

Thomas Aquinas's Doctrine of Divine Simplicity¹

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I suspect that discussing Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity might strike some as impractical or as uninteresting or as irrelevant as exploring the contours of medieval dentistry. Surely philosophical thinking has moved on to better methods and superior categories than those of ancient and medieval eras. On the other hand, one might think that rumors of the death of classical thinking are premature. While it might be fair to characterize such thinking as being on life support with the onset of the 20th century, things are changing in certain circles with a renaissance of interest in Aristotle and Aquinas—the philosophers whose metaphysics has informed so much of the discussion on simplicity throughout history and even today.³ This a notable increase of interest in the "classical" attributes of God,⁴ the metaphysics of the notion of

¹ A version of this paper with the title "Antecedents of Aquinas's Doctrine of Simplicity" was delivered at a joint panel session meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Religion in Denver, Colorado, USA, Nov. 19, 2018. The other interlocuters were my colleague at Southern Evangelical Seminary Brian Huffling who defended simplicity with me and William Lane Craig and Stephen T. Davis who rejected Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity. The video can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKLHMeeVJI&t=1157s>, accessed 06/28/23.

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³ Consider recent publications such as Edward Feser, ed., *Aristotle on Method and Metaphysics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views on the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Christian University Press, 1985). It is clear that Feser would celebrate any renewal of Aristotelianism (if, indeed, there is such a renewal) when he says "How significant is Aristotle? Well, I wouldn't want to exaggerate, so let me put it his way: *Abandoning Aristotelianism, as the founders of modern philosophy did, was the single greatest mistake ever made in the entire history of Western thought.*" [Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend: St. Augustine's, 2008), 51, emphasis in original].

⁴ Consider recent publications on classical theism such as Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man? The New "Open" View of God—Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997); Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neo-Theism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); James E. Dolezal, *All that Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017); *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011); Gerald L. Bray, "Has the Christian Doctrine of God Been Corrupted by Greek Philosophy?", and Paul Helm, "Is God Bound By Time?" Eric L. Johnson and

'good',⁵ and Natural Law Theory, especially, respecting the latter, in contemporary Reformed theology.⁶ I submit that all of these issues share certain common metaphysical concerns and commitments, some of which bear on the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity.

Aquinas's Doctrine of Divine Simplicity arises out of both his theology and metaphysics. There are a number of antecedent theologians and philosophers who have influenced his thinking as he incorporated some of their thinking into his own—some with little or no modification, some with important modifications, and some that served as counter-examples that spurred him on to make his own metaphysical innovations. Thomist Joseph Owens comments,

Ever since the time of Parmenides, Western philosophical thought has been conscious of difficulties in the notion of being. ... In the thirteenth century this problem of being was faced by Thomas Aquinas against a proximate background of patristic speculation and a remote background of Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, and Parmenidean thought.⁷

While it is manifest that Aquinas's motivations for his thinking and writing were theological and religious, it is equally manifest that, infused throughout his writings, is his metaphysics. One can acknowledge that Aquinas displayed the consummate example of how

Douglas S. Huffman, "Should the God of Historic Christianity Be Replaced?", in *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, eds. Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

⁵ Scott McDonald, ed., *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁶ Consider recent publications on Natural Law Theory such as J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008); Jesse Covington, Bryan McGraw, and Micah Watson, eds., *Natural Law and Evangelical Political Thought* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013); Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006); David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and the Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014); and David VanDrunen, "Medieval Natural Law and the Reformation: A Comparison of Aquinas and Calvin" in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80 (2006): 77-98.

⁷ Joseph Owens, "Aquinas—'Darkness of Ignorance' in the Most Refined Notion of God," *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 2, Aquinas and Bonaventure (Summer 1974): 93-110, reprinted in Joseph Owens, *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy, Volume 21: Towards a Christian Philosophy*, gen. ed. Jude Dougherty (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 207-224.

philosophy, the handmaid,⁸ can service of the queen of the sciences, theology whether or not one agrees that his efforts were well placed.⁹

In this paper I should like to touch on the key elements of Aquinas's metaphysics that give rise to his Doctrine of Divine Simplicity. It is my contention that Aquinas's Doctrine of Divine Simplicity emerges inexorably from his metaphysics together with certain of his theological commitments. I aim to set the context of his doctrine in the context of his metaphysics. Many have raised objections to the doctrine.¹⁰ I dare not hope to convince the

⁸ The handmaid (or handmaiden) imagery goes back at least as far as Philo in his treatment of Sarah's relationship to Abraham. Philo who uses the imagery specifically for "the intermediate instruction of the intermediate and encyclical branches of knowledge" in its service of the virtue of wisdom. [Philo, "On Mating with the Preliminary Studies." [De Congressu Quarendae Eruditionis Gratia] in *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 304-320 (305). See also: Albert Henrichs, "Philosophy, the Handmaiden of Theology," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 9 (1968): 437-450; and David C. Lindberg, "The Medieval Church Encounters the Classical Tradition: Saint Augustine, Roger Bacon, and the Handmaiden Metaphor," in *When Science and Christianity Meet*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 7-32.

⁹ Regarding the notion of metaphysical commitments and their bearing on Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity, Barry D. Smith, no friend of Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity, puts it this way: "It is important to recognize the role that presuppositions play in arguments for the simplicity doctrine from the nature of God. Some of the arguments advanced have Greek philosophical presuppositions. Of particular importance is the presupposition that simplicity is ontologically superior to compositeness, which is so foundational and pervasive that no one sees the need to argue for its validity. In some cases, the arguments are more narrowly dependent upon Aristotelian substance metaphysic with its philosophical categories of graduations of being, matter and form, potentiality and actuality, efficient causation, as well as genus and species (differentia). [Barry D. Smith, *The Oneness and Simplicity of God* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014), 61-62]. Stephen T. Davis, another critic of Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity (see note 1) said during our panel debate, "First of all, I want to say Richard, I really like your paper. That, and the whole discussion tonight, underscores something that I've long believed and that is that if you basically buy in to Aquinas's metaphysic, the doctrine of simplicity nicely follows. I think that's absolutely right." [time stamp 1:28]. In contrast, Craig regards Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity as incoherent and offers an alternative view: "How ought we to understand divine simplicity? ... We reject constituent ontologies. We should not think of things as metaphysically composed in any way. In this sense, everything is simple." [time stamp 58 min].

¹⁰ Detractors of Aquinas's Doctrine of Divine Simplicity include: our interlocutors in the simplicity panel debate in which Brian Huffling and I participated referenced in note 1; William Lane Craig, "Divine Simplicity Q&A with William Lane Craig and Ryan Mullins," available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piu1kehXf58>, accessed 05/29/23; "Theistic Critiques of Atheism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 69-85; (with J. P. Moreland) *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 524, 525; William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 127; Ryan Mullins, "Divine Simplicity Q&A with William Lane Craig and Ryan Mullins," available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piu1kehXf58>, accessed 05/29/23; "The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," (<https://thepolisinstitute.com/conversations/the-doctrine-of-divine-simplicity/> accessed 05/24/23); and "Simply Impossible: A Case against Divine Simplicity," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013): 181-203 (201); Ronald H.

critics that Aquinas's doctrine is true. I do hope that by seeing how his doctrine of simplicity arises out of these metaphysical commitments, we can attenuate any discussion and critique and, perhaps in some instances, redirect them.

