

How can Being be Limited?: W. Norris Clarke on Thomas's "Limitation of Act by Potency"

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Fr. Norris Clarke's 1952 paper on Thomas Aquinas's limitation of act by potency continues to be one of his key interpretive papers on Thomas. It articulates Thomas's position on being as a synthesis of the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian traditions, and gives a strong reading of the centrality of the act of existence in Thomistic metaphysics. Central to the account is Clarke's commitment to a 'thin essence' view, where essence is understood simply as potencies limiting act. Precisely what it means, however, for potencies (that is, a particular kind of non-being) to do anything is less than fully clear. This paper attempts to clarify Clarke's position by comparing it with Stein's alternative understanding of essential being—in contrast to Thomistic potencies—as limiting actual being.

It is a true honor to participate in a colloquium dedicated to the thought of Fr. Clarke. Many of you, I am sure, knew him well and have followed his work for many years. I first met Fr. Clarke early in my second year of graduate school. One of my housemates had been introduced to him at a department event and invited him over to dinner. We hit it off. I suppose it was an odd friendship in many ways. I was then an early 20-something, female graduate student; he was a renowned scholar and priest, well into his retirement. The fellow Jesuits at Loyola Hall liked to tease him that he always brought young women to dinner. Perhaps he did. But he also knew the importance of encouraging a new generation of scholars—and I just loved spending time with him.

When I was a kid, I used to sit on the living room floor, back against the wall and out of the way, listening to my parents and their friends tell stories. I was enthralled by the long narratives my father told about clients and our small-town history. Fr. Clarke too had a gift for story-telling, for weaving long tales and subtly, slowly telling a story. It's a talent I've rarely seen so well displayed in a native New Yorker. He told of climbing the George Washington Bridge, leaping out of range of the police, as they tried to get him to come down. He loved to repeat the story of visiting a harem and turning back the rain clouds in the Himalayas. And there was his habit of climbing trees for metaphysical meditation, his love of ghost stories and wisdom tales, his particular fondness for waterfalls (and, he admitted, a bit of skinny dipping when he was younger), his passion for the canyons of the Southwest, his enthusiasm for Dubonnet before dinner (which is, I discovered later, a somewhat mediocre liquor that I've nonetheless come to love). He regularly read the magazine *Science*, enthusiastically following developments in string theory. He once described his understanding of the moments before the Big Bang: "We have lo[c]ated the spot where the creative finger of God touches a strange world just this side of nothingness—speculation, of course, but brilliantly illuminating."¹ He loved to talk of the books he had read recently, and some of his recommendations have become my favorites—particularly

¹ Email exchange, July 21, 2003.

Richard Tarnas's *The Passion of the Western Mind* and Prudence Allen's *The Concept of Woman*. And then there is the sheer clarity, depth, tenacity, joy, and slightly transcendent, child-like awe with which he pursued philosophical questions. The only figure of popular culture that comes close to capturing something of Fr. Clarke's style is Yoda of the Star Wars movies, but Yoda lacks that particular joyful enthusiasm that is so much a part of Fr. Clarke. He is one of the few people I've met who believed in water sprites and woodland fairies, and when I spent time with him, I too came to believe.

I met Fr. Clarke in the mid-90s; he was long "retired," although still regularly teaching as a visiting professor at various places. When we met, I had been worrying about Thomas's account of God's knowledge of our free acts, confused about *how* God gained that knowledge, given the productive nature of God's knowledge. We spent a long lunch in the windowed dining room of the Jesuit residence, discussing God's knowledge. Fr. Clarke and I fought through the issue, and with each question I raised, he nodded and then presented another argument or example. I walked in sure that Thomas must compromise his account of either human freedom or divine knowledge. I walked out with the deep conviction that, not only was Thomas right about both human freedom and divine knowledge, but that Thomas had particularly deep insight into human psychology.

I went regularly to dinner after that; we traveled up to Connecticut to visit his favorite waterfalls, went out to movies, and hiked. After I left Fordham to begin teaching at Wheaton, we used to talk on the phone once a month. He liked to say that he had a set of Protestant friends he wanted to keep up with.

When my husband and I were married in 2004, Fr. Clarke co-celebrated. He charmed everyone in my small town, and ended the reception up in the barn, sharing from his wonderful storehouse of wisdom stories. When we last spoke on the phone in the Spring of 2008, he was excited that his *Philosophical Approach to God* had come out. He spoke of the original talks out of which the book grew, and when he sent me a copy of the book, he had corrected the subtitle. (It should have read a *neo-Thomist*, and not a new Thomistic, perspective.) I love that he cared. Even as it was clear that, at 93, he was forgetting a bit more than he used to, even as he repeated his stories a bit more often than before and his legs and eyes began to bother him, he never ceased to speak with that characteristic energy, anxious to commune and share his latest ideas.² He spoke in his pre-meal prayer of "our togetherness in joy." I've always loved that—"Bless us, O Lord, in these Thy gifts and our togetherness in joy." His own example of longing to be together in the sharing of ideas and the telling of stories is enough to convince anyone that the classic notion of contemplation need have little in common with any kind of disembodied, solitary, or merely passive encounter.

In the following, I would like to share a few of my favorite ideas from Fr. Clarke on being, essence, and potency. In a 1952 essay, Fr. Clarke interprets Thomas's account of the

² He passed away at 94, just a few days after his 94th birthday.

limitation of act by potency as a truly unique synthesis of the Neoplatonic participation tradition and the Aristotelian focus on act and potency.³ I would like to look very briefly at Fr. Clarke's account of Thomas on finite and infinite being, laying out the way in which the act of existence is central to our understanding of essence. I would like then to turn to a quite different account of being, to Edith Stein's tri-partite account of being. It is my hope that a comparison of these two accounts of being can bring out more fully what is distinctive to a Thomistic account of being, at least as understood and presented by Clarke. The topic of being in Thomas is, of course, immense. I hope, however, at least to provoke some of the questions and prompt a closer look at both Thomas on being and Clarke's particular interpretation of this favorite topic.

