

What's the Difference?

On the Metaphysics of Participation in a Christian Context

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The metaphysical notion of participation expresses the ontological dependence of things in the world on spiritual/intellectual realities, and ultimately on God. While the notion brings clearly to light God's presence in things, it tends, for the same reason, either to collapse into pantheism or, what amounts to the same, to deprive the world of any substantial reality of its own. This essay evaluates the place of this notion in Christian thought by exploring the question of difference in the structure of participation as it is found in Plato, Plotinus, and Aquinas.

I. Introduction: A Reason To Be Different?

From out of its origins, the word “participation,” $\mu\text{-}\theta\epsilon\chi\iota\varsigma$ bespeaks plurality, similarity, relation and asymmetry all at once.¹ The root of the term, $-\chi\omega$, generally “to have,” when used with a genitive object indicates in its earliest instances a “having of,” in the sense of “sharing in” [a whole] rather than “taking” [a part].² The prefix, $\mu\epsilon\tau\text{-}$, originally meant “amid, among” (and is thus related to the German “mit,” or the English “mid,” as in the word “midwife”), and thus found its proper use only with plurals or collectives.³ In compositional words, however, it means “after” or “behind” in a successive sense, but also, more dynamically, “in pursuit of” (e.g., $\mu\text{-}\theta\omicron\delta\omicron\varsigma$, “following or pursuing the path”). To speak of metaphysical participation is to say that one thing has what it is *with* and indeed *after* and *in pursuit of*, another: it has its reality, in other words, by virtue of something other than itself. We associate the metaphysical notion of participation, of course, most immediately with Plato,⁴ for whom the term served, if not to explain, at least to give expression to the way in which many things can warrant the same name.⁵

¹ Note that a reference to “parts” is not ingredient in the Greek term as it is in the Latin, which Aquinas explicates etymologically thus: “Participare est quasi partem capere,” “to participate is, as it were, to take a part [of something]”: *In 2 de Caelo*. 18g, *De hebdom.* 2.24. We ought not to let this root lead us to envision the *participatum* as having discrete *parts*, which is clearly excluded by the metaphysical use of the concept, i.e., meaning the sharing in a (metaphysically) simple quality; in any event has no part, so to speak, in the Greek understanding wherein the metaphysical notion was born and raised.

² See Fritz-Gregor Hermann, “ $\mu\epsilon\tau\text{-}\chi\epsilon\iota\nu$, $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\lambda\alpha\mu\beta\text{-}\nu\epsilon\iota\nu$ and the Problem of Participation in Plato’s Ontology,” *Philosophical Inquiry* 25:3-4 (2003): 19-56, here: 22-25.

³ Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, rev. by Gordon Messing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), §1691.

⁴ Plato was the first to use the term philosophically: Sr. M. Annice, “Historical Sketch of the Theory of Participation,” *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952): 49-79, here: 51. Evangelos Moutropoulos supplies some key references to Plato’s use of the term in “L’Idée de participation: Cosmos et praxis,” *Philosophia* 32 (2002): 17-21: *Protagoras* 322a; *Symposium* 208b; *Republic* VI 486a; *Parmenides* 132d, 151e; *Sophist* 256b, 259a; *Timaeus* 77b; *Laws* IX 859e. We ought to note, however, that the term was not a technical term for Plato (indeed, he explicitly forbids its being taken in a technical sense, *Phaedo* 100d). In addition to $\mu\text{-}\theta\epsilon\chi\iota\varsigma$, Plato uses a host of other terms to express generally the same idea. See Cornelio Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione Secondo S. Tommaso d’Aquino*, 2nd ed. (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1950), 47.

⁵ *Republic* X, 596a6-7.

Insofar as the so-called “problem of the One and the Many” lies at the very heart of philosophical thought and moreover bears on what Heidegger calls the most profound philosophical question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?,” it would be only a slight exaggeration to call participation, for good or ill, *the* metaphysical idea *par excellence*, and to agree with Cornelio Fabro that what to a certain extent specifies a philosophy—any philosophy at all—is the position it takes with respect to this idea.⁶

Now, the position Christian thought has taken with respect to the notion of participation is fairly complex. On the one hand, and most obviously, the reference that the notion of participation implies to a transcendent principle as the ultimate source of what exists in time and as sensibly manifest makes the notion quite suitable to Christian thinking. We thus have Augustine affirming that Christians need nothing from philosophy that they cannot find in the Platonists,⁷ and Bonaventure preferring Plato to Aristotle because Aristotelianism “arises from a thinking that seeks the reason for things in the things themselves, detaching and separating the world from God, . . . while Plato’s philosophy was, and most fundamentally sought to be, a philosophy of the beyond, placing the reason for things outside of the things themselves, to the point of denying them, sometimes excessively, any of their own subsistence.”⁸ Though Aquinas was long thought to represent a contrast to Bonaventure with respect to this particular preference, the fundamental significance of participation in Aquinas’ thought, first “discovered” by Geiger and Fabro, has now become generally accepted.⁹ On the other hand, however, the notion of participation bears a logic that seems to lead away from a Christian view of the world in at least two respects. First, insofar as the reference to the “beyond,” implied in the structure of

⁶ Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica*, 1. Indeed, Gilson observes that “the whole philosophy of the Middle Ages was little more than an obstinate endeavor to solve one problem—the problem of the Universals,” *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 3, which is of course the problem Plato introduced. It is clearly the same problem that divided the rationalists and empiricists in the early modern period, and the radical revision of the meaning of truth in late modern and postmodern thought is largely a dialogue with Plato: cf., Nietzsche, Heidegger, and David Rootchnik. In this respect, Whitehead is quite right to call all of Western philosophy “footnotes to Plato.”

⁷ “. . . What need is there to examine other philosophers? There are none who come nearer to us than the Platonists,” *City of God*, bk. VIII, 5, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 304. Clement of Alexandria had written, “What, after all, is Plato but Moses in Attic Greek,” *Strom.*, 1.21.

⁸ Gilson, *La philosophie de S. Bonaventure* (Paris, 1925), 98-99, cited in André Hayens, *L’Intentionnel selon saint Thomas* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1954), 55-56.

⁹ Cornelio Fabro, op.cit., L.-B. Geiger, *La participation dans la philosophie de saint Thomas d’Aquin*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1953); see also Joseph de Finance, *Être et agir* (Paris: P.U.F., 1945). N.D. O’Donough’s judgment that “the time has gone when participation was seen as the key to Aquinas” (“Creation and Participation,” in *Creation, Christ, and Culture Studies in Honor of T. F. Torrance*, ed., Richard W. A. McKinney [Edinburgh: Clark, 1976], 135-48, here: 136-37) was certainly over-hasty. See Klaus Kremer, *Die Neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin* (Leiden: Brill, 1971); Rudi A. Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Agustín Bascarre, “La Doctrina Metafísica de la Participación en Santo Tomás de Aquino,” *Giornale di metafisica* 30 (1975): 257- 66; W. Norris Clarke, “The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas,” in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being—God—Person* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994): 89-101; John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2000).

participation, constitutes the very *identity* of things, the notion seems to tend toward pantheism.¹⁰ Second, as the passage cited above already suggests, the notion of participation by the very same token seems to deprive the finite, temporal, and physical world any reality of its own.¹¹ We do not need to accept Aristotle's dismissal of participation as a poetic and merely metaphorical term to see that he has a point in rejecting the "separate" existence of forms and insisting on individually existing things as the primary meaning of being.¹² However problematic its implications might be, the notion of *haecceitas* that Scotus introduces at the turn of the thirteenth century stems from a deeply Christian intuition.¹³ Creation is ultimately *good*, and we encounter that goodness not merely in looking *past* things to their source, but also in looking *at* them, in celebrating their intrinsic solidity and their irreducible uniqueness.¹⁴ If the Neoplatonic tradition is correct to say that the form is, as it were, infinitely higher than any particular instance of that form because that instance will always express merely a partial reflection of the whole idea, Kierkegaard is also right to affirm that the individual is infinitely higher than the universal, because the individual alone exhibits the ineluctable seriousness of existence. From a Christian perspective, an adequate notion of participation must somehow have room for both of these affirmations.

In order to enter into the various aspects of the problem of participation, let us focus them around a single question: what accounts for the *difference* between image and reality, *participans* and *participatum*? As we saw above, Plato conceived the notion of participation primarily as a means of accounting for the unity among things. How is it, in other words, that I can call this, this, and this a chair? But resolving this problem by pointing to a shared form gives rise immediately to the problem of explaining *why* there are in fact these chairs if there is indeed Chair itself. In order to avoid thinking of the images as *simply* unreal, or affirming their multiplicity as a fall from unity and just so far as *imperfect*, we need to discover a positive *principle* for their difference. The tendency in Platonic thought is to explain the multiplicity, not by any positive principle, but by the relative absence of a principle. This approach has a clear advantage, in that it provides, as we will see below, a way of affirming the paradoxical identity of transcendence and immanence of forms in relation to images, which allows us to avoid both a pantheistic monism and a problematic dualism. But, as we will also see, this solution will ultimately remain insufficient insofar as the difference of the form from the image cannot be

¹⁰ See Annice, 60. Aimé Forrest affirms that "it is the spirit of Platonism to relate the being of things to the being of God, perhaps even to identify them. This assimilation is impossible for Christian thought," *La structure métaphysique de la concret selon Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1956), 27.

¹¹ Te Velde formulates this problem as one of the guiding questions of his study on participation in Aquinas (i.e., how it can be reconciled with the fact that creatures or substances with their own nature): xii.

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 9, 991a20-25: "And to say [forms] are patterns and the other things share in them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors." But one can just as well ask whether Aristotle's preferred *explanans*, α-τ-α—which originally means "charge" or "accusation," and which later takes on the philosophical sense of "cause," i.e., that which is responsible for something—is any less metaphorical.

¹³ See Hans Urs von Balthasar's beautiful exposition of the importance of Scotus in this regard for the Catholic poetic vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins: *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. III: *Lay Styles* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 355ff.

¹⁴ Forrest, 25-27.

sustained without a corresponding difference of the image from the form, i.e., without the image being as well both transcendent and immanent with respect to the form.