Philosophical Influences on Aquinas

A partial list of philosophers whose influenced has played into Aquinas's thinking would include Aristotle (384-322 BC); Porphyry (234-305) perhaps via the hierarchy of values and his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*; Proclus (410-485), particularly through the later commentary on his thinking, *Liber de Causis*); Pseudo-Dionysius (late 5th century to early 6th century *On the Divine Names*); Augustine (354-430); Boethius (480-524); Al-Farabi (870-950); Avicenna (980-1037); Anselm (1033-1109); Averroes (1126-1198); Maimonides (1135-1204); Phillip the Chancellor (1160-1236); Alexander of Hales (1170 (80?)-1245); William of Auvergne (1190-1249); and Albert the Great (1206-1280).

Undoubtedly, Aquinas gets much of his metaphysics from Aristotle. He was in very many ways an Aristotelian. But while certain of these Aristotelian doctrines are necessary for Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity, they are not sufficient. Doctrines deepened or developed by Aquinas together with additional philosophical doctrines added by him will be what, in the opinion of Thomists, turn the pagan philosophy of Aristotle into the Christian philosophy of Aquinas.¹¹ A list of these metaphysical doctrines (only a few about which I will be able to make

Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exposition of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 95-96; Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 47; and Barry D. Smith, referenced in note 9.

¹¹ Etienne Gilson deftly summarizes the situation: "Thomism was not the upshot of a better understanding of Aristotle. It did not come out of Aristotelianism by way of evolution, but of revolution. Thomas uses the language of Aristotle everywhere to make the Philosopher say that there is only one God, the pure Act of Being, Creator of the world, infinite and omnipotent, a providence for all that which is, intimately present to every one of his creatures, especially to men, every one of whom is endowed with a personally immortal soul naturally able to survive the death of its body. The best way to make Aristotle say so many things he never said was not to show that, had he understood himself better than he did, he would have said them. For indeed Aristotle seems to have understood himself pretty well. He has said what he had to say, given the meaning which he himself attributed to the

any comments) include: substance and accidents; Aristotle's Ten Categories;¹² Aristotle's Five Predicables;¹³ universals and particulars; form and matter; teleology; act and potency;¹⁴ efficient, formal, material, and final causality;¹⁵ exemplar causality; analogy of being; existence; the Transcendentals; and the essence/existence distinction.

Defining Simplicity

Turning our attention more directly onto this issue before us, for Aquinas, to say that God is simple is just to say that God is not composed in any way. Aquinas maintains that there are a number of ways in which a being can be composed, all of which, he will argue, are impossible with God.¹⁶ In his *Summa Theologiae*, Q. 3, he asks whether God is a body; whether God is composed of matter and form; whether God is the same as His essence or nature; whether

principles of his own philosophy. Even the dialectical acumen of Saint Thomas Aquinas could not have extracted from the principles of Aristotle more than what they could possibly yield. The true reason why his conclusions were different from those of Aristotle was that his own principles themselves were different. ... In order to metamorphose the doctrine of Aristotle, Thomas has ascribed a new meaning to the principles of Aristotle. As a philosophy, Thomism is essentially a metaphysics. It is a revolution in the history of the metaphysical interpretation of the first principle, which is 'being.'" [Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), 365].

¹² Aristotle's Ten Categories (*Categories* 4, 1^b25-2^a4) are: substance/essence (the only one through itself (*per se*)); all others through another (*in alio*); quantity; quality; relation; place or location; time; position; state or habitus; action; and passion. They can be illustrated in this sentence: "A six-foot tall^{Quantity} white^{Quality} man^{Substance}, much taller than his friend^{Relation}, was standing^{Position} in the field^{Place} yesterday^{Time} armed with an ax^{State (Habitus)}, cutting down a tree^{Action}, completely unaware that he was being burned^{Passion} by the sun."

¹³ The Five Predicables are genus; specific difference; species; proper accident; accident (*Caterories* 5, 1^b11, ff; *Topics* 5, 101^b36, ff; *Metaphysics* III, 3, 998^b25). For an example of the relevance of these categories with respect to logic and metaphysics, see Henry Babcock Veatch, "St. Thomas on the Question, 'How Are Synthetic Judgments A Priori Possible?'" *Modern Schoolman* 42 (March 1965): 239-263.

¹⁴ *Metaphysics*, D (V), 12, 1019^a15 - 1019^a20.

¹⁵ *Metaphysics*, D (5), 2, 1013^a24-1013^b3.

¹⁶ "Now in every composite of whatsoever kind of composition there must needs be a mixture of act and potentiality: because of the things whereof it is composed, either one is in potentiality to the other, as matter to form, subject to accident, genus to difference, or all the parts together are in potentiality to the whole, since parts are reducible to matter, and the whole is reducible to form so that no composite is first act." [*On the Power of God* Bk. III, Q. VII, art. 1, trans. English Dominican Fathers (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 3] Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from this translation.

essence and existence are the same in God; whether God is contained in a genus; whether in God there are any accidents; and whether God is altogether simple.

In this last point, Aquinas gives a more global defense of simplicity by examining the notion of composition as such. Regarding this, Aquinas seeks to show how no aspect of composition is possible with God, including the relationship of parts to whole; that any composition requires a cause for the composition; that any composition requires potentiality and actuality (either a part's potentiality to another part or the potentiality of the parts taken together with respect to the whole); and that nothing composite can be predicated of any single one of its parts.¹⁷

From Aquinas's *On the Power of God*, written before the *Summa Theologiae*, we can add to the discussion "whether 'good', 'just', 'wise' and the like, predicate an accident in God, ... whether the afore said terms signify the divine substance ... whether these terms are

¹⁷ "The absolute simplicity of God may be shown in many ways. First, from the previous articles of this question. For there is neither composition of quantitative parts in God, since He is not a body; nor composition of matter and form; nor does His nature differ from His 'suppositum'; nor His essence from His existence; neither is there in Him composition of genus and difference, nor of subject and accident. Therefore, it is clear that God is nowise composite, but is altogether simple. Secondly, because every composite is posterior to its component parts, and is dependent on them; but God is the first being, as shown above (Q. 2, A. 3). Thirdly, because every composite has a cause, for things in themselves different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite. But God is uncaused, as shown above (Q. 2, A. 3), since He is the first efficient cause. Fourthly, because in every composite there must be potentiality and actuality; but this does not apply to God; for either one of the parts actuates another, or at least all the parts are potential to the whole. Fifthly, because nothing composite can be predicated of any single one of its parts. And this is evident in a whole made up of dissimilar parts; for no part of a man is a man, nor any of the parts of the foot, a foot. But in wholes made up of similar parts, although something which is predicated of the whole may be predicated of a part (as a part of the air is air, and a part of water, water), nevertheless certain things are predicable of the whole which cannot be predicated of any of the parts; for instance, if the whole volume of water is two cubits, no part of it can be two cubits. Thus in every composite there is something which is not it itself. But, even if this could be said of whatever has a form, viz. that it has something which is not it itself, as in a white object there is something which does not belong to the essence of white; nevertheless in the form itself, there is nothing besides itself. And so, since God is absolute form, or rather absolute being, He can be in no way composite. Hilary implies this argument, when he says (*De Trin.* vii): 'God, Who is strength, is not made up of things that are weak; nor is He Who is light, composed of things that are dim.'" [*St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), I, Q3, art.7. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from this translation].

synonymous."¹⁸ Aquinas then rounds out the treatment of simplicity here with a robust discussion of relations with respect to God and creatures.¹⁹

Existence and the Essence/Existence Distinction

Of the different aspects of Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity, I suspect most would regard Aquinas's notions of existence and the essence/existence distinction as the most relevant. Thus, I should like to start with these and then introduce any of the others when necessary and as time allows to help us appreciate what Aquinas is doing with his doctrine of simplicity and why it emerges as it does in his overall theology and metaphysics.