I. Fr. Clarke on Thomas on being

Fr. Clarke describes himself as an *existential Thomist*, that is, a Thomist who places the act of existence at the center of the interpretation of Thomas's great metaphysical vision. All readers of Thomas agree that Thomas understands God's essence to be existence, that he takes the name most proper to God to be "I am," etc. But existential Thomists emphasize the import of the act of existence for understanding all of the created order. It is not a mere fact that actual things happen to have being but, rather, that being, or the act of existence itself, is the key to understanding the structure and nature of all things.

On Fr. Clarke's reading—and in contrast to a number of other existential Thomists⁴—there are two great traditions that come together in order to form Thomas's truly existential philosophy: first, the Neoplatonic and, second, the Aristotelian, although the synthesis is uniquely Thomas's. Fr. Clarke tells the story of how this synthesis was achieved by beginning with the ancient Greek identification of the infinite with imperfection.⁵ For both Plato and Aristotle, for example, perfection lies in that which is limited, that which has form, whereas the unlimited is without form, without intelligibility, and is thus chaotic and imperfect.

When Aristotle analyzes the infinite, he compares it with time (which is without end), with number (which is able to be augmented indefinitely), and with matter (which is indeterminate without formation). Each of these "has some part of itself outside of itself" and thus should not be understood as either self-sufficient or perfect.⁶ The perfect (*teleios*), in contrast, is that which has its own end (*telos*), and which is thus formal and limited. For both Plato and Aristotle, although in differing ways, the form limits and perfects. Form, in some sense, 'comes down' in order to provide a principle of limitation for that which is unlimited.

³ "The Limitation of Act by Potency in St. Thomas: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?," in *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952): 147–157. Reprinted in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being—God—Person* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 65–88.

⁴ For example, Gilson. Clarke loved to repeat the story of Gilson calling his interest in pursuing the Neoplatonic influence on Thomas's thought, 'the work of a madman.' See, for example, the Introduction to *Explorations in Metaphysics*.

⁵ Fr. Clarke begins with Anaximander, who may have had a more positive account of infinity, but this is a hesitant account and moves quickly into the more dominant Greek view of infinity as an imperfection.

⁶ "The Limitation of Act by Potency....," 73.

Form in being limited is more perfect, and it provides the principle of limitation for those things in need of such limitation because of their chaotic, imperfect, and infinite ‘nature.’

Such a view is quite different from the Thomist, Christian, or even most contemporary accounts of infinity. There is certainly no room in this Greek account for a God who is both perfect and truly infinite. If something is perfect, it simply cannot be without limit. A deity may be infinite in some quite limited respect, but it could not be a God infinite in all respects. Limit is thus identified by the ancient Greeks with both form and act, while the limitless is identified with that which needs form and the actualization of form.

This association of infinity with imperfection is undone in Plotinus, who introduces a truly perfect infinity, the One, out of which all other things flow. The infinite thus becomes the source rather than the receptacle; it is understood as mysterious rather than chaotic, a perfection rather than defect. In Plotinus’s case, there appear to be religious concerns which played a part in his shift. Plotinus lived during the 3rd century AD, a time when eastern mystery cults were particularly strong in the Roman Empire. A number of these groups emphasized the mysteriousness of God and a kind of mystical union with that which is divine, but, in doing so, they also allowed an anti-rationalism to pervade their approach. Plotinus was looking to synthesize a view of the mysteriousness of God with more Roman and Hellenistic ideals regarding reason. His Neoplatonic, hierarchical, and participatory account of emanation is the result, and, in Plotinus’s hands, a particularly powerful account of the perfection of the infinite was forged, a view that resonated with Christian thinkers.

The Neoplatonic account, however, although rejecting the earlier Greek focus on the finite as the home of the perfect and thus giving a more adequate account of the mysterious and awe-inspiring nature of the infinite, did not move away from the centrality of form and the ultra- or exaggerated realism characteristic of more Platonic thought. This focus on form—and particularly in an exaggerated realist version—raises, however, a number of challenges. Two were particularly important for Thomas.

First, Plotinus, like Plato, understood the highest entity to be beyond being. In the *Republic*, Plato describes the Good as beyond all other Forms, including Being. Plotinus, in contrast, names that highest form the One. That which is truly perfect is, for Plotinus, the unity of the infinite One. Nonetheless, both claim that Being is not the highest perfection. These claims raise a puzzle. What is the status of the Good or the One? Does the One exist? *Is there a One?*⁷ This question is problematic. It would be a bit embarrassing to say that the One is not. One would not want to claim that it is a mere illusion or is, in some sense, non-existent. And yet, if it is *above* or beyond being, then we cannot properly say that it is—that is, that it participates in something lower. Thus, one cannot say easily either that the One is or that it is not. Thus, the

⁷ See Clarke’s argument in “What Cannot be Said in Saint Thomas’s Essence-Existence Doctrine,” in *The Creative Retrieval of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Essays in Thomistic Philosophy, New and Old* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), especially 118ff.

hierarchical nature of the participation theory itself becomes problematic (unless, of course, Being itself is understood as the highest perfection).

A second challenge consists in the account of the unity of lower things. If each non-infinite thing is a combination of that which is given in the overflow of the One and some limiting principle, making it to be a finite participation in the perfection of the One, then how do we have a single, unified entity rather than a composite of many parts? What distinguishes these two elements and, more significantly, what brings them together, enabling them to unite in one finite entity? This problem is particularly acute if *form* is taken to be central, for what both distinguishes these differing formal principles (so that they may perform differing functions), while also truly uniting them so that there may be just one entity?

Thomas adopts from the Neoplatonic tradition the affirmation of the perfection of that which is infinite. Like the Neoplatonists, Thomas agrees that *limitation* needs justification and not vice versa. It is the infinite and not the finite that is perfect and needs no further principle. Further and more significantly, he affirms with the Neoplatonic tradition the centrality of participation. He affirms a hierarchical account of the universe, with a principle of unity and source of commonality underlying the many-ness of things.

