Avicenna and Aquinas: Essence, Existence, and the *Esse* of Christ

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*For centuries, Aristotle was considered the primary source of the thought of Br. Thomas of Aquino, OP. Beginning with the historical researches of Etienne Gilson in the 1920s, scholars began to recognize the important influence of Islamic and Jewish thinkers. While it is still true to say that Aquinas was an Aristotelian, historical research has made it necessary to address the question: just what kind of Aristotelian was he? In this essay, I argue that he is best understood as an Avicennian kind of Aristotelian. The argument proceeds in three steps: Aquinas adopted Avicennian metaphysical principles; he then adopted some Avicennian metaphysical conclusions about God; and, finally, he made use of his Avicennian-inspired doctrine of being (*esse), to formulate a consistent doctrine of the* esse *of Christ.*

I. Introduction

Students of the philosophy and theology of Br. Thomas of Aquino, OP, have long recognized the need to consult his intellectual predecessors in order to understand his thought. For centuries, Aristotle was considered the primary source, whose philosophy Thomas 'baptized.' Beginning with the historical researches of Etienne Gilson in the 1920s, scholars began to recognize the important influence of Islamic and Jewish thinkers. While it is still true to say that Aquinas was an Aristotelian, broadly construed, historical research has made it necessary to address the question: just what kind of Aristotelian was he? In this essay, I argue that he is best understood as an Avicennian kind of Aristotelian. Such refinements are necessary, in order to be faithful to Thomas's genuine thought. The argument which follows proceeds in three steps: Aquinas adopted Avicennian metaphysical principles; he then adopted some Avicennian metaphysical conclusions about God; and, finally, he made use of his Avicennian-inspired doctrine of being (*esse*), to formulate a consistent doctrine of the *esse* of Christ.[1]

II. The Principles of Metaphysics

A. Avicenna

Aristotle had said every demonstrative science has three parts—subject, principles, and demonstrated conclusions—to which Neo-Platonizing Aristotelians like Avicenna added a

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fourth, an end distinct from its subject.[2] Avicenna devoted Book 1 of the *Metaphysics* of his *Book of Healing* to clarifying these four features of his metaphysics.

He rejects God and the primary causes as its *subject*, because they are not universal enough; but he re-conceives God as the *end* of metaphysics, which is why in later works, like the *Book of Directives and Remarks*, Avicenna appended a study of Sufism to metaphysics.

But when he looks at "being (*mawjûd, ens*) *as* being," Avicenna notes that "it is universal"[3]; there is no wider notion. And the reason why "being" is an absolutely universal concept is because "being (*al-mawjûd; ens*), and thing (*al-shay'; res*), and necessary (*al-darûrî; necesse*) are those notions which are impressed on the soul in a first impression, which are not acquired from others more known than they are."[4] Owing to its universality, then, "The *primary subject* of this science is *being as being*; and its *objects of inquiry* (*matlûb; inquirabilia*) are the consequences of a being as being, without condition."[5]

Since metaphysics studies the universal "consequences" of being, it is what we can call an ontology. But because God is its end, metaphysics also contains a theology. Avicenna's ontology covers Bk. 3-7 of the *Metaphysics*, his theology Bks. 8-10. In order to clarify what is studied in his ontology, Avicenna divides its "objects of enquiry" into two groups: its "quasi species" and its "quasi proper accidents." The first are "like" species falling under genera, in the way "human" fits under "animal." These are the ten Aristotelian categories (Bks. 2-3). Even though the highest genera, they are less universal than "being," which transcends the categories in its universality. The "quasi proper accidents" are those consequences that flow necessarily from a nature, Aristotle's "properties," like "risible," which flows from "human." Avicenna explicitly mentions what later will be called disjunctive transcendentals: "one and many (Bks. 3 and 7), potency and act (Bk. 4), universal and particular (Bk. 5), and possible and necessary (Bk. 1)," pairs that are as universal as being. He treats all these topics in his ontology, as well as causality (Bk. 6). There are other "quasi proper accidents," notions equally as universal as *being* and *one*. These are the *true* (treated at 1.5) and *good* (see 8.6), which Avicenna considered in passing. Thus were born the four transcendentals later codified by Philip the Chancellor recognized by Br. Thomas.

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[2] Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 1.7 (75a390-75b2), ed. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949): "In demonstrations there are three parts: one is what is to be demonstrated, the conclusion, and this is something inhering in some genus essentially; second are the axioms, where axioms are those things from which [the demonstration proceeds]; and third is the subject genus, whose attributes and essential accidents demonstration makes clear." See also, 1.10 (76b12-16); 1.2 (72a15-25). All translations from Latin, Greek, and Arabic are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

[3] Avicenna, *Metaphysics* (hereafter, *Met.*) 1.2, Marmura Sec. 12, p. 9 (Eng: 31-3; Ar: 17-18), Lat: 1: 30-31. Cf. Marmura, sec. 18, p. 11 (Eng: 32-34; Ar: 17-18), Lat. 1: 15.89-16.91. Metaphysics "is first philosophy, because it is knowledge of the first in existence, which is the first cause (God), but also the first in universality, which are *existence* and *unity*." Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*: *A parallel English-Arabic text*, tr. M. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005). This is a slightly emended version of the Arabic text found in Avicenna, *Al-Shifa>': Al-Ila>hiyya>t*, ed. G. Anawati, et al. (Cairo: 1960), 2 vols. English page references refer to Marmura's facing page English translation. Latin texts from *Avicenna Latinus. Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina*, ed. S. van Riet (Louvain, Leiden: 1977-83).

[4] Avicenna, *Met*. 1.5, Marmura Sec. 1, p. 22 (Eng: 19-20; Ar: 11-12), Lat: 31.2-32.4.

[5] Avicenna, *Met*. 1.2. Marmura Sec. 12, p. 10 (Eng: 3-6; Ar: 2-3); Lat 1: 13.36-38.

The topics covered in Avicenna's ontology are the principles of the lower sciences. "The *usefulness* of this science [metaphysics], therefore, . . . is in attaining certitude about the *principles* of the particular sciences, and verification of the quiddity of the things they have in common, even if these are not causal principles. Therefore, this is like the usefulness of the *ruler* (*al-ra'îs*) in relation to the ruled."[6]

And looking forward, Avicenna's ontology prepares the way for the philosophical study of theology, which includes consideration of God (Bk. 8), the procession of creatures from God (Bk. 9), and the return of human creatures to God (Bk. 10).

After outlining the end, subject, and objects of enquiry of metaphysics, Avicenna took up the difficult subject of the principles the metaphysician must understand in order to develop its demonstrated conclusions. Avicenna followed Aristotle in distinguishing three kinds of principles: common or universal axioms (studied at 1.8), and two sorts of principles proper to metaphysics, its definitions (1.5) and its suppositions or postulates (1.6-7). Demonstrative reasoning presupposes conceptualization and judgment, so it takes its principles from these two prior acts of the mind.[7] The "definitions" of metaphysics are the most fundamental notions we have, fundamental because most universal. Its "suppositions" are its most fundamental judgments or propositions.

