

Avicenna, Aquinas and the Real Distinction: In Defense of Mere Possibilities or Why Existence Matters

Kevin M. Staley
Saint Anselm College

Both Avicenna and Aquinas argue for a real distinction between something's existence and its essence. Yet existential Thomists often cast Avicenna's metaphysics as essentialist, as a metaphysics in which realities are essences that exist. For Aquinas, the act of existence is primary, and many Thomists are wary of granting essences in themselves any "being" whatsoever – even possible being. So a question arises: given that both Aquinas and Avicenna support making a real distinction between essence and existence, is the principle of the real distinction between essence and existence in the thought of Avicenna and of Aquinas the same distinction or not? I argue that it is the same (Sections I-III). The differences between their metaphysics are due instead to differences regarding the ontological status of possibility (Sections IV –V). The tradition of existential Thomism has tended to be cautious when speaking about "possibilities" or "creatables" as somehow real (the kind of talk that leads to an essentialist metaphysics that is forgetful of being). I am hopeful that my argument will underscore the importance of "merely possibles" even for metaphysical existentialists.

Etienne Gilson once remarked:

But Thomas Aquinas could not posit *esse* as the act of existence of a substance itself actualized by form without making a decision which, with respect to the metaphysics of Aristotle, was nothing less than a revolution. He had precisely to achieve the dissociation of the two notions of form and act. This is precisely what he has done and what probably remains, even today, the greatest contribution ever made by any single man to the science of being.¹

Form causes something to be a substance-of-a-certain-sort. *Esse*, the act of existence, causes substance to exist rather than not exist. Aristotle's motto had been "a man, an existent man, and man are just the same"²—a motto that Gilson takes to mean that there is no more to being than being-a-certain-sort; to be is to be a kind.³ The motto of Aquinas's revolution is: *esse est actualitas omnium rerum et etiam formarium*—the act of existence is the actuality of all

¹ Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd Edition (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 174.

² ταὐτὸ γὰρ εἷς ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἄνθρωπος, καὶ ὢν ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἄνθρωπος, καὶ οὐχ ἕτερόν τι δηλοῖ κατὰ τὴν λέξιν ἐπαναδιπλούμενον τὸ εἷς ἄνθρωπος καὶ εἷς ὢν ἄνθρωπος (δῆλον δ' ὅτι οὐ χωρίζεται οὐτ' ἐπὶ γενέσεως οὐτ' ἐπὶ φθορᾶς), ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἑνός, ὥστε φανερόν ὅτι ἡ πρόσθεσις ἐν τούτοις ταὐτὸ δηλοῖ, καὶ οὐδὲν ἕτερον τὸ ἐν παρὰ τὸ ὄν, ἔτι δ' ἡ ἐκάστου οὐσία ἐν ἔστιν οὐ κατὰ συμβεβηκός, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὅπερ ὄν τι. *Metaphysics*, Z, 2; 1003b 25-33.

³ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 52.

things and even the actuality of forms.⁴ That is, there is a real distinction between the actuality involved in being a determinate sort of thing and the existence of that thing.

Professor Houser's paper demonstrates Thomas's indebtedness to Avicenna regarding the principle of the real distinction of *esse* and essence. His indebtedness to Avicenna is so great that one wonders, extending Gilson's revolution metaphor, whether Aquinas's revolution stands to Avicenna's as the French Revolution stood to the American. One might argue that Aquinas heard a shot that echoed around the world, but it was Avicenna who fired the pistol.

Dr. Houser's paper thus raises important questions. I address only one: Is the principle of the real distinction between essence and existence in the thought of Avicenna and Aquinas the same distinction or not? I will argue that the distinction is the same in content, that is, in what the principle claims to be the case (Sections I-III). I do not deny that there are striking differences between Avicenna, for whom the sheer existence of things is something of an afterthought, and Aquinas, for whom knowledge of actual existents as existing is the deep river that sustains and directs his metaphysical contemplation. However, I argue that these differences do not arise from differing versions of the real distinction; rather they arise from differences regarding the ontological status of possibility (Sections IV-V). Since the tradition of existential Thomism has tended to be cautious when speaking about "possibilities" or "creatables" as somehow real (the kind of talk that leads to an essentialist metaphysics that is forgetful of being), I am hopeful that my argument will underscore the importance of "possibles" even for metaphysical existentialists.

I. Some Differences between Aquinas and Avicenna: Real Possibilities, Mere Possibilities, Counterfactuals, and the Real Distinction

There are some superficial reasons to distinguish Avicenna's thinking on essence and existence from Aquinas's. In Book V, Chapter Two of the *Metaphysics of the Healing*, Avicenna seems to claim that existence is an accident. The Latin translation reads, "*naturae hominis ex hoc quod est homo accidit ut habeat esse.*"⁵ More recently, Michael Marmura translates the Arabic: "As for the nature of human inasmuch as it is human, it follows as a concomitant that it should be an existent."⁶ The terms "concomitant" and "*accidit*" both hearken back to the standard term for accident in Aristotle, "*symbebikos*" (from the verb to come to pass, to happen, to coincide). If one takes Avicenna literally here, his position is incoherent. Because all accidents belong to things that already exist and because they depend upon the existence of their subjects for their own existence, if existence were an accident, it would add to a thing what any accident presupposes the thing already has. To my knowledge, Aquinas never makes such a mistake, but even he talks like this in places.⁷ So I think it misleading and uncharitable to take Avicenna too

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I, 8, 1, ad4.

⁵ Avicenna, *Metaphysica*, tr. V, cap.2, f. 87; cited in Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 79.

⁶ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, V. 2, 2, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), p. 158, ll. 1-2.

⁷ "...quod accidens dicitur hic quod non est de intellectu alicujus, sicut rationale dicitur animali accidere; et ita cuilibet quidditati creatae accidit esse, quia non est de intellectu ipsius quidditatis; potest enim intelligi humanitas,

literally here. Avicenna's point is that existence is like an accident even if it isn't one. What it is "to be man" is indifferent to existence when considered in itself.

What makes Avicenna's position interestingly different from Aquinas's is that, although Avicenna argues that essences are indifferent to existence, he holds that no thing that exists (has existed, or will exist) is contingent in the sense that there ever was a *real possibility* that it could not have existed at all. A possibility is a real possibility if and only if it is impossible that it not be realized (happen) either always or at some time or other.⁸ Real possibilities, including the possibility of non-existence, are just the sort of possibilities that are eventually or always realized.

For the sake of precision, I will distinguish real possibilities from "mere possibilities." A mere possibility need not ever exist (happen) or have existed. It need never admit of realization at any time. Counterfactual propositions often refer to mere possibilities, that is, possibilities that might have been realized but were not. Thomas could have traveled to Jerusalem in 1235; but he did not; and now it is too late. His having travelled there in 1235 is a mere possibility that remained and will remain unrealized.

Aquinas's world is full of counterfactuals. In fact, Aquinas asserts counterfactual propositions of cosmic proportions. For example: This universe could have not existed; God could have created some other sort of universe; Adam could have not sinned; Christ could have not become incarnate. Avicenna's world, on the other hand, is devoid of counterfactuals; there are no mere possibilities. The universe, though in itself possible, exists and must exist just the way it is. It is a possibility that cannot fail to be actualized. It is a real possibility as opposed to a mere possibility.

