

## *note e commenti*

### Thomas Aquinas and Being as a Nature

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#### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

My paper concerns what I would call the transcendental influence of essence in natural theology, as conceived by Thomas Aquinas. Even the act of being requires that it be seen in the light of essence. I will call attention to the crucial role of created being, considered as a *nature*, in the solution of such key problems of natural theology as the existence of evil and human freedom. Knowledge of such a chapter in the history of natural theology is crucial for present-day reflection.

To bring out what I mean by the transcendental influence of essence, I wish first to cite a text about our view of God. In the *Summa contra gentiles* we read:

... those things which in creatures are divided are unqualifiedly one in God: thus, for example, in the creature essence and being [*esse*] are other; and in some [creatures] that which subsists in its own essence is also other than its essence or nature: for this man is neither his own humanity nor his being [*esse*]; but God is his essence and his being.

And though these in God are one in the truest way, nevertheless in God there is WHATEVER PERTAINS TO THE INTELLIGIBLE ROLE [*ratio*] of the subsisting thing, or of the essence, or of the being [*esse*]; for it belongs to him not to be in another, inas-

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: *CM* = *Commentary on the Metaphysics*; *CP* = *Commentary on the Physics*; *EE* = *De ente et essentia*; *Quodl.* = *Quaestiones quodlibetales*; *SCG* = *Summa contra gentiles*; *ST* = *Summa theologiae*. - An earlier edition of this paper was originally read at the Gifford Conference on Natural Theology held in Aberdeen, Scotland in May 2000.

much as he is subsisting; to be a what [*esse quid*], inasmuch as he is essence; and being in act [*esse in actu*], by reason of being itself [*ipsius esse*]<sup>2</sup>.

This is to say that even in the divine simplicity, essence as an ineluctable metaphysical dimension or contribution is not left behind. There is need to insist on this from the outset because some renowned interpreters have sometimes spoken as though the God of Thomas's natural theology were "beyond essence", an approach which limits the conception of essence to its created mode, rather than treating it as an unqualified transcendental perfection<sup>3</sup>.

We should recall the teaching of Thomas in his *De ente et essentia*, that essence is found *more truly* in simple substances, just as *esse* is found more truly in them. This can be seen *especially* in the case of God who is cause of all. I.e. essence is most truly essence in God<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, essence as such is a perfection, and the fact that in creatures the essence is potential with respect to the act of being is something that *happens* to essence inasmuch as it is *such* essence<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> SCG, 4.11, ed. Pera #3472-3473.

<sup>3</sup> In a paper published in 1943, Jacques Maritain warned against this error, but we see É. GILSON, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, Garden City, N.Y., 1960: Doubleday, p. 134, insisting on the view that Thomas sees God as "beyond essence". Cfr. L. DEWAN, O.P., *Étienne Gilson and the Actus essendi*, «Maritain Studies/Études Maritainniennes», 15 (1999), pp. 70-96. Cfr. É. GILSON, *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne*, Vrin, Paris 1960: he says [p. 198, my small caps]:

«LE PROPRE DE L'ESSENCE, mode fini de participation à l'être, est de rendre possible l'existence d'une *natura rerum* qui ne soit ni le néant ni Dieu».

Clearly, for Gilson, "essence" means a *finite participation* in being. Thus, at p. 170 of the same work, he speaks of God as "transcending the order of essence". - The Maritain paper is *L'Aséité divine*, in *Oeuvres Complètes XIII*, pp. 547-572; originally published in «Medieval Studies», 5 (1943), pp. 39-50, and republished in «Nova et Vetera», 1967, pp. 189-206. It is in *Oeuvres Complètes XIII*, as figuring in *Approches sans entraves*, which was in the works when Maritain died. At p. 25 of *Partecipazione e Causalità* (Società Editrice Internazionale, Torino 1960), Cornelio Fabro takes the position that *esse* can be without essence: «l'essere è l'atto semplicemente e può essere (atto) senza l'essenza, mentre ogni essenza materiale o spirituale è nulla se non riceve in sé, come atto in una potenza, l'atto di essere». (I am indebted to David Twetten for this information.)

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. *De ente et essentia*, c. I (ed. Leonine, lines 53-63. My italics.):

«...But because "*ens*" is said absolutely and primarily of substances, and posteriorly and in a somewhat qualified sense of accidents, thus it is that *essentia* also properly and truly is in substances, but in accidents it is in a certain measure and in a qualified sense. But of substances, some are simple and some are composite, and in both there is *essentia*; but in the simple *in a truer and more noble degree* [*ueriori et nobiliori modo*], inasmuch as they also have more noble *esse*; for they are the cause of those which are composite, at least [this is true of] the first simple substance which is God».

