

To Be or Not To Be:
The Imprint of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd
on Aquinas's Philosophy of Being

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I. Prelude

The intellectual roots of Aquinas are embedded in his predecessors, not only in Aristotle and Plato, but also in the Islamic and Jewish writers, through whom he received the genius of the Greek civilization. Aquinas possessed a keen eye as much as he possessed an acute mind. He knew where to search for the truth. He was not an ordinary friar that merely relied on what was conventional and approved. He went out to search until his quest had been fulfilled. He was not an ordinary thinker who merely memorized manuals and repeated what others before him have said. He was the icon of the classic medieval scholar who recognized and respected the eminent possibility of the discovery of the truth even when faiths differed.

Aquinas consulted texts which were both Christian and non-Christian. He was more broad-minded than any of his contemporaries. He sought both Muslims and Jews in his desire to come to the truth. The medieval scholar of the twelfth century was centuries ahead of his times. He saw the rich possibilities which scholars of "unorthodox" persuasions could provide in terms of a different view on the character of philosophical inquiry that may accommodate a received faith. Aquinas pursued this broader view despite the counter pressures prevalent during his times.

The saint's younger years seemingly conditioned his mind and spiritual physiognomy towards an accommodation of the Muslims

and the Jews as a given in an overall intellectual geography. This, aside from Aquinas' mental persuasion, which was primarily argument-centered, made his mind open and unthreatened by issues of whatever stripe. It is not surprising therefore to find the thinker's mind substituting and composing his lexicon creatively and critically.

In this particular research, the influence of the Islamic philosophers, particularly ibn Sina and ibn Rushd, on the philosophy of Aquinas will be probed. The research will be limited to one principal text of Aquinas, namely *De Ente et Essentia*. This is the earliest of Aquinas' works and, although brief, is fundamental to his philosophy of Being and permeates his subsequent metaphysical expositions. It is here where Aquinas lays the foundations for his philosophy, sets out his originality, and recognizes his indebtedness to his intellectual roots.

II. The Aristotelian *Aporia*

A. *Stepping out of Plato's Shadows*

A particular metaphysical conundrum being debated during the middle ages was the confounding legacy bequeathed by Aristotle. In his desire to veer away from the *eidos* proposed by Plato, he masterfully crafted a metaphysics of his own, different from that of his master, but as much as problematic nonetheless.

Plato proposed a comprehensive and extensive metaphysical system so much so that Alfred North Whitehead would later remark that all subsequent philosophical inquiries are but a footnote to Plato's. In his system, reality exists in the ethereal Forms which are found outside the human exigencies. There exists a world of Forms in which we find the perfect Forms of the existing worldly realities. And indeed, the realities that we see around are but a copy of the perfect reality in the World of Forms. For instance, the horse that we see is but a copy of the perfect horse in the world of Forms. And this perfect Form of the horse embodies all the forms of other horses.

Aristotle, on the other hand, did not believe in the existence of an extra-terrestrial reality. For him, form resides in the individual, and not in any reality extrinsic to it. This form combines with the matter of the thing to make it an existing individual. And every existing individual, for Aristotle, is a substance. As a logical consequence

of this, every being is definable, in terms of its matter and form. However, the solution that Aristotle proposed created an aporetic by-product.

B. *The Enigmatic Ousia*

Aristotle veered away from Plato in his conception of the definable part in an individual thing. Whereas for Plato, it is clearly that the forms of material beings participate in the separate Forms; while for Aristotle, the forms of each individual thing are totally present in the material being and coincident with one another. But for this, Aristotle run into a conundrum.

The persistent problem that Aristotle left in his *Metaphysics* is the relationship of the existing individuals to their intelligible natures. For Aristotle, substance means the existing individual thing; but in another respect, he also refers substance to that "which makes something to be what it is."