My question is whether these differences between Aquinas and Avicenna originate from different conceptions of the real distinction between essence and existence. "Essence" in this context refers to an intrinsic metaphysical principle of things, not an epistemological one. Essences may allow for universal knowledge (all squirrels are warm blooded), but as ontological principles they are not universals. When considered as the constituent principles of things,

et tamen dubitari, utrum homo habeat esse." In *I Sent.* d. 8 *Expositio Primae Partis Textus*. Cited in Thomas LaZella (2010) *Thomas Aquinas, the real distinction between esse and essence, and overcoming the conceptual imperialism. (Doctoral Dissertation)*. Retrieved from College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences Theses and Dissertations. <http://via.library.depaul.edu/etd/32>.

⁸ We see something like this notion operating in the third way. Aquinas argues: "We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, **for that which is possible not to be at some time is not**. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence." "*Si igitur omnia sunt possibilis non esse, aliquando nihil fuit in rebus.*" Aquinas, *ST I*, 1, 3, c. There may be a problem in this argument. Suppose one argues: "What is possible, such as the possibility to not exist, must eventually be realized. Since creation is actual, it must be possible. Therefore, creation must have been realized (occurred) always or at some time (*aliquando*)." But Aquinas holds that there need never be a creation even though creation is possible. So one must take the boldfaced premise in his argument as consistent with the proposition "If not every being is possible, that is, if some necessary being exists, then no other being need exist."

essences can be singular and include matter: “*Singularis autem essentia constituitur ex materia designate et forma individuata: sicut Socratis essentia ex hoc corpore et hac anima.*”⁹ The singular essence of Socrates includes his designated matter in virtue of which he is this man with this body and this soul rather than that man with that body and that soul.

Avicenna and Aquinas agree that something’s essence is really distinct from its existence. Both agree that considered in themselves, essences need not exist. Both agree that God just is existence or that His essence is to exist (unlike other things, God is not a species of thing). Both agree that God is the origin and cause of all that exists other than Himself. What, if anything, about the way in which Avicenna or Aquinas understands the real distinction gives rise to their different accounts of the created universe—Avicenna’s, a formidable block of solid necessity flowing from a necessary being, and Aquinas’s, contingent through and through?

II. Are Differences between Aquinas and Avicenna due to Differences in their respective Accounts of the Real Distinction?—A Thought Experiment

To answer this question, I would like to propose a thought experiment which suggests that the differences between Avicenna and Aquinas do not arise from differences in their respective conceptions of the real distinction between essence and existence or, more precisely, if there are differences, these differences originate outside the distinction itself and subsequently affect the manner in which the distinction is construed. The experiment steps back from the conception of the universe in Aquinas or Avicenna to consider another kind of universe, that of the ancient atomists.

While universes do not have essences strictly speaking, they are systems of interacting beings that do have essences; how these beings interact is a function of their essences or natures; and a universe is a function of their interactions. So by “kind of universe,” I am not claiming that universes are entities in themselves that have an essence; but I am committing myself to the claim that talking about different kinds of universes is meaningful and coherent. For example, Ptolemy’s universe does not exist; it may be inconsistent with observed data and the laws of physics as currently understood. But it is not impossible in itself, and thus it is *prima facie* legitimate to ask, for example, whether this “kind of universe” is possible.

Consider the universe of an ancient atomist like Democritus, a universe composed of different sorts of atoms in free fall through the infinite void. This cosmology describes a type or kind of universe quite different from our own.

In the ancient atomist’s cosmos, the essences of the beings whose interactions constitute the cosmos are fairly thin. Atoms differ in regard to their local motions, sizes and shapes (the hooks and barbs that allow atoms to stick together). These differences are not substantial ones; there are no “substances” of the Aristotelian variety in Democritus’ universe. At most, there is

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* (hereafter, *SCG*) I, 65, 3.

one kind of substance (the atom), instances of which differ by reason of quantitative properties. Still, the quantitative differences among the atoms that do exist in this universe are of the formal rather than the existential order. These formal differences may explain how atoms interact to form macroscopic entities, but they do not explain why there are interacting atoms rather than nothing at all. Atoms just are. What comes to be does so because atoms coalesce. What ceases to be does so because atoms disperse. But indivisible atoms can neither come to be nor pass away. If they are, they have always been and always will be. Is there a place for a real distinction between essence (however thin) and existence in such a universe?

In accounting for the distinction between essence and existence, both Aquinas and Avicenna appeal to the difference between knowing that something exists and knowing what it is. Avicenna argues:

It is evident that each thing has a reality proper to it—namely, its quiddity. It is known that the reality proper to such a thing is something other than its existence that corresponds to what is affirmed. This is because, if you said, “The reality of such a thing exists either in concrete things, or in the soul, or absolutely, being common to both,” this would have meaning [that was] realized and understood; [whereas] “The reality of such a thing is a reality,” this would be superfluous, useless talk.¹⁰

The first statement (“some reality exists”) is about the world. It is synthetic, to use Kantian terminology. There is more in the predicate than is contained in concept of the subject, namely, that the subject exists. The second statement is a trivial tautology: “reality is reality.” Aquinas’s account of the distinction in *On Being and Essence* runs along similar lines:

Everything that does not belong to the concept of an essence or quiddity comes to it from the outside and enters into composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without its parts. Now every essence or quiddity can be understood without knowing anything about its being (*de esse suo*). I can know, for instance, what a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant whether it has being in reality (*an esse habeat in rerum*). From this it is clear that being is other than essence or quiddity (*esse est aliud ab essentia*), unless perhaps there is a reality whose quiddity is its being.¹¹

If these arguments are sufficient to establish a real distinction between essence and existence,¹² then any kind of universe (including that of the atomists) offers sufficient evidence

¹⁰ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, I, 5, 11-12; Marmurra, p. 24, ll. 30-34.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. A. Maurer (Toronto: PIMS, 1983), 55.

¹² These arguments may not be sufficient to establish a real distinction. One might argue, for example, that one’s notion of “animal” is distinct from one’s notion of “squirrel” without conceding that there is any real distinction in the squirrel between the two. Avicenna thought that the distinction between essence and existence is self-evident. Many would argue that it is not. For example, one might hold that demonstrating the reality of the distinction

for the existence of a Necessary Being, that is, a Being whose existence is its nature. Even if ancient atoms are eternal and indestructible, what it is to be an atom (the “essence” or formal characteristics of an atom) does not contain within itself anything that would explain the atoms’ existence. Were such atoms to exist, they would be necessary only in the sense that they contain within themselves no possibility of destruction. Since they are indivisible and destruction is a matter of being divided, **if** atoms exist, then they must—given their constitution—continue to exist. But nothing about what it is to be an atom gives evidence for the truth of the antecedent of this conditional. True, if they exist, they have and will exist without end; but they can not-exist.¹³ (As a matter of fact, the atoms of the ancients don’t exist.)