Participation theories, in general, claim that where there are many, there must be one. That is, there is a single source for the similarities among things. We, for example, recognize commonalities and take things to be rightly grouped together based on similarities. Participation theories—both Neoplatonic and Thomistic—account for this by positing a source for the similarities, a source which possesses that attribute “in unmixed purity and perfection, from which each of the inferior recipients derives its own diminished and imperfect participation.”⁸ But what is unique in Thomas’s participation metaphysic is that the infinite, the ultimate perfection, is not the One, as Plotinus argued, or the Good, as Plato claimed, but, rather, *esse*, being, the act of existence itself. It is Being which is at the top of the hierarchy, being itself in its fullness and absolute infinite perfection.

Further, according to Thomas, *esse* is not simply one among the perfections of an infinite being, as, for example, Anselm’s ontological argument suggests. *Esse* is absolute perfection. The act of existence is the ultimate and only perfection. To be perfectly is, simply, *to be* fully. Thus, *esse* is not the perfection *of* something else, but, rather, as Clarke makes the point: “the entire essence itself of God is *nothing else than* the pure unlimited Act of Existence (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*).”⁹ Thus, Thomas adopts the Neoplatonic commitment to participation, but he understands that infinite perfection in which all other things participate to be being itself. There is nothing outside of being that is more perfect or complete, nor is there anything other than God that has the act of existence in its infinite fullness.

⁸ “The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas” in *Explorations in Metaphysics*, 90.

⁹ Clarke, “What Cannot be Said,” 121.

Thomas's placement *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* as the utmost and the source is a significant step forward for participation theories, improving upon both Plato's and Plotinus's versions. There is, however, the second challenge: accounting not just for the unlimited and infinite, but also the limited and finite. If there are finite beings and if they are to be distinct from the infinite, then Thomas needs an account for how that which is perfect and unlimited in itself (being) can be limited in the case of finite and created beings. Finding something capable of 'contracting' being and accounting for the existence of individual finite critters is no small task. Had he chosen something less expansive than being, the question—although challenging—would not have been quite so daunting. But what can possibly contract or limit *being*? Such a principle must be lower than being. But what is lower than being? It must be, it seems, non-being. And yet non-being is not—and thus is not an obvious candidate for doing anything at all.

Thomas turns to Aristotle in order to address this dilemma. Aristotle, among other things, is interested in the question of how to account for change over time. Aristotle does so by distinguishing between act and potency. A thing may be the same over time while still changing insofar as its potencies come to act. Thomas then takes this Aristotelian distinction between potency and act and puts it to a new use, making potency his principle of the limitation of the act of existence. This is sheer genius. Potencies participate in non-being in the sense that they are not yet actual, and yet potencies are not nothing. A potency is, rather, non-actuality oriented toward a very particular type of actualization. Thus, baby squirrels are, for example, neither adult squirrels nor zebras; they have the potency, however, for actualization as adult squirrels but not for actualization as zebras. Clarke describes this emphasis on potency in the process of change as its "horizontal" function. Potency understood in this way plays a role in accounting for the type of changes that occur in actual beings.

Thomas needs, however, to use potencies in a slightly different role, not simply for accounting for changes in already existing entities, but for accounting for how there can exist any finite beings at all. It is in this role—of accounting for finitude itself and not simply for the development or change within an already existing finite thing—that Thomas makes his most distinctive use of potency. Potency acts as the principle of the limitation of being, making an act of existence the act of a finite being. This function of potency is, as Clarke names it, the "vertical" role of potency; it is a reception and limitation, thus making it possible for there to be finite critters which are baby squirrels and infant zebras which can then develop into adult squirrels and zebras.

Thus, for Thomas, the ultimate perfection is *esse*, the act of existence; it is, as Clarke puts it, "the metaphysical core of every being and the basic unifying perfection of the universe."¹⁰ Essence, at least as understood in relation to the act of existence, is a principle of potency; it is a limiting principle. The act of existence is contracted or negated, one might say, by the essence.¹¹

¹⁰ "The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas," 89.

¹¹ Clarke succinctly says that it does so by "subtraction, not addition" (*The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001], 83).

The act of existence, insofar as it is, is thus a participation in the perfection of God. Potencies, however, insofar as they are not, may limit that act of existence yet without requiring an origin outside of being itself. And thus non-being (of a particular sort) becomes that by which the perfection and fullness of infinite being is limited for the sake of finite beings.¹²

II. Fine-tuning this account

I take this to be the broad strokes of the account of the limitation of act by potency, at least as told by Clarke. It is a particularly elegant story. There are, nonetheless, questions and mysteries that remain—certainly not the least of them is what is meant by ‘essence.’ There are at least three broad types of interpretations of Thomas on essence. I would like to walk through these three possibilities very briefly before turning to a comparison with Stein’s account of essence.

First, there are the non-existentialist readings of Thomas, although perhaps we might call these *pre-existentialist* readings, insofar as Gilson’s work on the import of being for understanding Thomas has become mainstream. This pre-existentialist reading understands existence as, in some sense, extrinsic to essence. The act of existence is distinct from the essence, and the essence has its own “positive perfection,” which is actualized by the act of existence. The act of existence actualizes the essence, and the essence—in being this essence and not that—thereby diversifies and limits the acts of existence.¹³ (This view shares much with Stein’s, as will be seen, although she does not argue that it is an interpretation of Thomas.)

Second, there are two types of existentialist interpretations. One is what Clarke calls the “thick-essence” view. On this account, “essence is still looked on as possessing a certain positivity of its own.”¹⁴ As distinct from the act of existence, the essence is a kind of positive subject which receives the act of existence. This view would certainly claim that the essence receives all of its perfection ultimately from God’s act of existence, and thus it differs subtly from the pre-existentialist reading. Existence—on this account—is the ultimate perfection, but the essence can still be thought of as a kind of positive structure and not simply a negation or contraction of an act of existence.