In Aristotle's conception of the substance as individual, he may be referring to (1) the individual as individual, with all its characteristics that makes an individual what it is; and (2) the individual as part of the whole, with only the characteristics that it shares with other individuals. The first conception refers to the way of universals, that is, the classification of things according to their universal characteristics. While the second refers to the way of the concrete facts, that is, the empirical classification of things according to their definable characteristics. Thus, substance in the first sense is the entire individual, while in the second sense, it refers to the basic definable characteristic of a thing, as opposed to its accidental or secondary properties.

In sum, Aristotle designates a "primary" substance when referring to an existing thing, and a "secondary" substance when he refers to the intelligible nature of that individual existing thing. Now, which among these two has ontological primacy?

The reason for the *aporia* can be traced in Aristotle's conception of a pure science by which all properties of its object could be logically derived from its essence by a mathematical methodology. This logically demanding concept of "apodeixis" produced a dual conception of substance. The first of which refers to the individual

substance which is unknowable except in universal terms. Meanwhile, there is also an abstracted essence which seems to have a detached character apart from the individual existing thing.

Furthermore, in Aristotle's metaphysical system, he used Platonic terms without necessarily appropriating them properly. Thus, the terms that Plato used in his own metaphysical system seem to be taken out of context and not given a proper meaning in their new environment. Consequently, this made Aristotle's metaphysical system "coincident in outline but not in detail."¹ It must be pointed out that the ontology developed by Aristotle were the expansion of an insight designed to invalidate the Platonic system. His Plato-critique led him to an *aporia* that he himself acknowledged.²

Metaphysicians after Aristotle would try to contend with this persistent *aporia*, proposing solutions that would identify the "secondary substance" differently, and thus avoiding entirely the *aporia*. And most of the creative minds that would wrestle with this problem belong to the Islamic world.

III. Ibn Sina: The Essence-Existence Distinction

A. *The Muslim Neo-Platonist*

Al-Farabi was the founder of Islamic Neo-Platonism, but ibn Sina stands as the greatest exponent of that philosophy in the East.³ However, it would be unfair to label ibn Sina as purely neo-platonic for he also examined the philosophical system of Aristotle. His division of the sciences even resonates that of Aristotle.⁴ It is accurate to say that he did set out the authentic Aristotelian doctrine in his encyclopedic *al-Shifa'*, but he nonetheless expressed his disenchantment with it in a later disclaimer.⁵ On one important point, however, he not only differed with Aristotle but also veered away from him in terms of the aporetic points of his metaphysics.

¹ Booth 1983, 2.

² Metaphysics 999a24-25: "the hardest of all and the most necessary to examine." See also Metaphysics 1087a13.

³ Fakhry 1970, 147.

⁴ cf. Inati 1996, 233-234.

⁵ cf. Booth 1983, 107-108.

Ibn Sina ushered in a new level of understanding that gave appropriate expression to Aristotle's insistence on the primacy of the existing individual. And ibn Sina secured this new level of understanding by introducing the proper conceptual tools and their consequent distinction.

B. The Conceptual Framework

In the context of distinguishing necessary being (*wâjib al-wujûd*) from possible being (*mumkin al-wujûd*), Ibn Sina proposed the concept of *mawjûd* or *anniyya* as distinct from *mâhiyya*. Ibn Sina was not that much preoccupied with Aristotle's concern regarding the proper way of characterizing individuals so as to secure their exemplary status. He is more concerned with finding a way of characterizing essences so that their existence in things may be properly explained.⁶ However, this doesn't mean that existence and essence are apart, at least not in fact.

As regards the essence of possible beings, something other than itself must explain for the fact of its existence. The essence, in itself, is neither universal nor particular, one nor many. All the essence gives us is the fact of a thing being itself, and by itself it cannot account for its own existence. This is so because, for ibn Sina, all essences are essences of possible beings, and their proper character is that they require some other thing to make them exist. On the other hand, the necessary being has no essence (*mâhiyya*) except that it be necessary being, and this is its existence (*anniyya*).⁷ This necessary being is then a unity, while the rest of the contingent beings are a composite duality of essence and existence.