<sup>5</sup> Thus, in *ST*, 1.3.4 (second argument in the body of the article), it is reasoned that, because *esse* is the actuality of form, *if* the form or essence is other, *then* it must be potential relative to the *esse*. Since in God there is no potency, his essence must be identical with his *esse*. Cfr. the sort of argument one finds in 1.26.1.ad 2: it *happens* to beatitude that it be the re-

## 2. *Esse* as a Nature

So important is this ineluctable dimension of beings that it makes its presence felt in the strongest way even in the treatment of the act of being<sup>6</sup>. Take an early text in which Thomas is aiming to show that there must be one and only one unqualifiedly first principle. He argues as follows:

... This is apparent ... from the very nature of things [*ex ipsa rerum natura*]. For there is found in all things the nature of entity [*natura entitatis*], in some [as] more noble [*magis nobilis*], and in some less [*minus*]; in such fashion, nevertheless, that the natures of the very things themselves are not that very being itself [*hoc ipsum esse*] which they have: otherwise being [*esse*] would be [part] of the notion of every quiddity whatsoever, which is false, since the quiddity of anything whatsoever can be understood even when one is not understanding concerning it *that it is*. Therefore, it is necessary that they have being [*esse*] from another, and it is necessary to come to something whose nature is its very being [*ipsum suum esse*]; otherwise one would proceed to infinity; and this is that which gives being [*esse*] to all; nor can it be anything else but one, since the nature of entity [*natura entitatis*] is of one intelligibility [*unius rationis*] in all, according to analogy [*secundum analogiam*]: for unity in the caused requires unity in the proper [*per se*] cause. This is the route taken by Avicenna in his *Metaphysics* 8<sup>7</sup>.

Thomas here uses “*entitas*”, “entity”, abstractly, just as one would use a word such as “whiteness”; and in speaking of “the nature of entity” which each things has, he is signifying its very act of being [*hoc ipsum esse*]. What interests me is the language of “nature” here, inasmuch as it is applied to the *esse* of things, *esse* taken as having a common *ratio*, a common intelligibility, even though only analogically common, i.e. according to more and less nobility.

While in the above we have an ascending presentation, from creatures to the first principle, we know how generally fundamental to *Summa theologiae* I the above line of thinking is<sup>8</sup>, not only for that ascent but also for viewing all things

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ward for virtue (inasmuch as happiness is acquired), just as it *happens* to being [*enti*] that it be the terminus of generation, inasmuch as the being comes forth from potency into act. God has being [*esse*] though he is not generated, and has happiness though not as a reward. So also, he has essence, though it is not really distinct from his act of being.

<sup>6</sup> For this way of indicating the meaning of “*esse*”, i.e. “*actus essendi*”, cfr. *ST*, 1.3.4.ad 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Commentary on the SENTENCES*, 2.1.1.1, ed. Mandonnet, pp. 12-13. Thomas actually presents three arguments, that cited being the second. It is of interest that the first concludes to a supreme final cause [*unum summum bonum ultimum*]; the third concludes to some one supreme thing in the order of immateriality, having the perfection of fullness and the purity of act [*perfectionem complementi et puritatem actus*].

<sup>8</sup> I mean the viewing of *esse* as found with a unity according to greater and less nobility; I am not so much concerned here with the argument for the distinction between *esse* and the proper nature of the thing, as found in the *Sent.* text (an argument which I would call “early St.

in the light of the divine being. We should remember not only the 4<sup>th</sup> Way in 1.2.3, but also 1.4.2 (the second argument in the body of the article): since God is the subsistent act of being, he is comparable to such *natures* as whiteness or heat<sup>9</sup>, which if they were pure, would have all the power of the nature<sup>10</sup>. God must contain all the power of being, all the perfections of being; and this means all the perfections of all things. The act of being, subsisting in God, is treated as a nature<sup>11</sup>, and, like all natures, it is a self-diffusing source<sup>12</sup>. It is through this line, further, that the divine being [*esse*] turns out to be unqualifiedly infinite: it has most of all what characterizes form as form<sup>13</sup>. Still in the same line, it is con-

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Thomas”). For the hierarchy of *esse* or *entitas*, cfr. also e.g. *CM*, 2.2 (295-298), where, with Aristotle, Thomas considers the parallel between hierarchy of truth and hierarchy of being.