Aquinas's understanding of existence, though clearly influenced by certain philosophical antecedents, is nevertheless, a profound innovation and serves, according to certain schools of Thomistic thought, as the key to his entire metaphysics—one which makes all the difference between him and Aristotle, despite Aquinas's tremendous indebtedness to him.²⁰

Aristotle's highest category in his metaphysics is Form (or, if you will, essence). To be is to be a Form. For him, Form is the highest level there is regarding the act/potency distinction.

¹⁸ *On the Power of God*, III, Q VII, p. 1.

¹⁹ *On the Power of God*, III, Q VII, articles 8-11.

²⁰ Thomists who regard Aquinas's notion of *esse* to be primary and the key to his metaphysics are referred to as Existential Thomists (not to be confused with Existentialism). For treatment of Aquinas's notion of *esse* and its overall place in Aquinas's metaphysics, see Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed., (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952); John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003); Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1968); and Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1963), reprint, (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, The University of St. Thomas, 1985). From the contours of the metaphysics of Existential Thomism arises a robust model of human cognition—or, if you will somewhat anachronistically, an epistemology. For an explanation and defense of this model see Joseph Owens, *Cognition: An Epistemological Inquiry* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1992). For other subdivisions of Thomism, see Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*, 1-31. For a defense of the epistemology of Existential Thomism against its greatest rival of the Critical Realism of Transcendental Thomism, see Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) and Etienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, trans. by Philip Trower, (Front Royal: Christendom, 1990), reprinted (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011).

While Matter is in potency to Form—constituting a hylomorphic essence of sensible objects—there is nothing to which essence and, for that matter to which Form as Form, is in potency. The thing to notice here is that Aristotle does not have a philosophical category of existence to which Form alone or a Form/Matter essence is in potency. As such, there can be no philosophical distinction in Aristotle's philosophy between essence and existence. Charles Kahn, classicist and professor of philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, observes, "The upshot is that, although we can recognize at least three different kinds of existential questions discussed by Aristotle, Aristotle himself neither distinguishes these questions from one another nor brings them together under any common head or topic which might be set in contrast to other themes in his general discussion of Being."²¹ Thomist philosopher Joseph Owens remarks, "From the viewpoint of the much later distinction between essence and the act of existing, this treatment must mean that Aristotle is leaving the act of existence entirely outside the scope of his philosophy. The act of existing must be wholly escaping his *scientific* consideration. All necessary and definite connections between things can be reduced to essence."²²

According to Kahn, Aristotle is not alone here, for there does not seem to be a distinctive philosophical doctrine of existence as such in any Ancient Greek philosophy, and, thus, no notion of an essence/existence distinction among the Ancient Greeks. In his aptly titled article "Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy" Kahn says,

In the extended discussion of the concept (or concepts) of Being in Greek philosophy from Parmenides to Aristotle, the theme of existence does not figure as a distinct topic for philosophical reflection. ... I must make clear that my thesis about the non-emergence of

²¹ Charles H. Kahn, "Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy," in *Philosophies of Existence: Ancient and Medieval*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 10.

²² Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics: A Study in the Greek Background of Mediaeval Thought*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies), 309, emphasis in original.

existence as a distinct topic is not intended as a denial of the obvious fact that the Greek philosophers occasionally *discuss* questions of existence. My thesis is rather that the concept of existence is never "thematized": it itself does not become a subject for philosophical reflection.²³

Kahn then interestingly goes on to observe, "My general view of the historical development is that existence in the modern sense becomes a central concept in philosophy only in the period when Greek ontology is radically revised in the light of a metaphysics of creation: that is to say, under the influence of Biblical religion."²⁴

In addition to his *Summa Theologiae* and *On the Power of God* already referenced, Aquinas lays out other key texts in his *On Being and Essence* and *Truth*.²⁵ The essence/existence distinction maintains that there is a real distinction in a created thing between its essence and its existence. A thing's essence is *what* it is. Its existence is *that* it is. Consider yourself as a human being: Your essence is what makes you a human. Your existence is what makes you a being. That essence and existence are distinct in sensible objects (i.e., objects that are evident to the senses) is evident from the fact that one can understand the essence of a thing without knowing whether it exists.

As an aside, I should let the reader know that I am aware of the sometimes-robust debate among Thomists as to where exactly in Aquinas's understanding the distinction between essence and existence is known to be real rather than merely conceptual. Note that the debate here is not *whether* this distinction is real—all participating in this "family" dispute agree that it is real—but rather where exactly this distinction is *known to be real*. What is at stake in this debate

²³ Kahn, *Existence*, p. 7, 9, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Kahn, *Existence*, p. 7.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968); *Truth* (De Veritate), trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert W. Schmidt, 3 vols. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from this translation.

is how it impacts one's understanding of certain elements of Aquinas's arguments for God's existence. What is *not* at stake is its connection to Aquinas's Doctrine of Divine Simplicity.²⁶

Aquinas argues in *On Being and Essence*, "Now, every essence ... can be understood without knowing anything about its being. I can know, for instance, what a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant whether it has being in reality [*esse habeat in rerum natura*]. From this it is clear that being is other than essence ... unless perhaps there is a reality whose quiddity [i.e., essence] is its being."²⁷

For Aquinas, God's simplicity emerges finally from the fact that there is no distinction between God's essence and God's existence. The full import of the essence/existence distinction is easily missed until Aquinas's notion of existence is unpacked. Once one appreciates what Aquinas says about existence, then, when coupled with the real distinction between essence and existence, one can begin to see its profound implications for the existence and attributes of the God of Classical Theism.²⁸

²⁶ For more comments in this regard, see note 46.

²⁷ *On Being and Essence*, IV, §6, p. 55. Elsewhere Aquinas argues, "Everything that is in the genus of substance is composite with a real composition, because whatever is in the category of substance is subsistent in its own existence, and its own act of existing must be distinct from the thing itself; otherwise it could not be distinct in existence from the other things with which it agrees in the formal character of its quiddity; for such agreement is required in all things that are directly in a category. Consequently everything that is directly in the category of substance is composed at least of the act of being and the subject of being." [*Truth*, XXVII, 1, ad. 8, trans. Schmidt, v. 3, 311-312].

²⁸ Thomist David B. Burrell suggests that, properly speaking, simplicity is not an attribute of God. He says, "The best way I know to put this is to remind ourselves that simpleness is not an attribute of God, properly speaking... That is, we do not include 'simpleness' in that list of terms we wish to attribute to God—classically, 'living', 'wise', 'willing'. It is rather that simpleness defines the manner in which such properties might be attributed to God. When we say God is simple, we are speaking not about God directly but about God's ontological constitution; just as when we say that Eloise is composite, we are not predicating anything about her in any of the nine recognizable ways of Aristotle." [David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 46]. I think that Burrell makes a good point. For the sake of convenience in this paper, however, I will reference simplicity in the context of the rest of God's attributes without any further reference to Burrell's point.

Various Latin terms are used in this discussion. The infinitive of the Latin verb to be '*sum*' (I am) is '*esse*' and is often translated into English as 'being' or 'existence.' This can be misleading for the English reader since the English 'being' can be both a noun and a verb. Further, the English 'existence' is always a noun. What will be important in due course is the emphasis upon the infinitive sense of *esse*. A literal translation of 'to be', however, tends to be awkward and probably less helpful than the various English renderings. Some Thomists use the Latin '*esse*' for this philosophical notion (I sometimes do), though Aquinas will also use other Latin words for 'existence'. We have already encountered Owen's use of the expression "the act of existing" to emphasize the verbal/noun sense of the infinitive.