In the process of identifying a new mode of composition in contingent beings, ibn Sina introduced a radically new level of understanding being. The new mode of composition is elevated from matter and form to essence and some other factor that causes the individual thing to be or to exist. However, this factor has never been conceptually formulated consistently.

⁶ Burrell 1986, 60.

⁷ Burrell 1993, 65.

C. Clarification of Terminology

It would be tempting to conclude that ibn Sina was the first to propose the essence/existence distinction, identifying the factor of existence as such. But the terminology used by ibn Sina is at times vague and confusing. Perhaps it was the difficulty of completely identifying the factor of existence and giving a conceptual terminology proper to it. Or perhaps it could be the limits of language.

The conceptual pair *mâhiyya/anniyya* might be a good terminology to give conceptual form to essence/existence. *Mâhiyya* is clear enough to express the essence of a thing or that which makes the thing what it is. But as for *anniyya*, ibn Sina did not use it isolatedly or consistently to mean existence. Rather, it expresses "the real existence of a particular individual." Thus, it refers primarily to a thing's "state of being" rather than the factor that makes it exist.

The term that ibn Sina prefers to denote existence is *mawjûd*, which is the participial form of *wujûd* or being. In its loose or colloquial sense, *mawjûd* means being there, that is to say, being present. *Anniya*, in turn, can be rendered more accurately as "existent." Thus, in effect, the factor that makes the thing exist, "existence," is not yet conceptually captured.

D. The Elusive Existence

In the philosophical system of ibn Sina, we thus see the failure of the complete conceptualization of existence. Furthermore, another problem crops up regarding its status in contingent beings. Seemingly, this factor is added only to beings that do not necessarily exist. It appears that existence is a property contingently held by everything except by the first being who possesses it necessarily.

This point crops up in the system of ibn Sina because he begins with essence prior to universality or particularity. In short, he examined essence *per se*. And in doing so, he left out the factor of existence. But this is merely to highlight the great difference that exists between possible beings and the necessary being. Ibn Sina can therefore rightly say that "existence" happens to or comes to the essence of possible beings.

Some scholars contend that existence must not be viewed as an accident because doing so would require a primary existent upon which it can be an accident. But existence cannot be an accident since that would be contradictory, for it presupposes itself so that it can exist in another.⁸

At any rate, the misunderstanding that crops up is a by product of a translation of concepts to a different language. If the existing thing here is to be understood in terms of substance then there is no problem of terminology. But if it is to be understood as essence in itself, then "existence" can be construed as something that comes into it or happens into it so as to make it an existent.

As of now, we are assured that this new metaphysics fits nicely into both the Plotinian emanation scheme and to the Aristotelian prime mover. Ibn Sina was able to make a way out of the Aristotelian *aporia* by taking into consideration the Plotinian account of creation. And at the same time, he is able to underline the difference between the Creator and his creatures. But the notion of existence remains elusive.

IV. Ibn Rushd: Being and Perfection

A. *The Commentator*

One of the most revered scholars on the Aristotelian philosophical system is a Muslim thinker named ibn Rushd, or to Western scholars, Averroes. His place among the scholars of Aristotelian studies was so eminent that St. Thomas and other Western scholars of the Middle Ages alluded to him as "the Commentator" referring to his voluminous works and commentaries on Aristotle.

Ibn Rushd's introduction into the works of Aristotle was occasioned by the request of the caliph during his time, Abû Ya'qûb. The caliph found the works of Aristotle too abstruse to be understood. Thus, he needed an interpreter to clear up matters for him.⁹ Ibn Rushd then undertook the project of commenting on the works of Aristotle, or at least, in paraphrasing him.

⁸ cf. Burrell 1986, 62-63.

⁹ Fakhry 1970, 303.