Avicenna introduces the "definitions" of metaphysical science by noting: "We say: A being (*al-mawjûd*; *ens*), and thing (*al-shay'*; *res*), and necessary (*al-darûrî*; *necesse*) are those notions which are impressed on the soul in a first impression, which are not acquired from others more known than they are."[8] These three notions are the "definitions" of metaphysics because there are no notions more universal and other equally universal notions, such as "one," presuppose these concepts. They cannot be defined through higher genera, of course, but they can be clarified through narrower terms or synonyms. The ten categories illustrate what *being* means, while lower species, such as triangle and white, are Avicenna's examples of *thing*.[9] Avicenna also clarifies the fundamental notions through synonyms. *Being* is illustrated by the notions of *established* (*al-muthbat*) and *realized* (*al-muhassal*), both of which signify the *actuality* of a thing. *Thing* has for synonyms *truth* (*haqîqah*, *certitudo*), which signifies the determinate content of a thing and introduces his ontological conception of truth, and *quiddity* (*mâhiyya*, *quidditas*), which points to its definition.[10] Such descriptions allow Avicenna to define

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[6] Avicenna, *Met*. 1.3. Marmura Sec. 5, p. 14 (Eng: 20-24; Ar: 11-13); Lat: 20.66-72.

[7] Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* 1.1 (24a10-b30).

[8] Avicenna, *Met*. 1.5, Marmura Sec. 1, p. 22 (Eng: 19-20; Ar: 11-12), Lat:31.2-32.4.

[9] Avicenna, *Met*. 1.5. Action and passion as species of being: Marmura Sec. 5, p. 23 (Eng: 20-21; Ar: 11), Lat: 33.25-36. Triangle and whiteness as examples of thing: Marmura Sec. 9, p. 24 (Eng: 18-19; Ar: 10), Lat: 34.54-35.61. On Avicenna's doctrine of *shay'*, see T.-A. Druart, "*Shay'* or *res* as concomitant of 'Being' in Avicenna," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 12 (2001): 125-142; Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca: 2003), 161-180.

[10] Established: Ar: *al-muthbat*. Realized: Ar: *al-muhassal*. The Latin tr. collapsed these two words into one: *aliquid*. Aquinas defines *aliquid* at *De veritate* 1.1 as the external side of transcendental unity—*ens divisum ab aliis*. Combination with its internal side (*ens indvisum in se*) yields transcendental unity.

one of the fundamental notions in terms of another, as when he defines *necessity* as the "assuredness of existing,"[11] thereby introducing a fourth fundamental concept: *existence* (*wujûd*; *esse*)," in addition to *being*, *thing*, and *necessary*.

After presenting these four fundamental notions, the "definitions" of metaphysical science, in Bk. 1, c. 6-7, Avicenna developed extensive arguments supporting its "suppositions" or fundamental truths. At the end of c. 7, he summarized these truths as follows:

> (1) Necessary being (*esse*) is *one entirely*, though not as a species under a genus, and *one in number*, though not as an individual under a species, but is a notion whose name signifies only that whose *being is common with nothing else*. We shall add an explanation later. (2) Therefore, it is *not multiple*. These are the properties of necessary being.
> Of possible being its property is clear from what has been said, namely, that it necessarily (3) *requires another which makes it exist in act*. For whatever is possible being in itself is either always possible being or at some point it happens to be necessary through something other than itself. Now this happens to it *always* or *at some particular time*. And that to which this happens at some time must have matter whose being precedes it in time. But that to which this happens *always*, (4) its truth [*al-haqîqah* ; *certitudo*] is *not simple*, because what it has *in itself* [= its quiddity; *mahiyyah*; *quidditas*] is *other* than what it has from another [= its existence; *wujûd*; *esse*]. And from both of these [principles] it acquires its individuality in existence [*huwîyya fî al-wujûd*;*esse id quod est*]. Therefore, nothing is completely freed from potency and possibility in itself, except necessary being. [*It is single; all else is composite*.][12]

Although Avicenna's articulation is complicated and obscure, the fundamental contrast between necessary existence and possible existence comes through clearly; and this contrast forms the two fundamental principles of his metaphysics. The first principle is that "*necessary existence is*

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[11] Avicenna, *Met.* 1.5, Marmura Sec. 24, p. 28 (Eng: 29-30; Ar: 18), Lat: 41.80. Assuredness of existing: Ar: *ta'akkud al-wujûd*; Lat: *vehementiam essendi*. On Avicenna's doctrine of *wujûd*, see M.E. Marmura, "Avicenna on Primary Concepts in the *Metaphysics* of his *al-Shifâ'*," in R. M. Savory and D. A. Agius, eds., *Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in Honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens* (Toronto: 1984), 219-239; Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca: 2003), 161-180.

[12] Avicenna, *Met.* 1.7 (Latin: 1: 54.38-55.55; Arabic/English: 38, sec. 13-14). Sed quia necesse esse *unum* est in nomine, non sicut species sub genere, et unum est numero, non sicut individua sub specie, sed est intentio quae designat illud tantum suo nomine, in cuius esse nihil aliud sibi communicat. Super hoc autem alias adhunc addemus explanationem. Ideo *non est multiplex*. Hae igitur sunt proprietates quibus appropriatur necesse esse.

Eius autem quod est possibile esse, iam manifesta est ex hoc proprietas, scilicet quia ipsum necessario *eget alio quod faciat illud esse in effectu*; quicquid enim est possiblile esse, respectu sui, semper est possibile esse, sed fortassis accidet ei necessario esse per aliud a se. Istud autem vel accidet ei semper, vel aliquando. Id autem cui aliquando accidit, debet habere materiam cuius esse praecedat illud tempore, sicut iam ostendemus. Sed id cui semper accidit, eius quidditas non est simplex: quod enim habet respectu sui ipsius *aliud* est *ab eo quod habet ab alio a se*, et *ex his duobus* acquiritur ei *esse id quod est*. Et ideo nihil est quod omnino sit exspoliatum ab omni eo quod est in potentia et possibilitate respectu sui ipsius, nisi necesse esse. The last sentence in brackets is from the Arabic, it was not translated into Latin.

one entirely."[13] Avicenna does not assume there is some being that is necessary existence, or God; he will argue for God's existence in Bk. 8.1-3. This principle means that God, should he be demonstrated to exist, will have to be ontologically one or simple, not composed out of the ontological principles of quiddity and existence. By contrast, existence possible in itself, whether eternal like the separate intelligences or temporal like things in the sublunar world, must be composed. So Avicenna's second metaphysical principles is that *all possible beings are ontologically composite, made up of existence and quiddity*. That Avicenna accepted these doctrines as principles, not as demonstrated conclusions, is clear on every page of his ontology.

B. Aquinas

In order to see the influence of Avicenna on his conception of the principles of metaphysics, let us now turn to the subject, end, objects of inquiry, and principles of metaphysics as they were presented by Br. Thomas early in his writing career. On the first three points, his early work *Super Boethium de trinitate* is a helpful text. While working on his commentary on the *Sentences*, Br. Thomas had written two small works at the request of his confreres, which present the principles of metaphysics and physics. His *De ente et essentia* presents the principles of metaphysics, and *De principiis naturae* does the same thing for the principles of natural science. To complete the picture about the theoretical sciences, he wrote his commentary on this work of Boethius, which is devoted to identifying the subject, end, and objects of inquiry of the three speculative philosophical sciences, as well as revealed theology, conceived as a science. At q. 5, art. 1, Br. Thomas offers a preliminary description of the three speculative philosophies, concentrating on their subjects.