Aspects of Aquinas's Understanding of *Esse*

Several aspects of Aquinas's understanding of *esse* should be noted. These observations should be taken primarily in terms of how Aquinas understands created realities. First, for Aquinas, existence or *esse* is an act. In thinking about created objects, existence is something that essences "do" or, more accurately, something that essences have done to them. Existence is something that created essences "have."²⁹

This relationship between the act of existence (or, if you will, the act of exist-*ing*) and the essence of a thing is the relationship of act and potency that Aquinas gets from Aristotle. Definitionally, act (or actuality) is to be real whereas potency is the power or capacity to be actual or real. As a capacity, it is said to be in a substance or thing. As such, a potency cannot exist on its own, but can only "exist" as a potency that is possessed by an existing thing, i.e., a thing that is in act. To be in act (or to be actual) is to be real. Joseph Owens summarizes, "When

²⁹ For treatments of the relationship of God's act of creating with the essence He creates, see: Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

existence is considered in relation to the thing it makes exist, it may be regarded as actualizing the thing and, accordingly, it appears as the actuality that gives the thing existence."³⁰ Aquinas puts it this way: "Wherefore it is clear that being as we understand it here is the actuality of all acts, and therefore the perfection of all perfections."³¹

Second, Aquinas's notion of existence entails that the existing of a created thing is continuously being caused. By way of illustration, suppose you saw a giant glass ball in front of you. You might ask "how did the ball come to be?" If someone answered that the giant glass ball was manufactured in a nearby factory and moved here as a promotional gimmick for a local retail service, you would likely be satisfied with that answer. What is more, your satisfaction would have nothing to do with knowing much more about the factory that made the glass ball beyond the fact that it manufactured it. Indeed, while it might be interesting for other reasons, whether the factory still exists would, for the most part, be irrelevant to your satisfaction with the explanation of the glass ball in front of you.

In contrast, suppose you were hearing music. In this case, you would *not* ask "where did the music come from" or "how did the music come to be?" Rather, you would ask "what *is causing the music to be right now?*" This so because, unlike the glass ball (as far as this

³⁰ Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence*, 51. But with Aquinas, there is another aspect of actualizing that is completely apart from any metaphysical aspect of potency, viz., creation. In his discussions of the various kinds of potencies or possible, Aristotle observes, "The possible, then, in one sense, as has been said, means that which is not of necessity false." [*Metaphysics* Δ (V), 12, 1019^b30, trans. W. D. Ross in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941)] Aquinas employs this distinction in his discussion of creation ex nihilo. "Before the world was it was possible for the world to be: but it does not follow that there was need of matter as the base of that possibility. For it is stated in *Metaphysics* v, 12, that sometimes a thing is said to be possible, not in respect of some potentiality, but because it involves no contradiction of terms, in which sense the possible is opposed to the impossible. Accordingly, it is said that before the world was it was possible for the world to be made, because the statement involved no contradiction between subject and predicate. We may also reply that it was possible by reason of the active power of the agent, but not on account of any passive power of matter." [Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, I, Q3, art. 1. ad. 2].

³¹ *On the Power of God*, VII, 2, ad. 9, v. III.

illustration goes) you realize that music is music only as it is being caused to be music at every instance that it is music. As soon as the cause of the music stops causing the music, the music goes out of existence. Music as music must continually be caused to be music if it is to be music at all.

In an analogous way, this is how Aquinas regards existence in creatures. As that which actualizes an essence, an essence exists only as it is being caused to exist at every moment of its existence, which is to say, an essence exists only as it is being continuously actualized. If the cause of the existence of the essence stops causing the existence of the essence, the essence goes out of existence. Thus, for Aquinas, if the existence of a thing is not due to what it is, which is to say, if the existence of a thing is not due to its essence—one should note that this is referring to anything where its existence is distinct from its essence—then that thing can only be existing because it is continually being caused to exist by something for which there is no essence/existence distinction.³² That thing must be subsisting existence itself—*ipsum esse subsistens*. That thing needs nothing to give it existence. It, instead, gives existence to everything else. For Aquinas, the creation *has* existence. The Creator *is* existence.

³² A renewed interest in these notions has been occasioned by contemporary atheism's response to the Thomistic cosmological argument. The debate centers on what is now referred to as "existential inertia." Some atheists maintain that the only thing that needs explanation is how a thing comes into existence, i.e., how a thing begins to exist. These atheists deny that once a thing begins to exist, it needs a continuing cause for that thing to remain in existence. They argue that things (or, at least certain things) have "existential inertia" in terms of which a thing, once it comes into existence, will remain in existence unless and until something causes it to go out of existence. For a discussion about existential inertia, see Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God: Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Leibniz* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2017), 233; "Existential Inertia and the Five Ways," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2011): 237-267, printed in Edward Feser, *Neo-Scholastic Essays* (South Bend: St. Augustine's, 2015), 84-117; "The Medieval Principle of Motion and the Modern Principle of Inertia," *Proceedings of the Society of Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* 10 (2012): 4-16; Gaven Kerr, "Existential Inertia and the Thomistic Way to God," *Divinitas* (2019): 157-177, reprinted in *Collected Articles on the Existence of God* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2023), 77-94; and Joseph C. Schmid and Daniel J. Linford, *Existential Inertia and Classical Theistic Proofs* (New York: Springer, 2022). Feser make several responses to blog posts by Schmid at <https://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2021/07/schmid-on-aristotelian-proof.html>, accessed 06/29/23 and <https://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2021/07/schmid-on-existential-inertia.html>, accessed 06/29/23.

Third, for Aquinas, existence as such contains all perfections. Note that 'perfection' here is not exclusively a moral notion. While moral perfection can be (indeed, *must be* according to Aquinas) parsed out within this category, here 'perfection' is a broader notion.³³ For the most part, to perfect something is to actualize the potencies in a thing, sending it towards fully becoming what it is. Aristotle used these terms interchangeably (ἐνεργάζομαι, ἐνεργεία: actualize, actuality; ἐντελέχεια: perfection).³⁴ That 'perfection' is an apt word to use in this

³³ In my judgment, that moral perfection (but not the moral virtues as attributed to God) must be parsed out in the category of the actualization of potencies, is the essence of Natural Law Theory, despite certain voices of the "New Natural Law Theory." John Finnis, for example, argues "Nor is it true that for Aquinas 'good and evil are concepts analysed and fixed in metaphysics before they are applied in morals'. On the contrary, Aquinas asserts as plainly as possible that the first principals of natural law, which specify the basic forms of good and evil and which can be adequately grasped by anyone of the age of reason (and not just by metaphysicians), are *per se nota* (self-evident) and indemonstrable. They are not inferred from speculative principles. They are not inferred from facts. They are not inferred from metaphysical propositions about human nature, or about the nature of good and evil, or about the function of a human being nor are they inferred from a teleological conception of nature or any other conception of nature. They are not inferred or derived from anything." [John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 33-34] In contrast, I agree with Edward Feser who maintains "It is widely assumed that the analysis and justification of fundamental moral claims can be conducted without reference to at least the more contentious issues of metaphysics. Nothing could be further from the spirit of Thomas, for whom natural law ... is 'natural' precisely because it derives from human nature, conceived of in Aristotelian essentialist terms." [Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: One World), 174] For a very helpful summary of this, especially regarding God's relationship to the matter, see Edward Feser, "Does Morality Depend on God? (Updated)" at <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/07/does-morality-depend-on-god.html>, accessed 05/29/23. See also Richard G. Howe, "Morality as Based on Natural Law," in *The Morality Wars: The Ongoing Debate Over the Origin of Human Goodness*. Lanham: Lexington, 2021. For more in-depth discussions, see J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); J. Daryl, Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); R. S. Clark, "Calvin on the *Lex Naturalis*," *Stulos Theological Journal* 6, no. 1 and 2 (1998): 1-22; Jesse Covington, Bryan McGraw, and Micah Watson, *Natural Law and Evangelical Political Thought* (Lanham: Lexington, 2013); Austin Fagothy, *Right Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice Based on the Teachings of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd ed. (Charlotte: Tan, 1959); Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); John T. McNeill, "Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers," *The Journal of Religion* 26, no. 3 (July 1946): 168-182; and David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); David VanDrunen, "Medieval Natural Law and the Reformation: A Comparison of Aquinas and Calvin," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80 (Winter 2006): 77-98. Much of the above is against the backdrop of Aristotle and Aquinas. For them, see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q 1-114, especially his *Treatise on Law* (Q 90-144, sometimes published separately). Finally, it should be noted (without at this point much supporting argument) that the reason the actualization of a potential is a perfection, or, more to the point, is an actualization of a thing's good, is because in Aquinas's thinking, the terms 'being' and 'good' are convertible. For a discussion of this, see Jan A. Aertsen, "The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas." *New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 449-470.