Let us try to bring out more clearly the difficult latent here. Aquinas, following the classical philosophical tradition, affirms that “that which is the principle of unity cannot be the principle of difference.”¹⁵ If this axiom is simply true, we can find a principle for the difference of the image from the form—and ultimately of the world from God—only by positing a second principle for difference. But we then face the problem of articulating the relationship between these two principles. Is there an ultimate unity between them? If yes, then what accounts for their difference? The alternatives would seem to be to affirm the Gnostic ultimacy of two principles, which is ultimately irrational, or to affirm difference as an “unjustifiable” fall from unity. In other words, either difference *has* no explanation, and thus has no “good reason,” or it has an explanation, i.e., a second positive principle of its own, which becomes thus the opposite of the good principle. In either case, it has no intelligible justification. The only real alternative to these alternatives would seem to be *either* to refuse to raise the question, and simply begin from the obvious existence of a unified multiplicity, i.e., to presuppose that this problem has nothing to offer to thinking, and then to turn one’s attention to other details—but here we fall into the wonderlessness of positivism and ultimately to the loss of philosophy. *Or*, we refuse to seek an answer and simply abide *within* the question in a Heideggerian fashion—but if we decide a priori that the question cannot find an answer, we have indeed already *de facto* answered the question, and specifically given it the same negative answer we considered first above. Thus, the question of *accounting for difference* in the structure of participation seems in the end to yield four possible outcomes: either nihilism, nihilism, nihilism, or nihilism. To borrow from Woody Allen, let us pray that we have the wisdom to make the right choice.

It would be vain to seek to solve, once and for all, a problem that remains, thankfully, inexhaustibly rich. What we intend to do in the present essay is to trace out the dimensions of the problem through a reflection on representative texts in Plato, Plotinus, and Aquinas, to see how the question of difference itself gets deepened and differentiated, and eventually leads us to the necessity of affirming the equiprimordiality of unity and difference. In the end, without deducing the content of Christian revelation, we will nevertheless see how the doctrine of the Trinity presents a “fitting” fulfillment of what the metaphysical structure of participation itself requires.

II. Plato on participation as the immanence of the transcendent

Perhaps Plato’s clearest expression of participation occurs in the *Phaedo*, during Socrates’ endeavor to present, as it were, his intellectual autobiography, his progressive attempt to come to an understanding of the way things are. After confessing the vanity of seeking corporeal causes for things in the manner of the early philosophers, the so-called naturalists,

¹⁵ *De veritate*, 8.8 sed contra 3.

Socrates “hypothesizes” (*Phaedo*, 100b6-7) the existence of “beauty itself by itself, goodness, greatness, and all the rest,” and then explains: “It seems to me that if anything is beautiful besides beauty itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than because it shares in (μετ-χει) that beauty: and I say that all things are like this. Do you agree with this sort of cause?” (100c4-8). Socrates goes on to insist that, though the precise details remain mysterious, we can find no better explanation for the sensible experience of something such as beauty other than “either the presence (παρουσ-α) or the communion (κοινων-α), whatever you may call it, of that Beauty in things, however it may come to be” (100d5- 7).

This brief passages expresses one of the key insights of Plato’s metaphysics: the presence of identifiable qualities in sensible things presupposes the reality of that quality in its own right. In relation to our specific question, let us note that he characterizes this reality by pointing to its *difference* from sensible things. There cannot be many beautiful things unless beauty is somehow distinct from each and all of them, for if beauty existed only as a quality inhering in a thing, it could do so only in *one* thing, and it would be impossible for many things to be beautiful. Thus, beauty must exist in some sense apart from all possible sensible manifestations of beauty; it must exist, as Plato puts it here, “itself by itself” (α-τ- καθ’α-τ-), which means in fact as transcending all manifest expressions of beauty whatsoever. It is for this reason that Plato elsewhere depicts Beauty, like all the other forms, as existing absolutely—i.e., not reducible to anything outside of themselves¹⁶—and therefore without any sensible qualities. Beauty itself

is not beautiful in this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that. (*Symposium*, 211a-b)

The lack of manifest qualities that Plato attributes to the forms—which he says are “colorless, shapeless, and intangible”¹⁷—is not accidental to them, but is a necessary function of their absoluteness, which is in turn logically entailed in their difference from every relative participation. And it is just this that renders them properly intelligible.

¹⁶ Although Plato does affirm an “interweaving,” συμπλοκ-, of the forms in the *Sophist* (259c), for example, he nevertheless says that their interrelation also presupposes their independent “self-being.” In the *Republic*, he makes all the forms in some sense relative to, i.e., dependent on, the Good, but he does so, arguably, because the Good in fact *gives* them their self-identity insofar as it is ultimately what is responsible for their being so many intrinsic, and thus non-reducible, “goods.”

¹⁷ *Phaedrus* 247c: “-χρ-ματ-ς τε κα- -σχημ-τος κα- -ναφ-ς.” It is significant that Plato describes the transcendence of being precisely by *negating* any sensible predication to it.

Such a total transcendence of the forms such as Beauty from the world of sense experience—the “separation” (χωρισμ-ς) of the forms from individually existing things, ο-σ-αι, that disturbed Aristotle—would seem to give rise to two distinct worlds, the intelligible and the sensible, with no possible intercourse between them. It is just this problem, in fact, that Plato wrestles with in the *Parmenides*, a dialogue that takes a remarkably clear-eyed view of the difficulties such a separation might entail. But in the *Phaedo*, Plato simply affirms the “presence” of the absolutely transcendent form in its sensible image. While it is often assumed that Plato gradually came to attenuate the radical difference in the notion of participation he expressed in the so-called middle dialogues, a reflection on the logic of transcendence suggests that he does not need to: radical difference does not imply dualism, but is precisely what prevents it.¹⁸ The transcendence of forms in relation to the sensible images that participate in them would *exclude* their immanence in sensible things *only if* forms and images were relative to one another *within the same order of reality*. If one corporeal *thing* is separate from another corporeal *thing*, it obviously cannot be present in it—indeed, corporeal things ultimately *cannot*, as corporeal, be immanent to one another. By contrast, it is precisely because the form transcends not only a particular sensible image, but in fact the very mode of existence of that image, that it can be present to it—and to every other. In other words, only partial transcendence—i.e., mere separation within the same order of reality—excludes immanence; true transcendence is coincident with immanence. Because a form is not a physical thing, and therefore not localizable in any particular time and space, it is free, as it were, to be anywhere, at any time. It turns out that all of the problems Plato raises concerning the forms in the *Parmenides* presuppose not *too much* transcendence, but *not enough*: we may thus suppose that he was criticizing there, not his own theory in the middle dialogues, as often assumed, but the misinterpretation of this theory.¹⁹

Does the non-corporeality of the forms mean that they are not really real? To the contrary. When Plato distinguishes between the modes of existence of forms and images, he accords real reality—or in fact “really real reality” (ο-σ-α -ντως ο-σ-α, *Phaedrus*, 247c)—to forms alone,²⁰ he does so for a host of reasons: they are eternal and unchangeable,²¹ the original source of the content of all we experience through the senses,²² and the objects of the highest

¹⁸ For a more thorough presentation of the argument that follows, see Eric Perl, “The Presence of the Paradigm: Immanence and Transcendence in Plato’s Theory of Forms,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 53 (December 1999): 339-62, and idem, “Sense-Perception and Intellect in Plato,” *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne* 15:1 (1997): 15-34.

¹⁹ See Perl, “Sense-Perception,” 28. Fritz-Gregor Hermann has shown that the terminology of the *Parmenides* points back to the *Phaedo*, and demonstrates that the reading the character Parmenides gives to the verbs μετ-χεῖν and μεταλαμβάνειν in his critique of the forms betrays the very same confusions that Socrates criticizes Anaxagoras for in the *Phaedo*, namely, to think of separation in corporeal terms and thus to interpret participation wrongly as “taking a physical part” of something. The dualism of orders thus necessarily follows. Hermann concludes that “There may well have been those who read the *Phaedo* in just that manner and confronted Plato with similar objections,” 47-48.

²⁰ See *Republic* V, 475e-480a.

²¹ *Phaedo*, 78c.

²² *Republic* V, 476b-c. In the *Phaedo*, 110b-111c, Plato presents a mythological tale that depicts the true world of ideas as more vivid and real “versions” of the things we perceive in the world.

part of the soul.²³ Here, again, there is no dualism between forms and images because these are not two “competing” realities set over against each other. Instead, forms are the only things in fact that are real. To say this does *not* mean, however, that the sensible world is ultimately a non-existent illusion, as the historical Parmenides seems to have thought. Plato clearly *distinguishes* images from non-being. As he says in the *Republic*, likeness comes between being and nothing.²⁴ It is not that sensibles do not exist, it is only that their existence is *wholly derived* from the truly existent forms.²⁵ Sensibles are, in a word, “something” rather than nothing, but that something is their being *nothing but* forms as sensibly manifest. This is, indeed, what it means to call them *likenesses* or participations.²⁶ To put it another way, sensibles *are* forms, but they are forms in a certain respect, namely, as present to the senses. To say anything else would be to pit their reality over against the forms. But if they cannot be set over against the forms, then it must be said that they *add nothing* to the forms. As Perl puts it, “Since the form is the universal determination by which the instances are such, the instances can do nothing for the form, while the form does everything for the instances.”²⁷

Now, for all the beautiful paradox of this simultaneity of transcendence and immanence that this view of participation implies, it nevertheless gives rise to a certain problem. Granted that the transcendence of forms in relation to images is precisely what allows forms to be in some respect identical to them—or perhaps better: allows images to be identical to forms²⁸—we must nevertheless ask what it is that is responsible for the multiplicity of the sensible images. Participation explains how the many can in fact be one, but it does not account for the *fact* of multiplicity. In the *Republic*, Plato says that it is “by communion with actions, bodies, and one another” that unique forms appear as many (476a5-7). But Eric Perl is right to insist we not read the intercourse with bodies as *causing* the multiplicity of forms, for such an interpretation would assume a causal reciprocity between forms and corporeal images that would undermine the genuine transcendence of the forms.²⁹ If sensibles are indeed wholly derivative of the forms, or

²³ *Phaedrus*, 248c; cf., *Republic*, 490b.

²⁴ *Republic*, 477a.

²⁵ C.J. de Vogel expresses this point well: “We are in full metaphysics here: physical being is a kind of reality, but a kind of reality which can neither exist by itself nor be known or explained from itself. It is found to be dependent on that other, superior kind of being. There proves to be a ‘difference of level’ in such a sense that, after all, there appear to be *not two realities*, the one next to or opposite the other, realities of basically the same order and thus independent the one of the other—which would be *dualism*—, but one kind of reality which symbolically should be indicated by a capital, a Reality which in the ontological order must be called ‘basic’ and in the qualitative order ‘supreme,’ a Reality which does not surpass the other in degree, in the way we saw of things surrounding us that one of them is ‘superior’ to another, but -πλ-ς; and another kind of reality which does ‘exist,’ but in its very existence is found to be dependent on the first,” *Rethinking Plato and Platonism* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 162.