<sup>9</sup> In *ST*, 1.4.2, Thomas uses for his thought experiment a hypothetical subsistent heat, which is particularly apt for the imagery of diffusion of influence; in *SCG*, 1.28 (#260), he conjures a hypothetical whiteness separate from any subject.

<sup>10</sup> On the notion of perfection as pertaining to the quantity of power [*quantitas virtutis*] proper to a nature, cfr. *CM*, 5.18 (1038), commenting on Aristotle at 5.16 (1021b20-23). Cfr. also *ST*, 1.76.8 (462a8-13), where Thomas speaks of the sorts of “totality” which pertain properly to form and essence. As Thomas recalls, *CM*, 5.18 (1033): “The “perfect” and the “whole” either are the same thing or signify almost the same thing, as is said in *Physics*, 3 [c. 6; 207a12-15; Thomas, *CP* 3.11 (Maggiolo #385)]”.

<sup>11</sup> For the terminology, cfr. *EE*, c. 1, Leonine lines 36-52, speaking of what is called “*essentia*”:

«This is also called by another name, “nature”, taking “nature” in the first way of those four which Boethius assigns in the book *On the Two Natures*; inasmuch, i.e., as “nature” names every item whatsoever which can be grasped by intellect to any extent for a thing is not intelligible save through its definition and essence; and thus also the Philosopher says in *Metaph.* 5 that every substance is a nature. However, the word “nature” taken in this way seems to signify the essence of the thing inasmuch as it has an order towards the operation proper to the thing, since no thing is lacking a proper operation; but the name “quiddity” is taken from the fact that it is signified by the definition. But it is called “essence” inasmuch as through it and in it the being has being [*per eam et in ea ens habet esse*]».

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. *ST*, 1.19.2:

«...the natural thing not only has a natural inclination with respect to its own good, that it acquire it when it does not have it, or that it rest in it when it has it, but also that it diffuse its own good into others inasmuch as this is possible: hence, we see that every agent, inasmuch as it is in act and perfect, makes something like itself».

And cfr. *DP*, 2.1:

«...the nature of any act whatsoever is that it communicate itself to the extent that this is possible. Hence, each agent acts inasmuch as it is in act...».

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. *ST*, 1.7.1: there it is seen that an infinity pertains to form as such. More generally, the notion of “form” is closely tied to that of the first grade of actuality, which is conceived as being “in” its subject: cfr. *CM*, 9.5 (1828); thus, Thomas, in *ST*, 1.4.1 *ad* 3, calls *esse* “*formale et receptum*”, and in 1.7.1 he speaks of it as “*maxime formale omnium*”; most clearly, however, in 1.8.1:

«Being [*esse*] is that which is most “within” [*magis intimum*] each thing, and what most deeply inheres [*quod profundius inest*], since it is formal [*formale*] with respect to all [the items] which are in the thing... [41b46-49]».

Again, we should note that form is one of those things which is found according to priority

cluded that there can only be one such being, one being which is a subsisting act of being<sup>14</sup>. Ultimately we see that all other being must *be* by participation, and thus requires to be caused by *ipsum esse subsistens*<sup>15</sup>.

The use of the language of “nature” in this context, here synonymous with “essence”,<sup>16</sup> could well be seen as stemming from Aristotle. Thus, in *Metaphysics* 4.1, Aristotle proposes a science of being as being, in contrast to sciences which have as their field of study only some part of being. It is a science that seeks the highest causes and principles, and these must be causes of *some nature*. As Thomas paraphrases:

... Every principle is the essential principle and cause of some *nature*. But we seek the *first* principles and the *highest* causes... therefore, *they* are the essential cause of some *nature*. But of no other nature than that of *being* [*entis*]...<sup>17</sup>.

As presented by Thomas, the field of metaphysics has a *per se* unity. Nevertheless he insists that its unity is one of “analogy” or imitation. In the *ST* 1 our most important text is perhaps 1.4.3, on the way in which creatures can be said to

and posteriority. “Form”, like “act”, is said analogically of diverse things. Cfr. Thomas AQUINAS, *De immortalitate animae*, ad 17 [in Leonard A. Kennedy, *A New Disputed Question of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Immortality of the Soul*, «Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge», 45 (1978), pp. 205-208 (introduction) and pp. 209-223 (text); at p. 222]:

«...forma et actus et huiusmodi sunt de hiis que analogice predicantur de diversis».

