before something can be in a particular way (i.e. have an essence), it needs simply to be in the first place.
However, Fabro (rightly) considers Geiger’s position to be a threat to Aquinas’ claim that there is a real distinction between essence and existence: Geiger seems to be too closely equating essence and existence, insofar as he considers that participation of a creature’s essence in being (esse) is primary – as opposed to Fabro’s assertion that it is the creature’s being which participates in being, not the creature’s essence.\(^{183}\) Perhaps Geiger is reading a bit too much Neoplatonism into Aquinas by saying that it is the essences of creatures which participate most directly and most primarily in being, thereby narrowing the distinction between essence and esse. It seems that on Geiger’s reading, if the essence primarily participates in esse, the essence itself would acquire a primary existence in relation to the composite – it seems now that the forms would have a kind of existence as limitations of being, in a way similar to the ontological status of the forms in a Neoplatonic system.

However, even if we take Geiger’s position not to undermine Aquinas’ essence/existence distinction, he still has not quite managed to retain a Neoplatonic participation via the essences of things as we have seen in the Christian Neoplatonists – for Aquinas, essences participate in God, even on Geiger’s reading, only insofar as they exist, not what they exist as. To put this into Geiger’s language of limitation: essences are a limitation, but of what? Of esse, and it is this relation to esse which causally links them to God, not their limitation per se. The form of cat, even on Geiger’s reading, only participates in being not in its own pre-contained existence in God, as Dionysius would have it.

To entertain now a third interpretation, John F. Wippel considers that Geiger and Fabro’s positions may be brought into harmony with one another. He agrees with Fabro on the point that there must be a composition of esse and essentia to account for limited instantiations of esse in creatures, the esse which then participates in God’s esse, i.e. transcendental-analogical participation. However, Wippel also grants to Geiger that participation by similitude ensures the limitations which account for the essences of creatures, in the sense that each creature imitates God’s essence (his esse) in a particular way, i.e. through its essence as a limitation of God’s being. Thus, with respect to Aquinas’ notion of participation between cause and effect, Wippel maintains that both “transcendental-analogical participation” and “participation by similitude or formal hierarchy” may be found in Aquinas’ philosophy. However, according to Wippel, Aquinas’ theory of participation stresses the former over the latter because the former more clearly shows the causal relationship of creatures to God. Wippel writes: “Creatures actually exist because God wills them to exist and efficiently causes them. But God can will a creature of a certain kind to exist only if it can exist. And it can exist only if it is viewed by God as a

possible way of imitating the divine essence.” This is to say, first of all, that God wills into being those creatures which can imitate him, and thus the primary sense in which he causes creatures is that he causes their existence. Then, secondarily, insofar as a creature exists as this or that, i.e. as a possible way of imitating God, it can be said that the essence participates in God’s existence. Essences certainly have some kind of existence insofar as they are part of creatures (otherwise Aquinas would be a nominalist), and so they must in some way, albeit secondarily, due to their dependence on the creature, also participate in God’s being. Thus, while granting that forms can in this highly qualified sense participate in God, Wippel can avoid Geiger’s claim that the forms primarily participate in God’s being, which would make the forms far too Neoplatonic, verging on the claim that they have an existence unto themselves apart from the composite. Rather, creatures more primarily participate in God by the very fact that they exist (their esse) and, secondarily, by the particular way in which they exist (their essence).

Wippel makes this last point clear: “To this I would add, in order to forestall any possible misunderstanding, that this is not to imply that the creaturely essence enjoys any actual reality in itself apart from the divine essence prior to its actual creation in an existing entity together with its corresponding act of being.” To put a bit more stress on this point for our purposes in this chapter: respective of what Aquinas writes about participation, essences only participate in God insofar as they exist; they do not participate in God qua essence, but rather qua part of an existing creature. This is to say, participation, whether through the esse or the essence of a creature, for Aquinas, is always participation in God’s being and thus ultimately confined to the order of esse.