The third and final view, the “thin-essence” view, claims that the essence has no positive being of its own. Essence is, as Clarke puts it:

¹² Clarke summarizes this Thomistic account: “Such an intellectual vision of the universe permits a truly ultimate unification of the real, without dissolving its multiplicity and diversity. All the latter, however, are now interpreted, not as the *addition* of something extra to existence, but as diverse modes of participation, through interior *limitation* (that is partial *negation*), in this one all-inclusive positive “attribute” of existence” (Clarke, “What Cannot be Said,” 120).

¹³ See Clarke, “What Cannot be Said,” 129. Clarke notes that this account is not so much unfaithful to Thomas as emphasizing “the early, more Avicennian phase of his thought and language.”

¹⁴ “What Cannot be Said,” 129.

nothing but the interior limiting principle, the inner limit or partial negation ... of the perfection that resides properly within the act of existence itself. The act of existence, accordingly, *as thus limited*, becomes the very subject which exists.¹⁵

The act of existence itself is the inner core of each thing. Existence does not bring anything *else* (e.g., an essence) to act but, on the contrary, the act of existence is itself all the perfection that any being contains. On this view, which is the version endorsed by Clarke, we cannot properly say that this or that essence exists but, rather, that there are existing things which exist in differing patterns or modes. There are thus horse-y acts of existence, squirrely acts of existence, acts of existence in a zebra mode, etc.¹⁶

Clarke takes a very strong stand on the nature of the essence: it has no nature except as non-being, as articulating or marking the limits of some particular act of existence. The act, and only the act of existence, is what is.¹⁷

My strong leaning is to agree with Fr. Clarke's account. It makes for a strikingly, and perhaps even deceptively, simple metaphysical account; it makes the act of existence central to each being in a way fit to a thinker claiming that God the Creator is truly the Great I Am; and it can affirm in a very strong way that all perfections originate in *esse*, in being. But it is also by no means obvious how this would work. There are many questions one could raise at this point; it is, quite honestly, confusing on several fronts. I would like, however, to explore the account further by comparing it to Edith Stein's understanding of the being and especially the being of the essence.

Stein—although inspired by and owing a significant debt to Thomas—does not understand her position regarding being to be Thomistic. Nor is she a very frequent interlocutor in Thomistic discussions. Nonetheless, I would like to compare Clarke's Thomas on being with Stein's tri-partite account of being. Stein gives a variant of the nature of the essence that can answer perhaps more easily some of the curiosities of the Clarkean "thin-essence" view, and yet she does so without compromising the commitment to God as the fullness of Being, to a notion that there is nothing outside of or superior to the fullness of Being in God. Further, Stein presents this distinctively non-Thomistic position with particular clarity, making her a helpful foil for understanding the Thomistic position. I would like then, however, to raise three questions of Stein's account and thereby show something of the strength of Thomas's alternative vision.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 129–130.

¹⁶ Ibid., 130. It is perhaps worth noting that, although Clarke prefers this final reading of essence, he does not claim that the choice among these readings can be decided by looking at Thomas's texts. Clarke does not think that there is decisive textual evidence.

¹⁷ There are, of course, epistemological questions that need to be raised at this point. I will, however, leave those to the side and pursue more metaphysical questions.

¹⁸ There are other medieval variants on Stein's positions, and comparisons with these versions might work as well.

III. Stein on the three types of being¹⁹

Stein's great philosophical opus is entitled *Endliches und ewiges Sein*,²⁰ and it was completed in 1936, although not published until 1950, eight years after her death at Auschwitz. It was translated and published in English only in the last few years, coming out in 2002 as *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*.²¹ We would need to look at the whole work in order to appreciate fully Stein's account of being. For sake of exploring more fully Clarke's position, I would like, however, to focus simply on one distinction Stein makes.

In chapter three of this work, Stein distinguishes three types of being, what she calls *mental being*, *actual being*, and *wesenhafte Sein*, which can be translated as 'essential' or 'substantial being.'²² In distinguishing these three types of being, Stein does not mean simply that being, or the act of existence, can be distinguished into existence as it is as an act of mind, an act of an entity, and whatever actuality there is to an essence. Rather, she truly means that these are three distinct types of being, not reducible to each other, although united in a perfect (and perfectly simple) way in God as Being Itself.²³ Thus, Stein agrees that God's essence and God's being are identical. Nevertheless, she wants to articulate in a bit of detail the kinds of things that are meant by *being*.

The two types of being Stein posits that are of most interest for this discussion are *actual being* and *essential being*. Actual being is being that is efficacious; it can effect change. Thus, actual being is being *in act*. In contrast, essential being is being as static and atemporal. As essential being, it does not effect change. Essential being is the being of that which is perfectly itself; it is properly the being of that which is intelligible and thus is fully what it is. Stein is not a strong Platonist; she does not think that the differing types of being occupy differing regions or realms, for example. Thus, one could not pick out an item with actual being that nonetheless lacked essential being or vice versa. Nevertheless, she thinks that one can distinguish the differing types of being with their characteristic features. Actual being is marked by its efficacy, whereas essential being is marked by its atemporality and fullness of identity.

¹⁹ Variants with differing foci of this discussion of Stein on being can be found in my "The Meaning of Being in Thomas Aquinas and Edith Stein" in second volume of Maynooth *Aquinas Lectures*, ed. James McEvoy & Michael Dunne (Four Courts Press, forthcoming), "Edith Stein and Thomas Aquinas on Being and Essence," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82:1 (Winter 2008), pp. 87–103, and *Thine Own Self: Individuality in Edith Stein's Later Writings* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming Fall 2009), especially chapter four.

²⁰ The most recent version of the text is *Endliches und ewiges Sein: Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins* [Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe 11/12], edited by Andreas Uwe Müller (Freiburg: Herder, 2006).

²¹ Translated by Kurt F. Reinhardt [Collected Works of Edith Stein 9] (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 2002).

²² The published English version translates it as 'essential being'; Augusta Gooch, however, in her unpublished translation of the book, chose 'substantial being.' There are advantages to Gooch's rendering, although I still prefer 'essential being.'

²³ See *Finite and Eternal Being*, III, §12.