²⁶ *Republic*, 476c-d.

²⁷ Perl, “The Presence of the Paradigm,” 352.

²⁸ “[T]he doctrine of participation makes the sensible identical with the intelligible, except that in sensible things the forms appear to us as a manifold instead of in their unity,” J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy*, part I: *Thales to Plato* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 166.

²⁹ Perl, “Sense-Perception,” 17 fn. 3.

as Findlay puts it, “parasitic upon them,”³⁰ while the forms are true being, then the images’ *not* being forms cannot be due to some reality *outside* of the forms. Instead, it would have to arise from something strictly *unreal*: and this is just what Plato affirms in the cosmological account of the *Timaeus*, the only dialogue to address this question directly. Here, Plato explains that it is the absolutely negative “existence” of the receptacle, or “space,” that allows the forms to appear, as it were, “outside” of themselves, and thus in the physical realm of becoming.³¹ We must understand why it is absolutely crucial for Plato to insist that this “space” be devoid of *any* qualities or characteristics whatever, or in other words, that it not *exist* in any way at all (for to have a quality of any sort is to participate in a form and therefore in reality): if the space *in* which forms were to be received had any reality of its own, it would first of all be just so far incapable of receiving form (the space would be, as it were, already occupied), and second of all it would introduce a positive reality *apart from* the forms. But this, as we saw above, would give rise to just the dualism that Plato’s doctrine of participation succeeds in overcoming.

Can Plato tell us where this absolute nothing comes from that makes all relative nothings, i.e., the multiplicity of the sense world of becoming, possible? Logically, he cannot: it does not “come from” anywhere, and in fact absolutely does not and cannot exist. If there is a principle for reality, there cannot be an additional principle for what is “other” than the really real; there can be only the absence of a principle.³² Though this “explanation” is consistent, we cannot help but feel uneasy with it. If there is no *positive* ground for the multiplicity of images, they have no justification *as* images.³³ The radical difference of forms from images necessary to Plato’s notion of participation is had at the cost of being unable to affirm any *real* difference of images from forms. The closest Plato comes to a response to this question is his reference to the *goodness* of the divine craftsman, who, in his goodness, and thus his “freedom from jealousy,” desired that “everything become as much like himself as was possible.”³⁴ In other words, to be good is to share oneself, and to share oneself requires others. For a deepening of what Plato merely hints at here, it is best to turn to Plotinus.

³⁰ Findlay, “Towards a Neo-Neo-Platonism,” in *Ascent to the Absolute: Metaphysical Papers and Lectures* (New York: Allen and Unwin, 1970), 251.

³¹ *Timaeus*, 50b-52b.

³² Perl argues that the manifestation of forms in sensibles is simply part of the nature of forms (“The Presence of the Paradigm,” 352-53). He compares forms to objects in sunlight, which cannot fail to produce a shadow, and yet are wholly independent of those shadows. While this interpretation is a brilliant way of explaining the nature of participation in Plato, it does not wholly remove the problem we are addressing. There is something outside of the objects, in this analogy, that “allows” them to cast their shadow, namely, the earth upon which it falls. But outside of the forms is, strictly speaking, nothing at all. We are thus still left to reckon with the status of the “receptacle.”

³³ One might object that Plato *does* in fact propose a ground for difference precisely in relation to the question of multiplicity in the *Sophist*, insofar as, there, he posits motion and difference as two of the greatest forms (254c ff.). However, this resolution fails on two counts: one, there is still a need, in this case, to account for the multiplicity of the greatest forms in the first place; second, and more decisively, the form of difference accounts as it were only for *formal* difference, and does not explain the “vertical” difference, which we might call the “real” difference, of images from forms. To put it concretely, the form of motion does not itself move. It tells us *what* motion is, but it does not account for the simple fact *that* things move.

³⁴ *Timaeus*, 29e. It is worth pondering the fact that Plato accounts for the creation of the world through a mythological “personification” of the principle of things.

III. Plotinus on Goodness as productive cause

In relation to our question concerning the provenance of difference, we find two insights introduced by Plotinus that, though they may be arguably implied in Plato, are worked out much more explicitly by this later disciple: first, the identification of perfection with productive power;³⁵ second, the related notion that the existence of the physical images of reality arises as a fruit of a logos or rational principle, namely, Nature's mediated contemplation of unity.³⁶ Let us explore the connection between these points.

One of Plotinus's most common descriptive names for the One is δ-ναμις π-ντων, the "potency" or perhaps "productive power of all things." What Plotinus intends by π-ντα is not merely the things of the intelligible realm, but absolutely all things whatsoever, in heaven and on earth. Now, there seem to be two reasons for his linking of absolute perfection and absolute productivity.³⁷ Looking at the world, we see that, not only rational beings, but all living creatures, and indeed elements as well, tend to produce some likeness of themselves as they become most fully what they are: by *being* fire, for example, fire gives off heat; similarly, living creatures reproduce themselves when they reach maturity, i.e., their proper perfection.³⁸ If this fruitfulness is a result of their perfection, how can we fail to ascribe perfect fruitfulness to what is most completely perfect, that is, to the One itself? Indeed, we seem also to have a more conceptual reason for doing so: if a failure to give generously is a result of self-seeking need, that which is absolutely transcendent and thus "independent," that which therefore has no trace of need, cannot fail to be absolutely generous. This inference leads to a certain paradox, which one must nevertheless admit glows with intelligibility: the One can be the principle of all things only by transcending them all, which means, to give being, it must be in some sense "beyond being."³⁹ There is a link, then, between transcendence and generosity, and the *difference* we saw in Plato's notion of participation becomes explicitly in Plotinus a productive principle. As Plotinus puts it, "It is because there is nothing in [the One] that all things come from it: in order that being may exist, the One is not being, but the generator of being (γεννητ-ς δ- α-το-). This, we may say, is the first act of generation: the One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes *something other than*

³⁵ "How then could the most perfect, the first Good, remain in itself as if it grudged to give of itself or was impotent, when it is the productive power of all things?," *Ennead* V.4.1. Plotinus is referring to Plato's *Timaeus* here with his use of the verb "to grudge," φθονε-ν. Cf., *Phaedrus*, 247a9-10.

³⁶ See esp. III.8.5-6.

³⁷ Heinz Robert Schlette is correct to observe that the "reasons" Plotinus affirms for the production of the many out of the One are intended, not to prove (*beweisen*), but to explain (*verdeutlichen*). See Schlette, *Das Eine und das Andere: Studien zur Problematik des Negativen in der Metaphysik Plotins* (Munich: Max Huebner Verlag, 1966), 72-73. That which is most original, of course, cannot be deduced from anything else.

³⁸ V.4.1: "If the First is perfect, the most perfect of all, and the primal power, it must be the most powerful of all beings and the other powers must imitate it as far as they are able. Now when anything else comes to perfection we see that it produces, and does not endure to remain by itself, but makes something else [-λλ' -τερον ποιο-ν]." See also III.8.3: "Making, for [Nature], means being what it is, and its making power is coextensive with what it is."

³⁹ V.4.2.

itself (τ-περπλ-ρες α-το-πεπο-ηκεν -λλο).⁴⁰ The Platonic notion of participation thus gets radicalized in Plotinus: it accounts not only for the *way* things are, i.e., their intelligible qualities, but also for the very fact that they are. And this radicalization requires a principle that not only transcends physical things, but is itself transcendence pure and simple.

It is well known that, for Plotinus, things *are* by being *one*, that is, by participating severally in unity: “It is by the One that all beings are beings.”⁴¹ On the other hand, and less often recognized, to be literally the productive power of all things, the One must be equally a principle—in some respect at least—of *diversity*, insofar as the One gives this unity precisely to what is other than itself. Or, better: to the other that it itself gives. As the originating principle, the One is simultaneously unifying and, so to speak, “otherifying.”⁴² If this were not the case, the One would be afflicted with a sterility incompatible with its perfection. But its sheer generosity makes manifest that its “poverty,” i.e., its not “being” anything at all, is at the same time an inconceivable wealth, because its utter absence of any determinate content in itself is just what accounts for its being the source of all content, i.e., for its absolutely incomparable “magnanimity.” A comparison with Hegel is helpful here: while Hegel begins with the concept of Being that is empty *because* of its universality, and thus *must* externalize itself in order to attain in reality the universality it already is logically, Plotinus begins with a principle that, as always-already prior to the distinction between poverty and fullness,⁴³ externalizes itself (so to speak) not because it needs to, but *precisely* because it does not need to. Necessity implies a kind of heteronomy that makes no sense in relation to the One, to which of course nothing can ultimately be in fact *heteros*, and we must therefore affirm the production of all things by the One that is just as much an act of free will as an act of (inner) necessity.⁴⁴ Plotinus, in this respect, would seem to stand closer to the Christian notion of *creatio ex nihilo* than is generally acknowledged.⁴⁵ However that may be, we ought to see that the pure transcendence, and therefore the *generosity*, of the first principle offers a surer ground for the positivity of difference, the “justification” of the otherness due to production, than one can find in Hegelian dialectics.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ V.2.1. Italics added. Note that Plotinus actually uses the present perfect tense, i.e., “has made something other,” not in order to indicate an action that took place in the past, as the literal English rendering would imply, but to indicate, as the Greek does, an action’s being completed in the present.

⁴¹ VI.9.1. In this passage, Plotinus goes on to show that things exist insofar as they are unified, and that dissolution—the loss of unity—is the loss of being.

⁴² Cristina D’Ancona Costa speaks of the “two different kinds of causality” of the One: “Plotinus and later Platonic philosophers on the causality of the First Principle,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed., Lloyd Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 356-85, here: 368-75. Costa presents the issue as a problem left unresolved by Plotinus to the later tradition.

⁴³ See V.3.15: The One “has nothing,” but may also be said to “possess all things beforehand,” because it *is* all of them *principally* (as non-passive potency) without distinction.

⁴⁴ VI.8.18-20.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Kremer, *Die Neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie*, 12-13.