<sup>14</sup>Cfr. *ST*, 1.11.3 [second argument]. - In an earlier paper, “St. Thomas, Joseph Owens, and the Real Distinction between Being and Essence”, «The Modern Schoolman», 61 (1984), pp. 145-156, I have argued that the reduction of *esse subsistens* to one alone can succeed only if *esse* is already grasped in the multiplicity of things as something like a *common nature*. As I there note, my use of such an expression of “being as a nature” to apply to Thomas’s treatment of the *esse* of creatures is rather different from Owens’ use of that expression, which applies *solely* to the case of God’s own *esse*.

<sup>15</sup>Cfr. *ST*, 1.44.1.

<sup>16</sup>Notice a text such as *ST*, 1.60.1, on the presence of natural love in all beings, including angels or intellectual beings:

«...that which is prior is always maintained in what is posterior. But nature is prior to intellect, because *THE NATURE OF EACH THING IS ITS ESSENCE*. Hence, that which pertains to nature must be maintained even in those things having intellect...».

<sup>17</sup>*CM*, 4.1 (533), on Aristotle at 1003a26-32. Italics mine. In *ST*, 1.45.5 *ad* I (288b35-38), Thomas qualifies his use of the term “*natura*” for the field of reality as falling under the cause of being as such:

«...sicut hic homo participat humanam naturam, ita quodcumque ens creatum participat, *UT ITA DIXERIM, NATURAM ESSENDI*; quia solus Deus est suum esse...».

«[...as this man participates human nature, so also each created being whatsoever participates, *if I may so speak*, the nature of being, because God alone is his own being...]».

Lest anyone question the appropriateness of my equating Thomas’s “*natura essendi*” with the “*natura entis*” of which he speaks in *CM*, 4.1 (533), I might recall *ST*, 1.5.1 *ad* 1: “...*per suum esse substantiale dicitur unumquodque ens simpliciter*.” [It is through its substantial act of being that each thing is called “a being” in the unqualified sense.]

*note e commenti*

be “like” God. The role of the notion of form is to be stressed. Thomas begins his reply with a definition of likeness:

... since likeness is caught sight of [*attendatur*] as a function of agreement or community [*communicationem*] as to *FORM*, likeness is multiple in accordance with the many levels of having *FORM* in common [*secundum multos modos communicandi in forma*]. [25b40-44]

This is the basis for the entire discussion. We then have a presentation of three grades, levels, or measures of likeness: two things may be (1) perfectly similar, as two equally white things; or they may be (2) imperfectly similar, as two things, one whiter than the other. And then we are told:

On a third level [*tertio modo*] those are called “similar” which have the same form in common [*communicant in EADEM FORMA*], but not according to the same *ratio*, as is evident in [the case of] non-univocal agents. [25b44-26a10]

At this point Thomas sees the need to launch into an explanation of levels of agency and the likeness that they involve. We are still working with a form and the way it can communicate something of itself. Sameness of form is fundamental, but the degrees of specific and generic likeness provide us with a schema for speaking of sameness of “*ratio*” or its absence. Sameness of *ratio* is primarily seen in communication of specific likeness. Mere generic communication already provides a conception of sameness of form with difference of *ratio*. - We now come to the point of it all:

If, therefore, there is some agent which is not contained in a genus, its effect will still more remotely acquire *A LIKENESS OF THE FORM OF THE AGENT*; not, indeed, in such a way that it participate the likeness of the form of the agent according to the same *ratio* of the species or the genus, but *ACCORDING TO A KIND OF ANALOGY* [*SECUNDUM ALIQUALEM ANALOGIAM*], AS BEING ITSELF IS COMMON TO ALL [*SICUT IPSUM ESSE EST COMMUNE OMNIBUS*]. And in this way those [things] which are from God are rendered like him inasmuch as they are beings [*entia*], as to the first and universal principle of all being [*totius esse*]. [26a19-26]

Obviously, *esse* is here being treated once more after the manner of form. The whole section on agents and the likeness in their effects is meant to spell out the general point made concerning the third level of likeness, having generally to do with “non-univocal agents”. The likeness of creatures to God is a case of having in common the *SAME FORM*, but not according to the same *ratio*, if by “sameness of *ratio*” one means the sort of community of form one finds in members of the same species, or even members of the same genus. Here the difference involved in unity of form is even more extreme than in the case of mere generic communi-

cation of form. And the example of this sameness of form is the community as to *esse*.

In this presentation of ST 1.4.3 I have not translated the word “*ratio*”. It refers to an intelligible character, such that one can say that, e.g., an incorruptible substance has being, and a corruptible substance has being, but the being of the one has *more* of *that intelligibility* [*ratio*] than the being of the other<sup>18</sup>.