> Now there are some objects of speculation that depend upon matter for their *existence* (*esse*), because *they cannot exist except in matter*. And these are distinguished, because some *depend upon matter* both for their *existence* and for *being understood*, such as those things in whose definition we posit sensible matter, for example, in the definition of a *human* it is necessary to include flesh and bones. Physical or natural science is about these kinds of things.[14]

Here Br. Thomas succinctly makes two points that follow Avicenna's *Introduction* to the *Book of Healing*. First, he uses two criteria to describe the things studied in physics. They depend upon matter for their existence, but also for "being understood." This second criterion—borrowed directly from Avicenna, but not found in Aristotle—is crucial for differentiating physics from mathematics. Second, the example is drawn from Avicenna: a human's definition—even though universal—must include physical matter of a specific sort, "flesh and bones." Abstraction is at the center of Aquinas's treatment of the topic in the next three articles, as it had been for Avicenna.

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[13] Avicenna, *Met*. 1.7, Marmura Sec. 13, p. 38 (Eng: 1; Ar: 1), Lat: 54.38-40.
[14] Thomas Aquinas, *Super Boethium de trinitate*, 5.1c.

He then proceeds to mathematical science:

> But there are some things that, even though they depend upon matter in order to *exist*, they *do not depend upon matter for being understood*, because *sensible matter* is not posited in their definitions, such as *line and number*. And mathematical science is about these kinds of things.

Like the "objects" of physics, the things mathematics studies "depend upon matter to exist (*secundum esse*)." But they can be understood without the "sensible matter" they require for real existence. Their definitions require a different, "intelligible matter," because the quantities and qualities mathematics studies, cannot be completely separate from all matter in our conception of them, since these two categories, in their very nature, depend upon a subject in which they inhere—a point Br. Thomas will develop at length in Art. 3, devoted to mathematics. This point is so familiar to Thomists that they think it is Aristotelian; but it is not, it is Avicennian. Finally, Br. Thomas ends with the examples of "line and number," coming from geometry and arithmetic. Again, the examples do not come from Aristotle, but from Avicenna, who had used them in his *Introduction*.

> Br. Thomas then turns to metaphysics.

> And there are other objects of speculation that do not depend on matter for existence, because they *can* exist without matter, either they are *never in matter*, such as *God or an angel*, or in some things they exist in matter *and* in others they do not, for example, substance, quality, being (*ens*), potency, act, one and many, and things like this.

It was Avicenna, not Aristotle, who had described the subject of metaphysics as things that *can* exist without matter, thus bifurcating the subject-matter of metaphysics in the way Br. Thomas here describes. And the examples he uses all come from Avicenna. God and the intelligences (or angels) are things that never exist in matter. For things that *can* exist in either state, Avicenna had mentioned "one and many" in his *Introduction*, but he added the other notions in his *Metaphysics*, as we have seen. This way of conceiving the subject of metaphysics is found nowhere in Aristotle; but a more thoroughly Avicennian interpretation of the "subject" of the science of metaphysics is hard to conceive.

> Then in Q. 5, Art. 4, Br. Thomas further developed his understanding of metaphysics, again along Avicennian lines. There he concentrates on the principles, objects of inquiry, and end of metaphysics, beginning with its principles: "If a science considers a subject-genus, then it must investigate the principles of that genus." But there are two very different kinds of principles:

> > Some [principles] are *complete natures in themselves* and nevertheless they are the principles of other things, as the heavenly bodies are principles of lower

bodies and simple bodies are principles of mixed bodies. . . . But there are some principles that are *not complete natures in themselves*, but only principles of natures, as unity is the principle of number, point the principle of line, and form and matter principles of natural bodies.[15]

Those that are merely principles, like "one," "point," and "form and matter" are what we might call *scientific principles*, because these concepts must be known at the outset of learning a science. The other principles are real things in their own right, so we might call them *real principles*. They fall under the "objects of enquiry" of a science, as heavenly bodies are principles of sublunar things. But they can also be studied in their own right, as the subject of a higher science, like astronomy. So a "science" can include *real principles* in two ways, as demonstrated causes of its subject or as the subject of a higher science.

Since metaphysics studies "all beings in as much as they share in being (*esse*)," metaphysics contains principles that are "common" to all beings. Then Br. Thomas makes another important distinction:

> Now *Avicenna* says these principles can be called *common* in two ways, first, *by predication*, as when I say that form is common to all forms because it is predicated of all; and second, *by causality*, as we say that the sun, which is numerically one, is the principle of all things subject to generation.[16]

Principles that are *common by predication* are the kind of *scientific principles* that must be known at the outset of scientific enquiry, as Aristotle had shown in his *Posterior Analytics*. It is impossible to pursue natural science without knowing the meaning of the concept "form." But principles *common by causality* are among the "objects of enquiry" of the science. They are discovered and become known in the course of scientific pursuit. For Aquinas, then, as for Avicenna, metaphysics includes an ontology in which the whole range of beings is studied: substances and accidents, causes and effects, one and many, universal and particular. Metaphysics is called "first philosophy in as much as all the other [lower] sciences, receiving their [scientific] principles from it, come after it."[17] But metaphysics is also called "theology or divine science, so called because its principal object [of enquiry] is God," whose existence and nature can be proven in metaphysics, as Avicenna also had said. This is what it means to say God is the "end" of metaphysics.

This Avicennian conclusion explains how the study of God is included in metaphysics, but it also opens up another way of studying God.

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[15] Aquinas, *Super Boethium de trinitate*, 5.4c.
[16] Aquinas, *Super Boethium de trinitate*, 5.4c.
[17] Aquinas, *Super Boethium de trinitate*, 5.1c.

Consequently, there are *two kinds* of theology or divine science. There is one that treats of divine things, not as the subject of the science, but as the [real] *principles* of the subject. This is the kind of theology pursued by the philosophers and also called metaphysics. There is another kind of theology, however, that investigates divine things for their own sakes, as the *subject* of the science. This is the theology taught in Sacred Scripture.

The theology of Scripture takes as its *scientific principles* the "articles of faith" as presented in the ancient creeds.

Our last topic here is to understand the *scientific principles* of the *rational theology* of the philosophers, which also is incorporated into the theology of Scripture, when conceived as an Aristotelian science, as in Aquinas's *Summa theologiae.* In order to consider the principles of metaphysics, let us turn to Br. Thomas's first presentation of them, in his *Scriptum in Sententiis,* Bk. 1, d. 8, q. 1, written shortly before this commentary on Boethius's *De trinitate.*

In Art. 1 and 3 of that question, Aquinas embeds Avicennian metaphysical principles into "sacred doctrine." He introduces his own versions of Avicenna's terms, propositions, and dialectical arguments in support of these principles. In Art. 1, he introduces the proper principles of Avicennian metaphysics, its "definitions," the notions of "a being (*ens*)," "thing (*res*)," and "existence (*esse*)." (He drops "necessary.") He also presents as his own Avicenna's two metaphysical "suppositions." The question asked in Art. 1 is "whether being (*esse*) is properly *said* of God." Br. Thomas answers in the affirmative and begins his "response" with three short "reasons" for his answer, taken from Jerome, Damascene, and Dionysius. But his fourth and longest argument is this:

