

## Aquinas on Essence, Existence, and Divine Simplicity – Strange but Consistent

In the third question of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas is concerned with divine simplicity. This is important for him both theologically and philosophically. It is theologically important because of the perfection of God: if God were complex then he would be composed of other things, and would be dependent on other things for his being. Connected to this is why God's simplicity is philosophically important: Aquinas has just shown (*ST*, Question 2) that God is the first cause, and it would not make sense to say that the first cause is composed of other things, since these things would be ontologically prior to the first cause. In 3.4 of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas concludes that essence and existence are identical in God, which is one essential part of Aquinas' argument for divine simplicity. This article draws on metaphysical principles enumerated in *On Being and Essence*. First I will describe the metaphysical principles. Then I will show that Aquinas' response to the first objection in this article is insufficient on most interpretations. Finally, I will argue that, on one interpretation, his response is sufficient, and that his argument regarding divine simplicity, here at least, is internally consistent.

In *On Being and Essence*, Aquinas argues for the distinction between essence and existence in order to solve the problem of universals. According to Aquinas, 'essence' is "something common to all natures thanks to which beings are placed in the different genera and species."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the essence is the 'whatness' of the thing, i.e. "that through which and in which the thing has existence."<sup>2</sup> On the

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<sup>1</sup> McInerny, Ralph. *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*. London: Penguin, 1998. p. 31

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

other hand, existence points to something being in reality. So, something has existence if “an affirmative proposition can be formed of it.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we can think about an essence (i.e. that which makes something what it is) without thinking of it actually existing. For example, we can describe a phoenix as a fiery bird with a lifespan of 600 years, at the end of which it turns into ashes and creates a new life cycle. However, none of this speaks to whether or not the being is in reality.<sup>4</sup>

In *On Being and Essence*, Aquinas also speaks of the essences and existences first of complex substances, then of simple substances. Here we will only be concerned with the latter, specifically God. However, a bit of background is required that will rely on an understanding of complex substances. In complex substances (i.e. hylomorphic composites), beings with a particular essence are individuated by their matter. For example, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all possess the essence “humanity,” but each individual is different because they have different designated matter. However, simple substances are precisely those without individuating matter, and so Aquinas claims that, “there are as many species [of simple substances] as there are individuals.”<sup>5</sup> So, each simple substance is its own essence. Therefore God, being a separate substance, is his own essence.

In Part 4 of *On Being and Essence*, Aquinas makes the argument that God is his existence. This claim is centered on the following argument:<sup>6</sup> Whatever can be said of a thing is caused either by the “principles of its nature” (i.e. some aspect of its essence) or something external. Something’s existence cannot be caused (i.e.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Kenny, Anthony. *Aquinas On Being*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> *SW* p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

efficiently caused) by the principles of its nature, because this would be to say that the being causes itself; this is impossible, since the efficient cause must ontologically precede the effect<sup>7</sup>, and nothing can ontologically precede itself. Therefore, everything must get its existence from something other than itself. But, if this were to apply to everything, then we would get an infinite regress. Therefore, there must be something that is its existence, and which is the first cause.<sup>8</sup> And, Aquinas has shown elsewhere (*ST* 2.3) that God is the first cause. Therefore God is his existence.

Thus, everything whose existence is other than its nature gets its existence from something other than itself. But, if everything's existence were separate from its nature, then there would be an infinite regress. Therefore, there must be a thing whose existence just is its nature. This way it can be the cause for the existence of everything else without being its own cause. If we accept this, then we have neither the problem of infinite regress nor the problem of something ontologically preceding itself. And, this thing must be the first cause, since otherwise something before it would either be subject to another regress or would cause itself. Since God is the first cause, the being with existence as its essence is God.

The notion that God's essence is his existence is also found in *ST* 3.4, and is necessary if Aquinas wants to hold onto divine simplicity, the topic of Question 3. For, we have seen by two separate arguments in *On Being and Essence* that God is both his essence and his existence. This could be in two ways: First, God could be

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<sup>7</sup> I will not describe this claim in detail here, but a brief description is in order. In *On the Eternity of the World*, Aquinas claims both that God the efficient cause of the world and also that God is outside time. This means that it is wrong to say that God temporally precedes his effects. But, he is still ontologically prior. This is why we say that the cause must ontologically precede the effect. This is not to say that, among temporal beings, it is not necessary for the cause to also temporally precede the effect – however, this claim is not needed here by Aquinas.