### 3. Cause of the Nature of Being

This approach to the real, as having such a *per se* unity, is used in the solution to certain crucial issues in natural theology. Take the question: why does the bad<sup>19</sup> exist in a universe created by an infinitely good and omnipotent God? It is established that the *raison d'être* of creatures is to represent the divine goodness<sup>20</sup>. This requires a certain perfection of the universe. We read:

... the perfection of the universe requires that there be inequality in things, *IN ORDER THAT ALL THE GRADES OF GOODNESS BE BROUGHT TO COMPLETION*. Now, one grade of goodness is that something be good in such a way that it never can fail.

<sup>18</sup>Consider the conceptual approach in *De substantiis separatis*, c. 7, Leonine lines, *Opera omnia*, t. 40, Rome 1969: Ad Sanctae Sabinae), pp. 47-52:

«It is evident that while being [*ens*] is divided by potency and act, act is more perfect than potency and has *MORE* of the *ratio* of being [*MAGIS habet de RATIONE essendi*]; for we do not say “is” [*esse*], unqualifiedly, [of] that which is in potency, but rather [of] that which is in act».

So also, above in n. 4, we have quoted *EE*, c. 1, on simple substances having more noble *esse* than composites: now, nobility itself is a dependent variable of *esse*: cfr. *SCG*, 1.28 (ed. Pera, #260); indeed, intelligibility itself is a dependent variable of *esse*: cfr. *ST*, 1.5.2 (read in the light of 1.5.1 *in corp.* and *ad 1*), and also 1.87.1. Consider also *In De anima*, 2.5, Leonine lines, pp. 49-68:

«...the operation of the soul is the operation of the *living* thing. Since, therefore, to each thing is befitting a proper operation according as the thing has being [*esse*], because each thing operates inasmuch as it is a being [*ens*], it is necessary to consider the operations of the soul according to the being [*esse*] which is found in *living* things. Now, the lower sorts of living thing whose act is the soul, about which we are now studying, have twofold being [*duplex esse*]: one which is material, in which they share with the other material things; but the other is immaterial, in which they have something in common, in a way, with the higher substances; now, the difference between the two beings is, that according to material being, which is confined by matter, *EACH THING IS THIS ONLY WHICH IT IS*, as, for example, this stone is nothing else but this stone; but according to immaterial being, *WHICH IS FULL AND IN SOME RESPECT INFINITE*, inasmuch as it is not confined by matter, *A THING NOT ONLY IS THAT WHICH IT IS, BUT ALSO IS IN A CERTAIN WAY OTHER THINGS...*».

<sup>19</sup>I am inclined to use the term “bad” to express the Latin “*malum*”, rather than “evil”. In English, “evil” seems to mean almost exclusively the morally bad, and indeed in an extreme form. “The bad” covers the many ways in which the good can be absent.

<sup>20</sup>Cfr. *ST*, 1.47.1 (300b8-11); for the background, cfr. *ST*, 1.44.4, and 1.19.3 and 5.

But another grade of goodness is that something be good in such a way that it can fail. *THESE GRADES ARE ALSO TO BE FOUND IN BEING ITSELF [in ipso esse]*: for some things are, which cannot lose their being, such as incorporeal [beings]; but some are, which can lose being, such as corporeal [beings]. Therefore, just as *THE PERFECTION OF THE UNIVERSE REQUIRES THAT THERE BE NOT ONLY INCORRUPTIBLE BEINGS, BUT ALSO CORRUPTIBLE BEINGS*, so also the perfection of the universe requires that there be some which can fail as to goodness, and thus it follows that they do sometimes fail. But the note of the bad consists in this, i.e. that something fail as to goodness [*deficiat a bono*]. Hence, it is evident that the bad is to be found in things, just as corruption [is]; for corruption itself is an instance of the bad<sup>21</sup>.

It is the *nature* of being and goodness that requires that there be these grades in the universe<sup>22</sup>.

However, there is no need to focus exclusively on as troubling an issue as the existence of the bad. Understanding the existence of human free choice, quite apart from its being the sort of thing which can fail, still involves the need for a vision of the causality of being as being. We might recall that the exercise of human free choice, according to Thomas, requires God as a prior agent<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, it is an instance of contingency, and raises the question: can con-

<sup>21</sup> *ST*, 1.48.2 (305a34-b4). Notice that Thomas affirms the proposition that it belongs to the best agent to produce his total effect as something best [*optimum*]. Thus, God established the entire universe as best, in accordance with the mode of created being: 1.47.2.ad 1. And the bad does not pertain to the perfection of the universe, nor is included within the order of the universe, save through association [*per accidens*], by reason of the associated good: 1.48.1.ad 5.