> The fourth reason can be drawn from the words of *Avicenna,* in this manner. Since in *everything that is* [= *ens*], one can consider its *quiddity,* through which it subsists in a *determinate nature,* and its *existence* (*esse*), through which one says about it that it *exists in actuality,* the name *thing* (*res*) is applied to a thing from its quiddity, according to *Avicenna,* while the name *who is* or *being* (*esse*) is applied from the act itself of existing (*ab ipso actu essendi*). Now since it is true that in every single created thing *its essence differs from its existence,* that thing is *properly denominated* from its quiddity and not from the act of existing; for example, the human from humanity. But in God *his existence itself is his own quiddity.* Therefore, the name that is taken from existence (*esse*) *properly* names him and is his proper name, as the proper name of the human is what is taken from his quiddity.[18]

The overall conclusion here is that *esse* is the best "scientific" term for God, better even than *essentia* or *ens*, though he fully recognizes that these two terms also can give "scientific" knowledge of God. In support of this conclusion, Br. Thomas lays out a succinct and accurate rendition of the "definitions" and "suppositions" that we have seen are the proper principles of Avicenna's metaphysics. He first adopts Avicenna's "a being," "thing," and "being," as the *terms* or notions of his own metaphysics, leaving behind Avicenna's "necessary" for the sake of simplicity. Then he presents an extremely succinct version of the two fundamental metaphysical *assertions* or propositions Avicenna had offered: God's quiddity is existence (*esse*), but in a created being (*ens*) its quiddity and existence are diverse. Since his question is about the *language* the "scientific" theologian should use about God, Br. Thomas then ends with a conclusion Avicenna himself had never drawn. Since we take the name of a creature from its quiddity, the best name for God should be taken from his existence (*esse*), because God's quiddity is his existence (*esse*). Following Avicenna's carefully constructed order of presentation is but one indication that Br. Thomas himself is inserting, not just Avicennian metaphysical *doctrines*, but more precisely Avicennian metaphysical *principles*, into his own theology. And this, the "reasoning" of Avicenna will allow him to demonstrate many philosophical truths, within "sacred doctrine."

In Art. 3, Br. Thomas asks "whether the name 'who is' is first among the divine names." His affirmative response is obvious from Art. 1; but his purpose in Art. 3 is to show more than that. He also wants to show that "being" and its three transcendental attributes—one, true, and good—are the preferred names for God.

> I reply that these names—'being' (*ens*) and good, one and true—according to the aspect of understanding, absolutely precede the other divine names. This is clear from how *common* they are.
> Now if we compare them with each other, this can happen in two ways. One way concerns their subject; and here they are convertible with each other, and they are the same in subject, and they never abandon each other. The other way concerns their meanings (*intentiones*); and in this way 'a being' (*ens*) is prior to the others unconditionally and absolutely. The reason for this is that 'a being' is included in the understanding of them, but the reverse is not true. For the first thing that falls into the intellect's conceptual vision is 'a being,' without which nothing can be apprehended by the intellect. Similarly, the first thing that falls into the judgment of credence by the intellect are the axioms, and especially this one, that contradictories cannot both be true. Consequently, all the others are in a way included within 'a being,' characterized by unity and distinction, as in a principle. And from this there is also a certain fittingness that it is the most proper divine name.

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humanitate. In Deo autem ipsum esse suum est sua quidditas: et ideo nomen quod sumitur ab esse, proprie nominat ipsum, et est proprium nomen ejus: sicut proprium nomen hominis quod sumitur a quidditate sua.

The other names we have described, namely, good, true, and one, over and above 'a being' add, not some nature, but some meaning.[19]

The reason Br. Thomas is so faithful to Avicenna is that the Avicennian principles he set out in Art. 1 provide the necessary foundation for the doctrine of the *transcendentals* presented here in Art. 3. And the reason why he prefers the four transcendentals is because these aspects of things are not intrinsically imperfect, in contrast with Aristotle's ten categories and their subdivisions, all of which are inherently imperfect. So this is the language for a "scientific" theology. Moreover, Avicenna had shown Br. Thomas the way to argue for these metaphysical principles and the doctrine of the transcendentals. Br. Thomas distinguishes the first and second acts of the mind, in order draw an analogy between the way the principle of contradiction functions as a propositional principle at the level of the *second* act of the mind, and the way the fundamental *concepts* of metaphysics function as principles at the level of the first act of the mind. We are all aware of the principle of contradiction; this well accepted principle presupposes the notions of "being," "thing," and "existence"; so these must be the "definitions" of metaphysics. And they are the basis for the other three transcendentals. The transcendentals, therefore, provide the central notions with which Br. Thomas will construct his philosophical theology, to which we now turn.

III. Using the Principles of Metaphysics in Rational Theology

A. Avicenna

In order to understand Avicenna's theology, it is best to remind ourselves of what Aristotle had concluded in his *Metaphysics* 12. There he first outlined the philosophical principles he employs throughout his works to address the existence and nature of a god: his ten categories, four causes, and the notions of being (ὄν), act, and potency.[20] His argument for the existence of a god, closely tied to the astronomical cosmology of his age, moves from the eternal motion of the heavenly spheres to the existence of their unmoved movers. This kind of argument shows a god to be "eternal, substance, and actuality," the last point ensuring that a god is immaterial and unchanging.[21] Aristotle first explained the nature of a god in causal terms. A god is a final cause in relation to lower beings. Intrinsically, a god's activity is that of an intellect contemplating itself.[22] A god is firmly contained within the category of substance, albeit the

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[19] Aquinas, *In 1 Sententiis*, d. 8.1.3c; 199-200: "Si autem comparemus ea ad invicem, hoc potest esse dupliciter: vel secundum suppositum; et sic convertuntur ad invicem, et sunt idem in supposito, nec unquam derelinquunt se; vel secundum intentiones; et sic simpliciter et absolute ens est prius aliis. Cuius ratio est, quia ens includitur in intellectu eorum et non e converso. Primum enim quod cadit in imaginatione intellectus, est ens, sine quo nihil potest apprehendi ab intellectu; sicut primum quod cadit in credulitate intellectus, sunt dignitates, et, praecipue ista, contradictoria non esse simul vera: unde omnia alia includuntur quoddammodo in ente unite et distincte, sicut in principio.

[20] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.1-5.
[21] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12.6.
[22] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7.

higher, immaterial kind, and so not infinitely perfect, but is limited in perfection. This is why there can be many gods, each living a self-contained intellectual life unaware of a world that depends upon it.[23] In short, a god is a sort of general, but an odd one, who inspires his troops while oblivious of them.

Avicenna's views about God exhibit only a few similarities with Aristotle's. In proving the existence of God, Avicenna offers a causal "demonstration of the fact." But his argument initially follows all four lines of causality, unlike Aristotle's argument from final causality; and Avicenna ends with one God as the first efficient cause of creatures.[24] At the end of his treatment of God's nature (*Met.* 8.6-7), Avicenna incorporates certain Aristotelian doctrines, such as that God is unchangeable, good, a self-knower, and supremely happy.