<sup>8</sup> This argument is found in *SW* 42-3.

both, but they could be different. This possibility would not be acceptable for Aquinas, for it would entail that God would be composed of both his essence and existence (i.e. two different things) and would therefore have parts. Thus, God would not be simple. The second possibility, that for which Aquinas argues, is that God's essence and existence are identical. This way we can say that God is both his essence and his existence, and also that God is simple.

The first objection in Article 4 poses a significant challenge to Aquinas' argument that God's essence and existence are identical. The objection claims that, "the existence to which nothing is added is the common existence that is predicated of everything,"<sup>9</sup> which is also divine existence (divine existence is God's existence and common existence is the existence of everything else). Therefore it would follow that God is predicated of everything. In other words, some kind of pantheism would follow. The objection in the text claims that this pantheism is impossible and therefore that God's existence and essence are different; however, I will focus on the meat of the objection, namely the idea that common and divine existence are the same thing.

First, it is difficult to tell what exactly could be "added" to existence in order for it to remain 'existence.' For, according to Aquinas, existence, along with essence, is "what intellect first conceives."<sup>10</sup> Now, if something were added to either common existence or divine existence, it would be strange to claim that the result is still what the intellect first conceives, since the intellect would have to conceive whatever is

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<sup>9</sup> *ST* 3.4 in Aquinas, Thomas. *The Treatise on Divine Nature*. Trans. Brian Shanley. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006. p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> *SW* p. 30.

added in addition to the prior notion of existence to which this other thing was added. So, in order for 'existence' to still be that which the intellect first conceives, it cannot have an element that would otherwise not be that which the intellect first conceives. The only other thing that the intellect first conceives is essence. But, essence cannot be the thing added to common existence in order to make divine existence because, for God, his existence is his essence; therefore, adding essence to common existence would be to add nothing at all. Conversely, essence cannot be added to divine existence to make common existence, since this would make common existence and the existence of common beings into one, which is precisely what Aquinas proves to be false in *On Being and Essence*. In any case, Aquinas maintains the use of 'addition' in his response to the objection, claiming that the difference between divine existence and common existence is that, while divine existence is that to which nothing can be added, common existence is not that to which something can be added. Whatever the reason for this strange use of the word, I will show that, on most interpretations of addition, with Aquinas' metaphysical principles, pantheism and divine complexity are necessary consequences. I will conclude, though, that if we take addition to refer to adding existence, pantheism and divine complexity do not have to follow.

Now, Aquinas' response to the objection is essentially to claim that common and divine existence are different from one another. For, if they were the same, then everything would have divine existence, and therefore God's essence, since according to the argument in *ST* 3.4, God's essence and existence are identical. Therefore, not only would God be in everything, but it is also difficult to say how he

might be simple, seeing as he is in everything. And, simplicity is ultimately what Aquinas is trying to defend in this question. There are four ways in which divine and common existence might be different: 1) they are completely different (i.e. have nothing in common), 2) common existence is divine existence with something else added to it, 3) divine existence is common existence with something else added to it, or 4) a combination of 2) and 3). I will systematically show that none of these will work with respect to Aquinas' views on essence, existence, and God, on most interpretations of what is added.

First, it is clear that 1) will not work, and it is equally clear that Aquinas does not hold it to be true. For, it is obviously inconsistent with the fourth way of proving the existence of God. In this proof, there are gradations in the world that point towards a maximum, and being (i.e. existence) is one of these gradations. Thus, God is "the greatest in being."<sup>11</sup> Now, if common existence and divine existence were to have nothing in common, then it would not make sense to claim, as Aquinas does, that God's being is that towards which all other being points. Therefore, for Aquinas, it cannot be the case that common existence and divine existence are completely different. Also, because Aquinas argues as he does in the fourth way, it is clear that Aquinas would not want to hold that they are completely different.

The second option, that common existence is divine existence with something else added to it, will also not work. Now, everything that exists, apart from God, has common existence. If common existence were divine existence plus something else, then it would follow that everything that has common existence also

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<sup>11</sup> *ST* 2.3 in Aquinas, p. 24.

has divine existence. And, if Aquinas is correct that God's existence is God's essence, then it would follow that everything that exists has God's essence. This leads to some kind of pantheism, and also questions divine simplicity, which is ultimately what Aquinas is trying to defend. For, it seems strange that God could at once be simple but also be in everything. Aquinas, were he to try to defend this position, would probably claim that this is possible in a way that we are incapable of comprehending. This kind of objection should be taken seriously insofar as it shows that my argument is not at the level of a demonstrable proof. While this might be satisfying for theologians, it is not philosophically compelling, as it does not give a positive account of how it would be possible for God to be in everything and yet be simple. So, in lieu of a better positive account, we can assume that my argument is plausible.