³⁴ It is interesting to note that the word ἐντελέχεια (perfection) arises from the root words ἐν (in) + τέλος (end, goal) and ἔχειν (to have).

context is argued by Joseph Owens. "An alternate word for actuality in this respect is "perfection" (*entelecheia*). It was used by Aristotle along with actuality to designate the formal elements in the things. These perfected the material element in the sense of filling its potentiality and completing the thing. Since existence is required to complete the thing and all the formal elements and activities, it may be aptly called the perfection of all perfections."³⁵

These notions of continuing (or current) causality (i.e., existence as an act) and existence as possessing all perfections are crucial to understanding the whole of Aquinas's metaphysics.³⁶ Their value is how they philosophically deliver for Aquinas both the existence of God and all of the classical attributes of God except those attributes contained exclusively in revealed truth like, for example, the Trinity.

Exactly how they are employed in an argument for God's existence is a topic that will have to wait for another occasion. (I have already touched upon the kernel of such a demonstration earlier when making the comment that any being whose essence is distinct from its existence needs to be caused to exist by a being whose essence is existence). How they are employed as a demonstration of the classical attributes of God, however, is more germane to the topic of simplicity. In the *Summa Theologiae*, the order of argument (after a few preliminary

³⁵ Owens, *Interpretation*, 52-53.

³⁶ This not to say that there are no other essential elements of Aquinas's philosophy. Along with Aquinas's accounting of existence, one must also have a proper application of Aquinas's notion of the analogy of being. For a varied discussion of this admittedly difficult topic, see W. Norris Clarke, "Analogy and the Meaningfulness of Language about God: A Reply to Kai Nielsen," *Thomist* 40 (1976): 61-95; George P. Klubertanz, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960); E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy: A Sequel to "He Who Is."* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), reprinted (n.c.: Archon Books, 1967); Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968); Joseph Owens, "Analogy as a Thomistic Approach to Being," *Medieval Studies* 24 (1962): 303-322; David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004); and Matthew J. Coté, PhD dissertation, *Truth's Light and Supereminent Darkness: The Problem of Univocal Concepts in Analogical Predication of God*, Southern Evangelical Seminary, forthcoming.

considerations) is the demonstration of God's existence (the famous "Five Ways") in Q2, then the demonstration of God's simplicity in Q3, and then the demonstrations of the remaining classical attributes of God in QQ 4-25. It is no accident that simplicity stands as a fountain head for the rest of God's attributes. For Aquinas, such attributes are tethered together like so many buoys on a ship—if one is thrown overboard, the rest will inevitably follow. Given the metaphysics that give rise to his arguments here, the classical attributes of God all stand or fall together.

How, then, should one understand the relationship between existence and perfections? Consider this illustration (which I borrowed from the philosopher Max Herrera). When one blows up a balloon, the air expands to fill the balloon up to the extent of and according to the shape of the balloon. By parallel, the *esse* (the act of existing) of a creature "fills up" the Form or essence of the creature to the extent of and according to the "shape" of the Form or essence of that creature. Thus, a horse contains all the perfections of *esse* (existence) up to the extent of and according to the limitations of the essence of horse. A human contains all the perfections of existence and up to the extent of and according to the limitations of the essence of human. Since in God there is no essence/existence distinction, then all the perfections of existence are in God because God's being is not conjoined with (and, thus, not limited by) Form. He is his own form or his own being. As Aquinas points out, "God is absolute form, or rather absolute being."³⁷ He argues that a being whose essence is *esse* possesses all perfections in superabundance. As he says it, "All perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly."³⁸

³⁷ *ST I*, 3, 2 and I, 3, 7.

³⁸ *ST I*, 13, 5.

Is Being a Genus?

Not to venture into the broader issue of dealing with specific objections, I would like to address one objection that will give me occasion to say something about existence vis-à-vis certain other philosophical antecedents. Some have argued that if God is His own existence, if there is no essence/existence distinction in God, then this makes the concept of God completely empty of content. In his dialogue on simplicity with William Lane Craig at a symposium at Claremont McKenna College in 2018, Bishop Robert Barron raises this objection in order to answer it. Craig revisits the objection in his response to Bishop Barron saying, "I must confess that I could not agree more with the objector that, drawing far more on pagan philosophical sources than on scriptural witness, Aquinas has presented a deeply distorted and hopelessly abstract notion of God more akin to a Buddhist abyss or a Hindu absolute than to the living, personal, and very particular God of the Bible."³⁹

It appears that Craig is taking Aquinas's notion of existence as if existence was a genus or a universal. The thinking would go like this. Take the individual Socrates. Consider the fact that Socrates is human. Note the differences between an individual human and the category 'human'. Here, I am not implying anything regarding the metaphysics of 'human' as, for example, in the realism/nominalism debate. Regardless of how one might regard the status of the category 'human' here in contradistinction to an individual human, it remains that Socrates is a member, if you will, of the category (or however one would designate the different layers) 'human'.

Now consider that 'human' is animal. Last, add to the layers by noting that 'animal' is 'living thing'. With each step through the layers from Socrates, to human, to animal, to living

³⁹ The audio of this dialogue can be found on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzhK2FrBDPM&t=26s>, accessed 05/29/23.

thing, as the category becomes more inclusive, which is to say, as a category expands to a greater number of members, the property commitments of the category become fewer.

The fact that Socrates lived in ancient Greece is irrelevant to his being a human. He would be no less human if he was living in the United States today instead. To be sure, that Socrates was a real human (as opposed to a fictional character) entails that he lived at some time and at some place. But the specific time and space are not entailed by his being human. Thus, the category 'human' has to be free from the particular (or individuating) constraints of specific times and places that obtain with being an individual human.

What is more, the fact that Socrates is rational distinguishes him as a certain kind of animal. Thus, the category of animal cannot contain the specific difference of rational, otherwise slugs (for example) would not be animals—either that or, more likely, every animal would be human if the category of 'animal' contained the attribute of 'rational'. We can see a similar way of thinking regarding 'living thing'. To be an animal is to be a living thing, but the category of 'living thing' is free from the constraints of being animal so as to include, for example, plants.