Far more striking, however, are the ways Avicenna goes beyond Aristotle's positions. In a completely original section (*Met.* 8. 4-5), inserted between his argument for God's existence and the more "Aristotelian" conclusions developed later in c. 6-7, Avicenna lays out his most important conclusions. Avicenna draws these conclusions from his metaphysical principles, which are so different from Aristotle's, as we have seen. Avicenna's God is primarily an efficient cause of *existence*, not a final cause of motion. Where an Aristotelian god is a "separate substance," Avicenna's metaphysical principles lead him to deny that God is a substance at all. This final conclusion of his analysis comes from a series of prior theses, all deriving from his proper metaphysical principles which are so different from Aristotle's. First, God's primary name is "necessary existence," that is, existence necessary through itself, not through another, the way in which all creatures are necessary. Second, God is unique, one in number, contrary to Aristotle's polytheism. Third, when considered intrinsically, God is ontologically simple. God is the same as his essence, and God's essence is identical with his existence. Indeed, God has no quiddity in the proper sense of the term. Further consequences follow, God has no genus, so species, so differentia, and, above all, cannot be a substance. This much when we consider God's intrinsic nature.[25]

Avicenna considers God's external relations in *Met.* 9, devoted to the emanation of creatures from God, and *Met.* 10, devoted to the return of creatures, at least, of human creatures, to God. The most important feature of all is that God is the ultimate efficient cause actualizing the intrinsic possibility to exist in all creatures.[26] God is also the ultimate final cause. God exercises efficient causality through a series of intermediate causes, following the lines of Neo-Platonic emanation, which begins with the highest of the intelligences, and ends with the tenth intelligence or "giver of forms." The giver of forms is the proper agent cause for all things in the sublunar world, in both of the senses of agency Avicenna distinguished. One kind of agent cause

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[23] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.8.
[24] Avicenna, *Met.* 8.1-3.
[25] Avicenna, *Met.* 8.4.
[26] Avicenna, *Met.* 9.1, on God as the ultimate efficient cause of being; 4.2, on potency coming from matter; 9.4, on mediate creation; 6.1, on the giver of forms bestowing being on a thing.

is like Aristotle's, one that bestows forms on things; the other bestows existence on things.[27] Secondary causes only prepare the matter for receiving a form. The agent that truly bestows a form on sublunar things is the "giver of forms." But form gives quiddity, and one of Avicenna's principles is that quiddity is distinct from existence, so that a being (*ens*) in the full sense of the word, must have a quiddity brought into existence by the "giver of forms" bestowing existence (*esse*), as well as quiddity, on sublunar beings.[28]

B. Aquinas

Let us now turn to Aquinas's consideration of God. In order to show that the influence of Avicenna on Br. Thomas did not diminish over the years, as some have maintained, we should use *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) 1, which was written 1266-68. When treating the existence of God in *ST* 1.2.3, Br. Thomas employs a version of Aristotle's argument from motion in his "first way," but the other four ways are modeled on the first step of Avicenna's argument, namely, proving that there is a cosmic "first" in each of the four lines of causality. But where Avicenna opted for one among the firsts—the first efficient cause—as God, the cause of the other three "firsts," Br. Thomas argues in "ways" two through "five" that *all four* lines of Aristotelian causality lead inevitably to one and the same first cause—"and this we call God." So God is the first *efficient* cause giving existence to all creatures; all possible beings, both those constituted of *matter* and even purely spiritual creatures, require a necessary God; God is the most *formally* perfect being; and God is the *final* cause that provides governance through imparting natural ends to creatures.

Intent on shining the lights of revelation and reason *together* on the issue of God's nature, Br. Thomas treats first the nature of the one God, as known primarily through natural reason (*ST* 1.3-26), then turns to the Trinitarian nature of God, knowledge that must be based on revelation (*ST* 1.27-43). In treating the divine nature rationally, Br. Thomas follows Avicenna's general plan, first treating the "Avicennian" features of the divine essence (*ST* 1.3-11), then adding what the divine operations add to our understanding of God following the "Aristotelian" approach (*ST* 1.12-25). *ST* 1.3-11 follows quite closely Avicenna's order in his *Metaphysics* 8.4-7.

Of premier importance is that Br. Thomas begins his treatment of God's nature just where Avicenna had, with God's ontological simplicity (*ST* 1.3). Here he adapts Avicenna to his own more empirical way of thinking. Where the Vizier had laid out consequences deduced from God's necessity and unity in a synthetic manner, Br. Thomas argues deductively, but in an empirical and analytic manner. He denies different levels of ontological multiplicity of God, beginning with stronger senses of multiplicity (and weaker senses of unity) and proceeding gradually to lesser senses of multiplicity (and stronger senses of unity). This order is designed to

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[27] Avicenna, *Met*. 6.2.
[28] Avicenna, *Met*. 4.2, para. 1-4 (Marmura ed.: 219-20), which asserts that bestowal of a form requires an agent cause external to the sublunary world, but without calling that agent cause the agent intellect or giver of forms. The term "giver of forms" is used in *The Book of Healing*, *On the Soul*, 5.4. Cf. Averroes, *Commentarium magnum in Metaphysica*, Bk. 7, tc. 31. See J. McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p. 135-7.

force the mind of his reader to recognize that God's essence is not multiple in even a minimal way, but completely and absolutely ontologically simple.

Br. Thomas, therefore, argues in turn: God is not a physical body whose parts are extended in space (*ST* 1.3.1). God is not composed of matter and form, as are all material substances (*ST* 1.3.2). Conceived as an individual subject, God is same as his essence (*ST* 1.3.3), unlike sublunar creatures, where there are many individuals of one species. Most importantly, God's essence is identical with his existence (*ST* 1.3.4)—Avicenna's premier metaphysical claim about God's nature. Since God does not have a quiddity or essence distinct from existence, God has no genus (*ST* 1.3.5). Nor does God have any accidents (*ST* 1.3.6), for God is completely simple (*ST* 1.3.7). Consequently, in no way does God enter into the composition of things, even though God is the direct efficient cause of the existence of all creatures (*ST* 1.3.8).

In his response at *ST* 1.2.4, Br. Thomas offered three arguments to show that in God essence and existence (*esse*) are identical. The first argument, which shows how much he has drawn upon Avicenna, shows not only that God is ontologically simple, but it uncovers Aquinas's philosophical notions of creator and creature.

> Whatever is in something, which is outside its *essence*, must be caused; either by the principles of its essence, as are the proper accidents that are consequent upon a species, as being able to laugh is a consequent on being a human, and is caused by the essential principles of the species; or by something exterior, as heat is caused in water by fire. Therefore, if the *existence (esse)* of a thing is *other than its essence*, it is necessary that the existence of that thing either is caused by something exterior or by the essential principles of that same thing. But it is impossible that existence is caused only by the essential principles of a thing; because no thing is sufficient for causing the existence in itself, if it has existence that is caused. Therefore, it is necessary that that thing whose existence (*esse*) is other than its essence have its existence caused by another. But this cannot be said of God, because we say God is the first efficient cause. Therefore, it is impossible that in God his existence (*esse*) should be other than his essence.[29]

In this subtle simplification of a far more complex argument of Avicenna's for the identity of essence and existence in God, Br. Thomas envisions three logical possibilities about the existence (*esse*) that makes something to exist, set out using the predicables. For anything, its

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[29] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 1.3.4c: Respondeo dicendum quod Deus non solum est sua essentia, ut ostensum est, sed etiam suum esse; quod quidem multipliciter ostendi potest. Primo, quia quidquid est in aliquo quod est praeter essentiam eius, oportet esse causatum: vel a principiis essentiae, sicut accidentia propria consequentia speciem, ut risibile consequitur hominem, et causatur es principiis essentialibus speciei; vel ab aliquo exteriori, sicut calor in aqua causatur ab igne. Si igitur ipsum esse rei sit aliud ab eius essentia, necesse est quod esse illius rei vel sit causatum ab aliquo exteriori vel a principiis essentialibus eiusdem rei. Impossiblile est autem quod esse sit causatum tantum ex principiis essentialibus rei; quia nulla res sufficit ad hoc quod sit sibi causa essendi, si habeat esse causatum. Oportet ero quod illud cuius esse est aliud ab essentia sua, habeat esse causatum ab alio. Hoc autem non potest dici de Deo; quia Deum dicimus esse primam causam efficientem. Impossibile est ergo quod in Deo sit aliud esse et aliud eius essentia.