Thought experiments do not make for firm conclusions, but they do allow for the consideration of interesting theses. The thesis I draw from the experiment is this: if true, the principle of the real distinction between essence and existence is cosmologically neutral, that is, it abstracts from the particular features of any given kind of cosmos. It applies equally well to the atomic cosmos, Avicenna’s necessary universe that is really possible and must exist, and Aquinas’s merely possible universe that could not have existed at all. Perhaps this is good thing. If metaphysical principles are universal, one would expect that they should apply to all possible universes. It also accounts for why Avicenna and Aquinas can introduce a new metaphysical scheme while keeping many of the conceptual elements of Aristotle’s natural philosophy (form, matter, privation, accidental and substantial change, etc.) intact.¹⁴ But if the proposition “there is a real distinction between essence and existence for all entities other than God” is true and cosmologically neutral, then one must account for the differences between Avicenna’s and Aquinas’s conceptions of the existent cosmos on other grounds.

requires additional steps—such as a proof for the existence of God. For an excellent review of the debate as it has unfolded among Thomists, see Thomas LaZella (2010) *Thomas Aquinas, the real distinction between esse and essence, and overcoming the conceptual imperialism (Doctoral Dissertation)*, Chapter Two, retrieved from College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences Theses and Dissertations. <http://via.library.depaul.edu/etd/32>. Negotiating these debates lies beyond the scope of this essay. I take it that Avicenna believes that there is a real distinction between essence and existence, even if his proof is inadequate. I contend that both Aquinas and Avicenna mean the same thing when they assert it as a proposition unto itself. The reason that the proposition takes on greater significance for Aquinas than for Avicenna lies not in the content of the principle itself but from the presence of other propositions in Aquinas and their implications for the ontological status of essences as mere “possibles.”

¹³ Note that the universes of Aquinas and Avicenna contain “atom-like entities,” that is, entities that, because of their indivisibility, lack any intrinsic potential to not existing. Separated substances, like intellects and angels, are pure forms subsisting without matter. Stars and planets, while possessing an intrinsic potential to be in motion, are composed of a different sort of matter, matter whose potentiality to be a certain sort of thing is completely actualized by its form—quite unlike the matter of terrestrial beings that remains in potential to be actualized by a form other than the one it currently possesses.

¹⁴ More recently, James Felt has attempted to retain Aquinas’s real distinction but replace Aquinas’s natural philosophy with a version of Whitehead’s process cosmology. While retaining the conviction that Thomas’s existential metaphysics captures truly the vertical dimension of reality, the relationship between Creator and the created, he looks to rework its horizontal dimension, hylomorphism. See James Felt, *Coming to Be: Toward a Thomistic-Whiteheadian Metaphysics of Becoming* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001). If the real distinction were not cosmologically neutral, his project would be futile. The project is far from futile.

III. Shared Motivations behind Making Real the Distinction between Essence and Existence

Aquinas's and Avicenna's motivations for drawing a distinction between essence and existence are similar. If we look at some of the details of Avicenna's position, we find that his most significant motivation is his commitment to the doctrine of divine unity, a unity which he construes along the lines of the Neo-Platonic One, an absolute unity precluding any intrinsic differentiation of any sort. Given this commitment, Avicenna was faced with a question with which Plotinus and others had struggled, namely, how can the One give rise to the multiplicity evident in the observed cosmos?¹⁵ The distinction between essence and existence provides Avicenna with a particularly elegant answer¹⁶ to this question that does not require him to undermine God's intrinsic unity.

According to Avicenna, God is the One, the supreme monad that knows itself; it is a necessary being without origin and without dependence on any other entity. In knowing itself,¹⁷ the One gives rise to an immaterial intellect, akin to the Neo-Platonic hypostasis, *nous*. Having arisen from the One, this intellect contemplates the One and gives rise to yet another intellect. It also contemplates itself under two distinct formalities—as possible in itself and as necessary in relation to its extrinsic cause, the One. In knowing itself as possible, this intellect gives rise to the outermost sphere of the cosmos, a bodily entity quite unlike the elemental bodies below the moon—but a body nonetheless. In knowing itself as necessary in relation to its cause, this intellect gives rise to the soul of the first heavenly sphere, a soul which animates and accounts for the motion of the stars. The second intellect, to which the first intellect gives rise, also knows its cause, itself as necessary in relation to its cause, and as possible in itself. From this trifold knowledge originates another intellect, heavenly sphere and the soul of that sphere.¹⁸ So

¹⁵ See, for example, Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.7, “How the Multiplicity of Ideal Forms Came into Being; and on the Good,” in *Plotinus: The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, New York: Larson Publications, 1992).

¹⁶ The distinction allowed Avicenna to explain why, in addition to another intellect, a soul and a celestial body emanate from a simple intellect—an issue that had not been adequately handled by his processor, al-Farabi, for whom intellects were pure forms but lacked any real distinction between their essence and their existence. See Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of the Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ “The first and essential act of the First Truth, however, is to intellectually apprehend His [own] essence, which in itself is the principle of the order of the good existence” (Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, IX, 4.4; Marmura, p. 327, ll. 1-3). Avicenna here departs from Plotinus for whom even self-knowledge implies a duality of knower and known and is thus incompatible with the absolute simplicity of the One. “Once there is any manifold, there must be a precedent unity: since any intellection implies multiplicity in the intellectual subject, the non-multiple must be without intellection; that non-multiple will be the First: intellection and the Intellectual-Principle must be characteristic of beings coming later” (Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.6.3, p. 479).

¹⁸ “The effect in itself is possible of existence and, through the First, is necessary of existence. Its necessary existence consists in its being an intellect. It apprehends itself intellectually and necessarily apprehends the First intellectually. Hence, there must be in it, by way of plurality, the meaning [(a)] of its intellectual apprehension of its essence as being, within its own bound, possible of existence; [(b)] of its intellectual apprehension of its necessary existence, through the First, that intellectually apprehends itself; and [(c)] of its own intellectual apprehension of the First. . . . Then, with association of this, there would necessarily proceed from it something, whereby a plurality follows—all of which is a necessary consequence of its essence. . . . Thus, there necessarily follows from the first intellect, inasmuch as it intellectually apprehends the First, the existence of an intellect beneath it. Inasmuch as it

cascades the cosmos from the supreme monad until, at last, a final intellect (the *dator formarum*) emerges, from which issue matter and the forms of the kinds of things that inhabit the sub-lunar realm.¹⁹

Aquinas's motivation, at least in *On Being and Essence* (to which I presently restrict my remarks), is to reject universal hylomorphism. Universal hylomorphism held that all creatures, both spiritual and corporeal, are composed of matter and form—though spiritual entities are composed of a different kind of matter, spiritual as opposed to corporeal matter. The utility of universal hylomorphism is that it provides a way to distinguish the simplicity of God from the simplicity of angelic or intellectual beings. Angelic or intellectual beings are composed of spiritual matter and form; but God is pure form—as had been the case with Aristotle's celestial movers. The disadvantage, as Thomas sees it, is that matter (whether corporeal or spiritual) is the source of something's unintelligibility. Since separate substances or intelligences are completely intelligible, their composition cannot contain any matter whatsoever. Moreover, in the case of corporeal beings, form gives being to the matter. But there is no reason that forms cannot exist without matter. So non-material as opposed to spiritually-material entities are more fitting members of the metaphysical hierarchy: form-matter, pure form, subsistent existence beyond all forms. Finally, the distinction between essence and existence allows for a more coherent treatment of the differences between the immortal souls of rational animals and the angelic intelligences.²⁰

Both Aquinas and Avicenna thus share a common project. Each is concerned with providing an account of divine unity/simplicity and an account of the structure of a graded plurality (from matter-less intellects to corporeal substances) of the created cosmos. The real distinction posits a distinction common to all creatures that is absent in God. Below God are matter-less intellects that are not completely simple because in them essence and existence are distinct. A third category of beings, corporeal ones, have essences that include matter since their

intellectually apprehends itself, [there follows from it] the existence of the form of the outermost sphere and its perfection—namely, the soul. Through the nature of the possibility of existence that is realized for it, enfolded in the act of intellectually apprehending itself, is the existence of the corporeality of the outermost sphere...This is the state of affairs in each successive sphere, until it terminates with the active intellect that governs our selves” (Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* IX, 4, 11-12; Marmura, pp. 330, l. 8-331, l. 22).