⁴⁶ Of course, one might point to the logic of the dialectical *Aufhebung* that not only eliminates (*tollere*), but simultaneously preserves (*conservare*) the difference in the sublation (*elevare*): In the end, it is true that Hegel’s identity is not the proverbial “night in which all cows are black,” but is a thoroughly *mediated* identity, i.e., the identity of identity *and* difference. Nevertheless, the point for Hegel is never difference *as such*, but the ever-

The One's pure generosity is reflected in everything that exists in the world, to the degree that corresponds to its degree of being.⁴⁷ The first "hypostasis" to proceed from the One, Plotinus calls νο-ς, though he also refers to this hypostasis as -ν or ε-νοῦ, insofar as the Intellect is ultimately the same as its essential object, being.⁴⁸ The Intellect is an image of the One.⁴⁹ Indeed, since it follows *immediately* (μετὰξ- ο-δ-ν) upon the One, it is the most perfect possible image of the One. In fact, Plotinus describes it as the One itself *insofar as it thinks itself*: "How then does [the One] generate Intellect? Because by its return to it it sees: and this seeing is Intellect."⁵⁰ Thus, where the One is absolutely undifferentiated unity, the Intellect is that same unity mediated by thought; in other words, it is the absolute identity of thought and its object, an identity than which, quite literally, nothing greater can be thought. The only difference between the One and Intellect is that what the One essentially *is*, the Intellect essentially *has* by participation. Since this "pure participation," as we may call it, constitutes the very identity of the Intellect, and because participation implies the "not" of secondarity, Plotinus affirms *difference* as intrinsic to the Intellect, a difference that is co-extensive with its self-identity: "For there could not be thinking without otherness, and also sameness."⁵¹ The implications of the otherness between the Intellect and the One that the Intellect appropriates *in* the act of participation, or better, *as* the act of participation—which Plotinus likes to refer to as the act of contemplation (θεωρ-α)—are many: whereas the One is beyond being, the Intellect is identical to being; while the One is the productive power of all things by being *none* of them, the Intellect *is* the reality of all things;⁵² while the One is utterly without difference, the Intellect is essentially a "One-Many";⁵³ while the One is the absolute stillness beyond need and its alleviation, the Intellect is the simultaneity of pure desire and pure satisfaction, "always desiring and always attaining."⁵⁴ Finally, while the Intellect constitutes itself through an act of contemplative participation, a love that is its very being, the One is not constituted at all. It does not, *cannot* contemplate, and likewise *cannot* love.⁵⁵

Note that we said the Intellect "constitutes itself": here, we touch on the second point mentioned above. The "act" of production cannot strictly speaking be an act belonging to the

greater expansion of identity; difference is affirmed *only because* and *insofar as* it offers a means to more comprehensive unity.

⁴⁷ See V.2.

⁴⁸ V.9.8: Intellect and being "have one active actuality, or rather both are one thing. Being and Intellect are therefore one nature."

⁴⁹ V.1.7.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ V.1.4.

⁵² VI.9.2.

⁵³ VI.7.14.

⁵⁴ III.8.11. The One is "before movement and rest," VI.9.3.

⁵⁵ Plotinus does speak of the One as "love of himself" (VI.8.15), but he is surely speaking metaphorically here insofar as he takes love to be essentially an "aspiration toward the higher and the good" (III.5.9), and there cannot be anything for the One to aspire to. The One itself "must not look or aspire to something else, but stay quiet and be the 'spring and origin' of natural activities" (I.7.1). In a word, love is associated with participation: what the One *is*, all other things love to be.

One because action implies the difference of potentiality, which is “external” to the One.⁵⁶ The production of the Intellect is therefore not something that the One “does”, but something that the Intellect “does.” But this means that the difference between the One and the Intellect, which is a difference *in* the Intellect, arises through the active pursuit of goodness, i.e., the One. In other words, the difference of participation is not so much a fall *from* unity, as it is a function of the *ascent toward* unity, which ascent is identical to the One’s “downward” generosity. We would lose the paradox of true productivity if we viewed it in a mere one-sided way as diminution. To think of the One’s “super-active” production coming *before* the Intellect’s own act of reception would be to introduce an inappropriate temporality. The gift and the reception are, so to speak, one and the same. At the same time, this ascent of the Intellect, because it is the contemplative reception and therefore imitation of the productive generosity of the One, is simultaneously the Intellect’s own productive descent, i.e., its generation of a new hypostasis that imitates, in its turn, the simultaneous activity and receptivity of the Intellect. Plotinus calls this the Soul: “Soul is an expression and a kind of activity of Intellect, just as Intellect is of the One.”⁵⁷ Just as Intellect is an image of the One, so too is the Soul an image of the Intellect,⁵⁸ a fruit of its productive reception of Goodness.⁵⁹

The procession of multiplicity out of unity thus appears, in one respect, as a cascading waterfall, in another as an ecstatic ascent; in any event, as following from the intrinsic creative energy of unity, it presents in a dynamic way the progressive multiplication of difference, not simply quantitatively, but first of all in a qualitative sense. The Soul’s participation in the Intellect is the addition of a difference to the difference that constitutes Intellect. Just as Intellect *is* the One, but the One *as* thinking itself “intellectually,” the Soul *is* the Intellect (and therefore also the One), but *as* thinking itself, so to speak, “soulfully.” What was the purely formal distinction of eternal ideas, each thinking the whole at once in thinking itself, becomes the *discursive* thinking of those ideas, dis-cursive reason being the thinking that “runs through” its objects successively: here, we have thus the introduction of temporal difference.⁶⁰ Finally, Nature in its turn contemplates the discursive ideas of the Soul, and from this contemplation emerges the new difference of space. Nature’s contemplation, thus, brings forth the sensible cosmos.⁶¹ Neoplatonism is often thought to harbor a certain contempt for the body, and the

⁵⁶ “Potentiality” is meant, here, in contrast to actuality. Plotinus uses the word *dynamis* quite often to speak of the One, but in this case he means a perfect potency that has no need to be actualized.

⁵⁷ V.1.6.

⁵⁸ V.1.3.

⁵⁹ V.1.7.

⁶⁰ See III.7.11. Cf., V.1.4. Plotinus describes time as an imitation of eternity, the former being the soul’s thinking of reality in its distinct aspects, one after the other, while the latter is the “intuition,” as it were, of all things at once.

⁶¹ We see in this context the significance of the argument Jonathon Scott Lee makes in his essay, “The Doctrine of Reception According to the Capacity of the Recipient in *Ennead* VI.4-5,” *Dionysius* 3 (1979): 79-97, regarding matter as a “limitation” of form in Plotinus. If matter could limit form, we would have a positive reality *outside* of Intellect, which entails all of the problems of dualism. For Plotinus, according to the brief sketch we have presented, the difference of limitation arises, strangely, from above: the limit of space is the *fruit* of Nature’s contemplation of Soul; it is not imposed on Nature from below, nor does the activity of Nature have to “accommodate” itself to matter. On the other hand, Nature’s spatially limited formation of matter is in some sense a

corporeal world accessible to the senses; one might perhaps expect such a contempt to follow from the logic of participation, which makes the participant *nothing but* a degraded modality of that *in* which it participates. But the deepest impulse of Plotinus's interpretation of participation is to affirm the participant in the first place as a *positive expression* of the *participatum*, the fruit of its love of unity, and ultimately as a beautiful expression of unity itself.⁶² One of the most passionately written of Plotinus's treatises is his work "Against the Gnostics," II.9, which condemns contempt for the physical world as blasphemy.

Nevertheless, one may still ask whether Plotinus's schema ultimately valorizes difference, or perhaps better, provides the grounds finally to sustain the difference he clearly does valorize in some manner. Although the sensible images that populate the natural cosmos are altogether good as manifestations of the Divine Intelligence and Unity, is it possible to say that they are good also, and simply, in themselves? One hesitates here: it cannot be forgotten that the multiplicity of the world is an effect of the Good, and is good as such an effect, and also that the "in-itself" character of things is not to be *juxtaposed* to their participation in the One because it *is* that participation at bottom; and yet, it is equally the case that, for Plotinus, unity alone is perfect, and all other things are perfect precisely to the extent that they relate to this unity, which means that their imperfection, conversely, is measured by their difference or distance from it. Speaking of Intellect, Plotinus writes, for example:

Now what comes from [the One] could not be the same as himself. If then it is not the same, it cannot of course be better: for what could be better than the One or in any way transcend him? It must then be worse; and this means more deficient. What then is more deficient than the One? That which is not one; it is therefore many. (V.3.15)

Of course, the One, as Plotinus never tires of repeating, is immediately present to all things; but that presence is limited by the capacity to receive it, the expanse of which depends on the thing's "level" of reality. Not, again, that the lower ever "measures" the higher, but that the higher constricts itself or becomes diluted in its going forth and thus, in its self-diffusion, becomes its own measure. Though Plotinus marvels at the beauty of the sensible cosmos, he nevertheless thinks of matter itself, *qua* matter, as "evil."⁶³ For all of the positivity of generation, which necessarily entails difference, a certain shadow hangs over the "self-being" of what is

constriction of the Soul above it, just as the Soul is a constriction of Intellect, and the Intellect, the One. Nevertheless, the *causal principle* of this constriction is itself a fruit from above. There is no causal force in the Plotinian cosmos that is not an expression of the first principle.

⁶² "Two points of great importance for the understanding of Plotinus's philosophy are, first that the production of each lower stage of being from the higher is not the result of any conscious act on the part of the latter, but is a necessary, unconscious reflex of its primary activity of contemplation; and, second, that every level of real being, even the lowest, is good. Plotinus may speak of matter, which is absolute non-existence, as evil, but he is intensely anxious to demonstrate the complete goodness of the material world, the glorious image of its still more glorious archetype, the world of No- ς ," A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 111-12.

⁶³ See I.8.3, and II.4.16.

other than the One; Plotinus often uses the charged word $\tau\lambda\mu\alpha$, “audacity,” in its regard.⁶⁴ Moreover, while Plotinus, as we have seen, celebrates diversity of a particular kind in certain contexts—above all, in the realm of the Intellect—what he seems to celebrate most is the unity that comprehends the whole and finds expression in it and in each of its parts. We see this emphasis, for example, in his treatise on beauty, the very first he wrote: beauty is not above all the unity *of a multiplicity* and therefore in some respect the *multiplicity of unity*, but is *unity* tout court; it “rests upon the material thing when it has been brought into unity, and gives itself to parts and wholes alike.”⁶⁵ In other words, though a complex thing can manifest beauty, the beauty that it shows forth is due solely to its unity, and not at all to its complexity. The difference of multiplicity does not itself, that is, contribute causally in the beauty of the manifestation.