What this shows us is that, as one ascends up the scale of the layers, the categories become more encompassing as to which members it includes, while at the same time they become emptier of specifying content. The significance of this for our purposes is what this might say about existence. Existence, it would seem, is the broadest category of all. Everything that is real, exists.⁴⁰ Given that this makes it the broadest category possible within reality, it must be (so the reasoning goes) the emptiest of all categories so as to include everything in it—if you

⁴⁰ This might remind one of W. V. Quine's "On What There Is," *The Review of Metaphysics* 2 (1948): 21-28 republished in *Contemporary Analytic and Linguistic Philosophies*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Amherst: Prometheus, 2000), 318-330. For a classical treatment of such an analytic approach to questions of existence see Henry Babcock Veatch, *Two Logics: The Conflict Between Classical and Neo-Analytic Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969) and Henry Babcock Veatch, *Intentional Logic: A Logic Based on Philosophical Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). republished, (New Haven: Archon Books, 1970).

will, to include all ten of Aristotle's categories of substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, habitus (or state), action, passion. George Klubertanz summarizes: "Genus is always abstract; and the wider and more universal the genus, the more abstract and potential it is. For example, *material substance* is a predicate that can be applied to every thing in our material universe: it is also a very abstract concept and is in potency to all the specific determinations—living, sensitive, rational."⁴¹

But why does this not make the Craig's point? If being is "indifferent" to any of the Ten Categories, does this not mean that it is "missing" these characteristics? Is this not exactly what a genus is? Does it not, then, need to be delimited somehow in order to give it content? Not at all. Aristotle explains: "But it is not possible that ... being should be a single genus of things; for the differentiae of any genus must ... have being ... but it is not possible for the genus taken apart from its species ... to be predicated of its proper differentiae; so that if ... being is a genus, no differentia will ... have being"⁴² Aquinas concurs. "Since the existence of God is His essence, if God were in any genus, He would be the genus 'being,' because, since genus is predicated as an essential it refers to the essence of a thing. But the Philosopher has shown (*Metaph. iii*) that being cannot be a genus, for every genus has differences distinct from its generic essence. Now no difference can exist distinct from being; for non-being cannot be a difference. It follows then that God is not in a genus."⁴³

It is not possible for being to be delimited such that it is given content that it somehow does not already have. For, whatever one might postulate as a delimiter (e.g., Form or essence), it

⁴¹ George Klubertanz, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 186.

⁴² *Metaphysics* B (III), 3, 998^b 21-26, McKeon, ed., 723.

⁴³ *ST* 1, Q3, art. 5, p. 18

itself must have some modicum of existence or being in order to be a delimiter in the first place. But if it has being, then being is ontologically prior to the delimiter *qua* delimiter. This becomes either self-refuting or involves an infinite regress such that nothing is ever delimited. Thomist philosopher Gavin Kerr comments: "When it comes to pure *esse*, it is not the case that *esse* indeterminately signifies all of the things that could possibly be, and therefore stands to be determined by something distinct from itself. Pure *esse* is precisely what it is to be. Accordingly, anything not envisaged by pure *esse* is precisely an impossibility of being and beyond the scope of being."⁴⁴ Consider, then, the rest of Klubertanz's point from before.

But *being* as it is understood in its first and proper metaphysical sense is named from that which is most actual and concrete, namely, the act of existing. Being is *not* the "widest in extension and the least in comprehension," because the logical rule of the inverse variation of extension and comprehension holds only for universals. Being is at once the widest in extension—for *is* can be said of all things—and the fullest in (implicit) comprehension—for any real act or perfection *is*.⁴⁵

Joseph Owens argues,

In groups of things, abstraction leaves out of consideration the differentiating traits and retains on the common. In this way it sets up the specific and generic natures. The higher the genus the more common is its range, extension increasing as content lessens. But the reciprocally inverse ratio of content and extension does not seem to hold for the highest grouping of all, that of things under being.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Gavin Kerr, *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 27.

⁴⁵ Klubertanz, *Introduction*, 185-186, emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ Joseph Owens, "Diversity and Community of Being in St. Thomas Aquinas," in John R. Catan, ed. *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 97. Owens' article was originally published in *Mediaeval Studies* 22 (1960): 257-302. Elsewhere Owens argues, "This is what actually occasions the trouble about the concept of existence. As seen earlier, this concept has been regarded as totally void of content. The conclusion drawn has been that the term 'being' should be banished from philosophy. If an attempt is made to attain this concept by continuing the process of abstracting grade after grade in the natures of sensible things, the result will inevitably be an empty concept. But if attention is given to the actuality attained in judgment, over and above what is attained through abstraction, the result is very different. The abstract natures of things can be graded in terms of actuality or perfection. Life is more perfect and more actual than mere corporeality, sentience than vegetation, rationality than sentience. But all these formal characteristics require actuation by existence. Existence can accordingly be defined as the actuality of all actualities and the perfection of all perfections. It is thereby defined by use of concepts drawn from sensible things through abstraction,

What, then, is the problem here? In my estimation, this is a confusion of genus (and, for that matter, the Five Predicables) with what came to be known in the 13th century as the Transcendentals. The doctrine of the Transcendentals began to congeal through the thinking of Philip the Chancellor (1160-1236), Alexander of Hales (1170-1245), and Albert the Great (1190-1249).⁴⁷

As with many of the points introduced, time will not allow a fair exploration of the doctrine of the Transcendentals. Let it suffice to say this much. The Transcendentals are attributes (for lack of a better word here) that "transcend" the Ten Categories of Aristotle in as much as all ten of the categories "participate" (admittedly a philosophically loaded term) in all the Transcendentals. The Ten Categories are modes, if you will, of being; which is to say, they are way of being real in the sensible world. Since being itself is infused through all Ten

but combined in a way that focuses the mind's attention on what has been attained through a different intellectual act, namely judgment." [Joseph Owens, *Cognition*, 175] Owens characterizes this as a confusion of metaphysics with ontology. He observes, "One basic trouble, for instance, is the tendency to conceive the metaphysics of St. Thomas as an ontology. Ontology, in the historically established sense of the term, is a general study of being that remains in some way distinct, at least partially, from a natural theology. It is a study of being that is not primarily, from the view point of method, a study of God. On the strength of a concept that is regarded as common to all beings and proper to none, it allows the investigation of being to proceed to the transcendentals and to the ultimate distinction between being and things without having first established the nature of being as subsistent in God. The difficulties of finding an authentically scientific object in the general notion of being, understood in this ontological way, have become only too clear in the course of philosophical thought from the time of Kant's *Critique*. Being, when considered as a nature isolated by a process of abstraction in the way humanity or animality is isolated, turns out to be an empty concept that is the equivalent of nothing and is a notion incapable of serving as an object of scientific investigation." [Joseph Owens, "The 'Analytics' and Thomistic Metaphysical Procedure," *Medieval Studies* 26 (1964): 83-108 (84)] A full appreciation of the import of Owen's comments requires a careful look at the distinction to be drawn between the acts of the intellect; particularly between abstraction from sensible objects (which give rise to concepts in the intellect) and judgment (which is the direct apprehension of the existence of the sensible objects of experience). What is more, one might employ Owens' thinking here into a broader argument of where exactly in the *De ente et essentia* argument the distinction is known to be real as opposed to merely conceptual. For the conversation between Owens and John Wippel, see John F. Wippel, "Aquinas's Route to the Real Distinction: A Note on *De ente et essentia*," *The Thomist* 43 (April 1979): 279-295 and Joseph Owens, "Stages and Distinction in *DE ENTE*: A Rejoinder," *The Thomist* 45 (1981): 99-123. Owens revisits the issue in "Aquinas' Distinction at *DE ENTE ET ESSENTIA* 4:119-123," *Medieval Studies* 48 (1986): 264-287.

⁴⁷ For thorough reading on the Transcendentals, see Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and his *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (Ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

Categories, it "transcends" them since it itself it is not confined to any of them specifically. The Transcendentals include Being, One, True, Good, and in some lists Beautiful. They are the attributes of being as such.