¹⁹ Determining the precise number of intellects in Avicenna's cosmos is largely an empirical project. There are at least ten: the first and nine subsequent intellects, the first of which is associated with the outermost sphere of the heavens (the stars) and eight others associated with the sun, the six planets closest to the sun, and the moon. On the assumption that all celestial motions are perfectly circular and that all apparently non-circular motions (such as the retro-grade motions of the planets) must be resolved into sets of circular motions, there will be as many intellects as there are distinct circular motions required to account for the astronomical data. The right answer as to the total number of intellects is probably something over fifty. Avicenna follows Aristotle here. See Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, IX, 3, 23; Marmura, p. 326, ll. 4-8.

²⁰ See Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, IV, 2-6. Universal hylomorphism is not a burning philosophical issue in contemporary metaphysics, and angels do not get much press in academe. However, for Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor—a moniker given in light of the subject matter he was thought to handle especially well—the issue was highly significant. That the youthful Aquinas, in an early work like *On Being and Essence*, uses the distinction between essence and existence to distinguish angelic from divine simplicity, as had Avicenna, indicates a significant commonality between him and Avicenna that can be easily understated.

forms cannot subsist without it. Corporeal beings are doubly complex since they contain a real distinction at the essential (form-matter) and existential (essence-existence) levels.

The thought experiment in Section II suggested that differences between Aquinas and Avicenna regarding the real distinction do not lie in the distinction itself. One might have suspected that their differences could be explained by the uses to which they put it. But Aquinas and Avicenna share a common project in many respects. Each uses the distinction to negotiate issues concerning unity, simplicity, and plurality. But in spite of the commonality of their projects, Avicenna's intellects that emanate from the One are really possible. They cannot fail of actualization. Given the One, they must exist. Aquinas's angelic intelligences (and everything else) are merely possible. They need never exist. So questions remain: What accounts for the differences between Aquinas's and Avicenna's metaphysics? Where do the differences lie?

IV. Sources of Difference

Three propositions, which Avicenna affirms and Aquinas denies, help account for the differences one encounters in the thought of Aquinas and Avicenna. We have already encountered the first: from the One only one can come to be. The second: necessity begets only necessity. The third: What an agent intends is better (greater, more perfect) than the agent. Avicenna affirms these propositions. Aquinas denies them.

Avicenna

Proposition one—from the One, only one effect can follow:

Avicenna's answer to the question, how can multiplicity arise from a unity, is that it cannot. From the One, only the first intellect arises. If any effect other than the first intellect were to arise from the One, then the source of this difference must be implicit in the One itself. But the unity of the One refers also to its simplicity. It is and it cannot not-be in any respect; and it cannot become what it was not. It contains no interior differentiation. It is not divisible "either in terms of parts in actuality, [nor] in terms of parts by supposition (as with the continuous), nor in the mind in that His essence is composed of varied intellectual ideas from which an aggregate becomes united." The One is also unique; it "does not share at all [with others] the existence that belongs to Him."²¹ Multiplicity can arise only from a being that is necessary in one respect and not necessary in another.

Proposition two—"what proceeds from the Necessary Existent is necessary:"²²

What proceeds from the One must exist even though, considered in itself, it is possible. If the effect of the One could exist or not exist, if it just happens to exist (or not), then something must decide or explain why one alternative is the case and the other not. The explanation cannot lie in the effect, since in itself it is open to either alternative. So the reason must lie in its cause,

²¹ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* IX, 1, 1; Marmura, p. 299, ll. 12-16.

²² Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* IX, 1, 9; Marmura, p. 302, l. 24 ff.

the One. But the One is necessary in all respects. If something could have proceeded from the One and did not or vice versa, some division must exist in or some change must have occurred within the One itself. But that is impossible.

Proposition three—what is rationally intended must be better than that which intends:

Avicenna notes that some (the Mutazilites) attempted to allow for unrealized possibilities by appealing to the One's will. He responds by making a distinction: "what is willed is either the very act of producing or it is a purpose or benefit beyond it."²³ If the One wills its own act of producing, then there is no reason why it should ever not will, not produce, or produce something other than it does produce. If, on the other hand, the object of will is some purpose beyond the act of producing, that is, if the One produces for the sake of some purpose other than its own producing, what is willed beyond the act of producing must be beneficial to the One. Since the One is self-sufficient, perfect and changeless, it cannot be benefitted in any way. The same principle holds for created intellects as well:

[I]t is impossible for any of the causes [the ten intellects]²⁴ to be perfected essentially [and] not accidentally by the effect, and they do not intend an act for the sake of the effect, even though it is satisfied with [the latter] and knows it. Rather, just as water cools by its essence in actuality to conserve its species [and] not to cool another, though cooling another is a necessary concomitant of it; [just as] fire warms by its essence in actuality to conserve its species [and] not to warm another, though warming another is a necessary concomitant of it; [just as] the appetitive power desires the pleasure of copulation so that sperm is emitted, completing thereby pleasure for itself, [and] not in order that a child will result from it, though a child is a necessary concomitant of it . . . so is the case with the prior celestial causes.²⁵

Since to intend means, according to Avicenna, to will some thing beyond the act of producing it, "it is impossible for the existence of all things [proceeding] from Him to be by way of intention."²⁶ Intentions are rational only when "the intended object is more worthy of the intender than its not coming into existence." What is worthy of the intender is that the intender be benefitted—such as the meriting of praise, gain, safety, or a good resurrection. Thus, "every intention which is not frivolous bestows some [form] of perfection on the intender such that, had the intender not intended it, that perfection would not have been." But the One is not frivolous. So the One or God does not intend that which proceeds from Him/it.²⁷

Even describing the cosmic intellects as bestowing goodness in imitation of the One is, though acceptable, a "superficial" way of speaking, according to Avicenna. "In reality it is to be

²³ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, IX, 1, 17; Marmura, p. 304.

²⁴ Brackets in this instance are my addition.

²⁵ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, IX, 3, 15; Marmura, p. 323, ll. 1-15.

²⁶ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* IX, 4, 2; Marmura, p. 326, ll. 21-23.