Aside from his commentaries on the works of Aristotle, he also produced works directed against al-Farabi and ibn Sina. For ibn Rushd, both philosophers either misunderstood or distorted the philosophical system of Aristotle, thus contributing to the current state of his times where Aristotle is being confused with Plotinus, reconciled with Plato, declared to be a disciple of Hermes and even hailed as a venerable monotheistic sage.¹⁰

Although Ibn Rushd's contributions as Aristotle's commentator can never be undermined, nevertheless it would be simplistic to judge him on these works or on his polemics against the Muslim Neo-Platonists. Like others before and after him, he has pushed forward a new level of understanding in metaphysics.

B. On Essence and Being

Ibn Rushd attacks the starting point of ibn Sina's concept of being. For ibn Sina, essence can be conceptualized independently whether the object is actually existing or not. Thus, essence logically precedes existence. According to ibn Rushd, ibn Sina did not make the proper distinction between real or ontological being and conceptual or intentional being.

As another consequence of this error, ibn Sina proposes the "accidental" nature of existence, that is, it happens to or comes upon essence, thus causing it to exist or to come into being.¹¹ According to ibn Rushd, there is a distinction in being as existing and being as one, as proposed by Aristotle. Being as existing has an ontological meaning, and therefore cannot be an accident. But being as one has a numerical meaning, and as such it can be considered to have an accidental nature.

C. The Perfection of God

Ibn Rushd deals with the question of God, his existence and his attributes, in one of his major theological writings, *al-Kashf*. Consistent with the view of Aristotle that recognizes no distinction

¹⁰ Fakhry 1970, 302-304.

¹¹ Fakhry 1970, 322.

in the first principle between subject and predicate, essence and attribute. In doing so, he is rejecting the charge of al-Ghazali that philosophers are negators of divine attributes.

For his part, ibn Sina denies that we can ascribe to God any positive characterizations, so much so that he also denies any essence in the Supreme Being. In order to know God, the best thing that we can do is to negate all characteristics.

Ibn Rushd maintains that divine attributes are predicated to God by way of transcendence.¹² God has absolute transcendence towards what he produces. And so although we can ascribe will and knowledge to God, nevertheless, these perfections are found in the simplicity of his Being.

V. Aquinas: The Philosophy of Being

A. *The Eclectic Philosopher*

In most philosophy manuals, Aquinas is usually described as an Aristotelian philosopher. However, recent research efforts conclude that he inherited greatly from the thoughts of Plato. In addition, it shall be shown here that he also benefited from the Islamic philosophers. With this, Aquinas can be considered as an eclectic philosopher, not in the pejorative sense of the word, but in its true sense. His eclecticism only proves that he widely read his sources and greatly used them to articulate his own. But he did not merely parrot them, rather he built his own philosophical system and the contributions of the philosophers before him were rendered due credit. For after all, as thinkers, we stand on the shoulders of those who precede us.

B. *The Aristotelian Worldview*

Before trying to decipher the differences and the influences, it is necessary to review the basic metaphysical system of Aristotle from which Aquinas built upon his metaphysical theology. Doing such step would also provide us with more perspectives on how the Aristotelian *aporia* was solved by Aquinas.

¹² Fakhry 2001, 78-79.

1. Being and its Perfection

In the Aristotelian system, everything that our perception encounters is a being, whether it be actual or potential, substantial or accidental, temporal or permanent. All are primary instances of being and all other things are beings through them. And all beings exist, either in reality or in thought.¹³

Thus, the factor of "existence" is either disregarded or presumed. This is so because in the Aristotelian system there is no need for efficient causality to bring everything into existence. All it needs is a Prime Mover which sets everything in motion, and leaves them as soon as they start to be in motion.

Aristotle ascribes the perfection of a being to its form, which limits the matter that it informs. Aristotle cannot conceive of a formless matter as perfect. It has to have a limit or a form that defines it. Thus, in the arena of matter and form, it is the form that gives the perfection to a being.

2. Epistemological Considerations

For Aristotle, there is no distinction between the existing thing and its being. A thing's existence and what it is coincides. And they are both known by the same mental activity.