Having introduced the doctrine of the Transcendentals in order to somehow give closure to our considerations of all the metaphysical notions out of which Aquinas's doctrine of simplicity emerges, one might think I have created more questions and problems than I have answered and solved. Aquinas's overall consideration is that the Transcendentals are attributes that are infused (my word) through all created being. Does this make the Transcendentals God? His answer is no. Instead, God is subsisting being itself—*ipsum esse subsistens*—who is the cause of all other reality and who is Himself beyond the constraints of finite being. As such, the Transcendentals, as attributes of all finite beings, find their reality from God who is Existence, Truth, and Goodness itself.

From this and other things that need to be said but will go without being said here, one can come to see in Aquinas how it is that the classical attributes of God—perfection, goodness, infinity, immutability, eternity, unity, omniscience, life, will, love, justice, mercy, providence, omnipotence—cascade inexorably from simplicity. To be sure, some contemporary philosophers of religion have contended for certain of these attributes by means quite different from the classical and medieval metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. But as is evidenced in the contemporary discussion, even among evangelicals, not all of these classical attributes have survived these contemporary means. Whether that is a good or bad thing for Christian theism, I will, for the time being, leave it to you to decide.

APPENDIX 1:

Theological and Philosophical Influences on Aquinas (in progress)

Aristotle (384-322 BC): "Life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God. ... It is clear from what has been said that there is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things. It has been shown also that this substance cannot have any magnitude but is without parts and indivisible. ... It has also been shown that it is impassive and unalterable; for all the other changes are posterior to change of place." [*Metaphysics*, Λ (12), 7, 1072^b27-1072^a11, trans. W. D. Ross in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), Ross, in McKeon, 880-881]

"To investigate all the species of being *qua* being is the work of a science which is generically one, and to investigate the several species is the work of the specific parts of the science. If, now, being and unity are the same and are one thing in the sense that they are implied in one another as principle and cause are, not in the sense that they are explained by the same definition (though it makes no difference even if we suppose then to be like that—in fact this would even strengthen our case); for 'one man' and 'man' are the same thing, and so are 'existing man' and 'man' and the doubling of the words in 'one man' and 'one existing man' does not express anything different. ... and similarly, 'one existent man' add nothing to 'existent man', so that it is obvious that the addition in these cases means the same thing, and unity is nothing apart from being." [*Metaphysics*, D (4), 2, 1003^b20-32, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 732-733]

Philo (30 BC - AD 50): "But those who enter into agreements and alliances with the body, being unable to throw off the robes of the flesh, and to behold that nature which alone of all natures has not need of anything but is sufficient for itself, and simple, and unalloyed and incapable of being compared with anything ..." [*The Unchangeableness of God* (Quod Deus Immutabilis Sit), XI, §56, in *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 162-163]

Irenaeus (140 - 202): "For the Father of all is at a vast distance from those affections and passions which operate among men. He is a simple, uncompounded Being, without diverse members, and altogether like, and equal to himself, since He is wholly understanding, and wholly spirit, and wholly thought, and wholly intelligence, and wholly reason, and wholly hearing, and wholly seeing, and wholly light, and the whole source of all that is good—even as the religious and pious are wont to speak concerning God." [*Against Heresies* II, 13, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html>]

Clement of Alexandria (150 - 215): "God is both invisible and ineffable ... It is therefore particularly hard to describe the first and original cause, which is the source of the existence of everything else which is or has been. For how is one to speak about that

which is neither a genus nor a differentia nor a species nor an individuality nor a number—in other words which is neither any kind of accidental property nor the subject of any accidental property? ... Nor can one speak of him as having parts." [*Miscellanies* 5, xii, 78-82, in Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, eds. *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 4, 6]

Origen (c. 184- c. 253): "God, therefore, is not to be thought of as being either a body or as existing in a body, but as an uncompounded intellectual nature, admitting within Himself no addition of any kind ... But God, who is the beginning of all things, is not to be regarded as a composite being, lest perchance there should be found to exist elements prior to the beginning itself, out of which everything is composed, whatever that be which is called composite." [Origen, *De Preincipiis* 1.1.6, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Albany, OR: *Books for the Ages*, Ages Software CD ver. 2: 1997)]

Hilary of Poitiers (310-368): "God, Who is Life, is not a Being built up of various and lifeless portions; He is Power, and not compact of feeble elements, Light, intermingled with no shades of darkness, Spirit, that can harmonise with no incongruities." [*On the Trinity*, VII, §27; <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/330207.htm>]

"For that God is not after human fashion of a composite being, so that in Him there is a difference of kind between Possessor and Possessed; but all that He is, is life, a nature, that is, complete, absolute and infinite, not composed of dissimilar elements but with one life permeating the whole." [*On the Trinity*, VIII, §43; <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/330208.htm>]

Basil the Great (329-379): "His attributes are various, but his essence is simple." [*Letter 234* in Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, eds. *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 11]

Augustine (354-430): "There is then one sole Good, which is simple, and therefore unchangeable; and that is God." [*City of God*, XI, 10, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1984), 440]

"We read, indeed, that "the Spirit of wisdom is manifold;" but it is as properly termed simple. Manifold it is, indeed, because there are many things which it possesses; but simple, because it is not a different thing from what it possesses, as the Son is said to have life in Himself, and yet He is Himself that life." [*Letter to Bishop Euodius*, 1.2 ed. Philip Schaff, I, pp. 1084-1085 (Albany, OR: *Books for the Ages* Ages Software CD ver. 2: 1997)];

Proclus (410-485):

Boethius (480-524):

Pseudo-Dionysius (early 6th century): "Hence, we see in almost every theological treatise the Godhead religiously celebrated, both as Monad and unity, on account of the simplicity

and oneness of Its supernatural indivisibility ..." [*On the Divine Names*, Caput I, §IV, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/dionysius/works.i.ii.i.html>, accessed 09/08/21].

John of Damascus (676-749): "We believe, then, in One God, one beginning, having no beginning, uncreate, unbegotten, imperishable and immortal, everlasting, infinite, uncircumscribed, boundless, of infinite power, simple, uncompound, incorporeal, without flux, passionless, unchangeable, unalterable, unseen, the fountain of goodness and justice, ..." [*An Exposition on the Orthodox Faith*, chap. 8; <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/33041.htm>, accessed 09/08/21]

Avicenna (980-1037):

Anselm (1033-1109): "There are no parts in thee, Lord, nor art thou more than one. But thou art so truly a unitary being, and so identical with thyself, that in no respect art thou unlike thyself; rather thou art unity itself, indivisible by any conception. Therefore, life and wisdom and the rest are not parts of thee, but all are one; and each of these is the whole, which thou art, and which all the rest are." [*Proslogium*, 18, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle: Open Court, 1962), 25];

Peter Lombard (1100-1160): Simplicity means "no diversity or change or multiplicity of parts, or accidents, or any other forms." [*The Sentences*, Bk. 1, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Giulio Silano, *Medieval Sources in Translation* 42 (Toronto: PIMS, 2007), 8.3 (23), as cited in Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 77]

Averroes (1126-1198):

Maimonides (1135-1204):

Phillip the Chancellor (1160-1236):

Alexander of Hales (1170 (80?)-1245):

William of Auvergne 1190-1249):

Albert the Great (1206-1280):

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215): "We firmly believe and openly confess that there is only one true God, eternal and immense, omnipotent, unchangeable, incomprehensible, and ineffable, ... absolutely simple ..." [Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV, Canon 1, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp>, accessed 03/20/17].