<sup>22</sup> It should not be thought that this discussion is only about the so-called “physical” as contrasted with “moral” evil. Thus, in the *ad 3*, we get a rapid but complete picture. The objector held that God, as making what is best, would admit no evil to his effects. The reply is: «...God and nature and any agent whatsoever makes what is better in the whole, but not what is better in each part, save as ordered to the whole, as has been said [1.47.2.ad 1]. But the whole which is the universe of creatures is better and more perfect if in it there are some things which can fail as to goodness, and which indeed do sometimes fail, given that God does not impede this. For [one reason, he does not impede since] “it belongs to providence, not to destroy but to preserve”, as Dionysius says, in *On the Divine Names*, ch. 4: now, the very nature of things has this [feature], that those which can fail sometimes do fail. For [another reason], since as Augustine says in *Enchiridion*, “God is so powerful, that he can bring out good from the bad”. Hence, many good things would be done away with if God did not permit any bad to be. For there would not be generated any fire if air did not suffer corruption; nor would the life of the lion be maintained if the deer were not killed; *nor would one praise vindicating justice and longsuffering patience if there were no injustices*». [my italics]

One sees the extent to which the doctrine of God as cause of being and its proper modes plays a role here, and how certain modes of the good can only exist as a response to the bad.

<sup>23</sup> *ST*, 1-2.9.4 and 1-2.9.6; *DM*, 6, ed. Leonine, lines 381-415, in transl. Jean Oesterle, pp. 241-242.

tingency exist in a universe conceived as the product of an almighty and omniscient God?

Consider the question of providence and contingency in *SCG*. We see once again the basic argument:

It pertains to divine providence that *THE GRADES OF BEING WHICH ARE POSSIBLE BE FULFILLED*, as is clear from what has been said [in the preceding chapter on goodness]. But *BEING IS DIVIDED BY THE CONTINGENT AND THE NECESSARY, AND IT IS A PROPER DIVISION OF BEING* [*Ens autem dividitur per contingens et necessarium: et est per se divisio entis*]. If therefore divine providence excluded all contingency, not all the grades of beings would be preserved<sup>24</sup>.

In the next chapter, on free choice and providence, it is argued that if the contingency which relates to the *imperfection* of creatures is fittingly preserved by providence, the contingency coming from the will's freedom, which results from its *perfection*, is still more worth preserving<sup>25</sup>.

These texts are not exceptions. Rather, this is the constant teaching of Thomas Aquinas<sup>26</sup>. In Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's METAPHYSICS*, one finds a remarkable treatment of the implications of divine providence. It occurs in Book 6, where Aristotle has just set aside from his theological

<sup>24</sup> *SCG*, 3.72 (#2481).

<sup>25</sup> *SCG*, 3.73 (#2488). The created will's freedom of choice is linked to the contingency present in the things on which it operates: cfr. *ST*, 1.83.1:

«Reason with respect to contingent things can conclude to opposites [*habet viam ad opposita*], as is clear in dialectical syllogisms and rhetorical persuasions. Now, particular things to be done [*operabilia*] are contingent things...».

<sup>26</sup> We have the same doctrine in *ST*, 1.22.4: does providence impose necessity on the things cared for? In fact, what we see here is an answer to a very common error, that a universal and omnipotent providence necessarily results in everything happening of necessity. We get again an appeal to the doctrine of the final cause of creation:

«It pertains to providence to order things towards an end. After the divine goodness, which is the end separated from things, the principal good existing within things themselves is *THE PERFECTION OF THE UNIVERSE; WHICH [PERFECTION] WOULD NOT BE [NON ESSET], IF NOT ALL THE GRADES OF BEING WERE FOUND IN THINGS* [*si non omnes gradus essendi invenirentur in rebus*]. And so for some effects God prepared necessary causes, so that they might occur necessarily; but for some contingent causes, that they might occur contingently in accordance with the condition of the proximate causes». [1.22.2 (157a49-b11)]

Once more, we have the appeal to what constitute the grades of being. And we should remember the added point in the *ad 3*:

«...the necessary and the contingent properly accompany being as such [*consequuntur ens in quantum huiusmodi*]. Hence, the mode of contingency and necessity falls under the provision of God, who is the universal provider of all being [*totius entis*], but not under the provision of any [merely] particular providers».