The question of the status of difference in the metaphysical structure of participation in Plotinus’s thought is an extremely delicate matter, but perhaps we may formulate it, finally, thus: By virtue of the essential generativity of the first principle, Plotinus affirms the *goodness* of difference, but he seems to do so *insofar* as it serves to “multiply” unity, and not because difference is simply good *as such*. In order to be able to affirm the goodness of difference *as difference*, there would *have to be some sense* in which, to put it crudely, things also get better the more multiple, and indeed the more external or physical, they become. In other words, to look at the issue in connection with the structure of participation, there has to be some sense in which the *participans* exceeds the *participatum*, however paradoxical that may seem. More concretely, it means, for example, that the sensible world would have to exceed the intelligible world *in some positive way*, and not simply by virtue of a progressive dilution. Plotinus claims that whatever one “adds” to the Good makes it that much less.⁶⁶ Thus, there is according to Plotinus ultimately nothing new under the One. The problem is excruciating: on the one hand, it seems we cannot affirm the “excess” of the *participans* in relation to the *participatum* without simply exploding the structure of participation (if x receives from y, how can it end up with *more* than y?). On the other hand, if we deny the excess then we will ultimately be without a ground for the genuine and good *difference* of the *participans*. We are thus tempted to look for some second principle, next to the One, to justify the excess, and we thereby fall into the dead-end nihilism of Gnosticism. Our only way out would be to affirm a first principle that, while absolutely simple, is not *mere* unity. For this, we turn to Aquinas.

⁶⁴ V.1.1. Referring to individual souls, he says: “The beginning of evil for them was audacity and coming to birth and the first otherness and the wishing to belong to themselves.” Naguib Baladi in fact interprets the whole of Plotinus around this word, insofar as it alone serves, he believes, to explain the possibility of the various levels of difference in a cosmos ultimately rooted in pure Unity: *La pensée de Plotin* (Paris: P.U.F., 1970). Armstrong, similarly, describes the progressive multiplication of diversity and externality in the Plotinian cosmos in terms of the increase of self-isolation: *Architecture*, 89-90.

⁶⁵ I.6.2.

⁶⁶ III.8.11.

IV. Aquinas and participation as reciprocal causality

It is a curious fact that, while participation is today generally accepted as forming a significant part of Aquinas's view of reality,⁶⁷ the works that first pointed its role out to twentieth century Thomism—Fabro (1939) and Geiger (1942)—were received as ground-breaking studies. Indeed, Etienne Gilson's classic exposition of Aquinas's philosophy gives only passing mention to the theme.⁶⁸ If it is the case that the idea of participation leads one to seek reality not in individual things themselves, but reductively in their transcendent causes, it is not surprising that the theme of participation would not have been as immediately apparent in Aquinas. For him, perhaps even more than for Aristotle, the primary sense of reality, metaphysically speaking, is composite substance. But this is just the novelty that he introduces with respect to the Neoplatonic tradition: as we will see, Aquinas's notion of participation *includes* an affirmation of the difference of that which participates, and thus opens the world to its transcendent source without thereby making the world something "insubstantial."

Aquinas shares with Neoplatonism the notion that all beings are essentially unities, and at the same time that no beings in the world are simply *identical* with their being: whatever does not exist by eternal necessity *can* exist only by sharing in, i.e., *participating* in, being, and participation implies a certain difference, or "not," for one cannot simply *be* what one has only through participation. There is a *difference*, Aquinas says, between existence and that which is.⁶⁹ A particular being or existing thing cannot be said *to be* being, but is rather said to "have" it: *Ens simpliciter est quod habet esse*.⁷⁰ Now, where Aquinas takes a distance from the Neoplatonic tradition in which he participates, as it were, is his affirmation of a *composition* at the heart of beings that (to speak loosely for a moment) "results" from their participation: "Therefore every substance which comes after the first simple substance participates in *esse*. But every participant is composed [*componitur*] of that which participates and that in which it participates, and the participant is in potency to that in which it participates."⁷¹ As straightforward as this passage may seem, it contains a profound mystery: composition implies multiplicity, and thus, being can enter into composition only with something that is *other* than it.

⁶⁷ In addition to the works cited above in footnote 9, we may add André Hayens argument that, while the Aristotelian theme dominates in Aquinas's epistemology, his metaphysics is basically Platonic: see *L'Intentionnel selon saint Thomas*.

⁶⁸ See Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 3rd ed. (New York: Dorset Press, n.d.), 189-40. Gilson immediately leads the notion of participation to that of analogy: see pg. 164, fn. 18, where he enters a "caution" regarding participation. There seems to be a tension between the "existentialist" interpretation of Aquinas and that which emphasizes the Neoplatonic element of participation (e.g., Kremer), as we will show below. George Lindbeck exaggerates the tension into a "contradiction" in Aquinas's thought: "Participation and Existence in the Interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Franciscan Studies* 17 (1957): 1- 22, 107-25. The contradiction, however, appears only if one fails to see the transformation of the structure of participation, as we will attempt to show. It bears remarking, however, that our interpretation does not claim to be an exegesis of texts in Aquinas and a tracing of any historical development, but simply a reflective reading of certain representative texts.

⁶⁹ *In de hebd.*, lecture 2, n.22: Boethius "dicit ergo . . . quod diversum est esse, et id quod est."

⁷⁰ *ST I-II*, 26, 4.

⁷¹ In VIII Phys., 21, 1153.

But Aquinas is quite clear that nothing is extrinsic to being except nothing, *non-ens*.⁷² With what can being be composed, or more specifically, how can it be composed with what is literally *nothing*?⁷³

We must enter more deeply into the terms in question. As is well known, Aquinas affirms a notion of being radically different from that which we find in the Greek philosophical world: while being was previously taken to be identical to intelligible form, Aquinas says that the primary sense of being is *act tout court*. It is *esse*, rather than *ens*, *essentia*, or *forma*.⁷⁴ The general word for being, *ens*, is, according to Aquinas, itself derived “from the very act of existing.”⁷⁵ Though he does not deny that intelligible form is indeed act, he nevertheless insists that intelligible form alone does not suffice to account for the actual existence of things. If it were, concretely subsisting forms would be identical with their existence, which would mean that they exist necessarily and eternally (as they *do* in fact for both Plato and Plotinus). If existing substances, however, are not responsible for their own being, there must be some act *beyond* the act designated by form, in other words, a “trans-formal” actuality. Aquinas thus refers to *esse* as the “actuality of all acts,”⁷⁶ and the “actuality of every form or nature.”⁷⁷ It is a kind of act, therefore, that causally transcends the acts that specify beings in diverse ways.

Moreover, since act is what perfects, Aquinas infers that, as the actuality of all acts, *esse* is also what is most perfect: “Existence is the most perfect of all things, for it is compared to all things as that by which they are made actual; for nothing has actuality except so far as it exists. Hence, existence is that which actuates all things, even their forms.”⁷⁸ Because nothing can be added to *esse* from outside of it, there is no perfection anywhere in the world that does not have *esse* as its cause; indeed, all perfections are nothing but specified modes of *esse*, which, in itself, is “superior to life and to all other perfections.”⁷⁹ It is “among all principles the most perfect.”⁸⁰

⁷² *De potentia dei*, 7.2.9.

⁷³ Geiger, for reasons that will become clear in a moment, insists that there are two modes of participation in Aquinas: the participation by composition, by which the act of existence, infinite *in se*, is limited by the receptive capacity of the particular essence (on this, see Clarke, “The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas”), and participation by similitude, i.e., the formal participation, according to diverse and limited degrees, of the essence in the Divine Essence: Geiger, 67-71. Te Velde is right to point to the problems that this double-participation leaves unresolved, in particular the unity of being (Te Velde, 88-91). But we will address a different problem, namely, what accounts for the formal diversity in the participation by similitude?

⁷⁴ To be sure, Plotinus sometimes refers to being as τ- ε-ναι. Nevertheless, he does not mean by this any “trans-formal” act, but invariably insists that being is identical to its intelligible content. Kevin Corrigan has argued that there is something like the scholastic essence-existence distinction in Plotinus, though Plotinus does not make it explicitly thematic: “Essence and Existence in the *Enneads*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 105-29. Indeed, the nature of the One, which is an “activity” radically distinct from that of Being, would seem to point naturally in this direction.

⁷⁵ I Sent 8, 1, 1.

⁷⁶ *De pot.*, 7, 2, ad 9.

⁷⁷ ST I, 3, 4.

⁷⁸ ST, 1, 4, 2 ad 3.

⁷⁹ ST I-II, 2, 5, ad 2.

⁸⁰ *De pot.*, 7, 2, ad 9 (see also ST I, 4, 1, ad 3).

If it is true that causality, as the communication of act, implies similitude,⁸¹ then the essential act designated by form will be a certain imitation of the act of being (*esse*, *actus essendi*) tout court.⁸² It is Gilson with whom we most immediately associate this theme of the “trans-formal” actuality of *esse*.⁸³

Once we acknowledge *esse* as the actuating ground, in some sense, of all perfections, it is quite tempting to interpret the participation of things in *esse* according to a certain aspect we have noted in the general Neoplatonic schema. All existing perfections, we might say, are “nothing but” manifestations of *esse*; as particular and thus limited modes of *esse*, their own reality is derived from first to last from that in which they participate. But then we face, once again, our familiar question: What is it that accounts for the particularity of these modes, the “limitation” of perfect actuality? What, in other words, *accounts* for the *difference* between individually existing substances and the *esse* in which they participate? Aquinas regularly insists that act is necessarily infinite within its own order,⁸⁴ and if act is found to be limited, this is due, not to the act itself, but to the potency of that in which the act is received. In the case of the participation in *esse*, it is thus the potentiality of the essence that limits, and thus specifically determines, the sheer actuality of *esse*. What, then, is the status of this essence that receives *esse*? It may be *act* in relation to matter in the order of natures, but it is potency in relation to *esse*, and indeed even the act it possesses in the essential order is its own only as received from the “actuality of all acts.” We may thus be led to say that essence does not itself determine *esse* in any sense, it does not “add” a specific determination to *esse*, but only “adds” a limitation to *esse*’s determining actuality. But in saying this we would already be saying too much: insofar as potency is always derivative of act,⁸⁵ we cannot even say that the essence adds a limitation to *esse*, because its very limiting capacity derives from *esse*. Again, if it is true, as Aquinas says, that “nothing can be added to *esse* from the outside, because outside of *esse* there is nothing,” then it would seem necessary to say that it is precisely *nothing* that limits *esse*, to think of potency primarily as a relative nothing—relative, that is, to the actuality of all acts to which it sets limits. This, we recall, was the inference to which Plato was led. According to this

⁸¹ *SCG*, 2, c.11 (3), c. 53 (5).