²⁷ See Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* IX, 3, 7-9.

rejected.” The intellects imitate the First Cause precisely “as not intending anything but in being [self-sufficient], singular in essence.”²⁸ Speaking of the creator as intending to bestow existence upon its creation is shallow. The cosmos is not so much God’s creation as it is a necessary concomitant of a Necessary Being. This does not mean that God causes the cosmos by nature, as fire causes heat. Unlike fire, God must “intellectually apprehend that the existence from Him of the whole is a necessary consequence of Himself.” This knowledge is the object of His will and His satisfaction: “His essence knows that His perfection and loftiness are such that the good proceeds from Him and that this is one of the necessary concomitants of His majesty that in itself is the object of His love.”²⁹ That is, God loves not so much the object produced as the producing itself; God’s act of willing is the object of His willing. The One, as in a telling analogy mentioned earlier, delights in that which proceeds from it in the way in which one delights in the pleasure of emitting sperm, of which the necessary but unintended consequents are a child and a cosmos.³⁰

Aquinas

Proposition one—it is not the case that, from a first cause that is one and simple, only one effect can follow:

Both Aquinas and Avicenna agree that to create is to cause something to exist without depending upon a pre-existing potency that is receptive of existence as a potter depends upon clay. More simply, creation is *ex nihilo* regardless of 1) whether the act of creating is voluntary or not, 2) whether the creature is subject to serial time or not, and 3) whether the creatures that do exist in serial time are with or without temporal beginning or end. But, argues Aquinas, “that which in no way exists is infinitely distant from act, nor is it in any way in potency.”³¹ Between the contradictories, to be and not to be, there is no middle position. There exists no finite proportion between something that is (even if hardly at all) and nothing at all—just as, mathematically speaking, the ratio of one to zero (1/0) is either undefined or, should one begin to divide 1 by successively subtracting zeroes from it, an infinite number of subtractions will follow. Since to bridge an infinite gap requires an infinite power, a creator must be infinite. Given that only one infinite being can exist (a proposition held by both Avicenna and Aquinas), it follows that if many things exist, then they are caused by one, infinite being.³² But many things do exist. Therefore, etc.

²⁸ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* IX, 3, 11; Marmura, p. 321, ll.18-23.

²⁹ *The Metaphysics of the Healing* IX, 4,3; Marmura, p. 327, ll. 4-6.

³⁰ Compare “It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing.” (Koran, 16:78)

³¹ Aquinas, *SCG* I, 43, 13. “*Sed id quod omnino non est, infinite distat ab actu, nec est aliquo modo in potentia.*” Aquinas concludes that the power to create must therefore be infinite: “*Igitur, si mundus factus est postquam omnino prius non erat, oportet factoris virtutem esse infinitam.*” “*Postquam*” implies serial time, that is, beginning to exist at a moment in time before which there is no moment. However, it is the lack of the presupposition of any independent passive potential from which creation proceeds that requires an infinite cause, not the temporal succession implied by “*postquam.*” Aquinas shows how this is the case in the following paragraph. I will not rehearse the argument here.

³² Thus, Avicenna’s claim that the first intellect causes the existence of the second intellect suffers from incoherence. If it is the cause of existence without presupposing any independent potentiality for its existence, then

Aquinas grounds the possibility of creating a multiplicity in God’s knowledge of Himself. For both Avicenna and Aquinas, God knows Himself. But in order to know something perfectly, argues Aquinas, one must know all of that to which that thing’s power extends. Since God knows His own power perfectly, God knows all that he can do.³³ Since His power is infinite, God cognizes infinitely many things including singular things that have existed, exist, and/or will exist (actual things). God also knows things that could have, could, or might exist but have not existed and will not exist (mere possibles).³⁴ Even if God were not to create at all, He would still know the infinitely many things that he could create, though he would know them only as existing within the divine power and not in the proper causes or in themselves (*in propriis causis et in seipsis*) since there are no created “selves” to know and no proper (proximate, secondary) causal relations among them. Because God knows all such things by knowing Himself and because God’s knowledge is nothing other than Himself, the multiplicity of the things that He knows does not entail that He is not simple.

Proposition two—it is not the case that all that proceeds from the Necessary Being proceeds necessarily:

the first intellect too must be infinite like the One and two infinite beings would exist—something Avicenna considers impossible. If it does not cause the second intellect to exist *ex nihilo*, then its causality presupposes a pre-existing potency—in which case the first intellect is a secondary cause.

³³ “*Deus suam virtutem perfecte cognoscit, ut ex supra dictis patet. Virtus autem non potest cognosci perfecte nisi cognoscantur omnia in quae potest: cum secundum ea quantitas virtutis quodammodo attendatur. Sua autem virtus, cum sit infinita, ut ostensum est supra, ad infinita se extendit. Est igitur Deus infinitorum cognitor*” (SCG I, 69, 3).

³⁴ “For those things that are not, nor will be, nor ever were, are known by God as possible to His power. Hence, God does not know them as in some way existing in themselves, but as existing only in the divine power. These are said by some to be known by God according to a knowledge of simple understanding (*secundum notitiam simplicis intelligentiae*). The things that are present, past, or future to us God knows in His power, in their proper causes, and in themselves (*in sua potentia, et in propriis causis, et in seipsis*). The knowledge of such things is said to be a knowledge of vision (*notitia visionis*)” (Aquinas, SCG I, 66, 8, trans. Anton Pegis in full citation). Note that God’s power extends to singulars, the essence of which contains both matter and form: “*Singularis autem essentia constituitur ex materia designate et forma individuata: sicut Socratis essentia ex hoc corpore et hac anima*” (Aquinas, SCG I, 65, 3). It follows, or at least seems to follow, that God’s knowledge of possibles would extend to possible individuals, but only as they exist in God—not as they exist in themselves and in relation to their proximate causes. Thus, possible individuals differ from actual ones in virtue of their lack of causal relationships with other actualities. Mere possibilities are not causally related to anything. Any relation they do have depends on God’s relationship to actualities. Whether or not knowledge of a possible singular or individual (as opposed to an existing one) is a coherent concept is a reasonable question. If possibility is by its nature indeterminate and if singularity is determinate, then knowing a possible singular would be tantamount to knowing an indeterminate determinate. (This is the gist of Charles Hartshorne’s critique of the treatment of the relationships between actuality, possibility, determinateness and indeterminacy in classical metaphysics.) For Aquinas, God’s knowledge of a created, existent singular and of an uncreated, possible singular differ because the former includes the existent singular’s causal relationships with other singulars and possible singulars have no causal relations to other existents at all (but God does). If to exist is to make a difference, as Norris Clarke has suggested in *The One the One and the Many*, then because mere possibilities (singular essences known by God that do not, have not, and will not exist) have no causal relations to anything else, Clarke denies them any being or any ontological status at all. A complete defense of granting mere possibilities some degree of ontological weight requires resolving such issues as are raised by Hartshorne and Clarke, a task that lies beyond the scope of the present essay.