3. Participation in the Fourth Way?

Granted that Aquinas’ (very brief) discussions of participation in the Commentary on Boethius’ De Hebdomadibus and the Commentary on the Metaphysics do not provide us with a participation via the order of essence, perhaps his discussion of God’s causality in the Fourth Way does. Here, we are turning to the Fourth Way in particular because many scholars have singled out the Fourth Way as a place where Aquinas seems to imply participation in God via the very forms of things – insofar as the Fourth Way is “based on the grades [i.e. of perfection] found in things.”

The starting point for Aquinas’ argument here is the question: Why are some things better and truer and more perfect than others? There must be something which is the best, most true, and most perfect. For Aquinas, whatever is the best,

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185 Ibid.
186 ST I, q. 2, a. 3, p. 14. “Quarta via sumitur ex gradibus qui in rebus inveniuntur.” Translations of ST are my own.
most true, and most perfect, is that which is the most “fully in being”\(^{187}\) – here an equation of being and perfection. Indeed, whatever exists fully as being “causes [being] in others” just as fire, the hottest thing, “causes all other things to be hot.”\(^{188}\) That which causes being (and goodness and perfection) in all other things is God. In this way, we move from seeing relative perfection in things to the claim that there is one perfection (i.e. God), just as we move from seeing relative hotness in things to the claim that there is one source of hotness (i.e. fire).

Does this not bring to mind Geiger’s account of participation which was likewise based on the relative perfection of things with regard to their formal content? Or, as van Steenberghen, sounding very Neoplatonic, writes of the Fourth Way: “Among the imperfections which we discern in the universe, there are some which are possessed by different degrees, all limited. This ordering of limited perfections implies a reference to absolute perfections: this is the principle of participation.”\(^{189}\) Indeed, van Steenberghen is correct: here, we come upon participation in Aquinas’ thought, a point which van Steenberghen explicitly ties to the Neoplatonic influence of Dionysius and the \emph{Liber de Causis}.\(^{190}\) However, unlike the participation of the Neoplatonists, this participation does not occur between sensibles and forms, and in turn between forms and God, but directly between sensibles and God. Thus, the relationship is Neoplatonic structurally, but our terms have been reshuffled: forms are not principles of being – they have been replaced with one, and only one, principle of being, God.

In the Fourth Way, as we saw above, there is one cause of being in things which exist, just as there is one cause of heat in things which are hot. Immediately we can see that because Aquinas is looking for one cause of being, participation in essences which would amount to a real Neoplatonic participation is not going to be found in the Fourth Way. The point of the Fourth Way is to identify the cause of being certainly not with a plurality of essences or forms, but with one God of being – this being the way in which Aquinas “proves” God’s existence.

We can further see that Aquinas’ mentioning of relative perfections does not refer to participation via essence. Doolan, for example, rightly points out that these

\(^{187}\) ST I, q. 2, a. 3, p. 16. “Est igitur aliquid quod est verissimum et optimum et nobilissimum et per consequens maxime ens....”

\(^{188}\) ST I, q. 2, a. 3, p. 16. “Quod autem dicitur maxime in aliquo genere est causa omnium quae sunt illius generis, sicut ignis qui est maxime calidus est causa omnium calidorum, ut in eodem libro dicitur.” For the reference Aquinas is making to Aristotle, see \emph{Meta.} IV. 3 (1005b11) and \emph{Post. An.} I.10 (76b23).


relative perfections mentioned in the Fourth Way do not refer to “comparing individuals within a species but instead, one type of being with another type of being,” and thus, “something cannot be, for example, more or less a triangle, an animal, or a man.” This is to say, the comparison which Aquinas is discussing in the Fourth Way is a broader sense of “comparison,” not one which would ground the objective ranking of things of the same kind, i.e. with regard to their intelligible content.