Here we come to the ultimate metaphysics of the situation. God is the cause of being as being, and these are proper differences of being as a nature. Cfr. also the later *De substantiis separatis*, c. 15 (ed. Spiazzi, #137).

philosophy<sup>27</sup> the study of being by coincidence [*to on ... to kata sumbebékos*]<sup>28</sup>. Does not this position of Aristotle's, in that it acknowledges the existence of mere haphazard, destroy the doctrine of providence? Does not "providence" suggest that everything happens of necessity? After all, divine providence cannot fail.

Thomas solves as follows:

[1219] But one must know that on the same cause depends the effect and all those [items] which are essential accidents [*per se accidentia*] of that effect. For example, just as man is [caused] by nature, so also are all his essential accidents, such as capability of laughter, and susceptibility to mental discipline. But if some cause does not make man, unqualifiedly, but [makes] man such, it will not belong to it to constitute those things which are the essential accidents of man, but merely to take advantage of them. For example, the ruler [*politicus*] makes a man a good citizen [*civilem*]; still, he does not make him to be susceptible to discipline of the mind; rather, he makes use of that property of [man] in order to make of him a good citizen.

[1220] But, as has been said, *BEING INASMUCH AS IT IS BEING [ENS INQUANTUM ENS EST] HAS AS CAUSE GOD HIMSELF; HENCE, JUST AS TO THE DIVINE PROVIDENCE BEING ITSELF [IPSUM ENS] IS SUBMITTED, SO ALSO ARE ALL THE ACCIDENTS OF BEING AS BEING, AMONG WHICH ARE THE NECESSARY AND THE CONTINGENT*. Therefore, to divine providence it pertains, not merely to make this being, but that it give to it contingency or necessity...<sup>29</sup>

And Thomas goes on to make the point that no other cause gives to its effects the modes of necessity and contingency; this is proper to the cause of being as being<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>27</sup>Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Metaph.*, 6.1 (1026a19).

<sup>28</sup>*Ibidem*, 6.2 (in its entirety).

<sup>29</sup>*CM*, 6.3 (1218-1220).

<sup>30</sup>The *CM*, 6 treatment is Thomas's most elaborate presentation of this point, but he does teach it in many other places. Thus, in his *Commentary on Aristotle's PERIHERMENEIAS*, he raises the question of providence and necessity. After dealing with it from the viewpoint of the problem of certain *knowledge* of future contingents, he takes up the problem of the divine *willing* of events. There is a parallelism of conceptions which we might note. In order to convey the stance of the divine *observer* relative to the flow of history, he had said:

«...God is altogether *OUTSIDE THE ORDER OF TIME, AS ESTABLISHED IN THE FORTRESS OF ETERNITY*, which is altogether at once, beneath which the entire course of time is laid out... and so in one look he sees all things that are done in the entire course of time, each one existing as it is in itself...».

And so, coming to the difference of the divine will from human wills, he says:

«...the divine will is to be understood as standing *OUTSIDE THE ORDER OF BEINGS [UT EXTRA ORDINEM ENTIUM EXISTENS]*, AS A CAUSE POURING FORTH BEING IN ITS ENTIRETY [*TOTUM ENS*] AND ALL ITS DIFFERENCES. Now, the possible and the necessary are differences of being [differen-

This is what I wish to stress, this unique feature of the divine cause, as argued for from its being cause of being as such, i.e., cause of the *nature* of being, and thus of the essential properties of that *nature*. The answers to the most difficult questions of natural theology are here tied to the conception of the cause of a *nature*, and to the doctrine that *being* is a nature caused by the first cause. Without the development of such a view, it is hard to see how one could have systematic answers to those questions. One would certainly not have the mode of answer favoured by Thomas Aquinas.

#### 4. Must God create all the grades of Being?

This is a premise we have seen used. Given that God is free to create, or not to create anything at all<sup>31</sup>, once he has decided to create, must he create *both* necessary being and contingent being? If we were speaking merely of the divine *power*, Thomas could say, I suggest, that God might just have created necessary being or contingent being (particularly if we simplify the issue by limiting it to substantial being). A universe containing only necessary beings involves no contradiction. It is inasmuch as we consider the divine *wisdom* that we rightly approach the contention that if he creates, he must create being and its proper differences<sup>32</sup>.

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tie entis], and so it is from the divine will itself that necessity and contingency in things have their origin, and the distinction of both in virtue of the proximate causes: [thus] for the effects that he willed to be necessary he established necessary causes, and for the effects that he willed to be contingently he ordered causes acting contingently, i.e. able to fail; and according to the condition of these causes, the effects are called “necessary” or “contingent”, even though all depend on the divine will as on a first cause which transcends the order of necessity and contingency. But this cannot be said of the human will, nor of any other cause, because every other cause already falls under the order of necessity or contingency, and so it is necessary that either the cause itself can fail, or that its effect is not contingent but necessary. But the divine will cannot fail, and nevertheless not all its effects are necessary, but some are contingent...» [*Expositio libri Peryermenias*, 1.14, ed. Leonine, t. 1\*1, Rome/Paris 1989: Commissio Leonina/Vrin, lines 438-461.]