Both Avicenna and Aquinas agree that God is a necessary being because in Him essence and existence are not distinct. They also agree that God necessarily delights in Himself. As Thomas puts it, God wills necessarily both His being and goodness.³⁵ Thomas argues also if God wills anything other than Himself to exist, he must will it as ordered to Himself as its final end. Because God is already in perfect possession of that which He wills necessarily, His own goodness, God need not will to produce any other being. If God does will something other than Himself to exist, then he must will it as ordered to Himself as its end—He must will it as an expression of His own goodness, power, knowledge, and so forth. But no finite effect or created universe can fully express God’s goodness. Some universes might be better reflections of God’s goodness than others; but no universe or created effect is so good that a better universe (i.e. one more reflective of God’s goodness) would not be possible. Therefore, if God creates, He need not create this or that sort of universe. Given the lack of proportion between God’s infinite goodness as end and any created world as a means of expressing God’s goodness, God is not constrained to create a certain sort of universe as opposed to some other sort as a means to express His goodness. Thomas prosecutes this argument with his characteristic economy:

Moreover, God, in willing His own goodness, wills things other than Himself to be in so far as they participate in His goodness. But, since the divine goodness is infinite, it can be participated in infinite ways, and in ways other than it is participated in by the creatures that now exist. If, then, as a result of willing His own goodness, God necessarily willed the things that participate in it, it would follow that He would will the existence of an infinity of creatures participating in His goodness in an infinity of ways. This is patently false,³⁶ because, if He willed them, they would be, since His will is the principle of being for things, as will be shown later on. Therefore, God does not necessarily will even the things that now exist.³⁷

Proposition three—it is not the case that all that is intended is better than the one who intends it:

Both Thomas and Avicenna agree that an effect cannot be more perfect than its cause because causes must already contain actually in some way the perfection of their effects. Also,

³⁵ See Aquinas, *SCG I*, 80.

³⁶ In context, this seems to be an empirically founded claim on Aquinas’s part, one that might be challenged by those contemporary cosmologists who argue that all possible worlds are actual. Whether it is coherent to speak about multiple worlds or universes is a question that lies beyond the scope of the current essay. This much seems clear: contrariety and contradictions exist among possibles. That is, not all possibles are compossible. If Jack had had a brother he would not have been an only child. His counterfactual brother is incompatible with his having been created as one who is (in terms of historical identity, i.e., causal relatedness to other actual existents) an only child. So, for any given actual world, there are many (perhaps infinitely many) possible worlds that are excluded. Actuality is in this sense a decision among possibilities (as Charles Hartshorne puts it) because “what is” limits what “can be.” The limitation here arises not from God, but from relations among the finite essences of creatures that, as finite, have boundaries or limits that account for their incompatibility with one another. Even God is bound by conditional necessities, that is, by necessities that are contingent upon the supposition of some other contingent state of affairs of a certain sort, e.g., if Jack is an only child, then Jack’s siblings cannot exist. (See Aquinas, *SCG I*, 84, 2.)

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles, On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, 5 vols, vol. 1, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1957), I, 81, 4, p. 258.

both thinkers recognize, admire, and share a common definition of liberality: to be liberal (generous, munificent) is to bestow a good upon a recipient without recompense (including such benefits as praise and gratitude).³⁸ The difference between Avicenna and Aquinas lies in their conceptions of the relationship between intention and unrealized possibilities. For Avicenna, to intend is to will some possible good that lies beyond that act of producing it. Intentions are reasonable (non-frivolous) only if the overall state of affairs is better or more perfect than would have been the case had the possibility remained unrealized. The One cannot reasonably (non-frivolously) intend that which it produces because the One is already absolutely perfect. Since real possibilities never fail to be realized in Avicenna's universe, God need not intend them to produce them. Thus, God can be both liberal (He benefits in no way from his producing) and non-intentional (producing, not the object of production, is the object of His will). For Aquinas, divine intentions are not without reasons. God may be bound by conditional necessities: if He creates beings that are dependent upon external nourishment, then by reason of His goodness He must create sources of nourishment for them. But the existence of creatures that require nourishment is a mere possibility; they could have not-existed. Conditional necessities never amount to sufficient reasons that necessitate absolutely. God can also adorn the universe (add a bit of *decorum* or *munimentum*) or make it a bit better (*melior*) because to do so is fitting or because it is the decent (*decentiam*) thing to do.³⁹ In willing creatures to exist as a means to express His perfection, God wills and intends both the means (creatures) and the end (Himself). The objects of his intention are beyond but not better than Himself, and they do not make God better. God creates rather than not and creates this world rather than some other because it is fitting that He should do so. God is not so much frivolous as He is decent. It is reason enough to create a good because it is good; and if, for any created good, some possible good would have been better, the lesser of any two possible goods remains nonetheless a good thing to do.

V. In Defense of Mere Possibilities: Why Existence Matters

Gilson has argued that Aquinas is responsible for a revolution in metaphysics by positing “to exist” (*esse*) as the primary expression of what it means to be rather than “to be a certain sort” (*essentia*). Avicenna also recognized a distinction between existence and essence, a

³⁸ See Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* IV, 5, 48; Marmura, p. 234, ll. 9-11; see also Aquinas, *SCG I*, 93, 7: “Moreover, as was shown above, the ultimate end for which God wills all things in no way depends on the things that exist for the sake of the end, and this either as to being or as to some perfection. Hence, He does not will to give to someone His goodness so that thereby something may accrue to Himself, but because for Him to make such a gift befits Him as the fount of goodness. But to give something not for the sake of some benefit expected from the giving, but because of the goodness and befittingness of the giving, is an act of liberality, as appears from the Philosopher in *Ethics* IV. God, therefore, is supremely liberal; and, as Avicenna says, He alone can truly be called liberal, for every agent other than God acquires some good from his action, which is the intended end” (pp. 286-87).

³⁹ “*Perfectio autem universi, licet ex aliquibus particularibus bonis ex necessitate dependeat, quae sunt essentiae partes universi, ex quibusdam tamen non dependet ex necessitate, sed tamen ex eis aliqua bonitas vel decor accrescit universo: sicut ex his quae sunt solum ad munimentum vel decorum aliarum partium universi. Particulare autem bonum dependet ex necessitate ex his quae ad ipsum absolute requiruntur: licet et hoc etiam habeat quaedam quae sunt propter melius ipsius. Aliquando igitur ratio divinae voluntatis continet solum decentiam; aliquando utilitatem; aliquando autem necessitatem quae est ex suppositione; necessitatem vera absolutam, solum cum vult seipsum*” (Aquinas, *SCG I*, 86, 6).

distinction that he considered to be self-evident. But, as Gilson sees it, Avicenna's existentialism fails because Avicenna severed the link between essences (which become pure possibilities) and existence:

The essences of Avicenna are so many ghosts of Plato's Ideas. Their whole being consists in their abstract necessity. Endowed with an intelligible resistance of their own, they victoriously resist all effort of our intellect to change them. Then they are immutable, and what is being, if not selfhood, immutability? What we are now witnessing, in Avicenna's philosophy, is the rise of a curious type of being, the *esse essentiae* of Henry of Ghent and of so many other scholastic philosophers.⁴⁰

As Gilson sees it, Avicenna's necessary universe results from his fascination with essences that deliberately exclude any reference (however indeterminate) to concretely existing realities: humanity is just humanity and does not include within itself any connection to existence in the mind or reality. Such fascination is traditionally called "essentialism" by existential Thomists; and its influence has been noted in subsequent metaphysical systems such as those of Duns Scotus, Suarez, Leibniz, Spinoza, etc. The history of metaphysics in the west is then cast as a tradition forgetful of existence.