When I rank things of a kind, I have to rank them with reference to the form of the kind, i.e. the perfection of the kind. An example of this would be: “Verdi is better than Puccini.” When I make the statement that Verdi is better than Puccini, I do this with reference to the form, “composer” – and I make a judgment with reference to the intelligible content that Verdi is closer to that form, closer to the perfection “being a composer.” When, however, I compare Verdi with a spider, I refer not to a form because they are not of the same kind – rather, I compare Verdi to the spider only with reference to goodness itself. The key distinction between these two kinds of comparisons concerns the standard according to which I make the comparison. When I compare two composers (e.g., Verdi and Puccini), I compare them with reference to a standard which is a form. However, when I compare Verdi with a spider, I am comparing the act of existence of a man with the act of existence of a spider, and I can do this only with reference simply to the act of existence: being, or goodness itself (i.e. God). It is this is second type of comparison on which Aquinas rests his argument in the Fourth Way, not the first. Indeed, Aquinas indicates quite clearly the cause which he is discussing, i.e. that which would ground these comparisons, is rather that which “causes ... the perfections which [creatures] have” (i.e. their forms) – God is not the perfections (i.e. forms) but the cause of the perfections.

If Aquinas were referring to the first type of comparison, i.e. comparing particulars against a form, we might have our link to a notion of participation via essence. Yet, the only reference point which Aquinas provides us with is being, and thus we can find only the comparison between the “acts of existences” themselves (e.g., man and spider) not the comparison between particulars (e.g., this man and that man). Thus, it is clear that Aquinas builds his argument in the Fourth Way on the notion that kinds of things are better or worse the more or less they share a likeness to or, rather, participate in that principle of goodness, but a goodness which is equated only with being – that which is best and most perfect: God. The forms do not come into play here as being standards for perfection.

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191 Gregory Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2008), 67. Doolan, however, also tries – albeit in a different way – to assert a kind of participation in God via the formal content of things, as we will see in the next section.

192 *STI*, q. 2, a. 3, p. 16. “Ergo est aliquid quod est causa esse et bonitatis et cujuslibet perfectionis in omnibus rebus, et hoc dicimus Deum.”

193 Hence, any such comparisons between particulars with regard to their intelligible content would not have this ontological weight of being grounded in God, but would be merely logical.
Moreover, Aquinas reinforces the position that God is being/goodness and thereby causes goodness only with reference to the existence/actuality of his effects: ‘Being, as we understand it here, signifies the highest perfection of all: and the proof is that act is always more perfect than potentiality. Now no signate form is understood to be in act unless it be supposed to have being... Wherefore it is clear that being as we understand it here is the actuality of all acts, and therefore the perfection of all perfections.’ Here, clearly the perfection with regard to the formal content of things does not concern form qua form, but form qua its existence. Perfection in Aquinas’ thought does not refer to any kind of formal or intelligible perfection, but rather simply to the actualization of being – furthermore, being which is really distinct from essence/form. Thus, when Aquinas speaks of God as the perfection or goodness of every creature, he is doing so in the sense that God is the immediate cause of being in every creature, not of the creature’s being this or that (i.e. with respect to its essence/form).

4. Participation in Exemplar Causes?

The reading of Aquinas which I have been arguing for thus far may sound, however, like God is merely some general source of being without any connection to or knowledge of the formal aspect of his creation. We find such a notion in some Islamic philosophers who maintain that God causes only one general creature and then in turn all distinctions between creatures – i.e. the plurality of different forms in the natural world – are caused by secondary causes. Such indeed is not the case for Aquinas. We now must clarify how, for Aquinas, all the distinctions between creatures come from, i.e. are caused by, God. In order to cause creatures, God must have knowledge of them. Thus, for God, there is a plurality of divine ideas, or exemplars. Aquinas writes: ‘In the Divine Mind there are exemplar forms of all the creatures, which are called ideas, as there are forms of artefacts in the mind of an artisan.’

In this chapter, I have been trying to show that for Aquinas the connection between God and his creation is limited to the order of existence. However, it may seem that Aquinas’ notion of exemplars provides a path to understanding a relationship between God and his creation also through the order of essences – this is to say, while a creature’s intelligible content does not participate in God himself, it nonetheless participates in an exemplar in God’s mind. It is interesting, however, to note that not until more recent scholarship on Aquinas was this doctrine of divine exemplars

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195 For example, Avicenna.