Stein's claims regarding essential being distinguish her most clearly from the Clarkean Thomistic position. Stein is committed to the claim that there is not simply a structure to the essence, but a *being* to the essence and that being differs from actual being. Each essence, each intelligible structure, has a being particular to it *as* an intelligible structure which differs from its being as an actual entity. For example, I know the Pythagorean theorem. And there is a particular history and process by which I came to learn that theorem. There were various teachers who helped bring me to that knowledge, putting examples on the board, walking through them, drawing pictures of triangles, etc. There were beings with actual being—that is, efficacious being—who were involved in the process by which I came to learn the theorem. But, nonetheless, *what* I learned in grasping that mathematical truth is not itself efficacious in the world. *It* does not do anything; it is itself atemporal. My *understanding* of the Pythagorean theorem has a history and unfolded in time, but the *content* that I came to learn did not. Stein argues that if there is some *it*, some atemporal content, which many of us learn and which we refer to by the name 'Pythagorean theorem,' then surely it *is* in some sense. But it is not in the way that my learning of the theorem and the actions of my teachers *are*.

Thus, Stein thinks that we need to distinguish these two types of being, referring to the being of the theorem (and other intelligible structures) as essential being and the being involved in all the various activities by which I came to learn that content as actual being. There is something to this claim. When any particular individual recites the theorem or grows as a human being, there is some kind of temporal unfolding. But *what* is unfolded—the theorem itself or what it means to be a human being—is not temporal. What it means to be the Pythagorean theorem or what it means to be a human being is not developing in time. It is. In comparison to this, we judge certain recitations to be mistaken or certain kinds of development to be deformed or imperfect in various ways. If this *what* is to be a criterion, if it is to be what is unfolded or understood, it must, however, also *be*.

Thus, Stein thinks that there is a being characteristic of essence,²⁴ and that being differs from the being of active, efficacious beings. The Pythagorean theorem—or the truth pointed to by that name—is not nothing; it cannot be said not to exist, and yet it simply does not exist like teachers, dogs, and frolicking squirrels. Stein likes to refer to an old German word for being when discussing essential being. The most common German term rendered as 'being' is *Sein*, and 'to be' is again 'sein.' There is, however, an older term that can also mean 'to be': *wesen*. In most contemporary work, *Wesen* is used as a noun and translated as 'essence,' or 'nature.' *Wesen* as a verb, however, means 'to be,' and like the Greek *ousia* carries an ambiguity: is it more properly tied to *what is* or to *that it is*? The German term Stein chose as a name for the being of intelligible structures is *wesenhaftes Sein*, and it is intentionally ambiguous. *Wesenhaftes Sein* is

²⁴ The phenomenological account of essences, which Stein is drawing from here, differs somewhat from the Thomistic account. But, since those differences are not central to what I am doing here and since they are similar enough for the point of this comparison, I'll leave aside discussion of their differences.

the ‘to be’ characteristic of essences—and in *wesenhaftes Sein* the what and that, although still distinguishable, are tightly connected.²⁵

Stein understands the primary characteristic marking *actual being* to be efficaciousness, the ability to effect change. The primary characteristic of *essential being* is an atemporal resting in what it is. Stein explicitly says that essential being “stands *in opposition to actual being*.”²⁶ Whereas that with actual being may efficaciously change something, that with essential being maintains its structure and identity in these changes. Thus, essential being acts as the ground in which the intelligibility and structure of actual beings is maintained. I would like to emphasize again that Stein is not taking the classic Platonic position, relegating the differing types of being to different and separable regions. Stein’s position is much closer to Scotus’s claim regarding the unity of the nature. Stein articulates this in terms of *being* rather than unity, but she nonetheless wants to claim that there is something unique about essences, something making them distinctive and able to give unity and structure to our experience.

This position is clearly not Thomistic. First, the interest in articulating three types of being already distinguishes Stein from Thomas. But further and more significantly, the claim that there is a particular type of being characteristic of essences which differs from the being characteristic of the act of existence makes Stein’s position quite different from at least any existentialist reading of Thomas. Essences, for Thomas, do not have a particular being except in the sense that they are a particular type of *limitation* of act. But the being of the essence is, properly, *non-being*, rather than a positive kind of being. For Stein, there is no doubt that essences have being, even if they act (in an analogous manner as for Thomas) as a limitation of actual being.

This non-Thomistic Steinian position has strength and seems to be able to make sense of how essences could limit act. The essence *is* in a positive sense and thus can do work, such as limiting an act of existence. Because essential being is a kind of being, there is nothing outside of being coming in to limit the act of existence. The being of the essence participates in God’s Being, just as the act of existence does, but they do so in slightly different ways, such that the one is capable of doing the work of limiting the other.

IV. Considerations in favor of Stein’s position

One of the great attractions of Stein’s position, one which ought not to be disregarded too lightly, is that associating essence with negation, non-being, or a non-positively existing limitation seems to sell short essence. It may be one thing to deny that limitation is itself more perfect than the unlimited. It is quite another to deny that limitation has any positive perfection at all. And yet the thin view of essence seems to do precisely this. It claims that *qua* essence, it is

²⁵ Stein maintains a real distinction between the essence and the act of existence, while she posits a conceptual distinction between the essence and its essential being.

²⁶ *Finite and Eternal Being*, p. 91.

nothing. Further, there is the very tricky question of how a non-existence can do anything at all, much less the critical work of limiting existence. How does that which is simply *potency* limit anything? Potencies, for Aristotle, are potencies *of* actually existing things. Something exists and then, in that existing structure, there is the orientation toward certain types of development rather than others. Thus, the structure of the actual thing is significant for what potencies are, well, potencies. On Thomas's account, in contrast, the potencies are the very thing enabling the finite thing to be at all. Thomas affirms not simply a "horizontal" account of potencies, but a "vertical" one. And this, it seems to me, is where the curiosities arise. Were there no potencies, there could be no finite beings. Without potency, being would presumably be infinite. Thus potency is the principle of limitation. But how can potency—as a kind of non-being—act in any way at all? What, in being, could make it to be a potency at all, rather than, for example, the more general 'logical possibility' or highly amorphous 'non-being' or lack of being? Potencies seem to do the work of limiting in quite particular manners, making an act of existence to be finite and a bird, or quark, or yellow sunflower, and yet they are supposed to do this in their 'capacity' as non-acts of existence, as non-beings. This is highly curious, to say the least.