existence is either a property flowing from its essence, or a sort of predicable accident which requires an external efficient cause, or it is the same as the thing's essence. Now the first option is impossible. The existence of nothing—neither God nor creature—can be both distinct from its essence but also caused by that essence. For nothing can make itself exist, that is, create itself, not even God. The second option describes creatures, not God. Every individual being (*ens*) whose essence is distinct from its existence (*esse*) is ontologically composite; so it must be caused to be by an external efficient cause, namely, by God. Since nothing can cause itself to exist, and God cannot be caused to exist in the way a creature is caused, it follows that the third option describes God. God's existence (esse) is identical with his essence. The phrase *ipsum esse subsistens* is just a different formulation of the description of the divine nature that has been established in this argument, a formula that emphasizes the subsistence or independent existence of the divine existence (*esse*), which has been shown to be identical with the divine essence. This argument, then, sharply contrasts the ontology of God with the ontology of creatures, in precisely the way Avicenna had done.

From his thoroughly Avicennian starting point in *ST* 1 3, Aquinas then develops other features of God's essence, again drawing heavily upon Avicenna's *Metaphysics* 8.4-5. Since God is ontologically simple, he is "most actual, and therefore most perfect." And as creator, God pre-possesses all the perfections of his creation (*ST* 1.4.1). God is not just good but "the highest good" (*ST* 1.6.2). Where Aristotle's highest god was the highest good only *per accidens*, because the final cause of the highest sphere, Aquinas's God, like Avicenna's, is not the highest good for some extrinsic reason, but "God alone is good *through his essence*, . . . for whom alone essence is his existence" (*ST* 1.6.3). This conception of goodness as a transcendental attribute of being (*ens*), leads Aquinas to re-introduce a new kind of participation which makes "all things good by the divine goodness."

> For although it seems unreasonable to posit species of natural things subsisting separately through themselves [as Plato did and Aristotle rejected] . . . still it is absolutely true that something is first which, through its own essence is a being (*ens*) and good, which we call God. . . . Therefore, by the first, through its own essence a being and good, everything can be called good and a being, in as much as it participates in it by way of a kind of assimilation, albeit remotely and deficiently. . . . Therefore, in this way everything is called good by the divine goodness, as by a first principle that is the *exemplar*, *efficient*, and *final* cause of all goodness.[30]

It also follows that God is "essentially" and "absolutely" infinite, a status that can only be true of one God and therefore is beyond Aristotle's many gods, who were limited in perfection by the immaterial forms they are (*ST* 1.7.2c). And God is omnipresent in creatures, "not as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that on which it works," for God "is in

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[30]Aquinas, *ST* 1.6.4c.

all things as causing the existence (*esse*) of all things."[31] God does this directly, a departure from Avicenna's mediated creation.

Moreover, God is utterly unchangeable (*ST* 1.9). Aquinas offers three reasons for this conclusion, only the first of which Aristotle could (and did) accept: God is pure act, without the admixture of any potency. But Aquinas adds two more arguments. Change requires composition, but "in God there is no composition, for he is altogether [ontologically] simple." Also, since God is infinite—another non-Aristotelian thesis—it would be impossible for him to acquire a new perfection through change, indeed, impossible to change at all (*ST* 1.9.1). God is also truly eternal; he does not merely persist through all time, as Aristotle thought (*ST* 1.10.1-2).

Finally, Aquinas completes the circle of his reasoning by returning to where it began, to unity (*ST* 1.11). Aquinas offers three reasons for God's unity, which stand as a kind of coda for the "Avicennian" section of his treatment of God's nature. God is one, first, "from his simplicity," second, "from the infinity of his perfection," and finally, "from the unity of the world" which is bestowed by the "first" which "is completely perfect and through itself, not through another."[32] None of these reasons could Aristotle have accepted in the way Br. Thomas explains them, because he had borrowed all of them from Avicenna.

For Avicenna, "God is one" means not only that "there is but one God," contrary to polytheists, but also that God is intrinsically ontologically simple "necessary existence (*al-wa>jib al-wuju>d*; *necesse esse*)," and only that. On Avicenna's authority, Aquinas dropped the term "necessary" as un-necessary; so God became for him "existence (*esse*)" or "existence itself (*ipsum esse*)" or, most accurately put, "subsistent existence itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*)." This is a progression in the conception of the divine nature of central importance to philosophy and theology.

When it comes to God's causality, Avicenna said God is, above all, the first efficient cause: the direct cause of the highest angel or intelligence, and the ultimate cause of the existence of all creatures, through his doctrine of mediated creation. God is efficient cause, but also the ultimate final cause, for a creator God is the ultimate, if never directly attained, end of all creatures. For humans, their direct and ultimate end is union with the tenth or agent intelligence who, as "giver of forms," also bestows their formal quiddity on all things in the sublunar world.

For Aquinas, then, God is the direct and proximate efficient cause of the existence of all creatures. But to be so, God must also be their ultimate formal and final cause. As creator, he directly bestows existence on each and every creature. So he must contain within himself all the formal perfections of creatures, though in a higher mode than found in creatures; and he must himself be the ultimate end of all creation, in order that creatures exhibit action toward their

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[31]Aquinas, *ST* 1.8.1c and ad 1.
[32] Aquinas, *ST* 1.11.3.

respective ends. And especially God must be the directly attainable final end for humans, whose intellectuality makes it possible for them to see God "face to face." But with this Biblical truth, one that surpasses philosophy (*ST* 1.1.1), let us now turn to one point in Aquinas's "theology of Scripture."

III. Using Metaphysics to Understand the *Esse* of Christ

In presenting his understanding of Christ, "true God and true man," Br. Thomas does not hesitate to use the philosophical doctrines he has drawn from Avicenna, in attempting to understand and defend the orthodox view of the incarnation, to the extent that reason can partially penetrate such a mystery of faith. Since Christ is one person in two natures, in order to follow his explanation, let us look first at the person in humans and God, then at the existence (*esse*) of Christ.

Following the traditional Boethian definition that "a person is an individual substance of a rational nature," Br. Thomas holds that created substances below the human level are not persons, though they are individual substances. For all such creatures, there is a real otherness between the individual subject (*suppositum*), its quiddity (*quidditas*), and its existence (*esse*), a Thomistic doctrine that comes from Avicenna, as we have seen above. Now what actually exists, properly speaking is the individual subject conceived as a whole. This is why in his simplest treatment of the issue of the *esse* of Christ, in his *Compendium theologiae*, written for his *socius* Br. Reginald, he says: "It is clear that when a whole is divided each of its singular parts has its own proper existence (*esse proprium*), but when the parts are considered in the whole, each does not have its own existence (*suum esse*), but all exist through the existence of the whole (*esse totius*)."[33] When a stone or a plant is divided into two parts, each exists on its own as a whole, though the two stones retain their basic nature, while the two parts of the plant die. Now existence, considered in itself, has no quidditative character; this is why what makes existence a limited *kind* of existence is the quiddity. This is why quiddity or essence is divided into two kinds, substantial and accidental, the difference being that a substance "has the kind of quiddity that it can exist not in a subject but through itself," to use Avicenna's and Br. Thomas's emendation of Aristotle's definition of substance as "what does not exist in another, but through itself." The language Br. Thomas uses to expresses this point is to say the whole is that "which exists" (*quod est*), such a whole has "existence absolutely" (*esse simpliciter*). It is an individual substance, such as this plant or that animal (inanimate things are harder to understand). Quiddity, however, is not a whole being but a formal principle "by which" (*quo est*) the existence of the whole is "contracted."