196 Quodl. 8, a. 2, p. 301. “Respondeo dicendum, quod in mente divina sint omnium creaturarum forme exemplares, quae ideae idcuntur, sicut in mente artificis formae artificatorum.”
paid much attention. This is due to the fact that Aquinas himself almost nowhere mentions the exemplars or exemplar causation. Gilson observes: “[I]t is hardly an exaggeration to say that at the bottom everything St. Thomas said about the Ideas was in his view one more concession made to the language of a philosophy that was not really his own” – i.e. it was conceded to the authority of Augustine and Dionysius.\textsuperscript{197} Gilson’s position, accordingly, is that there is nothing more than the customary nod to exemplarism in Aquinas, and that exemplarism essentially plays no central role in his wider metaphysics. Contrary to this, scholars such as Doolan have attempted to show that Aquinas does indeed have a well-developed doctrine of exemplar causation. Here, I do not wish to argue whether or not this doctrine is central or even really part of Aquinas’ thought, but only that whatever Aquinas is developing that may look like exemplar causation is not going to provide a direct participatory link between God and the formal content of creatures – this is to say, it will be entirely different from the doctrine of exemplar causation which we will see in Bonaventure.

Let us then look at what (little) Aquinas himself says about exemplars. As an exemplar is a cause, that which an exemplar causes participates in the exemplar. Aquinas uses the image of an artisan and the artefact to illustrate the relationship between the exemplar and that which it causes. An artisan has in his mind a preexisting idea of the artefact which he then uses to create the artefact itself. For example, a carpenter has in his mind the idea of a house. He then builds a house according to this idea. Aquinas writes: “[A]n artisan produces a determinate form in matter by reason of the exemplar before him, whether it is the exemplar beheld externally or the exemplar conceived in the mind.”\textsuperscript{198} Just as the artefact receives a form, so do all things in nature: “this determination of forms must be reduced to the divine wisdom as its first principle, for the divine wisdom devised the order of the universe, which order consists in the variety of things.”\textsuperscript{199} Thus, just as there is an exemplar for the artefact in the artisan’s mind, so are there exemplars in God’s mind which “are not apart from the divine essence.”\textsuperscript{200} To these exemplars, creatures then bear a likeness, although “not as a man begotten is like the man begetting”\textsuperscript{201} but “as they (i.e. creatures) represent the divine ideas as the material house is like the house in the architect’s mind.”\textsuperscript{202} In this sense, God is an exemplar cause.

\textsuperscript{197} Etienne Gilson, \textit{The Christian Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas} (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 103.
\textsuperscript{198} \textit{ST} I, q. 44, a. 3, p. 16. “Artifex enim producit determinatam formam in materia, propter exemplar ad quod inspicit, sive illud sit exemplar ad quod extra intuetur, sive sit exemplar interius mente conceptum.”
\textsuperscript{199} \textit{ST} I, q. 44, a. 3, 16. “Haec autem formarum determinatio oportet quod reducatur, sicut in primum principium, in divinam sapientiam, quae ordinem universi excogitavit, qui in rerum distinctione consistit.”
\textsuperscript{200} \textit{ST} I, q. 44, a. 3, p. 16. “… tamen non sunt realiter aliud a divina essentia.”
\textsuperscript{201} \textit{ST} I, q. 44, a. 3, p. 18. “… ut homo genitus homini generanti…”
\textsuperscript{202} \textit{ST} I, q. 44, a. 3, p. 18. “Similitudinem secundum representationem rationis intellectae a Deo, ut domus quae est in materia, domui quae est in mente artificis.”
For Aquinas, moreover, the divine exemplars are not separate from God, just as we saw the forms or primordial causes are not distinct from God for Dionysius. Aquinas reasons for this unity between God and the exemplars, however, in a wholly different manner than we saw in our discussion of Dionysius. Dionysius establishes the existence of the forms in God as the forms are effects of God pre-contained in God, their cause. Aquinas, however, approaches this question by reasoning about God as an intellect which knows the forms. Aquinas considers that for an intelligible to be in act, it must be known by an intellect. Conversely, for an intellect to be in act, it must know its object.\(^{203}\) If the ideas were outside of God’s mind, neither the ideas nor God would be in act. The ideas, then, must be within and one with the mind of God: “[T]he divine intellect understands by no species other than the divine essence … nevertheless, the divine essence is the likeness of all things.”\(^{204}\) The divine intellect thus thinks itself, which generates an understanding of itself – this understanding which God has of himself is “the likeness not only of God himself understood, but also of all those things of which the divine essence is a likeness.”\(^{205}\) Aquinas continues: “In this way, therefore, through one intelligible species, which is the divine essence, and through one understood intention, which is the divine Word, God can understand many things.”\(^{206}\)