⁸² Te Velde claims that “An essence as such is totally different from existence and cannot be thought to derive from it. Therefore, in my opinion, it simply makes no sense to say that an essence participates in existence” (Te Velde, 110, fn. 36). He is here disputing the translation of *esse* by “existence.” While it is true that *esse*, as *actus essendi*, is not exactly the same as *esse* interpreted as *existentia*—i.e., as the mere “fact” of existence added to the essence as an independent possible—Te Velde need not, it seems to me, exaggerate the difference between the actuality of factual existence and the formal actuality of essence: though they are, indeed, of radically different orders, we cannot deny an analogy between them without undermining altogether any intrinsic causal relation.

⁸³ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952), 154-89. See also Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione*, 338-62, and *Participation et Causalité* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1961), 179-244; de Finance, *Être et Agir dans la philosophie de saint Thomas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1965); Friedrich Wilhelmson, *The Paradoxical Structure of Existence* (Irving, Tex.: University of Dallas Press, 1970).

⁸⁴ See, among the texts cited in Clarke, 86-87, fn. 48, the following: *SCG* 1, ch. 43; 2, ch. 52-54; *De pot.*, 1, 2; 7, 2 ad 9; *ST I*, 7, 1-2; 50, 2 ad 4; 75, 5, ad 1 and 4.

⁸⁵ Aquinas affirms that there cannot be a reciprocal relation between act and potency, but we can refer act to potency only in reason (*SCG*, 2, c.12 (3-4)).

interpretation, we would thus be compelled to say that essence, as a principle of limitation within the existential order, is *wholly negative* with respect to *esse*, since to accord any “positivity” to it in this relation would be to contradict the notion that *esse* is the “perfection of all perfections” or indeed to posit the reality of something that lies, as it were, outside of reality. There would seem to be no alternative, along these lines of reflection, then, but to affirm, with William Carlo, the “ultimate reducibility of essence to existence.”⁸⁶ As Carlo sees it, we ought not even to imagine essences as “empty vessels” that are subsequently filled by the ocean of *esse*, for this accords them too much independent reality. Instead, it is best to think of *esse* as water being poured out on an impossibly cold day, so that it freezes into, say, a particular form by virtue of its own inward nature and not because of something being extrinsically imposed on it.⁸⁷

But Fabro is perfectly right to point out, in relation to the interpretation of *esse* as the perfectly actual “store” of absolutely all possible perfections from which all essences are drawn, that such a view not only entails the validity of the ontological argument, but also eliminates the notion of created being as “composed”—i.e., it undermines the “real distinction” that constitutes the createdness of created being.⁸⁸ Let us dwell for a moment on the implications of Carlo’s interpretation: if it is the case that the limitation of *esse* that accounts for the distinction of creatures is *wholly negative*, we run into the problem that has, as we have seen, haunted the notion of participation, namely, the inability to give ultimate justification for the difference of the participant. The participant becomes, from this perspective, defined specifically by a lack. Act is infinite and perfect; potency must therefore be imperfect precisely *because of* its limitation and the finitude such a limitation implies. Here we have a straightforward example of what Derrida would have criticized as a simple “binary opposition.” If it is true, we cannot but think of creation as a kind of fall from true perfection. Such an interpretation, however, fails to grasp the extraordinarily paradoxical character of *esse* as St. Thomas conceives it.

Although it is true that *esse*, as act, is in some sense infinite, it is equally true that the act of existence in the created order—i.e., *esse creatum*—is, for Aquinas, at the same time *radically finite*. In the first question of the *De potentia dei*, Aquinas presents a characterization of *esse* that has vast implications in relation to our question: “*Esse significat aliquid completum et simplex sed non subsistens*.”⁸⁹ On the one hand, being, as the act of existence, is complete and simple; it is perfect, which echoes what we have presented above. On the other hand and at the very same time, however, Aquinas also affirms here that being . . . doesn’t exist!⁹⁰ *Esse*, in other

⁸⁶ William Carlo, *The Ultimate Reducibility of Essence to Existence in Existential Metaphysics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 103-04.

⁸⁸ Fabro criticizes this view, not specifically in Carlo, but in Kremer (*Die Neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie*). He claims that Kremer’s interpretation of *esse* as the total content of all perfection, which would include actual existence with it, would ultimately make God identical to this sum of all perfections (ideas): see Fabro, “Platonism, Neo-Platonism, and Thomism: Convergencies and Divergencies,” *New Scholasticism* 44 (1970): 69-100, here: 80-82.

⁸⁹ *De pot.*, 1, 1, ad 1.

⁹⁰ Cf., *De hebd.*, n. 23.

words, is not simply actuality, but is the actuality of *all acts*, it is an actuality—reading the genitive as subjective—that *belongs* in some sense to what is other than itself, namely, the substance that it makes actual. Aquinas speaks of substances as possessing their *own* act of existence,⁹¹ and defines *ens* as “*quasi esse habens, hoc autem solum est substantia, quae subsistet.*”⁹² While *esse* is in a certain respect what makes all things be, it itself is *nothing* in the sense that it does not subsist in itself, but only inheres in *that which* exists.

The German philosopher Ferdinand Ulrich, who has unfolded the significance of this phrase from the *De potentia* at length in his extraordinary book, *Homo Abyssus: Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*,⁹³ describes *esse* as “pure mediation,”⁹⁴ and interprets it in terms similar to the sheer generosity that characterizes Plotinus’s One. *Esse*, according to Ulrich, is the “likeness of God’s goodness,” and “*bonum*,” in its turn, “*dicitur diffusivum sui esse.*”⁹⁵ One is tempted to read Aquinas’s statement from the *De potentia* as a contradiction, insofar as it affirms both complete perfection, which implies that it needs nothing outside of itself, and at the same time the radical incompleteness of non-subsistence. But Ulrich helpfully points out that we fall into this contradiction only if, forgetting its thoroughly “self-diffusing” character, we think of being *apart from* the things it makes be, and thus only when we juxtapose it to them as a thing subsisting in itself in contrast to those things which alone subsist. When we do so, however, we in fact essentialize what is radically other than essence. To essentialize *esse* in this manner would bring us into something like the dialectic of Hegel, who begins with Being in itself as the emptiest and most universal of all *concepts*, and thus as pure contradiction, the resolution of which is an act of despair rather than generosity. Instead of “essentializing” the act of being, we ought to follow rationally the movement of *esse* itself, the purely “fluid” movement Ulrich calls at different places the “*Subsistenzbewegung*” or the “*Verendlichungsbewegung*,” and thus to think of *esse* as the sheer act of giving oneself away, or letting be.⁹⁶ In this respect, *esse* is *indeed* perfect, but it, so to speak, has *its* perfection only in that which is other than itself, i.e., in the beings it makes be. Its own perfection is always already given away, or more adequately, possessed as having been given away. Thus, the perfect wealth of *esse* is coincident with a complete poverty.

As Dionysius the Areopagite affirms, following Plotinus, Being is the first of all creatures. Receiving this affirmation with approbation from the Neoplatonic text *Liber de causis*, Aquinas nevertheless adds a crucial qualification: *Esse* is not what is created, it is not the *subject* of creation; instead, the *terminus* of the act of creation is the concretely subsisting *ens*.⁹⁷ To say that *esse* is primary in creation does not mean it is created first, as a thing in itself, and *then* the variety of essences are so to speak drawn out of it, but that when we speak of things as

⁹¹ “Unumquodque est per suum esse,” *SCG* I, 22.

⁹² *Met.* 12.1.

⁹³ Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1998).

⁹⁴ *Homo Abyssus*, 27.

⁹⁵ *ST* I, 5, 4, ad 2.

⁹⁶ To follow this movement intellectually is to imitate *esse*’s own refusal to hold onto itself, and thus to resist, in one’s thinking, the temptation to allow one’s thoughts (of being) to congeal into fixed concepts.

⁹⁷ *ST* I, 45, 4, ad 1.

created, we refer first of all to their existence rather than to the particular modality of that existence. Thus, if Plotinus makes Intellect-Being the first hypostasis to proceed from the divine One,⁹⁸ Aquinas makes the sheer multiplicity of beings in the world the “first” to proceed from God’s creative act, though the primary perfection of these things remains first of all their simple existence.

Once we recognize the radical finitude of being in the created order, its non-subsistence, we see why we cannot think of it as a content-rich ocean of perfection, from which the partial perfection of the essence can be “scooped out”, and to which for that very reason it can ultimately be reduced once more. In this respect, the essence cannot simply represent a *negative* with respect to *esse*, which would in this case be affirmed as total positivity—and therefore as subsistent! We are thus tempted to fall into the opposite extreme, and to think of the essence as positive, i.e., as possessing its own perfection, to which *esse* is added as the sheer, and thus content-poor, *fact* of existing.⁹⁹ Here we find the problematic notion of creation as the free addition of existence (through an act of the divine will) to essences that, as so many logical “possibles,” already exist “separately,” as it were, in the mind of God.¹⁰⁰ In a much more subtle form, the danger of conceiving *esse* as super-added to essence (and vice versa) hovers over talk of the “real distinction” between essence and existence.¹⁰¹ However non-subsistent *esse* may be “in itself,” it remains the case that, outside *esse*, there is nothing, not even the purely intentional existence of abstract essence. Creation is *ex nihilo*: from nothing comes first the already subsisting *ens*, which is nevertheless not identical with being but participates it, even while *esse* does not simply subsist in itself.¹⁰² If, then, essence cannot simply be *derived* from *esse non subsistens*, which would make it simply negative, it cannot have its ground simply in *esse creatum* alone. Its ultimate source is rather God himself. As Ulrich has shown, we cannot make *esse* the *cause* of beings without turning it into something *subsistent*, and so must say instead that things exist by participating in being, but their participation in being is itself caused by God: “Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being . . . are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly.”¹⁰³ This affirmation implies, first of all, that things do not participate directly in God in the sense that would make God in fact the being of things,¹⁰⁴ but that creatures’ relation to God is mediated by *esse*; and at

⁹⁸ To be sure, Plotinus affirms that the Intellect is always-already all possible beings. But, for him, these are the transcendent forms, while the material instantiations of these forms are strictly speaking *posterior* to reality.