Furthermore, he regards the sensible and supersensible as coming under the one notion of being because of the focal reference to separate substance, which is the prime instance of being.¹⁴

C. De Ente et Essentia: Deciphering the Aristotelian Aporia

The centerpiece of Aquinas's philosophical enterprise revolves around his treatment and conception of being. In his early metaphysical tract, *De Ente et Essentia*, one can already see the genius of Aquinas at work. His conception of being radically separates him from Aristotle and at the same time, the influences of the Islamic philosophers, ibn Sina and ibn Rushd, are accounted for.

¹³ Owens 1993, 45.

¹⁴ Owens 1993, 49-50.

1. Being and its Perfection

Aquinas took a step farther away from Aristotle in his conception of being. Whereas he shares Aristotle's starting point of sensible objects, his rendering of being is conditioned by his reading of the sacred Scriptures. In its first pages, one can already read that God created all things. For Aquinas, rendering this to a philosophical jargon would mean that God is the efficient cause of all things. Furthermore, Aquinas reads in *Exodus 3:14* the revelation of God's name in terms of being: *Ego sum qui sum*. This, for Aquinas, is the sublime truth that the Christian can know about being.¹⁵ And for him, the primary instance of being can be no other than God. Thus, the basis for the radical difference between Aristotle and Aquinas has been laid.

From this viewpoint, Aquinas would propose that no creature could have being as its nature. Since the primary instance of being is God alone, and God himself is the efficient cause of all other beings, then necessarily, the beings of all creatures are bestowed by their efficient cause, who is God. Thus, being cannot be the nature or to be considered as part of the nature of any other thing. In every creature, being is said to be distinct from its nature.

Whatever is not in the concept of the essence or the quiddity comes from beyond the essence and makes a composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without the things that are its parts.¹⁶

Given this view, we now see a radical development of the Aristotelian notion of efficient causality.

It makes efficient causality antecedent to all finite form, so that finite form is brought into being by reason of the existential actuality it limits and specifies. Efficient causality now bears upon the whole of the finite thing and extends to the production of both matter and form through a creative act – the bringing of something into existence rather than the initiating of motion. In Aristotle, matter was related to form as potentiality to actuality, but now the whole finite thing is seen as itself a potentiality to its own existence.¹⁷

¹⁵ Owens 1993, 46.

¹⁶ DEE 4.

¹⁷ Owens 1993, 47.

Thus, the perfection of a being lies not in the form that limits and defines matter, but in the existence that gives actuality to the potential thing. As it is, the finite thing is not yet perfected without the existence that gives actuality to it. Existence is the actuality of every actuality, and the perfection of every perfection. Thus, we can see that Aquinas looks upon a thing as a being because of its having the actuality of existence. Without existence, a thing is simply nothing.

Existence is distinct from the nature of other beings except in God who is the efficient cause of all other beings. Existence is contained in the nature of God. In fact, his essence in his existence. Therefore, God is the perfect Being.

2. Epistemological Considerations

This difference in metaphysical conception of being points out to a new epistemological starting point. Contrary to Aristotle's view that a thing's being and its nature can be grasped by the same mental activity, Aquinas posits two mental activities that correspondingly grasp the thing's nature and its being.

The knowledge of what a thing is, or its nature, comes to the mind through the activity of simple apprehension. By apprehending what the thing is, we simply know what it is, but we have not yet isolated the factor that makes it exist. Only the thing's substantial and accidental natures are considered. They are abstracted from the thing and these abstracted notions in turn become the basis of our universal knowledge of sensible things.

However, the factor of existence is not grasped by simple apprehension but by a more complex mental activity called judgement. This mental activity works by forming a proposition in which a predicate or verbal notion is either joined to or separated from a subject.¹⁸ In his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, Aquinas admits that "our intellect, which has the source of its cognition in things that have composite being, apprehends that being only by composition and division."¹⁹

¹⁸ Owens 1993, 48-49.

¹⁹ In Sent. I, 38, 3, ad 2.

In judgement, we separate the notions of form and matter, as well as the notions of potentiality and actuality. We cannot come to the notion of these realities through simple apprehension. The mind must work on a higher level to be able to grasp them.