“Intention” is the key word here. The use of the word “intention” means that God does not contain in his mind the real being of the forms in which particulars participate. This would be altogether too Platonic and would violate Aquinas’ own position that there is a real distinction between essence and existence. The forms are not being, but are distinct from being – God alone is being. Hence, the forms exist in the mind of God not as ontologically one with God but only as intentional being.\(^{207}\) Thus, as Clarke writes: “[T]he divine ideas are now only the ‘signifying signs of things’ (intentiones rerum), not things themselves; their being is esse intentionale

\(^{203}\) SCG I, c. 51.6 (p. 186 of Pegis’ translation). “Furthermore, the intelligible in act is the intellect in act, just as the sensible in act is the sense in act. According as the intelligible is distinguished from the intellect, both are in potency, as likewise appears in the cause of the sense.” “Adhuc. Intelligenibile in actu est intellectus in actu: sicut et sensibile in actu est sensus in actu. Secundum vero quod intelligibile ab intellectu distinguitur, est utrumque in potentia, sicut et in sensu patet....”

\(^{204}\) SCG I, c. 53.5 (p. 189). “Intellectus autem divinus nulla alia specie intelligit quam essentia sua, ut supra ostensum est. Sed tamen essentia sua est similitudo omnium rerum.”

\(^{205}\) SCG I, c.53.5 (p. 189). “Per hoc ergo sequitur quod conceptio intellectus divini, prout seipsum intelligit, quae est verbum ipsius, non solum sit similitudo ipsius Dei intellecti, sed etiam omnium quorum est divina essentia similitudo.” Clearly this recalls Aristotle’s Nous which thinks itself. See In Meta. 2614 (p. 828).

\(^{206}\) SCG I, c. 53.5 (p. 186) (emphasis added). “Sic ergo per unam speciem intelligibilem, quae est divina essentia, et per unam intentionem intellectam, quae est verbum divinum, multa possunt a Deo intelligi.”

not *esse naturale* or *reale.* Furthermore, Clarke aptly points out that “this crucial distinction between *esse intentionale* and *esse naturale*, in terms of which alone the doctrine makes sense, is the one piece that has been conspicuously missing from the entire Platonic tradition,...”

What this comes down to is that when God conceives of his own divine essence, he is conceiving only of his own being. Aquinas writes: “But the divine essence comprehends within itself the nobilities of all beings not indeed compositely, but ... according to the mode of perfection. Now every form falls short of its perfection.”

This means that, despite Aquinas’ notion of exemplars, there is no real connection between the essences in the natural world and God via these exemplars; the only real connection, yet again, is to be found within the order of esse. Aquinas makes it quite clear that God understands the multiplicity of forms only “by understanding his essence (i.e. being) as imitable [in a multiplicity of ways].” Again, Aquinas writes: “[T]hese ideas though multiplied by their relations to things, in reality are not apart from the divine essence, according as the likeness to that essence can be shared diversely by different things.” There is only a multiplicity of ideas because there are multiple ways in which God’s essence (i.e. being) may be imitated. For Aquinas, the “multiplicity” of exemplars is merely the “manifold imitability in the divine essence according to the fulness of its perfection” (i.e. the fullness of its being).

As Wippel explains: “The notion that a divine idea expresses God’s understanding of his essence as imitable is crucial, just as is the point that the divine essence is imitated in different ways by different creatures....” If we consider God’s relationship to the multiplicity of his creation, there are many divine ideas; yet if we consider God’s knowledge of himself from God’s perspective, leaving creation out of it, there is but one idea. And this idea is of being.