⁹⁹ Fabro explains what he calls the “anti-Thomistic origin” of the interpretation of being as *esse existentiae*, rather than as the *actus essendi*: “Platonism,” 86-90.

¹⁰⁰ See Te Velde, 108.

¹⁰¹ Carlo shows how the “real distinction,” as Giles of Rome interprets it, entails a problematic extrinsicism in the relation between *esse* and essence in subsisting things: 18-86. But the rejection of the extrinsicism does not necessarily mean the rejection of the distinction.

¹⁰² Of course, non-subsistent *esse* presupposes *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, as we shall see in a moment.

¹⁰³ ST I, 44, 1. See *Homo Abyssus*, 122-27. Ulrich cites, among others, the following text: “*Res . . . fit participativa ipsius esse Deo*” (*De sub. sep.*, 8), and God is “*sufficientissima et dignissima et perfectissima causa totius esse, a quo omnia quae sunt participant esse*” (*Sup. Ev. Joan. Prol.*).

¹⁰⁴ As Martin Bieler puts it in his introduction to *Homo Abyssus*, “The creature participates in God through being,” Einleitung, ix. We have here an even more paradoxical sense of the simultaneous immanence and transcendence of

the same time, because *esse*, as non-subsistent, is *pure* mediation, we nevertheless can and must say that God's relation to creatures is *immediate*: no *thing* between God and creatures.¹⁰⁵ Because God is the ultimate principle of things, essences can have a positivity that is distinct from that of *esse* without however having that positivity except from within their sharing in *esse*. Aquinas thus conceives of creation essentially in terms of participation *even though* he does not view it solely in the terms presented by the Platonic tradition. However overly subtle and abstract this distinction may seem, it has crucial implications in relation to our question: as we shall see, it allows us to affirm that things possess their *own* existence, even while that existence is not simply different from God himself; it allows us therefore to affirm the *difference* of creatures as *ultimately* and *essentially* good; and it allows us to affirm the overcoming of dualism as Plato does with his notion of participation, without depriving the material cosmos of any reality of its own.

Let us first consider how Aquinas's notion of creation transforms the metaphysical dynamic of participation found in the Platonic tradition even while integrating it. For Plato, to say that beautiful things participate in Beauty itself is to say that Beauty alone is real, and that the reality of beauty in beautiful things *is* nothing but Beauty itself as present to them. Theirs is a wholly derived beauty. Plato's view expresses the paradigm for Neoplatonism more generally: the relative "existence" of instances of any quality implies the perfectly subsistent reality of that quality as absolutely distinct from them. There is a unilateral dynamic here: the form is real, and the image has reality only insofar as it has form, and in fact never truly "has" either, strictly speaking, but rather displays reality by displaying the form: "Instances, then, have no reality of their own, but must be understood as images in the sense of appearances of the forms."¹⁰⁶ That the orientation in participation is unilateral comes perhaps most clearly to light in the fact that form, then, is turned wholly to itself.¹⁰⁷ Its "production" of images is not so much a giving *to* them as it is a more indifferent "giving off," while the activity resides wholly on the side of the image, which so to speak chases after its reality.¹⁰⁸ Aristotle's description of the relation between principles comes to mind here: "What desires the form is matter, as the female desires

God than in Neoplatonism. Plotinus makes the divine Intellect the being of all things by being nothing in any of them (an affirmation taken up into the Christian tradition through Dionysius the Areopagite). In this view, God is in fact the reality of things because he is the sole reality. For Aquinas, God is not the essence of things, but he is still nevertheless "in all things, and innermost" (*ST* I, 8, 1). God is being, and things have being, but if the being in which things participate is non-subsistent *esse*, rather than *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, we would have to say that things share in God's being as always-already completely given away. The mediation of *esse creatum* in the structure of participation thus allows us to affirm the total immediacy of God to creatures and yet affirms that they own their own reality—and the more perfectly they possess this reality, the more profoundly do they reflect the presence of the Giver of that reality itself.

¹⁰⁵ *De veritate*, 8, 17: *non potest aliquid esse medium inter creatum et increatum*.

¹⁰⁶ Perl, "Sense-Perception and Intellect," 32.

¹⁰⁷ As we recall, Plato characterizes the form precisely as a reality existing α-τ- καθ' α-τ-ν. Plotinus puts the point somewhat differently. For him, the Intellect is turned wholly upward (to the One), which is perfectly coincident with being turned wholly inward. In other words, the theoretical act is identical to being oneself. See III.8.4 and 8. The last words of Plotinus's concluding *Ennead*, VI.9.11, are "φύγ- μονο- πρ-ς μ-νον," the flight of the alone to the Alone.

¹⁰⁸ Plato speaks of the instance "wanting" to be the reality, and "striving to reach it," in *Phaedo*, 74e and 75b.

the male and the ugly the beautiful.”¹⁰⁹ Aquinas’s view of participation in being introduces a radically new element: the purely vertical relation gets turned, as it were, on its side (without for all that losing its asymmetry). While that *in* which beings participate is indeed the perfection of all perfections, and therefore what is noblest of all, that perfection does *not* subsist in itself, as it necessarily does in Neoplatonism. Instead, it subsists only in its other, which is not therefore merely a negative derivation of *esse*, but has something positive, so to speak, to contribute to the very act that lets it be. But if it is positive in some respect and not merely derived, the essence must represent a kind of *novum* with respect to *esse*—as if to say (to speak perhaps inexcusably loosely) that *esse*, for all its perfection, is surprised to discover what can be brought forth from it in God’s creative act.¹¹⁰ The *ens* or substance is in some sense *more real* than *esse*, because it alone subsists, even while its reality is due wholly to the act of existence, which *is* the actuality of whatever reality it has. Here, we affirm a reciprocal causality between two co-principles that are inseparable from each other and yet also irreducible to one another: “As a consequence, the two distinct causalities, that of form and that of *esse*, reciprocally and correlatively realize each other: *causae ad invicem sunt causae*.”¹¹¹ What results is a pervasive and inexorable polarity in the core of worldly being, which we might say represents its deepest truth.

While the type of participation we have been considering in Aquinas is the participation of things in their *being*, Plato’s theory of participation concerned, for the most part, what scholastics would later call the participation of substances in their accidents. Though Aquinas himself, to my knowledge, does not apply this transformed view of participation to the substance-accidents relation, it seems to me that this would be a fruitful way of viewing that relation: on the one hand, it offers a way of reconciling nominalism and realism without any unsatisfying compromise, and on the other hand it definitively undercuts the “third man argument” critique of participation. That a transposition of this view of participation to the substance-accidents relation is possible in the first place stems from the similarity that effects necessarily have to their causes. It follows that formal act cannot be without some analogy to existential act.¹¹² We would expect, then, that as form is actuated by *esse*, it would reflect the self-diffusive character of *esse* within the order proper to it. Indeed, Aquinas affirms that “it is

¹⁰⁹ Aristotle, *Physics* I, 192a20-25.

¹¹⁰ Adrian Walker expresses this insight in Ulrich nicely: “Thus, *esse* does not generate substances out of itself, but is sheer availability to be the act of being of and for whatever substance God wishes to posit in existence,” “Personal Simplicity and the *Communio Personarum*: A Creative Development of Thomas Aquinas’s Doctrine of *Esse Commune*,” *Communio* 31 (Fall 2004): 457-80, here: 468, fn. 11.

¹¹¹ Jean-Dominique Robert, “Note sur le dilemme: limitation par composition ou limitation par hiérarchie formelle des essences,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 49 (1965): 60-66, here: 65. Cf., de Finance, *Être et agir*, 118: “In concrete being, essence and *esse* condition each other reciprocally; each one is a principle in a different order.” Robert supports his affirmation through a reference to the twofold participation in God’s mind and will, which is precisely the view of creation Te Velde persuasively criticizes: see Te Velde, 114, fn. 46. Nevertheless, it is possible to affirm an irreducibly complex notion of being that results from the single participation in God’s creative act if there is some sense in which God’s own absolute simplicity is itself complex in some fashion, as we will propose it is below.

¹¹² To suggest that there is an analogy between these two modes of act does *not* remove, but in fact implies, a radical difference between them.

the nature of every actuality to communicate itself as far as possible.”¹¹³ In the light of this analogy to existential act, we can read the determinate perfection of form as a *determining* perfection, that is, as an inherently self-donative forming principle. Thus, for example, whiteness does not subsist in itself any more than *esse* does, but subsists only within the substance in which it inheres. But to say this does *not* require us to draw the nominalist conclusion that universals are therefore merely rational, as opposed to real, beings. Instead, we can say that they are in some sense perfect and simple, insofar as they are act, analogous to the *actus essendi*. And if they, again like *esse*, do not subsist in themselves, they nevertheless *do* subsist: in the substances that share in them. In other words, they possess their own perfection, but *as* having always-already given that perfection away. Nominalism is right to deny the reality of the forms considered in themselves, and realism is right to insist that the forms nevertheless exist. Both aspects are true: Humanity is “nothing” in comparison to a particular human being, but this does not invalidate the complementary affirmation that the totality of existing human beings will never fully exhaust what it means to be human, i.e., that the universal remains in some sense “higher” than the particular.¹¹⁴

The same principle that rejects the alternatives of nominalism or realism answers the famous “third man argument” that Aristotle raises against Plato’s theory of the forms, and which Plato himself had already articulated.¹¹⁵ If the form of Large possesses the quality of largeness, like the various instances of large, there will have to be *another* form of largeness in which they all share, and so on into infinity. But if forms possess *their* perfection *in* their images, and nowhere else, the infinite regress of self-predication never occurs. The form cannot be predicated of itself because it has always already given itself away. Though it is not possible to pursue the issue here, it is worth observing that the notion of being as non-subsistent opens up a fascinating way of conceiving the relation between form and matter more generally: we can say that matter participates in form without making matter a mere privation, i.e., a negative, in relation to form (and, by implication, an evil, insofar as form is good). What allowed us to view essence as a positive principle even as wholly subordinate to *esse* was the divine causality distinct from both. Similarly, because *esse* introduces an actuality distinct from that of form, we can posit matter as having its ground not merely in form but in the trans-formal actuality of being, which would grant matter a positivity—dare I say also its own (receptive) mode of activity—which is strictly speaking *non-formal*.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ *De pot.*, 2, 1.