With the activity of judgement, we are also able to think of things which do not exist in reality but can exist in the mind. We are able to combine concepts such as wings and horse to form a notion of a unicorn, or a woman's head and a lion's body to form the notion of a sphinx. Even though the existence of these concepts remain in the mind alone and not in reality, still we reach these concepts, thanks to the process of judgement. As Aquinas himself notes, "every essence or quiddity can be understood without understanding anything about its existence."²⁰

It is also only through the mental activity of judgement that we arrive at the notion of existence. "Through the operation by which it compounds and distinguishes one thing from another by understanding that the one does not exist in the other."²¹

The lack of existence in a thing's nature allows Aquinas to see that existence comes from something else. And ultimately this existence subsists in one being, otherwise we go on in an infinite regress, which is a philosophical impossibility.²²

3. The Resolution of the Aristotelian *Aporia*

The new metaphysics of Aquinas provides a key insight and a resolution to the Aristotelian *aporia*. Aristotle's metaphysical system is based on the matrix of matter and form and on subsequent identification of the thing's being with its nature. Aristotle does not isolate the factor of existence but merely presumes it as already given. Thus, he runs into the puzzle of identifying ousia as the individual existing thing as well as its intelligible nature.

Aquinas elevates the entire Aristotelian discourse into another level, but still working within the Aristotelian terminology, albeit

²⁰ DEE 4

²¹ In BDT 5, 3.

²² DEE 4.

adding a fresh meaning to the concepts. Whereas Aristotle worked on the framework of matter and form, Aquinas took a step further to consider the composition of beings into act and potency. Thus, Aquinas proposed a new way of understanding Being.

Plato understood Being as the self-identical, selfhood. In this kind of philosophy, Being is ascribed only to the realm of the Forms. Individuals do not possess true reality.

Aristotle takes being to mean as substance (*ousia*). But here *ousia* means *energeia*. And for Aristotle, *energeia* means *form*, not *existence*. To be (*einai*) is to be *ousia*; thus, *ousia* primarily means to have form. *Energeia* is form, and there can no *energeia* of that *energeia*, no actuality of that act, no actuality which actualizes form, making *it* to be. Aristotle did not have a language which expresses a distinction between *to be* and *to exist*. In Greek, there is but one word for "to be," *einai*, and no separate word for "to exist."

The thematization of *esse* in Aquinas came about due to the problem of the "separate substance" or to Christians, "angels." The problem was how to explain the difference between God and angels.

The current interpretation of this problem was largely influenced by the Franciscans. They located the finitude of the angels in an ethereal or spiritual matter, which lacked the mass and resistance of earthly, ordinary matter. Angels are not material the way men are, but neither are they absolutely pure spirit the way God is. Angels have potency, while God is pure act. This potency that the angels have is a potency for matter, which is the universal characteristic of created beings.

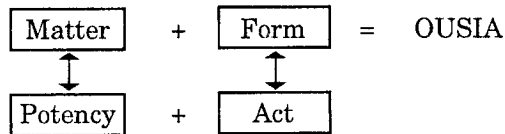
For Aquinas, the Franciscan interpretation contradicted the Sacred Scriptures from which it can be deduced that angels are pure spirits. Furthermore, the term "spiritual matter" is rather odd and ambiguous for him. If angels are pure spirits, this would mean, for Aristotle, that they are pure forms. If they are pure forms, then they are pure act, thus they would be confused with God. We have here then two problems as regards the angels: (1) the perfection attributed to the angels and (2) the potential principle in angels.