Here, we can see quite clearly the difference between Aquinas’ notion of ideas in the mind of God and what we discussed in Dionysius. For Dionysius, God “knows” the forms in the sense that the forms are pre-contained in God as an effect


209 Ibid.

210 *SCG* I, c. 54.4 (p. 188). “Divina autem essentia in se nobilitates omnium entium comprehendit, non quidem per modum compositionis, sed per modum perfectionis, ut supra ostensum est. Forma autem omnis, tam praelia quam communis, secundum id quod aliquid ponit, est perfectio quaedam: non autem imperfectionem includit nisi secundum quod deficit a vero esse.”

211 *SCG* I, c. 54.4 (p. 188). “Intellectus igitur divinus id quod est praeprivationum unicumque in essentia sua comprehendere potest, intelligendo in quo eius essentiam imitetur, et in quo ab eius perfectione deficit unumquodque....”

212 ST I, q. 44. a. 3, p. 16. “Quae quidem, licet multiplicentur secundum respectum ad res, tamen non sunt realiter alii; a divina essentia, prout eius similitudo a diversis participari potest diversimode.”


is pre-contained in its cause – this signifying the real being of the natural forms within God. And this is all possible, as we have seen, because God is beyond being and can thereby contain the real being of the forms. For Aquinas, however, God is conceived more explicitly as an intellect which has knowledge, and in order to preserve God’s simplicity, God must know one thing: himself – and he is being. Accordingly, the natural forms can have only an intentional being in God’s mind.

Thus, even those who wish to defend the presence of a doctrine of divine exemplars in Aquinas’ thought must admit, as Doolan himself does “… that Thomas himself does not appear to have referred to created essence as being a ‘participation.”’ Moreover, Doolan further concedes: “The divine ideas, therefore, are not themselves participated but are rather participabilities of that likeness as known by God, that is, his knowledge of the way in which his essence can be participated by creatures.”

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we can first of all return to our theme of Augustinianism vs. Aristotelianism. From the above, we can see that the position that God is a principle of being is primarily an Augustinian position – while Aristotle, of course, asserts that God is goodness and actuality itself, it is Augustine who makes explicit that God is likewise being itself. Moreover, this position is quite clearly in opposition to the Neoplatonic claim that God is beyond-being. Nevertheless, we see a significant influence of Neoplatonism on Aquinas – here, by way of the basic structure of participation between creatures and God. This is to say, the causal relationship between God and creatures is Neoplatonic in the sense that what God causes bears a similitude to him and thereby “participates” in him – i.e. God is being itself, and he causes beings which are similar to him and thereby participate in his perfect, transcendent being. However, while in the Neoplatonists this schematic was applied to the forms, in Aquinas’ system it is applied to God. To compare, the Neoplatonic system functions in the following way:

![Diagram of Neoplatonic system]

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216 Ibid., 245.
Aquinas’ system, structurally similar, functions in the following way, but with God taking the place of the “one” over the many:

This understanding of participation, however, as we have seen, leads to the question in Aquinas of why and how there are many different kinds of beings, not only many different beings. In a Neoplatonic system, a form is only able to make what it is – the form of horse makes horses, and the form of tree makes trees – while Aquinas’ God, the “form” of being, is only capable of making beings, irrespective of their kind.

This system in Aquinas – while bearing a structure similar to a Neoplatonic relationship of participation, coupled with an Augustinian notion of God as being – is fleshed out with Aquinas’ reading of Aristotle. Here, I stress that Aquinas’ reading of Aristotle is indeed just that: a reading, not the reading. This point will become more apparent when we see yet another reading: that of Bonaventure.

Indeed, much of what will shape Bonaventure’s understanding of the forms, as well as his wider ontology, is the dissatisfaction with both the Neoplatonic tendency to separate the forms from sensible things, as well as with a medieval reading of Aristotle’s forms such as we see in Aquinas. And he is understandably dissatisfied: if one wants to defend a realism, Aquinas’ has left too many fronts undefended, i.e. the claim that the forms are ontologically dependent on their compositions is inconsistent with the claim that they can ground human knowledge, while the claim that God is being is inconsistent with the claim that he can directly cause the formal content of his creation. Indeed, these are the two fronts which Bonaventure will try to cover in his own understanding of forms, along with the way in which they are caused by God – as we will see in the following four chapters.