¹¹⁴ On this, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologic I: The Truth of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 155-56.

¹¹⁵ See *Parmenides*, 132a-c.

¹¹⁶ Aquinas—in clear contrast to the Platonic tradition—affirms God as the principle, not only of the determinate *whatness* of things, but of the *whole* of their substance, which includes, of course, their matter: *ST* I, 44, 2. And insofar as there is nothing outside of *esse*, we can include matter within its embrace without making matter a kind of form. Though this is not a typical way of interpreting matter, I suggest that unless we affirm some sort of non-formal activity as the basis of matter, we will ultimately have no way at all of distinguishing matter from evil. On this, compare the similar point made by Dionysius, *Divine Names*, IV, 18 and 28.

In a word, the Thomistic insight into the non-subsistence of being allows a full integration of the metaphysics of participation while at the same time “leaving room” for the genuine positivity of difference: of the variety of essences within the existential order, and of the variety of material instances within the essential order. In Aquinas’s words, “the cause of being insofar as it is being must be the cause of all the differences of being and consequently of the whole multitude of beings.”¹¹⁷ Moreover, “the very difference by reason of which beings are distinguished from one another is a certain being.”¹¹⁸ As Gunther Pöltner has shown, the non-subsistence of being not only *unifies* (i.e., because all things whatsoever outside of God participate in being) but at the *very same time liberates multiplicity*.¹¹⁹

But we have yet to take what may be the most decisive step of all in the argument, and it is admittedly a step beyond usual interpretations of Aquinas, a speculative inching out on the proverbial limb. The structure of participation we have been developing compels us to raise the question concerning difference in God, though doing so we must keep in mind that we are thus reflecting on what is essentially a mystery, indeed, is Mystery itself. On the one hand, it is undeniably true that God is absolute simplicity.¹²⁰ This is a point that, in their own ways, Aquinas, Plotinus, and arguably Plato too all share. A consideration of the structure of participation itself points to this truth: the participation of all things in being, and thus the composition in all things of essence and existence, presupposes *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, a “being” who *is* his existence, in whom essence and existence are identical.¹²¹ Generally, one distinguishes between the being of God and that of creatures precisely in reference to creatures’ ontological composition; the absence of any such distinction in God is what most decisively marks the difference between God and the world. On the other hand, however, if it is precisely the difference between being and beings that enables us to affirm the goodness of multiplicity, then to define complete perfection simply, so to speak, as the opposite of the difference implied in participation would not only raise the question of onto- theologism in a certain respect,¹²² but it would also threaten to make difference *once again* a sign of imperfection in the sense of defect. Unless we have some way of affirming the absolute simplicity of God without eliminating the *ultimate* positivity of difference, then our interpretation of the meaning of being in Aquinas, I suggest, will in the end fall back into the ambiguity we noted in Plotinus.

In God, essence and existence are identical. But notice: this identity itself permits two distinct interpretations, namely, that God’s essence is identical to, and in this respect reducible to, existence, and that existence is identical to, and thus reducible to, God’s essence—and these two identities are not in fact the same thing, however much they coincide in truth. The former

¹¹⁷ *De pot.*, 3, 16, ad 4.

¹¹⁸ *De pot.*, 3, 16, ad 3.

¹¹⁹ Gunther Pöltner, “Pluralismo y unidad: La relevancia práctica de la idea metafísica de participación,” *Anuario filosófico* 36:1-2 (2003): 205-19, here: 212-13.

¹²⁰ *ST I*, 3, 7.

¹²¹ *ST I*, 3, 4.

¹²² Because we would thus group God and creatures together within a single spectrum, as it were, of reality: from imperfect to perfect being.

interpretation is the one typically followed. Because, the reasoning goes, essence represents a *restricted mode* of *esse*, in order to understand God's infinite, unrestricted *Esse*, we must eliminate the limitation imposed on *esse* in creatures by the essence, i.e., we negate the negation. Though this reasoning is true to a certain extent, the moment we take it to represent the *whole* truth, we once again lose the capacity to affirm the *goodness* of the difference of creatures. We move from the polarity in created being to the identity of divine being not by integrating the poles, but by eliminating one of them—therefore by making only one the expression of perfection and so denying the true polarity of created being (i.e., the co-incidence of non-reducible perfections). However, as Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, the divine identity cannot be deduced from created, composite (and therefore polar) unity by subtracting the imperfections therein and adding the remainder.¹²³ It is better, therefore, to think of the divine *Esse* not only as *esse*, as it were, *prior* to its “restriction” in a particular being, but at the very same time as wholly given over to “particular” being, that is, as subsisting *perfectly*. God is not only *Ipsum Esse*, but *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. In this respect, the absolute perfection of divine *Esse* contains the perfection of *both* poles, without reducing either one to the other, and in this way “sanctions” the difference between them, which constitutes the endless and glorious array of differences in the world. And once we recognize this *positivity* of difference in the ultimate principle of all things, we have a generous ground of the difference in the structure of participation; all of the things we associate with difference, even in their apparently negative aspects, can become surprising reflections of God himself.

But the affirmation of this identity of identity both prior to and posterior to difference leads philosophical reflection further than it is accustomed, perhaps, to go, and in some sense leads it in fact beyond itself. The absolute identity of God cannot be the absence of difference but must somehow be simultaneous with it. While this simultaneity cannot simply be deduced from natural evidences, we find it, as it were, surprisingly revealed in the doctrine of the Trinity. Looking at this mystery from a metaphysical perspective, as for example Gustav Siewerth does,¹²⁴ we have the perfect coincidence of act and subsistence, i.e., being as *pure act*, which nonetheless *subsists* perfectly in the hypostases of the Persons. Though there is an identity between the divine nature and the hypostases, they are at the same time not simply the same. Looking at the mystery more explicitly theologically, we may attend specifically to the “not” that distinguishes the Persons in their shared identity. If we try to preserve the simplicity of God by imagining this “not” to be so slight as to be ultimately negligible, we will invariably end up betraying God's unity precisely to the extent that we hold onto this “not” at all, or betraying the incommunicability of Personhood precisely to the extent that we don't hold on to it. In other words, we pit unity and difference against one another dialectically, which is just what the

¹²³ Balthasar, *Epilogue* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 49, 91-93. Thomas Prufer does just this in his dissertation, “Sein und Wort Nach Thomas von Aquin” (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, 1959), 48-53, by resolving the contradiction of *esse non subsistens* in God thus: God, as *ipsum esse simplex* ET *subsistens* = *esse simplex* SED NON *subsistens* + *ens subsistens* SED NON *simplex*.

¹²⁴ See the presentation of Siewerth in Balthasar, *Theologic 2: Truth of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 179-86.

doctrine of the Trinity forbids. We do more justice to the mystery to think of the “not” as *infinite*, and only thus as sufficiently vast, as it were, for the Father to unfold himself generously and generatingly to the Son *without remainder*, so that they can be perfectly *one* in being, as a mystery of love, and thus as perfectly united in the Person of the Spirit. It is this trinitarian mystery that finally justifies the infinite variety of structures of participation within the created order, for here we have an Other, the Son, who participates, so to speak, in the Father’s being, not at all as a defective copy, but as Perfect Image, and thus as an Other to the Father who, as “not” the Father and in this sense as *more* than just the Father alone, is by that very token also perfectly equal to Him, an expression not of himself but of the Father’s love. Participation, and the difference that lies within it, thus becomes not *simply* a figure of created being in opposition to the first principle but the very reality of the first principle itself. In other words, participation, being an image and therefore not one’s own source, is no longer simply that which marks the difference between the creature and God, as it necessarily seems to in religions and philosophies outside of trinitarian Christianity, because now God, too, “participates” in God: the Son and the Spirit “share” in God’s being! “Image,” in Christianity, is not posterior to the divine, but belongs to the divine mystery itself.¹²⁵ With this we have a rich and fruitful way to understand Aquinas’s affirmation that creation is rooted in the procession of the Persons,¹²⁶ and that we cannot understand it adequately without reference to the Trinity.¹²⁷

In conclusion, we might say that, if the metaphysics of participation is essential to Christianity, Christianity is in turn essential to the metaphysics of participation: for, the difference Christianity makes to this notion is just that: difference. In other words, the difference in God quite literally makes all the difference in the world. It is because the difference in created being is not simply the dialectical *opposite* of the divine identity that metaphysical reflection within the Christian difference can say not only with Plotinus that God gives precisely what is other than himself,¹²⁸ but *also* that God gives a share in what he *is*. The otherness that God gives in the gift of *esse* is not outside of God but is somehow paradoxically “part” of who God is.¹²⁹ Thus, however much the being of God is beyond worldly being, it remains the case that God *exists*, and indeed that being is in some sense his most proper name.¹³⁰

And this last point illuminates the significance of a final difference from Plotinus, and indeed from any philosophy that refuses the name of being to God. If God gives what is absolutely *other* than himself, or simply what he is not, namely, being, then no matter how

¹²⁵ *ST I*, 35, 1.

¹²⁶ “The processions of the divine Persons are the cause of creation,” *ST I*, 45, 6, ad 1.

¹²⁷ *ST I*, 32, 1 ad 3.

¹²⁸ *V.3.15*.

¹²⁹ Not, of course, in the sense that God has parts, but that the being different from God does not simply make the creature God’s dialectical opposite: according to the doctrine of the Trinity, otherness from God is paradoxically *intrinsic* to the meaning of God. Thus, the creature can be genuinely different *from* God (which denies pantheism) without being extrinsic to God (which denies deism).

¹³⁰ See *I Sent.*, VIII, 1, 3. Again, the name of being does not identify God with the being of creatures; the radical difference of analogy, as defined by *Lateran IV*, is never eliminated.

perfectly generous we may conceive that originating gift, I submit that we will never be able fully to eradicate a sense of *regret* from the roots of things, even though of course that regret is never, in Plotinus or Plato, without an accent of wonder and gratitude. The ultimate and prevailing “mood” of Neoplatonic metaphysics is nevertheless nostalgia. In Christianity, by contrast, participation is first and foremost pervaded by joy, which includes but surpasses metaphysical nostalgia¹³¹: the things that share in being are set free in the present,¹³² and open, in hope, to what is to come.

¹³¹ Kierkegaard contrasts his modern (Christian) concept of “repetition” to the Greek notion of recollection, in just these terms: “Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy,” *Fear and Trembling—Repetition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 131.

¹³² On the connection between freedom and the present, see Ferdinand Ulrich, *Gegenwart der Freiheit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1974).