Cfr. also *Compendium theologiae* I, cap. 140, ed. Leonine, Rome 1979, lines 12-23: Editori di San Tommaso [t. 42], concerning the efficaciousness of the divine will and the existence of contingency in creatures. To quote only the key point:

«He wills that some things come about necessarily and some contingently, because each is required for the complete being of the universe [*quia utrumque requiritur ad completum esse universi*]» [lines 17-19].

<sup>31</sup>For a very explicit statement to this effect, cfr. *SCG*, 3.97 (#2735).

<sup>32</sup>Notice that in *ST*, 1.47.1 (300b21), the cause of the distinction in things is the divine *wisdom*. Cfr. *Quodl.*, 12.2.2, where it is argued that, while an actual infinity of things is not self-contradictory, and therefore not beyond the absolute power of God, nevertheless it would have the character of matter without form, and so be in disaccord with the mode of action of God, acting through intellect and through his Word. God acts through the Word through which all things are *formed*.

Something said by Cajetan commenting on *ST* 1.50.1, which argues for the need that there be incorporeal creatures, is relevant here. The argument of Thomas is that God primarily intends that creation be like himself. Moreover, the perfect likeness of an effect to its cause is likeness as to the active power of the cause. God produced creatures through his intellect and will. Thus, the perfection of the universe requires intellectual, and so incorporeal, creatures<sup>33</sup>.

A counter-argument is noted by Cajetan<sup>34</sup>. When it is said that the universe must be perfect, and this means *perfectly similar to God*, this is denied. There is always some creature that God can make but has not made, whose existence would make the universe even more like God than it actually is<sup>35</sup>.

Cajetan, in reply, distinguishes between the *grades* of being [*gradus essendi*] and the many *special modes* which can divide up these grades. The makeable grades are finite, actually and potentially, and supreme among them and most similar to God is the intellectual. And he continues:

But the modes of being [*Modi autem essendi*], though they are also unqualifiedly finite actually, nevertheless speaking of logical potency and [the power] of God, they are infinite: because there is no such thing as a supreme creature makeable by God. *HENCE, THE PERFECTION OF THE UNIVERSE INDEED REQUIRES THE CONTAINING OF ALL CREATABLE GRADES, BUT NOT ALL CREATABLE CREATURES*<sup>36</sup>.

Speaking of the specific kinds of things, “best possible world” names an impossibility. But speaking of the “grades of being”, as Cajetan calls them, - i.e. intellectual and non-intellectual, or incorporeal and corporeal - in this sense any world God creates must be a perfect world, perfectly representing the nature of being (in the way that such representation is possible for created being).

## 5. Conclusion

My aim has been simply to put on display the role of the notion of essence in the presentation of the intrinsic nature of the act of being, as conceived by Thomas. I hope that it is clear that this has an importance for natural theology,

<sup>33</sup>*ST*, 1.50.1.

<sup>34</sup>I have simplified it for the sake of brevity.

<sup>35</sup>The objector is thus using Thomas’s own position on the question: can God make something better than those which he has made? Cfr. *ST*, 1.25.6:

«...speaking unqualifiedly, God can make something else better than any thing whatsoever made by him». [178a18-20]

<sup>36</sup>Cfr. Sancti THOMAE AQUINATIS, *Opera omnia*, t. V, Rome 1889: S.C. de Propaganda Fidei (this is the Leonine edition of the *Summa theologiae* 1.50 ff.). Cajetan’s commentary is contained therein: cf. 1.50.1 (Cajetan, para. V).

most obviously as regards the existence of the necessary<sup>37</sup> and the contingent, human freedom, and the bad. It is only as cause of the nature of being that God can be cause of the necessary and the contingent, the corruptible and the incorruptible, the infallible and the fallible. It is only in the light of these properties or differences of being as being that the presence in the created universe of the bad or of choice can be understood.

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<sup>37</sup>A line which I have not here explored is the way in which Thomas's doctrine *rejects* the rather common assumption that a created universe is "radically contingent"; against this, cfr. *ST*, 1.44.1 *ad* 2; and see L. DEWAN, O.P., *St. Thomas and Creation: Does God Create 'Reality'?*, «Science et Esprit», 51 (1999), pp. 5-25.