It would be a mistake, however, though one sometimes committed by Thomists through the ages, to say that within one being (*ens*) the *esse* of substance is one thing, and the *esse* of an accident another, for that would be to confuse the characters of *essentia* and *esse*. As was said above, there is only one *esse* of a thing that has parts, the "existence of the whole" (*esse totius*).

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[33] Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae* 212.

So existence in a way (*esse secundum quid*) is shorthand for 'the existence of the individual, whole creature, as manifested in one of its parts.' This point will be of capital importance when we turn to Christ; but first we must consider the human person before turning to a divine person. When Br. Thomas explains "person" in the *Summa theologiae*, he begins at the subhuman level, noting that

> in a certain special way individual is found in the genus of substance. For substance is individuated through itself, while accidents are individuated through their subject, which is substance. For whiteness is said to be 'this' in so far as it is in this subject. And so it is appropriate that individuals in substance have a special name, before other things; for they are called hypostases or primary substances."[34]

When we turn to human individuals, their basic ontology changes in one important way: their substantial form or soul exists on its own; it is not limited to existing merely as part of the composite. This is how Aquinas explains the immortality of the soul. But the rest of their ontology, which is what is important for understand the *esse* of Christ, remains the same as lower creatures. So the reason why individual humans deserve the special name "person," is due to their "rational nature," which is a quidditative rather than an existential characteristic.

When describing a divine person, however, the situation changes drastically. The reason is because in God there is only substance and relation; there are no accidents. But in substantial terms there can be no division in God, who is *ipsum esse subsistens*. Consequently, divine persons must be understood as some special sort of relation. Since what "person" means for humans and angels is "individual substance of rational nature," to understand a divine person, Br. Thomas focuses on "individual," because

> the individual is what is indistinct in itself but distinct from others. . . . Now distinction in the divinity only happens through relations of origin. . . . But relation in the divinity is not like an accident inhering in a subject, but it is the divine essence itself. Consequently, relation is subsistent, just as the divine essence subsists. Therefore, just as deity is God, so the divine paternity is God the Father, who is a divine person. Therefore, a divine person signifies a relation as subsisting; and this is to signify a relation in the mode of a substance, which is a hypostasis subsisting in the divine nature.[35]

The second person of the Trinity, therefore, is a *relation* of origin in comparison with the other persons of the Trinity, but is *subsisting* in comparison with the divine essence, which is identical with the divine existence. So the divine Word is a person; a person is an individual; and this person exists by reason of the divine existence (*esse*), which is not "other" than the divine "essence," in contrast with the "essence" of any creature, which is "other" than its existence.

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[34] Aquinas, *ST* 1.29.1c.
[35] Aquinas, *ST* 1.29.4c.

When "the Word became flesh" the second person of the Trinity assumed a human essence which it did not have before. Since for creatures essence is the principle that "contracts" existence (*esse*) to be this or that kind of being, once the Word assumes a second, human essence, this raises the question whether in Christ there is also a second existence (*esse*). Having seen that "what exists" (*quod est*) is the individual subject taken as a whole, the hypostasis for subhuman beings, and the person for human beings, and having seen that the existence for each divine person is determined by the divine essence, which is identical to the divine existence, it follows that the existence of the person who is the Son must be divine existence (*divinum esse*), before the Incarnation. But the Son does not lose divinity in the Incarnation, and therefore does not lose divine being. In the *Compendium theologiae*, the conclusion follows immediately: "So therefore, if we consider Christ himself as an integral individual subject (*suppositum*) with two natures, there will be only one existence (*esse*) of him, just as there is only one individual subject (*suppositum*)."[36] The weight of this argument is carried by two points: there is only one person involved, whether called Word, Son, or Christ; and that person, because already divine, has only the one existence that makes him a divine person in the first place. Here there is a straight inference from the unity of the divine person to the one, divine existence in the incarnate word, Jesus Christ.

In other texts, however, Br. Thomas is a bit more careful. All texts but one draw the same conclusion, but the disputed question *De unione verbi incarnati*, art. 4, at least on one reading, seems to conclude that there are two *esse*'s in Christ, *after* the incarnation. So let us compare his reasoning in the *Summa theologiae* 1, with this disputed question. In both of these texts Br. Thomas's Avicennian ontology comes even more into play.

In the *Summa*, after having explained that in Christ there is one person but two natures in Christ, Br. Thomas asks "Is there only one existence (*esse*) in Christ?"[37] His answer is that there is only one. To explain why this is true, he begins by noting that whatever "pertains to" the one person must itself be one, and whatever pertains to the two natures must be two. The issue is whether *esse* pertains to person or nature. What complicates the issue is that *esse* pertains to both, so the resolution will come by pointing out that *esse* pertains to each in a different way. Now a hypostasis or person is a subsisting *individual* "which is" (*quod est*), so *esse* pertains to "a hypostasis as to that which has *esse*," such as a tree or a human or, in this case, Christ. *Esse* pertains to "a nature, however, as to that by which (*quo*) something has existence," which makes a nature function like a form and have existence like a form, which does not exist in itself, but is a principle by which the individual whole, of which it is a part, exists. Br. Thomas gives some welcome examples: whiteness is a form by which something is white, and humanity is a form by which something is a human. To link this distinction to the language of being, Br. Thomas adds that a hypostasis or person has existence "absolutely" (*simpliciter*), while a nature or form has existence "in a certain respect" (*secundum quid*). "Now nothing prevents this latter kind of existence from being multiplied in one hypostasis or person. For the existence whereby Socrates

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[36] Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, c. 212.
[37] Aquinas, *ST* 3.17.2.

is white is other than the existence whereby Socrates is musical. But that kind of existence (*illud esse*) which pertains to the hypostasis or the person *in itself* cannot possibly be multiplied in one hypostasis or person, because it is impossible that there should not be *one existence of one thing*."[38]

Now there is a way there could be two existences in Christ. But this could only happen "if human nature came to the Son of God, not as hypostasis or person, but in the manner of an accident." But this is heretical; part of the Nestorian heresy. An orthodox view of the *esse* of Christ, then, requires that "human nature be conjoined to the Son of God as hypostasis or person . . . , not as an accident."

> The consequence is that through human nature there does not come to him new personal existence, but only a new relation of his pre-existing personal existence to human nature, namely, so that that Person is now said to subsist, not only according to the divine nature, but also according to human nature.[39]

Br. Thomas has supported the view that in Christ there is only one existence (esse), the divine esse, by looking at the way *esse* is related to person and nature, at least a created nature. A hypostasis or person is an individual, subsisting thing which exists in the proper meaning of the term (simpliciter). A created nature, however, does not exist in itself, as God's nature does, but it exists only in the manner of a form, which exists as a part of the whole, a principle contributing quiddity to the hypostasis or nature. In this way it becomes clear that because the Son of God is a person which exists by reason of the divine existence, when he becomes "truly man" the human nature which he assumes cannot contribute a second existence to Christ, because that nature, like every created nature, does not exist in the way that would allow it to contribute a second existence. For it exists only *secundum quid*, as a principle "whereby" a hypostasis or person can exist as a whole. But Christ already exists *simpliciter*, to which human nature can add nothing in the order of existence (*esse*).