I have argued that recognizing a real distinction between essence and existence is cosmologically neutral (Section II). The claim can now be put more precisely. The set of propositions {(a) there is a real distinction between essence and existence; (b) from that which is absolutely one, only one effect follows; (c) from a cause that is necessary in itself an effect follows necessarily; and (d) what is intended is greater than that which intends} is logically consistent. So is the set of propositions that affirms the real distinction between essence and existence (a) and contains the negations of propositions (b), (c), and d) in the previous set.

If I am correct, then the difference between Avicenna and Aquinas on the nature of the universe and its relationship to the creator does not arise from the real distinction between essence and existence, a distinction which they both use for a common purpose (Section III). I am not claiming that existential Thomists have somehow overstated the significance of the act of existence in Aquinas's metaphysics or underrated its significance in Avicenna's. In the final analysis, Avicenna is no existentialist. Aquinas is. My question is why "*esse*" is so valued, so heavily laden with axiological significance or weight in the philosophy of Aquinas and remains something of an afterthought in Avicenna, the last addition to the already majestic edifice of being? If the principle driving its valuation is not recognition of the real distinction between essence and existence, what else could it be?

The answer I propose is the presence of mere possibilities in Aquinas's metaphysics (possibilities that need never be actualized) and their absence in Avicenna's, for whom all that is

⁴⁰ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 76.

really possible necessarily is actualized. If something is never actualized, then it is not really possible for Avicenna. Not so for Aquinas (Section I).

The ground for the reality of “mere possibilities” lies, according to Aquinas, within God who, as infinitely powerful and perfectly knowledgeable of Himself, knows all that He can create even if He does not create it. Creatables are within God’s self-knowledge as the *rationes* (intelligible structures) of creatures that need not ever be actualized to be considered possible. *Rationes* differ from *exemplars*, according to Aquinas. *Rationes* correspond to what can exist, creatables. Exemplars are the *rationes* of that which has been, is, or will exist. All exemplars are *rationes*; but not all *rationes* are exemplars.⁴¹

Rationes explain how many things can come from something that is intrinsically simple (on the assumption that self-knowledge is not *de jure* a kind of complexity). As mere possibilities, *rationes* allow that a Necessary Being can give rise to a world that is not necessary in any absolute sense. The actual world may possess conditional necessities: given what has been created, then some other things must be created and some possibilities are rendered impossibilities. So the actual world remains intrinsically intelligible. But considered as a whole, it lacks a sufficient, i.e., necessitating, reason even in the mind of God, who may well have other sorts of reasons in mind (decorum, fittingness, decency, munificence, beauty, etc.). Thus, understanding the gratuitousness (giftedness) and radical contingency of the actual world, as well as the graciousness of the act of creating, relies as much upon a deep understanding of its actual existence as it does upon the recognition that other, merely possible, worlds might have been. Adam might not have fallen, for example. Without these *rationes*, creation reverts from the status of gift to the status of the one and only necessary concomitant of the One.

⁴¹ Comparing Avicenna and Aquinas, Thomas LaZella remarks: “For Aquinas, instead [i.e., unlike Avicenna], divine wisdom can think through an order for the universe without thereby committing God to its actual production. As he argues in *De Veritate*, much like an artist who has practical knowledge of what she might create, but merely ‘thinks through’ (*excogitat*) without intending such a work, likewise, in merely contriving an order for the universe, God does not yet actually produce such an order. When the divine *rationes* do come to serve as the principles of actual production and pertain to practical cognition, they are called *exemplares*.” See Thomas LaZella, *Thomas Aquinas, the real distinction between esse and essence, and overcoming the conceptual imperialism. (Doctoral Dissertation)*, pp. 235-236. Here is a proof text: “*Respondeo dicendum quod, cum ideae a Platone ponerentur principia cognitionis rerum et generationis ipsarum, ad utrumque se habet idea, prout in mente divina ponitur. Et secundum quod est principium factionis rerum, exemplar dici potest, et ad practicam cognitionem pertinet. Secundum autem quod principium cognoscitivum est, proprie dicitur ratio; et potest etiam ad scientiam speculativam pertinere. Secundum ergo quod exemplar est, secundum hoc se habet ad omnia quae a Deo fiunt secundum aliquod tempus. Secundum vero quod principium cognoscitivum est, se habet ad omnia quae cognoscuntur a Deo, etiam si nullo tempore fiant; et ad omnia quae a Deo cognoscuntur secundum propriam rationem, et secundum quod cognoscuntur ab ipso per modum speculationis*” (Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 15, a. 3, c. See also Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 3, a. 3, c.). God’s thinking through the possibilities does not, of course, take time just as his knowing all of the natural numbers does not take time. “Thinking through” all the possibilities to create some actualities might be compared to seeing all at once some of the natural numbers (perhaps infinitely many of them) and their relations to one another (existents causally related to one another) while not losing sight of all the other numbers in themselves and apart from their relations to other numbers (mere possibilities that have not, are not, and will not exist and that are not causally related to any actual existent). Admittedly, the comparison does not do justice to the reality; the fact that relations among numbers are necessary makes the comparison misleading.

When viewed against the backdrop of 20th century currents in Thomistic existentialism, defending the “reality” of mere possibilities may seem yet another form of essentialism. Existential Thomists (and many others) desire to rid the hen house of all mere possibles.⁴² Gilson criticizes Duns Scotus, for example, for whom what can be created (*creabilia*) have some sort of being of their own in the mind of God.⁴³ To speak of a possibility as some-thing-that-*is* suggests there is a special sort of being reserved for possibles. For Gilson, few philosophical errors are bigger than this; for how can a possible, that is not, be? More recent Thomists, like Norris Clarke, have little patience with essences conceived as possible beings, things whose being is to be possible. Essences in themselves, argues Clarke, are nothing positive at all. Rather they are the result of the limiting of the act of existence that, in and of itself, already contains all of the perfections present in any finite being. What makes a being finite is not something real apart from actuality, that is, an essence, but rather a lack of the fullness of existence—the *ipsum esse subsistens*.

In defense of granting “mere possibilities” (unactualized essences) their own ontological status within existential Thomism, I would argue that the error of essentialism is not granting possibilities some sort of ontological status this side of absolute nothing; rather the error lies in treating “mere possibilities” as if they were actualities—either in themselves or as distinct actualities in the mind of God. In themselves, mere possibilities (essences) do not actually exist. In the mind of God, they exist as God’s knowledge of Himself. Without God, there would be no mere possibilities. But a God without mere possibilities yields only necessities. This much Avicenna has taught us. Existence in Avicenna’s world does not much matter since what-exists must exist as it exists. For Aquinas, what-exists exists, but it could have been different; it could have been more or less perfect. It still can. So existence becomes a matter of concern.