APPENDIX 2:

Theologically Influenced by Aquinas (in progress)

John Calvin (1509-1564): "For the essence of God being simple and undivided, and contained in himself entire, in full perfection, without partition or diminution, it is improper, nay, ridiculous, to call it his express image." [John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), Bk. 1, XIII, §2), vol. 1, p. 110]

Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609): "Simplicity is a pre-eminent mode of the Essence of God, by which he is void of all composition, and of component parts whether they belong to the senses or to the understanding. The essence of God, therefore, neither consists of material, integral and quantitative parts, of matter and form, of kind and difference, of subject and accident, nor of form and the thing formed, neither hypothetically and through nature, through capability and actuality, nor through essence and being. Hence God is his own Essence and his own Being, and is the same in that which is, and that by which it is." [Jacobus Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), I, 438]

John Owen (1616-1683): "The attributes of God, which alone seem to be distinct things in the essence of God, are all of them essentially the same with one another, and every one the same with the essence of God itself." [John Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae: The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined: Mr. Biddle's First Chapter Examined in The Ages Digital Library: The John Owen Collection CD ROM* (Rio, WI: AGES Software), 94]

Francis Turretin (1623-1687): "Is God most simple and free from all composition? We affirm against Socinus and Vorstius. ... The orthodox have constantly taught that the essence of God is perfectly simple and free from all composition. ... The divine nature is conceived by us not only as free from all composition and division, but also as incapable of composition and divisibility." [Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), I, 191]

Stephen Charnock (1628-1680): "This is signified by the name God gives himself (Ex. iii. 14): 'I am that I am:' as simple, pure, uncompounded being, without any created mixture ..." [Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), I, 182-183]

John Howe (1630-1705): "Whatsoever simplicity the ever-blessed God hath, by any express revelation, claimed to himself, or can by evident and irrefragable reason be demonstrated to belong to him, as a perfection, we ought humbly and with all possible reverence and adoration, to ascribe to him. But such simplicity as he hath not claimed, as is arbitrarily ascribed to him by overbold and adventurous intruders into the deep and most profound arcana of the divine nature ... we ought not to impose it upon ourselves, or be so far imposed upon, as to ascribe to him such simplicity." ["A Calm and Sober Inquiry

Concerning the Possibility of a Trinity in the Godhead," in *The Works of John Howe: 1630-1705 in Three Volumes* (Ligonier: Soli De Gloria, 1990), vol. II, p. 530. This edition is reprinted from *The Works of John Howe in 3 Volumes* (London: William Tegg and Co. 1848) which is based on *The Works of the Rev. John Howe, M.A.* (n.c., Calamy, 1724).] ⁴⁸

John Gill (1697-1771): God being a Spirit, we learn that he is a simple and uncomposed Being, and does not consist of parts, as a body does; his spirituality involves his simplicity. ... every attribute of God is God himself, is his nature, and are only so many displays of it. It is certain God is not composed of parts, in any sense; not in a physical sense, of essential parts, as matter and form, of which bodies consist: nor of integral parts, as soul and body, of which men consist: nor in a metaphysical sense, as of essence and existence, of act or power: nor in a logical sense, as of kind and difference, substance and accident." [John Gill, *A Body of Divinity*, (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971), 33-34]

Charles Hodge (1797-1878): "If God is a spirit, ... it follows that God is a simple Being, not only as not composed of different elements, but also as not admitting of the distinction between substance and accidents." [Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), I, V, §4, p. 379]

William G. T. Shedd (1820-1894): "The Simplicity of God denotes that his being is uncompounded, incomplex, and indivisible. Simplicity does not belong to angels and men." [William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), vol. 1, p. 338]

Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886): "In order to avoid both extremes theologians have been accustomed to say that the divine attributes differ from the divine essence and from one another, 1st, not realiter or as one thing differs from another, or in any such way as to imply composition in God. Nor 2d, merely nominaliter, as though there were nothing in God really corresponding to our conceptions of his perfections. But 3d, they are said to differ virtualiter, so that there is in him a foundation or adequate reason for all the

⁴⁸ But consider these qualifications by Howe regarding the simplicity that ought to be rejected. My worry is that he has in mind the thinking of Aquinas, et al. "... such as can never be proved to belong to perfection and a blemish, would render the divine nature less intelligible, more impossible to be so far conceived as is requisite, as would discompose and disturb our minds, confound our conceptions, make our apprehensions of his other known perfections less distinct, or inconsistent, render him less adorable, or less an object of religion; or such as is manifestly unreconcilable with his plan affirmations concerning himself; ... It would be an over-officious and too meanly servile religiousness, to be awed by the sophistry of presumptuous scholastic wits, into a subscription to their confident determinations concerning the being of God, that such and such things are necessary or impossible thereto, beyond what the plain undisguised reason of things, or his own express word do evince; to imagine a sacredness in their rash conclusion so as to be afraid of searching into them, or of examining whether they have any firm and solid ground or bottom; to allow the schools the making of our Bible, or the forming of our creed (who license and even sport petulant and irreverent a liberty as they would upon a worm, or and the meanest insect, while yet they can pronounce little with certainty even concerning that,) hath nothing in it either of the Christian or the man. It will become as well as concern us, to disencumber our minds, and release them from the entanglement of their unproved dictates; whatsoever authority they may have acquired, only by having been long, and commonly, taken for granted. The more reverence we have of God the less we are to have for such men as have themselves expressed little." [Howe, "Trinity," pp. 530-531].

representations which are made in Scripture with regard to the diving perfections and for the consequent conceptions which we have of them." [A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology: For Students and Laymen* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 136-137]

James Petigru Boyce (1827-1888): "By this we mean, that the nature of God, comprising his essence and his attributes, is simple or uncomposed pure spirit. ... In God there can be no composition, and therefore his spiritual nature must be uncompounded. Even his attributes and his nature must be in such a manner one, that his attributes essentially inhere in that nature and are not capable of separation from it, which really makes them one with that nature." [James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), 67]

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921):

Louis Sperry Chaffer (1871-1952): "By this term it is indicated that the divine Being is uncompounded, incomplex, and indivisible. ... He being the perfect One, is to be worshiped as the finality and infinity of simplicity." [*Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary Press, 1947), I, 213]

Louis Berkhof (1873-1957): "When we speak of the simplicity of God, we use the term to describe the state or quality of being simple, the condition of being free from division into parts, and therefore from compositeness. It means that God is not composite and is not susceptible of division in any sense of the word." [*Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 62].

Norman L. Geisler (1932-2019): "The divine attribute of simplicity is foundational to the orthodox view of the nature of God. ... God is ontologically one Being, without dimensions, poles, or divisions." [Norman Geisler, H. Wayne House, Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 142]

The Waldensian Confession: "We believe in one eternal God, of a spiritual, infinite, incomprehensible, and simple essence ..." [*Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, 4 vols., compiled by James T. Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), II, 219]

The Belgic Confession: "We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God ..." [*Reformed Confessions*, II, 425]

The Thirty-Nine Articles: "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all things, both visible and invisible." [*Reformed Confessions*, II, 754]

The Irish Articles: "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, both visible and invisible." [*Reformed Confessions*, IV, 92, §8]

The Westminster Confession of Faith: "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions ..." [*The Westminster Standards*, II, 1 (Philadelphia: Great Commission, n.d.), 5]

The Savoy Declaration: "There is but one only living and true God who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure Spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions ..." [*Reformed Confessions*, IV, 461]

The London Baptist Confession: "The Lord our God is but one only living and true God whose subsistence is in and of Himself, infinite in being and perfection, whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself; a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions ..." [*Reformed Confessions*, IV, 535]

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