The problem with *De unione verbi incarnati*, art. 4, is that, at least on first reading, it seems to contradict all other texts of Aquinas on this point. For Aquinas says there:

> But there is another existence (*aliud esse*) of this individual subject (*suppositi*), not insofar as it is eternal, but insofar as it has been made man in time. This existence (*esse*), even though it is not accidental, because 'man' is not predicated accidentally of the Son of God, as was said above, nonetheless it is not the *principal existence* (*esse princpale*) of its individual subject (*suppositi*), but a secondary [existence]."[40]

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[38] Aquinas, *ST* 3.17.2c.
[39] Aquinas, *ST* 3.17.2c.
[40] Thomas Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, art. 4c, in *Thomas von Aquin: Quaestio disputata `De unione verbi incarnati', e*d. W. Sener, B. Bartocci, K. Obenauer (Stuttgart: Frommann - Holzboog, Stuttgart, 2011). For Latin, see following note.

When considered in isolation, this text does seem to posit two *esse*'s in the person who is Christ, an *esse principale* coming from the divine nature and divine *esse*, and a *secundarium* [*esse*] coming from human nature. But when taken in its immediate context, we can see that this is not Aquinas's meaning. As before, Br. Thomas distinguishes how *esse* applies to a person and a form: "Existence properly and truly is said of a subsisting individual subject (*de supposito subsistente*)"; but forms are that "by which" things have existence, accidental forms causing "something to be a being (*ens*), not absolutely (*simpliciter*), but in a way (*secundum quid*)," and substantial forms causing "a subsisting thing to have existence absolutely (*simpliciter*)." Up to this point there has been no change in language or doctrine. But now Aquinas does change his language:

> But in Christ, the subsisting individual subject (*suppositum*) is the person of the son of God, which is absolutely made a substance (*simpliciter substantificatur*) through the divine nature, but is not absolutely made a substance through human nature. Because the Person of the son of God was before humanity was assumed, not in any respect is the Person augmented or made more perfect through the assumption of human nature. But the eternal individual subject (*suppositum aeternum*) *is made a substance through human nature, in so far as he is this human*. And therefore, just as Christ is one absolutely on   account of the unity of the individual subject, and two in a certain respect on account of two natures, so also he has one existence absolutely on account of the one eternal existence of the eternal individual subject (*suppositi*). But there is another existence of this individual subject. . . .[41]

Adding the context shows, first, that Br. Thomas is in no way backing off from his prior conclusion that when we are considering *esse simpliciter*, "he has *one existence* absolutely on account of the one eternal existence of the eternal individual subject." This means that when we are talking about Christ's *esse* in the proper meaning of the term, that is, when we are talking about Christ as a person, there is only one *esse*, the divine *esse*, because Christ is the divine person who is the Son of God. Aquinas also refuses the heretical view that Christ's human nature is added as an accident. What then, does Br. Thomas mean when he says "the eternal individual

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[41] Aquinas, *De unione verbi incarnati*, art. 4c. Considerandum est autem, quod aliquae formae sunt quibus est aliquid ens non simpliciter, sed secundum quid; sicut sunt omnes formae accidentales. Aliquae autem formae sunt quibus res subsistens simpliciter habet esse; quia videlicet constituunt esse substantiale rei subsistentis. In Christo autem suppositum subsistens est persona filii Dei, quae simpliciter substantificatur per naturam divinam, non autem simpliciter substantificatur per naturam humanam. Quia persona filii Dei fuit ante humanitatem assumptam, nec in aliquo persona est augmentata, seu perfectior, per naturam humanam assumptam. Substantificatur autem suppositum aeternum per naturam humanam, in quantum est hic homo. Et ideo sicut Christus est unum simpliciter propter unitatem suppositi, et duo secundum quid propter duas naturas, ita habet unum esse simpliciter propter unum esse aeternum aeterni suppositi. Est autem et aliud esse huius suppositi, non in quantum est aeternum, sed in quantum est temporaliter homo factum. Quod esse, etsi non sit esse accidentale - quia homo non praedicatur accidentaliter de filio Dei, ut supra habitum est - non tamen est esse principale sui suppositi, sed secundarium. Si autem in Christo essent duo supposita, tunc utrumque suppositum haberet proprium esse sibi principale. Et sic in Christo esset simpliciter duplex esse.

subject (*suppositum aeternum*) *is made a substance through human nature, in so far as he is this human*"? What he means is that, when the Son assumes human nature, that nature causes him to be human, not just some human, but "this human," the very same person who is also Son of the Father. But why add that there is "another existence," a "secondary existence"? I think Aquinas has not added this language in order to change his basic doctrine. He does not say a *second existence*. He has added this language in order to clarify a crucial point. When Christ assumes a human nature, he is already an individual person. So the humanity he assumes is individualized by the pre-existing divine person. But how does humanity exist as a whole?—for a human person is a whole, an "individual substance of rational nature." The "secondary existence" points to the aspects of a human that are not found in a divine person, precisely because he is divine. These, of course, are the panoply of physical and psychological features of a *whole* human person. So Aquinas's change in language was just a way of emphasizing, *with the language of existence*, that the assumption of human nature meant that Christ the Incarnate Word was "true man" in man's full materiality and psychology, as well as "true God."

This change in language, I am sad to report, has had an unfortunate impact on interpreters of Aquinas, both medieval and modern. But the meaning of Thomas's doctrine of the *esse* of Christ, and the arguments he uses to explain that doctrine, have not changed. Only his language has changed—and even then only slightly—in order to accommodate another point he has tried to make. Disciples, after all, do betray the doctrines of their masters, by drawing consequences from their principles they had not themselves drawn, sometimes for the better, but sometimes for the worse.[42]

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[42] I have treated some of these issues in other places: "Let Them Suffer into Truth: Avicenna's Remedy for Those Denying the Axioms of Thought." Issue on "Medieval Islamic Thought," ed. T.-A. Druart. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*. 73 (1999) 107-133. "The Real Distinction and the Principles of Metaphysics: Avicenna and Aquinas." in *Laudemus viros gloriosos: Essays in Honor of Armand Maurer CSB*. R.E. Houser, ed. Center for Thomistic Studies Series. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, 75-108. "Language and the Nature of God in the Aristotelian Tradition," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association: Philosophy and Language*, Vol. 84 (2010): 113-132. "Aristotle and Two Aristotelians on the Nature of God," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 51/3 (2011): 355-375. "Why the Christian Magistri turned to Arabic and Jewish *Fala>sifa*:: Aquinas and Avicenna," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association: Philosophy in the Abrahamic Traditions*, Vol. 86 (2011): 100-119. "Avicenna and Aquinas's *De principiis naturae*, cc. 1-3," *The Thomist* volume on "Aquinas and the Arabs" 76/4 (2012): 577-610. "Avicenna, *Aliqui*, and the Thomistic Doctrine of Creation." *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 80(1), (2013), 17-55. For two recent bibliographies of Aquinas, see R. E. Houser, "Thomism," and M.V. Dougherty, "Thomas Aquinas," at *Oxford Bibliographies: Medieval Studies* (online). http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/browse?module_0=obo-9780195396584