The third possibility, that divine existence is common existence with something else added, is more easily refuted: if divine existence were common existence with something else added, then divine existence would have parts. Now, as we have seen, Aquinas argues in *On Being an Essence* that God is his existence. Therefore, if divine existence were to have parts then so would God, since God just is his existence. Hence, this possibility contradicts exactly that which Aquinas is ultimately trying to prove: divine simplicity. Therefore, the third possibility should also be discarded.

The fourth possibility, the combination of the second and third possibilities, is wrong because it is susceptible to the objections that apply to the second and third possibilities. Thus, we should not accept it.

It seems, therefore, that on most interpretations of addition Aquinas' argument will not hold. For, the arguments that I have given against Aquinas' view have been non-specific with respect to what might be added to common or divine existence, and show Aquinas' response to the objection not to work. If, therefore, common existence and divine existence are not different then they must be the same, which leads to the problems regarding both pantheism and divine simplicity described above. However, there is one way Aquinas could argue, though he does not in his response, that saves his position in this case: the difference between common existence and divine existence is that common existence is a deficient version of divine existence. In other words, God is pure actuality whereas everything else has potentiality and actuality.

Arguing in this way circumvents the peculiarity I identified with respect to addition. For, I said that, if essence could not be added, then something that the intellect does not first conceive would have to be added. However, this leaves aside the possibility of adding existence. If we add existence to existence, then the result remains 'existence,' and therefore remains that which the intellect first conceives. Furthermore, existence as the object that could be added is completely consistent with Aquinas' response to the objection: God is that to which no existence could be added because he is already pure existence, whereas it is not in the nature of everything else to have existence added to it, though it might be possible for God to add existence to common beings if he so desired.

Moreover, this seems like the kind of answer Aquinas might give. Aquinas does hold that God is pure actuality whereas everything else – even the angels – has



potentiality.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Aquinas argues in *ST* 3.7 that God is pure actuality *because* he is simple, and that in every composite being there is both actuality and potentiality.<sup>13</sup> The reason God's simplicity entails his being pure actuality is that, if God were not pure actuality, then part of him would be actual and the other would be potential, which would entail that he has parts. So, being simple entails being pure actuality, and being complex entails not being pure actuality. Therefore, we can say, consistently with Aquinas' response to the objection, that the difference between divine existence and common existence is that the former is pure actuality whereas the second is actuality that is both not pure and mixed with potentiality in the composite.

We can quickly apply this result to the four possible ways I argued that the two types of existence could be different. It is not the case that the two types of existence are completely different, since both are defined in terms of actuality, and common existence can be considered as a deficient form of divine existence because it has less actuality; therefore they are clearly on the same scale. It is also not the case that common existence is divine existence with something added to it, since common existence just is less actuality than divine existence. This also precludes the fourth possibility, since the second possibility not applying means that the possibility in question cannot be a combination of the second and third possibilities.

We are left with the third possibility, that divine existence is common existence plus something else, i.e. 'existence.' Recall that the problem with this possibility was the result that divine existence would have parts. For example, if we

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<sup>12</sup> *SW* p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> *ST* 3.7 in Aquinas, p. 35

were to add a property or a thing to common existence to make divine existence, then divine existence would be common existence plus that property or thing. However, this is not a problem if the thing to be added is existence, because we have seen that, according to Aquinas, a thing that is purely actual is simple, and therefore does not have parts. Note that addition here is only conceptual – it is not the case that, to create divine existence, we take an instance of common existence and add more existence. Rather, the concept of addition merely illustrates the difference between the two types of existence.

To conclude, we have seen how Aquinas can consistently maintain the difference between common and divine existence with divine simplicity: divine existence has more existence than common existence because it is pure actuality. We have also seen that Aquinas' response will not work for any object of addition other than existence, since the object added can be neither anything that the intellect does not first conceive, nor essence. While Aquinas does remain internally consistent, how exactly this all works remains mysterious, for we can still ask the question of how something purely simple is capable of bring everything else into existence. Aquinas' probable response – that we cannot know because we do not have the adequate intellectual capacities – seems like a cop-out, but I have not shown it to be false. Therefore, I have not shown Aquinas to be right or wrong, but I do believe I have shown him to be internally consistent on a particular interpretation.

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