Stein's positive account of the being of potencies and essences appears, at least initially, to respond to this problem better than the Clarkean negative one. Essences can limit act because essences simply are not nothing. They are not acts of existence, but neither are they non-being. An essence has its own being, in virtue of which it could then do something, such as limit an act of existence.²⁷ In giving this account of the being of essences, Stein cannot be accused of introducing a perfection beyond being. Essential being is, after all, still *being*. And God, as Being Itself, as *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, is still, on Stein's account, pure being. Nothing else is introduced. There is nothing about which we must ask, "is it?" There is only being. But there is not only the act of existence, and thus there is (a) participated being capable of limiting an act of existence in finite things and (b) participated being that may be an act of existence. There is thus a clear way of understanding what it might mean to say that *potency* limits act.

V. Objections to Stein's position

Stein's position is subtle, but surprisingly clearly stated, and it presents a particularly powerful counter-position to the Thomistic one. But I think that it is, nonetheless, wrong. It is fascinating and a further contribution to the broadly Avicennian-Scotist line, but it is still, I think, weaker than the Thomistic line, especially as read by Clarke. Three things in particular concern me with Stein's account. First, I think that there is an ambiguity about the *meaning* of being in Stein's account. Second, I think that she has slightly but problematically downplayed the

²⁷ One might object that Stein's position takes essence and existence to be separable things, rather than metaphysical principles. Thomas never claimed that essences *existed* separate from the act of existence. There is neither, for finite things, without both. Essence and existence are co-principles, interrelated and interdependent. Stein, however, might respond: Regardless of which came first, regardless of whether they can exist in separate states, etc., there is a *logical* problem. Clarke's Thomas understands potencies as a kind of non-being. But metaphysical principles—even if inseparable—have their own distinct lawfulnesses. How can a non-being have or contribute any kind of lawfulness? Having being only within a composite unity is not the same as being properly a kind of non-being.

significance of the actual. And, third, I think that her account suffers from an excessive reliance on a spatial model for understanding being and limitation. I would like to address each of these briefly.

a. What is the meaning of being?

This question is a troubling one for Stein—in a way it is not for Thomas—because she explicitly says that actual being stands in opposition to essential being. Actual, mental, and essential being differ, and the marks of each type differ. What justifies, however, calling all three *being*? What is common to both the atemporal rest of essential being and the efficaciousness of actual being, such that it is appropriate to call both *being*? If there is something in common, what is that more fundamental feature in terms of which both are truly *being*?

There are several possible answers Stein might give to this question. She might say, for example, that ‘presence’ is the mark of being, and one could thus contrast presence in act to presence in thought to presence in rest. But it is not clear what it means to be present in such differing cases. How do we recognize ‘presence’? What is the mark of presence? Being efficacious cannot be the mark of presence, because essential being is not efficacious. Being structural cannot be the mark, because mental and actual being are not the being proper to intelligible structures. How then does one recognize something as real? What is the mark by which something is?²⁸

A Thomist can answer this question, even if the answer is not always easy to recognize in all cases. But the answer itself is clear. Being is being in act; it is the *act* of existence, and Fr. Clarke has beautifully articulated that act as a self-communicative act. There is a single description appropriate to being in all cases, and a mark by which we can recognize that being. But given the distinction among the three types of being, such an answer is not as easily available to Stein. Thus, one of the first weaknesses of her account of being is the question of the meaning of being.

b. What is the value of the actual?

Stein does not call the actual world illusory or secondary to essential being. All three types of being are co-equal for Stein. But the fact that she has introduced another type of being in addition to act and actual being, suggests that the actual is, in some ways, not enough. Stein posits, for example, individual forms for each human being, and each of those forms has, presumably, essential being. If I die, what I ought to have been as laid out in my individual form remains in being—in essential being—even as my actual being ceases. So also, when anything fails to achieve its potential, that potential is nonetheless achieved in essential being.

²⁸ This answer would also raise the problem of whether Stein’s approach might not be particularly susceptible to the various Heideggerian critiques of the metaphysics of presence.

While lovely, something of the true tragedy and fragility of life seems to be compromised. Actual finite beings, on this account, undergo the trials and tribulations of life, but each thing is also safeguarded from any fundamental risk or danger by the preservation of all in essential being. I'm not convinced, however, that life is so safe. We can rest confident and hopeful in the loving Providence of God, but that Providence does not remove the reality of true tragedies, even if ultimately working all things together for the good of those who love God.²⁹ I will leave further discussion of this point to the side, although I suspect that this subtle de-emphasis of actual being will also have significance for her evaluation of human freedom and the empirical sciences.

Finally, and this is the question I would like to focus on:

c. Has Stein relied on an excessively spatial model?

In his discussion of the Greek identification of limit with perfection and the infinite with imperfection, Fr. Clarke says:

But the inability of the early Greek thinkers to transcend material categories or to distinguish between philosophy and natural science, their growing preoccupation with astronomical problems, and the very manner in which they framed their fundamental problem, 'what is the first principle *out of which* all things are formed?' gradually led them—if not Anaximander, at least his successors—to identify the infinite with the indeterminate, formless substratum or raw material of the universe, the primeval chaos of matter in itself, as yet unperfected by the limit of form.³⁰

Clarke claims here that the ancient Greeks were misled because of their inability "to transcend material categories"; they were increasingly preoccupied by astronomical concerns; and they thus framed the problems in less than ideal ways. I take it that part of the point here is that they allowed themselves to think of being too much on the model of a body, thinking in terms of largely material categories.

In the seventh book of the *Confessions*, Augustine criticizes himself for using a wrong model in thinking about God. He thought of God as an infinite being stretched out in space like a giant ocean but without boundaries. He imagined each of us as sponges in that great sea, being filled with and living in God. Even when he came to acknowledge that God was immaterial, he still thought too often of God using material models, albeit qualified by adding that little caveat 'but not really.' Augustine's God was, for a time, much like Descartes's soul: although verbally said to be immaterial, it nonetheless seems much more like a material thing (an ocean or ghost) than a genuinely immaterial spirit.