An argument that mere possibilities are not anything at all because God knows them only in Himself is insufficient to eliminate them. God knows existing actualities in and through Himself as well, but existing actualities are not eliminated because God knows them in this way. To argue that granting any ontological status to mere possibilities or un-actualized essences will result in resurrecting Plato’s world of Ideas, a realm of eternal essences generating necessities that will hamstring God’s creative freedom, also fails to eliminate them. Mere possibilities cannot necessitate anything since they do not enter in causal relations with other created entities;

⁴² There are several other standard ways of eliminating mere possibles from one’s metaphysical landscape. Leibniz’s method of extermination remains one of the more attractive strategies. If God can do only what is best and there is only one best possible world, then only real possibilities remain. What looks like something that might have been but was not, really was not, in the final analysis, possible. Thus, we return to the cosmos of Avicenna. Or one can get rid of essences all together, following Ockham and al-Ghazali. Third, one can get rid of mere possibles on epistemological grounds. If human knowledge of the possible is based upon the actual, one can dismiss as meaningless all talk about mere possibles as if they were realities or one can accept that such talk is meaningful, but claim that possibles are only mental fictions, like Huck Finn—which are actual mental contents, not possibles. Or, fourth, one can use linguistic-logical stipulations to exterminate the possibles by restricting the modalities of possible and necessary to propositions (not things). Talk of possible and necessary beings is non-sense since only propositions are possible or necessary. Fifth, one can take the route being made popular by some contemporary cosmologists who argue that all possible worlds are actual after all.

⁴³ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 84-85.

and if there were no mere possibilities, creatables that God does not create, then God's creative freedom is limited as well. Finally, the sort of necessity associated with unactualized essences arises when "essence" is construed as the content of a universal term in a syllogism, that is, logical necessity. When essence is considered as an intrinsic principle of something that is or might not be, it is not universal (it is a singular in the case of singular things and unique in the case of things that subsist without matter).⁴⁴ To construe "mere possibilities" as things that necessitate assumes that they can enter into causal relationships with existing, created entities. They do not, precisely because they are merely possible.

One may well object that if "mere possibilities" cannot enter into any causal relationships with existents, then they may be inoffensive but completely pointless. Wouldn't the actual world still be itself without positing something like knowledge of mere possibilities in the mind of God? Is it not enough that God knows all actual existents as existing without knowing all possibles as possible? I think this a fair but poorly formulated question. It splits being into two distinct realms, the realm of existents and another realm, possibilities or essences that can exist but do not exist. Properly formulated the question should read: isn't it enough that God should know all existing things as they exist rather than knowing all existing things as they exist, as they could have existed, and could yet exist but need not exist? If God knows equally the past, present, and future, what would be the point of knowing what could have been but was not and what could be but never will be?

Framed in this fashion, the question does not split the world into two domains, a domain of existing and a domain of possible beings. Rather, it is a question about how God knows actually existing beings, even if He already knows them eternally. Arguing that God need only know actually existing things as they exist at each and every moment in time implies that knowledge of what could be or could have been is extraneous to knowledge of what it is. The universe is what it is. It contains the kind of things it contains; they exist and exist as what they are. God knows all of that. What more could be desired?

I think knowledge of mere possibilities is ingredient in complete knowledge of actual existents. Aquinas said that if God knows himself completely, he must know all things that are not—what he can but does not do. If this is true for God's knowledge of Himself, it should be true of His knowledge of other existents as well.

That complete knowledge requires knowledge of mere possibilities (uncreated creatables, essences) is even more evident in the case of one's knowledge of values or goods, that is, questions about why something matters. Existence matters both because existing things could not have existed and because other kinds of things could have existed instead. Counterfactuals are ingredient in knowledge of the goodness and significance of things. Any number of goods might serve to make an argument for the claim (freedom, creativity, novelty, beauty, etc.) I will

⁴⁴ See footnote #34.

examine the values associated with gift giving (generosity, gratitude) since the theme of “gift” is widespread in the literature of Thomistic existentialism.⁴⁵

The necessary concomitants of a cause are given once the cause is given, but what is given is not a gift. Not all givens betoken the generosity of the giver. Avicenna’s cosmos is not a gift. The One is majestic and delights in producing, but is “generous” by default. The One does not benefit from what it gives, a sign of generosity, but only because it is impossible that it benefit from anything. A gift is just the sort of thing that is given but need not be given. So the knowledge of anything as gift requires the knowledge that it is, but need not have been given. In matters of gift giving, what the gift is also matters too. The kind of thing it is cannot be simply necessary; so more than one kind of gift needs to be available. A gift well-given must contain some element of surprise. But the gift must also be appropriate or fitting to both the giver and the recipient; giving and receiving are intentional acts. Randomly selected gifts can be surprising, but are often inappropriate because they fail to express the knowledge and love that the giver has for the beloved. If they do, it is simply a matter of chance. So knowing that something is a good gift requires that one know that it need not have been given and that something else might have been given instead. That is, complete knowledge of an actual gift requires knowledge of mere possibilities.

Gifts matter; gifts are and express objective goods, and thus call for more than a cognitive response. (This thing is an immature canine.) They call for a moral response appropriate to the generosity of the giver, gratitude. (Oh my God, it’s that puppy! Thank you.) If there were no mere possibilities, actually existing gifts would not matter. Generalizing, without mere possibilities and knowledge of them, existence would not matter. The theme of creation as gift rather than a given is, I believe, one of the most fundamental sources of the intuition that give it life, applicability to ordinary experience, and adequacy. But recognizing it requires more than recognizing the real distinction between essence and existence. It requires more than knowing the actual as actual. It requires recognizing that mere possibilities are—however odd their being is. If advocating for the reality of mere possibilities is a form of essentialism, then the division of schools of metaphysics into existentialist and essentialist camps, though useful, is ultimately misleading.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See, for example, Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982).

⁴⁶ My position is open to another serious objection that needs to be mentioned. I have claimed that the difference between possibles and existents is, in part, grounded in the fact that all existents interact (have causal relationships to) other existents. Aquinas makes this claim too. See footnote #34 above. Without this claim, uncreated essences (*creabilia*, possibles, etc.) become the sorts of “things” to which existentialists and I object. But if all existents are in a causal relationship with other existents and if this is part of the very meaning of the existing, then if God exists, God must be in a causal relationship with something other than Himself. It would follow that, given the existence of God, the existence of something other than God must exist that is caused by God. I would reply to such an objection by arguing that something like a causal relationship must exist in God—though it would not be a causal relationship strictly speaking. There would be no act of causing some other thing to exist. I would have to develop an analogical relationship and call it something different. A term like “begetting” might do. Thus, my response would amount to the claim that, if existence implies some relationship to an other, then there must be some sort of relationship like that involving God, and such a relationship is intrinsic to God. But from a methodological point of view, the argument transgresses the line that Aquinas draws between philosophy proper and sacred theology. It would amount

to a philosophical argument for a proposition in Trinitarian theology, a matter one knows by faith alone. The argument: “To exist is to be related to another. God exists. So God must be related to an other. But God need not create something other than Himself. Therefore, He must be related to Himself as other in Himself. But this is what we call the Father and the Son. Therefore, etc.” The argument is formally valid. So if such philosophical arguments for Trinitarian distinctions are *de jure* impossible, some premise must be false. The premise that all existents must be related to some other existent in a causal or analogously causal way is the most likely culprit. The other possibility is the premise that God need not create something other than Himself—the very proposition that separates Avicenna from Aquinas. So the objection is quite serious, though answering it lies beyond the scope of this essay and perhaps philosophy.