Aquinas explained that angels are composed of form and *esse*. Angels have potentiality for existence but not for materiality, while God Himself is free from the potentiality for existence. Angels are free from matter, while men are not free from materiality. In

Aristotle, the actualizing principle is form while the potential principle is matter. In Aquinas, the actualizing principle is *esse* while the potential principle may be form alone (as in the case of angels) or both form and matter (as in the case of men).²³

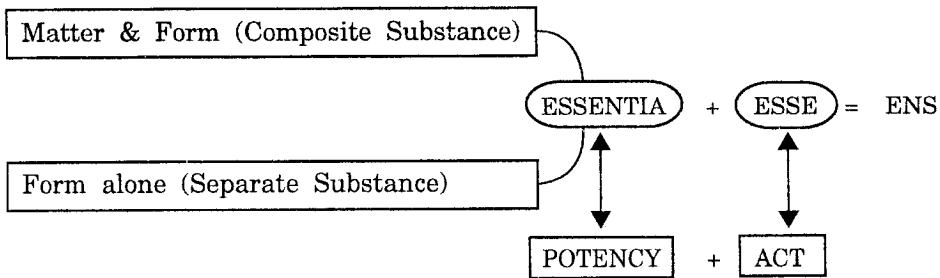
The differences of Aristotle's *ousia* and Aquinas's *ens* can be illustrated by the following ideogram:

Aristotle's OUSIA

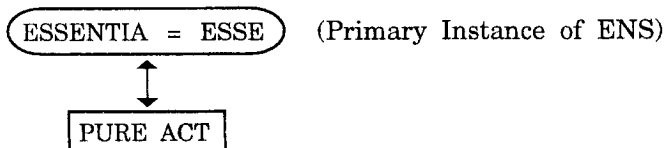


Aquinas's ENS

A. Created Beings



B. Creator of Beings



²³ cf. DEE 5 where Aquinas posits that essence can be found in three kinds of things: (1) in God where his essence is his existence; (2) in created intellectual substances, in which existence is other than essence, although the essence is without matter; and (3) in substances composed of matter and form, in which existence is both received and limited because such substances have existence from another.

By transposing the language of potency and act to the order of Being and extending them beyond the order of changing and sensible substance, Aquinas shattered the Greek predilection for limit, definition, substance and form.

Due to his Neo-Platonic heritage, Aquinas distinguished two kinds of infinity: (1) material infinity, which is always potential and imperfect, an infinity which is never actual; such infinity is perfected when it is rendered definite, finite [Aristotelian]. The second kind (2) is the infinity of perfection in which to be finite means to share partially, to possess imperfectly [Christian].

In Aristotle, the actual principle determines matter and saves it from being unformed; in Aquinas, the potential principle determines and restricts being in its very being. In Aristotle, act limits potency; while in Aquinas the reverse is true, potency limits act and this is the Thomistic breakthrough.

D. The Islamic Philosophers's Influence

From the preceding discussion on the resolution made by Aquinas regarding the Aristotelian *aporia*, several factors stand out. And these factors are incorporated into Aquinas's philosophy of Being. This is made possible due to the contribution or the advancement made by the Islamic philosophers. The critical association of Avicennian and Averroan theses in *De Ente et Essentia* shows the indebtedness of Aquinas to the Islamic philosophers from this earliest opus.

1. Ibn Sina: The Existence Factor

It was ibn Sina who exposed that Aristotle presumed the factor of existence in a substance. In his commentary on *Metaphysics XII*, ibn Sina criticized Aristotle for failing to notice that in addition to the communication of all movement from the First Mover, there must primarily be a communication of being.²⁴ With this failure of Aristotle, ibn Sina was compelled to use conceptual tools to elucidate this process of communication of being.

²⁴ Booth 1983, 109.

The conceptual tools that ibn Sina proposed did not grow out of a vacuum; as most ideas are historically or socially conditioned. In this case, the conceptual tools evolved in the light of a metaphysics of creation. This new metaphysics took its shape in Islamic philosophy in the form of a radical distinction between necessary and possible existence: between the existence of God and the existence of created beings.²⁵

This movement away from the discussion of primary and secondary substance was occasioned by the neo-platonic tendencies of the philosophers from the third to the fifth centuries, namely Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus. These neo-platonic tendencies yoked ontology with logic with the less general serving the more universal; with the most inclusive category of all is being.²⁶ This being in turn is an emanation from the One. This concept appealed greatly to the religious thinkers, since this all but assured the primacy and uniqueness of the Divine Being, while all the same time affirming Aristotle's insistence on the individual.