²⁹ Romans 8:28.

³⁰ "Limitation of Act by Potency," 69.

There is a similar temptation when thinking of being. It is easy to imagine material things; it is simple to come up with spatially-based models and illustrations. Thus we might think of being itself as the sort of thing that could be spread out on the table, with potencies as various sorts of cookie cutters used to limit being and make finite beings. We might, of course, acknowledge that each of us has our own act of existence, that none of us is a piece snipped off of the being of God, that all kinds of immaterial things are, etc., but such qualifications can work to mask the ways in which our fundamental model is nonetheless spatial.³¹

Avoiding problematic spatial models is difficult. It took Augustine a very long time to undergo his own intellectual conversion. And all of us are, after all, corporeal beings; our knowledge begins in sensation, and all of us learn by working through concrete examples and sensible particulars. Although the tendency to employ spatial models is understandable for human beings and although such material metaphors are inevitably some part of our process of understanding, they should not be our dominant models for understanding being. They can, to use Heidegger's words, tempt us to confuse *being* with *beings*, the ontological with the ontic.

It seems to me an important question whether, first, Stein has implicitly or explicitly employed a model that is inappropriate for understanding being. And whether, therefore, some of the objections to the Thomistic claim are themselves pseudo-problems insofar as they only arise when one tries to imagine being using an inappropriate model.

It is certainly the case that many of our notions of 'limitation' come from material items. We think of the limit of a color in a painting as a positive boundary drawn around the figure; we limit the number of people in the room by closing a door; we limit the amount we eat by pushing aside the excess; etc. In each of these cases of limitation, something with positive existence—the boundary, the door, and our forks—comes in and does the work of limiting. Thus, it is tempting to think of potencies as a kind of fork picking up a limited amount of being out of the great plentitude or cutting off a finite quantity of being.

We all know that in certain respects such spatial models are problematic for understanding acts of existence. It is regularly emphasized, for example, that Thomas is not a pantheist. Thomas claims that each of us has our own act of existence. Fr. Clarke develops a lovely analogy for this point by comparing God's gift of our act of existence to the practice of teaching. A teacher, out of her plentitude of knowledge, gives knowledge to students, but in this giving of knowledge, each student comes to know with her own act. The increased knowledge of the students does not lead to a decrease in the teacher's knowledge, and the 'handing' of knowledge to the students is not like the passing around of brownies. Further, each student receives the knowledge in a way fit to that individual and her stage of development. Thus, even though the students' knowledge originates from and participates in the teacher's knowledge,

³¹ Clarke makes clear that these 'qualifications' are true. He says, for example, "God has no pieces nor can he lose his infinite fullness by creating more beings. Each particular act of existence is a new one, fresh out of the oven, so to speak, which exists only as correlated with its own particular limiting essence, not first in an unlimited state, then afterwards limited" (*The One and the Many*, 86).

even though the teacher is truly the cause of the students' coming to know, the acts of knowing on the part of each student also truly belong to that student.³²

Clarke emphasizes with this example that we must be careful in thinking about the relation between our individual act of existence and God as the fullness of Existence. Certain models, less obviously spatial models (e.g., teaching students), are illuminating—while spatial models (e.g., a plate of brownies) distort our understanding. The lesson might be similar in regard to the limitation of those acts of existence, and perhaps we should be wary about thinking of essence on a spatial model. It seems to me that accounts of the limitation of act by potency, which claim a positive existence of some kind for the essence, are thinking of limitation on a more spatial model, thinking of limitations too much in terms of forks dividing up one's dinner or doors cutting off a room. If the act of existence is not well thought of as a piece of fabric or plate of brownies, then perhaps the limitation of that act is also not well thought of as like a pair of scissors or a knife.

It is, however, one thing to claim that certain models are inappropriate. It is quite another to present a better model. If the limitation of act by potency is not like the limitation of brownies by knives, then what is it like? What models are useful here? This is a difficult question, and one which I cannot answer well. Nonetheless, I would like to propose one model. I am not yet convinced that it works well. There are likely much better ones, but perhaps it can serve as a provisional model or analogy for the way in which being may be limited without needing an additional, positively existing entity. Before presenting the model, however, I should admit that Fr. Clarke exhibits quite a bit of caution at this point. He says:

To see beings as really limited is part of a synoptic vision of reality as a whole. To try and lay hold of the being of limit as such exceeds the limits of language and conceptual thought. It may then be wiser to rest content with the couplets 'limited-participation,' 'limited-perfection.' To seek to analyze further is to seek to say what cannot be said.³³

This is a good warning, and it is surely right that ultimately *creation ex nihilo* cannot be well-thought on any model derived from the created order. Nonetheless, I would like to try at least one possible aid and model.

Augustine writes in *De trinitate* that the mind does not see “the way the eye of the body sees other eyes and does not see itself ... [but] knows itself too through itself.”³⁴ Thomas writes in the *Summa theologiae*: “The mind knows itself by means of itself, because at length it arrives at a knowledge of itself, though led thereto by its own act.”³⁵ Both Augustine and Thomas point to our acts as critical for knowing ourselves. We know ourselves not by looking at ourselves as

³² See *The One and the Many*, 86–87.

³³ “What Cannot be Said,” 131.

³⁴ *De trinitate*, IX, iii, 3.

³⁵ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 87, a.1, reply to objection 1.

one would an object but, rather, through our self-awareness in our acts themselves. As finite beings, perhaps a turn to our acts may illuminate something for us of what we can know of the way in which our being is limited.

There are many types of act, including knowing, wishing, hoping, refuting, etc. These acts differ and are distinguished in part by how they are directed toward their object and in part by the objects toward which they are directed. We might take the example of ‘wanting.’ We have all experienced wanting and have observed many examples of wanting. We might imagine a little girl who plays quite happily, who appears to be fully content and joyous in what she is doing. There may not seem, at least at that moment, to be any particular longing or any strong kind of want. The child may, however, catch sight of an advertisement or notice a toy in a store window. That brief glimpse may awaken a very intense and very particular longing, bringing to life something that was not before and forming (and thereby limiting) that wanting in a very particular way. The child now wants a blue Jimmie Johnson racecar!

This is a less than ideal analogy for the way in which potencies may limit acts of existence because, first, the child already exists before getting that longing and, second, the child already has a love of and desire for things to play with in general before developing the desire for a very specific toy. But, nonetheless, there is a kind of non-being—in this case, the non-being of the child’s own blue Jimmie Johnson racecar—that shapes the way in which the longing comes to be. The child’s longing is formed by the *not* having of *that particular* toy. That which exists, the act of wanting, is limited by a particular kind of non-being, but a non-being that can give form and shape to the longing.

We might think of the potencies in Thomas’s account to be similar. They are a particular kind of non-being, but they are not just any kind of non-being. Rather, they are a non-being corresponding to a particular ideal, or aspect of the fullness of being. Thus, the act of existence is given shape by being an orientation toward a particular kind of fullness.³⁶ Just as the child’s longing did not exist (in one sense) until it was awakened by a particular toy car, so too each of our acts of existence do not exist until given by God. But the structure of the act of existence is not something from *outside* of the act; rather, is the internal structure or shape originating in being an act of existence oriented in this way rather than that, toward this type of ideal rather than that. Once again, there are important weaknesses in this analogy, but perhaps the way in which longings are limited by a certain kind of non-being can give one model for how a lack, or non-being, can nonetheless limit an act.

If we accept a model like this, there is at least one sense in which *essence* must be understood to exist positively, but that positive being exists in God, as an idea in the Mind of God, rather than as a positively existing distinct structure within the finite critter. There would be

³⁶ Articulated in this way, the divine ideas act strikingly like Whiteheadian ‘lures’ for the development of actual entities. For a comparison of Thomas and Whitehead, see Clarke’s “God and the Community of Existents: Whitehead and St. Thomas” in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 40, 2 (June 2000): 265–287.

no positive existence to the essence as a part of our act of existence.³⁷ Essence simply is the kind of activity that is characteristic of this act of existence, and that kind of activity is limited by being a potency or longing or directedness toward this ideal rather than that, etc. Further, these potencies are neither mere logical possibilities nor simple non-being. Just as a longing has a direction based in a particular type of lack, so also the potencies limiting act are more than mere non-contradictions or mere lack. The child may lack many toys, but longs for only a few. So also, the non-being characteristic of our potencies is not just a lack of being, but a lack coming to fuller act in particular ways.

Someone might object that I have not really answered the question, I have only shifted the location of the mystery. Presumably, the divine ideas, as exemplars for particular entities, are already themselves—at least in some sense—certain types of limitations of the fullness of Being. They are, after all, exemplars for this type of thing rather than that. Thus, we still need to account for how these ideas can be limited so that they are ideas fit for finite things. This account still leaves that mystery in place. It is, however, a more appropriate place for mystery, and I will leave the question of whether there is any limitation of act that is in any sense appropriate to divine ideas for another scholar.

Whether or not this analogy is successful, it is critical that we pay particular attention to the models that inform our attempts to understand being. Although all of our models will draw to some degree from our sensible, earthly life, some of the models will emphasize more fully those features of our experience which are true to us as spiritual beings. If we are not to reduce Being to beings or simply presume that reality is fundamentally material, we should be wary of models that draw too much from spatially-existing things.

VI. Conclusion

I opened with a few stories of Fr. Clarke and then turned to an albeit all too brief discussion of being. I would like to end by tying these two elements together. As most of you are well aware, Fr. Clarke thought that friendship and being went together in a particularly intimate way. Stein, although ‘disagreeing’ with much in the Clarkean Thomistic account of being and essence, shares with Clarke a concern for the person and the significance of *persons* for our understanding of being. She says:

we see that while the being of the I is separated from divine being by an infinite distance, it nevertheless—owing to the fact that it is an I, i.e., a person—bears a closer resemblance to divine being than anything else that lies within the reach of our experience.³⁸

³⁷ This, of course, raises the question of the status of the real distinction between essence and existence. Fr. Clarke discusses this point in “What Cannot be Said” as well as the preface to William E. Carlo’s *The Ultimate Reducibility of Essence to Existence in Existential Metaphysics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), vii–xiv.

³⁸ *Finite and Eternal Being*, p. 344.

The traditional name God gave us in Exodus 3:14 is the “I am.” Thomas places the emphasis on God’s essence as existence, that God is Being itself, Being in its fullness. Stein agrees that the Exodus name is a particularly proper one for God—God is Being in its fullness, absolute, infinite Being. But she places the emphasis slightly differently from more traditional accounts. The name, as she translates it, is not ‘I am who am,’ but ‘I am who *I* am.’ She says, “It seems to me highly significant that in the Scriptural text we do not read, ‘I am *being* [*das Sein*],’ or ‘I am *he who exists* [*der Seiende*],’ but ‘I am who *I* am.’”³⁹ God calls God’s self by the name that each of us uses to describe ourselves, a personal name. Being—or the act of existence—is, in its most perfect form, a Person. This feature of being is central to Clarke’s “creative retrieval” of Thomas. It is in the person that being is actualized most fully. God is, after all, a Trinity of Persons.

Whether Fr. Clarke is right that Thomism must incorporate some form of personalism, he is surely right—at least in my own experience—that coming to understand the nature of being is not unrelated to our encounters with acting, self-communicating persons. Fr. Clarke loved to repeat a passage from Plato’s *Sophist*. Near the end of the *Sophist*, the stranger asks young Theaetetus if he agrees with a point just made. Theaetetus replies:

Perhaps because I am young, I often shift from one belief to the other; but at this moment, looking at your face and believing you to hold that these things have a divine origin, I too am convinced.⁴⁰

Thank you so much.

³⁹ *Finite and Eternal Being*, p. 342.

⁴⁰ *Sophist* 265d.