Aristotle's *aporia* does not admit of a resolution, even when both species and individual are subsumed into a larger emanation scheme. The only remaining maneuver in going around the conundrum is to distinguish what makes the individual to be or to exist, namely its existence, from what makes it to be the kind of thing it is, namely, its essence. Through a notion of creation, the difference between the creator and the creature will also mark what distinguishes the individual existent from its essential characteristics.

With this ibn Sina was able to posit the factor that accounts for the existence of a being. The factor of existence, although never conceptualized consistently in ibn Sina, was then used extensively by Aquinas in explicating his own philosophy of Being, and thereby helped him also in resolving the Aristotelian *aporia*.

2. Ibn Rushd: The Perfection of Being

In one controversy regarding the question of the unicity of the possible intellect, Aquinas used strong language against the

²⁵ Burrell 1993, 63 quoting Khan 1982, 15.

²⁶ Burrell 1986, 58.

doctrine of ibn Rushd. But this does not mean that Aquinas's tirade extends to the entirety of ibn Rushd's philosophical system. In fact, this strong language and burning passion was not occasioned by ibn Rushd himself but by Christian Averroists expounding on the thoughts of their master.

The frequent and respectful references that Aquinas made to the opinions of the "Commentator" and the absorption of a number of his theses into his metaphysical system mean that Aquinas is indebted to ibn Rushd in ways beyond our imagination. "The ontology of ibn Rushd was therefore a greater tributary to the comprehensive ontological figure of Thomas than appears from the explicit references."²⁷

In *De Ente et Essentia*, Aquinas modified the ontology proposed by ibn Sina with the help of ibn Rushd. We have seen the risk of misunderstanding *esse* or existence as an accident, as it only "happens" or "comes into" possible beings. Ibn Rushd argued that being cannot be an "accident." With this insight, Aquinas was able to posit that *esse* is the act of the essence, whereas in ibn Sina, *esse* remains merely as the formal element in the essence.

On another point, he relied on the insight of ibn Rushd regarding the perfection of God. For Aquinas, although God is existence alone, the remaining perfections are not in any way lacking in him. God possesses all perfection, whether physical or intellectual, in a more excellent way. In God all these perfections are one. These perfections belong to Him in virtue of His simple being. For the rest of the entities, these perfections are applied only analogically.²⁸ This point was insisted to ensure the uniqueness and perfection of the self-subsisting *esse*.

VI. Postlude

The references made by Aquinas to the Islamic thinkers have not been in vain. The fine distinction that occurs between species, as the facet that makes a thing the kind of thing it is, and individual as existing, does not clearly emerge in Aristotle, as it does with al-

²⁷ Booth 1983, 254.

²⁸ DEE 4.

Farabi and Ibn Sina. The clarity that this particular point assumes leads to a better view of the difference between creator and its creation. We find in Ibn Sina's discussion taking a different gear from Aristotle's, so that the Philosopher's aporetic pains on this crucial point are resolved.

What Aquinas accomplishes in his *De Ente Et Essentia* is the radical move to take out *esse* completely from the Aristotelian formulary and restoring the whole matrix centered on the combination of actuality and potentiality. In this manner, the whole framework assumes a cosmos which is both created and redeemed.

However, it takes another man in the person of Maimonides to render the structure its more definitive contours. Maimonides provides three areas for Aquinas in the overall project of reconciling reason and revelation. They are – the temporal limitedness of the cosmos, the meaning-structure of divine names, and God's knowledge of singulars and the range of providence.

Discussing Maimonides here will take us beyond the intended scope of this research. Suffice it to say that the Islamic philosophers produced a tremendous impact on the philosophical thoughts of Aquinas. They not only gave Aquinas the conceptual tools to get past Aristotle's aporetic ontology but also provided him with the insights to articulate his own original ideas. □

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